



Seduced By the Squire (Diamonds in the Rough #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: Llinos can see only one way out of a betrothal she doesn't want. Sir Benedict needs an untouched bride? Very well, when he comes back from Kent he will find her ruined. There is just one problem. Who can she ask to go along with her daring plan?

When a beautiful lady propositions him, Duncan is furious. It is always the same with arrogant nobles, they think they can just take what they want! The noble lady wants to be bedded by a nobody? Very well, he will use her for his satisfaction and make sure she regrets ever coming to him.

But what started as a cold bargain soon morphs into something neither of them had prepared for. What will they do now? What future can there be for a rich heiress and a man so lowly their paths should never have met? With Sir Benedict's return looming, decisions will have to be made.

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Toying with her food, Llinos watched the endless procession of servants going to and fro from the great hall. Roast lamb stuffed with rosemary, stewed greens, freshly baked bread, the smells assaulted her nose, challenging her already over-taxed brain.

All afternoon she'd mulled over the shocking idea that had burgeoned in her head when Sir Benedict had taken his leave.

I need not to be a virgin when he comes back because he will break our betrothal for certain if he finds me ruined.

He was this very moment riding to his great-uncle to inform him he had found the virgin bride he needed to make his position as heir secure. A maidenhead was the only thing he wanted from her but Llinos had the weakness to want a husband who took some interest in her as a person. That was precisely why she had remained unmarried for so long.

Because so far no one had.

For sure men took interest in her fortune, in her body, in her ability to run a household efficiently, but not in her. She wasn't sure Sir Benedict had realised she did not like red meat and could not countenance the sight of spiders. Not that this was what defined her, by any means, but surely a man who had spent weeks by her side should have noticed she never ate roasted venison or lamb and shivered at the mere mention of the eight-legged beasts.

Yet he always acted surprised when she refused the meat he offered her and never understood why she jumped out of her skin when a spider scuttled away from her.

No, Sir Benedict was a perfectly amiable gentleman, but he would never be a suitable husband to her.

And so when he came back in three months' time, he would be told he could not marry her after all, and this when he had just assured his great-uncle that he was the right man to be granted the family inheritance. It would undoubtedly be a blow. In desperation, he might well turn to Llinos' cousin Ffion, who would only be too delighted to accept his offer, was definitely a demure virgin and too besotted with him to think of refusing the less than flattering offer. Yes, Llinos thought with satisfaction, all this would work for everyone's benefit.

There was only one problem with her plan .

Finding a man to take her maidenhead was all well and good on principle, but how was she supposed to go about achieving such a thing? How could she work up the nerve to go to a man and ask him to deflower her? For that matter, who could she ask? It needed to be someone she could trust to behave gently in bed and keep silent about the whole episode afterwards. Or perhaps that was not such a necessity after all. If Sir Benedict was told she was going around asking men to her bed, he would cast her away before she had time to utter a single word of explanation.

It would work just as well but that was too extreme by far. She wanted him to rethink his choice of wife, not spread the word of her scandalous ways and utterly ruin her...

So she had better find someone discreet. But who?

Just then the door of the great hall opened.

As in a trance, Llinos watched a tall, broad-shouldered man walk up to the dais, the perfect answer to her prayers. A moan escaped her mouth and she quickly stuffed a piece of bread into her mouth to stifle it. Then she took a sip of her ale to wash down

the shame of her reaction. What was that? Since when did she ogle men and moan while she did?

More importantly, who was this man and how could she convince him to make love to her?

The two questions jostled in her mind while he made his way across the room, all masculine presence and predatory intent. Why wasn't everyone else gawping at him? You didn't see a man like him everyday! His shoulder-length blond hair framed a face so perfectly chiselled it could have been carved out of marble by a master sculptor. From where she was she could not discern the colour of his eyes but she certainly saw how piercing his stare was, how graceful his gait, how muscular his body.

He was a living, breathing statue of male perfection, and just as enticing.

Not even throwing a glance in her direction, he ascended the dais to come and stand behind Lord Masterson. Which meant he was now perilously close to her. If she extended her left arm she would touch him. Not that she would ever do something like that of course... would she? For more security Llinos folded her hands in her lap, in case her body chose this moment to betray her. She suddenly felt it could not be trusted to behave decorously — or even normally. Only a moment ago her wicked throat had moaned out loud of its own accord. There was no guarantee her wayward hand would not now try to stroke the man's taut buttocks.

Llinos went red to the roots of her hair. What did she know about buttocks, taut or otherwise?

"My lord," the man said, his voice low but not so low that she didn't hear. "Sir Gilbert is at the gate, requesting a word with you. I told him you were busy but I'm afraid he insisted."

Dear God... Even the way he spoke was enticing, deep and velvety. It was as if someone had conspired to make the man as irresistible as humanly possible to test her resolve to the limit. Her whole body relaxed at the sound of his voice, as if he had actually stroked her. No! She stiffened on her chair. She was on the dais, in full view of everyone. It would not do to appear as if she were about to swoon.

“Did he say what this was about?”

“It seems that you were right, a group of outlaws were spotted in the woods yonder this morning and he...”

Lord Masterson waved the rest of the explanation away. “I will go and see him.” He stood up and bowed to her. “If you will excuse me, Lady Llinos?”

“But of c — ”

The word was cut short as, at that moment, the man turned his attention onto her. All at once she saw that his eyes were green, framed with gold, and even more piercing than she had supposed .

Oh. Lord.

Llinos forgot to breathe.

After what felt like an eternity, he bowed to her. “My lady.”

She blinked, having no idea how to address him, having suddenly forgotten how to use her tongue. Apparently, she had been right, her body was unable to function normally in the presence of this man. Seeing that she did not respond, he tilted his head and took his leave. A moment later she was alone on the dais, as dazed as if she had just woken up from a dream.

Well, at least now she had the answer to her question. This was who she would ask to take her maidenhead, and no one else. She had not thought to choose a man who appealed to her senses before but now it was all she could think about. This man would make the whole thing seem less like a chore and more like a... Llinos wasn't sure quite what but one thing was certain, she would enjoy every moment of it.

Before she could lose her nerve, she hurried towards the courtyard. Despite the small number of torches illuminating the place, it did not take her long to spot the man. He was too tall and too magnetic to melt into any crowd. He veered right and started to walk along the walls with long, easy strides.

Her heart skipped a beat. No! She could not lose him now!

“Wait, please!”

She came to a skidding halt when the man abruptly turned to face her. She had followed him all the way round the tower before calling out to him, preferring to have the very awkward conversation in a secluded place. The darkness around them was almost complete but she could see him thanks to the glow coming from a window situated on the second floor of the tower. The soft light made his green eyes sparkle like gems. Just like earlier, Llinos forgot how to breathe.

“My lady?”

“I...”

“Duncan,” he supplied, his face impassive. He could have been annoyed at the interruption, curious to hear what she had to say or simply bored. Her heart sank when she realised that he was most probably bored. Uninterested. Just like her betrothed. She wasn't even sure he had recognised her for the woman who had just been sitting next to Lord Masterson at the high table.

She willed herself onwards.

“Duncan, I have a... erm...” Again she stalled, which was no wonder.

What on earth could she say? I have a favour to ask of you. Could you take me to bed, now, before I lose my nerve, and make love to me, before I lose my mind?

“My lady?” he repeated when she remained silent. “Is anything the matter?”

“Yes, I suppose there is.”

“Then can I be of assistance?”

He had a slight accent, one that gave his every word a seductive edge. He was not Welsh like her, or English, or at least not from round these parts. He did not speak like Sir Benedict or Lord Masterson, which only increased the appeal he exerted over her.

Before she knew what she was doing she placed a hand on his forearm. She was about to retreat in shock at her presumption when she realised that perhaps this was the best way to go about it. Perhaps she could make him understand what she wanted without having to actually say the shocking words... Could she convey with her body what she wanted? That might be the best, slightly less humiliating solution.

“Yes, I think you might be able to help me,” she murmured.

Under her palm she felt rock hard muscles tense.

Llinos saw in Duncan’s eyes the exact moment he understood what she wanted from him and she felt in the stiffening of his body that he would never consent to it, no matter how she asked, no matter how much she begged.

She did let go of his arm then.

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The lady was propositioning him.

She wanted him, Duncan could not doubt it for one moment. She had gone all blurry-eyed and soft at his proximity. If he'd had a shilling every time he'd seen that look on a woman's face he would have repaid his debt to Lord Masterson by now and be free to go back home to Scotland. No. He was no stranger to being pursued by women.

But a high-born lady coming on to him? That was most definitely new.

And highly unwelcome.

His whole body tensed up in loathing. Usually the women who came to him for a tumble did not raise his hackles so, because they were on an equal footing with him and he was free to accept or refuse the offer without fear of retaliation. They did not try to take advantage of him or think to use their status to put pressure on him. It was easy, a matter of simple desire between two people. But a tumble with this woman would be anything but simple. It would be demeaning, and quite possibly dangerous .

He would never agree to it.

Not that she lacked personal charm. In fact, had she been anyone other than a lady far above himself, he would not have hesitated in calling her... Duncan racked his brain for the best word to describe her and settled, oddly enough, on adorable.

Not beautiful, exactly, much less striking. Too petite, too shy to make a man catch his breath at first sight, she had nevertheless captured his attention. Her nose reminded him of a pixie's, the freckles on her cheeks were the perfect counterpoint to her doe-

like eyes and her rosy mouth was cute as a bow.

Aye, she was adorable.

Or at least she would be if she were not considering him as a piece of meat available to her just for the asking! Well, she'd chosen the wrong man to play with and he would make sure to let her know as much. Even if such an offer had not been insulting, he was not going to let history repeat itself, he was not going to allow her to make a fool out of him. He would not break his promise to his father, no matter how badly she wanted him, no matter how...

How alluring she looked.

Mo chreach!

The more he looked at her, the more Duncan could feel his resolve soften — and another part of his anatomy harden. Forget adorable, she was striking, in her own way.

Oh, how he wished he could show her what happened to women who provoked men twice their size. He wished he could punish her for her presumption and make her pay for making him feel so low – and tempt him despite his better judgement.

If he had her under him, as she clearly wanted, then he would make her regret asking for it. She had followed him all the way around the tower and to the postern gate, almost breaking into a run in her desperation to catch up with him. And yet earlier on the dais she had not even answered when he had greeted her. So that's how it was. In public she considered it beneath her dignity to speak with people as lowly as him but in private, with no one to see, she was not above using them for her pleasure.

Pleasure.

The idea of feeling her spasm around his shaft almost wrenched a groan out of him. Oh, he would make her scream and pant, not relenting until she could not move and questioned the wisdom of having come to him.

Enough. All this did was make him harder than a poker.

“I think I know what you are looking for, my lady,” he said, trapping her impossibly delicate wrist into his hand and refusing to release her when she tried to snatch it away. If she wanted to touch him then she would have to deal with him touching her . “And it’s not going to happen.”

She blinked a few times in quick succession. “I’m not sure what you...”

Oh, and now she was playing the innocent, pretending not to understand what he was talking about, flushing like a maid, trying to save face, making it appear as if he was a boor for even thinking about debasing a nobly born lady.

Perhaps it was time to talk plainly.

“I’m sorry, my lady,” he said, lacing the two words with heavy sarcasm. No woman behaving as she was behaving deserved the title. “But I am not going to fuck you.”

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Heavens.

Everything inside Llinos tightened. In mortification, she assured herself, not in desire. That word! Spoken in that tone, by that mouth! It was both the most shocking thing she had ever heard and the most arousing.

“I-I...” she stammered.

“No need to pretend that’s not why you followed me all the way here,” Duncan said harshly. Her stomach sank further. So he had seen her leave the hall and rush after him... How had she thought he would not? She had not followed him after all, he had led her all the way here on purpose. “Or did you have an important message from Lord Masterson to deliver?” he added, a corner of his mouth curling up.

She couldn’t speak, not when she felt so utterly foolish, when he was looming over her, when her wrist was imprisoned in his impossibly large hand. On the dais she had been sitting, and not as close, she had not had a sense of just how big and forbidding he was. Not that he had appeared as a weakling, of course, but you needed to stand in front of him to really get a notion of his masculine presence. Not a tall woman, Llinos was used to feeling at a disadvantage, but not this... vulnerable.

This man, Duncan, made her feel as if he could have snapped her in half without even noticing, as if he could have thrown her above his head with one arm. Worse, he was looking at her as if he would have enjoyed doing those things, as if he was debating on the best way to humiliate her.

It had been a mistake to come here, where no one could come to her aid if need be.

“I’m sorry,” she said, trying to disentangle her arm from his hold. “I shouldn’t have — ”

“No, you shouldn’t,” he said, pushing her hand away as if the touch of her skin made his flesh crawl. He sounded so harsh, looked so disgusted that she recoiled in shame.

What had she done? This was why women did not pursue men and demand to be bedded! Because it was undignified and dangerous, because it made them feel soiled, stupid and worthless when the man refused them.

“I-I will leave you now,” she stammered, her breathing making it impossible to simply

turn on her heel and walk away, even from a man behaving so shockingly towards her.

“Yes, I think it’s best.”

Foregoing the rest of the meal, Llinos fled straight to her bedchamber.

This had been a total disaster.

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“I hope you will forgive me for all the extra precautions I took last night, my lady, but Sir Benedict is adamant I should keep a close eye on you. As you know, he cannot afford to marry a woman whose virtue is in question. But I guess the real question is, have you given him reason to suspect you of lewd behaviour?”

Llinos blinked. Had Lord Masterson really dared to ask her that humiliating question? In front of all the people assembled in the hall, no less? This included Duncan who, placed where he was, could not have failed to hear everything.

“No, of course not!” she said as firmly as she dared. “No one could ever accuse me of lewd behaviour.”

Her cheeks burned when she recalled the scene in the lists the evening before. She had gone to a stranger to ask him to bed her. That she had not actually said the words out loud and that he had not acceded to her request hardly made her behaviour acceptable.

“Good, because I have no wish to assign a guard to your person by day and post someone in front of your door at night.”

Was he trying to embarrass her? She could tell everyone was listening to their conversation, most especially the blond man making no attempt to avert his gaze. The look on his face was one of wry amusement. He was enjoying watching her squirm and refute any accusation of lewdness. Llinos could easily imagine what he thought of her denial, and she could not even blame him.

Was he about to speak up and tell his master that she had propositioned him last night

and he had better assign a guard to her day and night? It did not seem impossible and would be a good way to make her pay for her impudence.

“I assure you there will be no need to trouble yourself,” she murmured, desperate to put an end to the discussion.

“Very well.” To her relief, Lord Masterson seemed to accept her word without hesitation. “Now, to business. MacQuarrie, go see to my horse. I think I will pay a visit to my man in the village today.”

Duncan got up and nodded. “Yes, my lord.”

Once he was gone Llinos found that she could not eat another thing. She dipped her fingers into the bowl of scented water a servant offered her when she got up and excused herself .

A moment later she was breathing in the morning air from the top of the battlements. The day promised to be hot again. She closed her eyes and sighed. For months on end, she would have nothing to do but wait for Sir Benedict’s return and hope he’d changed his mind about marrying her somewhere between here and Kent.

“So, my lady.”

The deep voice almost made Llinos jump out of her skin. Once again Duncan had chosen his moment well. They were alone, away from prying eyes and ears. Supposing she had wanted to call for help, no one would have heard her. Supposing she had wanted to flee, she couldn’t have. His massive frame was blocking her only way out. Trying to force her way past him would be too dangerous. She might well plummet to her death.

But...

She did not want to call anyone, she didn't want to run.

Heart pounding, she waited.

“So,” he repeated, coming closer. “You need to be kept from acting upon your unlady-like urges if I understand correctly. Your future husband fears you will go and seduce all the men you see, nobles and servants alike...” He shook his head in mock concern. “I cannot help but sympathise with the poor man. After what happened last night I understand why he would be worried.”

“It's not what you think — ” Llinos started, knowing he would never believe her after what he'd heard and what she'd had the gall to do but she could not let him accuse her of such behaviour without raising a word of protest.

“Of course it's not,” he interrupted her. “Mayhap you fell madly in love with me and wish to marry me instead of Sir Benedict.”

The cutting sarcasm surprised her. True, she had been unusually bold for a woman, and a lady, but as a guest of his master, she was owed respect. A squire so below her should feel wary of addressing her, never mind insulting her.

“I do not wish to marry you,” she answered as steadily as she could.

“No. You just wish to fuck me.”

Oh, that word again.

“Yes.” The answer darted out of her mouth before she could think, even more shocking that what he had just said. Oh no, what have I done!

The air between them seemed to still for a moment then Duncan crossed his arms

over his chest.

“Well,” he said slowly. She could tell he hadn’t expected her to be so honest. In truth, neither had she. The word had just come out of its own accord, another deplorable consequence of her body being out of control in this man’s presence. It had to stop or she would make a complete fool of herself. “Now we know where we stand, I suppose.”

He waited for her to say something but Llinos couldn’t reply, or even nod. He was too forbidding for her to think straight.

“I don’t want to marry Sir Benedict,” she suddenly blurted out.

Now that she had admitted out loud what she wanted from him, she might as well explain why, so he did not get the wrong impression. Nothing she said now would make him think any less of her anyway. On the contrary, she might redeem herself in some way. If he understood her reasoning, he would see that she had not propositioned him because of a flaw in her character but out of necessity.

“That is why I... I came to you yesterday. You heard Lord Masterson. If Sir Benedict finds me compromised when he comes back, he will call off the betrothal. That is what I want. I don’t want to marry him.”

“Mm.” Duncan’s expression was unreadable. “And what do you have against him? He seems to me like a perfectly amiable gentleman. I fail to see why a woman would not want to ally herself with such an enviable party.”

Llinos’ heart sank. This was not going well at all, he did not seem to sympathise in the least. “Sir Benedict is an enviable party and perfectly amiable, you’re right,” she said in a whisper.

She could not pretend otherwise. Not only would it be a lie, but it would not be fair on him. It was not his fault she was regretting her rash decision to marry him. But if she listed the reasons why she did not wish for this marriage to go ahead, she knew Duncan would not deem them as serious enough for a woman to reject a man like Sir Benedict over.

She stared at the floor, feeling more dejected than ever.

“Why don’t you want to marry him?” Duncan insisted. “Do you have a father threatening to disown you if you don’t?”

“No.” She did not even have that excuse. “Both my parents are dead.”

“Why then? Do you need the money this union will bring you?”

Anger, fuelled by powerlessness, surged through her. “Why should I give you any reason? You don’t really want to know, you just wish to make me feel bad for having dared to come to you yesterday, you mean to make me pay for my folly!”

“Dinnae presume to ken better than me what I think!” he snapped, taking a step towards her .

The explosion of anger surprised Llinos less than the sudden reversal to his natural accent. He was a Scot then... Of course she had suspected as much – with a name like Duncan MacQuarrie he was hardly going to be Spanish – but to have it so unequivocally proven stunned her. He sounded... well, wild, and a dozen times more dangerous.

A hundred times more enticing.

He rubbed the back of his head warily. She could tell he did not like the fact that she

had been able to goad his real self out. It wasn't hard to guess that he prized his control above everything else, not to mention that he might fear she would hold his identity against him. Scots were not exactly well considered round these parts. King Edward had negotiated a treaty with their leaders earlier in the year but the terms of it had been breached less than a month later by William Wallace and a handful of his men. They had been defeated, as could have been predicted, but now all Scots were seen as potential rebels and a threat to the crown by the English.

However, Llinos was not English, but Welsh. If anyone hated King Edward as much as the Scots, it was her.

With a sinking heart she realised that, by revealing his true identity, Duncan had made it even harder for her to resist the appeal he exerted over her. A Scot and a Welshwoman would always be natural allies.

“Why don't you want to marry the man?” he repeated, reverting to the practiced, polished accent he would have worked hard to master. “Answer me, or lady or no lady I will...”

Instead of finishing his sentence he allowed his gaze to wander over her body, as if to decide what to do with her. Llinos was left with a few options cascading in her mind.

I will toss you over my shoulder, take you to the nearest bed and do exactly what you want me to do.

I will fuck you right here, right now, on the battlements for all to see.

She shivered because neither of these possibilities frightened her in the least. In fact she was at pains to decide which one she would rather have him do. Duncan's face had gone hard as granite and more handsome than ever.

Still, he was waiting for her answer. There was no choice but to be honest and tell him why she did not wish to become Sir Benedict's wife.

“Well, for one, I do not need to get married to live comfortably. I have a sizeable inheritance, you see, and I grew up fancying that this would afford me the freedom to choose my own destiny.”

She gave a scoff at her naivety. Being an heiress had not made her independent so much as a prey of choice for greedy suitors. True, none of them had the means to pressure her into being their wife, but it was tiring – and often dangerous – to be the focus of men trying to build their fortune through a marriage with her.

Sir Benedict was, admittedly, not after her money, as he was a rich man himself, but that did not mean she did not regret accepting his proposal. He had visited her castle one day after a particularly determined suitor had cornered her, intent on using physical coercion to force her into a union. When his efforts at wooing her had not worked, Sir Huw had reverted to a more expeditious and violent method – taking her maidenhead and then letting everyone know they had no choice but to marry. Only her faithful steward's intervention had saved her from rape.

Sir Benedict had come calling shortly after and, shaken by the assault, fearful others would try the same thing to try and trap her into marriage, Llinos had suddenly seen him as the answer to all her problems. He was amiable, young and respectful. He was honest about his motivations and did not try to pretend he was in love with her or force her into anything. Marriage to him had seemed the perfect solution. It would give her the protection she needed and make it possible for her to have the children she hankered for.

Besides, she sympathised with his own predicament. He had recently been informed that he was the closest male relative of a distant great-uncle and, as such, eligible to become an earl. But the people who would have preferred to push their own claim

were pouring poison into the old man's ear. Sir Benedict might not be legitimate, they whispered, everyone knew his mother had been a notoriously fickle woman... Wouldn't it be better if the title went to people whose lineage was impeccable, if a little more distant? Would the earl not prefer to know his family line had been kept pure?

Sir Benedict meant to quell the rumours about his birth once and for all and then convince the great-uncle he had never met that he was not placing the family in any danger of more slander. The only way to do that was to marry a lady of unarguable virtue.

In other words, her, who had lived the life of a nun, notoriously keeping all suitors at bay.

Llinos turned to survey the landscape at her feet. Above the rolling green hills the sky was a sheet of shimmering blue. Despite the early hour, it was already warm.

"I want a husband who sees me as more than a womb for his legitimate heirs, a trophy to present to his uncle, a warranty of the purity of his line," she said with a sigh. Was it so wrong to want more out of life than a husband chosen in a moment of panic and a loveless marriage? "I want a husband who trusts me to behave appropriately and doesn't ask a friend to keep an eye on me, who would object to me bedding other men because he was jealous, not because he thought it would compromise his chances of becoming an earl."

"In other words, you want to marry for love. How predictable!" Duncan was leaning a broad shoulder against the stone wall and the expression on his face was one of intense amusement. Llinos' heart sank. She had opened up for nothing. Far from sympathising, he was mocking her.

"I am trying to tell you the truth," she said, hurt. "I have other reasons for regretting

my decision to marry Sir Benedict but if you are not ready to listen, you will either think me a fool or not believe me.”

“Try me.”

“None of the reasons on their own are very — ”

“Start talking now, lass!”

She gasped. Lass ? People, much less servants, did not address her so familiarly. Sir Benedict, who was set to marry her, had never called her anything other than ‘my lady’ .

“Y-you can’t talk to me like this!” she stammered, not sure what to make of it. It was not offensive exactly, but certainly disconcerting.

“I just did. What are ye going to do about it? Nothing.” No. There was nothing she could do. Llinos bit her lip and waited. “Besides,” Duncan added, pressing his advantage. “Ye cannae seriously object to the way I talk to ye when ye want me to f — ”

“Yes, yes, very well,” she cut in, her whole face going crimson. She wasn't sure what she would do if she heard him say that word one more time. Beg him to do it there and then was not entirely out of the question. “Anyway, as I told you, most of my objections have little to do with Sir Benedict himself. I thought I wouldn’t have to settle quite yet.”

“Why? You’re already well past the age for matrimony.”

Llinos arched an eyebrow at the man’s bluntness. “Why don’t you tell me to my face that I am a dried-up old spinster while you’re at it?”

“I won’t, because you’re not,” he said tranquilly, not in the least put out. “But ‘tis no offence to say that you must be in your twenties. I am five and twenty myself, and I don’t consider myself in my old age quite yet.”

“I am three and twenty,” she answered, defeated by his logic.

“Then we are agreed, you are well past the age of matrimony. So why don’t you want to be married?”

“I thought I could afford to wait until I chose the right man. And I don’t want to go and live in England, which will happen eventually if I marry Sir Benedict.” How had she not taken that into account when she had accepted his offer? He was stationed in the Welsh Marches at the moment but as soon as he became an earl, which was bound to happen within the year, they would move to Kent.

“Weel, I can only sympathise wi’ ye there,” Duncan said, his accent bursting through once the hate for a common enemy surged through.

“If that is how you feel, why are you here, and not in Scotland?” Llinos could not help but ask.

“I thought we were discussing yer reasons for not wanting to marry Sir Benedict, not my personal life?” he said, his voice dangerous.

The warning was clear. He would not tolerate the discussion venturing on anything too personal. Where he was concerned, of course, for he didn’t seem to have any problems interrogating her.

“We were,” she agreed hurriedly. It would have taken a stronger woman than she was to stand up to an irate Duncan MacQuarrie. “Well, if you must know, I rushed into this decision for all the wrong reasons and now I regret it.”

“What wrong reasons?”

Llinos sighed. Why had she thought he would give up so easily?

“It’s not — ” The look he threw her made it clear she had better answer. “I’ve had many offers of marriage in the last few years, each less acceptable than the other. The day before Sir Benedict renewed his offer, one of my most determined suitors had tried to... force me into accepting his suit. He argued that if I fell with a child of his loins, then I would have no choice but to accept his hand to save my reputation. And he was right. I would have been trapped into a union with him, like so many women before me.”

As she had her eyes to the floor she couldn’t be sure, but she thought she heard Duncan swear under his breath. At least he did not mock her this time or worse, say that this was only what she deserved for being such a wanton.

It gave her the strength to carry on. For the first time he seemed to lend a sympathetic ear.

“My steward mercifully came to my aid before the man could... put his threat to execution but I will admit I was shaken. I was still upset from the episode when Sir Benedict renewed his offer. Suddenly being married seemed the only way to keep such unwanted advances at bay.” Before Duncan could comment she lifted her head and looked at him defiantly. She had said enough on the subject of Sir Huw. “On top of that, I suspect that my cousin Ffion, who lives with me, has developed feelings for Sir Benedict and I am loath to break her heart. I know she would be perfect for him, but he did not even consider asking her.”

Duncan stared at her as if she had just admitted to having an eleventh finger growing out of her ear.

“That’s it? That’s yer reason for throwing yerself into a stranger’s arms and ask him to fuck ye? So that yer cousin can keep fawning at a man who doesnae want her?” The accent was stronger than ever. “Ye ken he could have asked to marry the lass, yet chose to have ye instead?”

“It’s one of the reasons! Have you even been listening to a word I said?” Llinos started wringing her hands. Indeed, she knew that her not marrying Sir Benedict would in no way guarantee Ffion’s happiness, but it was just one more thing weighing in the balance. “I told you you would mock me!”

“Weel, aye I will, if ye show yerself to be so foolish!” he snorted.

Foolish. Wanton. Spoiled. That was what he thought of her. Llinos had always found it hard to handle other people’s criticism and being judged so harshly by a man who had made such an impression on her was a blow.

There was an uncomfortable pause.

“So ye want yer betrothed to change his mind about marrying ye? Ye want him to come back from Kent, take one look at ye and ken ye’ve bedded another man in his absence?” Duncan asked at length.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Ye want him to look at yer legs and imagine them wrapped around another man’s body while he pumps into ye?”

Llinos’ throat went dry. “I...” She wouldn’t have expressed it so scandalously but she supposed it would serve her purpose. “Yes.”

“Ye want him to look at yer breasts and wonder if another man suckled them until ye

begged for mercy?” he carried on. “Ye want him to imagine yer thighs dripping with seed, ye want him to look at yer mouth and imagine ye’ve been sucking a man’s cock, ye want him to torture himself over knowing how much ye enjoyed having a lover bring ye to pleasure with his tongue?”

Heavens.

Llinos would most definitely not have expressed it like that! For one, she did not possess such shocking vocabulary, for another, she’d had no idea a man and a woman could do all that. Just imagining half of the acts Duncan had mentioned caused her head to spin – and her centre to melt.

A man could suckle her, bring her pleasure with his tongue ?

Well, that sounded like something she wanted to experience for herself, and not just because it would serve her purpose.

“So, my lady? Is this what you want?” The impersonal voice was back but there was a glint in Duncan’s eyes that made her legs quiver.

Llinos could barely nod and croak her answer because, after his shocking questions, it felt as if she was agreeing to much more than before. To think she had been disconcerted to hear him say the word ‘fuck’...

“Yes,” she said eventually.

“Well...” He tilted his head and smiled. “And who exactly are you going to ask such a thing to?”

Llinos stared at Duncan stupidly.

Why, she would ask him of course, why else would they be having this conversation?

He smirked when she remained silent. “’Tis a dangerous thing to ask a man. Surely the encounter with that vile suitor of yours showed you that a man might well be tempted to take more than you are prepared to offer.” He took a step towards her, then another, forcing her to retreat if she wanted to avoid having his body come into contact with hers. “You might get hurt. They might well decide to treat you like a whore once they have you in their bed and at their mercy.”

“They wouldn’t dare, if I explained my reasons for being there!”

He snorted. “Aye, they would, and perhaps it would not be surprising, considering what you would be asking for.”

“I...” She blushed furiously. “I wouldn’t quite ask for... what you told me!” She would certainly not ask them to pleasure her with their tongue!

“No, I can well imagine. Still, one look at you and they would want to have you in all the ways a man can have a woman, one taste of your lips and they would want to feast on the rest of you, one look at your pretty little mouth and they would...”

To Llinos’ shock, he brought his finger to her mouth and traced a line along her bottom lip. His eyes had gone incandescent and something hot and heavy gathered between her legs.

“They would...?” she asked in a breath, knowing she would regret it .

The simple act of saying the words caused her to part her lips slightly. Duncan took advantage of it to slide his finger inside her mouth. Heavens. He’d just mentioned that some women liked to...

Suck a man's cock.

That had been his shocking words. And that's what he meant now. He meant that he thought men would watch her lips and imagine her doing... that to them.

The idea of doing it to Duncan sent fire to her loins and before she knew it she had swirled her tongue around the thumb invading her mouth.

All the warning she got was a growl. A heartbeat later she found herself turned around and pinned to the wall, caged in by a strong, warm body.

"There is something you need to understand, my lady," Duncan purred into her ear. "You should never make the mistake of underestimating what men are capable of. Men are beasts. You are too naïve, too innocent by far, and even though one of them tried to take advantage of you, you still haven't learnt your lesson. If you really want your betrothed to believe you've been with another man, then you need to at least appear aware of what men think when they look at you."

Llinos would have liked to answer but her throat was too dry and her mouth... well, her mouth still had not recovered from the feel of his wicked finger teasing it open.

Duncan brought his lips to the crook of her neck but did not touch her. Still, her skin prickled at his proximity.

"Do you understand that from now on you must always be aware of the effect you have on men? Will you stroke your arm absent-mindedly when in presence of a man, and risk brushing against your breasts, drawing his attention to them? Will you ever lick your lips, or look at anyone straight in the eye again?"

Well... Yes, she would, because these were innocent actions and she could not be expected to control herself at all times. But she would most certainly lose some of her

spontaneity, Llinos had to admit. She wasn't sure how she was going to bear it. It wasn't fair.

“Will I have to guard myself all the time?” she managed to croak. Why should she have to? It would be hell if she had to watch her every step for fear of being assaulted. “Are all men like this?”

But she already knew the answer. Now an awful lot of things made sense. The way her suitors had ogled her, with an odd expression on their faces, the way Sir Huw had pounced on her. She had thought him a scoundrel but now she was being told he'd only done what all the others had dreamed of doing. She had truly thought they were after her fortune, not her body. Now she was reconsidering.

“As far as a woman as beautiful as you is concerned, then yes, all men are like this,” was Duncan's uncompromising answer.

“Are you?”

A dry laugh, not quite a chuckle, reached her ear. “What do you think?”

Oddly, considering their current position, the answer that came to her mind was ‘no’. Still, as she wasn't sure quite why that might be, she did not answer.

“Should I fear you?” she asked instead.

He stilled, as if he could not understand how she could ask such a question while he was pinning her to the wall, and she had to agree that it did not make much sense.

“You tell me, my lady. Are you afraid?”

Llinos thought hard. She should definitely be afraid... but she was not. “No,” she said

in a whisper.

“Don’t you think you should be?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“How about now?” He leaned into her and she felt against the small of her back something hard, something only men possessed. A gasp escaped her lips. He was aroused, ready to take her. But he didn’t press further. “In case you were wondering, that’s not the hilt of my sword.”

“I didn’t think it was.”

“One cannot be too sure with an innocent like you,” he said, his voice reduced to dark honey. “So if it’s not my sword, what is it you can feel?”

Llinos’ eyes widened. Was he really going to ask her to say the word out loud? It appeared so.

“Your...” she started, before stopping. How on earth was she going to name it? Why did she have to name it at all? Ladies did not discuss such things.

“My cock,” he supplied, giving another nudge. Oh my. His very big, very hard cock. “Say it. My cock,” he ordered.

“Your... cock.”

She screwed her eyes shut, not because she was embarrassed, but because saying the crude word had caused Duncan to give a feral growl in her ear and this in turn had sent a jolt of longing between her thighs. Her body was calling out to him, making it known in the only way it could that it wanted to be filled.

By him.

“You know what this means,” he purred. “It means I want you, I’m ready for you. I could have you right here, right now. You wouldn’t be able to stop me. We’re alone and I’m three times stronger than you. So tell me now, are you afraid?”

This time she didn’t hesitate. “No.”

He snorted, as if this was not the answer he had expected to hear. “You really are a fool.”

“I may be an innocent but I’m not a fool,” Llinos retorted. “You’re nothing like the suitor who pounced on me. I may not know what passes a man’s mind when he looks at my mouth, my hips or my breasts, but I know a considerate man when I see one, even if they go out of their way to convince me otherwise.”

“Oh, I’m a considerate man, am I? What gave me away, lass, I wonder? The fact that I’m forcing ye to repeat crude words?” he said in his deep Scottish brogue. It sounded rougher than before, as if he had decided there was no point even trying to suppress it now he had given himself away. “Or perhaps ‘tis the way I threatened to lift yer skirts and have my way wi’ye?”

“These are words,” she managed to say. “To get the measure of someone one shouldn’t listen to what they say but instead watch what they do when they think no one is watching.”

“Och aye, and what did ye see me do that was so considerate? Trap ye against the wall and press my cock against the small of yer back? ”

“You are trapping me, yes, but you chose to do so against the only section of the wall that is made of smooth stones,” she said, her lips curling up. She had not missed the

fact that he had moved her a few feet to the left before caging her in. Evidently he had not wanted her to be hurt against the rough stones. “And you only pressed yourself against me to warn me about what ill-intentioned men might do, when a truly dangerous rogue would have simply thrust inside me and be done with it.”

Sir Huw had told her all the right things, worded his offer in the most flattering terms and yet when she had refused he had turned into a beast. Yes, actions spoke louder than words, she knew that at least.

When Duncan remained silent, she carried on.

“I also saw you pick up Evan the little page in the courtyard earlier and send him on his way with a tickle to the chin. And in the hall that morning you helped the servant who dropped — ”

“Verra weel,” he cut in, visibly annoyed at her perspicacity. “I am a considerate man. So considerate in fact that I will do what ye want me to do. I will take yer maidenhead, I will turn ye into such a wanton that Sir Benedict willnae want to have anything to do wi’ ye.” He swivelled her around so that she was facing him once more. “But I will do it on my own terms, do ye hear? I will take ye whenever I want, wherever I want, however I want.”

Llinos nodded faintly. Now that she could see Duncan, the Scot, not the distant, respectable squire, now that she could feel him pressed against her, she wasn’t quite sure she was safe with him. His green eyes had gone dark with intent. Should she run while she could, forget the whole crazy idea? Probably. But did she want to? No.

Besides, she did not have any other choice. After what he’d warned her about, she would never dare go to another man for fear he demanded much more than what she was ready to give. If she wanted to give herself a chance to see her betrothal broken, she would have to agree to Duncan’s conditions.

“Very well,” she said in a whisper.

“I will not kiss ye, I will not pamper ye. I will just fuck ye. Is that clear?” he asked, bringing their lower bodies in close contact.

Llinos smiled inwardly. Despite the crude words, he was still giving her a way out, and waiting to see if she would take it or not before doing anything. So much for being a dangerous beast!

“Yes,” she said more confidently. She would be safe with him. “Crystal clear.”

*

Duncan went down from the battlements with his cock hard as iron and his temper black as sin.

Why on earth had he agreed to the lady’s mad scheme?

It had been a mistake to go to her. He had meant to tease her, make her see just what he thought of her despicable attitude. She had told Masterson she did not need guarding, and she had even managed to look genuinely distressed at being mistaken for a wanton. After that performance he should have stayed well away and forgotten all about her shocking offer.

Because now he had heard her reasons for coming to him, and they were not at all what he imagined. Now he had felt her in his arms, he had heard her talk about his cock, imagined it in her mouth, and everything had been turned on its head.

Yesterday she had been an arrogant, wayward lady behaving as if he was hers to dispose of and he had wanted to teach her a lesson. Now she was a woman in a quandary and part of him wanted to help her. Another, less reasonable part of him

wanted to tumble her under him and make the most of what she was offering.

The idea of plunging inside her tight, wet heat wrenched a groan out of him. He would be the first to enjoy the treasures she had to offer, to show her what her body could do, to hear her moans of pleasure, the first to make her shatter in ecstasy, and he would make sure to enjoy the opportunity to the full.

Aye, he could think of a dozen things he could do with – and to – this woman who had so foolishly come to him, and taking her maidenhead would only be incidental. By the time he was finished with her, there would not be an ounce of innocence left in her.

“Hello, Duncan. Can I help you with that?”

“With what?” he barked, turning to face Jennie, one of the kitchens scullions. He’d attracted his fair share of female attention since he’d arrived at Pitcairn Castle and she was one of the most persistent ones.

“That,” she said, nodding towards his groin. The short tunic he was wearing did nothing to hide the bulge at the front of his hose. “It looks in dire need of female attention.”

Oh, it was, but he was not going to give in to its demand. Frustration would be just punishment for his folly. Besides, though comely enough, Jennie did not stir his interest in the least. Who would be satisfied with stewed turnips when they were aching to sink their teeth into roasted meat? What the scullion had to offer would not slake his lust, only whet his appetite, and make him crave Lady Llinos more.

“Go back to your chores,” he told her. Right now, the woman he wanted under him was not a blond kitchen maid but a fiery-haired lady he should never have laid eyes on. He wanted to see her sapphire eyes become stormy with passion, her creamy skin

flush when she came undone under his touch. He wanted to hear her cry out his name at the height of her pleasure. “It will go down eventually.”

One could only hope.

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“Have a drink, Lady Llinos, in this heat it will do you good.”

“Thank you.”

Llinos accepted the cup Lady Janet was handing out to her. It was a scorching hot day, and the ladies had elected to go to the lake at the foot of the hill in search of much needed coolness. She brought the cup to her lips. Just then a fish jumped out to the lake and fell back in the water with a splash. Lady Janet screamed and stumbled against her.

“Oh!” she cried out, staring at the wine-stained dress in horror. “Forgive me, the fish... It gave me a fright.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Llinos reassured the woman but in truth, she was soaked and the smell of alcohol was quickly becoming overpowering. Even though they had only just arrived she would have to go back to the castle and change. It was a dispiriting thought. The last thing she wanted was to climb all the way back up under the glaring sun .

“Wait!” Lady Janet said before she could move. “I saw the laundresses bring a load of washing out this morning. They will have left the garments to dry in the meadow just behind the bushes. With luck we will find something suitable for you to change into so you don’t need to go all the way back to the castle.”

She left before anyone else could speak and came back a moment later holding a gown and a shift.

“Here! These are less refined than your usual clothes but they should fit you just fine. I also took this rag for you to wash yourself with before you get into the clean dress. I hope it will suit.”

The woman looked so relieved to be able to make up for her clumsiness that Llinos did not have the heart to refuse. Besides, she did like the idea of getting out of the wet, smelly gown and allowing the breeze to cool her heated skin, if just for a moment. Not to mention that the simple dress would be more comfortable in this heat than her refined, but highly restrictive gown.

She smiled to Lady Janet.

“My thanks. I will go get changed over there behind the reeds. When I come back you might help me adjust the gown.”

“Of course. And we will keep guard, never fear.”

*

A rustle in the reeds ahead caught Duncan’s attention.

Before taking his next breath he unsheathed the dirk he kept hidden in his sleeve, trusting the familiar weapon more than the sword buckled around his waist. Silently, he crept forwards, ready to pounce if this turned out to be one of the outlaws Lord Masterson and his neighbour were worried about. It wasn’t.

It was the most shockingly beautiful woman he had ever seen.

Stark naked.

He froze, as his brain refused to comprehend what he was seeing. Lady Llinos was

completely naked. Right here, in front of him. Why was she naked? Did it matter? What was he to do? Should he even do anything? She was naked. Perhaps she had taken a dip in the lake to cool down. And now she was naked, presenting her delicate back and luscious arse to him.

She was naked. It was all he could think of. She was naked. The phrase kept playing in his mind over and over again.

Unaware she was being watched, she bent down to dip a piece of cloth into the water and wrung it dry. Holy Mary mother of God. The blood in Duncan's veins rushed to his groin with dizzying speed when the movement afforded him a glimpse of the pink treasure hiding between her legs. In less time than it took her to squeeze the water from the piece of material he was as hard as the dirk in his hand. How could he not be? The woman was temptation personified. In that position the curve of her arse was nothing short of scandalous and he could picture himself doing all sorts of equally scandalous things to it.

And then she turned around and started to rub her breasts and stomach with the cloth. All the air left his lungs. Possibly because of the coolness of the water her nipples puckered, tightening into little rose buds as he watched. What he wouldn't give to warm them with his kisses! Her whole chest was dusted with freckles, and it occurred to Duncan that he would never look at a woman's fair, unblemished skin again without thinking that something was missing. The little dots were like the stars peppering the skies at night and just as mesmerising.

Once she was done she lifted the riot of copper curls off her wet shoulders, shook her head and then let her hair cascade back down her back, arching her spine as she did it, causing her breasts to jut forwards and her stomach to tense up.

God's teeth, she was glorious – and he was about to expire from unfulfilled need .

It had been two days since that moment on the battlements when he had held her trapped into his embrace and he had been battling with the desire raging in his body ever since.

Before he could think, his hand went to his straining hardness. He had no choice but to try and ease the discomfort. He was so hard it was painful. It would not take him long to explode anyway. The mere friction of his hose as he untied the laces might well make him burst like a lad of sixteen in front of his first conquest.

Just then Llinos bent again to retrieve her shift. No! The last thing he wanted was for her to cover her glorious body now!

He must have made a sound, possibly even growled his disapproval because she suddenly stilled and brought an arm up to cover her breasts. Her left hand flew to her womanhood and she hid the triangle of fiery curls as best she could. Her eyes darted around, searching for a possible intruder about to jump on her. He hated himself for having frightened her in such a vulnerable moment. The best way to put an end to her fear would be to step forwards and show her that it was only him.

Duncan thought better of that idea when he glanced at the erection tenting his hose. It showed no sign of flagging and, supposing she didn't take fright from it, she would take him for a shameful voyeur, hiding in the bushes to get a glimpse of her naked form and stroking himself while he watched her.

He shouldn't give a fig about what she thought of him, but damn it all, he did. He did not want her to think him so base or worse, change her mind and go to someone else to put her mad plan to execution. As he debated on the best course of action, she shrugged the shift over her head and quickly donned a white linen gown. Once she was covered she took hold of another dress and hastened away. A moment later a chorus of female voices heralded her arrival in the meadow.

He frowned, all licentious thoughts forgotten. Were the ladies alone in the forest while outlaws were roaming about?

He stole a glance in the clearing to make sure. Three women, three children, and Llinos.

Not a man in sight.

His body having finally accepted that it would not get any relief this day, he strode forwards. If there truly were outlaws in these woods then he could not leave while the women were alone. Had no one warned them not to venture out of the castle unescorted? Not only that but the foolish Welsh lady evidently thought nothing of getting undressed and washing herself for all to see !

It was madness.

“Mr MacQuarrie!”

A woman, whom he seemed to remember as Lady Janet, ran to him as if he were her saviour.

“My lady.” He bowed, doing his best not to look at Llinos, even if she had her back to him. One of the ladies was finishing lacing the back of her dress while she braided her hair with swift, efficient gestures. His cock gave a twitch in remembrance of what was hidden under the clothes.

“How propitious it is to see you!”

“Is it?” His eyes instantly darted to the undergrowth. Had they seen anything suspicious? Was he about to see a dozen men jump on them? He was on his own, and only armed with a dirk and a sword he could barely use. The fight would be a quick

one.

“The children have been gathering apples and I’m afraid I won’t be able to carry the basket on my own. If you could help...”

He arched a brow in disbelief. He had been bracing himself to defend the women against an attack all by himself and he was being told he was needed to carry apples?

“Of course,” he said more tersely than he intended. His erection had subsided but that did not mean his mood had improved. Frustrated desire was still buzzing in his veins and being used as a packhorse was not helping.

“Mr MacQuarrie, could you reach up to this branch and untangle my ribbon? I can’t get to it and you’re so tall!”

Oh, so now he was tall as well as strong! What next? He was handsome? Charming? He smelled good? He barely repressed a sigh of annoyance. Could women be more predictable? Didn’t they know he could see through their feeble ploys to attract his attention? Ten to one the woman had thrown the ribbon in the tree herself when she’d seen him walk in into the clearing, for how else would it have got caught up in the branches?

You just wish to fuck me.

Yes.

The words exploded through his mind. Unlike these simpering ladies, Lady Llinos had not shied away from what she wanted. Instead of coyly praising his physical attributes she had simply gone to him and made clear what she wanted. His respect for her begrudgingly increased.

He blinked. Respect! He did not respect her, he desired her because he was a man and she a beautiful woman, nothing more! He could not respect a woman who thought to use him because he was a nobody, even if she was honest about it !

He hid his irritation as best as he could and did as he was asked, keeping his eyes carefully averted from the Welsh temptress.

As soon as he handed the ribbon to the effusive woman the third one jumped on him. “If you wouldn’t mind...”

Jesu, how long would this masquerade last? At least Llinos was ignoring him, she was not pretending to have a bug entangled in her hair or claiming to need his assistance in lacing her shoe. She didn’t want anything from him. Well. Except from one thing.

You just wish to fuck me.

Yes.

Would that conversation plague him for the rest of his life? Would the image of her naked body be branded in his mind forever? Probably.

Barely containing a groan of longing, he set about helping the women assemble their belongings.

As they all made their way back to Pitcairn Castle laden with apples, Duncan manoeuvred to find himself next to Llinos. He only did so because he didn’t want to endure Lady Janet’s inane prattle or her friends’ fawning, he assured himself, not because he sought her company.

This morning she looked different. The dress she was wearing made her seem

younger, more approachable somehow. The distance between them was not erased but didn't seem quite so unsurmountable.

“Ye dinnae have anything to ask me?” he asked her quietly. It surprised him to hear his accent come out naturally. Only with her did he seem comfortable using it. Perhaps because she was not English either.

“What do you mean?”

“Weel, so far I've been asked to carry apples, catch a ribbon in a tree and remove a pebble from a child's shoe. So is there anything ye want me to do?”

She almost tripped on a root, proving she had understood the real question in his mind and he braced himself for her answer. Would she be honest?

“Yes, there is. But you already know about it,” she murmured. “And you have accepted. There nothing else I need from you.”

Oh, she had been honest – and the answer knocked the air out of his lungs.

There is nothing else I need from you.

Well, that was clear enough. He was good to fuck, but nothing more. She was not different today, not more approachable. She was the same haughty lady, dressed in commoners' clothes, that was all. It did not change who she was, in the same way that swapping his plaid for English breeks had not make him less of a Scot.

Duncan gritted his teeth.

*

She had angered him. Llinos' heart sank at the thought. Why oh why did she have to go and say she didn't need anything from him except for... that ? How had she not thought of how offensive that would sound? She had merely meant to distance herself from the women fawning over him on the flimsiest of pretence but she had ended up sounding as if the only thing she considered him good for was a romp between the sheets.

She didn't, even if she was certain he would be good at it.

To hide her embarrassment, she selected an apple from the basket he was carrying and bit into it. Sweetness exploded into her mouth. Oh, that was good!

While she chewed on, a drop of juice escaped from the corner of her lips. As she caught it with her thumb, awareness prickled her skin. She was certain Duncan would be watching – and imagining her tongue licking something other than apple juice.

She lowered her gaze to the floor.

It seemed that he had already robbed her of her naivety, even if he had not yet taken her innocence. Perhaps that was a good thing. That way she might not be taken unawares again by the likes of Sir Huw.

“Can I have an apple, my lady?”

At first she did not understand how the tall, brooding Scot could talk with such a high-pitched voice. Then she glanced to her right and saw Pip, one of the little girls, with her hands in front of her in supplication. Of course. She had been the one asking for an apple, not Duncan! There were other people with them, Llinos reminded herself sternly, even if she had forgotten all about them...

“There you are, darling,” she said, picking up an apple from the basket.

“Thank you.”

By the time they reached the castle it was clear that Duncan was in a black mood and eager to leave the company of bothersome women. He deposited the basket of apples in the middle of the bailey and turned towards the stables.

“One last thing, ladies” he said, his voice clipped, speaking over his shoulder. “Do not venture out unescorted in the woods again. ‘Tis not safe. Lord Masterson has heard reports of outlaws roaming the land.”

Lady Janet’s hand flew to her mouth while the other two ladies inhaled in shock. Llinos did not move a muscle. She had known about the outlaws but, perhaps stupidly, she had not thought they would dare venture so close to the castle. It seemed she had much to learn, in more than one domain.

And she was more convinced than ever that Duncan was the man to teach her.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:59 am

A dark, looming shape in the shadows caught Llinos' attention.

"Duncan?" she asked tentatively, as a chill crept up her spine.

What if it wasn't him? Only a few days ago she might not have thought much of being alone with a man in a dark corner, confident that her rank would be enough to deter him from disrespecting her. In her mind Sir Huw's behaviour had been an anomaly, brought on by her refusal to give in to his entreaties. She had not thought that he had only been waiting for an excuse to assault her, or that others might well do the same given the opportunity. After her shocking talk with the Scotsman, however, she wasn't so sure. He had made it clear that all men were after the same thing and so she was wary, more than she would like to admit.

Before she had time to worry, Duncan appeared in front of her.

"You followed me all the way here," she said in a shaky breath.

"Aye, lass, I did."

If the look in his eyes hadn't been enough to warn her about what was about to happen, the fact that he was addressing her in such an informal manner would have made it clear he was about to do what he had agreed to do.

Tonight he would be the fiery lover, not the respectful squire, and do what she wanted him to do.

Everything within her leapt at the thought.

“Here?” She looked around nervously. The bed behind them suddenly seemed an impossibly forbidding sight.

“Here,” he answered, coming forwards. “Now.”

Llinos’ throat went dry. This was it. In a moment she would not be a virgin anymore. Should she tell him that she was nervous? Should she ask him to be gentle? No, he would take offence if he thought she assumed he would not be. Besides, she trusted him not to hurt her on purpose.

Should she get undressed? Should she go to the bed? Unsure what to do, she waited. He had said he wanted to do this on his own terms and she had agreed. He wouldn’t take it too well to be denied control now.

“Lesson number one. Men like breasts.”

This was so far removed from what she had expected that she lowered her head to stare at her own two breasts. Neither large nor small, they were completely unremarkable. She was still wearing the linen dress Lady Janet had found for her and the bodice was cut lower than she was used to. Because of the heat of the day, up until then she had not really registered the fact. But now, under Duncan’s heated gaze, she felt almost naked.

“Why? What could you possibly find of interest in breasts?” she murmured, looking at the swell peeking above her bodice. The fact that her skin was sprinkled with freckles did not help to make them attractive in her opinion, quite the opposite.

“Everything,” he said in a low growl. “We like to look at them, feel their softness in our hands, cup them, taste them, lick them, squeeze them, watch them move while we fuck. And the nipples... There is nothing like having a tight — ”

“Very well, I believe you,” Llinos cut in before she could go red all over. “Men like breasts.”

Heavens but the man had a way of talking that would have made a nun rethink her vocation.

“Aye, we do. And ye have the most glorious breasts I’ve e’er seen.”

Seen? She blinked. When had he seen her breasts ?

“It was you!” she cried out when realisation dawned. “You watched when I undressed by the lake this afternoon!”

She had not been mistaken, someone had been there, hiding in the bushes! How had she not realised it was none other than Duncan when he had appeared out of the same bushes barely a moment later?

He arched a brow. “Of course I did. Only a fool would walk in on a naked lady and not watch. I am no fool. Are ye saying that ye would not have done the same had it been the other way around?” Llinos bit her lip. Oh, she definitely would. She would have stared at him until her eyes ached. “I see,” he drawled, “ye are no fool either. Perhaps I should go and take a wee dip in the lake tomorrow and see what happens.”

“You can do what you want,” she said in a low voice, trying not to picture the scene. Mercifully, as she had never seen a fully naked man before, she could not conjure up anything too dangerous for her peace of mind. All she knew was that he would look, well, glorious.

Duncan smirked, then his face suddenly became serious again. “Why were ye naked in the middle of the clearing?”

“I was not in the middle of the clearing!” Llinos protested, flushing. “Lady Janet had drenched me in wine earlier, and I was changing out of my soiled dress.”

“Weel, it was mighty foolish of ye. I stayed to make sure no one jumped on ye. How did ye not think ye were placing yerself in danger by doing something like that wi’ men lurking about?”

Absurdly, Llinos was disappointed. Shocking as it was, she would have preferred to hear he had watched because he thought her desirable, not just because he wanted to ensure her safety. “So you watched over me?”

“Aye, of course I did, as I would have done for any of the other ladies.” Something in his eyes shifted and she wondered if that was quite the whole truth. Perhaps he did find her desirable after all. “But I made the most of the opportunity. I needed to see whether I could perform as a stud for ye. Men cannae bed a lass if they do not feel any desire for her. They need to be hard, and that’s not going to happen wi’ someone who doesn’t appeal to them.”

Don’t ask. Don’t ask!

“And... Do you think you will you be able to bed me?”

Llinos’ eyes widened. Had she actually asked the inappropriate question? Was she mad? That was only courting disaster! Besides, she had already felt the proof that he thought her desirable that day on the battlements. She knew he could get hard with her .

“Och aye, definitely.” The look he threw her sent a burning arrow through her chest. “I will be able to rise to the challenge.”

Every nerve ending started to sizzle. Llinos wanted to lick her suddenly dried lips but

she remembered his warning. Doing so would undoubtedly make him think of her performing some lewd act on him.

So what? her treacherous mind screamed. Let him think what he wants! Aren't you imagining him performing some lewd acts on you even as we speak?

Yes, she was.

"So shall we, my lady?"

The polite squire again. She was learning to differentiate between the two quite easily, though she was not quite sure why Duncan would choose that moment to revert back to his formal persona, when they were about to do the most intimate thing a man and a woman could do together.

"Bare your breasts to me."

Oh. Suddenly she understood why he had become the squire again. Instead of simply tumbling her onto the bed, he was going to make this as humiliating, as difficult for her as could be. Or was it... as arousing?

Because, undoubtedly, when she started to lower her bodice, something happened within her, something she was certain he had anticipated. Heat spread through her, making her feel beautiful and wanted rather than vulgar. Perhaps he did not mean to humiliate her at all, but make the moment as thrilling as possible for both of them.

"Look at me," he ordered. "Look at me while I look at you."

At her breasts he meant. She did, loving the way his eyes slowly caught fire, like the sun rising above the horizon at dawn. The more she revealed, the brighter the flame in his green eyes became. Thank God she was not wearing one of her own gowns, it

would have been a lot harder to follow his instructions. When cool air brushed against her heated flesh, she shivered. When her nipples poked out from under the hem of her gown, she bit her lip. When the bodice fell to her waist in a whisper of fabric, she inhaled sharply.

Duncan had not touched her, not even said a word, yet she was more aroused than she had been in her entire life.

His gaze was fixed on her nipples, which had become as hard as pebbles and the urge to cover herself vanished. Instead, she fought the impulse to rub her palms against them, needing some friction to ease the stinging. As if he'd guessed her desperation he growled and lifted her onto a stool, bringing her aching breasts level with his head. And then finally, blessedly, he put his hands on her.

His hands and his mouth.

Llinos could not contain her moans. Her breasts which, up until that moment, she had not considered as worthy of more interest than her elbows or her feet now felt heavy, exquisitely sensitive and... well, glorious, just like Duncan had said.

True to his promise, he lavished his attention on every part, taking his time, massaging, squeezing, licking, biting. Oh, the biting! She moaned and moaned again like a wanton but she could not help it, it felt too good. Her hands went to his head, her fingers wove into his hair to anchor him in place. She couldn't get enough of this, she didn't want it to ever stop.

His hands travelled down to her hips, following the shape of her curves, before he grabbed her buttocks in a possessive, unashamedly masculine hold. That was it. He was about to lift her off the stool and bring her to the bed. Finally! He had reduced her to a mass of need with his teasing and she wanted to feel his weight on her, his heat in her.

“Now,” she rasped.

“Now,” he growled in response.

Footsteps resonated in the room next to them, bursting through the fog of desire.

Bewildered, Llinos looked around, panting. Duncan was already rearranging her shift and gown, covering her exposed flesh.

“Go, my lady, we mustn’t be seen alone together,” he urged.

But she couldn’t move, couldn’t think, she couldn’t even blink. She could only stare at him stupidly, unable to comprehend what had just happened. He swore under his breath and ran a hand through his hair.

“Werra weel, I ’ll go then!”

He made to the door but, at the last moment, reconsidered and ran back to her. Without a word he plucked her from the stool and deposited her onto the floor. His face was a picture of hunger and frustrated desire.

In the blink of an eye, he was gone. A moment later, the door opened again.

“My lady?” Elena, one of the ladies Lord Masterson had assigned to her comfort – or possibly to spy on her – skidded to a halt in front of her. “Are you quite all right?”

“Yes, yes, I’m all right, yes,” Llinos said, her voice all hoarse, as if she was coming down with a cold. Odd, because she had never felt hotter in her life. “I’ll be going now. I need to rest. The heat is getting to me. ”

She willed her feet to move. Thank goodness Duncan had taken her off the stool. She

had completely forgotten where she was and would have fallen flat on her face the moment she took a step into thin air.

“Erm, my lady, your bedchamber is that way,” Elena said, pointing in the opposite direction.

“Yes, yes, of course it is. Thank you.”

Llinos walked away on shaky legs. How on earth was she going to face Duncan after what he had just done? Even more worryingly, considering what she had felt with him doing no more than fondle her breasts, how was she going to survive being made love to? It would be overwhelming, possibly even frightening in its intensity.

In the end she didn't have to worry about any of it. She spent the evening in her room, feigning a headache and the following morning, she was told he had gone to Shrewsbury and would be gone for several days. The news sent her into a flurry of anguish. Not that she thought Sir Benedict would be back before he was, but now that Duncan was gone, she realised that she had been looking for him at every turn, searched every corner of every room for a glimpse of him.

When a door opened she automatically raised her head in the hope that it would be him, when a horse was heard in the courtyard her heart started to beat faster, when someone laughed she checked to see if it wasn't him.

In less than a week he had taken a disproportionate place in her life.

And they had not slept together yet...

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It was only when the heavens opened that Duncan understood why he was in such a

foul mood. It had nothing to do with the sudden change of weather and the gnawing sensation in his gut was not hunger.

He was furious, that was what it was. Furious at having been taken away from Pitcairn Castle – or rather, to have been taken away from Llinos before he could use her body to douse the burning need she had woken up in him.

He had never seen anyone like her. Who the hell was this Lady Llinos and why did she have to burst into his life?

Duncan didn't know many people who would have had the guts to stand up to him the way she did, to tell him to his face she wasn't afraid when he had her all but squashed against the wall.

The woman was a walking contradiction. A lady yet not above mingling with inferiors, wee as a kitten and yet fierce as a wolf, innocent but bold enough to go to a man to demand to be taken and follow his most daring orders. Jesu the way she had bared her breasts to him! And the word 'cock' in her mouth! He grew hard just thinking about it.

What was he going to do with her? At first, he had wanted to teach her a lesson for thinking he was just a plaything to be used and discarded but now... Now he wanted to give her a proper lesson in fucking, plunge inside her again and again, until he had cured himself of this most unnerving infatuation.

Everything about her was sending him mad, even the most innocuous detail. Her freckles were a good example. That he had noticed them was already puzzling. That they sent him wild with desire was incomprehensible, and beyond maddening. Now he had touched the ones that graced her lush breasts and throat, he longed to see the ones covering the rest of her body. The absurd idea that he would not be satisfied until he had kissed and licked each and every one of the cinnamon-coloured dots

crossed his mind.

At first he had thought she was only yet another pampered, selfish, foolish lady, but those ladies he despised would never bite into an apple as if it was the most delicious treat imaginable, they would not make a man like him feel like their equal, they would not ruffle a child's hair and laugh at their jokes.

They would not let him suckle her because they knew how much pleasure he was deriving from it, they would instead demand he did what he was here for.

Nay, the lady was like no other. Even her name was unique. He did not know anyone else called Llinos.

He didn't know anyone else who looked, smelled, or tasted as good as she did. God, the taste of her! So clean, so fresh, so utterly intoxicating. He could still feel her tight little nipples roll over his tongue, hear her moans and squeals of surprised pleasure. If it had been so satisfying to suckle her, how much better would it be to take her?

The last time he had bedded a virgin, he had been a virgin himself, and the whole experience had been disappointing, over in moments and rather messy. Although he had become a much more accomplished lover since then, he wasn't quite sure what to expect from a tryst with the Welsh lady. One thing was sure, however, he would not be disappointed.

If what he had seen so far was to be trusted, it would be explosive.

What was he doing? Playing with fire, that was what. Getting obsessed about her had not been part of the bargain. God only knew what people would say if they saw him and Llinos together. No one would believe she had been the one coming to him, even supposing he was crass enough to reveal such a thing.

What would happen to her if she got her wish and Sir Benedict really did refuse to marry her because she was no longer a virgin? It was obvious she had not thought beyond ensuring he would not marry her but her actions would have serious repercussions. Would the man ruin her good name and make it impossible for her to find another husband? It was possible. Humiliated men were capable of the worst.

Why was he even wondering about it? It was not his problem, she had asked to be fucked, and he would fuck her. It was that simple.

Tonight he would be back at Pitcairn Castle, tomorrow he would go to find Llinos at the earliest opportunity, hold up his end of the bargain and put an end to whatever it was they were doing. There would be no more spying on her naked body, no fondling her breasts as if they were his to enjoy, no daydreaming about her. He would lift her skirts, take her maidenhead, spill outside her body, leave and be done with it.

Aye. It was the best thing to do. Then, with luck, his life could resume its normal course.

With a new determination he kicked his horse onwards.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:59 am

“Meet me in the room ye ken once ye’ve broken yer fast.”

Duncan tensed. What was he doing, giving such blunt assignments to ladies? But the lady in question nodded, as if he had every right to command her, and made her way to the great hall without a word of protest.

Knowing he would not be able to eat a single thing until he’d had her, Duncan made his way to the chamber they had used a few days ago, where he had suckled Llinos to within an inch of her life and waited for her, tense as bow, hard as an arrow, and ready to shoot. Mo chreach , he had to calm down! At this rate he would not last the time it took to help her overcome the pain of her deflowering. He wasn’t at all sure he would be able to take it slow. For a moment he considered bringing about his own release while he waited. It would render him temporarily unable to perform, of course, but it would be of little consequence. As soon as Llinos bared her breasts to his gaze – and mouth – he would be as hard as he was now .

Duncan shook his head in disgust. He would not allow the woman to make such a fool out of him. He was a grown man, for Christ’s sake, not a green lad of sixteen, he had more control than that! He refused to be humiliated thus. What if she walked in while his hose was round his ankles? It did not bear thinking about.

Nay. He would just wait, and stop being such an idiot.

A moment later Llinos slipped in the room, silent as a shadow. He closed the door behind her and his heart almost failed him when he saw her in front of him. She was... perfect.

“Sir Benedict might come back earlier than anticipated,” he said, knowing he was only looking for an excuse to take her into his arms before he went mad with the need for her. “We need to make it happen now.”

“Yes.” Thankfully, she did not point out that they still had weeks, if not months ahead of them. In fact, she sounded as desperate as he felt.

She glanced at the bed in the corner. He shook his head and sat her onto the table right behind her.

“I — ” She started to protest.

“I told ye. It would be however I want, wherever I want.”

He bunched her skirts around her waist quickly, exposing her legs and the place he coveted the most. A smile tugged at his lips when he saw it was adorned with hairs that looked as soft as silk.

Well, now he was really playing with fire.

Literally.

The woman was a living flame. Fiery spirit, fiery curls between her legs to match the fiery mane on her head. He could almost taste danger on his tongue. That decided him. Before he took her, he would taste her. If he ended up getting burnt, then so be it. Never had a condemned man gone to face his fate with more relish.

He dropped to his knees and gave her pretty pussy a long, luxurious lick.

Aye, danger. She tasted of danger and pure woman.

“W... what are you doing?” Llinos asked in a strangled voice.

He had just changed his mind, that was what. Yesterday morning, as he rode back to Pitcairn Castle, he'd resolved to take her in the most perfunctory manner, not to allow himself anymore pleasure than necessary, to keep her glorious body covered but now he could not remember why. He needed to make the most of her, needed her to enjoy his attention, needed to hear, see, taste her pleasure. He would be damned if she remembered her first time as less than mind blowing and he an unsatisfactory lover.

Wouldn't it be the best revenge to show her what a real man could do before sending her to a stilted lord too worried about his own pleasure to think about hers? She would remember all her life how hard the low born squire had made her come and wish she had...

He stopped the thought before it took him somewhere he didn't want to go.

“I'm going to give ye more pleasure than ye think possible,” he told her in a growl. Perhaps it would even be the first time she orgasmed. He doubted the respectable lady pleased herself. His pride surged at the thought. Aye, he would make sure she remembered him all her life, because he already knew he would never forget her and he couldn't bear to be the only fool unable to put that summer behind him when they parted ways. “I told ye, lass, there's nothing better than a man's tongue to give a woman's pleasure.”

Before she could protest he allowed the tip of his tongue to glide over her folds slowly. She cried out. He did it again, even more slowly, taking his time. She was delicious, and so soft!

“Oh, Duncan, please!”

Hearing his name pronounced in such a throaty, sensual whisper, in such an erotically

charged moment sent his blood to roaring in the blink of an eye. She was begging him. It was good enough for him. He was in control, not her, even if he was the one on his knees.

She tried to sit up. He stopped her with a hand splayed over her stomach.

“Nay. Lie back, lass, and open yer legs for me. Ye dinnae need to do anything.”

“No, I know, but I... I want to watch.”

Mo chreach !

Duncan was speechless. Had the respectable, very proper, very innocent Lady Llinos just told him, base born Duncan MacQuarrie, that she wanted to watch as he speared his tongue into her? He had never heard anything more arousing in his life.

She wanted to see? Well, he would make sure she saw everything.

Keeping his eyes locked with hers he opened his mouth. Slowly, he extended his tongue and licked along her seam. Oh, she was wet, so wet, wet for him . He groaned and licked again, and again, filling his mouth with her sweetness. Despite her intention to watch, Llinos’ eyes soon fluttered and her head rolled back. Then with a low moan she arched her back. In response he swirled his tongue around the little bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs, teasing it mercilessly, making her mewl in pleasure.

She buried her fingers into his hair to keep him in place, just like she had done when he had suckled her breasts. No need, he was not going anywhere until he had earned her complete surrender.

“More,” she rasped.

With that one word Duncan lost all restraint. Aye, more. He needed more as well. He needed to send her wild.

“Lie flat,” he ordered, before grabbing her hips to lift her to his hungry mouth. Her keening noises sent him mad, urging him on. He had never been more desperate to see a woman come undone.

When she cried out and convulsed around his tongue his decision was made.

He would deflower her now, in a moment of pleasure, he would spare her the anxiety of seeing his erect member about to enter her, he would make this as painless and quick as possible for her. Taking advantage of her climax, he slid two fingers inside her wet heat in a decisive thrust. She bucked in surprise but did not protest. He waited a moment before opening his fingers, ensuring that her maidenhead was well and truly breached, just as she wanted .

She sucked in a breath but did not appear to be overly distressed. Evidently, it had not hurt as much as he had feared.

He lowered his head to her again, and carried on lapping at her to soothe the burn. Carefully, he started massaging inside her wetness, intent on making her come again and forget all about the discomfort. The moans that filled the room were the most scandalous he had ever heard. Who would have thought it? It seemed that ladies were wilder in the bedroom than their demureness led to suppose.

Or maybe it was just Llinos.

When he curled his forefinger upwards she erupted again and clutched his hair so hard that he almost cried out himself.

Well, mission accomplished, Duncan thought wryly. The lady was no longer

untouched – and she would not forget him if she lived to be a hundred.

Slowly, a smile playing on his lips, he eased her back to reality.

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Llinos remained panting a long time, oblivious to everything that wasn't the delicious burn between her thighs. This had been nothing like what she had imagined when she had decided to lose her maidenhead. It had been exhilarating, unbelievable.

Incredibly intimate.

Eyes still closed, she smiled to herself. Duncan had said no kissing.

Well, he had just broken that rule, even if, admittedly, he had not kissed her where men usually kissed women. And contrary to what she had imagined, he had not taken her. Still, she could not bemoan the fact, when the alternative was so delicious. Twice he had caused her body to come apart at the seams, the second time even more glorious than the first.

But he still had not entered her. Would he do it now? She was ready for him, for whatever he wanted to do. She would not even mind if he didn't bring her to the bed first. Just as long as he...

A scrape of metal against stone broke through her thoughts.

No, not again! Llinos let out a squeak. Quick as a flash, Duncan covered her exposed legs and lifted her down from the table. As a result of his presence of mind, when Lord Masterson entered the room a moment later, he was faced with a fairly innocuous scene.

Thanks to the dim light in the room, he might not see her flushed cheeks and, as Duncan was keeping himself at an angle, he might not see the jutting hardness between his thighs. Of course he had not reached his pleasure...

“Are you all right, Lady Llinos?” Lord Masterson enquired, looking around the room. “I heard someone scream.”

Had she screamed? It was all too possible, after all she did not remember anything of the past few moments, save the blinding pleasure that had burst inside her body. If someone told her she had called the King of England a bastard at the top of her voice, she would believe it.

But even if she could feign ignorance of the scream, she would still have to account for all the moaning and panting... This, she distinctively remembered. How had Duncan made her lose her mind so, and behave so shamelessly?

“I — ”

“So you heard it too, my lord?” Duncan cut in smoothly. “We were wondering who the two culprits might be.”

Heavens... Llinos could barely contain her gasp of awe. He was brazen indeed! But of course he was right. It was far better not to deny having heard anything, as it would only make Lord Masterson more suspicious. Could it work?

Heart thumping hard, she waited. Then, to her relief, Lord Masterson chuckled.

“I have no idea, but evidently the man was quite the skilled lover. I have never heard the like.” He made a face, realising he had all but admitted he was incapable of making his conquests moan and beg for more. “In any case, I’m sorry you had to witness such an inappropriate display, my lady,” he said, bowing to Llinos. “It is not

something respectable ladies should ever have to hear.”

She flushed but, mercifully, this could easily be explained by the discussion they were having. “It’s quite all right.”

She threw a grateful glance at Duncan but he was not looking her way. Yes. Very wise.

“This happens more often than not, I’m afraid. One would think Pitcairn Castle inhabited by people only interested in one thing.”

He sounded almost excited, so much so that Llinos started to question his behaviour. He had heard two people making love and instead of tactfully retreating, he had barged in, as if hoping to catch them in the act. It made her uncomfortable. As she had told Duncan, she watched what people did, and Lord Masterson’s actions had just painted him as a voyeur.

Or... She tensed. Perhaps there was another, altogether more worrying reason for his bursting into the room as he had done. He had suspected that the lady moaning under her lover’s caresses was none other than her and he had wanted to interrupt before it was too late and she was ruined. After all, he was supposed to guard her virtue, he would understandably have wanted to ascertain what the situation was when he’d heard a woman lost in the throes of passion.

What would have happened if the scrape of his sword against the wall had not betrayed his presence in the staircase? It did not bear thinking about. He would have seen her with her legs spread wide and her most secret part being licked by a man who should never have had the presumption to touch her, and this mere days after she had assured him he did not need to put her under surveillance!

Being seen in such a compromising position was not what she wanted. It was one

thing telling Sir Benedict she was no virgin when he came back, quite another being seen while a man enjoyed her body in the lewdest manner imaginable.

“I will return to my tasks now that you’re here to escort the lady back to the great hall,” Duncan said with a nod in Lord Masterson’s direction.

Llinos did not want him to leave but she agreed that doing anything else would raise his master’s suspicion. It was already a miracle that, too focused on wondering who the two lovers might be, Lord Masterson had not asked what they had been doing together alone in a closed room.

“My lady?”

Automatically she took the arm he was offering and did her best to join in the conversation in a natural manner.

Mercifully, it wasn’t long before Lord Masterson excused himself.

The rest of the day was spent in a daze.

Llinos had the impression that someone had piled the rushes on the floor three times as thick as usual. She felt as if she was walking on clouds.

So it was done. Her crazy idea had worked. She was not a virgin anymore. Even better, what she had dreaded as a necessary task had actually been the best moment of her life.

Then her heart sank as she realised that, now he had taken her maidenhead, she had no reason to see Duncan again.

Well, she might not need to see him, but she wanted to more than ever. Having a

mouthful of a delicious cake had never been enough to sate anyone's hunger. It only made you want to finish it all.

As sure as her name was Llinos, she would make sure she devoured the rest of it – and enjoy every bite.

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“I think I will take a walk to the lake this morning,” Llinos announced, placing her eating knife down. “I lost an earring the day us ladies went last week. It might not be there but I wish to make sure.”

Lord Masterson raised his head from his bowl of frumenty. “You cannot go alone; it is not safe. The outlaws still have not been apprehended. They could be anywhere.”

She made a face, even though he had said precisely what she had wanted him to say. “Oh. Well, perhaps you could accompany me? Surely they will not dare attack a woman placed under such a powerful man’s protection?”

He tilted his head in acknowledgment of the compliment she had thought prudent to use to soften him up. “Indeed they would not. But alas, the bailiff is coming to see me today. The meeting was arranged days ago. I cannot possibly leave the castle.”

Of course Llinos knew that, otherwise she would not have asked him to go with her. The prospect of a ride with Lord Masterson was not an exciting one. His conversation was not what she would call stimulating and since the other day, when he had revealed his penchant for spying on people making love, she had been uncomfortable in his presence.

Still she pouted as if disappointed and dipped her fingers into the bowl of scented water.

“I dare not wait another day, in case it gets washed away or stolen... It is quite precious to me.” She sighed. “But if you say it isn’t safe to go unescorted then I suppose I shall just have to wait until someone is available to go with me.”

Lord Masterson looked at the door through which Duncan had just disappeared. Llinos started counting in her head, knowing she had timed her intervention well. When she reached four, he said the words she'd been hoping to hear all along.

“MacQuarrie is going to the village this morning on my behalf. It is just beyond the lake. He will escort you if you don't mind making a small detour.”

She tilted her head in consideration. “Indeed not, and that way I can buy some new thread for my sewing while I'm there. 'Tis the perfect solution, thank you.”

It was hard to hide her smile. People were so easily manipulated when one made sure to appear innocent and malleable. When she had heard Lord Masterson instruct his squire to go and see the brewer earlier, she had known he would not be going alone.

A moment later they were in the inner bailey. The sun was still hiding behind sliver-coloured clouds but the day promised to be glorious.

“MacQuarrie.” Lord Masterson called out to Duncan, who was saddling a sorrel gelding with quick, efficient gestures. Llinos let out a sigh of relief. They were just in time, he had not left yet. Even the most carefully laid out plans could sometimes go awry. “You won't be needing the horse. You are to escort Lady Llinos to the lake on your way to the village and she told me that she preferred to walk.”

Of course she did. It would take them longer on foot. Had she been able to, she would have insisted they crawled there and back. She wanted to be with Duncan as long as possible.

As impassive as ever, Duncan nodded and set about removing the saddle from the gelding's back. Llinos turned to Lord Masterson, eager to be alone with his squire.

“I wish you a good day, my lord.”

With a nod he left.

A moment later she and Duncan walked out of the gate .

“When did ye decide to go to the lake?” Duncan asked, keeping his gaze on the path ahead. “Before or after Masterson asked me to go to the village?”

She smiled. “During.”

He gave a snort, as if he had expected no less from her. “Ye’re a wee minx.”

“And you’re...”

“Aye?” Abruptly he stopped and planted himself in front of her, all brooding intent. “Tell me, lass. What am I exactly?”

“Tall,” she croaked.

A corner of his mouth lifted. The mouth that had coaxed such pleasure out of her the other day. It was impossible to look at his lips without thinking of where they had been. She swallowed hard as her centre started throbbing in remembrance.

“I’m tall. Is that all I am?”

“No. You’re also very broad.”

“Be careful, lass. Ye’re starting to sound like Lady Janet,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest. “Next ye’ll demand that I carry yer wee bag and tell me that I’m strong.”

“Well, you are strong,” she said in a breath.

“I’ll tell ye what I am if ye really want to ken. I’m a bastard,” he said, the word cutting harshly through the banter.

“No!” Was he berating himself for his behaviour the day before? Did he think he had been too forward and deserved to be punished? They had agreed he would take her maidenhead but perhaps he thought she would have preferred it if he’d done it in the normal way. She did not. What had happened had been too spectacular for her to regret anything. “I... You know I wanted you to... Well... You did not take advantage of me!”

“Aye, I ken that, lass, and I would ne’er do anything like that,” he said, shaking his head. “But I mean, I’m truly a bastard, born out of wedlock.”

She blinked. Why would he tell her that now? “Oh, I see,” she said, feeling at a loss.

They walked some more until Duncan started to explain. “My father was a commoner. My mother was a laird’s daughter, from clan McDonald. Her father had high hopes of a good marriage for her.”

“Oh no.” Llinos’ heart sank. She had a feeling she knew where this was going. Was Duncan the result of a rape?

But once again he surprised her. The man truly was unpredictable, one of the many things she liked about him .

“She took a fancy to my father as soon as they met and pursued him until he gave in,” he carried on without looking at her. “Not that it took much persuasion, I imagine. There is only so much teasing a man of twenty-five summers can take from a beautiful woman before he loses control, whoever she is, however unwise it is.”

The slanted look he threw her made her waver on her feet. She distinctively

remembered him telling her he was five and twenty just a few days ago. And she knew he found her beautiful, it was clear from the way he looked at her. He was effectively telling her that it was no wonder he had given in to her demand, however unwise it was. Her heart sank. She was not special in any way, nor did he sympathise with her predicament, he was simply a virile young man finding it impossible to resist his bodily urges and he had done what anyone else would have done in his place.

“I guess that her parents never accepted the affair?” she asked quietly.

“Affair?” Duncan snorted as if the word did not describe what had happened. “They ne’er found out about the ‘affair’, or the fact that it resulted in a bairn. Neither did my father. He was a minstrel, ye ken, and had been hired to play music at a gathering. After a few days of entertainment, the troop left the castle. And he didn’t realise he’d left the beautiful lady with child.”

“But then how...” Llinos closed her mouth. It was not her place to ask questions.

Duncan’s lips twisted as if her inability to keep her comments to herself amused him and carried on with his explanation. “Later that year the MacDonald’s daughter disappeared for a few months under the pretext of visiting a sickly cousin on the Isle of Mull. When the babe was born she handed him to nuns and rushed back to the castle to marry the man she had been promised to all along, a wealthy clan chief.”

Silence fell in the forest around them, only broken by the sound of their feet stomping on leaves. Llinos’ stomach was churning with nausea. A well-born lady betrothed to a rich lord going to a handsome commoner for a few nights of pleasure and then disposing of him when she’d had what she wanted out of him... The story sounded too familiar for comfort.

“My father told me ne’er to trust nobles. They only take what they want and discard ye once they are finished wi’ye.”

She couldn't answer because of course she had planned to do just that. Once Sir Benedict was back, he would be told she was not a virgin. Then, hopefully, he would break off the engagement and as soon as she was free, she would leave Pitcairn Castle – and Duncan – behind.

It had never been her intention to hurt him but how had she not anticipated that it would make him feel used and soiled?

“I-I’m so sorry,” she stammered, feeling suitably chastened. “I never thought beyond these few weeks and ensuring the wedding never took place. But I see now that I should never have — ”

“Dinnae fash yerself,” Duncan cut her embarrassed apology short. “’Tis not the same. Ye were honest wi’ me. I kent from the start where I stood. Ye told me what ye wanted from me, and why. Ye didn’t pretend to be attracted to me or anything of the sort.”

He made a derisory sound, as if to indicate he thought such a thing would be impossible. Oh, if only he knew! She had been attracted to him from the first. Now she might well have gone from attracted to infatuated. And he had not bedded her yet! There was no telling what she would feel once he had.

Would it not be wiser to stop seeing him now? What she had wanted to achieve had been achieved. She was no longer the virtuous bride Sir Benedict needed and she had the means to prove it. Although admittedly she had not bedded anyone yet and was in no danger of birthing a bastard child, all her betrothed would see was that she had lied about her virginity. After this betrayal he would be unable to trust her ever again.

Yes, she had done enough to get her betrothal cancelled and the wise thing would be to put an end to what she was doing with Duncan. But she might as well decide to stop breathing. The handsome Scot intrigued her more than ever, which was no

wonder after what he had done to her. But it was not only his beauty and skill in pleasuring a woman that drew her to him. Now that he had shared his story with her, she wanted to know all there was to know about him. So many questions remained unanswered... For one, if he had really been abandoned by his mother, and his father had never been told about his existence, then how come he knew who his parents were and how they met? And he'd said his father had warned him about nobles taking advantage. When? How?

She did not dare ask so she simply walked on. Then, as they reached the edge of the forest and she thought the subject was closed, Duncan spoke.

“Ye have nothing to blame yerself for, lass,” he said slowly. “I agreed to the bargain.”

*

Yes, he had agreed, Duncan thought ruefully, not thinking for a moment that he would lose control of the situation. But after their fiery encounter, he was more desperate for Llinos than ever. Not just for her body, but for her presence. It was not just the fact that he had not possessed her yet that bothered him, but that he had not found out all there was to know about her.

He needed to enter her body and her soul.

He felt like a man who had stepped into a wild cat's lair thinking the beast inside could be easily mastered, only to find out it was not a kitten after all but a fully grown, menacing adult. And he was out of his depth, a most unpleasant feeling. Duncan never felt out of depth.

Fool that he was, he'd thought he would enjoy taking a beautiful woman, teach an arrogant lady a lesson, and not risk his heart in the process. He'd thought that he

would derive satisfaction from humiliating her and not end up feeling like a low cur for using her so.

It had not happened like that because Llinos was not like the woman he had imagined.

He had not expected her innocent charm, her disarming spontaneity, her smiles, her unexpected brazenness, her responses to his caresses. At no point had she made him feel unworthy, he had done that all on his own. She didn't mock him, he mocked her, and instead of flying into a rage, she simply took it on the chin. She made him laugh, she made him see things that had not caught his attention before, she calmed him and last, but not least, she allowed him to be himself. When they were together there was no need to change the way he talked because she did not think his accent ridiculous, there was no need to hide the fact that he was a Scot because she was not English either and there was no need to guard his tongue because she did not take exception to his bluntness. On the contrary, she seemed to like it.

So where did that leave him? Somewhere he was not comfortable.

“Will you forgive me for being so thoughtless?” she asked in a voice that tugged at his heart. “I did not know about your past when I came to you but that is no excuse. I should have seen that I could only hurt you with my selfish demands.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Och, I will forgive ye if ye forgive me for treating ye like a — ”

She stopped him with a hand on his arm before he could utter the word, for which he was grateful. “You never did that, so there is nothing to forgive. I don't regret any of what happened between us. I couldn't have chosen a better man to introduce me to the art of lovemaking and I can't wait to see the rest.”

Lovemaking.

Mo chreach but the woman would never give up, would she !

“I dinnae make love, lassie,” he said, running a possessive hand over the swell of her breasts. It was time they re established what they were doing. It was not making love. “I told ye. I only fuck.”

Her smile unnerved him. It was clear she was not in the least chastened. “Yes, well. You told me as much but perhaps I don’t believe you. What you did yesterday was...” Whining noises interrupted Llinos on the verge of a confession Duncan wasn’t sure he wanted to hear. It would only end up confusing him more. “What could that be?” she exclaimed, eyes wide. “A child in pain?”

Before he could forbid her to go when they had no idea what was waiting behind the bushes, Llinos had disappeared in the direction of the noise. He had no choice but to follow. Had she forgotten about the outlaws already? He had not, even if for a crucial moment he had been too stunned to react as he should have. But this could be a trap. Dirk in hand, he ran after her.

He found Llinos on her knees next to a dog lying on its side. The animal had got its back leg tangled in a rabbit snare, and it was so wee it could not muster the strength to free itself.

“Look at this little cutie!” she exclaimed, favouring him with a blinding smile.

Little cutie ? Duncan barely repressed a snort. Never had a dog – or indeed any creature – looked sorrier. Its fur looked about as soft as wire and as if that was not enough, it was caked in mud. Duncan slid the dirk back into the sheath strapped to his forearm.

“Leave it, it’s most likely full of fleas,” he said, when Llinos made to stroke it.

“So? That’s nothing a bath won’t solve!” she answered, patting the puppy on the head.

“Och aye, and who’s going to do that exactly?” he drawled, crossing his arms over his chest. He was not touching the beastie with a barge pole.

“Why, me of course!”

“Ye? Lady Llinos, attending to the needs of a dirty mongrel?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time, would it?” she said, throwing him a slanted look.

Well, damn if she didn’t have the knack for rendering him speechless! Duncan found himself fighting a smile. The lass was impossible. Wasn’t he supposed to tame her? Perhaps it was time he started.

“I should make ye regret yer words,” he growled, rubbing the back of his head.

“I don’t see why, when I’m speaking nothing but the truth,” she said as she set about freeing the animal’s leg with gentle tugs. She was so careful, so gentle! It was mesmerising to watch and he could not help imagining her hands on him. Wishing to feel her hands on him. “There. Now, do you think he can walk or will I have to carry him?”

Duncan was incredulous. “Ye are not seriously considering taking him back to the castle wi’ye?”

“When I was young I wanted a dog and on my twelfth birthday, I was presented with a greyhound,” Llinos said instead of answering. “A more magnificent beast you had

never seen. All silver fur and elegant limbs.”

“Aye, I can weel imagine.” Nothing but the best for the spoiled lady. All she had to do was ask and she got her wish. A dog, a horse, a bejewelled pendant... Nothing would be too fine for the little girl.

“I was beside myself with joy because I had been pestering my parents for years to have one but they always pretended not to hear me.” Duncan arched a brow at the admission. Well perhaps her wishes were not always instantly granted... Still. “That same day the dog bit me,” she carried on. “That beautiful animal with all the pedigree you could wish for was a monster. All I wanted was to play with him and cuddle him. But he never once allowed me to touch him.” She ruffled the scruffy puppy’s head as she spoke. “Now I will have all the hugs I have dreamed about since I was a child. ”

“Ye would take yer hugs from a dirty half-breed?”

“Yes.” She looked at him straight in the eye, magnificent in her confidence and placed the dog on the floor. “I will take them from whoever wants to give them and count myself lucky.”

This was it.

Duncan’s blood roared and his cock surged, demanding satisfaction. The wretched dog had provided him with the long-awaited opportunity to do what he had been requested – and was aching – to do. He and Llinos were alone in a clearing, and the animal would warn them should someone approach. This time they would not be interrupted until he had reached his pleasure as well.

Perfect.

It was time to show the lady what it felt like to be under a man.

“Ye will take whatever embraces rutting half breeds want to inflict on ye?” he growled, feeling like a randy dog himself.

Llinos winced, as if she did not like to hear what they were about to do – or him – described thus but she didn’t lower her eyes. “Yes.”

“Weel then.”

*

Finally.

Llinos inhaled sharply. Finally she was about to know what it felt like to have a man inside of her. Her whole body started to quiver in anticipation because that man was Duncan, the man she had chosen for herself. Nevertheless, because it was Duncan, and in view of what he had just told her, she felt compelled to speak first.

Her desire for him would have to come after his need to know she was not just using him as his mother had used her father.

“You know... After what you did the other day there is no actual need for you to actually...” Her voice trailed.

“To actually...?” he repeated, a corner of his lips curling.

The wretched man was going to force her to be clearer. He really had a thing for making her say the lewdest things out loud.

“There is no need for you to actually take me,” she breathed, unable to be more explicit. “After what happened I’m not... Well, you said I was not a maid anymore.”

Unless he had lied? How would she know? She had always heard that being deflowered hurt, and she could not be said to have experienced any real pain when he had pushed his fingers inside her. True, with his tongue distracting her, she had been in no state to evaluate the true extent of the discomfort it had caused her but still she knew she would have realised it if he had hurt her. So perhaps her maidenhead had not really been breached. Perhaps that was why he still thought it necessary to bed her. Perhaps a man's fingers could not do what his manhood could do.

"Nay, ye're not a maid anymore," Duncan answered the silent question in her eyes. "But ye still dinnae ken what it's like to have a man surge inside ye, fill ye over and over again until ye cannot take it anymore and are desperate for release."

"Oh." Indeed she didn't know anything about that. And it sounded very much like something she wanted to experience – with Duncan, at least.

"Ye wanted yer betrothed to ken ye've been wi' a man, to see the difference in ye without even asking, didn't ye?" he asked, cupping her face in his hands. "This will only happen if ye actually allow a man to bed ye."

Yes, indeed, she had hoped she wouldn't have to actually say she was not untouched anymore. In her dreams, Sir Benedict would take one look at her, see her for a fallen woman and turn on his heels faster than a coward fleeing a battlefield. Such a result would save her the trouble of having to explain herself or, even worse, name her seducer. All of a sudden dread crept up her spine. How had she not thought of that? What if Sir Benedict demanded to be told who had deflowered her and robbed him of the bride he had found to secure his inheritance? Would she have the strength to hold on to her secret? If he found out what Lord Masterson's squire had done he might well kill him and everyone would agree he was within his rights to do so. And if he found out that she had been the one going to Duncan, then what punishment would he think up for her?

Her fear must have shown in her eyes because Duncan shook his head slightly. “Lass. I will ne’er tell yer betrothed or anyone that ye were the one coming to me.”

“I-I would like to tell you I will never reveal your name but I’m not sure I’ll be strong enough to sustain his interrogation without betraying what happened,” she stammered.

“Aye, I ken it. Dinnae fash yerself. I can face my responsibilities. I told ye, I agreed to this,” he said firmly. “And I ken that ye need him to doubt ye as soon as he arrives because otherwise it will all have been for naught. If he realises only on yer wedding night that ye are not untouched, then ye will already be his wife. It would be a much uglier business.”

“Yes,” she breathed .

To her surprise he twisted his lips, a sign of hesitation she would not have expected from him. Duncan MacQuarrie was all about masculine confidence. “Of course, if ye dinnae want me to take ye, I willnae. I dinnae force women, and strictly speaking, what ye wanted has already been accomplished.”

Llinos bit her lip. She should tell him she didn’t need anymore since, rather unexpectedly, he was giving her the option to walk away without actually sharing the shocking intimacy of having a man inside her. She should...

The words were out of her mouth before she could finish the thought.

“No, I want you. Take me.”

A heartbeat later she was flat on her back, trapped under a hard body. Hard everywhere. Lord, this was really happening. She let out a strangled groan, which Duncan took for a sign of fright.

“Are ye scared, lass?”

“N-no.” She wasn't scared exactly, but still she could not deny being apprehensive. He was so strong, so determined, and he was so close to her. His face was inches away from hers, the whole length of his body was pressing down on her, pinning her to the grass.

“It willnae hurt, I swear,” he said, bringing his forehead to hers. “I will e'en do my best to make it pleasurable for ye.” Absurdly her eyes filled with tears. So much for just fucking her... Hadn't she known it would be an empty threat? She let out a shaky breath and once again he mistook her reaction for fear. “I swear I will be careful, but if ye'd rather I pleased ye first I — ”

“No.” How had this man ever thought she would take him for a thoughtless beast? She smiled, not wanting to cause him any distress. “I trust you.”

From the moment he heard her agreement he became a different man, or rather he reverted to his usual commanding, masculine self. Llinos was left wondering which was the real Duncan. The forbidding Scot or the attentive squire.

“Open for me, lass,” he instructed softly, brushing his fingers up along her inner thigh. “Let me prepare ye. Ye need to be nice and wet for me.”

“I already am,” she breathed, past all shame.

He growled when she spoke and again when he felt against his fingers the proof that she was not lying. “Och, aye ye are,” he rasped, evidently pleased. “As I am ready for ye. I cannae wait anymore.”

He fumbled with the laces of his hose. A moment later something nudged at her entrance, and started to push its way in. Something enormous.

“Duncan, wait!” Now she was scared. This was nothing like what had happened before on the table. “There must be a mistake. This not going to work... It’s too big!”

He gave a throaty laugh. “Nay, lass, it’s not. It’s going to fit just perfectly, and it shouldn’t hurt, since I made sure to take yer maidenhead already and yer body has had time to recover. ‘Twill be just fine if ye relax, and breathe. Ye trust me, remember?”

Llinos tried to do as he asked. It helped. “I trust you,” she repeated.

“Ye want me, aye?” She nodded. Despite her wariness, she did, more than ever. “Ye wanted this, ye came to me for it. Here then, take it.”

Oh!

In one thrust he was inside her, buried to the hilt. Or... Llinos had no idea if this was actually the case because she had nothing to compare it to. Then she realised that Duncan was still poised over her, and that she could not feel his pelvis against hers or his legs against her inner thighs. Mmm. Not quite to the hilt then, or even anywhere close.

He moved again, pushing in deeper as if to prove there was still a long way to go yet. Llinos focused on breathing .

“Am I hurting ye?” Duncan sounded gruffer than ever, strained with the effort of holding back.

“No.”

“Dinnae lie. Ye’ve gone all stiff.”

She could not help a snort. He thought she was stiff? “You are not hurting me,” she said honestly. “It is odd, that’s all, not what I imagined, nothing like your...” She blushed. “Like before.”

“Like my fingers and tongue,” he clarified in her stead. “Aye, likely it isn’t.” His eyes darkened. “Ask me to move. I need to move. Ye feel so good, so tight around me.”

“Yes, move.”

When he did, it was different, his progress was less difficult.

And soon he was buried to the hilt inside of her. She had never been closer to any human being. Duncan was everywhere, looming over her, pressing against her, surging inside her.

“See, lass. What did I tell ye?” he purred into her ear. “A perfect fit.”

*

Now. Duncan had to withdraw now, or he would spill inside her. Llinos had reached her release moments ago, crying out and going all tense around him, squeezing him for all she was worth.

God’s bloody teeth but this was bliss. He gave another thrust. And then a last one. He reared up, preparing to leave her heat and explode in a climax such as he had never experienced before. Whether that was because she was a virgin, a lady that should have been out of his reach or simply because he usually didn’t wait when he wanted to bed a woman and the expectation had sent his blood to boiling point, Duncan didn’t know. Whatever the reason for it, he felt as if he was about to pass out in ecstasy in Llinos’ arms.

Just when he clenched his teeth in preparation for leaving her blissful hot sheath she wrapped her arms around his waist to hold him in close. At any other time he would have found the strength to push her away but right now a feather could have knocked him to the ground.

There was no choice. With a roar he emptied himself inside her and then collapsed, utterly sated.

He should have been angry, furious at Llinos for the trick she had played on him but, deep down, he knew she had not tried to trap him into anything. The innocent little minx didn't know anything about men, she'd had no idea he had been about to come, she would not have recognised the signs.

After a while her voice reached his ear. "Duncan, please. I can't breathe."

He moved faster than if she had stabbed him with a red hot poker. "Apologies."

But she didn't look inconvenienced in the least. On the contrary she was smiling dazedly, looking as drained as he felt. He didn't tell her that with her hair spread on the grass and her cheeks flushed she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, that he'd never felt this way about anyone before or that he'd nearly lost his mind with the pleasure of this possession.

That he wanted to do it again.

"Now ye ken," was all he said.

"Yes, I do," she agreed with a contented sigh. Then she said something in Welsh.

"What was that?"

“Mm?” She sounded sleepy.

“What did ye just say?”

“Nothing.”

He could not allow her to ignore his request, not now that he had obeyed her silent command to stay inside her to reach his release. He needed to regain control of the situation. He was the one in charge, not her, and she had already taken more of a hold over him than he was comfortable to admit.

“Ye had better answer me, lass. What did ye say?”

Llinos opened her eyes, surprised at his gruffness. For a moment he feared she would recoil. He did not want her to, not now, mere moments after their joining. Then her eyes softened and she placed a hand on his cheek. “I said that yes, now I know how it feels like to have a man inside me. And I don’t think I will be satisfied until I have felt it again and again.”

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“What is that?”

Llinos bit back the sarcastic answer already on her tongue. It’s a pigeon, as you can see.

“It’s a dog I found trapped in the forest, next to the lake,” she told Lord Masterson in a mild voice. In truth, this graciousness cost her little. After making love to Duncan in the woods, she felt better than she had ever felt. “I will look after him.”

“Not here you won’t. He looks terrible.”

She barely repressed a sigh of irritation, her good mood fast evaporating now that she was back to reality. Couldn’t anyone see past appearances? Saying that the dog could not be accepted into the castle walls because he was dirty was much akin to saying a man could not be a guest at a banquet because his clothes had got muddied on the road. Ridiculous.

“By tonight he will be thoroughly clean,” she assured him. “And he will not bother you.”

Lord Masterson made a face. “If he’s presentable tonight I might, just might consider allowing you to keep him. But he will sleep in the stables. I’m not having an unknown dog wandering around the castle at night causing chaos,” he ruled. “During the day he will be under your responsibility. If there is any trouble — ”

“There won’t be,” Llinos cut in. “I will bathe him immediately.” She had left Duncan at the gate and was eager to go back to see him.

“Did you find your earring?” Lord Masterson enquired before she could leave.

“No. I’m afraid it is lost.”

He made a sympathetic noise. “Did you at least get the thread you wanted at the village?”

Thread? Llinos blinked. What was he talking about?

“Erm... no,” she said when she finally remembered the lie she had made up that morning. In light of all that happened since then she had forgotten all about it.

“Then you went all the way there in vain.”

Well, no, not in vain. Never had an errand been more worthwhile. A burst of heat exploded between her legs when she remembered what she and Duncan had done.

“Let me go and find everything I need to wash the dog,” she said to hide her embarrassment. “I saw a bucket by the stables earlier. It will do very nicely. ”

Just as she had hoped, Duncan was busy grooming his master’s horse. Once the bucket was filled with water she placed herself so that she could keep an eye on him while she washed the pup – and was gratified to see him glance her way every so often. It was as if an invisible thread stretched between them since they had joined their bodies.

Not that she would not have looked at him otherwise.

Everything Duncan did mesmerised her. The way the muscles of his legs tensed when he bent down to pick the horse’s hooves, the gentleness with which he ran his hand along the animal’s flanks, the little reassuring pats he gave it on the rump. She had

the absurd impression he was lavishing on it the attention he wanted to lavish on her, that he stroked the stallion because his fingers were itching to stroke her . In response, her own gestures became slower and more languid. She caressed the dog's back as she would have Duncan's and allowed her fingers to weave into his fur in the same way she would have liked to play with his hair.

Had played with it, while he teased her innermost folds with his lips and tongue.

At that precise moment the dog gave her a lick and she almost jumped out of her skin.

"Not now!" she whimpered, desperate not to be reminded of another tongue lapping at her. She was in full view of everyone!

Eventually there was nothing for either her or Duncan to do. The horse was gleaming and the dog had been restored to his normal colour, a thoroughly unremarkable shade of brown. Llinos smiled. Indeed he looked nothing like her beautiful, silvery greyhound had.

When everyone left to go have their evening meal, she remained behind under the pretext of having to dry the dog. As she rubbed the cloth over him she gave him a pat on the head, gratefulness swelling in her chest. He had already repaid her a hundred fold for saving him, by allowing her time alone with Duncan and giving him the opportunity to make a woman out of her.

Once the bailey was almost deserted Duncan leaned against the stable door and crossed his arms over his chest. "Ye stand by yer decision then?" he drawled. "Ye will adopt the wee beastie?"

"Of course. I am not the changeable sort, and the 'wee beastie' as you call him has won my heart," she said, ruffling the hairs between the puppy's ears. The dog would always remind her of what had happened that day in the clearing, of her first

encounter with a man. “I think I will call him Cwtch. ”

“What does that mean, I wonder?” Duncan arched a brow. “Dirtball? Monster?”

Llinos gave a giggle. The man was impossible. She would never have suspected this dry, mischievous side to him. He looked more prone to skewer you with a dark stare than make you burst in laughter. “Stop it! It means hug.”

“Och!” He winced. “The poor bastard. Such a manly name for him!”

“Leave my dog alone.”

“Certainly I will. I have no intention of going anywhere near him.”

“Afraid, are you?”

“Aye.” Duncan leaned in and bared his teeth. His white, perfect teeth that had nibbled at her. “Afraid of catching fleas and spending the next few nights scratching myself raw.”

Llinos rolled her eyes in mock exasperation. “Well, I’m not afraid to hug him. He’s just had a bath, what more do you want?”

“A thorough dousing in the river? Or three? And some flea powder?”

“Do you mean that you don’t believe dogs can be loved despite a lack of breeding? That because they’ve been dirty and neglected once it is too late for them?”

Duncan pierced her with his stare. Oh no. He had understood she was not really talking about dogs.

“I believe that... dogs ,” he placed special emphasis on the word, “should know their place. Ye might cuddle the laddie but everyone else will kick him out of their way. Ye showing him the same treatment ye did yer silver greyhound will only confuse and hurt him in the end. He won’t understand when someone else treats him as he deserves.”

“No one deserves to be humiliated. And dogs are not stupid,” Llinos said roundly, looking him straight in the eye. “Cwtch will understand perfectly that some people are just cruel, prejudiced idiots who should be avoided at all costs. If other people cannot see him for the marvel he is, then he will just stick to me. It will be their loss.” She stood up and lifted the cuff of her dress to expose her wrist. A series of silver dots in a crescent shape marked the place where the greyhound had bitten her all those years ago. “I still have the scars to remind me not to judge people by their appearance. I told you, I know a good dog when I see one. And a good man.” She tilted her head and favoured him with an impish grin. “It’s hardly surprising. Men are nothing but dogs on two legs anyway.”

In response Duncan barked a laugh. “Are they now? ”

“You told me so yourself. All they are interested in is mounting women.”

“Aye, they are.” He suddenly sobered as if he’d remembered something unpleasant. She braced herself. What now? What had she said? “That man...” he started.

“What man?” The change of topic threw her.

“The bastard who tried to rape ye before Sir Benedict proposed.”

Sir Huw, he meant. Her heartbeat went wild at the memory. “You remember that?”

His nostrils flared. “Of course I do. How could I forget something like that! Is he here

at the castle? Is it someone I ken?"

"N-no," she stammered, taken aback by the hatred in his voice. "Why do you ask?"

"So I can ram my fist down his throat, that's why, and see how he likes it!" Duncan roared. "How can he think he can get away wi' something like that?" His green eyes glittered with barely contained fury.

Heat spread through Llinos. No one had ever sprung to her defence with such vehemence. "You don't think I only got what I deserved for my — "

"Lass," he interrupted her. "Ye just said that no one deserved to be humiliated, regardless of their origins. Weel, no woman deserves to be raped, regardless of what she says or does. Ye refusing his offer of marriage is absolutely no excuse for him to pounce on ye. And I really doubt ye said or did anything that would justify him pretending ye were willing when ye were not. A man kens when the woman in his arms doesn't want him."

His absolute confidence and support shook her to the core. Llinos knew there and then that having him surge inside her in the meadow had created less of an indissoluble bond between them than having him spring to her defence so readily had. Duncan MacQuarrie had made a woman out of her and, even more importantly, he had made her see that, instead of being threatened and used because she was weaker, she should be respected and appreciated because of it.

"Now that Cwtch is clean I think I should go and eat," she murmured, knowing she was in danger of doing something foolish if she stayed here any longer.

"Aye, ye should. I will go and get something at the tavern."

"Why?" She didn't want him to leave.

“I think ye ken why.”

Llinos slowly nodded. He was afraid he was about to do something foolish too.

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As he watched Llinos leave, Duncan tried to make sense of the feelings agitating him.

Anger, desire, powerlessness, and the need to pummel someone to the ground warred inside him.

The idea of a man forcing himself on her was enough to send his blood to boiling point. Even the idea of the pain she had endured when that hound of hers had bitten her was unbearable. He didn't want her to experience anything other than joy and pleasure. Today that dirty little mongrel of hers had brought her joy and then he himself had brought her pleasure. It had been beautiful to see and he didn't want to leave it at that.

The first thing she'd said after he'd withdrawn from her sated body was that she wanted to do it again. So did he. Although the purpose of their meetings had been fulfilled, it was not over between them.

It had only just started.

Kicking a stone with the tip of his boot, he set off for the tavern. He didn't really want to go but it was better than going to the great hall and seeing Llinos sat on the dais like the lady she was. He would have to watch from a distance and behave as if he did not know the heat of her embrace and the taste of her pleasure. He wasn't sure he could do it tonight, not when his body was still humming from the pleasure she had wrung from him earlier.

Damnation, that wouldn't do at all she was the one supposed to appear like a lust-governed creature, not him!

He pushed the tavern door open with decision.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:59 am

The following day Cwtch came back from his run in the forest almost as dirty as he'd been the day before.

“Oh no! Where have you been, you devil?” Llinos exclaimed in despair, as she watched him rush back to her, his face covered in mud.

“Incorrigible, isn't he? What did I tell ye? Once a mongrel, always a mongrel.” Duncan smirked. She could tell her was enjoying her discomfiture.

“Lady Llinos!”

“Oh no,” she muttered under her breath, while Duncan retreated to the stables. As ever, they were careful to avoid being seen together.

“I thought you had bathed your dog last night?” Lord Masterson asked, arching a brow in Cwtch's direction.

“I did but he fancied a run this morning again and well, we both know how irresistible a puddle of mud can be,” she said, smiling in the hope to forestall any further criticism. “I will take him to the river this time. It is a hot day, so I think he will like to play in the water after I wash him. ”

He rolled his eyes at her attempt to minimise the inconvenience of having to wash a dog twice in as many days. “If you insist... After all, it is not as if you had anything else to do here at Pitcairn Castle. Davies!” He called to the man cleaning a saddle on the side. “You will accompany the lady to the river while she washes her dog.”

“It shall be my pleasure, my lord.”

The man sounded eager. Suspiciously eager. So eager that Lord Masterson’s eyes narrowed.

“On second thoughts... MacQuarrie, you will go. Davies will finish cleaning the tack.”

Llinos forced herself not to smile when the tall Scot walked towards them and gave a mental thanks for Cwtch’s love for mud. Once again the pup was providing her with the perfect excuse to spend some time alone with a man she would otherwise have no reason to see. When Duncan didn’t betray any emotion at the idea of accompanying her Lord Masterson nodded, satisfied that nothing untoward would happen. She bit the inside of her mouth not to betray her delight.

“Take her to the clearing beyond the bend. The water is slow there. And keep your eye out for outlaws.”

“Very well.” Duncan sounded unusually tense, as if he feared betraying any unseemly complicity between them. After what had happened the day before, it was hard to blame him. She did feel as if it was branded on both their foreheads for all to see and she found it incredible that no one seemed any the wiser.

A moment later they were out of sight and he visibly relaxed.

“Do ye ken why Masterson changed his mind about Davies going wi’ ye to the river?” he asked while Cwtch bounded ahead with as much enthusiasm as if he had not just spent the morning running around.

“I think it was because he seemed too eager to accompany a lady who might get wet while she washed her dog,” Llinos replied cautiously.

“And why might that be, I wonder?”

“Because then he would be able to... ogle me while my clothes cling to my body, shall we say?”

“Verra weel,” Duncan said with a nod. “Ye’re learning.”

She was. Only a week ago she would not have understood Lord Masterson’s sudden change of mind. She was also getting bolder.

“I think he was happy to send you because he saw from the disinterested way you looked at me that you had no intention of doing the same,” she added with a grin.

He snorted. “Lass. Unlike that oaf Davies, I am clever enough not to let my intentions show on my face!”

“Does that mean you do not intend to take advantage of it if I happen to get wet?”

“Och, I intend to take advantage of ye all right, and I will be the one getting ye wet, not that mangy cur! Believe me, it will be no accident but a deliberate, thorough attempt on my part.”

Llinos would have tripped had Duncan not caught her by the elbow. “You cannot mean that you will...” She hesitated. She was getting bolder, but she still had a long way to go to be his match.

“Splash ye while ye wash the wee beast? Nay, that’s not what I mean at all,” he answered in a dark voice. “I have other ways of making ye dripping wet, ye ken I have. I cannae believe ye’ve forgotten what happened yesterday?”

Oh she had not forgotten anything. But...

“We can’t, not in front of the dog!”

Duncan threw his head back and laughed, a rich, evocative laugh that sent tingles all the way to her toes. “Why not? Ye did not complain about it the last time.” Llinos realised only then that indeed she had not thought about who or what might see them yesterday, man or beast. She had let Duncan tumble her into the grass and expose her body as eagerly as if they had been in her private bedchamber. “And it’s not as if he had not copulated in front of humans before,” Duncan finished.

“Copulated!” Llinos cried out. For some reason, the word had sent her knees to water.

“Aye. Dogs copulate,” he repeated firmly. “They dinnae make love, lass.”

“Neither do some men apparently.”

Yes. He had warned her about it.

I will not kiss ye, I will not pamper ye. I will just fuck ye.

Duncan stopped and glared at her. She whimpered, fearing he would not allow this impudence to pass.

“Weel, as to that, it is as ye said. Men are only two-legged dogs after all. So they dinnae make love either. Now. Shall we?” To her relief the ice in his voice melted. He would not hold her remark against her. “Someone is in need of a bath.”

“Oh,” she teased him, sniffing at her sleeve. “I had hoped you wouldn’t notice the rotten fish smell.”

“Rotten fish!” He scoffed. “Lass. Ye smell like a bouquet of roses.”

Llinos went red to the roots of her hair. Oh no, now she would look like a bouquet of roses as well... crimson roses.

At the river, it took a lot more time and effort than she had anticipated to get Cwtch back to his original shade of brown. The dog was so excited he kept running away and dirtying himself all over again. It had been a whole lot easier in the bucket. During the whole operation Duncan, the wretched man, did not lift a finger to help her. The twinkle in his eyes clearly said: 'Ye made yer bed, now ye lie in it.'

Talking of which, he had still made no move to touch her. She refused to think it was disappointment churning in her gut.

"Getting wet yet, lass?" he purred, as she wiped her brow with her sleeve.

"Not too bad," she replied with commendable bravado.

Was he going to pounce now?

He did not. In fact, he started the walk back to the castle.

"The mongrel will need a good run now, to dry himself off," he said as if to explain his decision. Llinos was not fooled. He did not care a fig about the animal. There had to be another reason for his sudden decision to leave the riverside, but what could that be?

As they entered the wood, the answer came to her. Because he did not want her. He considered his task done and didn't want to have anything to do with her anymore. Certainly he had not volunteered to accompany her to the river, he'd been made to by Lord Masterson. But then why had he spoken to her so provocatively earlier?

I intend to take advantage of ye all right, and I will be the one to get ye wet, not that

mangy cur! Believe, me, it will be no accident but a deliberate, thorough attempt on my part.

She had taken it to mean that he wanted to tumble her into the grass but perhaps that had been wishful thinking. Perhaps that was just what she wanted. What would she do if he refused to see her again? She could not pursue him, not after what he had revealed about his mother. She would not have him believing her as cold and dismissive as that woman had been.

Llinos risked a glance at Duncan and saw his jaw clenched. He was steeling himself for an unpleasant task. Namely telling her they had to stop seeing each other.

Heart heavy as lead, she stared at the ground, focusing on placing one foot in front of the other.

“Ye remember that my father was a minstrel?”

Relief almost floored her. Thank God she’d got it all wrong, he wasn’t about to announce he didn’t want anything to do with her, he looked grim because he was revisiting his past, that was all!

“Yes, I do,” she answered softly, knowing he was not really asking if she remembered, merely signalling he was ready to talk about something he found painful. That he wanted to talk about his past with her warmed the part of her soul who’d gone cold when she had thought he was about to take his distance from her.

“Weel, about a year after their meeting, he and his troop were called back to the castle – to play at Lady Eileen MacDonald’s wedding.”

“Oh no!” Llinos’ hand flew to her mouth. “The poor man!” Forced to attend the wedding of the woman who had used him so casually!

“The day after the ceremony she went to find my father, saying that she would like to make the most of a virile young man while he was here. Apparently her distinguished husband had failed to give her satisfaction in bed and she could not forget their nights together.”

If Duncan’s father had looked anything like his son then it was hardly surprising the woman would have wanted more of... Llinos bit her lip before the shameful thought could fully take form.

What was she thinking? The man’s appeal was no excuse. Lady Eileen had shamefully used him and had not even felt any qualms about it.

“She never dared!”

“Och, she did. My father refused, as ye can imagine,” Duncan carried on, staring right ahead. “Out of spite, the lady revealed that their week together the previous year had borne fruit. When he asked to see the bairn she told him to forget about it, that she had abandoned it and he would never get to see it.”

“‘Tis monstrous!” Llinos’ guts twisted.

“Aye, weel, I believe that Lady Eileen was a monstrous woman.”

She noted that he always called her by her title, never ‘my mother’. Considering what she had done, it was hard to blame him.

They walked in silence for a moment.

“My father never gave up on me. Travelling the length and breadth of the country as he did, he could ask questions, so he enquired everywhere, and eventually, he found out about my whereabouts. The nuns were only too happy to allow a man who

actually wanted his bairn to take me away. I was about a year old then.”

At the thought of Duncan as a clumsy, golden-haired toddler Llinos’ heart melted. He would have been utterly adorable, even if it was hard to imagine him as anything other than tall and self-assured. “I’m glad you two were reunited,” she murmured.

“My da raised me. As soon as I was old enough to take an interest in lassies he made me promise ne’er to be as foolish as he had been, and keep a cool head where noble ladies were concerned.”

Never had Llinos felt so sheepish. How had he not lashed out at her the night she had so crudely accosted him? He would have thought history was repeating itself, would have been reminded of what his father had endured.

“Duncan, I’m really sorry,” she said, taking a step to the side. How could he even bear the sight of her? Simply being with her was disloyal to his father. Sleeping with her would have felt like the ultimate betrayal towards the man who had raised him in such sad circumstances. “If you preferred to — ”

“Nay, lass.” He caught her elbow to force her back to his side. “’Tis not the same wi’ye. Ye dinnae mock me for my lack of refinement, ye dinnae behave as if everything we did was owed to ye. ‘Tis not the same at all.” He shook his head in disgust.

“Is that how it was for your father?” Llinos was dismayed. How vicious of his mother to go to a commoner and then making him feel below her dignity!

“Aye.”

He didn't say anything else and she did not insist. There was nothing she could say that would help .

“So you were raised by minstrels?” she asked eventually.

“Aye.” He sounded diffident, as if he thought she would think less of him for having had such a childhood.

“Then... you must know how to sing and dance, mayhap even play an instrument!” The idea made her insides flutter.

Duncan stopped and stared at her as if she had just grown another head. “Is that all ye have to say? That I can sing?”

He didn’t seem to think it was anything worthy of note. Oh, but it was! She was not even surprised. His voice, so deep and resonant, was already musical when he spoke. Hearing him sing would be thrilling.

“Well, can you sing?”

“Aye,” he said cautiously.

“Oh! Then you — ”

“Nay.”

She bit her lip. No, of course not. There would be no singing, just like there would be no kissing. That was not part of the bargain. He was not here to woo her, but to fuck her. She could tell he was thinking exactly the same thing.

I will not kiss ye, I will not pamper ye. I will just fuck ye .

And suddenly it was not enough. How could she have even pretended otherwise? Cwtch gave a sudden bark and bounded ahead, cutting through the tension.

“It seems that you were right,” she mumbled, grateful for the respite. “He did need a good run.”

“Aye, weel, it wasn’t difficult to guess. A man can only endure so much petting afore he has to expand energy in one way or another.”

She could not help a giggle. She loved Duncan’s dry humour, and even more the fact that he was not afraid to use it with her.

“Cwtch is not a man,” she told him sternly. “He’s a dog. I assure you, he can ‘endure’ petting. That’s what he likes best. Along with rolling in mud, of course.”

“Is it now?”

Just then a series of grunts and yelps caught her ear, followed by growling, and soft barking. Llinos’ smile instantly froze.

“Cwtch, no! He’s being attacked!”

“Nay!” Duncan hissed, catching her by the waist as easily as he would catch a child. “I willnae have ye assaulted by outlaws because ye ran after a dog! Yesterday ye gave me the slip, but it’s not going to happen again.”

“We have to help him! Please,” she whispered, unable to bear the idea of her dog being injured .

“Let’s go and see if he needs us first.”

Slowly they crept towards the scene of the commotion.

Llinos almost collapsed at the sight meeting her eyes. Her dog was enthusiastically

pumping away into a slender white dog almost twice as tall as him.

A hand at her elbow lifted her back to her feet. Then a chuckle reached her ear.

“Weel... Someone’s getting assaulted all right! It would seem that the laddie’s found a better way to expand his energy than running around. Good on him! And his tastes appear to run to the refined!” Indeed the white dog appeared to be pure bred, nothing like the animal a farmer would keep. “An ambitious lad, yer Cwtch!”

Linos flushed crimson. “We must... perhaps we should...”

“Avert our eyes? No need,” Duncan scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest. “I told ye, he doesnae care who watches him. Besides...”

Before he could finish Cwtch stepped down from his conquest and trotted in the direction of the river. The other dog shook herself and disappeared in the opposite direction.

“Oh,” Llinos said, not impressed by the perfunctory quality of the encounter. “That wasn’t very...”

“Verra what, lass? Gallant?” Duncan suggested, coming to stand right behind her. “Romantic?” he murmured in her ear. “Considerate?”

“I was about to say ‘satisfying’.” She could barely talk. Having him behind her put a picture of such lewdness in her mind that she knew she would not be able to say anything else. Could men mount women in such a way? She had never wondered about it before but after all, why not? Dare she ask Duncan? He would know. Perhaps he could even show her how it was done...

“How do ye ken it was not satisfying?” He brushed a strand of hair from her neck.

She almost swooned at the sensuality of the gesture.

“Well, it was so fast...”

He chuckled again. “Aye, that it was. Shall we show that mutt of yers how it should be done?”

Relief washed through her at the same time as arousal scorched her veins. He still wanted her! He wasn’t finished with her yet. And he was about to do what she’d been hoping he’d do and tumble her to the ground.

“But I’m dry as bone now,” she said, running her hands along her dress, making sure to follow her every curve.

Where had that urge to provoke him come from? She was getting bolder... Mercifully, Duncan seemed to love it. With a roar he drew her flush against him.

“Dinnae worry about that, lass, ye won’t stay dry for long. I will make ye wetter than ye’ve ever been.”

Heavens. She already was.

“You know there is no need to take me a second time.”

Something flashed in the green eyes. “Och, aye lass, there is every need.” He pressed her harder against his manhood. “I told ye. I will have ye any time I want. And ye agreed,” he reminded her.

“Yes,” she said hastily, not wanting him to think she meant to push him away now that she’d had what she wanted from him. Teasing him had been a stupid, thoughtless thing to do, considering what he’d told her about his parents. “But if you want me,

why did you not pounce on me by the river?"

"Pounce." Duncan winced and she cursed herself at her choice of words. She had meant it as a compliment, because she liked his predatory ways but she could see why he would not like it. Why did she have to be so clumsy around him? She should leave the taunting to him, he wielded the weapon far more efficiently than she ever would. She felt as stupid as if she had rashly seized a sword, thinking she could spar with a seasoned warrior and launched herself into a fight she had no chance of winning.

"I mean... That's not what I wanted to say, I just..." He must have realised she had not meant to offend him because the expression on his face softened.

"I see. Ye like it when I 'pounce'," he said in a purr.

"Yes," she said, grateful for his indulgence. "But by all means, don't take my word for it. Why don't you do it now and see for yourself? My gown might be dry but you'll find me all wet underneath."

Llinos was rewarded for her boldness when Duncan groaned and lifted her into his arms. But instead of throwing her onto the floor, as she had expected, he started to walk away, holding her like a prize.

"Not here," he said, answering the silent question in her eyes. "Yesterday I took a great risk. I should ne'er have taken ye out in the open when I ken there are outlaws roaming about. I'm not going to make that mistake a second time. There is an abandoned cottage at the foot of the hill. I sometimes spend the night there when Masterson sends me on errands. That's where we're going."

She melted against him. Wild with need, he was still placing her safety above his desire. Even more importantly, he had just revealed that he too had been overwhelmed the day before, forgetting where they were because of his need for her.

“I can very well walk!” she felt compelled to say, even if the last thing she wanted was for him to let her go.

“Aye, and I can verra weel carry ye.”

With a snort he gave her buttocks a light tap. The gesture, both playful and proprietary, stole the breath from her. She’d been aroused before, she was now positively scorched.

Once they reached the cottage he kicked the door open so hard it almost splintered against the stone wall. Without a word, he deposited her onto a surprisingly clean straw pallet. Llinos briefly wondered if he sometimes brought women to the cottage during his nights of respite before pushing the uncomfortable thought away. Today was for them.

“And now, lass...” he said in a dark voice, coming over her until she was completely caged in. “Now I’m going to pounce.”

He did more than pounce. He devoured, he consumed, he growled, he panted like a ravenous beast. Llinos revelled in everything. Never had any victim surrendered more readily to her attacker.

It was well into the afternoon when they finally left the cottage.

Llinos was slightly unsteady on her legs but Duncan looked as if nothing had happened, which was probably for the best. If they both looked exhausted and flushed when they came back, questions might well be asked.

“You and the dog should go ahead, my lady,” Duncan said when the castle appeared into view.

Llinos' heart sank. Not ' ye and yer mangy mutt should go ahead, lass '. Duncan had slipped back into his respectful, attentive, distant squire persona. She gritted her teeth. It was getting more and more difficult to accept the difference between them.

"Very well," she said dully. Even if Lord Masterson had ordered him to accompany her to the river, it was better if they weren't seen together too often. But it pierced her heart not to be able to be with him without giving rise to comments, especially now, when she could still feel him in the place between her legs. "You know I don't think we should not — "

"I ken it," Duncan said, looking as miserable as she felt. "Dinnae fash yerself, lass, I dinnae think any less of ye. How could, I after ye allowed me every liberty just now?" He stopped and looked at her with smouldering eyes. This was definitely not the impersonal squire talking but the fiery lover. Oh, the relief! He wasn't angry at her, only at the situation!

"So I will... see you..." She wasn't sure what she wanted to say, as she was not sure how or when they could meet again but he nodded all the same, as if he understood.

"Aye."

With that single word, he disappeared into the forest.

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Feeling absurdly like Llinos' dog in need of expending his energy, Duncan set off at a run. Once he started running, he couldn't stop. As his feet pounded the ground he relieved the stolen moments they had spent together in the cottage.

Had he really fucked her like a beast all afternoon, allowing her no respite?

Aye, he had, there was no going around it. A dark part of him had wanted to make her admit she was regretting her decision, an even darker part had wanted to make her pay for the humiliation he had felt when she had first come to him. A more worthy part had wanted to make the most of the opportunity of holding a beautiful, willing woman in his arms and give her as much pleasure as he could.

And Llinos had revelled in everything he'd done.

She'd welcomed the thoughtful lover and embraced the wild beast with equal fervour. He had touched every part of her body and not once had she raised the slightest objection. He'd pounded into her mercilessly and she had only begged for more. He'd made her kneel at his feet and she had obeyed without hesitation. He could have used every part of her body and she would have agreed. He could have allowed his urges to take over, positioned her in any way he wanted and she would have let him. He could have reached his release inside her mouth and she would have swallowed.

But a last shred of sanity had prevailed, and he had managed to stop himself from showing her just how depraved he could be. Still it was all madness, for where could it all lead?

Nowhere.

It was almost dark when he finally reached the castle, sweating and panting hard. Luck was with him, and he was able to go to bed without seeing anyone. He wasn't sure how he would have handled having to make small talk in his present mood. He might well have ripped someone's head off.

The following day Lord Masterson made an announcement while they were all breaking their fasts in the great hall.

"I received a letter from my lady mother yesterday. She wishes to escape the heat by

coming to spend a few days in Pitcairn Castle. It is much cooler than her own castle, being surrounded by woods. We shall leave tomorrow and escort her back here.”

“We?” Duncan watched Llinos raise her head as she asked the question.

“But of course. I thought the ride would provide you with a welcome distraction, my lady. Are you not cheered by the prospect of an outing?”

“Yes, of course, only I... I don’t want to leave...” Her eyes flicked over to him briefly and he understood what she could not say out loud. Him. She did not want to leave him. “My dog behind,” she finished in a breath.

“That mongrel!” Lord Masterson scoffed, amused. “God only knows what you see in the creature!”

“He’s my mongrel,” she said quietly, but with undeniable pride.

What was that loosening sensation in his stomach, Duncan wondered? She was talking about him – and the notion brought a warmth to his chest he had never experienced before, never known he wanted to experience.

Lord Masterson laughed. “By all means, take the mongrel with you. I don’t mind. But he will have to run after us.”

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:59 am

They set off early the next morning as planned, a company of six riders. Having refused to take a lady in waiting with her for such a short journey, Llinos was the only woman in the group.

When she saw Duncan mounted on a prancing grey stallion she consciously averted her gaze, knowing she would never be able to hide her admiration and betray her interest in him. He was magnificent on his own. Atop the mighty animal, he presented an image of such splendour that her mind could barely apprehend it.

This man was her lover, all six foot four of muscles and masculine intent of him. The notion was bewildering and she suspected he would take objection to being called thus but, regardless, that was what he was. They met in secret, they were not married, and they had slept together more than once. For all intents and purposes, they were lovers. It was wrong on so many levels and yet... yet it felt so right. Just like it felt right when he was inside her, gifting her with the part of her she hadn't known was missing until then.

Her womanhood quivered at the memory of their wild afternoon together. What wouldn't she give to steer her mount towards the cottage right now! This time she would not let Duncan dictate her every action, she would come up with some ideas of her own... Last night, as she'd lain dozing off in bed, her mind had presented her with all sorts of alternatives to what they had done, each more scandalous than the last and she was desperate to see whether she could —

“Let's ride!” Lord Masterson's order cut through her licentious thoughts.

Llinos nudged her mare into a walk, when she was really itching for a gallop. How

apt. All her life she had been forced to play the demure female and keep her more reckless urges on a tight leash. Of late it had become more and more difficult to be satisfied with the role she was supposed to play. And then, out of the blue, she'd met someone who'd severed the restrictive leash restraining her with one uncompromising swoop of his arm.

There would be no going back.

In the same way that she would never be a virgin again, she would never be the meek damsel she was supposed to be anymore. Her mind had been as irremediably changed by her meeting with Duncan as her body had been altered. He'd possessed her – in every sense of the word. How long she would be able to keep up with the pretence and hide the transformation was anyone's guess...

The company of riders soon exited the village and reached open terrain. When Lord Masterson launched his mount into a canter Llinos laughed and, allowing the devil whispering into her ear to sway her for once, kicked her mare into a full gallop instead. Let him remonstrate with her later if he wanted, she needed this. She needed to feel the powerful surge between her legs, the wind in her hair, she needed not to think and just... be.

She threw herself into the fray with as much relish as if demons were yapping at her heels.

All too soon she heard a call behind her.

“Lady Llinos!”

There. Her moment of folly, short as it had been, was about to be brought to an end.

She slowed her horse back down to a trot and turned to face the rider drawing up to

her side. Lord Masterson, inevitably.

“What happened? Did you lose control of your mount?”

Llinos almost rolled her eyes. Of course he would assume that. Heaven forbid she had actually meant, never mind wanted to do something exhilarating! And of course she could not possess the skill needed to control her horse... Really, were men all so predictably condescending? No, not all of them, she decided. Scottish squires were a lot less patronising than English lords, it seemed. She was starting to think that being with such a man was the only way she would be able to lead a satisfactory life.

“No, of course I did not lose control of my mount,” she said, the picture of innocence. “I fancied a gallop and I assumed you would all be able to follow. I’m sorry if it wasn’t the case.”

There. She too could be condescending. Lord Masterson’s grimace made it clear he had not expected this answer and he did not find it to his tastes.

“I can follow any woman, my lady, be it on horse or on foot,” he said crisply. “But I have no wish to tell Sir Benedict you got injured whilst under my care.”

She could not help a smirk. So he was guarding her physical integrity as well as her virtue... What next? Would he spoon feed her to make sure she did not choke on her food? Would he help her put on her headdress in case she accidentally stabbed herself with a pin? It would be a busy few weeks at this rate...

“Don’t worry. When Sir Benedict comes back, he will not see any broken bones on my person. ”

No. All the damage to her body would be on the inside. She afforded a smile. Just then the rest of the men joined them. Duncan’s face was as impassive as usual but his

eyes sent sparks. He, at least, had understood that her galloping away had been no accident.

“Well then, I didn’t want to suggest it out of consideration for Lady Llinos but if she’s not opposed to a hard ride, we might actually be able to reach my mother’s castle before nightfall.” Lord Masterson looked pleased as he turned to face her. “Are you up to the challenge, my lady?”

Llinos bit the inside of her mouth to stop her smile from bursting through. “Oh, absolutely. I’m always up for a hard ride.”

She was careful not to look at Duncan when she spoke the provocative words. She was certain his eyes had caught fire. Perhaps even his body. Hers certainly had.

“Let’s go then!”

In the end it was a blessing that Cwtch had not been persuaded to follow the retinue. She would not have been able to indulge her urge to gallop if he’d been trying to run alongside them. But because he wasn’t with them, she was free to go as fast as her mare could manage. And it was exhilarating.

They reached Lady Mary’s castle under a purple sky dotted with diamonds .

As soon as they dismounted a grey-haired woman approached Lord Masterson. “Son, you are right welcome but this is a surprise. I did not expect you to arrive so early.”

“No. In the end we made good time. But we are famished and thirsty.”

Lady Mary caught a glimpse of Llinos by his side and grimaced. “Oh, you poor dear! Don’t tell me the men made you ride like a warrior on campaign so you could reach the castle before nightfall?” She sounded horrified at the idea.

Llinos laughed. “No. It was not as bad as that. But I confess I will be glad of a rest.”

“Of course. Come here, I will have everything ready for you in a moment.”

Fussing like a mother hen, she ushered her and Lord Masterson into the great hall. To Llinos’ dismay, Duncan and the other men were left behind in the bailey. No one spared them a glance or asked if there was anything they needed.

“Forgive me, but I daresay our companions will be just as hungry and thirsty as we are,” she could not help but say.

“Companions?” Lady Mary swivelled around in alarm. “Did you bring guests?”

Her son placed a soothing hand on her arm. “Lady Llinos is talking about the guards accompanying us, nothing more. Worry not,” he added, turning to face Llinos. “They will be given what they need at the stables. The grooms will see to it.”

She had to be content with this. She followed Lord Masterson and Lady Mary to the great hall when she wanted to be with Duncan. After a lavish but somewhat bland meal and some taxing conversation she pretexted the need to retrieve an item from her saddle bag to go to the stables and make sure Duncan and the others were comfortably settled.

“Come to see yer mongrel has everything he needs, have ye?”

The deep, gravelly voice sent a shiver down her spine. “You know very well I did not bring Cwtch with me.”

“Aye, I do. So what are ye doing here?”

She looked at Duncan from under her lashes. “I’ve come to see if you have

everything you need.”

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Did he have everything he needed, Duncan wondered? No.

Should the lady worry about it instead of enjoying their host’s hospitality? Definitely not.

Could she provide him with what he was missing? Aye, but not here, not now .

“Lass. Ye cannot stay here,” he said, not knowing whether to march her out or drag her into an empty stable and show her exactly what he needed right now. “The lads and I will be just fine. Go back to yer bedchamber. Ye must be exhausted after that hard ride.”

The look she sent him reduced his loins to cinders. “I am tired. But I’m not sure I’ll be able to sleep. I might well be ready for some more... riding.”

He barely contained a growl. Jesu, the lass would be the death of him! What was she doing, coming to tempt him when he was at snapping point? Here she was, with a devilish glint in her eyes and lewd propositions on her lips. Why could she not have remained the innocent little fool he’d taken her for? He would have had no problem sending that woman to Hell.

“Go!” he snapped. “I don’t want to see ye. Ye have nothing to do here. Go back to people who want ye.”

Deeply shocked by his outburst, Llinos turned around without a word and fled, leaving him feeling like the bastard he was – and hollow inside.

The company set off early the following day to make the most of the cool air. Duncan could tell from the shadows under Llinos' eyes that she had not slept any better than he had though, unlike him, she would have lain on a comfortable mattress in Lady Mary's best chamber. He remembered how she had fallen asleep in the cottage on the floor with barely a smattering of straw and a thin blanket thrown over it once he'd wrung the last drop of strength from her body.

Duncan cursed inwardly. He had to stop torturing himself thus, and remember who they really were. Not lovers but a lady and a nobody.

The day went by with excruciating slowness. In deference to Lady Mary, they rode at a sedate pace and not once was he afforded a glimpse of Llinos. She was riding in the middle of the group and predictably, he had been sent to the head of the retinue to keep guard.

As a result his mood was foul when they reached the inn where they were to spend the night. After a quick meal of bread and cheese, he collapsed onto the pallet and was asleep within moments. In the morning he was pleased to see that Llinos appeared more rested. Just like him, she would have surrendered to sheer exhaustion after a sleepless night and a sluggish day.

"My mother wishes to be at Pitcairn Castle before nightfall," Lord Masterson declared as soon as they had broken their fast.

Everyone nodded, understanding it meant they had to leave without delay, as Lady Mary would never be able – or indeed willing – to gallop like Llinos had on the outward journey. Duncan afforded a smile. Aye, his lady was like no other he knew.

His lady .

The thought stopped him on his tracks. Since when did he think of her as his? This

was getting silly – and potentially dangerous. Hadn't he decided only the day before he should remember who they were?

“All right, MacQuarrie?” Davies landed a heavy hand on his shoulder. “You heard his lordship. We ride.”

“Thank you,” Duncan snarled. “I'm not deaf!”

“Well then, why have you suddenly morphed into a statue?”

“It's none of your business and I'm not such a statue that I could not pummel you to the ground. Now, stop your blabbering and go get the horses ready!”

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They had barely left the village when the whole company had to come to a halt. Lady Mary's horse had cast a shoe.

"We will have to retrace our steps and see if we can find a farrier," Lord Masterson declared, doing his best not to let his irritation show.

"No, we won't," Lady Mary interposed swiftly. "Not all of us need to ride back. One of your men will wait with my horse at the farrier while the rest of us ride on. Lady Llinos will give me her mount. She can ride pillion with one of the men."

Llinos worked hard not to bristle at this demonstration of high-handedness. One of the men had been volunteered to stay behind, which meant he would have to travel dozens of miles with a horse in tow, alone and exposed to danger. As for her, her preferences had been being dismissed out of hand. She was fine on her own horse, thank you very much, she didn't want to ride with one of the men like a child! Except...

Her gaze landed on Duncan. Perhaps she could make her peace with riding pillion if it was with him. But how to ask for him in particular without appearing suspicious?

"Would you mind riding with one of the men, my lady?" Lord Masterson inquired. It was obvious he was eager to press on and thought it a neat solution to the problem.

"Of course she would not!" Lady Mary interposed before she could answer. "There's nothing of her! The horse will barely register the added weight."

Well. Llinos wasn't sure that was the case but she could hardly contradict the lady.

“It should be fine,” she whispered.

“Very well. Davies, you will — ”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Once again Lady Mary interrupted her son, a habit that was quickly becoming irksome. Llinos marvelled that the man did not put her back in her place. She was itching to do so. “Davies is as round as a barrel, the poor dear will be squashed!”

Lord Masterson rolled his eyes in surrender. “Who do you suggest, then, Mother?” It was obvious the lady had already made her choice and would not allow anyone else to have their say. Llinos braced herself.

“Well, the black gelding is already lame, and of course she cannot ride with you.” Why that was, the woman did not explain and Llinos did not ask. It suited her just fine to have Lord Masterson ruled out. The last thing she wanted was to spend the day with her arms around him. “So it’s either the grey stallion or the roan mare.”

In other words, Duncan or a young lad called Alexander. Llinos knew which one she would prefer to ride with, even if they had not talked since he had sent her away so harshly the other day.

The boy glanced at her and gave a cough. “With your permission, my lord, I think her ladyship would fare better with MacQuarrie. I’m afraid I’ve never...”

Although it was obvious he meant he had never ridden with someone else pillion, the colour on his cheeks made it look as if he was owing to having never been that close to a woman before. Which he probably had not.

Lord Masterson eyed him up and seemed to agree that he looked too nervous to ride with her safely. After all, as he’d told her only the other day, he was supposed to

ensure Sir Benedict found her hale and healthy upon his return, so he had little choice but to select a safe means of transport for her.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “She will go with MacQuarrie. He knows what he’s doing.”

It was Llinos’ turn to blush like a maiden. Yes. Duncan did know what he was doing with a woman.

A moment later she was seated on the grey stallion, her arms wrapped about Duncan’s lean waist, his heat warming her body. It was quite a scandalous position to be in. Duncan was literally between her legs but because he had his back to her rather than his front and they were sitting on a horse instead of lying on a bed, no one thought to object. What hypocrisy! Apparently, he was below her notice but good enough to be entrusted with her life. She was allowed to wrap her arms around him and press her breasts against his body all she wanted while they rode across fields but heaven forbid she should dare touch his little finger once they had dismounted.

It was all ridiculous.

Well, she would make the most of it while she could. She would make sure that this day of riding with Duncan was a day to remember. For once they were allowed to be together and touch in public and she would revel in the opportunity. The first thing she should do was to set things right between them. The last time they had spoken he had barked at her and she had been too stunned to reply. She didn’t want any misunderstanding to linger.

“I’m sorry about the other night,” she said before she could lose her nerve. They were rounding up the rear of the company and would not be overheard if they spoke quietly. “I did not mean to make you uncomfortable, only I did not like the way Lady Mary — ”

“It’s all right, lass,” Duncan cut in. “In truth I should be the one apologising to ye. I shouldn’t have snapped at ye that way. I ken yer heart is in the right place.”

She let out a sigh of relief. Things were going to be all right. Closing her eyes, she allowed her body to relax further against him. He was so warm, so comforting!

“How do ye like riding a stallion then, lass?” he asked her a moment later.

“I like it almost as much as I liked riding its master,” she whispered back, feeling deliciously naughty.

Unfortunately, she could not see Duncan’s reaction but she heard – and felt – the rumbling in his chest. Her heart picked up speed. Was he amused? Annoyed? Aroused? Did it even matter? She had coaxed a reaction out of the stoic man. She knew enough about him by now to appreciate the achievement for what it was worth.

Thank God Alexander had been a timid virgin, wary of feeling a woman pressed tight against him because now she was right where she wanted to be. Knowing no one could see her, she allowed herself to place her cheek against Duncan’s shoulder blade. Oh, he smelled so good! Felt even better, so strong and protective. The way his muscles twisted and corded to accompany the horse’s movements put her in mind of their afternoon at the cottage. He had been so wild, poised over her, riding her for what had felt like hours without tiring, until she —

“Stop doing that!”

The rebuke was like a cold shower on her heated senses.

“D-doing what?” Llinos stammered, shaken out of her erotic reverie.

“Moaning and squirming against me,” Duncan answered, sounding as gruff as a bear.

“Ye’re making me harder than the blade of my sword. Not comfortable in a saddle, not to mention unwise while we’re in full view of everyone!”

Llinos bit her bottom lip. She hadn’t realised she had been doing any squirming or moaning. And Duncan was saying that it had sent him hard? She could scarcely credit it, for she guessed he was used to much more overt seduction ploys from women. Surely it took more than having one pressed against this back to arouse him? Could she dare reach out and feel for herself if he was as hard as he said? She flushed to the soles of her feet. Of course she could not do anything like that! He had objected to her moaning, what would he say if she started stroking him in full view of everyone!

“I’m sorry. I’ll stop,” she mumbled.

“Och, lass, ye’ll be the death of me,” she thought she heard him say between his teeth.

Heat bloomed inside her at what felt like the most heartfelt compliment she had ever received.

Making sure not to distract him, Llinos focused on the parts of Duncan she could see or feel. His stomach, hard and flat, his neck, strong and tanned, his hair, sleek and soft, his shoulders, broad and —

“Halt!”

Somewhere at the head of the retinue a commotion was heard. Lost in her contemplation, Llinos had not noticed anything. Had another horse cast a shoe? No. Everyone was keeping silent, even Lady Mary. Something must be seriously wrong if the woman thought it best to keep her mouth shut. Llinos felt Duncan tense against her.

“What’s happening?” she mouthed to Lord Masterson when they drew to his side.

He nodded towards an opening between the trees. Frowning, she surveyed the landscape until she spotted a group of men camping at the bottom of the hillock. The outlaws! There was at least a dozen of them, almost twice as many men as there were in their retinue. If they were seen, it could spell disaster.

“Davies, MacQuarrie, ride with the ladies back to Pitcairn Castle as quickly as you can and come back with two dozen men. We will wait for you here. If they move before you arrive, we will leave Alexander behind to indicate which direction they took.”

Duncan nodded and the four of them set off as quietly as they could.

Once they were a comfortable distance away they started cantering to reach Pitcairn Castle as fast as possible. Llinos pressed herself close to Duncan to speak in his ear.

“Promise me you will be careful.”

It felt silly to make him promise such a thing but she couldn’t bear to imagine him being hurt – or worse.

“Dinnae fash yerself about me,” he growled.

Oh, but she did, ‘fash herself’. She did more than that.

The rest of the ride was accomplished in silence. It did not take Davies long to assemble the men Lord Masterson had required and get ready to ride back. There was no opportunity for Llinos to see Duncan alone. Lady Mary was hovering at her side like a bothersome fly, commenting on everything that was happening, as if it had not been clear enough.

“They are getting the horses ready, I see. They should be making sure they have a bite to eat before leaving or they will not be able to fight...”

Llinos wished she could shut her ears to the incessant chatter.

Dusk had already set in when the men left the castle in a thunder of hooves. They would ride hard to reach Lord Masterson and presumably attack at dawn, taking the outlaws by surprise. Llinos already knew she wouldn't be able to close an eye that night.

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Duncan had to focus.

Only a week ago he would not have given any thought to facing the outlaws, he might even have relished this opportunity to do something other than patrol the battlements and endure Masterson's constant boasting. But now... He wasn't afraid or worried about his well-being but he knew someone who would be. It was an odd sensation, not one he was certain to enjoy but all the same, he did not want to get injured, because he did not want that certain someone to be afraid or worried about him.

In truth he should not want Llinos to think about him at all. But he did. He ...

Duncan shook his head in disbelief. He liked it! Damnation, he liked having someone thinking about him, asking him to be careful when he left on a dangerous mission. It gave meaning to the life he had been leading at Pitcairn Castle. Without Llinos there was no reason for him to return to the castle unscathed.

With her, there was the best incentive to make it back hale and hearty.

As the sun pierced the horizon, Masterson raised his arm and gave the order in a whisper. “We attack.”

Duncan drew out his sword.

“Where...”

Llinos swallowed, knowing she could not ask any of the questions jostling in her mind.

Where is Duncan? Is he alive? Is he well? Can I see him?

“Where are the others?” she managed to say, looking at Lord Masterson. He was unscathed, so she had reason to hope the outlaws had been easily subdued. Perhaps Duncan was not dead. Perhaps she could start breathing again. “Is everyone well?”

“A couple of the men are worst for wear but Alexander was the only one seriously injured. MacQuarrie is taking him to the healer as we speak. Davies’ arm was almost — ”

Although she felt bad for not caring about what had happened to Davies’ arm, as soon as Lord Masterson had confirmed that Duncan hadn’t died, Llinos stopped listening. Thank the Lord, he was alive! Even better, he wasn’t badly injured or he could not have carried young Alexander all the way to the top of the tower. Life returned to her limbs.

And then he was there, right in front of her.

His face was shadowed by stubble, his forehead streaked with mud, and his cheek stained with blood. Her legs wavered. Was it his blood? Had he been hurt? It was hard to see any cuts under all the grime. It struck her then that Lord Masterson looked not only unscathed, but unruffled. Not a single hair was out of place, no mud, no

blood came to mar his features. Had he stayed in the background while his men fought the brigands on his behalf? It would not surprise her in the least.

“MacQuarrie? What is it?” he asked with an arched brow.

“Young Alexander is being tended to by old Bessie.”

“Is there anything I should know?”

“No, not at this stage.”

“Well then, there was no need to come and tell me that!” Lord Masterson said irritably. “I knew where he was, since I asked you to take him myself!”

Llinos let out a shaky breath. Indeed there wasn't any need for Duncan to apprise him of the fact. He hadn't come for Lord Masterson's benefit but to let her see that he was all right. Knowing she would be worried about him, he had braved his master's rebuke to put her mind at ease. She stared at him, hoping to convey her gratitude and relief with a smile. But he was not looking at her, ever the polite, distant squire who had no reason to speak to a lady guest or even look her way when all she wanted was to throw herself in his arms. Tears of frustration started to well in her eyes. Just when she made to wipe them, Duncan's gaze caught hers.

The depth of emotion in them told her he had understood all she was not allowed to say – and he agreed with her that it was unbearable they had to keep their distance from each other.

After a brief nod, he took his leave.

“Well. That was a success,” Lord Masterson congratulated himself once they were alone. “Now Sir Gilbert will be indebted to me for ridding his lands from these awful

outlaws! It will make him think twice about underestimating me in the future.”

Yes, Llinos thought bitterly, he would reap the benefit when others had risked their lives and been injured!

“I do hope you weren’t hurt,” she said with heavy sarcasm.

“Me? Oh no, don’t worry yourself about me, my lady.”

Dinnae fash yerself about me, lass, Duncan had told her.

Well this time she did not worry about the man reassuring her, not in the least, and she found it difficult not to snatch her hand away when he took it to place a kiss on her fingers. “I hope young Alexander recovers quickly,” she said instead.

“Yes.” Lord Masterson didn’t sound remotely concerned. “Although I suppose I should be grateful he was the one injured in the fight. I would have been at pains to replace someone like Davies or MacQuarrie. But the lad...”

He made a dismissive gesture that made his meaning clear. The lad was expendable. Bile rose in Llinos’ throat when she thought of the poor youth lying injured in the tower room. Inexperienced, self-effacing and easily replaced – just like she was. It did not matter if he was damaged, there would always be another warrior to take his place, in the same way that, now she was damaged, there would be another bride to take her place as Sir Benedict’s wife.

Well, she would make sure Alexander knew at least someone cared for him.

“I will go and see if he needs anything,” she declared, making her way towards the door.

“Old Bessie is here. You need not trouble yourself with the lad.”

“‘Tis no trouble.”

If she stayed another moment she might well tell Lord Masterson what she thought of his callous attitude, and she might well do it in a way that would land her in trouble. She wasn't worried about being punished, but she had no intention of having her movements monitored, making it even more difficult than it already was to snatch moments alone with Duncan.

Later that afternoon, reassured Alexander would not suffer any lasting damage from his injuries she bounded down the steps – and almost collided with Duncan at the foot of the spiral staircase.

“My lady.” He steadied her with an arched brow, as if wondering why she was running.

“Forgive me, I went to see young Alexander,” she said hurriedly. “And I didn't pay attention to my surroundings.”

“‘Tis no trouble.” Duncan leaned in to whisper in her ear. “Ye can run into me whenever ye like, lass. A wee thing like ye isn't going to cause any damage.”

The hands at her waist tightened a fraction then he released her, regret shadowing his eyes. He had cleaned up and changed, she noted, as well as shaved. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw the cut under his eye. This was not something he could have inflicted on himself with the shaving knife.

“You were injured in the fighting!” she cried out. It had been his blood after all! Her legs suddenly felt as weak as blancmange and she wished he was still holding her up. “Where else were you hurt?” Her eyes darted all over his body.

Duncan smiled. "Is this a ploy to see me naked, my lady?"

She flushed. He had refused to get undressed that day in the cottage, even if he had not allowed her to keep a stitch on. No doubt it had been his way of proving that they were only 'fucking'. It had not worked. From her point of view, at least. Clothes or no clothes, it had all felt too personal. What would it take for him to realise that if they were just fucking, he would not bother undressing her at all, caressing her and ensuring she got twice, if not three times as much pleasure as he had every time they met? How long would it take him to see that he was not just fucking her? The fact that he didn't get undressed or refused to kiss her didn't mean anything, but the way he touched her did.

He cared about her, in some way.

"I don't want to see you naked," she answered in a whisper.

"Do ye not?" He arched a brow, clearly sceptical.

She flushed, because indeed she would welcome the opportunity to see him naked. "Well, I mean... Right now I only want to establish whether you are injured or not. I'm only asking because I am worried about you."

From the way his green eyes darkened it seemed she had said the wrong thing.

"I told ye not to fash over me," he growled. "I'm nothing to ye."

It was as if he had slapped her. After all they had done together, how could he think such a thing, never mind say it out loud? "Surely you don't believe that?"

"What else can I believe? Ye're..." He made a gesture of impatience, as if there was no way to explain the difference between them. "And it's better that way."

It was not. Before Duncan could move, Llinos reached out to his cheek and traced the cut with a light finger. “It will leave a trace you know.”

He shrugged. “I have dozens of scars already. What’s one more?”

“I don’t mean the cut.” Llinos shook her head. She meant them . This. Whatever it was they were doing. It would not leave her unscathed, she knew. It had already changed her body, it would also leave a trace in her heart.

“Lass.” Duncan took her hand in his. “Dinna touch me so. It’s too dangerous.” He was right. Touching his cheek made her want to touch other parts of him. Did the caress have the same effect on him? Was he finally admitting to feeling something for her? “Someone could see us.”

Oh. Her heart sank. Of course. He was worried about other people, not about the effect she was having on him. She really was a fool. Mortified, she took a step back.

“Forgive me, I should not expose you to — ”

“ Me ?” he cut in sharply. “I’m more worried about ye! Ladies are not supposed to go around touching squires’ cheeks, much less stroke them!”

She blushed. “No, they’re not.”

Duncan sighed. “Ah, lass, stop being so damned — ”

“Foolish?” she finished in his stead. Of course, he didn’t have time for her antics. This was getting worse and worse. She had to leave because in a moment she might start crying.

“So damned adorable,” he said with another sigh.

Llinos blinked. Adorable... She was being ridiculous, flushing like a child, wasting his time, placing them in danger of discovery and instead of berating her, or even mocking her, he was calling her adorable? Coming from anyone else it would have made her melt. Because it was Duncan, a man determined not to show any emotions with her, it made the gift even more special.

“I’m sorry,” she said placing her hand on his cheek again. “I can’t help it.”

“Nay. Likely ye can’t,” he said with a slanted smile. “Ye cannot help being adorable the way a kitten cannae help being cute or yer dog cannae help being scruffy.”

“And you cannot help being — ”

“Lady Llinos!”

Llinos started and realised she had moved so close to Duncan that everyone would think they’d been kissing. No one would know that kissing her was the last thing Duncan would do to her, even if the list of what he would – and had already done – was quite long. She took a step back a moment before a familiar figure appeared in the door frame.

“Lady Mary,” she said with as much composure as she could muster.

“There you are. I’ve been looking everywhere for you. I was wondering if you wanted to join me for a walk.”

“I...” Going for a walk and having to talk to Lady Mary was the last thing Llinos wanted to do but she could not think of a single excuse to invoke or gather the courage to tell her as much.

“Oh, you poor dear, you look quite flushed,” the lady remarked, peering more closely

at her. “Are you quite well?”

Duncan bowed and took his leave without a word. Lady Mary had not addressed him a single word or spared him a single glance since she had appeared. Everything within Llinos tightened in anger. Who could ignore another human being like that, just because he happened not to be noble?

“That was quite a tale you told me,” she told Duncan before he could disappear, unable to leave it at that. “It all sounded awfully dangerous. Lady Mary and I are grateful to you and Davies for taking us back to the safety of Pitcairn Castle before the assault began.”

“Yes. Quite.” The older woman sounded crisp, as if she didn’t like to be reminded she should be gracious towards mere squires.

Well, too bad, she should not need to be reminded something like this, she should be gracious and grateful to people who risked their lives for her. Just like that, Llinos found the courage to voice her opinion out loud. Lady Mary’s own rudeness would make hers pale in comparison.

“Forgive me but I don’t think I will come for a walk,” she announced. “As you said, I’m feeling quite flushed already. I’m afraid the fault lies with Mr MacQuarrie.” She boldly planted her gaze straight into Duncan’s. Not a muscle on his face moved but the light in his eyes changed.

“How so?”

“His retelling of the battle was really rather gruesome. I confess I feel rather faint.”

*

The minx!

Duncan watched as Llinos wavered on her feet and placed a hand to her temple, the very image of the weak damsel he knew she was not. Everything within him surged. Oh, she would pay for this! He was even looking forward to it.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Lady Mary called out to him. “You heard the lady! She’s about to swoon, thanks to your indelicate comments. Escort her back to her room before she injures herself.”

“Do you need to be carried, my lady?” he asked solicitously, skewering Llinos with a dark stare. Would she dare go that far? He hoped so, for in this moment he desperately wanted to hold her. She didn’t answer but turned an alarming shade of red. His cock twitched.

“Of course she does, can’t you see she’s about to fall!” Lady Mary huffed. “Look at her!”

Not bothering to point out that people about to faint usually went to colour of milk rather than wine, Duncan scooped Llinos into his arms. He’d been ordered to, and that way her skirts would hide the erecting growing in his breeches.

“Thank you,” she murmured. This time he knew her breathlessness to be real.

As soon as they disappeared from view she softened against him and buried her face into the crook of his neck. Her whole body started to shake. He frowned. Was she... crying? Had he been mistaken, was she genuinely distressed by the idea of the battle he'd fought? His chest constricted at the thought.

Then she let out a giggle and he realised she was laughing.

“Oh, Duncan!” she said in a whisper. “Forgive me, I just could not stomach the idea of a moment alone with the woman.”

He snorted. “Aye, I can well imagine. But could ye not simply tell her ye did not fancy a walk instead of pretending to faint?”

“She was the one who commented on how unwell I looked when I felt perfectly fine! Besides, I... I’m not good at voicing my wishes out loud when I know they are not what people expect to hear.”

“I think ye’re better than ye give yerself credit for, lass.” Hadn’t she come to him and all but begged to be fucked?

Duncan smiled to himself, for she had just presented him with an interesting challenge. She had difficulty admitting to her wishes and desires? Well, he would be sure to make her do so the next time he had her naked and under him. She would not get anything until she asked for it very clearly. It should prove a stimulating exercise for both of them.

He kicked the door of her bedchamber open, feeling absurdly like a groom taking his newly wed bride to bed for the first time. The ludicrousness of the proposition caused his guts to twist into knots. When – if – he ever took a bride home, it would not be one dressed in velvet or smelling like soap scented with expensive rose oil.

Annoyed at himself for even thinking such things, he deposited Llinos onto the floor.

“So. I’m gruesome, am I? Indelicate?” He crossed his arms over his chest, determined to appear stern.

“I said your retelling of what had happened was gruesome, it’s not quite the same,” she had the audacity to answer. “And Lady Mary was the one who called you

indelicate.”

“Och, aye, it’s all right then, there’s no need to punish ye for it, I guess. ”

Llinos opened wide eyes. “P-punish me?”

“Ye made me appear like a boor who goes around frightening ladies out of their wits, ye forced me to take ye into my arms and cross the bailey in front of everyone when ye ken having ye against me sends me hard as a poker!”

“I do? It does?” Her eyes were now big as cartwheels. He let out a groan. She truly had no idea of what she was doing to him.

“Lass. How could it not? Ye’re...”

He shook his head. He had not planned to tell her just how irresistible she was. He had planned to teach her a lesson. But now... Damnation. He knew that if he touched her now, he would not end up punish her but doing everything he could to make her cry out in pleasure. He could not, not here in her bedchamber when, unlike the other day, the lewd noises she'd make would only be attributed to her.

“Ye should get some rest. Ye look as if ye didn’t have much sleep last night.”

“I didn’t,” she admitted. “I was too worried knowing you were fighting.”

There it was again, this concern for him. He had to get out of here before he drew her into his arms and admitted he had thought only about her while he was fighting. “Sleep then,” he told her gruffly, walking towards the door .

“So you... you are not going to punish me?”

The Lord have mercy on him. Just like that Duncan went stiff as a pike. Damn, it seemed that he didn't have to touch her to get hard, or even look at her. One evocative question was all it took. He took in a deep breath.

“Nay. It would not be a proper punishment if ye were waiting for it, now would it?” Begging for it, he amended with a sigh. He had not missed the hope in Llinos' voice when she'd asked about it. She wanted him to submit her to his will. “I will do that when and how I deem it fit.”

With those words he walked out of the door.

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“I’m afraid I’m getting quite obsessed with him,” Llinos muttered to Cwtch as she ruffled him between the ears. “But don’t tell anyone. It could be dangerous for us both.”

The dog yawned. Over the last week she had fallen into the habit of talking to him in Welsh. It did her good to speak her language and it served another purpose. No one would understand she was talking about Duncan if she didn’t say his name out loud.

Still she looked around before she carried on. “There is so much I would like to know about him. Why is he here in England if he was raised by a band of Scottish minstrels and he hates the English?”

The dog closed his eyes and let out a series of whimpers when she tickled his belly. She gave an amused snort. Evidently, he did not care about her questions and was only staying for the caresses.

“Are ye torturing the wee beastie? Is that why ye rescued him, so ye could have a victim at hand?”

Caught out, Llinos gave a start and then remembered she had mercifully been speaking in Welsh, which Duncan did not understand. He would be none the wiser as to what she had been talking about. Or... She didn’t think he understood Welsh, but had she not just bemoaned the fact that she didn’t know enough about him? Had he understood the questions she had addressed the dog? She dearly hoped not.

She hid her confusion under a mask of outrage. “I’m not torturing him, I’m stroking him. Can’t you tell the difference?”

“Evidently not.”

He strode forwards, all masculine intent. She inhaled sharply. My. Had a more forbidding man ever drawn breath? Not in her presence, at any rate.

“And what were ye muttering about while ye stroked him?”

She gave him her sweetest smile. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Aye, I would, or I wouldn’t ask.”

“Well. What if I did not want to tell you?”

“Then I would find a way to make ye talk.”

Dark desire pooled between her legs. “That sounds promising,” she said in a breath .

He gave an exasperated shake of the head. “It is supposed to sound ominous.”

Ominous! Being at his mercy did all sorts of things to her insides but make them quake with fear was not one of them.

“Do your worst,” she said, feeling deliciously wicked. Finally he was about to punish her. Ever since he’d threatened to do it, she had fantasised about what he would do to her. There was only one certainty. She would love whatever he decided to do.

He looked her over, eyes clouded with desire. “Ye might regret uttering those words, lass.”

“I doubt it.”

He came to stand right in front of her, a tower of strength. “Do ye ken I could throw ye over my lap and spank a confession out of ye?”

She smiled, if a little nervously. “I’m not worried. If you threw me over your lap you’d only end up pleasuring me.”

“Is that so?” He arched a brow as if he could not believe she had dared contradict him. “I could slip my hand under yer skirts and tease ye until ye go mad with need and confess everything.”

“If you did that you would make me come after three strokes and then I surely would forget everything. So there would be no confession worth hearing.”

“I could pound into ye until ye lose yer mind and tell me every little thought that ever crossed yer mind.”

“I’m sure you could but if I was delirious with pleasure you wouldn’t know if what I told you was the truth or not.”

He raised his chin. “So how am I to get the truth out of ye?”

“You could always ask me nicely, I suppose.”

He rolled his eyes. “For the love of Christ, woman, will ye please tell me what ye were telling that ugly dog of yers?”

Llinos giggled at the poor effort at graciousness. “If you must know I was talking about you.” She knew she had given in too easily, but she was curious and after their banter Duncan might be more amenable to answering her questions.

“Me?” He sounded surprised.

“Well... How did you end up in England?” she blurted out. “And where is your father now?”

She waited, knowing he might be angry at her for asking so many questions. But to her relief, he relaxed and a corner of his mouth lifted. “I was wondering how long it would take ye to start asking questions,” he said, chuckling to himself. “Congratulations, lass, it took even less time than I thought it would.”

She reddened. “I’m sorry. It’s only... I’m very curious.”

“Dinnae be sorry,” he said, lifting her head with a finger under the chin. “I like ye being curious.”

His smile broadened and she understood that, far from being angry, he had purposefully kept information from her to see if she cared enough about him to ask for the rest.

Well, it seemed she had passed the test. Not that it was hard because she did care, a lot more than she should.

“Shall we take a walk? I could tell ye everything then. Crutch here could do wi’ a run. And, ideally, another dip in the river.”

“His name is Cwtch, not Crutch, you horrid man! And he’s perfectly clean,” Llinos protested. She gestured at Duncan's clothes. His tunic was streaked with rust-coloured sand and his hands were covered with grease. Evidently, he had been cleaning Lord Masterson’s armour when he’d spotted her. That he had come to her before washing proved he had not wanted to waste an opportunity to speak to her. The thought warmed her. “You’re the dirty one around here!”

He planted his gaze into hers. “Lass, ye have no idea.”

*

They set off, Duncan deciding for once to chance it and make up an excuse afterwards for their absence if need be. Cwtch would help, they could always pretend he had helped Llinos look for the dog when he had disappeared from view all of a sudden. He only took the time to wash his hands and shake his tunic before running back to her.

The day was warm, but not as hot as it had been. Autumn was finally on its way. Bird song filled the air with sweet sound and the whole forest was swaying in time with the breeze. Duncan waited, knowing it would not be long before Llinos succumbed to the temptation of asking him the questions jostling in her mind. He could see her lovely lips parting in readiness. Oh, those lips... He would never forget how they had wrapped around his shaft, engulfing it in tight, wet heat. Their afternoon at the cottage already felt like a lifetime ago.

She turned to him and he refrained from smiling.

The interrogation was about to start.

“Why are you here at Pitcairn Caslte if you hate being in England? And why are you squire to a man you obviously don’t like or respect?”

He gave her slanted look. The first part of the question, he had fully expected. The second one took him by surprise. The woman was perceptive. Or perhaps she was not, and she had just picked up on something that was there for everyone to see...

“Is it that obvious?” he asked, frowning. Had anyone else picked on the animosity he felt for Masterson? Had the man himself? He hoped not.

She smiled reassuringly. “It is to me. I told you. I watch what people do when they

think no one is looking, not what they say in public. So don't worry. From the way you act or talk in front of Lord Masterson, no one would suspect a thing. But if you want to hide your real opinion you might want to stop compensating for the way he treats people."

"What do you mean?"

"Well... When we stopped at the inn that night with Lady Mary, for example, I saw you go to the innkeeper to pay for the broken ware."

He winced. He'd been so sure no one had seen him do so! "Were ye watching me?"

"I always am," she replied, blushing a little. Aye, he'd had the right of it when he had thought her adorable the day she'd come to him. The woman was far too adorable for her own good – and his. "And I could give you a dozen such examples."

"Ye are unusually perceptive, lass," he murmured. How had she read so much in what he had done? It could simply have been seen as common courtesy... But she was right, he did try to compensate for Masterson's callous ways whenever he could. Every day brought a new opportunity to do so.

"Thank you," she said with a tilt of the head. "I like to think I am perceptive. And I cannot help but notice that you haven't answered my question."

Perceptive and stubborn then. It should irritate him. It only made him smile.

"I didn't choose to serve Masterson, and I'm not his squire exactly," he finally admitted. "That's what he tells everyone because the truth makes him look bad."

"And what is the truth?" Duncan had never like being questioned but there was something about Llinos that made it all right. She seemed genuinely eager to know all

there was to know about him. And so he simply told her what he had not told anyone else at Pitcairn Castle.

“I am here to repay a debt.”

“A debt?”

“Aye. One day last year, the troop was playing in a castle near the English border. Many of the guests were English. Masterson was amongst them,” he explained with a sigh. “One night, one of the pipe players got drunk and decided that the best thing to do was to mess wi’ the guests’ horses. He went to the stables in the middle of the night and opened all the doors. Then he scared them so they all bolted away. Eventually the grooms brought them back but Masterson’s warhorse was never found.”

“Most likely he was stolen by someone who could not believe their luck at seeing such a prized animal trotting into their backyard,” Llinos observed.

“Most likely. Ye can imagine how that went down. The stallion was still young and worth a fortune. E’en if they had pooled all their resources, the minstrels would ne’er have been able to repay him in ten years.”

“So you offered to pay the debt in the youth’s place?” Llinos sounded outraged.

“Aye, weel...” Duncan ran a hand through his hair. “What else could I do? The fool was only young. Everyone makes mistakes.”

He did not add that he had felt responsible for the lad’s decision to get drunk that night. His eye had been caught by one of the maids at the castle and he had tried to attract her attention from the moment they’d arrived but the woman had only had eyes for the older Duncan. Knowing the youth was infatuated with her, Duncan had

ignored her advances, not wishing to make an enemy out of someone who looked on him as a brother.

But one evening she had cornered him in one of the corridors and pressed herself against him to try and steal a kiss. Stuart had walked in on them while she had her arms about his neck and drawn the wrong conclusion.

When he'd heard the commotion in the stables later that night, Duncan had immediately known who would be responsible for the pandemonium – and why.

Ironically the maid, who hated the English with a passion, had been impressed by Stuart's taunt and finally taken an interest in him. In the end, the lad got what he wanted. Last Duncan had heard, they were married and had a bairn on the way. Everything had turned out well – except for him. He was now effectively Masterson's slave.

Still, he did not regret his decision. He would do the same again tomorrow if he had to.

“My da had died the previous year and I had no real reason to stay with the troop. They had raised me, looked after me, fed me, taught me everything they knew, loved me in their own way. I felt I owed it to them to make sure they could walk away from the castle without trouble,” he explained. “It was my way of thanking them. Anyway, as ye can guess, I have no money and no possessions to my name so Masterson thought to use my body instead.”

“As a sort of personal guard?”

He allowed himself a smile. “Aye, lass, definitely not in the same way ye thought of using it.”

Llinos flushed bright red. Och, but she really was adorable. Beautiful even. How had he ever thought otherwise?

“Yes, well, I had assumed as much...” she mumbled.

“I dinnae think I could have risen to that challenge even if he’d paid me a king’s ransom,” he added wryly. “I told ye. I like breasts. Cock, not so much.”

“You don’t know what you’re missing.”

Duncan’s eyebrows shot upwards at the unexpected comment. Well... The lass was definitely getting bolder. He loved it.

“Mayhap. Still, I ken what I’m getting.” In one swoop of his arm he had her flush against him, one hand at her hip, the other on her breast. “Mm, aye. Softness, everywhere,” he purred in her ear. “That’s what I like.”

“I prefer hard, masculine bodies,” she answered in a whisper.

“Then ye’re in luck,” he growled. “I’m hard all over.”

“Yes, I can feel that.”

She sounded breathless, expectant. His head went down a fraction, and then reality hit. Had he just made to kiss her? Nay, surely not! Kissing was not part of the bargain! Theirs was a cold arrangement, nothing more! He had told her as much and he had every intention of keeping his word.

He abruptly let her go of her and resumed the walk. There would be no touching from now on, except when they fucked.

“Masterson is a coward,” he said, determined to carry on with their conversation as if nothing of importance had happened. “It seems that having a big brute nearby makes him feel safe.”

“I can understand that,” Llinos murmured.

“Aye? A big brute would make ye feel safe?”

“Not any big brute. But you, yes. Having a hulking Scotsman at hand is just what every woman needs to sleep soundly at night.”

“Masterson is not a lass but it seems that he sleeps better wi’ me within shouting distance,” he snorted.

“That I sympathise with as well.”

Duncan couldn’t help a smile. “Are ye saying that ye would sleep better wi’ me around, my lady?”

*

My lady .

Llinos’ head spun as they made their way back to the castle. Duncan had used her title as an endearment, while speaking in his normal accent and using the intimate tone of voice reserved only for her. It was a heady combination, because it was as if he’d acknowledged who they both were – and accepted it.

It seemed to her that something changed between them that day. For the first time he had behaved as if he did not resent the difference between them. Even more significantly, he had not drawn her into the woods to have her way with her but to

just to talk and be with her. Say what he might, he was starting to see her differently, as more than a woman he wanted to fuck. He had just opened up about something private – and painful.

And what he had revealed had shocked her to the core. He'd been bought for the price of an animal! A prestigious, expensive, well-trained warhorse, admittedly, but an animal nonetheless. It was outrageous and she wondered how she would manage to hide her disgust the next time she saw Lord Masterson. The more she saw of the man, the less she liked him.

They soon reached the lists. Llinos leaned against the outer wall to gather her thoughts before walking through the gate. Duncan waited by her side for her to catch her breath. Suddenly, he slapped his hand on the wall by her head, making her jump.

“What was that?” she asked as he made to throw something away.

“Nothing.”

Frowning she turned to look at the wall. Duncan instantly swivelled her so she was facing him again.

“Dinnae look. There's another one.”

“Another what?”

He made a face and urged her away from the wall before answering. “Another spider,” he said in an apologetic whisper.

A gasp escaped her lips when she understood what he'd done earlier. He had stopped a spider from crawling all over her. A shiver ran along her spine at the thought of the animal getting stuck in her hair. “Thank you. How did you know I hated spiders?”

He let out a snort. “Lass. If ye think I haven’t noticed the way ye scream every time one of the wee beasties creeps past ye then ye think me a blind fool! ”

Llinos went very still. He had noticed. Even more significantly, he wanted to help.

“No,” she said in a breath. “I never thought you were blind or a fool, but I never thought you would...” She stopped and changed the topic. “Do you think you could bring me a few strips of dried venison next time you see me? Some for Cwtch and some for me. I confess they are my favourite treat.”

He arched a brow. “Are they? I thought ye didn’t eat meat.”

She shook her head in disbelief. He had noticed that as well! “It’s only red meat I don’t like. How do you know?”

“Lass, ye’ve been at Pitcairn Castle for three weeks now!” He laughed. “I must have seen ye eat two dozen times at least.”

Yes, but always from a distance. And she had never told him about her dislike of red meat. He could have thought her refusing a particular dish was just a coincidence. Yet he had observed everything and drawn the right conclusion when, every evening, she had to remind Lord Masterson she didn’t want any of the roast lamb the servants invariably presented him with.

“I... I think we had better go back inside,” she said, feeling slightly light-headed.

“Aye,” he agreed slowly .

Llinos immediately went to her bedchamber. She had to tell someone what was happening or her chest would burst with the effort of keeping everything in. She had crammed so much in three short weeks that she felt like a different person.

Angélique.

Her friend would be the ideal person to confide in. She would not judge her. Llinos selected a piece of parchment and dipped her quill in ink.

Dear Angélique,

I am this moment staying at Lord Masterson's castle in Shropshire while I await for Sir Benedict to return from Kent. We shall be married as soon as he comes back, in about two months' time. But...

Llinos turned her quill between two fingers, debating how to word her confession. Should she be totally honest? How much should she reveal?

One look at the dog sleeping at her feet decided her. She would bare her soul.

But I have no desire to through with it. You see, I've had second thoughts about this marriage from the start and now, I have fallen for another man. I doubt anything can come of it, as he is in possession of neither rank nor fortune, but it has confirmed the fact that I want more from life than marriage to a man who is indifferent to me as a woman, and only wishes to ensure the legitimacy of his children. I doubt Sir Benedict even knows what colour my eyes are – or cares.

Duncan was not indifferent to her as a woman, and he knew not only the colour of her eyes but that of her nipples – dusky pink, as he'd informed her that day at the cottage – her intimate curls – burning copper – her freckles – cinnamon – and, most shockingly of all, her intimate folds. When he had told her, his lips shiny with her pleasure, that he had never seen a softer shade of pink she had almost spontaneously combusted.

It was not just the raw carnality between them that had her enthralled. As he was

supposed to make a woman out of her, it was perhaps understandable that he took note of her body. But more to the point, he had seen her fear of spiders and meant to spare her the sight of them. He had watched her attentively enough to note that she never partook of the roasted meats Lord Masterson kept plying her with. Someone not interested in her would never have noticed these things. He cared for her, and the thought was intoxicating. Had she not bemoaned the fact that Sir Benedict did not really know her? Had she not wished she could find a man who liked her because of who she was?

Today Duncan had proven that he could be that man. How was she supposed to fight the attraction now ?

Duncan MacQuarrie, squire to Lord Masterson, has quite stolen my heart. He is so forbidding, so unashamedly masculine... I admit that it makes me feel rather powerless. In a good way. It is difficult to explain but I am sure you would understand if you got but a glimpse of him. It was all it took for me to fall under his spell.

I hope to write to you in a few weeks to tell you how the whole mess has been resolved.

Your friend,

Llinos

Before she could think better of her decision and burn the incriminating letter, she went down to the great hall.

“My lord, I have a letter I wish to send to my friend Lady Angélique Delacourt at Belvoir Castle, about a day’s ride away to the south. Do you have a man who could see to it?”

“But of course,” Lord Masterson answered.

At the last moment doubt seized her. What if he opened the letter before confiding it to his man? He was here to guard her virtue, what if he wanted to ensure she was not writing to a man instead of a lady friend? What would his reaction be when he read that she did not wish to marry Sir Benedict and had fallen for Duncan instead?

It would be a disaster.

Before she could say anything else Lord Masterson took the letter with a bow. His manners towards her were becoming more and more courteous as the days went by. On occasion, the odd thought that he would have liked to court her himself had crossed her mind before she rejected it as ludicrous. Surely he would not be entertaining such ideas about a woman who was betrothed to his friend?

“MacQuarrie will see to it,” he told her. “He can visit my man at Hackworth Castle while he’s there. We discussed it only the other day. The west battlements are in need of repair and Evans is supposed to send me a list of all the necessary expenditure. MacQuarrie will bring the list when he comes back.”

Llinos’ heart plummeted. Not Duncan. The last thing she wanted was to have him spend time away from her. Writing the letter had been a liberation, admitting to her forbidden feelings had eased some of the weight from her shoulders but if it took Duncan away from her then it was hardly worth it.

But she could not think of a way of asking someone be sent in his place without raising dangerous suspicions. When he was summoned, Duncan took the letter from Lord Masterson without glancing at her.

Well at least she was assured Lord Masterson would never read it .

Duncan turned towards the door.

“Wait!” Llinos cried, unable to be parted from him just yet, and in that cold manner. “I’ve forgotten something. I will be only a moment.”

She rushed back to her room with a beating heart, broke the seal wax, dipped her quill in the ink once more and added a line at the bottom of the missive.

Be sure to tell me in your response what you thought of the man delivering this letter. I think you can guess why!

Slightly breathless, she handed the newly sealed letter to Duncan. He gave her a perfunctory nod. No one would suspect him of having buried his head between her thighs or ridden her to the edge of madness only days ago.

She stayed in the courtyard until the noise of his horse’s hooves faded away. What would she do now?

As if to add insult to injury, it rained for the whole three days Duncan spent away from the castle. Apart from looking after Cwtch, who obliged her by making sure he needed a bath at least once a day, Llinos did not have anything to do. No rides across the country to take her mind off licentious thoughts, no dips in the river to cool her heated blood, no visits to the village to meet with people who would talk to her about anything but a certain surly Scot .

All there was to do was stay indoors, avoid Lady Mary, have long lie-ins, retire early to bed – and obey Duncan’s orders.

I want ye to learn to touch yerself while I’m gone. Dinnae think I will not ken if ye don’t do it, because I’ll ask ye to show me when I come back.

How she had not collapsed in a heap when he had whispered the lewd words in her ear, she would never know. Trust the man to tell her something as shocking while she was in plain view of everyone! Of course making her uncomfortable was exactly what he had wanted.

And so here she was, lying in bed with her legs spread wide and her hand draped over her core.

Llinos bit her lip. Where on earth was she supposed to start? There was no way she could recreate the sensations Duncan had wreaked inside her with his tongue, of course, but even with his fingers. She had no idea what he had done.

But then she imagined his displeasure if she admitted that she had not even tried. Lying was not an option, the man would make her spew out the truth before she had time to blink and then he would be displeased.

Closing her eyes, Llinos curled her fingers.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 8:59 am

“Did ye do it?”

As Duncan had predicted, Llinos almost jumped out of her skin when he spoke. A corner of his lip curled up. The lass was deliciously spontaneous. Intent on surprising her, he had been careful to approach the castle at a walk and get in as unobtrusively as possible so as not to alert her to the fact that he had returned. By the looks of things, he had succeeded.

“You scared me!” she croaked, placing a hand over her heart. Over her breasts, the breasts he had fantasised about day and night in the past month.

“So I saw. Didn’t I tell ye always to expect the worst from men?” He was at her side in a heartbeat and before he knew what he was doing, he had drawn her flush against his chest. For a wild, and altogether bewildering moment he wondered if he was not about to kiss her.

He started. Not again!

Duncan MacQuarrie, bastard son of a minstrel, kiss Lady Llinos as if he had every right to ?

Don’t be such a fool , he cringed inwardly, before releasing her. Having her soft body against his was just tempting the devil in him.

“So?” he asked, crossing his arms across his chest. It was better for both of them if he reverted to being a commanding Scotsman instead of acting like a love-struck ninny.

“Did ye do as I asked? Did ye practice touching yerself?”

Aye, that was why he was here, to turn her into the veriest wanton, not to entertain foolish ideas about her or behave like a loving husband returning home after a long absence. Three days, damn it, he had only been gone for three days! And yet he'd missed her as if it had been three years.

"I believe you have a letter for me?" she demurred.

He snorted at her attempt at diversion. Did she really think it would be that easy to make him forget what he wanted to know when it was all he had been thinking about on the long ride back to Pitcairn Castle? "Oh no, lass! Ye willnae get anything until ye answer me."

"That is blackmail!" she gasped.

He shrugged. Even after all that had happened between them she still seemed surprised to see him act like a rogue. The lass really was too trusting by far. It was high time she understood what he was capable of. Blackmail was really not the worst thing on the list.

"It could be worse. I could ask ye to show me the result of yer experimentation," he said with a slight smile. "Here, in the corridor. But I'm only after an aye or a nay."

She flushed. "And then you will give me the letter?"

"That depends on what the answer is. If it is a nay, I will be mighty displeased. I willnae hear that ye disobeyed my orders."

"Disobeyed... orders... I..."

He'd rendered her speechless. Perhaps it was not surprising, considering that he had no right to order her about in the first place. But he had. And it felt right.

“I asked ye to do something, I expect ye to have done it,” he confirmed. “And dinnae even think about lying to me, because I’ll ken the truth.”

“How?”

Oh, she had walked straight into that one. His smile broadened. That woman was just too delicious to be believed. “Because either way, I will ask ye to prove it. So I will be able to judge for myself.”

When her lips parted, his shaft, already more than half interested in what they were discussing, grew straight as a poker .

“You don’t mean that!”

He barely repressed a growl. He most definitely meant it. Seeing her touch herself was all he had thought about while he stroked himself on those long, lonely nights at Hackworth Castle. Her body had been on his mind every time he had closed his eyes. Her name had been on his lips every time his seed had shot out of him in hot, creamy spurts.

“So, tell me, lass, do ye want to see yer letter?” he asked, pushing the memory away. It would only make him do something foolish.

“Yes.”

“Is that aye ye want to see the letter or aye ye obeyed my orders and pleased yerself?”

“Yes, I touched myself.”

Holy mother of... White hot shards of need exploded up Duncan’s spine. What was it

with hearing lewd words in her innocent little mouth that sent his blood to boiling point? The combination of demureness and impudence was intoxicating.

Slowly he reached inside his tunic to retrieve the letter. He had to go now, before he either disgraced himself by coming inside his hose like a lad of sixteen or he took her against up the wall. Even supposing she had not balked at such rough treatment, now was not the time or the place. They were in a corridor where anyone could happen upon them and Masterson would have been told of his arrival by now. He would want to hear about the situation at Hackworth Castle.

Duncan could not delay any longer at the risk of being interrupted.

“There you are, my lady. Your letter.”

He stepped back and reverted to his practiced, impersonal speech. His Sassenach speech. Llinos’ face fell and he could not bear it.

Unable to resist, he seized the hand she had used to grab the missive and drew her to him again. All thoughts of propriety, of caution, flew out of the window. He just had to know.

Now.

“Which one?” he asked in a rasp, brushing each of her delicate finger in turn. Llinos buried her face into his chest.

“This one,” she said, placing her middle finger into his palm.

He let out a low rumble and drew the finger into his mouth, to try and recapture some of the lingering taste he craved. It wasn’t enough. He would have to get the nectar straight from its hidden source, and soon. Llinos moaned as he sucked on her finger

and sagged against him. He thought he heard her whisper his name. He closed his eyes at the sound. What was she doing to him?

“And did ye — ”

A door opened in the distance. They jumped apart at the same time.

“I must go,” Llinos whispered, sounding both panicked and dismayed. “Thank you for the letter.”

With those words, she was gone.

*

Dearest Llinos,

I won't mind admitting that I was quite flustered when I saw the rugged Highlander delivering your letter. And then I read your message and I understood that I was not the only one... Mon Dieu , Llinos, what a man! No wonder you are finding yourself in quite a quandary! I know your heart was never really set on marrying Sir Benedict, and now I've seen your handsome squire, I can only sympathise. Two more different men I cannot imagine. But...

Yes. But. Exactly.

But it could lead nowhere. But she might as well have set her sights on the King of England himself. But there was no hope for her, for them. Ever. She was betrothed to another, and even if she had hatched a plan to free herself from that bond, there was no guarantee it would work. If it did work, then it still didn't mean they could be together. The squire and the heiress. Ridiculous. Duncan was not even a squire; therefore he had no chance of ever becoming a knight. The minstrel and the lady

then. Even more ridiculous. Not only ridiculous but a painful reminder of what his parents had been. He would never agree to being with a noble woman after promising his father he would not follow in his footsteps.

Llinos fell onto her bed, utterly defeated.

After days spent on high alert, waiting for Duncan's return, she was tired. Soon, she started to float into unconsciousness. A moment later, she succumbed to a deep sleep.

The feel of a hand on her breast woke her up.

Duncan's or someone else's?

She froze, afraid to open her eyes and betray the fact that she was no longer asleep. If the man in her room was not the one she wanted and he saw that she was awake, there would be no stopping him. She was already lying flat on her back and in a bed... A man who had slipped into her bedchamber uninvited would not hesitate in making the most of the opportunity. That was in all likelihood why he had come. But who could it be? And how had she not heard him come in?

A chuckle reached her ear and the hand at her breast gave a gentle squeeze .

"I ken ye're awake, lass. Dinnae think ye can fool me."

Relief washed through her. This irreverent burr could only belong to one person. The man she wanted the most in the world.

"And just what do you think you're doing, stealing into my chamber?" she whispered, eyes still closed. Judging from the silence surrounding them, it was the middle of the night. Duncan had never dared come to her before. Could she dare hope it meant something? Her heart skipped a beat.

The mattress dipped when he leaned in on one knee to speak into her ear. “What do ye reckon? I’ve come to see that ye didn’t lie to me.”

Blood started to race through her veins. She’d asked that man to deflower her, she had allowed him to fondle her breasts, to see her naked, to take her maidenhead, to place his fingers, his tongue, his... cock inside her, to slide it in her mouth even, and yet this felt like the ultimate barrier.

“I couldn’t,” she whimpered.

“Och aye, ye could and ye will, because it would please me to see it. And to that end...”

He left the bed. Llinos opened one eye to watch him light a candle on the fire embers. So he really meant to see everything. He would not only make her expose herself, but he would make sure no to miss a single thing.

Her breath caught in her lungs.

“Did ye reach yer pleasure when ye touched yerself, lass?” Duncan asked once he had placed the candle on the chest by the foot of the bed.

Llinos flushed and knew she could not lie. “No,” she admitted. Her caresses had left her wanting, there was no denying it. All she had managed to do was stoke the burning need inside her. The whole thing had ended up in a frustrated scream. “It was pleasant but I did not... I’m not sure quite why but I could not...”

He chuckled. “Oh no, you poor dear!”

Her eyes widened in disbelief. Had he just imitated Lady Mary? Yes, of course he had. He never used that crisp accent with her, and he would never ever, thank the

saints, call her a 'poor dear'.

She gave him a playful tap on the arm, grateful for the release of tension. "Wretched man! How did you know I could not stand that?" He really did know her inside out!

Duncan chuckled again, a delightful sound. "It isn't hard to guess. I would hate it too. Now, where were we?" he asked, reverting to his forbidding, commanding self in the blink of an eye. "Aye, ye needed help wi' the best way to make yerself come. I can do that."

Of Lord. Every time she thought he had uttered the most shocking thing she had ever heard, he somehow surpassed himself.

"Lift yer skirts," he instructed tersely. "Lower yer bodice. Ye'll want to touch yerself and stroke yer breasts as weel. And I'll need to see them."

She obeyed because by now she knew it was useless to resist him. They both knew she would comply in the end and it aroused her to follow his guidance.

"Wouldn't it be easier for me to just get undressed?" she asked nonetheless.

"Easier, aye, but less exciting. Trust me, lass, ye'll feel more wanton that way, more exposed, and it will only help."

It didn't take Llinos long to see the truth in what he was saying. Revealing herself bit by bit, imaging the sensual tableau she would present with her bunched-up skirts and her rumpled clothes did more to rouse her desire than her most daring caresses had. Knowing Duncan was watching her only increased her arousal further.

"Beautiful," he said under his breath. She bit her lip. He was not teasing her now, he meant it, absolutely. "Now, show me how ye make yerself come."

“I can’t!” she rasped. Was she going to end up frustrated like the last time? It would be horrible because she would also be humiliated, and all this in front of Duncan. “I told you. No matter what I do, I just can’t...”

“Can’t what?” he coaxed when she stopped.

“I can’t make myself come!”

Oddly, saying the words out loud took her perilously close to doing just that.

“Dinna fash, I can help wi’ that,” Duncan purred in her ear. “I willnae touch ye, but I’ll tell ye what I see. And ye will come, because it will arouse ye to ken that I can see it all.”

“What do you see?” she rasped as she gave a tentative stroke.

“Och, yer small, delicate finger sliding over the place where my cock wants to be right now,” he answered in a groan. “Yer thighs shiny wi’ the juices my tongue aches to lick. Yer breasts with their hard nipples begging to be suckled hard. Ye’re so beautiful, lass. I’m so hard I could come just watching ye touch yerself.”

Llinos’ breath caught in her throat. The man really had a knack for dirty talk. A sudden rush of moisture came to ease her movements and her finger slipped right past her entrance. She shuddered.

“Aye, that’s it,” he said. “Show me how ye spasm out of control. Show me how ye use that wicked wee finger of yers. Slide it in. Then when ye’ve finished ye’ll bring it to my mouth so I can lick it clean. Show me how beautiful ye are when ye come.”

A moment later she did just that.

He trapped her cries of pleasure under his palm and she almost bit him in her ecstasy.

As soon as she'd calmed down, he grabbed her wrist and brought her hand to his mouth to do what he had promised to do. His gestures were rough, proof of his desperation to taste her. Llinos whimpered when her middle finger disappeared into his hot mouth. So decadent! Somehow the swirls of his tongue wrenched more pleasure out of her core. How was that even possible?

"So good." Duncan growled, as if he was tasting the most delicious treat imaginable.

Then he ripped at his clothes and freed himself in a heartbeat. Just as he'd told her, he was harder than stone.

"My turn. I'm going to make myself come. Watch me," he ordered, before grabbing himself in hand. "Will ye let me come on yer breasts?" He sounded urgent, gruff, nothing like the sensual tones had used to ease her into pleasure. It sent her wild.

Although she wasn't sure why he would find that arousing or why the question had her blood boiling, the answer darted out of her mouth. "Yes. Come on my breasts."

Fascinated, she watched as Duncan stroked himself with swift, punishing strokes that had little in common with the gentle, careful touch he used when he pleased her. How was he not injuring himself with such frantic movements?

"Ah, Jesus!"

All of a sudden he threw his head back and stopped moving. Thick spurts of milky seed fell onto her exposed breasts, sending shivers of desire through her. Llinos had never felt so wicked. Her hand automatically went to the warm liquid pooling on her skin and, before she knew what she was doing, she brought her forefinger to her mouth and sucked it clean, in much the same way Duncan had done with hers. Her

gaze met his as the salty taste of him hit her tongue. Just like that, a fresh burst of need exploded between her thighs.

Even though she had achieved her release only moments ago, she wanted more.

Duncan watched her lick the last remnants of seed from her finger and opened his mouth. No sound came. A smile bloomed on her lips. For the first time since they'd met she had rendered him speechless.

She waited. Eventually he cleared his throat .

“For that, lass, ye deserve a reward,” he told her darkly. “Spread yer legs for me.”

She didn't need to be told twice. Whatever he wanted to do to her she would be amenable to it. The whole scene had sent her every fibre aflame and she was more desperate for release than she had ever been.

Before placing his hand on her sex he traced his fingers in his seed, spreading it all over her breasts, coating them in the sticky substance.

“For what I have in mind, the wetter ye are the better,” he drawled.

She cried out and arched her back when he cupped her with his slick hand. Slowly, he eased a finger inside of her, withdrew, then with a feral, possessive growl, he slipped in another. In a different place.

Llinos almost bolted off the bed.

“You are not — ”

“Relax, lassie. Trust me. ‘Twill feel good.”

Oh, it had. Still, he wasn't supposed to touch her there, surely?

“But — ”

“But nothing. Lie down. Let me give ye pleasure this time.”

He stalled further protests by bending his head and sucking her most intimate bundle of nerves into his hot, wet mouth. His fingers resumed their scandalous dance and his other hand latched onto her breast – and it was too much. Llinos moaned. He was everywhere at once and she wasn't sure how she would take it. She gave a series of moans so loud and lewd that she would never be able to explain them away if anyone asked about them tomorrow.

Her body dissolved, exploded, disappeared and expanded all at once.

After an eternity of bliss Duncan straightened back up. When Llinos opened her eyes he was staring at her from the foot of the bed, eyes ablaze. She dreaded to think what picture she presented with her spread legs, her bunched up skirts, her exposed breasts sticky with his seed and her face flushed from the forbidden pleasure he'd extracted from her, but she could not bring herself to care. This had been the most glorious moment of her life.

“Duncan.” The word was a mere whisper. She wanted him to join her in bed and finish the night with her. Without him she was cold and lonely, she wanted him to take her in his arms and hold her tight. “Duncan, please,” she repeated, knowing he would never agree to staying.

Something shifted in his eyes. Regret. “I will leave you to rest now, my lady. ”

And just like that the squire was back.

*

Damnation. How would he sleep now? Or ever again?

Watching Llinos lick his seed from her finger had almost pushed him over the edge. For a moment he had not known what to do. He was supposed to shock her , not the other way around. But seeing her taste his most intimate flavour had been the most soul-wrecking, devastatingly erotic experience of his life.

After that, and after what he'd dared to do to her, he fully expected her to put a stop to the whole madness. He had gone too far this time, taken too many liberties. He imagined she would tell him she didn't need to be debauched any further, that things had gone far beyond what she had wanted in the first place. He'd entered her forbidden place, forced her to expose her most intimate moment, made her watch him as he pleased himself and emptied himself all over her like a beast marking his territory.

He clenched his teeth when he remembered all the things he'd done to that woman he should never have approached. That she had been the one going to him first was neither here nor there. He should never have agreed to this folly. No doubt he would pay for it in the morning when she told him in no uncertain terms she wanted nothing to do with him any more.

But to his intense relief, when she sat on the dais to break her fast, she appeared her usual beautiful, if slightly shy self. It was he who felt different, unable to meet her eye.

Ashamed.

It was a new, and highly unpleasant feeling.

He stared at the food in front of him and found he was unable to eat another mouthful. The bread tasted like ash and the ale like vinegar. Last night he'd allowed his baser instincts to take over. He'd been no better than that mangy cur of hers. He'd soiled her perfect body with his tainted seed, he'd taken possession of her most secret places! How could he have forgotten himself so?

Well, at least he had not kissed her. Small consolation! He was starting to think that the rule he had put in place to protect his dignity was actually preventing him from doing the thing he most desired to do to her. Aye, this was the most galling thing of all.

He wanted to kiss her.

Leaving the rest of his meal untouched, he left the great hall and went to the stables. Cwtch was still locked in, waiting to be let out. When he spotted Duncan he tilted his head instead of wagging his tail as he did whenever Llinos approached.

“Why are ye looking at me like that, ye dirty wee mongrel?” Duncan mumbled between his teeth. “Because ye ken last night I behaved no better than ye do when ye mount yer bitches, that’s why. Because ye ken what I did to yer beloved mistress. Go then,” he said, opening the door wide. “Go to her, ye lucky bastard.”

The dog, mangy as he was, was allowed to be with Llinos in public, she was allowed to hug him as many times as she wanted. Duncan snorted as he bent over to pick the grey stallion’s foot. So what? He didn’t need to be seen in public with her, and he especially didn’t need to be hugged.

He didn’t need her full stop.

If only he could persuade himself that was the case!

“There is to be a banquet tonight.”

“Jesus Christ!” Duncan raised his head so fast he bumped it on the stable wall. “Ye made me jump, lass!”

For a reason he could not fathom, Llinos’ giggle pierced his heart. He’d been so sure she would be embarrassed, or angry at him after last night! And yet here she was, behaving as if nothing had changed between them. He had almost convinced himself it would be for the best if she was angry, for it would help ward off temptation. He might not need her but he wanted her still.

And it was a recipe for disaster.

“So I see. For once you know how it feels. Usually it is you who surprises me.”

“What do ye want?” he growled, rubbing his head. Being in pain wasn't helping his dark mood.

“I wanted to tell you about the banquet tonight since you left the hall before Lord Masterson’s announcement.”

They stared at each other. They both knew she hadn’t needed to come in person to apprise him of the fact, he would have found out soon enough.

Say something , Duncan silently prayed, say something that will shake me out of this madness, something that will make these new, unwelcome feelings go away, something that will make me see we cannot be together in any way, something that makes it clear you don’t want to see me anymore because, the Lord have mercy on me, I cannot walk away from you.

Llinos opened her mouth and stared at the floor. This was it. She was about to tell

him it was all over. He braced himself for the pain of having his pathetic hopes nipped in the bud.

“I didn’t bathe this morning,” she whispered. “I... I wanted to keep your scent on my skin.”

Oh, bollocks.

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The day was spent in a series of preparations each more tedious than the next. Llinos simply could not muster any enthusiasm for it. All she wanted to do was lie in bed and dream of Duncan. He was the only person she wanted to see right now.

Towards the middle of the afternoon Lady Mary came to find her.

“It is time for us to get ready,” she said. “As the two ladies acting as hostesses tonight, we need to look our best and that will require time.”

Llinos arched a brow. The lady did not think much of her beauty if she thought she needed half a day to transform herself into a hostess worthy of the name, unlike Duncan who, without ever uttering a single compliment, always managed to make her feel the most beautiful woman in the country. She never felt better than when she was naked and dishevelled in his arms.

Like the night before.

She swiftly chased the memory away before she could become the colour of her crimson dress.

“You should not lose another moment, my lady, lest you do not achieve a satisfying result,” she couldn’t resist answering, knowing that Lady Mary was not the most gifted of people where subtlety was concerned. As long as her interlocutor appeared to go along with her, she was satisfied.

As if to prove the point, the lady nodded. Apparently, she had not noticed that Llinos had all but declared her so plain she needed extensive grooming to appear

presentable. "I have asked for a bath to be prepared in your chamber. It should be ready presently."

Llinos barely repressed a sigh. Of all the things the woman could have forced her to do today, this was one of the worst! But try as she might she could not think of a single good excuse to justify her refusal to bathe before such an event. She shook her head. Perhaps it was for the best. It had been foolish on her part not to wash after what had happened last night.

Foolish and probably too decadent to be acceptable.

"I will wear my ivory gown," she told Lady Mary, determined to push away all lewd thoughts until she was alone. "'Tis the only one I have that would be suitable for a banquet."

"The only one! Oh you poor dear!"

Llinos bit the inside of her mouth. Poor dear... It had sounded so much better in Duncan's velvety voice...

"I've never needed to own extravagant gowns, as I lead a modest life. It will do very well for tonight, I assure you. After all, it is not as if I was required to change half way through the meal. No one needs to know it is the only elaborate dress I own."

"No, of course... In any case, I expect that once you are married, Sir Benedict will lavish presents over you. Leaving you at Pitcairn Castle with only one item of clothing worthy of a banquet is most probably an oversight on his part. I hear he is quite wealthy."

"He is," Llinos answered dully, refusing to be drawn into a conversation about her future groom with a woman like Lady Mary, who would only say all the wrong things

and end up make her feel worse than ever.

Her betrothed was rich, but so was he. She didn't need him. She didn't want him.

There was only one man she wanted.

She ran for the stairs before she could hear another comment and plunged her body in the water awaiting her with fierce determination. As she scrubbed her skin raw, she fought the tears welling in her eyes. She would never have the man she wanted, she was already another's property. Her body did not belong to Duncan, or even to herself, it belonged to a man who did not want it, who did not think it particularly beautiful and who most likely would not know how to coax pleasure out of it.

When Sir Benedict had tried to kiss her she had felt nothing but unease and irritation. What would a kiss from Duncan feel like, she wondered? He had warned her he would not kiss her and so far he had kept his promise. Once or twice she'd had the impression that he wanted to kiss her but she must have been mistaken, for he had never acted in the impulse. If he had felt the urge, he would simply have kissed her. He was not a man to prevaricate and hesitate.

But Sir Benedict was. And he was far too proper, far too tame to ever rouse her desire. On the single occasion he had stepped over the boundaries of propriety he had asked her permission before touching her hand, for heaven's sake! And then he had pecked her cheeks a few times before he'd actually managed to kiss her on the lips. She scoffed out loud. Duncan had taken far more without the least hesitation, without giving her protests any heed. What he had done to her last night... She should have been horrified but in fact she was grateful he had not let her stupid preconceptions stand in the way of astounding pleasure.

Left to her own device, she would never have allowed him to invade her most secret entrance – and what a shame that would have been!

What else could he make her discover, she wondered? Would they have enough time before Sir Benedict arrived for her to discover all there was to discover between a man and a woman? One way or another her betrothed's arrival would signal the end of her affair with Duncan, either because she was sent away in disgrace or because Sir Benedict married her.

"Are you all right, my lady?" the maid asked, coming towards her with a piece of linen.

"Yes."

It was a lie. She had rarely felt more dejected. She dried herself absent-mindedly, slipped on the gown without feeling its softness, and allowed the maid to untangle her curls in complete silence.

"You look lovely, my lady," the maid enthused, as she took in the magnificence of the gown. "Now. Let us braid your hair so you can dazzle everyone."

*

Holy Mary mother of God.

Never had anything so beautiful caused anyone more consternation, Duncan mused when Llinos entered the great hall in Lady Mary's wake. The ivory gown was just a shade darker than her creamy skin, and the gold embroidery on her décolletage matched the fire shimmering in her hair. Two sapphire pendants hung from her ears, as brilliant as her eyes and her curves were barely contained by the skin-tight, perfectly smooth velvet.

Tonight she looked too regal to be adorable, she was...

Duncan racked his brain for the best way to describe her and found it when she climbed onto the dais and surveyed the assembly from her vantage point.

Out of reach.

That's what she was. This was unquestionably a wealthy lady, an esteemed guest of the lord of the castle, betrothed to a future earl. And he was... no one. He would not even be allowed to sit at one of the tables tonight. He was only here for the help he could offer if one of the male guests got drunk and involved into a fight.

He looked at Llinos again.

The difference between them had never been clearer, the distance more impossible to bridge. All traces of him had been erased from her body by now. She would have bathed to prepare for the banquet, the last remnants of his seed would have been washed away and the flavour of expensive wine would have replaced the taste of him on her tongue. Last night's folly might as well never have taken place.

Should never have taken place.

In his black tunic he felt as menacing as she was angelic. The simple material of it was a stark contrast to the rich velvet adorning her body. He felt like a crow would feel in front of a swan, he was the shadows lurking in her light, the sin corrupting her purity.

As dinner progressed, he watched her smile, eat, talk, and the bitterness in him grew more and more intense, like a poison slowly spreading through his veins, threatening to overpower him. It was too late, he was a condemned man. Even if he bled himself dry he would never get her out of him now.

And then, just when he was thinking that he would have to leave the hall or go mad

with frustration, Llinos got up and excused herself. That was the opportunity he had been waiting for. Making sure no one saw him, he slipped out of the room and followed her at a distance.

He could not wait another moment to see her. The castle possessed a hidden passage running along the great hall, which was being used on occasion to spy on people without being seen.

Well tonight it would be used for a very different purpose.

*

If she heard another pointless anecdote, if she stayed another moment in the great hall Llinos would scream. The air was suffocating, the company oppressive, the food stuck to her palate and her dress was too tight. That was not normal. Why did her own dress feel so restrictive? It had been made for her only six months ago. Had she put on weight in the last few weeks? Perhaps.

Since her arrival at Pitcairn Castle – or rather, since her meeting with a certain handsome squire – she had eaten with more appetite than usual. Perhaps it had started to show... It certainly felt as if she had put on a few pounds now that she was wearing a dress she hadn't worn in months. She felt unable to breathe properly.

Or perhaps her discomfort had nothing to do with her clothes and all to do with Duncan's remoteness.

He had barely met her gaze all evening and on the rare occasions he had glanced her way, his eyes had been veiled with indifference. He had been surveying the room, ostensibly looking out for potential threats. In reality she knew he was only here to impress the guests. Lord Masterson wanted to add to his consequence by having as many strong, forbidding men around as possible .

And no one looked stronger or more forbidding than Duncan.

The black of his tunic highlighted his masculinity. In it he was the perfect counterpoint to her. One black, one white, it was as if they were two sides of the same coin, different and yet inextricably linked. They were opposites that attracted and complemented one another. He was tall, she was small, he was hard, she was soft, he was poor, she was rich, he was the dark secret that had given her dull life meaning.

And yet he couldn't come to her, or even look her way because his father had been able to sing rather than fight.

It was unbearable.

Making sure no eyes were on her, she slipped behind a tapestry and into a hidden corridor running along the length of the great hall. Perhaps to prove that he would be watching her at all times, Lord Masterson had shown her the secret place the day after her arrival at Pitcairn Castle and she needed some time alone to think. Duncan had been acting distant all day. Usually, even if they could not be together, they found a dozen opportunities to catch a glimpse of each other. But today he had made a point of avoiding her and not meeting her gaze whenever she walked past him .

Why? The only thing she could think of was that he was ashamed to be with her after what he had dared to do last night. But she was not, even if, admittedly, it had been shocking. Perhaps next time they met she should...

A gasp barely had time to escaped Llinos' lips before a hand clamped over her mouth, silencing the scream already bubbling in her throat. Panic flared. This was supposed to be a secret place! Who had followed her, and why?

"Hush, lass, 'tis I."

Duncan. Thank God. She sagged against his chest, weak with relief. He'd frightened the life out of her. She had been so certain he would still be in the hall, standing guard!

"Are ye going to scream if I let ye go?" Though she would have liked to stay in his arms a bit longer, she shook her head. "Good."

He removed his hand.

"What are you doing?" she whispered, turning to face him.

*

What was he doing?

Duncan wasn't sure. All he knew was that he could not have watched Llinos being admired a moment longer without going mad.

"Everyone's looking at ye, seeing a beautiful, respectable, demure woman. Ye look perfect tonight," he said through gritted teeth. "Too perfect. Not a hair out of place, not the slightest crease on yer dress, not a hint of colour on yer cheeks. That won't do at all. Ye're supposed to be a fallen woman, remember?" he said in her ear, careful of not being overheard. Though they were hidden from view, they were in actual fact mere feet away from the guests dining in the hall, on the other side of the wall.

"I'm not supposed to look wanton all the time," she protested faintly. "Only when Sir Benedict arrives and he's not here yet."

Duncan did not let this reasonable argument sway him. After watching her all night, he was past reason. He needed action. "It matters not. Ye need practice, ye need to arouse suspicion amongst the guests, so that when yer betrothed asks about ye later

on they can tell him in all honesty what a wanton ye really are,” he declared, taking her by the shoulders to turn her away from him. “When ye reappear in the great hall tonight people need to wonder what ye’ve been doing.”

“What would that be?”

He gripped her by the hips and brought her flush against his straining hardness. Mo chreach ! He was so hard, so ready for her that he could have come just by grinding himself against her luscious curves. This was what he had dreamed of doing ever since he had seen her naked at the lake.

“Getting fucked to within an inch of yer life, like a lady can ne’er hope to be fucked,” he whispered in her ear. “That’s what ye’ll be doing.”

The gasp of arousal she gave almost caused him to spill there and then. He knew how much she liked his crudeness. Damnation, he had to get inside her, before he disgraced himself.

Placing a hand between her shoulder blades, he forced her to bend forwards.

“Brace yerself against the wall,” he ordered roughly. To hell with caution and gentleness, this was going to be hard and primal, nothing like what they had done so far. She was no virgin and all too aware of his dark penchants by now. She would just have to take it the way he wanted to give it to her.

“We can’t!” Llinos whimpered. “Not here!”

“Aye, here,” he contradicted, hiking up her skirts and closing his hands around her slim waist. “And now.”

Before I lose my mind.

“Ye said I could have ye whenever I wanted, however I wanted,” he growled, pinning her in place. “Ye said aye to my conditions, ye agreed. Don’t ye dare refuse me now!”

Not now, not when he felt so worthless already, when he needed her, needed to be shown he mattered too.

“I’m not refusing you!” She sounded frantic. “But people will hear!”

“Nay. They will only hear if ye want them to hear.” He pushed the leather glove he’d brought for that exact purpose between her teeth. “Bite down onto that if ye need to.”

Oh, he would make sure she would need it. He would make her lose her mind, in the same way she was making him mad with need. The only problem was, he wasn't sure he would be able to swallow his own roar of triumph when pleasure overcame him. Perhaps he should have brought the other glove as well.

At the last moment a vestige of doubt assailed him. Was he not being too forceful, too frightening? Probably. But he had watched Llinos all night and never had the gulf between them appeared wider. He needed to bridge it the only way he could. As a lowly servant, not even a proper squire, he would never have been allowed to sit down next to her on the dais and feed her morsels of food, he could not have presumed to engage her into any kind of conversation or sweep her into a dance.

He snorted. So what if he could not do any of those things? He didn’t want to eat with her, talk or dance with her, he wanted to fuck her, nothing more. This was no romantic arrangement, she wanted only one thing from him, and he would be sure to give it to her.

Now.

“Are ye sure ye want this, lass?” he asked, his only concession to decency. Heaven help him if she said no, he wasn't quite sure what he would do then.

“Yes,” she said, her voice muffled by the glove. Imagining her biting down on the leather only increased his arousal.

“Tell me ye’re ready and wet,” he ordered, feeling on the verge of desperation. He heard her whimper in protest, a plea for mercy. He gave none, she would have to admit it out loud. He needed her ready and wet, for there would be no preliminaries. He was a man half demented with need. “Touch yerself, and tell me.”

He watched her reach to the place between her legs.

“I’m ready.” Her voice was but a whisper.

Digging his fingers into her hips he thrust into her, barely repressing a growl at the exquisite sensation. As promised, she was wet and swollen, as aroused by the illicit encounter as he was. The demon within him was somewhat soothed. Despite his low status, he could make the noble lady wild with need. It was better than nothing.

Again and again he thrust, until he could feel nothing but the hot sheath welcoming him. He was close already, too close to last much longer, too lost to pleasure to want to stop. Still, he should slow down, he should see to her pleasure, he should...

With a muffled curse, he increased the speed. This time, her pleasure would have to wait until he’d reached his own, he would never be able to stop himself now. Two more swift thrusts and he emptied himself, throwing his head back in ecstasy.

He’d managed to spill outside her body that day at the cottage – both times – but today he did not even try. He could not think. He just had to claim her, mark her, and consequences be damned.

*

Leather.

Llinos would never be able to smell the spicy scent ever again without remembering the shocking urgency of her encounter with Duncan. He was pounding into her with wild abandon, gripping her waist so tightly she was sure he would leave bruises. It was nothing like what had happened in the meadow, or even in the cottage, when he had tempered the worst of his ardour. Tonight he was like a man possessed, beyond all control. The position itself was unashamedly dominant, almost too shameful to be believed.

Delicious.

She thought back to the two dogs they had caught in that exact same position the other day. Now it was her turn to be mounted and used for her mate's pleasure. Except... Except that she was not going to leave unsatisfied.

Duncan gave a final thrust and stilled, back arched, hips quivering. Heat flooded her, causing a small wave of sensation to unfurl through her stomach. He had not withdrawn, like he had at the cottage. The idea that he had lost control was thrilling.

After a while he slumped over her, placing his forehead between her shoulder blades. Then he muttered something in Gaelic.

I found my release. Now it's your turn.

Although she couldn't be sure, she imagined it meant something like this because a moment later she felt his hand snake between her legs, reaching to the centre of her pleasure. A finger slowly brushed along the place where they were joined. Lord, the idea that he was still inside of her, still hard, that he had just used her and yet wanted

her to reach her release made her wild. Had she not been so aroused she would have laughed. To think Duncan had once wanted her to believe he was an inconsiderate man...

He started to stroke her with swift, assured flicks that had her squirming in no time. His earlier attentions had sent her to the edge and she would not need much to topple over.

All the while he kept talking to her in Gaelic. The raspy sounds, the velvet-soft voice, the nimble fingers at her core and the hard shaft inside her... It was all too much.

She exploded with unprecedented force and the glove between her teeth was not enough to muffle her cries of ecstasy. By a happy coincidence, at that precise moment, shouting erupted in the hall, signalling the arrival of some elaborate dish or other and she reassured herself that her moaning would go unnoticed. Taking advantage of it, Llinos gave way to the scream that had been building inside her throat.

Letting it out only seemed to intensify her pleasure. She cried out again. Duncan groaned at the same time.

“Jesu, lass, ye’re squeezing me so hard, I cannae...”

Instead of finishing his sentence he thrust forward. Llinos whimpered. Dear, would the pleasure ever ebb? The man was merciless. He thrust again, more forcefully, and she cried out again, louder .

“More, I need more,” Duncan said through gritted teeth. “I want ye again.”

She could only nod her agreement, even though she wasn't sure he was asking for it. For her part, she didn't want him again as much as want him still . The pleasure had

never really stopped, crashing through her in waves, each more devastating than the other.

Duncan slammed into her one last time, withdrew with a curse and emptied himself on the small of her back, flooding her with the warmth of his release.

Eventually, he went still. Llinos focused on standing upright. Her legs seemed to have turned to water. Forget ladies, surely not many women had ever been fucked like that. To within an inch of her life, Duncan had said. Well, it certainly felt like it. She was on the verge of collapse.

After one last groan he drew away from her and readjusted his clothes. She stayed where she was, exposed and trembling, breathing hard. A moment later her skirts were restored to their normal, decent length and an iron arm wrapped around her waist, offering her the support she needed. Her knees finally buckled.

“Careful, my lady, you cannot afford to falter right now. Your host is waiting for you.”

Her heart squeezed because his accent was once more that of a respectable, English squire, which could only mean one thing.

Duncan was in control once more.

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Llinos felt limp and smaller than ever in his arms. Duncan gritted his teeth. He should let go of her, he desperately needed to, but he could not. If he removed his arms from around her waist, she would fall to the floor.

Eventually she straightened herself and took the glove from her mouth.

“Surely you don’t mean to send me back into the hall looking like this?” she asked, glancing at herself.

He grunted. “Looking like a thoroughly sated woman you mean?” He spoke in his squire voice, the one he never used with her.

She definitely didn’t look like she had earlier. She was flushed, a few strands of copper hair had escaped from her headdress, and her gown had gained a few creases. And that was just on the surface... Underneath the clothes she would be even more flushed, her flesh would be bruised from his iron hold, her heart would be beating wildly and her skin would be slick from their combined releases. He had branded her as his but no one would know it, would even be allowed to suspect it .

Fury swelled within him, dousing the last lingering embers of need inside him.

“Go,” he said harshly, taking a step back. “Go back to where you belong, go and play the lady knowing that you have just been used like a whore, go and exchange pleasantries with lords all the while remembering that you had a bastard minstrel between your legs. Talk to barons and knights and try to forget your thighs are dripping with my seed.”

Llinos opened wide eyes. He wasn’t sure if she was shocked or hurt – or both. “Why are you talking to me like this?” she asked, her bottom lip trembling. “You know I don’t think of you in such terms, you know I don’t — ”

“If you won’t go, then I will!” Duncan snarled, before walking away.

He didn’t want to hear that she didn’t think of him like that, because then what would he do? Take her again, kiss her senseless, beg her to run away with him? Everything seemed possible at the moment.

He needed to hold on to the notion that they could not be together, because it might knock some sense into him at last.

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In the end Llinos didn't have to rack her brain to find a way to explain her flushed cheeks and unsteady legs. When she reappeared in the great hall Lady Mary took one look at her and rushed out to her side. True to herself, she did not let her get in a word in edgeways and simply drew her own conclusions.

“Oh you poor dear, what on earth happened to you? Come sit here and tell me all about it.” She patted the chair next to her. “You look as if you are about to fall. Have you had a fright, is that what it is?”

Llinos could only nod. She was on the edge of tears.

What had happened to Duncan tonight? He had been like a different man... It wasn't exactly that he had been more forceful in his lovemaking, even if that was certainly the case, but there had been a desperation in his voice and his eyes she hadn't witnessed before. And then the way he had walked away from her... It had been as if he hadn't wanted to let her go and yet could not have borne to be another moment with her .

His words came back to her mind.

Go back to where you belong.

You had a lowly squire, a bastard between your legs.

So that was what was eating at him, why he had been so distant during the day, why he had watched her so intently throughout the evening, why he had needed to possess her so fiercely! He had needed to prove to himself that there was at least a part of her

he could have.

Her heart bled for him because even though she would gladly have given him all of herself, he thought himself unworthy of her, too low to be allowed to be a part in her life, even a base one.

“Yes, I had a fright. I had forgotten something in my bedchamber, so I went to retrieve it. But as I crossed the courtyard I saw... a shape,” she mumbled and made a vague gesture, knowing that Lady Mary never really listened to her anyway. As long as she appeared distraught, it would be enough to explain her flushed state. “If you will forgive me, I think I will retire to bed. I feel a headache coming on. You know, women’s problems,” she added in a low, conspiratorial murmur.

“Oh, I do. Poor dear.”

Poor dear .

Llinos set her teeth. If she heard the two words one more time she would scream.

She was not a poor dear, she was not a helpless, insignificant person! She was a woman who knew what she wanted and could not have it! Why could Lady Mary not leave her be? Why couldn’t they all just go away?

When had the company of the people here at Pitcairn Castle become so unbearable? In the space of a few weeks Lord Masterson had changed from affable to overzealous, his steward’s nasal voice grated on her nerves and every time Lady Mary opened her mouth, it was to utter platitudes that made Llinos cringe on the inside. No one could raise an ounce of interest within her. Nothing held any appeal. The only person she wanted to be with was Duncan, the only thing she wanted to do was be with him. His conversation was invigorating, his presence comforting and of course every time he touched her, she dissolved in pleasure such as she had never

known existed.

She couldn't have chosen a better man to put her plan to execution, but for all that, nothing had happened the way she had imagined. She had thought she would find a man, allow him to bed her once and be done with it, she had assumed the encounter would happen in a bed, not on the grass of a sun-filled meadow, she hadn't anticipated that the man would make her utter shocking words and perform shocking deeds, she had not expected him to be shockingly handsome, shockingly skilled, or to make her body explode in such a shocking manner.

And, most importantly of all, she hadn't imagined that she would be hankering for him long after the bargain was sealed. But she was. Desperately so, hopelessly so.

Llinos got up, determined to leave before she started crying.

"Will you be all right to go on your own?" Lady Mary enquired as she wavered.

"Yes, thank you."

"We should ask for someone to see you safely to your chamber."

"No!" If they asked Duncan it would be a disaster and she didn't want to see anyone else. She didn't want to talk, answer questions or pretend everything was all right.

She turned around.

"Poor dear, I bet you cannot wait for Sir Benedict's return."

No, Llinos thought with a shudder. The longer he stayed away, the better. But undeniably, if he arrived tonight, it would ensure the success of her mad plan. One look at her and he would guess that his future bride was a far cry from the innocent

virgin he wished to marry. If she looked half as debauched as she felt then he would publicly shun her.

In her bedchamber she found the tub she had used to bathe earlier. It had not been emptied yet. Sucking in a breath, she plunged into the cold water. Despite the goosebumps covering her skin, she washed herself thoroughly, fearing that if she stayed with Duncan's scent on her she would never be able to keep tears at bay.

Tonight something had been broken between them, something she wasn't sure she would be able to repair.

The next day, unable to face him, she stayed in bed. Hopefully, Lady Mary would spread the word of her supposed headache, thereby ensuring Lord Masterson did not think it odd that she did not appear. Anyway, she didn't care. Let them think what they wanted. The only person whose opinion mattered to her was Duncan and she knew that, even if she made the effort to get up, he would only be avoiding her.

If he had been uncomfortable after the interlude in her bed, he would be horrified by what they had done in the secret passage, thinking himself no better than a beast governed by lust, mounting her like Cwtch had mounted his bitch and making her take it without complaint.

That night, as she lay awake in bed she decided to be brave in the morning. She could not stay away indefinitely, and she missed Duncan.

Before dawn she was up, determined to see him while the castle was still asleep.

After a fruitless search in the bailey, she found him in the lists, practising his sword moves. Oddly, he was doing so alone, instead of fighting a partner, as was common practice. For a while she remained hidden in the shadows and just watched him, entranced by the way his body moved and his muscles flexed. It did not take her long

to understand why he was practising on his own instead of sparring with other men. He was ashamed of his inability to wield the weapon properly, and intent on improving. Because he was strong and graceful, his movements were impressive but, as a noblewoman used to seeing knights fight, Llinos could tell he was not as fluid or proficient as he should be for a squire. But of course he was not really a squire, he was only a minstrel's son posing as one, a bastard alone and away from home, trying to make a life in a place where he was not allowed to be himself, little more than a slave.

Her heart bled for him but she stayed where she was because she knew he would hate to be seen in such a vulnerable moment.

He proved it when, a moment later he swivelled round, and ran to where she was hiding, blade pointed straight at her.

Even if he was not as skilled as he would have liked to be, he was still ten times faster and stronger than she was. He could have cut her to ribbons before she had time to understand what was happening. Stifling a scream, Llinos flattened herself against the wall.

Duncan stood in front of her, his sword aimed at her throat. Had it been anyone else she might well have fainted with fright. Because it was Duncan, she knew he would never actually run her through, even if she had witnessed his humiliation.

“What are ye doing here? Have ye come to gloat? See the poor man unable to use his sword properly?”

“N-no.” There was no use pretending she had not noticed he was not as skilled as he could be, but surely he knew she would never make him feel bad about it? What did he take her for? Had the last few weeks meant nothing to him? “I didn’t know you came here to practise.”

He ignored her comment. “Why have ye come? Didn’t ye have enough the other night when I mounted ye like a bitch in heat?”

The words were like a slap. “I — ”

“Have ye washed today?” he carried on, not giving her time to formulate a response. “Or are yer thighs still dripping wi’ my seed?”

This was no lewd talk meant to entice her, it was crudeness meant to hurt her. And it did. Was that all he had to tell her after all they had shared together? Call her a bitch in heat and he a poor man mounting her like an animal?

“Please, Duncan, we need to — ”

“We need nothing! We dinnae belong together and ye ken it,” he snarled. “Go away. If I touch ye again I will do it in a way ye willnae like. I will take possession of every part of ye, do ye hear? I will leave ye feeling lower than a whore.”

“Why?” she asked, feeling all the blood drain from her face. “Why would you do this?”

“Because I can!” he roared, planting his sword into the ground. “Because ye let me! And I would be a fool not to take advantage of the opportunity of humiliating a noble lady!”

It was then that Llinos understood. He had never wanted her . He had only wanted the opportunity to take revenge on his past.

“I see. You didn’t bed me to help me out of a marriage I did not desire, you didn’t even mean to make me pay for my selfishness, teach me a lesson for assuming you would accept my offer without question,” she said, biting the inside of her mouth to

stop her lips from trembling. “You meant to take revenge on your mother, nothing more. When you... used me, you didn’t do it because you wanted me, but because you had a score to settle with your past. You wanted to treat me like your father should have treated your mother.”

Although she didn’t want him to see how deeply the realisation hurt, she could not help the tremor in her voice. He’d said he would use her, that he would make her feel lower than a whore. But she had done nothing to deserve that. His mother was the villain of the piece. She was the one who should be punished.

She, Llinos, was paying for a crime she hadn’t committed.

Her heart broke, because she had allowed herself to believe Duncan cared for her when he had only meant to pay Lady Eileen back for the pain she had caused his father.

“I was always just an instrument for you, and yet you made me feel as if I was the despicable one for going to you!”

Perhaps it was no more than she deserved for considering using him for her own purpose, but it hurt to know that she had been nothing more than a way to right a wrong. Now she knew why he had forced her to behave in such a wanton manner, to utter those shocking words, and perform those shocking deeds. He had wanted to transform her into his mother, so he could show her what women like her deserved.

He'd made her service him, expose herself, take whatever he wanted to give her, and all the while he had not seen her, but Lady Eileen MacDonald.

“Did it help?” she asked in a sob. “I hope it helped you to do to me the things you wish your father had done to your mother, because it certainly makes me feel like a fool!”

Llinos turned away, unable to look at him. There was no point in running away, he would catch up with her before she could reach the gate. Or... Perhaps he did not care enough to go after her. She didn't want to find out so she stayed where she was.

"Nay, it did not help." He grabbed her by the shoulders to make her face him once more. "At first I thought ye no better than my mother, I will admit, running after me to demand to be fucked, not giving a damn about what I thought or wanted. I thought ye were yet another lady using a common man for her own purpose, without a care about his feelings or preferences. But ye weren't like that and — "

"Don't lie!" Llinos said, trying to disentangle herself from his hold. "I know what I did, and how it must have appeared to you!" She knew she had hurt him but she didn't want to have this turning into a conversation about what she had done wrong because he was the one under accusation at the moment, not her. "But you are not free from blame either, you jumped at the chance of humiliating me, you — "

"Nay, 'tis not what ye think. Listen to me!" Duncan growled. "At first I did think to use ye, to my shame. As I said, not many men in my position would resist a woman like ye and I did think it would help to soothe away my anger to make ye pay for yer presumption. I did mean to use ye and make ye regret coming to me. But then..."

Llinos stared at him. His bluntness, painful as it was, made her see that he was trying to be honest. He was trying to tell her the truth. Whether she would like hearing it was another thing. Still, she asked. "But then?"

"But then I saw that ye were nothing like my mother. Ye didn't want me just for my body, ye had reasons for coming to me, reasons I can sympathise with. And ye gave yerself to me rather than just take what ye wanted." He ran a hand through his hair. "I... I ne'er thought ye would treat me as yer equal but ye did."

"What else could I do? What do you take me for? I'm not Lady Mary!"

“I ne’er said ye were, only...”

When he hesitated she looked at him square in the eye, which required her to lift her head .

“You got it all wrong from the start. You thought that lying with me would humiliate me when I was the one suggesting it! You thought that by using me you would make me think you’re a brute but it only made me crave more of your touch.” She shook her head. “You really don’t know me at all.”

“Aye, I do ken ye now lass, but I didnae at the start. I think... I think we both started this for all the wrong reasons and got trapped in a web of our own making. And now I cannae see a way out of it.” He placed his forehead against hers, a gesture of surrender, apology and longing all at once.

She placed a hand on his nape, gifting her with the forgiveness he sought. “Neither do I.”

They might be trapped but she did not want to get out of a web that felt more like a cocoon. With Duncan she could be herself and be appreciated for it. It was a wonderful feeling. She didn’t need to hide her feelings or repress her unlady-like reactions. When Welsh words escaped her lips, he never battered an eyelid, and even asked her what they meant.

No, as difficult as all this was, she could not regret any of it. She would rather be trapped with Duncan than free with people who made her feel like a prisoner.

“Let me walk ye back to yer bedchamber,” he said eventually.

Llinos smiled. Though she was certain no one would attempt anything against one of Lord Masterson’s guests, she wanted to indulge him. If he wanted to be protective,

she would revel in it. Only a moment ago she had feared he only wanted her as a tool in his revenge. It felt good to be shown that it was not the case, that he truly cared about her.

“Please, I would feel safer if you did.”

They walked in silence, Duncan staying a few steps behind her as was proper. No one happening upon them would see anything other than a squire escorting a lady.

“You know... You still have not punished me for my behaviour the other day,” she told him once they reached her bedchamber. “Are you ever going to do it?”

“It...”

He cleared his throat and her body caught aflame. The idea of him submitting her to his will had her inner muscles clench in anticipation. “I wouldn’t mind.”

“Lass,” he warned, taking a step towards her.

“Well, are you going to punish me?” He hesitated again and the urge to tease him became overwhelming. “Relax, I’m only after an aye or a nay, I’m not going to ask you to do it right now. ”

The look Duncan threw her caused her stomach to swap places with her heart.

“Ye are without a doubt the most provoking woman I have e’er met.”

Llinos wasn't fooled. Although he did his best to sound disapproving, she knew Duncan MacQuarrie had just given her the most heartfelt compliment she had ever received.

A door slammed in the distance, recalling them to the reality of the situation. The castle was waking up and he could not be seen anywhere near her bedchamber. He gave a bow.

“I bid you good day, my lady.”

During the next few weeks Duncan and Llinos stopped fighting the inevitable. Instead, every chance they got, they met, even when they knew they would not have the opportunity to make love. It was both the best and worst time of Llinos’ life. Moments spent with Duncan sent her soaring to the Heavens, then every goodbye hurled her into an abyss of despair.

They were headed for disaster but the journey was the most enjoyable interlude she could have dreamed of.

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What the hell was happening?

Duncan ran a hand through his hair and growled when the smell hit him. Damn it all. Flowers. His hair smelled like flowers.

Like her .

And no wonder. A week ago Llinos had gifted him with a cake of soap. He'd been duly offended by the gift.

“Do I reek so much, lass? Haven't ye got enough work wi' that dog of yers, do ye now plan to bathe all the mongrels ye can find within the castle walls?”

The wretched woman only giggled. “You most definitely do not reek. In fact, you smell better than anyone I've ever met. But I made a batch of soap yesterday and I couldn't resist giving you a piece. I wanted you to...”

She blushed such a delicious colour that he drew her into his arms. He had long stopped trying to resist the impulse to touch her when they were alone. The only barrier he had not crossed yet was the one he had erected at the beginning. In all those weeks together there had been no kiss.

On the mouth at least.

“What did ye want, lass?” he asked, annoyed that the urge to place his lips on hers was getting stronger and stronger by the day. He wasn't sure he would be able to resist it for much longer.

“It’s silly. I wanted you to smell like me, in the same way I sometimes smell of you. I hoped it would make you think of me before falling asleep, and perhaps dream of being with me?”

That had to be the most damned adorable, satisfying thing he had ever heard. Lady Llinos wanted him to smell like her, to dream of her. And she liked to smell like him.

“What do ye do in bed when ye smell of me, lass?” he growled in her ear. He hadn’t missed the way she’d blushed as she’d said the words. Perhaps... “Do ye touch yerself and imagine my hands on ye?”

Please say you do. Please say I am not the only one pleasuring myself imagining I was with you .

“I...”

“Tell me,” he ordered, tightening his hold on her.

“Yes. ”

There it was. She gave herself pleasure at night whilst thinking of what they did together by day. And now she wanted him to do the same, to stroke himself while he bathed and wrapped himself in her evocative smell.

And damnation if he hadn’t done exactly that! Night after night he had washed himself with the soap until frustration shot out of him in long, scalding spurts.

This would not do.

He was losing sight of what was at stake here, of their bargain. He was no longer going to Llinos to teach her lessons in the art of debauchery, he was going to her

because he wanted to be with her, because of the way she smiled when she saw him and the way her eyes sparkled when he talked to her. He didn't bed her to show her what men did to women, but to show her the many things he wanted to do to her. A lifetime would not be enough to quench his thirst for her and they only had a few weeks.

She had completely bewitched him, making him do things he had sworn never to do. He allowed her to sleep in his arms when her body had been wrung of all its strength, he gave her foot massages when he thought she looked tired, and only the other day he had given that mangy dog of hers a pat on the head, for Christ's sake!

It had to stop! He was in danger of seriously losing it.

All the while he hadn't been teaching her anything she wouldn't have learnt from another, but she had managed to do something no one else had ever done. She'd made him...

Dear God.

She'd made him fall in love with her, that was what she had done.

Horror froze the blood in his veins. He could not be in love with a lady. Why had he not sworn on his father's deathbed never to fall for a noblewoman? Then he might have found the strength to honour the oath, even at the cost of his sanity. Why had he gone and promised himself never to fall for a Sassenach wench when he'd left Scotland? It only left the door wide open for Welsh ladies. Llinos had taken him by surprise, attacking his unprotected flank. He had not thought to guard himself against women like her, because she was nothing like the women he thought to meet – never mind bed.

She was just too bloody perfect, and utterly unattainable.

And he was a fool. Duncan MacQuarrie, in love with Lady Llinos, a betrothed noble lady. How ridiculous. He couldn't let her know that for him what had started as a mere game had taken a completely different turn .

In the morning he pretexted a visit to the blacksmith beyond the valley to stay away from the castle for two days even if every fibre of his body ached to go to her. When he came back Llinos allowed him to get away with the pretence that he was required at the tiltyard all day. Then she started to get suspicious and it became hell to avoid her. Not just because he was running out of ideas but because he needed her.

Finally, on the morning of the sixth day – not that he was counting – he found himself face to face with Llinos.

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“You’ve been avoiding me.”

Llinos could not help the accusation bursting from her mouth. She had missed Duncan so terribly. In the last month they had not spent more than a day without seeing each other. Even if they could not touch, she needed to see him, hear him, be with him.

And then out of the blue something had changed. Why was Duncan avoiding her now, when time was precious, when their days together were numbered? They had not spoken for nearly a week. This could not be allowed to continue.

“I — ”

“You have been avoiding me, don’t deny it! Just tell me why.”

“Don’t ye dare give me orders!” Duncan growled, as disgruntled as a bear. “I’m the

one who gives ye orders!”

“That was not an order,” she replied, taken aback. He had not used that tone with her since their argument the day she had seen him practise his sword skills.

“I tell ye what to do, not the other way around,” he carried on ruthlessly, not meeting her eye. Something was wrong. What was going on now? She had so desperately hoped they had put all misunderstanding behind!

She decided to attack before he could.

“Very well, order me about then. You know I like nothing better. What will it be today, master? Shall I lie on the table and spread my legs for you? Or do you want me to take you in my mouth and — ”

“Stop!”

Llinos started when Duncan slammed his fist on the door inches away from her face. Something was very wrong indeed. Even when he was put out, he was never violent.

“I dinnae want ye do to anything except leave!” he said through gritted teeth. “Our lessons are over.”

Lessons! She recoiled under the unexpected blow. He was still thinking of their times together as lessons ?

“But — ”

“But nothing. Ye wanted me to take yer maidenhead, nothing more, and instead I turned ye into a whore. I exhausted my purpose the day I thrust my damned fingers inside ye. After that there was no need for us to see each other again.”

“That’s not what happened!” She was horrified at this summary of their situation. “You did not turn me into a... a...”

“Nay?” Duncan asked bitterly. “I’ve fucked ye in all the ways a man can fuck a woman. I’ve used ye for my selfish pleasure and I’ve made ye beg for it. There is not an inch of yer body I haven’t soiled. I took yer innocence along with yer maidenhead. Thanks to me ye now ken just what bastards men really are where women are concerned.”

He sounded no longer angry, but rather, defeated. Llinos’ chest contracted. Was that why he had avoided her? Because he felt guilty about his treatment of her? True, their lovemaking had become increasingly wild but surely he’d seen that she had loved every moment! As to him soiling her, she would take issue with anyone daring to utter such a slight.

“Duncan, that’s not — ”

“It is. Ye are a lady, and ye were a virgin. I should ne’er have — ”

“I was the one who asked!” she cut in, unable to believe they were back to the same argument again. “Yes, I was a virgin, but that was precisely the problem I needed to remedy. As to me being a lady... What difference does it make? I’m still a woman!”

But she knew it bothered him. She had not forgotten his comment when they had seen Cwtch mating with a well-bred dog all those weeks ago.

His tastes appear to run to the refined! An ambitious lad, yer Cwtch!

Well, just because she was a woman and not a bitch, she should only be allowed to mingle with her own species! To hell with that! She would mate with mongrels if that was what made her happy.

“Please listen to me. I am so grateful that I asked you to deflower me when this mad idea got into my head. Anyone else would have just taken me, they would not have given me pleasure with it. These last three months with you have been...”

She could not finish because suddenly a thought struck her.

The last three months had been a series of blissful encounters indeed. Of uninterrupted blissful encounters.

Oh Lord.

A chill ran up Llinos’ spine. “I’m sorry, I have to go,” she said, feeling light-headed.

For the first time since she had gone to Duncan, she was the one walking away from him.

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Duncan watched Llinos walk away on unsteady legs. The urge to run after her was overwhelming but, calling on all his inner strength, he resisted it.

If he didn’t stay right where he was, he would end up making the biggest mistake of his life, and worse, ruin hers.

And so, instead of chasing after her, he ran to the village tavern. Perhaps drinking himself into oblivion would help.

Later that night he had to face facts. All the alcohol in the world would not be enough to quell the urge to go to Llinos and apologise for hurting her. The way she had left...

Duncan emptied his tankard in one gulp and returned to the castle. Clenching his jaw

he strode towards the kitchens – and the two maids inside. If he spent the night fucking them he would surely wake up in the morning cured of his silly infatuation with a certain Welsh lady he had no business dreaming about.

“Duncan,” Jennie cooed, wiping her hands on her apron. It was time to use to his advantage the soft spot she had for him. This was where he belonged, with scullions and dairymaids, not with ladies. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Aye, there is,” he growled. “You and Ella both. Come to my room. Now.”

*

She had to go to his room. Now.

Llinos stared at the ceiling. Duncan deserved to know why she had fled so precipitously this afternoon or he would think she agreed with everything he’d said, that he should never have gone to her. He deserved to know he was going to be a father. Or at least...

To know that she was with child, because how could he ever be a father to a babe that should never have been conceived?

That was one of the many things they would have to discuss, along with what she would do with regards to Sir Benedict. It was now doubly important that their marriage did not go ahead. He had proposed to her on the understanding that she was untouched, thereby ensuring their children were legitimate. This babe, born less than six months after their wedding, conceived while he was at the other end of the country, would not be.

Llinos afforded herself a wan smile. It seemed that she had succeeded in getting herself out of a marriage she didn’t want, as Sir Benedict would never marry a

woman already with child.

Unfortunately, she would be unable to deny that her seducer resided in Pitcairn Castle, as she had decided to do. To protect Duncan from retaliation, she had elected to pretend she had actually been deflowered by Sir Huw the day he had assaulted her and too ashamed to admit to the truth at first. Now she wasn't sure her betrothed would believe this story. She hadn't started to show yet, and the supposed rape had happened over four months ago. Sir Benedict would never believe she was halfway through her pregnancy and rightfully conclude she had fallen with child while under the care of the man who was supposed to ensure her virtue remained intact.

Which was exactly what had happened.

She couldn't believe how unlucky they had been. Duncan had lost control only twice in all those weeks, but it had been enough to make her with child. Had it happened the first time in the meadow, when she had prevented him from withdrawing or the second time in the secret corridor, when he had been too lost to his bitterness to keep a level head? It mattered not. It had happened, and in spite of everything, she could not regret it.

She glanced through the window and saw only the barest hint of light above the horizon. It was still early but that would serve her purpose. At that time, Duncan might well still be asleep, so there would be no avoiding her like he had done the last few days.

She wrapped herself in her cloak and stole to his sleeping quarters, hoping to find him still in bed. The door opened without a sound – and she almost let out a scream.

Oh, he was most definitely still in bed!

Llinos stared at the picture of pure debauchery in front of her. Duncan was lying flat

on his back, naked as the day he was born, with both his arms flung above his head. Draped around his long, golden body were two equally naked women. The red head had one hand resting on his pectoral, while the brunette was holding his...

His magnificent, splendidly erect cock.

Llinos' stomach, already unsettled, gave another lurch. Her rasp caused Duncan to open an eye. A smile lit up his face when he saw her.

"It's ye lass... Do ye ken, I was dreaming of ye," he murmured, stretching lazily. He frowned when he felt the two women against him, as if he'd already forgotten about them. Then he bolted upright. "Jesus Christ! Llinos, wait, it's not what ye think!"

He'd never called her by her name before, never dared, no matter how many times she had tried to tell him she would like him to. Of all the times to start using it!

"I think it is and I'll leave you to it," she said in a breath. "I can see you're busy."

If she stayed another moment a number of things might happen. One of the women might wake up and smirk at her, someone might walk in on the appalling scene, she might be sick, Duncan might start to give feeble explanations.

None of these possibilities were what she wanted.

She ran and barely had time to reach the lists before she was violently sick. Whether the child or the shock was responsible for it, she didn't know but it made no difference. Once the retching had subsided, she staggered away, collapsed on the cool grass and closed her eyes. It was a mistake, because then she saw Duncan, sprawled naked on his pallet, with two naked women by his side. The awful image was branded on her eyelids forever, branded in her mind, branded in her heart.

With a cry of frustration, she opened her eyes – and found herself staring straight into Duncan’s emerald gaze.

“No!” she whimpered. She didn’t have the strength to face him right now, she could not bear the idea of him seeing her pain. “Leave!”

He did not move a muscle and kept staring at her. At least he was dressed now.

“I ne’er thought ye would come to my room,” he said eventually, his voice gruffer than she had ever heard it. “I didn’t even think ye kent where I slept.”

Llinos could barely believe it. He was not apologising, was not remotely sorry or embarrassed. He was placing all the blame for the encounter on her. If she had been shocked, she only had herself to blame, she should never have been there in the first place!

“I’m sorry, did I put you off? Well,” she answered savagely, getting up to her feet. “Go back to your conquests, there was no need to leave them, not on my account anyway.”

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Why on earth had Llinos come to his place? Never would he have imagined a lady coming to his drab sleeping quarters, at the risk of being seen, recognised and compromised.

She would have had something important to tell him, it was the only explanation. Never before had she come to him, even to demand to be made love to. So why had she...

He froze as a possible explanation crossed his mind.

Mo chreach!

She had just been sick, he had distinctly heard her retch while he was hastening towards her. Of course the shock of seeing him with the women might have caused it, but... There was another reason women were sick in the morning. A reason that might well force a woman to look for a man in the wee hours to impart vital information to him, even at the risk of being seen.

Duncan ran a hand through his hair. Despite the warm temperature, a shiver ran down his spine.

“What did ye come to see me for, lass?” he asked, feeling about to retch himself.

Not that. Please, not that.

“Whatever I had to tell you I doubt you will want to hear,” Llinos spat. “I never want to see you again, do you hear! You wanted to make me regret bedding you, you wanted to humiliate me, make me pay for coming to you, well you have! I am now well and truly...” She stopped as a sob escaped her lips and wrapped her arms around her stomach. “Heartbroken. Congratulations.”

Heartbroken, she’d said, not ruined, as he had expected. His own heart seized in his chest.

“Och, lass, I...” Not knowing what to say, he took a step towards her.

She hurried away. “No! Don’t touch me! Keep your caresses for someone who wants them! I will not have you hurt me!”

“When have I ever hurt ye?” he asked through gritted teeth.

The look she threw him pierced his guts.

Now , it said. You are hurting me now.

And that simple thought wanted to make him howl.

“Llinos, please,” he begged, using her name. He had expected it to feel odd but it did not. “I need to ken the truth. Are ye carrying my bairn?” he asked, bunching his fists. As difficult as it would be to hear it, he had to know. Damnation, he had only lost control twice, at the very beginning. Surely it had not been enough to make her pregnant? Surely the sacrifice it had been to withdraw from her every time he’d reached his release since then had not been in vain? “Is that why ye fled yesterday, why ye came to see me this morning? Are ye with child?”

She stared at him and wiped her eyes where angry tears had pooled.

“I am. Damn you, yes, I am!”

*

What was she to do now?

Llinos could only hug herself and stare at the ground.

“How could you?” she whispered, hating herself for sounding so pathetic. Duncan did not deserve to see her pain. What was wrong with her? She had admitted to being heartbroken when she should have shouted that he had ruined her and made him feel lower than dirt.

No. She could never have done that to him, no matter how hurt she was, not when he was already struggling with the difference in status between them. She was not that

cruel.

“Stay here,” he ordered, before running to the kitchens. A moment later he came back with a cup of spiced wine. Fool that she was, she had not moved a muscle, when she should have taken the opportunity to leave. “Drink,” he said, handing her the cup.

The need to wash her mouth made her accept when she knew she should have refused. Without a word she drank the sweet wine.

Once the cup was empty Duncan took it and placed it at his feet.

“Listen, nothing happened with the lasses. At least...” He sighed. “Nothing of what ye’re imagining happened. ”

She snorted. To think she had dreaded to hear his feeble explanations! They would have been preferable to his lies.

“Don’t lie!” she cried out. “You were all naked, in the same bed, and you were hard!”

He shrugged and twisted his lips. Incredibly, she had the impression he was embarrassed when she had expected him to be furious. “Men always wake up hard, lass, regardless of what happens around them,” he said. “It’s only — ”

“If you are going to say it is yet another thing a woman who has bedded men should know then you can save your breath,” she hissed. She would not be made a fool out of, not now. The time for ‘lessons’ had long since passed. “And perhaps if you had allowed me to sleep next to you one night, as I asked, I would know in what state men wake up!”

“Listen to me, please.”

He drew her into his arms. She did not even try to free herself. She lacked both the strength and the determination to get away from this man.

“I cannot stop you from talking if you want to talk,” she said slowly. “So talk. And then let me go.”

There was a silence. Then Duncan spoke.

“Yesterday I realised I had fallen in love wi’ye.”

Llinos froze. This had to be the last thing she had expected to hear. But it did not excuse anything. On the contrary.

He had fallen in love with her and still he had not put an end to his wenching?

“And instead of telling me as much, you decided to go and bed other women?” She didn’t know whether to slap him or laugh in his face.

“Aye, weel, that was the plan,” Duncan winced. “But in the end I couldna... Ye ken.”

“No, I don’t ‘ken’,” she answered frostily, though she could well imagine what he meant.

“Damn it, woman, must ye make me say it out loud? ‘Tis not easy for a man to admit to these things!”

“More difficult than for well-bred ladies to say the word ‘cock’?” she asked, arching an eyebrow. He would be made to spell his humiliation out. Admittedly, it was a petty revenge but it might help to soothe some of the burn. Let him squirm. He deserved nothing less.

There was another silence then Duncan threw his head back and gave a long, throaty laugh. “Ah lass, if I didn’t already ken why I fell in love wi’ ye, now I do. There is no one like ye in all Christendom.” He lowered his head so he could whisper in her ear. “Verra weel. I couldna get hard last night, I couldna f — ”

“Thank you, yes, I think I understand,” Llinos cut in. Suddenly she didn’t want to hear more than necessary about what had happened – or not happened – between him and the women.

“They wouldn’t accept it and got it into their heads that they would wait until I could perform, even if I told them it was not going to happen. By then I had come to my senses. They kept plying me wi’ drink. A bad idea. A drunk man is even less able to f — ”

“Well, clearly they hoped you would wake up refreshed,” she cut in again. “Since they were all over you.”

“I have no idea what they did after I passed out but that was without my knowledge – or consent. I swear it. I was hard when you came in because it was morning, and as I told ye, I was dreaming of ye. Ye have to believe me.”

And Llinos realised that she did believe him. Still, it hurt. He might not have succeeded in bedding the women but he had tried.

“Why did you do it?”

“Because I’m a fool, that’s why!” he erupted. “A fool and a coward.”

Well. Now she knew he truly was sorry. Proud, brave Duncan MacQuarrie had just called himself a fool and a coward. For her. She had turned him into a man he despised. She couldn’t bear the thought .

“Does it scare you so much to love me?”

He stared at her as if she had gone mad. “Aye, of course it does. What do ye think can happen between us? Jesu, I’ve never been so petrified in my life! And that was before I found out about the bairn!” He placed a protective hand over her stomach. “Now I’m terrified. Because I cannae bear the idea of losing ye both.”

“Don’t be scared.” Llinos placed her hand over his. “I’m not scared and I’m not ashamed. You are not going to lose us. I belong to you. I carry the proof of it deep inside my womb. You are part of me now.”

“Will ye... Will ye teach me something, lass? Will ye teach me what it is to love? Because I dinnae ken how to and now I need enough love for two.”

Llinos’ heart almost burst out of her chest. “I’m not sure you need to be shown anything about love, Duncan, which is good because I have no idea how to teach something like that.”

“Och, ye do. I’ve never seen anyone wi’ so much love to give. Why, even wi’ that mangy cur ye behave like a mother.”

“Leave Cwtch out of this!” She could not help a smile.

“Aye. So will ye?”

“You will have to teach me something first. Teach me how to kiss. We’ve never kissed, you know. We’ve done everything else but that.” Suddenly, she was shy. What she was asking seemed the height of daring, even though compared to what they had already done it was nothing. “I want — ”

Before she could finish Duncan crushed his mouth on hers.

*

Honey and fire.

That's what Llinos tasted like, his Llinos, the woman he loved, the mother of his child. Finally he got to know her taste.

His tongue swirled around hers, slowly, languorously. He was getting drunk on the intoxicating taste, building their need for each other, sending their bodies on fire. This was way more than a kiss, he poured in it all he had wanted to tell her, all he wished he had told her before.

"I want you," she whispered, rubbing a hand over his pectoral.

"Not here. I should take ye back to the bed."

Llinos shook her head and he mentally kicked himself. In his bed were two naked women waiting for him. How could he have been so thoughtless as to even mention the place? She did not need to be reminded of what he had done – or rather, tried to do – last night!

"It's not — "

"Please Duncan, I cannot bear to be without you now I know you love me, now you know about the child you gave me. I need you."

Not waiting for his agreement, she pushed at his chest. A moment later Duncan was lying on his back with his woman astride him like a fierce Amazon warrior. It was more than he could bear. Whatever she wanted, she would get.

With a roar he reared up and rolled her under him. Once she was on the floor, spread

over her opened cloak, he gave free rein to his desire – and pounced.

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Llinos had thought Duncan was fierce before, but it was nothing. She'd thought she'd had felt pleasure, but it was nothing. She'd thought that they shared something, but it was nothing. Now not only was he fierce, but he made her just as wild, not only did he make her mewl, but she forced him to roar. They didn't share anything, they simply were one.

She clutched at him, cried out, arched her back, dug her nails into his buttocks – and finally, dissolved into a million pieces while he pulsed his release deep inside her, this time on purpose.

And then, as if all this was not enough, Duncan kissed her.

With his body still embedded inside her, with his child warm inside her womb, he kissed her. It was glorious, unlike any intimacy they had ever shared. Then he drew back and she stayed there a long time, panting, gazing into his amazing green eyes, the eyes that had captured from the very beginning.

“I'll never fuck anyone ever again,” Duncan said, placing his forehead against hers. “I'll only e'er make love. To ye.”

“Aw. How touching.”

Llinos almost jumped out of her skin when Lord Masterson emerged from the shadows and planted himself in front of them. How long had he been there? Too long, as his next words made clear. She had been right, he was a shameless voyeur. He had not just walked in on them, he had watched everything. Her flesh crawled at the thought.

“Well well well, if the Lady Llinos isn’t the most enthusiastic lover! Enthusiastic and talented. Heavens, but Benedict is a lucky bastard. As is the Scot. It is not every woman who will take a man into her mouth without being made to.”

By now Duncan had withdrawn from her, restored her skirts to a seemly length and tucked himself back in his hose. As for her, she had not moved. She was frozen in horror.

Lord Masterson drew out his sword and placed the tip of the blade at Duncan’s throat.

“Step away, you cur. How dare you touch the lady? How dare you even look at her?”

Duncan didn’t move, he remained between her and the drawn blade. Llinos saw his hand go to the place where his sword should be and heard a muffled oath. He had not taken the time to buckle his scabbard around his waist before running to her and he was cursing himself for the oversight. She gasped. Would he really have fought his master for her? Perhaps it was better he was unarmed after all. They both knew he would not have bested a trained knight. He would only have been killed.

“Duncan, it’s all right,” she said, scrambling back to her feet. The last thing she wanted was for him to face retribution when what had happened between them when it was all her fault.

“Stay where you are, my lady,” he said, extending an arm to stop her from placing herself within range of the blade.

“My lady,” Lord Masterson snorted. “Who are you trying to fool? You didn’t show her half the respect you owe her when you pumped into her like a man possessed. Not that I blame you, if she’s going to allow anyone to have her.”

“I’m not!” Llinos shouted. “It’s not — ”

“Save your breath. It’s clear you are quite indiscriminate with your favours. No wonder Benedict wanted me to keep an eye on you! Now I understand everything. It was you that day in the room, moaning in that wild, shameless manner... How are you going to explain to your groom that you are not a virgin on your wedding night, that you allowed a Scottish bastard to have you?”

“How are you going to explain that you allowed a lady under your care to find herself a lover?” she countered. “You were supposed to watch over me and you failed!”

“Lass, hush,” Duncan said between his teeth.

Lord Masterson’s eyes glinted. “Let us strike a bargain shall we? I will not divulge your little indiscretion if you allow me to be next.”

“Next?” Llinos repeated stupidly.

“Yes. Your little display got me quite aroused, I will admit, and there can be no harm in it, since you are clearly not a virgin anymore. You allowed the Scot between your legs, so you will have no difficulty letting me take my turn.”

“Over my dead body,” Duncan growled before she could even open her mouth.

“That can easily be arranged. You are unarmed. What are you going to do to stop me?”

“Armed or nay, if ye touch a single hair on her head that will be the last thing ye e’er do.”

“Oh, I have no interest in the hair on her head,” Lord Masterson said, baring his teeth in a parody of a grin. “Move. Or I’ll make you.”

“Ye’ll have to cut me to pieces where I stand because I’m ne’er going to let ye touch her. ”

The words were spoken with such lethal determination that Llinos barely recognised Duncan’s voice.

“Fye, with that accent I cannot understand a word you’re saying,” Lord Masterson mocked.

“Understand this then. I will never allow her to be hurt.”

“I don’t mean to hurt her. I mean to make her squirm with pleasure. I think I can acquit myself of the task as well as a blasted Highlander.”

Duncan hissed. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“You really want to lose a limb over her? Very well.”

Lord Masterson sprung forwards. Llinos screamed, then screamed again when Duncan kicked the blade away from him. It was a bold, risky move but he didn’t have much choice against an armed opponent. And it almost worked. The kick prevented the sword from slicing through him but it sent him off balance.

When he fell to the floor, Lord Masterson was on him before he could roll away. Llinos screamed again.

“No! Don’t kill him!” she cried, rushing towards the two men.

“Llinos, get back! Run, damn ye!” Duncan ordered .

“I’m not going to kill him,” Lord Masterson growled. “I’m going to make him watch

while I take you. It's only fair. After all, I watched him."

"Ye think I'm just going to stay here and watch while ye rape her, ye sick bastard!"

"Oh but you won't have much choice."

Before Llinos could wonder what he meant, Lord Masterson raised his sword and planted it into the ground – through Duncan's hand. It took her a moment to comprehend that he had pinned him in place. She screamed, and abruptly stopped when the man stamped on Duncan's other hand with the heel of his boot, crushing all the bones.

"Here. I'd like to see you get out of this, Scot." He turned to face her and smiled. "And now, my lady, I'm all yours."

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The pain barely registered.

Duncan knew he should be in agony, and he was, but it had nothing to do with the blade stuck in his flesh, or the throbbing in his right hand signalling at least one of his fingers had been broken. No, the real pain came when Masterson threw Llinos to the ground and tore the front of her dress open.

"I would be a pity to leave these covered up, I think," he said as he yanked the shift out of the way to expose her breasts. "I have fantasised about them more than once, and wondered how they would feel in my mouth. Finally I will get my fill of them."

"No!" Llinos screamed when he placed his lips on her, and Duncan roared at the same time.

“Stop struggling! You liked it well enough before, there is no reason to think that I cannot give you as much pleasure as a low-born Scot,” the bastard said, as he freed himself. “Hearing your moans got me all hard so it’s only fair you help relieve the ache in my balls. Come. Moan for me. Let me hear your pleasure.”

“All you will hear is my protest!” Llinos spat, as she tried to push him away. But the man was a warrior, he would be heavier than a horse, impossible for her to move. “Let go of me!”

Jesu, Duncan was going to go mad. Right here, right now, as he was forced to watch the woman he loved being raped, he was going to lose his mind.

He rolled onto his side and tried to get to the sword hilt. In vain. His right hand was useless, and the hilt too high off the ground for him to use as leverage anyway.

Perhaps he could kick at it to try and dislodge it...

Llinos’ screams pierced holes at the base of his spine. The bastard would pay for this, Duncan swore to himself, he would not live to see another dawn. And where was everyone? They were not that far from the bailey and dawn had broken a while ago. Hadn’t anyone heard her protests? Then he stilled when he understood that, yes, someone had.

Someone furry and scraggy.

Furious barks resounded, followed by the sound of paws rushing over the portcullis. A heartbeat later Cwtch launched himself at Masterson, biting his bare arse with undisguised hatred. The man howled like the animal he was and rolled into a ball to protect his vitals, finally, blessedly, letting go of Llinos.

Duncan closed his eyes and swore never again to utter a single disparaging word

against the beastie who had just done what he, Duncan, had been unable to do.

“What’s going on here?”

His eyes snapped open. Sir Benedict was standing a few paces away, eyeing up the scene with understandable disbelief. For a moment no one moved then Llinos covered herself and scrambled to her knees. Duncan could see she was shaking badly. Oh, how he wanted to wrap his arms around her!

“Sir Benedict, oh, thank God!” she said in a sob. “I’m so glad you found me! ”

“I didn’t. That dog did,” he said, nodding towards Cwtch who was still growling at Masterson. “I assume it is yours? He was making an awful racket in the stables when we arrived, so much so that we had to set him free. He then all but forced us to follow him. I imagine he heard you scream, even through the din of activity in the bailey.”

His voice took on a distinctive cold edge as he looked at his friend who was still clutching his bare, bleeding arse.

“Yes, he must have,” Llinos murmured. “Thank God.”

Indeed. Duncan could have kissed the clever mutt.

Llinos stood up and placed a hand on Sir Benedict’s arm. The gesture tugged at his heart. She was placing herself under another man’s protection when he should be the one making her feel safe! But he was pinned to the floor, as helpless as a bug turned on its back. Damn it all! He had failed her. Now she would never trust in his ability to protect her.

“Lord Masterson forced himself on me. I’m afraid he... he despoiled me.”

“Despoiled! Ah! I didn’t even — ”

Disliking the anger in the scoundrel’s voice, Cwtch cut him short by barking furiously. Llinos took advantage of the respite to carry on with her explanation.

“He did attack me, you all saw it. Forgive me, but I am not a maid anymore. I think you won’t doubt my word, considering what you just witnessed, but I will submit myself to an examination if you require proof. Old Bessie will confirm that I am not a maid any longer and that I have...” She blushed furiously but she raised her chin. “I have a man’s seed inside me.”

Duncan blinked. Jesu but the lass was incredible. Clever, resourceful and utterly brazen.

Sir Benedict stared at her for a moment. “Well, that is...” He coughed in what Duncan assumed to be embarrassment. It was not every day a lady talked about a man’s seed so openly. “That is certainly — ”

“She’s lying! I was not the one who — ”

Once again Masterson’s protests were cut short by Cwtch’s angry barking. It was clear that, as long as the mutt was here, the man would not be able to get a word in edgeways. Perfect. Llinos might be able to twist facts to her advantage.

“I’m not lying. You all saw what happened.” she carried on, soothing the dog. Duncan saw that her hand was trembling and that she was using the pup to draw strength from. Mo chreach ! He wanted to do that for her! “Why do you think Lord Masterson ended up with half his clothes off? Why do you think my dress is torn? Why do you think he was on top of me? His squire, Dylan, happened to be walking by when I was attacked. He came to my aid but here was no stopping the scoundrel. I need not describe what he did to the poor unarmed man to neutralise him.”

“No, indeed.” Sir Benedict’s eye roved over him, taking in the way the sword pinned to the ground. “It is all perfectly clear. You have my thanks, Dylan.”

“My name is actually Duncan,” Duncan said, barely repressing a smile. Llinos was a marvel. What better way to establish they were strangers than to get his name wrong so casually?

“Forgive me. I will take the lady back inside now,” Sir Benedict said, glowering at his erstwhile friend, who was still writhing on the floor. “Shall we?” he asked, extending his arm to Llinos. “After your ordeal, you no doubt wish yourself well away from here.”

“I’m sorry,” she answered, instead of taking the arm he was offering. “But I cannot marry you now.” To Duncan’s utter shock, she fell to her knees. “I know how important my virtue was to you and your family. Now, not only am I soiled, and therefore unworthy of you, but I may be carrying a child who will never be the legitimate son you need. Its paternity will always be in doubt, and a weapon in the hands of your enemies. I cannot in all conscience allow you to marry such an unsuitable woman. I will retire to a convent to expiate my sin.”

“Not your sin, my lady. In this instance the blame lies elsewhere. And you being assaulted doesn’t make you unworthy,” Sir Benedict replied, offering his rather unexpected support. The man had some honour, Duncan had to admit. Nevertheless, he could see that Llinos’ arguments had hit a nerve. He knew that Sir Benedict needed a virtuous wife and could not afford to have the legitimacy of his children put in question. “If you wish to join a convent I cannot go against your wishes,” he added, gratefully accepting the way out she was suggesting.

Duncan’s heart sank to his chest. Llinos had called herself soiled, unworthy. The words pierced at him. Was that what she really thought? Did she really wish to go a convent? The mere idea made his stomach churn.

No, his mind must be addled by what had just happened, and his stomach unsettled by the pain radiating through his body. He could not have dreamed their earlier conversation. He had told her he loved her, and instead of pushing him away, she had fallen into his arms, asked him to kiss her, and made love to him with as much passion as she was capable, there on the ground for all to see.

Llinos turned to him. Her eyes were shiny with unshed tears, and filled with love.

No. He had not dreamed any of it. She was only doing what was needed to sever the ties chaining her to this man. In the end she hadn't had to have any awkward conversation with her betrothed. He had seen for himself that she was no virgin – and why. Her reputation was safe.

“Please,” she said, turning back to Sir Benedict. “We need to attend to the squire.”

“Yes, of course,” he said grimly. “And call someone to see to Masterson's wound.”

*

A fresh wave of nausea roiled in Llinos' stomach when Sir Benedict yanked the sword from Duncan's hand. Closing her eyes, she swallowed it back. Now was not the time to falter. The man she loved needed her. She had to be strong for him.

“Let me see to the wound,” she said, coming forwards with a strip of cloth she had torn from her already ruined dress. “'Tis woman's work.”

No more needed to be said. No man would agree to be seen performing women's tasks.

She pressed the cloth against the wound to stem the blood. Oh God, the pain would be excruciating. Would Duncan ever be able to use his right hand ever again? Or his

left? It was swollen and bruised, and at least one of the fingers would be broken. She bit the inside of her mouth to repress a sob.

“Do not fret over me, my lady. I shall be all right,” Duncan said in his best squire’s voice. His eyes, for her only, were bright with intent. “But you should go and rest. You’ve had quite a shock and...”

The rest of the sentence was contained in the glance he threw in her stomach’s direction.

And in yer condition ye should not get agitated.

He was the one with the horrific injuries and yet he was thinking only of her and the babe. She almost threw herself into his arms. She desperately needed to be held, to feel safe, to know that it was all over. But for her gamble to work she needed to carry on with the pretence that they barely knew each other. Besides, he needed his injuries tended as soon as possible.

“Will you be able to walk back to the bailey?” she asked, straightening up. “I will call for Bessie to see to you immediately.”

“Thank you, yes. I should be able to manage.”

With the help of one of Lord Masterson’s men he got up and made his way to the inner bailey slowly. By the time they entered the great hall, he had gone pale as a sheet.

Just as Llinos was asking for the healer to be summoned, he collapsed.

Four days.

For four long, agonising days Duncan tethered on the edge of consciousness and Llinos went almost mad with worry.

“He’s lost a lot of blood and the shock and pain of his injuries will have taken their toll,” Bessie explained as she tied fresh bandages around his hands. The wound had been stitched and the two broken fingers straightened. Perhaps it had been a blessing that he had been unconscious through it all, for it would have been excruciatingly painful.

Llinos had insisted in helping and, mercifully, she had been allowed to. But once the worst was over the healer would not hear of her remaining in the chamber.

“Go and have a rest, my lady,” she said, shooing her away. “You’ve had quite a shock yourself and need your rest. I’ll take it from there.”

That had been the worst part. As Lady Llinos, mere guest to the castle, she had no reason to see to Duncan herself .

Because she desperately needed rest, she went. But as soon as she woke up later that afternoon, there was only one thing on her mind. See Duncan. And this time nothing would keep her away.

No sooner had she dressed than she went to see Bessie.

“How fares the patient?” she asked, doing her best not to betray undue anxiety.

“He’s well enough. Still asleep.” The old woman placed a hand on her shoulder. “It’s kind of you to take an interest, my lady, but you can rest easy. I know what I’m doing. Besides, all there is to do now is wait.”

The healer smiled, evidently thinking that she would leave now that she’d had her answer.

Llinos steeled herself. “I would like to see him.”

Those lessons in uttering difficult things were coming in handy. Without them she would never have dared voice out loud what she wanted. Even more importantly, she would never have been able to tell a whole assembly of men that if they examined her they would find proof she had been possessed by a man. But thanks to this she had been able to get out of the betrothal she didn’t want.

“Well, as I said, he’s asleep, so there is little to be gained by going now.”

There’s everything to be gained! Llinos wanted to shout. I need to be with the man I love, with the father of my baby!

She needed to see him, to make sure he was safe, to thank him, to hold him. Oh God how she needed to hold him! Could she steal into the room? No, it was too dangerous. It would be better to appeal to the woman’s sensibilities.

“I’m sorry to insist but I really wish to see that he is all right. His injuries were quite horrific and he sustained them while coming to my aid in a most distressing situation. You see, I was being...”

She couldn’t finish. Just remembering the heat of Lord Masterson’s mouth on her breasts was enough to make her heave.

“I know.” The kind woman shook her head. “Shocking, that.” Then she looked at her

more closely. “You have taken a shine to the young Scot, have you not? And why not. He’s handsome enough and, as you say, after what he did for you, I can understand that you would want to thank him. Go then, but I must warn you. He can be quite gruff at the best of times and he might not like being seen in a position of weakness, much less by a lady.”

Llinos almost smiled. Yes, she could well imagine he would hate it. Still, she had faced him in worse moments and she would gladly have him barking at her if it meant he was alive and well.

“I consider myself duly warned. Thank you.”

And so she was able to attend to Duncan. Luck was on her side. Later that evening two of the watchmen fell prey to bad indigestion. Between them, her usual patients and Lord Masterson’s bite wound, Bessie was busier than ever and happy to leave the care of a sleeping man to someone willing to take on the task.

But during the night the fever set in. Panicked, Llinos ran to the healer.

“That’s what I was afraid of,” the old woman sighed. “Fever is the real danger now. He will have to drink this infusion of yarrow and willow bark regularly and he will need to be sponged with cold water to bring the temperature down.”

“I will do that. You already have your own patients to attend. I do not know anything about indigestion and I cannot bear to go to Lord Masterson and see his...”

“No, of course not,” Bessie answered diplomatically. “But I am not sure this is very seemly. You, alone in the company of a half naked man...”

Llinos reddened. If the woman only knew! Sponging him was by far the tamest thing she had done to Duncan .

“It is no issue. You see, I intend to join the holy orders once I leave the castle and I will no doubt be required to take care of sick people in my new capacity.” The words passed Llinos’ lips easily. She would have done far worse than lie about her future intentions to be with Duncan. “This will be good practice for me.”

The healer’s brow cleared. “Yes, I remember Sir Benedict saying that you two would not marry after all. If that is the case, then he cannot object to you getting a glimpse of another man’s nakedness.”

“No, indeed.”

But she would make sure to get more than a glimpse.

The next four days were the longest of Llinos’ life. She stayed at Duncan’s side night and day, only leaving to see to her personal needs. At night she bolted the door and lay next to him on the bed, wishing she could hold his hand or wrap herself around him. But his fingers were bandaged and the last thing he needed was extra body heat, so she simply lay by his side, her ankle locked with his.

Finally one morning he woke up.

“Llinos.”

The word was no more than a whisper but she could not miss it from where she was. She placed a hand on his brow and found it cool to the touch. “Duncan. Thank God! I’m here.” Tears filled her eyes.

He looked pale and tired, and a short blond beard was covering his jaw. He had never looked dearer to her.

“I cannae move my hands.” He sounded puzzled by this.

“No, they have been bandaged,” she explained. “Don’t try to move your fingers.”

“Why? What happened?”

“You don’t remember?”

Oh dear. Could his memory have been addled by the fever? What if he had forgotten who she was? She placed a hand on his pectoral and reminded herself that the worst was over. His mind had blocked the horror of what had happened, that was all. Hadn’t he just called her name? He obviously had not forgotten her. In time, he would remember and everything would be all right.

“Where am I?” His words sounded slurred.

“In the castle. We had to tend to your injuries and afterwards you had a fever.” She hesitated, wondering if she should reveal what had happened or allow him time to recover first.

Duncan frowned. Evidently, he knew he was supposed to remember something but could not quite place what it was. Down in the courtyard a dog barked.

“Cwtch!” Duncan said, sitting bolt upright in the bed. “Masterson! Sir Benedict! The...” He stared at her, at her stomach. “The bairn!”

“It’s all right,” she said, her voice wobbly. He did remember! “The babe’s all right.”

“Thank the saints. And ye?”

“I’m fi — ” She burst out in sobs before she could even finish the word.

“Och, lass, come here.” He reached out to her and gave a curse when he found his hands bandaged. “Damnation, but I need to hold ye!”

“I need to hold you too.” She fell into his arms, draping herself over him. “Oh, Duncan, I thought I had lost you! You’ve been almost unconscious for days, I thought... I thought you would die from the fever! What were you thinking confronting a man with a sword?”

“What was I thinking?” he growled, tightening his hold on her. “I would have confronted a man with a mace and pike if he meant to rape ye! Dear God, will ye e’er forgive me for not being able to stop him!”

“Don’t think about it. In the end, nothing irreparable happened, Cwtch got to us in time.”

“The bastard threw ye to the floor, he ripped yer dress open, he placed his hands, his goddamn lips on ye, he frightened ye! That’s not nothing! I swear I will kill him for that.”

“Please. I don’t want to have to think about it ever again.” Llinos screwed her eyes shut. “Deciding to take Cwtch back to the castle proved to be the best idea I’d had in a long time.”

“That wee beastie! I swear I could kiss his ugly little face.”

Llinos let out a shaky laugh. “He’s not here. So why don’t you kiss me instead?”

His eyes softened. “Aye, that will be better.”

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The kiss, delicious though it was, was cut short when reality slammed back into Duncan’s head.

He’d been lying on that bed for four days, which meant that there was not a moment

to lose.

“Masterson will have told Sir Benedict what he saw by now, he will have told him about us,” he said, making to get up. “We need to — ”

Llinos placed a hand on his chest, forcing him to lie back down. To his utter mortification, he did not have the strength to fight her. “Hush. Don’t agitate yourself. Everything will be all right. Lord Masterson had no time to speak or even see Sir Benedict. By the time Bessie had tended to his wounds, it was too late. ”

“Too late? What do ye mean?”

She smiled. “As you know, Cwtch prevented him from presenting his version of events, barking every time he dared utter a word. Then when he was allowed out of his sick bed, ready to explain everything to Sir Benedict, there was no one to listen to him.” Llinos looked mighty pleased with herself. “He had already set off for my home in Wales to go and ask for Ffion’s hand in marriage. My cousin, remember, the one who’s in love with him?” she specified when he frowned. “After I lied about wanting to join a convent, I convinced him she would be the perfect bride for him. It’s not even a lie. I’m sure she will be an infinitely more suitable wife for him than I could ever be.”

“And he went, just like that?”

“Yes. After having secured his great-uncle’s approval, he did not dare delay before getting married.”

“The bastard!”

His reaction made Llinos suck in a breath. “I... I thought you would be pleased. Would you have preferred he stayed and insisted I married him?” she asked, visibly piqued.

“Nay, of course not!” he snapped. The mere idea of anyone marrying her sent his blood to boiling. “All the same, he was awfully quick to abandon his wronged betrothed, don’t you think? She is assaulted, he sees the scene with his own eyes, he is told she might be with child from the rape and he washes his hands off her and the bairn, riding off into the sunset to marry another! The man should be hung by the bollocks and left to rot for not caring about ye.”

She gave a tentative smile. “Duncan please, I understand your outrage and I thank you for it but really, ‘tis all for the best. I was not raped, Sir Benedict will marry a suitable woman and Ffion and I will both get the man of our dreams. Don’t you see? This means I am now free to be with you.”

Llinos placed a hand on his arm and smiled. A radiant smile that pierced a hole in his chest.

“Lass,” he whispered, covering her fingers with his bandaged hand. “Ye are not free to be wi’ me, we cannot be together. Ye cannae — ”

“I will not hear any of this,” Llinos cut in sharply. “I am carrying your child, of course we can be together. Or... are you saying that you don’t want me? That you don’t want us?” Her other hand went to her stomach. It was still flat but she already looked like a protective mother, fierce, proud, and unutterably beautiful. “Is that what it is? You don’t want us? Be careful what you say, Duncan MacQuarrie.”

“Llinos, listen to me,” he said fiercely, drawing her to him. “I want ye both more than I want my next breath but... I have right to ye.”

“You have every right to a woman who chose you!” she cried out. “How can you think otherwise? You have as much right to this child we made together as I have, and half the responsibilities. Don’t you dare abandon me now!”

“I dinnae want to abandon ye, lass! Damn it, I need to stroke you!” he cried, looking

at his useless hands, frustration making his voice gruffer than usual.

“Just hold me. I will be the one to stroke you.”

Yes. Please. Stroke me. Hug me. Love me.

The words he had never even thought once in his life almost passed his lips. He wanted this woman to look after her, to pet him.

Gently she pushed a lock of hair from his forehead. “I bought Lord Masterson a new warhorse and ordered him to release you on pain of revealing to Lady Mary what he had done to me. He agreed. So your debt is cancelled. As soon as you’re healed we’ll leave for Scotland together,” she said. “No one will know to find me here.”

He recoiled in shock. Not only had she bought his freedom, but she wanted to flee with him! “Ye cannae be serious!”

“I’ve never been more serious in all my life. I told you, I don’t want to live in England, and I don’t want to risk returning to Wales. So Scotland is perfect.” She cupped his cheek in her hand. “Just like you. You’re perfect.”

“Och, lass, ye are the perfect one, not me.”

“If I’m so perfect then you’re going to have to marry me.” She bit her lip and her eyes suddenly filled with tears. “I’m afraid, Duncan, I don’t want my child to grow up without its father, I don’t want to live without you. I love you. I could not bear to be apart from you. So you see, you have no choice. Unless you want to break my heart you’re going to have to make me your wife.”

He grunted. “’Tis blackmail.”

“Yes, it is. Deal with it.”

Deal with it.

Duncan blinked.

Was the woman mad to provoke him so? Nay, he thought ruefully. The minx knew full well she had nothing to fear from him. He would rather cut his own hand than harm her in any way.

Including breaking her heart, damn her.

And so he would have to surrender, do what she was asking – and get what he never thought he could have.

“Your father...” Llinos started, looking at him as if she feared an outburst on his part. “I’m sure he would have wanted you to be there for this child. He looked everywhere for you, just so he could be allowed to raise you. But you... You don’t have to scour the country. Your son is here already.”

She took his hand and placed it over her stomach.

She was right. His father would never have forgiven him for turning his back on his son or daughter when being kept away from his child had hurt him so much.

“As soon as you are ready, we will leave,” Llinos carried on, as if there was nothing more natural for a wealthy heiress than to contemplate marriage to a man like him. “But I think it would be better to leave separately.”

He flared up. “Why? Are ye ashamed of me? Because if ye are — ”

“No!” she cut in, looking horrified that he should even think that. “But I don’t want any questions asked, I don’t want to risk having anyone coming after us and stopping us. I want to disappear.”

“Nay, lass ye don’t.” He sighed. “Not really, and I willnae let ye. I willnae have ye hide like a criminal simply for wanting to be wi’ me. If we are to be together, then I want the people ye love to ken it. I willnae cut ye from yer friends and family. I will only marry ye if ye agree to invite the people ye care about to the wedding.”

Llinos started to cry. “’Tis blackmail,” she said through her tears.

“Aye. Deal with it.”

There was a long pause.

“Very well. Anything you want. As long as we’re together.”

“Together. Forever. Now kiss me.”

In the end it took them two months to travel back to Scotland, find a place to live and organise the wedding. By the time everything was ready and the guests had arrived, Duncan was frantic. Up until the last moment he had not dared believe that he and Llinos would actually get married. It seemed too good to be true.

And then she was here, at the entrance of the church.

Utterly transfixed, he watched her glide towards him. Dressed in an ivory gown embroidered with silver tread, she was a vision from the Heavens. Her stomach was full and her cheeks were flushed. She was carrying their child, the most precious gift anyone had ever given him, with pride.

“You came,” he said when she stopped in front of him .

“Of course,” she answered. “I love you and I thank you for insisting we get married in the presence of the people I love.”

She nodded towards her friend Angélique Delacourt, who beamed at them. The French lady had welcomed him as naturally as if he'd been a lord, helping him to accept their odd situation.

The priest cleared his throat, intent on drawing their attention back to him. With difficulty, Duncan tore his gaze away from Llinos, swearing to himself he would spend the rest of the night looking at his wife until his eye ached.

And then, only then, would he ravish her until neither of them could hold a coherent thought.