



Taming the Highland Beauty (Guardians of the Isles #7)

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Category: Historical

Description: They have seven days to break the curse...

Banished to the Gairloch woods near Dunvegan Castle and cast with a spell that turns her into a beast, fairy Gille Dubh retains enough magic to protect the woodlands and lost children. She's lonely, and in peril, but her solitary life is better than the torment of fairy realm. When local villagers try to capture Gille, she's rescued by a handsome MacLeod warrior, who asks a favor.

Callum MacLeod is both warrior and musician, yet when he learns locals hunt a rumored magical creature, he rides to the rescue hoping to save the beast and perhaps free his mother's ghost, the Grey Lady. Callum and Gille prevail, yet as they escape the burning forest, an unseen enemy emerges, dooming Gille and perhaps the entire MacLeod clan.

Time is running out for Gille, who's temporarily transformed into a stunning beauty by the magic steeped into the castle walls. Their foes gather even as she and Callum fall deeply in love. Callum's loyalties are tested. Will he use the legendary Fairy Flag to save his clan or the mysterious woman he loves?

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Dunvegan Castle, Scotland

Tuesday, April 30th, 1743

The laughter of Clan MacLeod drifted through the afternoon air as Gille Dubh looked on from the back of the crowd gathered to welcome Rosalyn and Keiran home from whatever adventure they had been on for the past two days. Gille smiled as she caught a glimpse of Rosalyn and Keiran emerging from the old keep, unharmed. These two had overcome so many obstacles, even death, to be together in this life.

With her next breath, a pang of longing pierced her. How she craved belonging to a family the way Rosalyn, the newest member of the MacLeod clan, did; as her sister, Aria, had before her. Perhaps there was hope for Gille in the future to be a part of a clan like the MacLeods?

Suddenly, a cold hand clamped over her shoulder. Gille gasped, whirling around to find Oberon, King of the Fairies, his face twisted in a cruel smile. “Enjoying the festivities, little traitor?” His voice dripped with amusement.

Panic flooded Gille as memories of her attempt to destroy the fairy king in Fairyland flashed before her. “Your Majesty. I meant you no harm,” the fairy stammered.

“No harm?” Oberon tilted his head, searching her face. “You sought to kill me. You used your magic to send me into the shadow realm.” He raised his hand, and a malevolent green light pulsed from his fingertips. Pain flared in Gille’s chest. A coiling sensation tightened around her heart. Her magic was useless against him. Frantically, she looked at the others to see if anyone noticed Oberon’s presence. But

they all simply laughed and talked to each other as though nothing untoward was happening in their presence.

“They cannot see you. Not any longer,” Oberon said with an evil smile. “Since you almost destroyed me, I will not be so kind in my turn. No, not death for you. Instead, I will curse you, Gille. You shall live the rest of your days alone in the woodlands of the human realm,” Oberon declared. “The joy you so desperately crave shall forever remain just beyond your grasp.”

“Nay,” Gille cried out.

“And you shall bear the mark of your beastly behaviour,” he said waving his hand before her face.

Gille could feel the bones of her face shifting, contorting. She brought her fingers up to feel that her cheekbones were now elongated, her nose flattened. “What have you done?”

“Only what you deserve.” Oberon laughed. “Since I am not the beast you are, I will give you one boon by allowing you to leave the woodlands for a short time—seven days at any one time, but no longer—just long enough for you to remember what you are missing. If you do not make it back to a growing, vibrant forest before sunset on the seventh day, you will turn into a tree.” The light intensified, tendrils of it wrapping around Gille, tearing at the very fabric of her being. Then as abruptly as it began, it was over, and Oberon was no longer at her side.

Gille slumped to the ground at the base of an old, moss-covered beech tree, finding herself not at Dunvegan, but in the isolated woodlands beyond. She could still hear laughter coming from the castle, but now it sounded like a distant, mocking echo. She was truly alone, condemned to wander the woodlands, yearning for a happiness that could never be hers.

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The Woodlands around Dunvegan Castle, Scotland

Saturday, April 25th, 1744

The damp Scottish air brushed Gille's cheeks as she peeked out from her hiding place near the base of the ancient moss-covered tree. The dense canopy of the forest loomed before her. The midday sun filtered through the leaves overhead in dappled shards, reminding her of both the freedom she longed for and the entrapment she endured. Each rustle of leaves, each snap of a twig, sent a jolt through her.

Anxiety gnawed at Gille as she adjusted the hood of the cloak that had been her constant companion since she had left the fairy world behind her. Her cloak, a patchwork of moss, leaves, and vines woven onto a base of thin, supple leather, felt like a mockery of comfort. It camouflaged her, helping her to blend into the wilderness, but nothing could hide the hammering of her heart within her.

Even so, beneath the fear, a fierce determination burned. She was no stranger to the forestland around Dunvegan Castle or the men who came to the woods with far more frequency since word had spread about how she and her sister, Aria, had rescued Keiran MacLeod from Fairyland. These men had learned she was now forced to live in the forest, to never leave its protection for more than seven days or she would turn into a tree herself, gnarled, trapped, alone for the rest of her life, all because of Oberon's curse.

Yet men from the surrounding villages still came to the woods to trap her like a beast, to try to force her to use the little magic she still possessed for their own purposes, no matter the cost to herself. Over the past year, what they never seemed to pass on to

each other was how many times they had failed to trap her, here deep in the woodlands.

Gille's grip tightened around the edges of her cloak, pulling it more tightly around her. A disguise. A lifeline. She had chosen this spot, a natural choke point in the forest, for a reason. Her enemy never expected resistance, not here, not from a lone figure seemingly one with the foliage.

She closed her eyes, blocking out the sound of the birds singing overhead and the constant hum of the hidden animals and insects around her. Instead, she pictured herself training for this moment, recalling the hours she had spent both in Fairyland and in the human realm, honing her reflexes and silent movements. A single misstep, a single sound, could spell disaster. But Gille would not give her enemies that satisfaction. She had made herself a whisper in the woods, a predator waiting for its prey.

Taking a deep breath, she forced the tremor from her hands. Fear was a luxury she could not afford. Here, in the heart of the forest, under the watchful gaze of the ancient trees, Gille became an extension of the wild, a guardian waiting to strike. But instead of stomping masculine footsteps, Gille heard laughter echo through the trees, a bittersweet reminder of the life she could no longer have.

Suddenly, a whimper separated itself from the other sounds. Gille peeked through the foliage concealing her to see a young girl, no older than six, clutching a tattered doll. Her blond hair was tangled with leaves, and tears welled in her bright blue eyes. Another lost child.

The girl's vulnerability tugged at something deep within Gille. Despite the curse that bound her to these woods, she could never turn her back on a child in need. She certainly knew what it was like to feel alone, isolated, and afraid. She would not wish that on her worst enemy, let alone an innocent child. She had to help the little one

find her way home. The risk of becoming trapped in the form of a tree seemed inconsequential when compared to the despair of a child separated from her family.

Slowly, Gille pushed back the hood of her cloak as she stood, not wanting to frighten the child further. Still hidden by the foliage, she plucked a few leaves from her hair and set her cloak aside at the base of the tree before stepping into the dappled light. “Do not be afraid, little one,” she cooed softly, walking towards the crying child with slow, measured steps.

The little girl did not seem to hear. She kept walking in circles as tears raced down her cheeks, then she cried all the harder when she tripped over a gnarled root and fell onto her knees.

The need to help spurred Gille out of her usual reserve as she raced to the child’s side. “Are you hurt?”

The girl screamed and reared back, rocking back on her buttocks as she stared at Gille with wide blue eyes. Her tears vanished but fear now replaced her sorrow.

Why did children startle so easily? “It is all right. I am here to help you. I know the way back to your home,” Gille said in a calm voice.

The girl’s eyes narrowed suspiciously as she studied Gille’s face. What she saw must not have frightened her further because she visibly relaxed. “Who are ye?”

“I am a friend of the forest. I have come to help you. Would you like to go home?”

The child nodded, then got to her feet. Again, she studied Gille, but with more curiosity than fear. “Where did ye come from? Do ye live in the forest? Why are ye dressed like that? Why do ye have leaves in yer hair? Are ye a fairy?”

Suddenly Gille remembered why she usually avoided children. They were too perceptive and asked too many questions. Gille remained silent, hesitating, yet the young girl simply stared at her, waiting for a response. Gille blew out a breath and replied, "I was walking in the forest." A lie. "I live in the area as you do." A partial truth. "These are my clothes, and you also have leaves in your hair." Two truths. "Do you believe in fairies?" she asked cynically, hoping to avoid answering the question. She need not add any new rumours to those already seeking her out.

The girl pressed her lips together, and indecision flared in her eyes. "I do believe in fairies. That's how I got lost. I was followin' a butterfly that was supposed tae lead me tae a fairy." The little girl pointed to the orange and black butterfly nearby. "Or at least that's what the other children said." Tears welled in the little girl's eyes once more.

Gille frowned. Another truth was the butterfly had led her to a fairy. "Come." Gille held out her hand. "I can walk with you back to your home."

The girl did not hesitate to take Gille's hand in her own smaller one and allowed herself to be led through the dense forest until they came to the edge of the treeline. There, Gille stopped and released the little girl's hand as she beheld the imposing silhouette of Dunvegan Castle rising in the distance and Dunvegan village before them. "Do you recognise where you are?" Gille asked the little girl.

The girl turned her face up to smile at Gille. "How did ye ken I lived in the village?"

She had guessed. Oberon had sent her into the Dunvegan forest with his curse so that she would be close enough to know what she missed, yet too far away to form connections with anyone within the gates of the castle or streets of the village. Besides, the other surrounding villages were too far away for a child experiencing neither hunger nor cold. Gille plucked a few leaves from the girl's hair before turning her to face her home. "Go. I am certain someone is missing you terribly."

The little girl nodded.

“And next time you and the other children play, stay closer to the village. The forest is not a safe place for children alone.”

The little girl looked back over her shoulder. “But ye are there tae help children like me. Children who get lost.”

“I cannot protect every child,” Gille said as a sudden heaviness weighed her down. “Tell the others to stay out of the forest. It is a dangerous place.”

The girl nodded, twisting her long blond hair over her shoulder. “Are ye coming with me?”

As if the forest were answering for her, a tendril of shadow, cast by the ancient beech behind her, fell over Gille’s face. She swallowed roughly as a stinging regret mixed with a deep sense of grief in her throat. “I will return to my own home. Go now. And do not wander again.”

The little girl took off in the direction of the village, skipping through the dappled sunlight as Gille pressed herself deeper into the gnarled embrace of the hollowed-out beech tree at her back. She had spent many days and nights nestled inside the old tree, watching the castle in the distance where her sister and mother lived freely amongst the MacLeod clan.

A wave of longing washed over Gille. She yearned to follow the little girl, to be a part of a family for the first time in her life. But the curse tethered her yet again to another place she could not escape for more than a few days. Nay, it was better for her to remain here, amongst the animals who had come to accept her.

At least she no longer lived in darkness, but in a place filled with light for a portion of

each day. She tipped her face up, seeking the sun as it dipped towards the horizon. A few hours of daylight remained. Instead of turning back to the trees, she nestled in the cradle of the hollowed-out beech and let her gaze linger on Dunvegan Castle.

A stream of visitors headed for the gates. The MacLeods were obviously having a gathering with a neighbouring clan. A pang of jealousy moved through Gille. How she wanted to participate in such things. Instead of attending, she would sit in the tree and imagine the festivities. And if she were lucky, she might hear a few refrains of bright music as it floated from the castle to the surrounding vicinity. That would have to be enough for Gille tonight and any other night for as long as she remained under Oberon's curse.

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Time and space seemed to melt away as Callum MacLeod closed his eyes and continued to strum the strings of his mandolin. The innovative harmonies of Bach's "Chaconne in D Minor" demanded his full attention. Callum's brother, Orrick, had commissioned a hand-copied version of the piece from one of his friends in Edinburgh as a gift. Callum was forever grateful for the addition to his musical library.

Preparing to play, Callum shut his eyes on those gathered in the great hall for Gwendolyn's cèilidh . The social gathering with Clan Nicolson was touted as a way to thank their allied clan for their help in locating the English regiments scattered through the Highlands over the past year, but Callum suspected the gathering was merely a way for his sister-in-law to introduce him, her brother, and sister to other young, unmarried people in that clan. Callum wanted nothing to do with anything other than entertaining or protecting his clan. And today called for much entertainment.

Callum resisted the urge to open his eyes, forcing his excess energy out through his

fingers, translating it into something beautiful and emotional. Music did that for him, released the dammed-up reservoir of emotions he held inside, until he felt weightless and free. Only when the song came to an end did he open his eyes to the sound of applause and to see his kin gathered around him.

Alastair, his oldest brother and their clan leader, smiled in appreciation. Callum could finally smile back. It had taken two years since his brother's return to Dunvegan to let go of Callum's resentment at being left to run the castle and manage the family alone after their father had died. Callum had barely reached his majority at the time and had not had any training in running a vast network of estates. Their loyal staff had stepped in to help him, but that had not decreased his anger with Alastair, or the rest of his brothers and sister, who had gone away for various reasons. Music had been his only constant.

Callum's gaze travelled about the great hall. Tapestries from ages past lined the walls, and chandeliers hung overhead, casting a golden light about the chamber. It was a cosy room, despite its grand size. It had been a haven he'd sought many times when he needed solace.

His brothers Tormod, Orrick, and Keiran had all returned over the past two years, as had Graeme, the captain of the guard, and Aria, their long-lost sister. Wives had been added. He smiled at Gwendolyn, Fiona, and Isolde as they continued to express their appreciation of his talents. The only two people missing were his sister, Rowena, and her husband Marcus, who were sailing the seas in search of adventure.

Also, never far from their sides since she'd been freed from the Fairy Tower, was their ghostly mother. Lady Janet lived a kind of half-life, stuck between the human and the spirit realm. Callum nodded to the spirit.

Your talent never ceases to amaze me. Lady Janet's words were not spoken but entered the minds of all around her, allowing her to communicate with her family.

“Tell us a story, Mother. Something we have not heard before—something related to Dunvegan,” Tormod asked from his seat next to Fiona, wanting to continue the revelry.

I have told you all the stories about Dunvegan over the years.

“Tell them about the Dunvegan selkies,” a female voice came from amongst those gathered towards the back of the great hall.

“Aye, a selkie story,” Tormod said. “You never really explained to any of us why you have such a great fear of the selkies in the loch. There must be a reason why?”

Lady Janet floated back and forth, as though suddenly agitated. Her features became pinched. I do not fear the Dunvegan selkies. I simply do not trust them. That is why I have always warned my children to stay away from them.

“Tell them the tale of the selkie wife,” the female voice offered from her place, hidden amongst the guests.

Callum stood, trying to see who had suggested the tale, but he could not identify the woman among so many others.

“Aye, the selkie wife,” Tormod said with an encouraging smile and patting the open space on the bench beside him. “Please, Mother. None of us have heard it before.”

I have heard the story many times, but this is the only time I will tell you this tale, so listen closely. Lady Janet hovered on the bench beside Tormod as silence settled across the chamber.

One night, during a storm, a lonely fisherman walking along the shore stumbled upon a sight that made his breath catch. Lady Janet cleared her voice; even so, her tone

held an emotional rasp as she continued. A group of beautiful women with hair all the colours of seaweed and skin that shimmered like moonlight frolicked on the shore. He instantly knew they were selkies who could shed their sealskins and walk on land.

Startled by a noise, the women grabbed their sealskins and vanished into the churning waves, all except for one, the most beautiful woman of them all, who hesitated. Driven by desire and greed, the man crept forward and took her sealskin, trapping the woman in human form. He offered the woman a deal: be his wife and he would keep her sealskin safe.

Their mother kept her eyes downcast. With no other choice, the selkie agreed. The two married, and for a time were happy. The man was a good husband, and the two had children, yet a deep sadness clung to the selkie woman. Her eyes, the colour of the ocean's depth, would wander to the horizon, drawn by the call of the sea.

One day, while cleaning the attic, the selkie woman came upon a hidden chest. Inside, nestled amongst old clothes lay her stolen sealskin. A wave of longing washed over her and, in that moment, the life she had built with the man and even her children paled in comparison to the freedom of the sea. Tears formed in their mother's eyes.

With a heavy heart, the selkie woman went to the water's edge and donned her skin, let out a mournful cry at all she left behind, and slipped beneath the waves. Tears rolled down their mother's cheeks and her voice sounded tight as she continued. The selkie woman was forever caught between two worlds. Her heart belonged to the sea, but her children were born of the land.

At the conclusion of the tale, the noise in the chamber resumed as those gathered talked about what they had heard. But not their mother. The story had affected her deeply as evidenced by the tears she tried to bat away, only to have her hands pass right through her ghostly face. Her failure only brought more tears.

Callum stood and went to their mother's side. While the festivities continued around them, Callum and Tormod looked on with concern. "Thank you for the tale, Mother," Callum said. "Now I understand why it was so hard for you to tell us that story, because you are also caught between two worlds." Callum tried to wrap his arms around her seemingly corporeal body, but his hands also went right through her.

"That's odd," Tormod said. "We were able to embrace you a few weeks ago."

Lady Janet's gaze met Callum's, and he saw not only fear but also pain. Something is changing. I am not as solid as I have been in the past, and there is an ache inside me that grows more intense each day.

"Mother, why didn't you say something?" Tormod asked.

You were all so busy planning this celebration and preparing for Beltane next week. I did not want to distress you.

"Do you know what might have triggered this... pain?" Tormod asked.

Sadness filled their mother's eyes. I am not certain, but I believe I am being pulled into the spirit realm where I should have been when I died, instead of here with you, my children. I fear that if I cannot truly pass into the afterlife soon, I will be caught in the emptiness of the spirit realm and live in eternal torment.

"Is there anything we can do?" Callum swallowed roughly, forcing his emotions back as he met Tormod's gaze. They had to do something to help their mother.

Since it was fairy magic that most likely kept me with my children all these years, I believe it is only fairy magic that can help me to move from the human realm into the afterlife before I am consumed by the spirit realm.

“Do you think Aria or Pearl could help you?” Callum asked.

They have already tried. Their magic is diminished after their last battle with Oberon.

“Then who can help us?” Distress pulled at the corners of Tormod’s mouth.

There is one who might, but she was cursed by Oberon to live in the forests beyond Dunvegan. Helping me might jeopardise her own survival. We could not ask that of her.

“Who is this fairy, Mother?” Tormod asked.

Gille, Aria’s sister.

Callum straightened. Why did it always have to be fairies who could help the MacLeods? Over the years he had sworn to keep his distance from fairies. That had included Aria and her mother, Pearl, for a time, until he convinced himself that they were more human than fae, despite their bloodline. But Gille? She was different—spirited, untrustworthy, dangerous. He had not given her a second thought for over a year now. “She disappeared from Dunvegan after we defeated Oberon.”

Oberon is not defeated. Gille’s presence in the forestlands outside Dunvegan is proof of that.

Callum stood. Against his better judgement, he knew what he had to do. To save his mother, he would put aside his own feelings. “I will convince Gille to come here and help you.”

’Tis not that easy, my son. She never leaves the woodlands. Their mother’s face contorted as she clutched her midriff.

Tormod stood. “I am going to get Lottie to see if she can do anything to help relieve Mother’s pain.”

Callum nodded, even though he knew the healer most likely could not help. None of Lottie’s potions or unguents would work on someone who was not truly of this realm. “As soon as I am able, I am going to the forest to bring Gille back here. None of us want all that you have done to protect your family for the past fourteen years to be in vain.”

Son . . .

“Nay, Mother. Gille must help you. I will force her, if need be.”

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The next morning, Callum quietly left Dunvegan alone and entered the forest beyond it. He had left the castle before anyone else stirred to avoid his older brothers asking where he was going, and if they could accompany him. He was so tired of all of them treating him as if he needed a constant escort. Had they all forgotten the years he had spent at the castle, running the estate while they had been off at university and then fighting in the West Indies?

Callum's hand drifted to the hilt of his sword at his hip and felt the weight of another at his back. He also carried a dagger against his thigh, and a sgian-dubh in his boot. He might be younger than his brothers, but he was highly skilled with a sword and ready to defend himself against whatever dangers might await him in the woodlands.

He stepped over the gnarled roots of towering trees that stretched towards the sky. Shafts of morning light pierced the thick canopy, dappling the moss-covered ground. The air smelled of damp earth with a hint of salt from open waters beyond Loch Dunvegan. He came to the forest today for one purpose: to find the fairy who lived here and bring her back to his home. His mother's existence hung in the balance, and even though he didn't like the fact he would be asking a fairy for help, Gille was his only hope.

As Callum ventured deeper, the forest around him came alive. Ferns brushed against his legs, rustling leaves overhead seemed to announce his arrival, and unseen creatures scurried away. He followed a narrow path, guided only by his desperation.

He could see no one, yet he sensed a presence. He pushed forward, heart pounding, until he reached a glade bathed in sunlight. The sensation of someone watching him sent a shiver across his flesh. "Who's there?" he asked, standing perfectly still,

listening for any sound to indicate the fairy's presence. "I mean you no harm."

There was no response, not even the slightest intake of breath.

All the same, Callum sensed Gille was close. He steeled himself for what he had to ask. "I have come to request your help. My mother is... dying." The last word caught in his throat. It was not entirely the truth, for his mother was already dead. However, she was fading away and would soon be lost to them in a way that she had not been before her murder.

"Please." His voice was raw. "I must have your help."

The rustle of leaves sounded towards his left. He turned to see a creature rising from the forest floor covered in a cloak of moss-covered leather. She pushed back her hood to reveal red hair that reflected the morning light yet hid her features from him. Even so, he knew this was Aria's sister, Gille.

"Why do you think I can help you? And why seek me out now when I have lived within walking distance of Dunvegan for the past year?"

He frowned. "Does no one come to see you? Not even Aria or your mother?"

Her emerald-green eyes held the weight of centuries. "The only ones who come are the villagers who want my magic for themselves." Her gaze narrowed to slits. "Everyone wants something from me. Even you." Her words carried as much hurt as anger.

He met her gaze, and his breath caught. Her pupils were dilated to an unnatural extent and devoid of any warmth, giving her a predatory appearance. "I will not lie to you. I had forgotten about you until yesterday." She was not the same fairy he remembered. A hint of danger surrounded her and her rugged almost beastly appearance. Her hair

was tangled, her skin streaked with dirt, and her features were somewhat distorted.

She turned her face away, hiding her emotions. “You have all been enjoying yourselves so much that you barely spared a thought for who was no longer among you.”

“The last year has not been an easy one, if that is what you think. The MacLeods have faced many dangers.”

When she turned back to face him, her expression was blank. “And I have had no difficulties at all, here in the woods all alone.”

“That is not what I meant.” Callum pressed his lips together. She would not make this easy on him. If he wanted her help, he would have to at least appear remorseful for not remembering about the fairy he only wanted to forget. “I apologise if we hurt you.” His words sounded sincere as he held her gaze.

She shrugged. “At least it was you who came today and not the villagers. They are getting more aggressive every time they come to search for me.”

His gaze dropped to the unusual cloak she wore. “You are very adept at concealing yourself.”

“Out of necessity.” She pulled her cloak tighter about her shoulders as silence settled between them.

Callum took a step forward. Despite her anger at being forgotten, he was determined to persuade the fairy to help his mother. “Do you remember my mother?”

She nodded, then tilted her head, assessing him. As her hair fell away from her face, he could finally see her features more clearly. Despite her beautiful eyes, her face was

pale, her nose seemed flatter rather than rounded, her brow jutted forward slightly. As sisters, how could Aria be so ethereal and Gille be almost animalistic?

He shook off the thought. Her looks mattered not. It was her magic he needed. “Lady Janet needs your help. Aria and Pearl have both tried to stop her from fading away, but they were unsuccessful. Without your intervention, she will die.”

“Your mother is a ghost, and already dead. I cannot save her. You have wasted your time coming here.” Her voice was tight. “Go home and forget all about me again.”

Gille started to turn around, but Callum caught her arm. “My mother is fading away. Without your help she will be restlessly trapped in the spirit realm for all eternity.”

Gille jerked away from him, and her eyes narrowed once more. “I do not know if I even have magic any longer. Oberon has taken everything from me, why not that too?”

He frowned. “You mean you have never tried to escape these woods by using your magic?”

“If your mother remembers me, she should have also remembered that I am cursed. I cannot leave.”

“You can leave for a short time.” His frown deepened. “Why did you not try to come back to Dunvegan?”

Anger flashed in her eyes. “I... you know nothing about—” The anger in her eyes was replaced by a sudden flash of fear at the sound of leaves rustling in the distance. “I must go.” She pulled her hood up over her red hair and raced past him into the denser woodlands.

“Wait!” Callum sprinted after her. He usually had no trouble keeping up with his older brothers, but this woman was light on her feet, flying over the root buttresses that slowed him down as if they were no obstacle at all. She wove her way through the trees, gaining distance, until she somehow seemed to vanish.

Callum stopped, listening for any sound that might betray her location, but it was difficult to discern any other sounds above the noise of the footsteps coming towards him.

He turned back to see seven men dressed in dark-coloured breeches, muslin shirts, and waistcoats. It was not their simplistic dress that startled Callum, it was the torches, scythes, and pitchforks in their hands. “What are you doing in these woods?” Callum asked.

“‘Tis none of yer business,” the older, grey-haired man in front, carrying the torch, replied.

“But it is my business since you are trespassing on Dunvegan lands.”

One of the men with a pitchfork and dark hair frowned. “Ye’ve nae right tae tell us where we can and cannot go in the woodlands near our village. We ’ave a right tae roam.” The man took a step forward and threateningly jabbed his pitchfork at Callum.

Callum avoided the tines as his hand moved to the hilt of his sword. “You have a right to roam, aye. But hunting the animals or destroying the woodlands is another thing entirely.”

“And who are ye to tell us what we can do?” a third man asked as he stepped forward beside the other two older men threatening Callum.

If Callum had not had older brothers, he might have been intimidated, but he was

used to holding his ground as the youngest. “You do not remember me? I am Callum MacLeod. The stand-in laird until my brother’s recent return.”

All three men’s faces paled slightly. “It’s been a while since we’ve lived at the castle. Ye’ve changed. Yer—”

“Taller now,” one of the younger men, a redhead in the back, replied.

Another younger man next to the redhead narrowed his gaze on Callum. “None of the MacLeods come into these woods. Yer more of an ocean clan, ye are.”

“Not all of us are ocean people.” Callum lifted his chin and widened his stance, ready to fight if necessary. The odds were not in his favour, but he was certain he could take the first three older men down before the four younger ones charged him. “Go back to your village. No one need be injured today.”

The men laughed. “Lad, ye might be a MacLeod, but we outnumber ye,” the grey-haired man said, waving his torch. “Let us pass. Once we ’ave the fairy, we’ll leave the woodlands and nae return.”

“How do you even know a fairy lives here?” Callum asked, stalling as he considered his options. Alastair would not be pleased if Callum harmed any of his people.

“There’s a fairy, all right,” the dark-haired man in the front replied. “Saw ’er with me own eyes when she brought my lost daughter back tae the village.”

Callum quirked his brows. “If this supposed fairy saves your lost children, why would you want to harm her?”

“We don’t want tae harm her. We just want her magic tae better our lives,” the young redhead in the back said.

“If such a fairy does exist, then she cannot leave these woods for longer than seven days or she will turn into a tree and remain that way for all ages,” Callum informed them of the story his mother told him a short while ago.

The redhead’s features pinched. “I dinna know—”

“It matters not,” the grey-haired man interrupted, waving his torch. “If she dies, then another fairy will only replace her. Lots of fairies in these parts of the woods.”

“If this fairy exists,” Callum said, “she is under the protection of the MacLeods, and the laird will be forced to retaliate if she is harmed in any way. He could very well strip you of your livelihood and force you from your homes.”

The weapons of the men in the back dipped and their faces became ashen. The front three held their ground. “Once we ’ave the fairy we’ll have nae need of the village. We can use ’er magic tae conjure up a fortune and leave Dunvegan behind. Now move out of our way,” the grey-haired man said.

Callum drew his sword. “You’ll have to fight me to move beyond this point.”

“Let’s go home,” the redhead said, placing his hand on the grey-haired man’s shoulder. “I don’t want tae kill the fairy or this MacLeod. There is too much at stake fer our families.”

The grey-haired man jerked away from the younger man’s touch. “Don’t be a sissy, Arran. We can take this lad, tie him up, get the fairy, and be on our way before Laird MacLeod knows what we’ve done.” His eyes narrowed to slits. “Let us pass, ’cuz we’ll ’ave that fairy one way or another.”

Callum steadied his sword in his hands, ready to strike whichever man advanced towards him. His breathing slowed, even as his heart pulsed in his ears, anticipating

the battle to come. But with his next heartbeat, a whoosh sounded behind him. The tree branches near them swooped down, swatting at the villagers, knocking them to the ground. Their cries of distress sent the birds in the trees into flight.

Callum turned to see Gille behind him. With her cloak wrapped around her and her eyes blazing, she looked more like an avenging beast than a maligned fairy.

She held her hand out to him. “Come, Callum. We must flee. I’ll not have you sacrifice your life for me.”

Callum hesitated. “These men will only follow us.”

“I know where we can hide. Please, trust me,” she pleaded.

He sheathed his sword, and, taking her hand, allowed her to pull him deeper into the woodlands. He cast a glance behind him only to see the men rise. The four younger men in back turned and ran back towards Dunvegan village, but the older three gave chase. The woods around them echoed with the guttural roars of the three angry men.

Gille’s steps were as sure and swift as before. In moments, she put some distance between the two of them and the villagers as she wove her way around the trees into the thicker, darker part of the woods. The thought they might escape entered Callum’s mind until flickers of red pierced the darkness, growing in intensity with every heartbeat, casting grotesque shadows on the trees and the panicked animals fleeing all around them.

Gille’s steps slowed as she turned back to look. “They are setting fire to the forest.” Her voice was raw with fear.

The air, crisp moments ago, tasted thick with smoke as fire devoured the undergrowth. The enraged bellows of the village men mixed with the slow hissing of

the flames, which quickly built to a roar. They could no longer hide. Every fallen log, every thicket, was now bathed in the flickering orange glow of the fire. The once vibrant forest was vanishing all around them, making hiding an impossible dream.

“We cannot stay here, Callum. We must go.” Gille squeezed his hand, her touch surprisingly strong.

“But if you leave—”

“If we do not leave, we will both die.” Tears streaked from her eyes, leaving twin trails in the soot now covering her face. The sound of pursuit faded as the crackling flames licked at the tree branches, consuming the canopy as they had the underbrush. Gille was right. They had to leave. It was their only hope for survival.

A splash of dappled light appeared ahead of them, between two trees. One path not yet consumed by the flames offered a sliver of hope. “There,” Callum said, leading the way towards the momentary haven. His lungs burned and his eyes stung as they broke between the trees to a steep, rocky incline. It promised a treacherous but perhaps a lifesaving path.

With a burst of energy, Callum pulled Gille through the trees only to find a near-vertical cliff on the opposite side, leading down to the rocky shore of Loch Dunvegan. He turned to Gille. “We must go down,” he rasped, his voice hoarse from the smoke. He was not certain if the villagers would follow. He knew from living at Dunvegan his entire life that the cliff was dangerous, but it was their only hope for escape.

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Gille's heart was in her throat as she swung her legs over the side of the cliff, searching for footholds. She knew they had no choice but to climb down, but once her hands left the soil of the forest, time would become her enemy. She cast a quick glance at the sun through the haze of the smoke to see that it was halfway to its zenith. Seven days from now, at sunrise, she would only exist as a tree, unless by some miracle the forest was restored, or she broke her curse.

Callum saw the direction of her gaze and offered her a sympathetic smile. "I am certain we can find a way to keep you from..." His words died in the wind as he turned to concentrate on the task at hand. He moved slowly, making certain she saw the handholds he used as he lowered himself down the cliff before her.

Gille turned back to the blazing woodlands behind them. She closed her eyes and sent out a plea to the creatures that had been her friends for the past year, asking them to seek safety, to care for each other until she could return and try to repair the damage that had been done. If such a thing were possible. For her magic came from the flora and fauna. When they were destroyed, would her magic be as well? A flash of fear shot through her, clawing at Gille's throat, its icy grip threatening to paralyse her.

"Don't look down." Callum's voice pierced her anxious thoughts. "Simply focus on your next foothold, and before you know it, we will be safe."

Gille turned her gaze back to the sandstone in front of her, and the fear in her chest eased. There was no fairy magic that could help either of them if they fell onto the rocks below. But Callum seemed convinced they could make it, so she would hold on to that hope and use it to lower herself.

Halfway down, Gille could feel the heat of the fire above and heard the angry shouts of the villagers as they too reached the edge of the cliff. One by one they threw their weapons at the pair. Callum flattened against the rock face, avoiding the scythe aimed at his head. It disappeared below. Next came a pitchfork that flew past them, and a torch followed. All the weapons missed her, but it only made the trembling in her body intensify. Her fingers slipped on a handhold, sending a spray of pebbles down upon Callum's head.

"Steady," Callum said. "You can do this."

Gille appreciated his faith in her even as her vision blurred with exhaustion. Her climb might be easier if she released the tie that kept her cloak hanging about her shoulders, but Gille could not part with the garment. It was her refuge. If she died, she would die wearing it—whether on the rocks below or when she turned into a tree.

Ignoring her protesting muscles and the villagers also climbing down the cliff, she turned her thoughts to her next handhold or foothold until several minutes later she felt Callum's hands at her waist, lifting her down to the rocky shore.

"We made it," she said, her breathing still laboured.

Callum glanced at the men descending above them. "We are not safe yet. Now, it is you who must trust me. You know the forest. But I know this shoreline."

She nodded and followed him over the rocky beach. There was nothing to hide them from the men who followed, and yet Callum seemed confident in their zigzagging path across the rocks. Gille looked behind her to see that the villagers had reached the ground and were heading in their direction just as Callum headed away from the water and towards the cliff face to their left. Were they going to climb back up? The thought had no sooner formed than she saw a large opening in the rocks.

“This way.” Callum tugged her along after him into the opening of the cavern.

The tide was out and only rivulets of water remained on the cavern floor as they ventured inside. The air chilled and the light dimmed as they crept in, and an earthy, clay-like scent came to her as she drew a shallow breath. “Won’t we be trapped if we—” Before she could finish her sentence, a view of a rowboat separated itself from the shadows.

“Grab the oars and throw them in the boat,” Callum said as he shifted the wooden boat from a ledge to the bottom of the cave. “We’re going to have to carry it to the water’s edge.”

Grabbing the bow, Gille lifted and headed back towards the cave opening. Callum carried most of the boat’s weight, while she guided them in the right direction until they were once again on the beach. A quick glance back showed the villagers struggling to make their way across the rocky beach. Where the rocks had been no obstacle to Callum, they slowed down the men unfamiliar with the coastline.

Following Callum, Gille waded into the water and jumped into the boat while he secured the oars in the crutches and started rowing them away from the shoreline. The angry roars of the villagers who apparently could not swim could be heard between the sound of the oars slicing through the chilled water of Loch Dunvegan.

They were safe for now.

Exhausted silence hung between Gille and Callum as the men on the shore faded into the distance. Instead of calm, a growing anger gnawed at her insides. Orange-red flames and black smoke still hovered over her beloved forest, devouring everything, including the last vestiges of hope in her heart. She was doomed, and there was only one person to blame for her predicament. “Why did you have to come into the forest today?”

The slap of the oars against the water stopped for a moment before continuing. “I came to find you.”

Her gaze narrowed on Callum. “And if you had left me alone as you all had for the past year, my forest might still exist.”

“Are you blaming me for the fire?” Callum raised the oars, causing the boat to drift in the vast expanse of the loch. “I am not the one who set the underbrush aflame.”

“If you had not come today, I could have easily eluded the villagers as I have in the past.” Gille crossed her arms, not hiding her growing anger.

“Those men came with weapons,” Callum said with a tone of exasperation. “I do not think they were going to be as easily dissuaded as they might have in the past.”

“We will never know now, will we?”

“You are being ridiculous. You know perfectly well that those men were either going to find you and bring you back to the village or kill you today with or without me being there.” Callum returned the oars to the water. “My presence might very well have saved your life. Did you consider that?”

“Saved my life? My life was essentially over the moment I slipped over the side of the cliff, or did you forget the fact that I will turn into a tree in seven days? A tree!”

“Not if we work together,” Callum said far too calmly for her liking. “If you help the MacLeods save Lady Janet, then we will help free you of your curse before the curse takes effect.”

Gille’s heart leapt momentarily before she pushed the sensation aside. She could not rely on others to help her. She had learned that lesson over the course of her life.

When she had given trust in the past, she had only been disappointed. “And if I refuse to help you?”

Callum drew a deep breath as he let one of the oars drag in the water, sending the little boat in a circle, and levelling her with his gaze. “You are right. It should be your choice whether you help us or not. But let us explore your options, shall we? Once we are on shore near Dunvegan, you can leave. You can go off into the woodlands and choose a nice sunny location where you will spend the rest of eternity. Or you can come with me to the castle. My entire family has centuries of experience dealing with Oberon and the fairies. We can help work the puzzle of Oberon’s curse on your behalf.” He paused as his gaze bored into her own. “What will your choice be?”

“Those are not my only two choices,” she replied tartly, as the reality of his words sank in. She would have a better chance of survival if she trusted the MacLeods to help her.

“Enlighten me.” Callum leaned back slightly. “What other options do you have?”

Gille pressed her lips together and turned her gaze to the water. “There must be some other way.” When she could think of nothing, she turned her gaze back to Callum. “How do I know I can trust you will do as you say?”

“Right now, you do not. I can only promise that I will help you. You are the one who must risk trusting me. But with that risk could come a great reward: the MacLeods saving your life.”

“I have had very little reason to trust humans or fairies in my life.”

His brows furrowed. “Wasn’t living in Fairyland an idyllic dream?”

“Idyllic?” A shocked laugh burst from Gille. “I thought the MacLeods knew about

fairies and Fairyland, especially after Keiran returned to tell his tale of being under Oberon's spell for so many years."

"Keiran has not really discussed with me what his life was like, or with others in my family."

"And Aria?" Gille asked. "Did she not share the horrors of her life with all of you?"

Unease shadowed Callum's eyes. "She did not share her misfortunes with me either. I had always assumed Fairyland to be a place bathed in perpetual sunlight, where flower petals shimmer in every colour imaginable. Where crystal-clear streams meander through the landscape, the sound a constant melody. And where whimsical creatures flit about, leaving trails of sparkling dust. Where time flows differently, and everyday worries melt away."

She shrugged. "For someone who has never been there, you are partially correct. There are parts of Fairyland that are exactly as you think, but there is a dark side as well." She pulled her arms up tight against her chest. "The part of Fairyland I lived in most of my life was where the magic in the air felt heavy and oppressive. The sweet scents were replaced by the stench of rotting vegetation and decay. The melody of the birds was only a distant memory, replaced by the buzzing of insects and the unsettling rustle of unseen things."

Gille shivered at the memory. "Laughter is a cruel echo, mocking your presence in that desolate place. Time stretches out before you, filled with a sense of dread and foreboding. My memories of Fairyland are not like the fairy tales you might have heard growing up, but a place where dreams turned to nightmares."

Callum stared at her without speaking as a tortured expression shadowed his brown eyes. After a long moment he said, "I had no idea you had suffered so much. And I can understand why trusting me at my word would be hard for you." He looked out at

the water. “You might not believe me, but I do know what it feels like to be isolated, alone, and... afraid.” He dropped his gaze to a sheath on his belt and slowly drew a dagger from the leather. “This dagger was given to me by my father before he died. It is the only thing of his I possess. It means everything to me.”

He returned the weapon to the sheath and then, loosening his belt, slid the sheath and dagger from it. He turned the hilt towards Gille. “I want you to have this as a sign of my pledge to you. The MacLeods will do everything in their power to break your curse if you will agree to help our mother.”

Gille shifted her gaze between the dagger and Callum. “Accepting this does not mean I forgive you for setting fire to the woods.”

Callum inched the dagger closer. “So long as you agree to help my mother, I can live with that.”

Gille accepted the dagger and set it in her lap. “I will help her if I am able.” She could at least try to do one last good deed before she succumbed to her curse, even if it was for a ghost.

As the terror of the fire and the fear of capture faded, Gille focused on the sights and sounds of Loch Dunvegan. She had come to the loch occasionally to hunt for food. Even then, she had stayed no longer than necessary. The water frightened her at times. The endless expanse seemed to go on forever. She preferred places she could see and understand instead of a vast unknown.

She gripped the edge of her seat as Callum started to row once more. A light spray of salt stung her lips. A flicker of movement at the water’s surface caught her eye. A sleek, silverish-grey head bobbed up, followed by another, and another. Seals. A shiver snaked down her spine. These were not ordinary creatures. Gille could feel the simmering anger rolling off them in palpable waves.

“Selkies,” she whispered into the light breeze.

Callum chuckled as he continued to row with forceful strokes. “Do not worry. The seals like to play with the boats. They are harmless.”

Gille relaxed her shoulders just as one of the selkies, larger than the others, reared out of the water, its gaze locking on to Gille’s. Its eyes, intelligent and strangely human, held a cold fury that sent a jolt through her. This was no playful creature. This was a predator, a judge, and a jury all rolled into one.

They say the MacLeods always get what is coming to them , a voice, both smooth and gravelly, echoed in Gille’s head. It was not a language she spoke, yet somehow, she understood as it resonated deep within the primal part of herself.

Gille looked at Callum. Had he heard the voice? Obviously not, as he continued to stare off in the distance, at the fortress on the edge of a cliff that she knew to be Dunvegan.

Fear once again clawed at her throat. “Callum,” she rasped, her voice barely above a whisper. “We need to get away from here before these selkies tip the boat.” As her words were caught and carried away by the wind, the seals started ramming the boat with their heads.

Callum’s eyes flared as he started rowing in a zigzagging path towards the castle in the distance. “Is there anything you can do?”

“I have no power over the water. That is my mother and Aria’s gift.” Her power came from the forested world.

“Can you swim?” Callum asked.

“Aye. But if we end up in the water, I fear the selkies will drown us.” Gille clung to the sides of the boat as the ramming continued, almost succeeding in overturning the vessel.

Just when all seemed lost, another sleek head, impossibly black, appeared at the surface of the water, followed by several more. This time black seals, also selkies, forced the grey, spotted seals to disengage. A female selkie’s very human gaze connected with Gille’s. Hurry. We can distract them, but not for long. Again, that language of old resonated in her head.

Callum took advantage of the reprieve and rowed quickly until they reached the rocky shore of Dunvegan. He hopped out into calf-deep water and tugged the small boat ashore, then offered Gille his hand, helping her over the side of the vessel. He did not release her hand as they raced across the beach and to the wrought-iron sea gate cut into the side of the castle’s defensive wall. He pulled a key from his sporran, then quickly inserted it into the lock just as both black and grey seals reached the shores. Their furious barking filled the late-morning air.

Once inside the gate, Callum slammed it shut and locked it once again before expelling a heavy breath. “Perhaps you were right. Why would the seals want to hurt us?” he asked, studying the irritated grey seals who had reached the gate, slapping their fins against the wrought iron.

“Only the seals know the answer to that.”

The large grey seal turned her gaze to Gille. This is not over. We will have our revenge. It’s only a matter of time.

Everything seemed to be a matter of time now: her last few days of freedom. How long it would take the villagers to come after her again. Lady Janet’s return to the shadow realm. If the MacLeods could keep the threat of the selkies at bay.

“Come. My mother awaits.” Callum seemed not as concerned about other dangers except the threat against his mother as he continued up the pathway towards the rear courtyard of the castle.

Along the shoreline, the black seals with lighter spots waited in the surf. Instead of the barking she was used to hearing, a soulful melody whispered across the breeze. Were they singing? A ripple of sensation pricked the hairs on the back of her neck. The song. It was important somehow. Did the selkies know something about the curse upon her that Gille did not?

At her pause, Callum reached back and took her hand. “No need to worry, we are safe from the seals.”

Jolted back to the moment, Gille cast a quick glance back at the angry selkies then followed Callum. His features were no longer burdened with anxiety as they made their way to the castle and the mother who awaited him there. Instead, his face illuminated with so much loving radiance that it took her breath away. She had never witnessed such emotions before, in Fairyland or in the human realm. And all her misgivings about leaving her forest vanished. It had been the right thing to do, to come with Callum to Dunvegan and to attempt to save the woman he obviously cared about.

Callum never asked about her ability to heal injured or even dying things. Over the past year she had used her magic to heal many types of plants and animals, but she had never been able to bring back something that was already dead.

Gille continued up the pathway after Callum. He did not expect Gille to resurrect his mother. All she had to do was find a way to move Lady Janet from one spectral plane to another. How difficult could that be?

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“Mother!” Callum shouted as they entered the castle, hoping the ghost would appear quickly. The sooner they tested Gille’s magic on Lady Janet the better, before the fairy changed her mind or her magic faded without the forest to sustain her.

When the eerie white mist that usually preceded his mother did not appear, Callum moved up the stairs then down the hallway to the great hall. Inside the chamber were Alastair and Graeme near the fireplace. Gwendolyn and Aria sat at a table not far away with a pile of pea pods between them. They snapped open the pods and emptied the tender peas into two bowls. It was a scene of domestic bliss the couples had worked hard to achieve. Retrieving Gille would upend all of that in a matter of moments.

At Callum and Gille’s entrance, Alastair stood, followed by Graeme. Alastair smiled at his brother. “We wondered where you had gone off to when you did not come down to break your fast.” At the sight of Gille, his smile slipped and for a moment he simply stared at the young woman as though trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

Callum nudged Gille forward. “You remember Gille. She has come to save our mother.”

Aria’s bench screeched against the flagstone as she stood, then quickly came to stand before her sister. “Gille? Oh, my goodness. Is it really you?” She searched the young woman’s face, and her brows creased. “Where have you been all this time?”

At her sister’s appraisal, Gille straightened her back. “I was in the forest where Oberon’s curse forced me to remain. And I am changed in appearance because of his

spell.”

Aria frowned. “You were here with all of us. Then you vanished.” Aria pressed her fingers against her brow as though doing so would bring back the memory.

Confusion crossed Gille’s face, and a pained look darkened her eyes. “I was there, in the woods. So close to all of you, and yet no one came to see me.” Gille swallowed roughly. “Oberon captured me. He punished me for what we all did to him in Fairyland,” Gille said, her voice faltering.

The crease in Aria’s brows deepened. “Dear heavens. I do not remember any of that. Or anything about your presence in this realm. If I had—” Tears welled in Aria’s eyes as she pulled Gille against her chest and held tight. “I am so sorry, Sister. How lonely you must have been.” Gille’s arms hung at her sides despite the overwhelming affection surrounding her.

Callum pressed his lips together. This was a fairy who did not forgive easily. It would serve him well to remember that regarding her perception of his burning down the forest.

“Oberon must have made certain you all forgot about me.” Gille pulled back, her gaze seeking Callum. “How did you know where to find me?”

“Our mother remembered you and where you lived,” Callum said.

“Of course,” Gille said bitterly. “Oberon’s curse would not have any effect on her memory.” Gille stepped out of Aria’s arms and searched the chamber. “Where is your mother? If I am to try to heal her, let us begin that process so that I can turn my attention to my own problems.”

Aria frowned. “What problems? What has Oberon done now?”

Gwendolyn came to stand before them, her gaze running over Gille in concerned appraisal. “Whatever must be done to Lady Janet can wait a while. It is obvious Gille needs not only medical care, but a bath and a change of clothing.” Gwendolyn placed a hand on the young woman’s back and gently guided her towards the door. Aria followed.

“I suppose Mother’s needs can wait a short while.” Callum watched the women leave, noticing for the first time the red and blistering wounds on Gille’s right hand and left cheek, and the soot covering her clothing. He looked down at his own clothing, similarly covered with ash and soot. He’d escaped with no burns, but that did not mean that he did not need to refresh himself as well.

“What happened out there in the woods?” Alastair asked with deep concern in his voice.

Callum returned his gaze to his brother. “The villagers came looking for Gille, just as Mother told us yesterday. This time, they came with weapons, intending to take her and her magic back to their village.”

“And?” Alastair prompted when Callum paused.

Perhaps Gille had a right to be angry with him. “And when I appeared and challenged them, one of them set fire to the woodlands. We barely escaped.”

Alastair tensed and turned to Graeme. “Gather the men and send them out with shovels to dig a fire line to control the burn. We do not want the fire to reach Dunvegan.”

Graeme nodded and after he left, Alastair’s full attention shifted back to Callum. “Why did you go out there alone?”

Callum forced himself to meet his brother's angry gaze. "I wanted to help Mother. Gille can use her magic to keep her from disappearing."

"Did she come willingly?" Alastair asked as his gaze narrowed.

"Not until she had no choice," he admitted. Why did Alastair always have to see to the heart of every problem? "Do you not care if Mother disappears?"

"Of course I care, but now because of your actions, we have a fire to contain and villagers to appease."

Callum dropped his gaze. "There is more. I promised Gille that if she helped Mother, we would help break her curse."

Alastair drew a deep breath. "Gille spoke of a curse, but I seem to have forgotten."

"That is because Oberon wants us to forget," Callum said, returning his gaze to his brother's. "If Gille is not returned to her forest before sunrise on the seventh day, she will turn into a tree."

"So essentially, you were just like the villagers, demanding Gille help you at the expense of her own life." Alastair shook his head. "Do we know anything about how to break her curse?"

Callum frowned at Alastair's words. Had Callum acted like the villagers, forcing his will on the fairy? Nay, he pushed the thought away. Fairies were not like humans. They did not experience the same kinds of emotions. Gille had come back to Dunvegan because she needed their help. Feeling satisfied with his conclusion, Callum answered, "Mother might. If she does not disappear before she can tell us." Callum hesitated. "There is more."

Alastair's eyes flared. "More?"

"I am not sure what to make of it all, but as Gille and I were returning to Dunvegan by boat, several grey and black seals tried to overturn our vessel. I could not shake the feeling that they were angry, and that their fury was directed at the MacLeods. Do you have any idea why those animals would act in such a manner?"

Suddenly, an icy breeze swept through the chamber followed by a frothy grey mist. It swept across the floor then gathered into the shape of a woman, growing denser with every beat of Callum's heart. Their mother's soulful grey eyes connected with his. The seals are not our friends. Stay away from them, I beg you.

The Grey Lady's dark hair and ivory skin were less solid this morning than they had been even yesterday. If they did not find a solution, she would be lost to the spirit realm before long. But there was something new about her as well, a new kind of darkness that had come to her eyes. In the eyes of his enemies, Callum knew that look to be deception. "Mother, what are you not telling us?"

The ghost started and reared back, but the impression of prevarication remained.

"The seals, Mother. Particularly the grey seals, why did they act as though they wanted to harm us? This wasn't the first time the MacLeods have been attacked in the waters surrounding Dunvegan." Callum narrowed his gaze on her ghostly face. "Does this have something to do with the story of the selkie wife you told us the other night? You were very emotional in the retelling."

Her face darkened. Leave things be, Callum Joseph MacLeod, for your own safety.

Callum straightened his shoulders. Never in all his life had he challenged his mother as he did now. "How can we do that if we are to help you? Do you not want us to save you?"

The Grey Lady's features paled again as she clutched her midriff and doubled over in pain. Aye, I want to be free of my burdens, but the toll on my family might not be worth the cost of my half-life.

Concern pulling at the corner of his mouth, Alastair moved to their mother's side. He tried to put his arm around her, but his grasp only slipped through her increasingly incorporeal body. "Perhaps we should call Lottie to see if she can ease your pain?"

Lady Janet shook her head. There is nothing more Lottie can do for me. But perhaps it is time that I do something for Lottie.

Callum's gaze connected with Alastair's. "What are you talking about, Mother? What does our healer have to do with what is happening to you?"

Everything. Tears welled in their mother's eyes, sliding down her cheeks. She said nothing more, continuing to grow more and more despondent with every passing moment.

"I shall go find Lottie. Perhaps she can explain," Alastair said, leaving the chamber.

Even though there was nothing solid to hold on to, Callum wrapped his arms around his mother and pretended that she was as solid as she had been a few weeks prior. "We will figure this out, Mother. None of your children are going to let you slip away from us without a fight. And with Gille to help us, I am certain you will find a solution very soon."

It is my own fault. My failings have brought me to these depths, my child. I am the one who must make amends, if I only knew how, or vanish into the spirit realm as I deserve.

As her strange words faded from his mind, the grey mist in his arms shifted to a

bright white that lifted towards the ceiling, then disappeared. “Mother?” Callum called, his voice echoing in the now-empty chamber, his arms suspended as though still holding his mother.

He lowered his arms. There was much more to Lady Janet’s disappearing and pain than any of them had previously assumed. Somehow the healer who had been with the MacLeods since Callum’s birth had a role to play in their mother’s unfortunate half-life.

Callum headed for the door, but paused at the threshold, suddenly torn as to what direction he should head. Should he help Alastair find Lottie to see if she could help unravel the strange ramblings of their mother? Or should he go abovestairs to check on Gille? Only she could assist their mother in moving to the afterlife she deserved.

Or was her current torment what Mother deserved? For the first time in his life, Callum wondered if his mother was completely the innocent victim of their father’s rage when he left her in the dungeon to die. By her own words, she had admitted to harming Lottie in some way.

Even so, whatever had happened in the past did not mean he did not want to save his mother now. Perhaps instead of finding Lottie or helping Gille, he should figure out where their mother went so that when Gille was ready, she could set their mother to rights. Using Gille’s magic was more urgent than ever.

For a moment, Callum’s steps faltered in the hallway. His thoughts were exactly those of the village men. He wanted to exploit the fairy and her magic for his own purposes. He would force her to do so just as everyone in her prior life had done. Callum frowned. No wonder she had a difficult time letting go of her anger. Oberon, and perhaps others, had never allowed her to decide her own path. They all had forced her to become a recluse, a beast relegated to the forest.

He was not like Oberon. Perhaps he should wait—a day or two, as she could not afford but a few—until she recovered from the fire and felt more secure here at Dunvegan. He straightened and continued his path down the stairs while considering how he might expedite Gille's sense of security in being with the MacLeods.

Callum paused again before heading out the door and towards the old keep where he often found his mother lingering. He was still being manipulative of Gille for his own purposes. He thrust away the thought and kept walking. Perhaps, he could turn the situation into a beneficial one for both Gille and his mother if Lady Janet had any knowledge of how Gille might break her curse. Then the situation might be seen as beneficial to both. And he could shed the feeling that he was extorting Gille as others had in her life.

Lady Janet was the only one who had remembered Gille after Oberon had cursed her. There was a great likelihood that she did have some knowledge no one else had. Feeling less burdened by his own actions, Callum continued towards the keep.

If he had knowledge of some way to help Gille, then he would no longer have to force her to help the MacLeods. She would do so willingly. At least that was his hope.

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Gille allowed Gwendolyn and Aria to lead her upstairs to a bedchamber in the castle's south tower. She had been to Dunvegan before but had never stayed inside the castle. She had always run to the woodlands, searching for more familiar surroundings. But now, the woodlands were gone. The skeletal remains of the trees would offer her no comfort. And if she were honest, she did not want to leave. The villagers knew where she and Callum had gone. They could be outside the castle walls, waiting. Gille shivered. Those men would not be as kind as the MacLeods if they captured her.

“Come,” Gwendolyn said, beckoning Gille to enter the chamber fully. “Let us get you into the bath. I had one sent up the moment we saw you and Callum at the shoreline.”

Near the hearth, a copper tub with steaming, heather-scented water sat enticingly. So different from her world of mossy streams and icy lakes. “I have never bathed indoors before,” Gille said, a hint of excitement in her voice as she moved to the bath and dipped her fingers into the water, marvelling at the temperature.

Aria smiled. “You will never want to bathe in a stream again after this. I promise.”

Gille snapped her fingers back. “I may never have the opportunity again if I cannot break Oberon’s curse.” Only rainwater would fall on her branches for the rest of her life.

“I blame myself for your predicament,” Aria said, her tone solemn and the pain in her eyes palpable. “I should have protected you.”

“You are not to blame,” Gille said, trying to reassure her sister. “Oberon needed to punish someone. If not me, then he would have sought out you or Mother.” Gille’s throat tightened as she voiced the conclusion she had come to over the last few months.

“What’s important now is finding a way to undo what has been done,” Gwendolyn said. “What did you say... we will have seven days to find a solution?”

Gille nodded.

“Well, then let’s start the first of those seven days purging the remnants of the fire from your skin, hair, and clothing.” Gwendolyn reached for the tie of Gille’s cloak.

Gille jerked back. “A bath hardly seems the most urgent thing. I must do all I can to

break the curse as soon as possible.”

Gwendolyn’s gaze turned sympathetic. “A bath will clear your head and calm your nerves.”

Aria nodded. “Oberon has hurt you not only by placing a curse on you, but also by separating you from your family for the last year. Why would you want to allow him to continue hurting you by poisoning all your hours and minutes with anxiety and fear for the next seven days?”

Gille pressed her lips together as she turned her gaze to the bath. “I agree I must make the most of every moment.”

When Gwendolyn reached for the ties once more, Gille instead handed her the dagger Callum had given her. “Could you take this and put it somewhere?”

Gwendolyn frowned down at the sheathed weapon before returning her gaze to Gille. “Where did you get this? Callum never goes anywhere without it.”

Gille shrugged. “Callum gave it to me as a sort of peace offering for burning down my forest.”

Gwendolyn and Aria’s gazes clashed. “I thought the villagers set fire to the woodlands,” Aria clarified.

Gille pressed her lips together. “If Callum had not been there to distract me—”

“Callum prizes this dagger above all things,” Gwendolyn interrupted. “That he gave it to you is significant. Callum has not even trusted his brothers with this dagger since they returned home over the past few years.”

Gille bit down on her lip, forcing herself not to ask what had driven Callum's brothers away from Dunvegan or why they had returned. She did not need to get involved in the MacLeods' lives. She was here to help Lady Janet the best she could and then solve her own problems.

And once those problems are solved? a voice inside her asked. If she found a way to break the curse, then what would occupy her days? She had spent most of her life either hiding from Oberon, as a prisoner in the shadow realm, or living in isolation in the forest. Alone. Always alone.

"Those days are in the past," Aria said, as though sensing the direction of Gille's thoughts.

Gille frowned. "How do you know—"

"Because I had those same thoughts myself." Aria reached up and loosened the tie of Gille's cloak, slipping the moss-covered garment from her shoulders. "As my sister, you are part of this family now. You will no longer be forgotten or cast aside as unimportant. You can remain here with me for as long as you like."

"For the next seven days . . ."

Aria shook her head. "Together, we will figure out how to free you from Oberon's curse. All of us."

An odd sense of warmth flooded Gille's chest. "We have never been a true family before: you, me, and Mother."

"Then perhaps it is time," Aria said with a smile as she steered Gille towards the bath. "The sooner you bathe, the sooner we can get on to finding the solutions we need to set that future into motion."

“We will step outside and give you some privacy,” Gwendolyn said as she and Aria headed towards the door. “But we will return shortly.”

Gille’s lips lifted at one corner as she tried to smile for the first time in ages. What would it be like to dream about more than simply making it through the day without being captured and exploited? What would it be like to fantasise about the future?

Gille lifted her charred and soot-covered gown over her head and set it aside, followed by her shift, hose, and moss-covered boots. The thought of soaking away the grime and soot in the heather-scented water was suddenly more than she could resist.

As the water flowed around her, wrapping her in its heat, a sob rose up inside her. For years she had been frightened, terrified even, to shed her cloak for even a few moments to bathe in the waters of the forest. Now, with Aria and the MacLeods nearby, she had let the garment go, no longer feeling like she needed such protection every moment of every day.

So much had changed in her life in just one afternoon. Weary from exhaustion, she leaned her head back against the copper tub, wanting nothing more than to simply exist in this moment. For as soon as she stepped from the water, reality—and the countdown to breaking her curse—would begin in earnest. For now, she had found a reprieve.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:46 am

The wind whispered across Lottie's face as she stood on the rocky shore of Loch Dunvegan. The waves lapped at her bare feet as she gazed into the distance, where the horizon met the water. She felt it for the hundredth time—the ache, the emptiness—as if a part of herself had been torn away.

For eighteen years she had lived with the MacLeods. The first year had been anguish, but after that she had settled into her fate and learned to accept what had happened. Yet on days like today, the yearning was more than she could bear. It had been nearly two decades since Lady Janet had taken her pelt. That was not entirely truthful. It had been nearly two decades since Lottie had surrendered her pelt as penance for what she had done, leaving her stranded on land. Her children, once chubby-faced and curious, were now grown adults. Would they still remember her—their mother who vanished without a trace?

As Lottie lingered at the shoreline, the seals of Dunvegan came to her, their sleek silvery-grey bodies breaking the surface. They bobbed in the swells, their eyes filled with longing. A few of the seals still remembered her, recognised her scent, and pleaded silently for her return. But without her pelt she was bound to the land, unable to slip back into the sea and become one with the waves.

Lottie closed her eyes and tipped her head back, allowing the salt-scented air to flow across her cheeks. But today the air was unusually pungent, carrying the acrid scent of burning wood and leaves. Lottie opened her eyes and followed the coastline to her right where billowing black smoke hovered at the edge of the sea cliffs.

She tensed. A fire had started in the woodlands. Did the MacLeods know? She lifted her skirts and turned back towards the castle only to see Callum MacLeod coming

across the beach.

“I am so glad I finally found you,” he said as he approached.

“The fire. Is anyone hurt?” She noted the streaks of soot on his face as he came closer. “Were you harmed in the fire?” She scanned Callum for signs of distress, and when she found none, her gaze clung to his face.

“I am unharmed,” he said in a calm, reassuring voice.

Lottie released a tight breath. Whether in seal or human form, she had always been a healer. It was the reason she had allowed Lady Janet to capture her pelt. She had come to heal the boy, and to try to heal Lady Janet’s husband who had injured his head in battle. Though Lottie had healed the laird’s wounds, she was never able to purge him of the erratic behaviour that followed. The man became cruel, suspicious of everyone, and transformed from a loving father and husband into a tyrant who would eventually kill his wife through neglect.

That Lottie could never completely cure the old laird, or save Lady Janet from her fate, was why she had stayed at Dunvegan even though she longed to return home. And when all the MacLeod boys, except Callum, left Dunvegan to pursue their interests, she had stayed for the young man before her. Through their shared pain and loneliness, she and Callum had forged a bond that was every bit as strong as that of mother and son.

“If no one is hurt, then why are you looking for me?” Lottie asked, confused. “What could be so important that you did not take a moment to cleanse yourself of this soot?” She reached up and tenderly ran her finger across his cheek, causing the ash to smudge against his skin.

He reached for her fingers and held them. “My mother said something strange,

something I have never heard her say before. And it concerned me.” His gaze held both curiosity and fear.

“What was that?” Lottie asked, but she already knew. She had seen the pain in Lady Janet’s gaze earlier this morning. It was the same ache that haunted Lottie—the need to make amends before it was too late.

“Lady Janet alluded to the fact she had hurt you in some way.” Callum’s gaze narrowed. “I always knew, since I was a child, that there were secrets between the two of you. Perhaps it is time for you to tell me those secrets and let me help you both.”

“If only I could, Callum, but it is not my secret to share,” Lottie replied with a tender smile designed to reassure, but inside she once again felt the weight of Lady Janet’s actions. Her true family was beyond her reach, a distant memory at best. “It is your mother who must decide whether to reveal the truth or not.”

Callum’s fingers tightened on Lottie’s as he brought her hand down to settle between them. “Then let us go back to the castle and call Mother forth. There is no more room in our lives for secrets, not when Mother is about to fade away.”

Lottie hesitated as her heart wavered. For the first time in eighteen years, she might have a chance to recover her pelt if Lady Janet was truly filled with remorse. Her breath caught at the thought of freedom. To be a selkie was to belong to the sea—to dance with the tides and sing with her children once more. But she had lived another lifetime as well in the human realm. To remain human was to hold fragile moments in her hand—the taste of honeyed tea, and to feel the warmth of Callum, a second son’s hand wrapped around her own.

Perhaps she could choose both worlds, both families—to be both selkie and human. She drew a deep breath of the salt-laden air, allowing it to fuel her spirit as she took

a step towards the castle. “Let us find your mother.” For the first time in eighteen years, Lottie felt a glimmer of hope that her life might be something more.

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An hour later, after Callum himself had bathed and changed his clothing, he sat in the great hall with Lottie, his mother, Pearl, and his brothers as they waited for Gille, Aria, and Gwendolyn to come down. Callum frowned at the empty doorway. What was keeping them? The hum of his family’s voices usually calmed him. This afternoon, it had no such effect.

It seemed that Mrs Honey had waited long enough for the women to arrive as well, as she signalled her maids to start serving the afternoon meal. Moments later, the savoury scent of roasted mutton filled the chamber. Callum stared down at the plate set before him. His favourite double-cruste d meat pies, mashed turnips and gravy, and apple wedges. Yet he found he had no stomach for food. He wanted answers for Lottie’s sake and action for his mother’s.

He scraped his chair back, intending to go search for the missing fairy when suddenly Gwendolyn and Aria walked through the doorway, followed by a woman with familiar burnished red hair. But the beastly fairy he recalled from the forest was not the graceful young woman who entered the chamber.

Her wild tangle of red hair had been tamed and pulled away from her face, causing a cascade of curls to tumble across her shoulders and down her back. Her face had been scrubbed of soil and soot to reveal a peachy complexion that almost glowed. The jut of her forehead seemed less pronounced, and her nose seemed more rounded. Startling green eyes, the colour of the Cuillin hills in the springtime, gazed about the room with both curiosity and amusement. Her pupils seemed less dilated, less animalistic. And the dark green dress she wore highlighted a perfectly proportioned figure that had previously been hidden beneath the moss-covered cloak she had worn

in the forest.

Callum shook his head, clearing his thoughts. Of course she would be lovely. After all, it was fairy blood that flowed through her veins. By the time she stood before him, he had recovered enough to motion towards the empty seat beside him. “Come, sit. Once you are done eating, we will see what can be done to help my mother.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking the seat with all the refinement of a great lady.

Aria sat across the table beside Pearl. The three fae or part-fae women next to and across from Callum could not have been more different. Where Aria’s skin was fair like clouds reflected in the waters of a clear summer brook, Gille’s was rosy and warm like the colours of the leaves in the fall. And Pearl was much like her name—radiant despite her age, with a youthful pinkish tint to her cheeks.

But of the three, it was Gille who caught his attention. While the fairy took up an apple wedge and nibbled at the flesh, he continued to study her. He had convinced himself over the last several years that fairies were lesser creatures, evil and vile, for all the hardship they had brought to his family. When Aria had first arrived, Callum had been angry with his family for accepting her. But time, and her ability to protect those he loved, had worn him down. She was half human, he had told himself as justification for why he had finally accepted Aria as family.

Gille was fully fae. He should feel nothing but revulsion towards her. Instead, Callum found he was experiencing a multitude of wild emotions that took him completely off guard. Anger and sympathy battled with an odd sense of guilt that he may have had a hand in destroying her forest and setting off the chain of events that might end her life in six and a half short days. Dragging his gaze back to his meal, Callum forced himself to eat, neither tasting nor enjoying his food.

When everyone else had finished, Gille settled her hands in her lap and instead of

engaging in the conversation that flowed around them, she leaned towards him. “When do we get started?”

“Now, if you would like.” Callum stood and waited for Gille to do the same before encouraging her to walk before him in the direction of his mother, leaving Pearl and Aria behind. He could not help but admire Gille’s bravery. She held her head high and her shoulders straight, not collapsing into a heap of tears over her situation.

A hush came over the chamber as they stopped before Lady Janet. “Mother, this is Gille. She has come to help set you free. In return for her help, I also promised that we would help her break the curse Oberon placed on her.”

A curse will be difficult to break , Lady Janet said, her voice hesitant.

“You can help her, though.” Callum nodded at his mother, praying that she would agree to some sort of assistance. He was not certain Gille would help free his mother otherwise. He needed answers about Lottie as well, but that could wait for another time when he was alone with his mother.

The Grey Lady’s gaze shifted to Gille. Cursed and damned, the two of us. Lady Janet released a mournful sigh that whispered through the chamber. We can find some way to help each other, I am certain.

The Grey Lady floated closer until the mist that coiled along the floor curled at their feet. And even though Callum was relieved that his mother had agreed to help Gille, he shivered as a sudden chill shot through him, making him long for the warm, affectionate woman his mother had once been. “Over the last two years, our mother has been steadily growing more solid, more human, until the last few months when she started fading away again.”

“Do you have any idea why this is happening?” Gille asked Lady Janet.

Sorrow twisted the ghost's features. I have made so many mistakes.

"That is part of life. Mistakes are stepping stones to wisdom," Gille replied, her voice gentle. "Would you allow me to touch the spectral part of you to see if I can understand what keeps you trapped here and in so much pain?"

Aye. Anything you can do to help me would be most appreciated.

Aria and Pearl came forward. "Would you like us to help you?" Aria asked her sister. "Much of my magic was taken from me by Oberon, but I could try to help."

"And though my magic has been drained by the fairy king, too, I still feel the pull of it deep inside," Pearl offered with a smile. "Together we might have more insight about how to solve this problem."

Gille nodded, and together the three fairies locked hands and stepped into the mist surrounding Lady Janet. Callum clutched his hands before him as they faded from view. With luck and a little fairy magic, they might help his poor, suffering mother cross over into the afterlife.

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Gille tensed as a paralysing cold seeped into her bones. It was not the familiar chill of cold air seeping through the castle's stones, but something far deeper. It clung to her like a shroud, a tendril of sorrow that pulsed through Lady Janet's translucent form. Gille reached out, her hand passing through the ghostly apparition with no resistance as she tried to connect with what little remained of Lady Janet's core.

Gille's own body felt like a forgotten shell. No comforting warmth radiated from Gille's skin, no steady thrum of her heartbeat. Just a chilling emptiness that mirrored the hollowness she sensed emanating from the ghost.

The vibrant world around her dulled with each passing second. The rich tapestries lining the walls became leached of their colours, transforming into a drab display of browns and greys. Even her own dress, a dark emerald green, took on a sickly hue. The hands that had joined with hers only moments ago vanished, leaving behind a phantom touch—a cold, distant pressure that sent shivers down her spine. And then even that faded, leaving her with Lady Janet in a colourless void, the echo of a touch the only reminder of connection.

In stark contrast to Lady Janet's pale, insubstantial essence, vibrant memories flickered and danced before Gille's eyes. A scene of the MacLeods only a few years ago as they danced before a bonfire, their laughter echoing through the night air. A wave of joy washed over Gille only to be ripped away as quickly as it had arrived. Tattered, shattered, suddenly broken.

The image of Oberon, his face contorted in rage mirroring the storm he had conjured over the loch, and an answering primal fury flickered hot within Gille. The image disintegrated then flashed to English soldiers advancing in a tide of destruction that collapsed Dunvegan's stone walls. A corresponding sense of grief crushed Gille like a physical weight, the air thick with despair before the image crumbled like the wall and disappeared.

A flash of Lottie, tears streaming down her face as she stood alone on the shore, followed by another of Lady Janet disappearing into the trees. Each memory was a sensory overload. The joy, the rage, the grief—emotions so intense they threatened to drown Gille with their intensity. There was no filter, no buffer, just a torrent of raw feeling. One fragmented memory slammed into the next, a chaotic sea of emotions with no rhyme or reason.

And then, with a jolt, clarity struck. These crumbling memories, and so many others, were the anchors dragging Lady Janet down. Her very essence was fracturing, mirroring the splintering of her past. Perhaps, the key to helping the ghost find peace

was not just ushering her into the afterlife but putting the pieces of her life back together. To help Lady Janet sift through these memories, to identify the ones tethering her to the mortal realm. Once she found resolution, perhaps then she could finally let go and find her way to eternal rest.

Gille recoiled, pulling away from the onslaught of emotions. She had promised Callum she would help, but a sudden weight of responsibility pressed down on her. Could she save Lady Janet and herself within the next few days? Or would she have to pay the ultimate price—her own life—to fulfil her pledge?

The weight of indecision threatened to consume Gille as she staggered backwards. She cried out, the sound lost in the muted silence of the mist. Then, Gille felt herself falling. Hands reached out for her, but she fell too quickly for them to stop her and she crashed onto the cold stone floor. A jolt of pain lanced through her skull, forcing a gasp from her lips. The spectral mist around Lady Janet dissipated, the world spinning wildly. Blurry figures swam into her vision, their voices a distant murmur.

Overwhelmed, Gille surrendered, closing her eyes and sinking into the blessed darkness.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:46 am

Callum straightened in the chair near Gille's bed, arching his spine to rid it of stiffness. The movement did little to ease his discomfort after sitting immobile all night and into the next morning. He really should get up and walk around the chamber, but to do so might wake up the woman lying on the bed.

Gille's sleep had been restless and fitful since Lottie had left her some hours before. Callum's gaze wandered about the chamber, seeking something to distract him. He had been in the green bedroom before but had never noticed the paper on the walls was that of faintly drawn trees that had leafed out in the early spring. Would the delicate drawings bring her comfort, or remind her of the fate that awaited her?

Callum's gaze drifted back to Gille. He was responsible for putting her in that bed. If he hadn't been in such a hurry to save his mother, he might have taken time to think things through and find a safer way for Gille to uncover the reason Lady Janet was fading away.

But there was no going back. What's done was done. All he could do now was hope Gille woke soon and that she sustained no lasting damage despite the streak of white that had appeared in her hair, a startling contrast in a sea of burnished red.

He frowned. Despite being a MacLeod, he'd had little exposure to the fae, except for his long-lost relative Aria. Though she was partially a MacLeod, she was also half-fae and so very different from the woman on the bed. Where Aria was steady, Gille was fiery and impatient. Where Aria was ethereal, Gille was earthy. Aria's features were classic perfection. Gille's were less so. She had visibly changed since her arrival several hours ago. Had leaving the forest somehow changed her looks? Or was Dunvegan having some sort of effect on her?

Callum continued his study of her. He noted that her oval face was too long, her cheekbones too high, her lips too well defined, and when she was awake her eyes too sharp and determined beneath her arched brows. Her features, taken individually, were all wrong, but fit together in perfect harmony to form a whole that was fascinating, compelling, and quite different from her half-sister's. And while Aria's body was supple and strong, Gille's body—partially concealed beneath the covers—was far more delicate than he had imagined when hidden beneath her cloak.

The door opened softly behind him, and Callum turned to see Alastair and Orrick as they entered the room. "How is she?" Alastair asked.

"Look at her," Callum whispered, tamping back a rush of emotion. When had he started caring about what happened to the fairy? "Gille is changed, but she is also broken, and it is all my fault. I asked her to try and help Mother." It was not caring so much as it was guilt, he tried to tell himself.

"She is not dead," Alastair said impatiently.

"What if she does not wake up?" Unsettled by his thoughts, Callum picked up the strands of white hair. "Something terrible happened in Mother's mist."

"She will awaken," Alastair said, his tone less harsh. "Something similar happened to Gwendolyn. Gille will wake up. Give it time."

Callum nodded as he released the silken white strands of her hair, letting them fall back against her cheek. "Let us hope that is before the seventh sunrise, or her life will be truly over."

"About that," Orrick said, coming to sit at the edge of the bed. "I might have found something hidden among the books in our library."

“What did you find?” Callum asked, intrigued.

“A journal written by William MacLeod.” When Callum frowned, Orrick continued. “William was Iain Cair’s son, and the first MacLeod to be blessed with fairy blood.”

“That is not a blessing,” Callum remarked with a scowl.

“Of course it is. Our clan’s prosperity and good fortune have relied on the gift Pearl gave her first-born child: the Fairy Flag.”

Callum cast his brother a less than pleased glance. “What has the Fairy Flag got to do with Mother’s fading away and Gille being cursed by Oberon?”

“Everything. They are all linked, if William MacLeod is to be believed.” Orrick leaned forward. “He wrote that before Iain Cair fell in love with Pearl, that the MacLeods of Dunvegan enjoyed an unusual relationship with both the fae and selkie worlds. They were all united by the natural world that surrounded them. They each had their place. The Fae ruled Fairyland, the Selkies ruled the sea, and the MacLeods ruled their peaceful corner of the Isle of Skye. All that changed when William was born. His very existence started the first rift in the peace.

“Because of the magic that coursed through his veins, the human world now had fairy magic in it. And when Pearl was forced to leave her family and return to Fairyland, she caused the second rift by gifting the MacLeods with the Fairy Flag for protection and acting as a bridge between the human and fairy worlds.” Orrick’s gaze shifted between Alastair and Callum. “William suspected that each rift weakens all three worlds, leaving them open to corruption and a misuse of the powers each holds.”

“Another rift might have occurred when Oberon stole Keiran from his crib,” Alastair added. “It could also explain why Father was never the same after his head injury. Perhaps the corruption that William wrote of kept Father from healing.”

Orrick nodded. “And his instability was what led to him imprisoning Mother in the dungeon, ultimately leading to her death, and perhaps why she remains with us as a ghost.”

Callum shook his head. “That is a lot of supposition on both of your parts. Father did what he did because he was angry with Mother for protecting Aria and Pearl.”

Alastair sighed. “That is not how Mother saw the situation. She has explained to us in recent years that she protected all of us. Including Aria and Pearl, against a man who was no longer rational.”

Orrick held up his hand, cutting off the debate. “The past has already happened. We cannot change any of it, but we can allow it to inform the present.”

“Agreed,” Alastair said.

Reluctantly, Callum nodded. “If what you say has any truth behind it, then why is Mother fading away, and why did Oberon curse Gille?”

“I believe I know.” Gille’s voice was soft, broken.

All three men turned to see Gille’s lids flicker open. She had heard and understood at least part of their conversation. At the thought Callum’s heart soared. Perhaps Gille was not as badly injured as he had suspected. “How are you feeling?”

“Like my head is going to explode.” She swallowed roughly. “Dizzy.”

Callum wanted to reach for her fingers, to comfort her. Instead, he clutched his hands together. “You hit your head hard on the flagstone. We were worried—”

“Callum is trying to say that he is pleased you are awake,” Alastair cut in with a

smile.

Gille tried to return Alastair's smile, but flinched and brought her fingers to her brow, as though pressing against it might settle her dizziness. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Less than a day," Callum replied, even though it had felt like forever.

"You were going to tell us why you think Oberon cursed you and why Lady Janet is fading from this world," Orrick reminded her.

Gille struggled to sit, winced, then collapsed against her pillow once more. "Something Lady Janet did before she died is fracturing her memories. Those fractures are causing her to fade." Her gaze returned to Callum's. "Perhaps she created another rift like the ones you talked of earlier."

"It is possible, but what could Mother have done to cause such trouble?" Orrick offered Alastair and Callum a pensive look that usually preceded him being lost in thought.

Callum swallowed hard, remembering his mother's own confession that she had wronged Lottie. "I am positive it has something to do with Lottie."

"I saw a memory of her running away from the healer into the woodlands," Gille offered. "In the memory, they were both much younger."

"God's blood!" Orrick exclaimed. "It suddenly all makes sense."

Alastair and Callum shared a confused look. "What makes sense?"

"It almost seems too fantastical to be real," Orrick said, shaking his head as though

still trying to work the puzzle out. “William wrote that only when all three worlds—fae, human, and selkie—had suffered a rift, would the harmony the MacLeods had long enjoyed begin to crumble.”

“What exactly are you saying, Orrick?” Alastair’s dark eyes held concern.

“Mother gave us the clue the other night when she told us the story of the selkie wife,” Orrick explained. “She somehow angered the selkie world.”

Gille gasped as her gaze flew to Callum’s. “That would explain the warning the large grey seal gave me when she almost overturned us in the water.” Gille’s voice was uneven. “The seal spoke to me in the same way your mother does. I could hear the seal’s thoughts.”

“I heard nothing,” Callum said with a frown.

“What did she say?” Orrick prompted, ignoring Callum.

“That the MacLeods always get what is coming to them.”

Silence settled over the chamber for several long moments before Callum stood, too restless to remain in his chair any longer. “Why did you hear this message, and I did not?”

Gille shrugged. “I am probably more in tune with nature, which is probably also why I was the only one of the three who stepped into your mother’s mist who was able to connect with her. Pearl and Aria were knocked out.”

“What happened when you did?” Callum asked, moving closer to Gille. “You said Mother’s memories are fracturing?”

“Aye. I truly believe that somehow weaving her memories back together will resolve any lingering attachments keeping her tethered to the human realm and perhaps by doing so, heal a rift or two.”

Callum gazed at Gille for a long moment. “You know how to do such a thing? Weave memories together?”

She remained quiet for so long that Callum thought she might not answer him when she said, “I am not certain, but I have helped to heal trees in the forest by weaving their injured parts back together with the morning dew. Perhaps that is at least worth trying.”

A muscle jerked in Callum’s jaw as his gaze moved to the shock of white in her red hair. “Would you have to reconnect with Mother’s incorporeal mist?”

“I believe so.”

Callum shook his head, and his gaze sought again the white streak in her hair. “It will most likely be dangerous to you. We could not ask that of you.”

“You asked me to help.” Gille perched on her elbows for a long moment before sitting up. “This is how I can help, Callum. And perhaps the next time I connect with her, I can determine if what Orrick said is true. If the fae, human, selkie, and spirit realms are all connected, then helping your mother might also help me.”

Still uncertain about putting Gille in danger again, Callum shifted his gaze to Alastair and Orrick.

“What do we have to lose?” Alastair said. “It is worth a try at least.”

Orrick turned to Gille. “If you are willing to take the chance...”

Gille's fingers drifted up to the shock of white at her right temple and instead of fear, a smile lit her features with warmth. "If it means not changing my very nature in six more days, then it will be worth the risk."

Callum gazed at Gille for a long while before he finally nodded. This fairy was difficult to understand. Only the day before Gille had been wild and untamed, with sharp edges and a driving will to survive. She still had the will to survive, which was why she had offered to connect with Lady Janet again despite the danger to herself.

But there was another side to this fairy woman that he had not noticed, or if he were honest, taken the time to see before now. She healed the animals and the trees in the world around her, and despite her desperate situation she could allow herself to smile. And her smile had been beautiful...

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It took another two hours for Gille's dizziness to settle. When she could finally stand, she washed herself then made her way to the armoire. She selected the most demure gown Gwendolyn had lent her—a light grey, black, and red tartan dress with a stomacher and underskirt embroidered with tiny rosebuds and leaves.

Gille struggled into the gown, secured the ties, then smoothed it over her waist before examining herself in the small looking glass above the washstand. It had been a long while since she had seen her own image reflected in something other than a stream. She looked... softer. Reaching up she touched the skin on her cheek. Aye, her skin was silky to the touch instead of the grit and coarseness she used to feel in the woods. The bath had helped, or was it something more?

Befuddled, she looked lower at the dress she had chosen, and bit down on her lip. The dress clung to her breasts and hips. Gwendolyn was obviously smaller than herself. She tugged at the bodice. No matter how much she tried to pull it up, the fabric persisted on falling lower. With a sigh Gille gave up. The dress would have to do. Besides, who ever looked at her closely enough to notice such things?

A wave of heat tingled through Gille that had nothing to do with the fire in the hearth. This morning Callum had looked at her in a way no man ever had before, either fae or human. With trembling fingers, she lifted a comb and parted her hair in the middle, then pulled it back, securing it with a black ribbon on the washstand that she tied in a simple bow. Then, to soften the effect, she tugged two tendrils loose at her temples. She checked her appearance once more and nodded. Perhaps Callum had just been concerned about her and the odd looks he had given her would not continue.

Either way, she could not avoid going belowstairs if she was going to help Lady

Janet, and possibly herself. Resolved to do what needed to be done, she headed out the door and down the stairs. At the landing she paused, and her heart gave a jerk. Callum was at the bottom of the stairs, waiting for her. His dark eyes followed her as she descended and stopped before him. She caught the fresh scent of soap, and he gave her a smile that was different than any smile a man had given her before.

She swallowed against the sudden tightness in her throat. “Are we to get started straight away?” she asked Callum as Alastair, Tormod, Orrick, and Keiran came to join them.

Callum’s gaze did not waver, but his smile slipped. “We are eager to start healing Mother’s memories, but we can wait until you have broken your fast.”

“If I am going to reconnect with your mother as I did last night, it might be best to do that on an empty stomach. Besides, I would rather make use of the early morning hour.” She clasped her hands behind her back. “But before we go, there is something I must say to you.” She needed to make amends before she lost her nerve. “I realised this morning while trying to regain my equilibrium that I had been unfair to you.”

At his questioning gaze, she drew a deep breath and continued quickly. “I blamed you wrongly for the fire in the forest. I was angry and frightened. The villagers were not going to leave unless I went with them. The fire was a result of their actions, not yours.”

“I am sorry you had to take a bump to your head to realise that, but I will accept your apology on one condition.”

“What?”

“That you accept mine.” His brows lifted in challenge. “I should have asked you to help Lady Janet instead of trying to force you.”

“Thank you, and I accept.” She smiled at him. “Does that mean we agree on a truce?”

“I suppose it does.” Callum’s smile returned. “What do we do now? Where do we start in trying to stitch Mother’s memories back together?”

“I need to go to the garden beyond the gates.”

His gaze narrowed. “It would be safer if we stayed behind the gates of Dunvegan. The villagers might have followed us here.”

“While Dunvegan is beautiful, it is made from stone, and very little grows behind the walls of the keep. My magic comes from nature. I must surround myself with the natural beauty of the gardens to draw fully on my power, or I might not be able to heal your mother.”

“So be it then,” Tormod cut in. “The men are in the courtyard, waiting to protect all of us should the villagers be waiting outside the gates.”

Reluctantly, Callum nodded. “Stay close.”

Gille walked alongside Callum as they made their way to the castle door, where he paused and lifted a tartan shawl from a hook near the door and handed it to her. “It is still a bit chilly out there this morning.”

She accepted the finely woven cloth even though she would have preferred her own moss-covered cloak, but now was not the time to argue that point. In silence, she draped the MacLeod tartan around her shoulders and proceeded across the courtyard, surrounded by the castle’s guards. Behind her walked Alastair, Tormod, Orrick, and Keiran, as well as Lady Janet, who floated behind them all, and Lottie.

Callum must have noticed her curiosity at the healer joining them today because he

said, “Lottie asked to join us. She has a stake in whatever Mother’s dreams reveal as well.”

Gille could not argue that point and simply nodded as she progressed towards the gates. Despite the large group, Gille managed to block out the sound of the footfalls on the earthen path and focused her senses on nature’s magic.

A chill hung in the air, making each breath a visible puff. The scent of damp earth mingled with those of heather, peat, and pine to create a distinctive Scottish perfume. In the distance sheep bleated softly, their calls echoing in the pre-dawn stillness.

As the gates opened, they headed to the right, crossing the stone bridge. With each step, the yellow and gold morning sunshine increased. At her feet, wisps of mist clung to the pathway, shimmering like spun silver in the growing light. The natural world became visible around her, leaving Gille with a sense of renewal. A new day stretched before her filled with the possibility of both repairing Lady Janet’s memories and finding a way to break her own curse.

Callum’s brow furrowed with concern. “Which part of the garden would be most suitable?” he asked, keeping pace beside Gille. “Perhaps the picturesque Round Garden, or the serene Water Garden?”

“The Walled Garden,” Gille replied, her voice tinged with nostalgia. “It is the oldest part of the estate, and where I felt most at peace during my previous visit.”

They entered the secluded Walled Garden, a vibrant tapestry of plants and flowers. Fragrant herbs lined the path, while raised vegetable beds overflowed with healthy greens and delicate blooms, promising sustenance for the MacLeod clan. The land pulsed with a sense of purpose, its connection to the family who had stewarded it for generations as undeniable as the hint of forgotten magic that seemed to linger from the largest trees to the tiniest seeds.

Gille stopped in the centre of the garden, her gaze sweeping the landscape. “This is the ideal location,” she murmured, then gestured for Lady Janet to approach. Lady Janet drifted closer, while Alastair, Tormod, Orrick, Lottie, and Keiran observed from a distance, their faces etched with worry.

The morning dew shimmered at Gille’s feet, and as the ghostly mist surrounding Lady Janet mingled with it, Gille knew it was time to begin. She stepped forward, the chilling mist that made up Lady Janet enveloping her legs. A shiver ran down her spine.

Callum’s hand shot out, grasping her arm. “Are you certain this will work?” he whispered urgently. “Weaving her memories with... dew?”

Gille met his worried gaze and nodded. “The morning dew holds the essence of the dreams, whispers on the breeze, fragments of forgotten moments. It will aid me in piecing together Lady Janet’s past.”

“But won’t it further deplete your own life force?”

Gille offered a reassuring smile. “Without this knowledge, I will have no life left in six days. I accept that danger.”

A faint, mournful echo drifted through the garden. I will not harm her , Lady Janet’s voice promised.

Callum released Gille’s arm and stepped back.

I am ready , Lady Janet’s voice echoed once more.

Gille’s gaze locked with Lady Janet’s. “Is there a specific memory that feels fragmented?”

“Aye.”

“Excellent. Focus on that memory and try to hold on to it.” Gille reached out to a nearby foxglove, her finger brushing against a spiderweb, collecting a glistening dewdrop. She brought the dew to Lady Janet’s incorporeal form. The mist seemed to absorb the droplet, and as it did, Gille closed her eyes, allowing her own memories to surface. Memories of her mother, Pearl, teaching her an ancient language, a language as old as the trees themselves. Gille whispered the near-forgotten words.

A collective gasp rippled through the group. Gille opened her eyes to see Lady Janet’s form flicker, solidifying for a moment. Gille gathered more dew, closing her eyes once more and allowing Lady Janet’s memories to flow through her own thoughts.

A vision of Alastair and Gwendolyn standing at the altar in the chapel, exchanging their wedding vows, materialised. The image wavered, threatening to vanish, but Gille reached out, weaving the dew around it, mending the fractured memory.

“Another memory,” she urged the ghost.

Another image flickered into view, that of Tormod and Fiona, wrapped in each other’s arms before the Samhain fire. A bell tolled as midnight approached. Then the memory began to dissolve, until Gille wove it back together with another dewdrop. The entire MacLeod family came into focus, smiling at Lady Janet. When silence settled, Tormod smiled. “It seems you are not quite ready to leave us, Mother.”

Lady Janet’s smile echoed his sentiment. I suppose I am not.

Lady Janet’s smile was genuine and solid now, but Gille could feel the immense strain on her own energy. “Perhaps one more memory,” she encouraged the ghost.

Gille plunged back into the swirling mist, her mind reeling. A flash of grey fur vanished before she could grasp it. Then, a gnarled beech tree, ancient and imposing, materialised in the depths of the forest. A heart-wrenching cry shattered the stillness, morphing into a bird's song. Gull or eagle, it was lost in the whirlwind. A glistening seal, a flash of red fur—a deer perhaps? The images bombarded her, a fragmented tapestry woven with urgency. What story were they trying to tell?

A jolt of pain ripped through Gille as the multi-coloured images continued to flash before her eyes, and Gille cried out. Strong arms yanked her back, pulling her out of the swirling mist and into the cool morning air.

“Gille.” Callum’s voice was laced with worry as he held her close. “Are you well?”

Gille gasped for breath, her gaze flickering back to Lady Janet. The ghost’s form shimmered, wavering between translucent and almost solid. “I need to go back,” Gille forced out, her voice raspy. “There is something important in those memories.”

Callum’s grip loosened as worry etched his face. “Be careful, Gille,” he murmured before releasing her. She stepped back into the swirling mist that shrouded Lady Janet.

Images flickered before Gille’s unblinking eyes. A young woman’s laughter, bright and joyful, echoed across the shimmering waters of the loch. A mischievous glint sparked in her eyes as a young boy frolicked in the water, splashing his arms with abandon. Then he suddenly vanished beneath the surface followed by the flick of a seal’s fin then tail. The scene abruptly shifted, and a wave of fear washed over Gille from Lady Janet’s form.

A feverish child. A mother’s raw desperation clawed at Gille. A dark-haired man materialised, his voice laced with fury and blame. Madness flickered in his eyes as he loomed over Lady Janet, who stood protectively in front of their ailing child. The

child... those eyes... unmistakably Callum's.

The memory dissolved, replaced by a poignant scene by the loch. Selkie skins lay abandoned on the shore, their wearers, beautiful women, vanished. A gasp tore from Lady Janet's spectral form, her hand flying to her head. Lottie... The sound, a whisper, as a torrent of emotions swirled within the mist.

Gille reached out, her touch a beacon of comfort amidst the storm. The memory flickered back... a struggle by the loch, a stolen sealskin—light coloured with dark spots—and a desperate flight into the woods. Before it could vanish, Gille wove the memory with a dewdrop, anchoring it to Lady Janet's form.

A choked sob racked the ghost. Shame and regret pulsed in the swirling mist. I hid it , Lady Janet confessed, her voice a mere tremor of sound. Near the knotted beech tree, deep in the forest. I... I needed her. Callum needed her.

The weight of the revelation pressed down on Gille. Callum, the man who had cared for her with such tenderness last night, the man whose eyes mirrored those of the child in the memory, was somehow connected to the stolen sealskin. A pang of fear twisted her gut, but it was quickly overshadowed by a fierce determination. She would not let Callum lose his mother, nor would she let Lottie remain trapped.

As Gille pulled back from the mist, she met Callum's gaze. His worry deepened, laced with a flicker of something more—a possessiveness that sent a spiral of warmth through her. In that shared look, a silent vow formed. They would face this curse together.

Gille quickly told the others what she had seen so that Lady Janet's spoken confession made sense.

"I am to blame for Callum's sickness." Lottie came forward with tears in her eyes. "I

was the one who pulled Callum down into the deeper waters. I only wanted to play, not realising he would die without air.”

She drew a fractured breath. “It was my fault he drew water into his lungs, water that led to his illness.” Lottie’s gaze shifted to Lady Janet’s ghostly form. “And when you went after my pelt to secure my services as a healer, I allowed it to happen, so great was my guilt.”

Callum frowned. “I do not remember being pulled beneath the water or being ill. Though I do recall Lottie’s attempts to heal Father were met with many angry words and a few violent swings at Lottie’s head.”

Tears continued to trail down Lottie’s cheeks. “Your mother stepped in to protect me from the worst of it, especially while I was ministering to you, Callum.”

Callum cast a puzzled glance between Lottie and his mother. “Even so,” he continued haltingly. “Mother trapped you here against your will.”

“Nay.” Lottie wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand. “I came to Dunvegan willingly as penance for what I had done to you.” She pinned on an overbright smile. “Thankfully, you were young and strong, and with the right herbs, you fully recovered.”

Drawing a long breath, Callum looked to his brothers. “We have an obligation to Mother but also to Lottie, to make things right.”

“Agreed,” they all said in unison.

“Where do we start searching for Lottie’s sealskin?” Callum asked Gille.

“We must return to the forest. There, we might be able to find a tree I saw in your

mother's memories," Gille said.

Callum's brows furrowed. "What if it burned down along with much of the forest?"

"We must hold out hope," Gille said, her voice stronger than before. "That sealskin holds the key to sending Lottie home, and perhaps..." she hesitated, as warmth came to her cheeks "...perhaps to breaking the curse that binds me to the forest."

Callum stepped forward, his hand settling over hers. The warmth of his touch sent shivers down her spine. "We will do whatever it takes to break both curses."

Callum's hand instinctively grasped Gille's. Its warmth seeped into her, a stark contrast to the chilling exhaustion that radiated from within. Weaving Lady Janet's memories had been a draining task but seeing the ghost's form solidify made it worthwhile. However, a nagging question gnawed at Gille.

"Why, Lady Janet?" Gille spoke, her voice laced with empathy. "Why steal Lottie's pelt and condemn her to a life on land?"

Lady Janet's spectral form flickered with sorrow. I had already lost Keiran. I could not bear to lose another child. A mournful sob escaped her lips. When Callum fell ill with a fever, desperation clawed at me. The castle healer was away, tending to a difficult birth in the village. Her gaze dropped to the mist swirling around her feet.

The pelt was not my first desperate attempt, Lady Janet confessed. Against your father's wishes, I stole the Fairy Flag, hoping to use its last magical flicker to heal Callum. But the laird caught me. He forbid me from ever touching the flag again and threatened that if Callum died, I would never see any of my children again.

A flicker of recognition crossed Alastair's face. "I... I have a faint memory of that. Why did I forget?"

“It was not just you, Alastair,” Tormod chimed in. “We all blocked out memories of our father.”

I could not let Callum die. Lady Janet turned to her sons, her voice thick with emotion. Nor could I let that man harm any of you.

Orrick spoke, his voice gentle. “We understand, Mother. We will help make things right—for you, for Lottie, for Gille.”

“Do you recall where you hid Lottie’s pelt?” Gille pressed, praying it was not lost to the fire that ravaged a part of the forest.

Only fragments of that memory remain , Lady Janet replied, her voice fading.

“We will piece them together,” Gille declared, releasing Callum’s hand but feeling his reassuring presence behind her. Just as she readied herself to delve deeper, a sudden commotion shattered the tranquillity of the garden. Familiar shouts and angry yells pierced the air.

“Villagers,” Tormod said, reaching for his sword. “They must have seen us enter the garden.”

Alastair, Orrick, and Keiran followed suit, pulling their weapons, as did the guardsmen. But instead of reaching for his blade, Callum shifted Gille close, shielding her with his body.

Figures emerged from the trees, sending a fresh wave of panic crashing over Gille. Among the villagers, clad in a horrifying crimson, were English soldiers. The villagers, driven by fear, had sought help from the very enemy they had once fought against.

Gille's heart hammered against her ribs. Though the numbers appeared even on both sides, the MacLeods were essentially trapped in the Walled Garden.

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When Gille was safely out of harm's way, Callum drew his sword. The two of them had avoided capture yesterday. He would not sacrifice Gille now just because the villagers had sought help from the English.

"There is no need for aggression here." Always trying to avoid conflict at all costs, and weighing the situation as dangerous to both parties, Alastair turned to his men. "Stand down."

The guardsmen did as the laird ordered, but it took his brothers another long moment before they complied. At a signal from one of the Englishmen near the front, the soldiers put away their weapons. The villagers, however, did not.

Alastair stepped forward. "What is the matter?" Alastair might have sheathed his weapon, but Callum knew his brother well enough to know he was searching for strategies to keep the MacLeods safe should the English or the villagers press their slight advantage.

"Good day, Laird MacLeod. I am Thaddius Gilbert." The English officer gave Alastair a stiff nod. "We were out patrolling when these men came to us, accusing you of harbouring a woman who has committed crimes against Dunvegan village." The man's gaze moved to Gille.

"Give us the girl," one of the villagers shouted.

"She has committed no crimes," Alastair said despite the interruption. "And even if she had, any punishment for those crimes would fall under my jurisdiction and that of the local magistrate. The villagers have no authority here."

Lieutenant Gilbert's gaze shifted back to Alastair. "I was sent here to investigate just what kind of authority you have over the Isle of Skye, Laird MacLeod, and why one of our lieutenants was miraculously promoted despite his past blunders. And several of our men appear to be missing." He narrowed his gaze. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you, MacLeod?"

"The Scottish Highlands are wild and untamed. It is not unheard of for men to lose their way while trying to navigate the territory."

The lieutenant studied Alastair for a long moment before he visibly relaxed. "As you say, but I'll tell you this, MacLeod, not everyone in England is pleased with the way things are right now in the Highlands. The threat to the English crown grows stronger each day. I suggest you and your men try to bring as little attention to yourselves as possible, or you might not care for what happens."

Alastair's back went rigid. "Is that a threat?"

Lieutenant Gilbert cocked his head. "You and I both know troubling times are brewing. I offer my advice as a suggestion so that you and your clan can maintain your way of life as is."

Alastair relaxed. "Aye. Troubling times, indeed." The words had no sooner left his lips than a commotion sounded behind the wall facing the loch. Callum made certain Gille was behind him.

"What the devil?" Lieutenant Gilbert exclaimed as his hands moved to his sword. Six armed men dressed in black sprang over the wall and into the once-peaceful garden. Six more men followed, then a dozen more. "An attack!"

Callum exchanged a glance with Alastair as the latter drew his sword, but before advancing, the laird paused. An odd expression came over his face. "Cease!" Alastair

exclaimed. “’Tis Marcus MacDonald and his men. Marcus is family.”

The returned seafaring family froze, their weapons sagged, and their aggression faltered. “What is the meaning of this?” Marcus asked from the front of the group. “Are the English attacking the castle, or has much changed since Rowena and I left?”

Alastair could not stop the smile that pulled up his lips at the confusion etched on Marcus’s face. The situation was serious, but Alastair was pleased to know Marcus and his sister had returned to Dunvegan. “Lieutenant Gilbert and his men are here on a diplomatic mission, I assure you,” Alastair said with an emphasis on “diplomatic.” At the lieutenant’s nod, Alastair added, “Have your men stand down.”

At a signal from Marcus, the seafarers sheathed their swords, encouraging the English soldiers to do the same.

Callum remained with Gille as Alastair strode towards Marcus and clapped him on the shoulder. “What are you doing here? We did not expect you until the year’s end.”

Marcus’s features softened. “We completed our mission compensating all the families I had wronged.” A soft smile came to his lips. “And Rowena wanted to come home.”

The tension in the garden slowly dissipated as Alastair led Marcus back to where Lieutenant Gilbert stood. The English leader was visibly shaken but maintained his composure, planting a seed of hope in Callum that future conflicts with the English might be avoidable. He and Gille had much to accomplish in the next six days. They did not need the English complicating their search for a way to break the curse and find Lottie’s sealskin.

Turning back to Marcus, Alastair said, “We are pleased that you have returned, even if your entrance was a bit dramatic.”

Concern reflected in Marcus's eyes as his gaze shifted from the English to the villagers. "I truly thought you were in trouble. After last time..."

"Much has changed. And much has stayed the same," Alastair said ambiguously, most likely not wanting to provide the lieutenant with personal information about the MacLeods.

Callum watched the Englishman closely. He was different, not as aggressive as other English soldiers who had come to Dunvegan over the years, but that did not mean the man should be trusted.

"If you will excuse us," Alastair said to Lieutenant Gilbert, "we have family business to attend to."

"And the villagers?" the lieutenant asked, returning to the original reason for his and his men's presence in the gardens.

The threat the villagers posed to Gille was still very real. If he and Gille were going to begin their search for Lottie's pelt, they did not need the villagers dogging their every move.

As though reading Callum's thoughts, Alastair moved past the Englishmen to stand before the villagers. "I should place you in shackles and throw you in my dungeon for what you have done to the forestlands. Both the villagers and the MacLeods depend on those woodlands for many valuable resources. And you cannot think I would allow you to essentially kidnap my kin and use her for your own nefarious purposes without repercussions?"

Several of the villagers paled. "We weren't the ones who set the fire," a darker-haired man said. "'Twas Harold." He turned to the grey-haired man beside him. "We'll nae be going tae the dungeon fer somethin' he did all on his own."

“Ye mangy dog,” Harold growled. “We did this together.”

Alastair held up his hand, stopping any further arguments. “I can be a forgiving man, if the lot of you are willing to come back to Dunvegan with me and, over a meal, negotiate what reparations you can make for burning down the forest, as well as discussing what you had hoped Gille could do for you and your families. Perhaps we can come to an arrangement.”

The grey-haired man who had set fire to the forest narrowed his gaze. “Ye seek tae distract us from our purpose.”

Alastair shook his head. “I seek to keep you out of prison and to negotiate for the freedom of one of my clan members.”

Beside Callum, Gille drew in a sharp breath. “The laird would do such a thing for me?”

Callum smiled down at her. “We consider you family.” At the thought, he paused. When had he started thinking of the fairy in such terms? Only yesterday, he had despised everything about fairies and Fairyland. Was it the changes in her appearance that had softened his heart? God’s teeth! He hoped he was not as shallow as that.

Callum swallowed roughly as he studied the woman before him. Determined to be objective, Callum reconsidered their every encounter. She had not looked the part of the beast when he had first met her, but he had easily dismissed her because of her fairy nature. And in the woodlands, he had wanted something from her badly enough to look past her unusual appearance.

The moment their lives were in jeopardy in the woodlands came into his mind. It was then that he’d seen through the beast to the frightened young woman beneath. She’d glanced up at him and Callum found himself staring into a pair of green eyes the

colour of wet leaves. Tears sparkled on her wet lashes, and tufts of red hair framed her face. She was the picture of innocence and humanity. Nothing about her had seemed fairy-like or unnatural. Only a woman in distress as she was now caught between the villagers' desires and a curse that would end her life as she knew it.

Callum sighed, realising that was the moment his heart had changed, not because of her looks. And although she was somewhat transformed from the beast she used to be, this current Gille seemed as perfectly suited to roaming the untamed land of the Scottish Highlands as she did walking through the gardens in the beautifully tailored dress she wore.

Deciding not to wait for Alastair to negotiate with the villagers, Callum offered Gille his hand. "Come, let me take you back to the castle where we can plan our next step."

After a brief look at the others gathered around, Gille accepted his outstretched fingers and allowed him to weave her between the Englishmen, past the frowning villagers then out of the garden, heading for the gates of Dunvegan.

Once they were safely back inside the castle, Callum noted that Gille's pull on his hand became heavier, and her steps became slow and unsteady. "Gille?" he asked, not bothering to hide the concern in his voice.

"I do not... feel well." She slipped her hand from his and reached for the wall, leaning heavily upon it.

Callum searched her face and noted her lack of colour and the purple blotches beneath her eyes. The white streak in her hair had remained unchanged during her connection with his mother's spirit, but Gille was still drained from the contact. "You need to rest. Come, let me help you abovestairs."

She started to shake her head, then stopped, clutching the wall for support. "We need

to get started even though my head feels like it is caught in a vice.”

He crossed to her side. He did not know how or if he should touch her, but at the distressed look in her eyes, he decided he at least had to try to help, so he wrapped his arm about her waist and pulled her close. When she did not object, he said, “Let me help you up the stairs to your bedchamber. You can rest there for a short while and then we will plan what comes next. Lottie will bring something to ease your headache.”

“A short rest,” she said, leaning against his side.

She and Callum made it up two stairs before her legs went out from beneath her. With no other choice, Callum lifted her into his arms and hastened up the stairway and down the long hallway until he settled her on her bed. “I should go back and get Lottie. She will know what to do.”

“Nay,” she protested. “I will regain my strength in a moment. Stay with me, please.”

He settled beside her on the bed and drew her against his chest. She was warm and soft, and smelled of the morning dew. Callum drew a deep breath, savouring the fresh scent while also trying to slow the rapid beat of his heart. To distract them both, he asked, “What does it feel like when you touch my mother’s essence?”

“How do I describe it?” Gille drew a breath and closed her eyes. “It feels as if I have plunged myself into an icy lake, but instead of bone-chilling cold, a surge of energy, raw and potent, courses through me, and my emotions are no longer my own. Sorrow, longing, bitter despair all leave me breathless, and in their wake, a chilling numbness siphons the very life force from my body.” She drew a wrenching breath and opened her eyes. “It is profoundly unsettling.”

“I had no idea.” He felt a rush of tenderness so powerful it hurt. “I did not mean to

cause you such pain.”

She brought her gaze to his. “It was my choice, and not an entirely selfless act. I needed to experience her memories to save both Lady Janet and me.”

When her voice broke, Callum found himself stroking her back. “Still, I wish we could accomplish the task without causing you further pain.”

Her mouth twisted. “I suffered much worse in Fairyland.”

He drew her close so that her face was tucked between his head and shoulder, fighting back his own anger. He had never considered how she had suffered amongst her own people. And to make matters even worse, Oberon had cursed her to remain isolated from what family she had in the human realm, then cast a spell on her. Truly, it was more than any one person deserved.

Callum drew a breath, not wanting to frighten her with the anger that coursed through him at the other fairies and the fairy king. “I would have protected you from Oberon had I known he would curse you.”

“I am certain you would have.” She said nothing more, simply closed her eyes once more and drifted off to sleep, her breathing soft and warm against his throat.

Callum was awed that she had trusted him enough to reveal her pain and anguish to him. He smiled down at the top of her head as he wondered which of the two of them had truly been the beast when he had found her in the woods. She might have looked the part, but he had allowed his heart to grow hard over the years. Only when he played his mandolin did he feel like his emotions softened.

And even without playing his mandolin right now, he could feel himself softening towards the woman in his arms. Gille had changed not only his attitude about fairies,

but she also made him long for things he had never thought he wanted. He wanted to befriend her. He wanted to see her happy. He wanted to protect her from anyone who thought they could extort her magic. He wanted to save her from Oberon's fate for her in six days. And, as desire blossomed in his loins, he realised he also wanted her in every way a man could want a woman.

The question was, did she want the same thing? Or did she see him only as a means to breaking her curse?

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Gille found herself pulled from sleep by a soothing melody that whispered through her chamber. The sound was soft, yet evocative as the strings of a mandolin were plucked with a gentle touch. She tried to open her eyes, but her eyelids were still too heavy. She had heard the melody Callum played before. But where?

She concentrated on the sound, letting the music move around her, through her as she tried to remember. A snippet of memory came to her. The darker seals in Loch Dunvegan had sung that song. As she and Callum had moved across the rear courtyard of Dunvegan, the sound had become fainter. Perhaps Callum had heard the song as well, which was why he played it now.

The music ended abruptly, and she heard Callum sigh. “Why can I not remember?” he whispered from somewhere near the right side of her bed. Disappointment laced his words.

She wanted to tell him that she did not recall the entire melody either, but what her mind wanted and what her body was capable of in that moment were two different things. So, instead, she relaxed into the sheets beneath her and let her thoughts return to what she and Callum had to do next to help Lottie, Lady Janet, and herself.

She and Callum had gained valuable information when Gille had connected with Lady Janet’s essence. They would have to begin their quest in the forest to find Lottie’s hidden sealskin. And once it was returned to her, perhaps Lottie could assist her and Callum in asking the selkies for help in remembering that song, because Gille could not shake the feeling that the song was somehow important to breaking her curse and helping Callum’s mother move into her afterlife.

When Gille had regained her strength, she and Callum would begin. She tried once more to open her eyes and failed. Instead of fighting, she surrendered to the powerful urge to sleep for a few moments more.

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Gille woke feeling a sense of peace so vast she thought it was a dream. Yet the warmth that surrounded her and the arm that draped across her chest told her it was not. She smiled and stretched as she opened her eyes, then frowned when Callum's hand cupped her breast. It was not the spiral of heat that shot through her that caused her alarm, or the masculine body that held her so close. It was the yellow-gold sunlight streaming through the window. Had she slept the night through?

Callum's soft, light breathing told her he was asleep. She gently lifted Callum's hand, placing it at his side. Yet when she tried to rise, his hand came around her again, pulling her tightly against him.

"Where are you going?" he said, sleepily.

She tensed as the light coming through the shutter intensified. "I have slept through another day."

"You needed time to heal." He opened his eyes and smiled down at her, only increasing the warmth that pooled in her belly. "Is your head still aching?"

"Only a little, but I feel as though my strength has returned."

Callum's hand slid down her arm. "Lottie gave you a tonic last evening. I am pleased it worked to ease your pain."

Gille had no memory of that, but an odd taste lingered on her tongue. "Was that what

tasted so bitter?”

He laughed. “Lottie mixed in honey.”

Gille shuddered. “Not nearly enough.” She sobered. “We have lost another day. Only five days left before I—”

“You will not turn into a tree,” Callum said with a fearsome scowl. “Not now, not ever.”

Her breath caught as his gaze dipped from her eyes to her lips. Time seemed to slow as his face descended. His kiss was a storm, violent and unfamiliar. Panic flared in her chest before dissolving into something deeper, something primal. His body pressed into hers, hard and insistent. She wanted to flee, but her hands moved up his chest instead. She liked the feel of him beneath her hand. Close. Intimate. And there was something else, something even more fragile building between them: trust. She realised with a sense of awe that she trusted Callum and received trust in return. He was the first person aside from Aria and Pearl with whom she could simply be herself—the woman and the fairy.

Abruptly, he pulled away. His eyes, wide and filled with a strange turmoil, met hers. “I—I did not mean to do that,” he stammered.

Disorientated, she blinked, her mind reeling. “Neither did I,” she managed, her voice tight. A fierce longing pulled at her, a desire to reclaim the stolen moment. But sanity prevailed. This was no time for weakness. With an effort, she detached her hands and sat up, creating distance between them. “We have a mission.”

He nodded, his gaze avoiding hers as he moved to the edge of the bed. His hands raked through his hair, and a deep breath shuddered through him. “I should have said... I will not let anything happen to you, Gille. We will find Lottie’s pelt and

break your curse. Nothing will stop us.”

A warmth spread through her, a flicker of hope ignited by his words. She believed him. For his mother, if not for her. With renewed strength, she swung her legs over the bed and stood. The air crackled with tension as his eyes roamed her, assessing. She met his gaze, and what she saw there made her pause. “We should start our search.”

His scrutiny continued, intense and unwavering. Finally, his eyes met hers. “You change every day, Gille. A different woman, yet I cannot quite place what is different.”

Gille swallowed, the question echoing in her mind. Every day was a transformation, a shedding of the beast Oberon had made her. But who was she beneath the layers? Would she like the woman emerging, or would the curse claim her before she discovered who she was meant to be?

She shoved the terrifying thought aside, focusing on the practical. Her wrinkled dress demanded attention. “Grant me a moment to change,” she told Callum.

He started for the door. “I will gather supplies and ready the horses.”

Gille halted him. “No horses. We should travel on foot.”

Callum frowned, clearly disagreeing. “We will cover more ground faster.”

“The fire might have altered the landscape,” Gille insisted. “We need to see everything. Trust me.”

Reluctantly, he nodded. “Your knowledge of the woods is unmatched. I will meet you below.”

When he stepped from the chamber and shut the door, she shed her dress, the fabric whispering against the floor. Her chemise followed. After rolling down her stockings, she folded the discarded garments neatly and set them over the back of the chair.

Kneeling before a basin, she splashed cool water on her face. The heather-scented soap transformed the mundane task into a soothing ritual. Her hair, freed from its ribbon, tumbled down her back. After a vigorous wash, she wrung it out and shook the excess water free.

The rough linen towel was a luxury after the icy streams of her imprisonment. She savoured the sensation before slipping into a clean chemise. Gwendolyn's delicate gowns were tempting, but impractical. She chose her old dress instead, a familiar weight settling on her shoulders. She brushed out her hair and tied it back with a ribbon. It would dry in the morning air.

Her return to the forest would not be complete without her moss-covered cloak. She retrieved it from the armoire where it hung and tossed it about her shoulders. Though she was once again dressed in the clothing that had been a part of her curse, she no longer felt like the beast who had once worn them. Everything was different now. She was different now.

A surge of determination replaced her earlier fear. She was no longer a captive of the forest. She was forging a new path, a path to freedom. With Callum by her side, she would find the sealskin and return Lottie to the sea. As an ally amongst the selkies, she might be able to convince them to help Gille break her curse. For only the selkies had the ancient wisdom and magic that might counter Oberon's curse. Determined to move forward, Gille left her chamber and joined Callum at the bottom of the stairs.

At the sight of her, his features brightened and his eyes warmed, causing her heart to stumble. "You and that cloak no longer seem to blend together as you once did."

“It feels the same to me,” Gille lied, briefly looking down at her clothing before heading outside.

The morning mist left a chill in the air, but even the mist could not diminish the smoky, acrid scent lingering over the land. “Shall we begin?”

Callum nodded and he hoisted a leather satchel over his shoulder as they walked towards the gates. “I spoke with Alastair and informed him about where we were going. He wanted to send a contingent of men with us, but I refused, telling him this was something you and I had to accomplish on our own. Instead of insisting we be accompanied, he wished us well,” Callum said with a laugh.

“You find that amusing?” Gille asked.

“What I find amusing is how much my older brother has mellowed since he became a father. He used to haunt my every move, my every decision, trying to save me from myself. Yet now, I believe Alastair has learned with his own child that he cannot control everything. He must let others find their own way.”

Gille shrugged. “I think it is nice that he worries about you. I would have given anything for that kind of relationship with my mother and sister.” They passed through the gates and headed north towards the forest.

“Since your return to the castle, I have seen worry on Aria’s face when she looks at you, as well as regret.”

“That may be true,” Gille replied. “I only hope we have the chance to build a relationship in the human realm as sisters—one that we never had in Fairyland.”

A hopeful smile came to Callum’s lips. “We will break this curse, Gille, and you, Aria, and your mother can finally be a family.”

They continued their progress on foot towards the forest in silence until Gille could see a desolate landscape in the distance, a stark contrast to the lush greenery it had once been. The vibrant towering trees that had housed her for a year were now skeletal remains, their charred branches reaching towards the sky like blackened fingers. The forest floor was a carpet of ash, littered with the remnants of fallen trees and scorched vegetation. The air was thick with the acrid smell of smoke, and the only sounds were the rustling of the wind through the charred trees and the distant calls of birds.

Gille's heart pounded in her chest, a drumbeat against the eerie silence. She moved purposefully into the skeletal expanse, her eyes searching the ravaged woodlands.

"I am sorry," Callum said as he followed closely, his hand finding hers.

"I knew the fire would destroy, but I had hoped for some part of the forest to remain untouched," she whispered, her voice hoarse, her throat tight. As they pressed deeper, in her mind's eye, Gille searched for the familiar contours of trees that had once grown towards the sky in this very location.

The bark of the trees was charred and cracked, and the wood was blackened and brittle. The leaves were shrivelled and brown, and the needles were gone. The forest floor was a patchwork of ash and charred vegetation, with the occasional patch of green where a plant had somehow managed to survive.

The scene was one of destruction, but it was also one of resilience. The forest was a testament to the power of nature, and even in the face of such devastation, life would find a way to prevail.

A sudden cry pierced the air, a sharp pained keening. Gille's heart lurched. A small fawn, with legs caught in a tangle of roots, whimpered helplessly. Without a word, Gille knelt, her hands hovering over the trapped animal. A soft green glow enveloped

the fawn, and with a gentle sigh, it stood, wobbly but alive. Gille sat back on her heels and breathed a relieved sigh. Even though the woodlands had burned, she still retained the power it gave her.

“I did not know you could do that,” Callum said, his voice filled with awe.

“I had wondered if my magic would remain with the trees burned as they are. I suppose the plants and animals that remain have somehow retained the essence of nature’s bounty.” Though she was happy, her chest felt tight. She had hoped that by returning to the forest the curse would reset, and she would have seven days to live if she left her sanctuary again. But nothing inside felt reborn, renewed. She was unchanged, and the curse remained.

Callum continued to smile, unaware of her change in thoughts. “Then there is still hope of us finding Lottie’s sealskin?”

She forced a smile, reminding herself that all was not lost. They still had time to break her curse, and there were little signs of life that the forest had not been obliterated. “There is always hope.”

Whatever momentary enthusiasm she had mustered faltered as a strange sensation pricked the back of her neck. Someone was watching them. She narrowed her gaze and searched the distance, finding nothing. Perhaps she had imagined the sensation.

“Come,” she said, motioning for Callum to follow her. “There is still much territory for us to cover.” Their search continued and was marked by false hopes and growing despair as the sun reached its zenith. They had spent half a day in the woodlands already, and Gille had yet to recognise any sort of beech tree, burnt or otherwise.

As they ventured deeper into the forest, the familiar paths began to twist and turn in an unnatural manner. Untouched trees, once steadfast landmarks, seemed to shift and

change, their outlines blurred by the sudden rise of a mist. Hours passed and they had made no progress in their search. Gille's memory, once a reliable guide, seemed to fail her.

"We are getting nowhere," she said in frustration as her stomach began to growl. Callum must have heard the sound because he encouraged her to sit on the stump of a tree and eat a piece of bread and a slice of cheese he had brought in his satchel. When they had both eaten and drunk from skin of water, they continued to search. Several more hours went by.

Callum frowned up at the sky. "Are we getting nowhere, or is something else going on? Because the sun, which should have begun its descent, has not changed its position since we ate."

She tried to focus, to find a familiar marker, but everything was wrong. The forest, once a comforting ally, had become a treacherous foe. And there was only one entity she knew who had the power to change reality like that. She had experienced his machinations many times before in Fairyland.

Panic crept into Gille's heart. Had the sensation she'd felt earlier been Oberon watching them, tricking them, deluding them into thinking they were making progress while he changed the landscape before them?

"Callum, Oberon is responsible for this. He is manipulating us and our reality." Gille gritted her teeth against a tide of anger that rose in her. All the frustration and anguish she had buried inside herself at Oberon over the past year erupted in a scream that echoed all around her, resounding in her ears like thunder.

"It's all right, Gille." Callum reached out and pulled her close. "We will prevail against him, together."

Gille turned her face into Callum's chest. She did not know how long she remained there, wrapped in his arms, her face buried in the soft linen of his shirt, but it seemed like forever. Gradually, her frantic heart rate slowed, and silence surrounded them.

"Gille?"

She looked up into Callum's comforting gaze and felt an overwhelming sense of relief. "He cannot succeed in his games against us. Not this time."

Callum framed her face with his hands. "I will be right beside you, Gille. Oberon is no match for the two of us. We already figured out that he was playing a trick on us. Now we must focus on breaking free of Oberon's illusion."

Callum was so close. Close enough to kiss. She shifted forward, bringing her lips in contact with his. He kissed her quickly, then pulled back. "Kiss me, Callum, like you did this morning."

His lips brushed hers hesitantly. "We should stay true to our mission."

"If we want to complete our mission, then kiss me. If Oberon hates anything, it is a connection of hearts and minds between two people."

She did not have to convince him further. Callum's arms closed around her, and a groan escaped him. His lips caressed hers in a dozen kisses that robbed her of breath and sent shivers tingling through her.

She inhaled sharply as she pulled back to stare into his face. His features were taut with strain, but in his eyes, she saw something she had not seen there before. Hope.

She felt it too, a surge of something light and wonderful and pure. In that instant, the burnt forest around them shimmered then faded until darkness replaced what had

once been light. “Nay,” Gille gasped. “The entire day has passed with us trapped in Oberon’s illusion.”

Callum held her more tightly. “’Tis all right. We have broken free of his magic. Now we can accomplish what we set out to do.”

Gille shook her head. “It is too dark for me to see things clearly.” Once again that odd sensation of being watched rippled across the back of her neck. Gille tensed. “Callum,” she whispered. “Someone else is here in the woods with us.”

Callum released his grip on her as his hand moved to the hilt of his sword. Only a quarter moon illuminated the sky, making it difficult to discern what might be the burnt skeleton of a tree, or something more sinister. Suddenly a shape separated itself from the shadows.

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A light flared, revealing a man, lean and hard-eyed, his face etched with lines of both age and desperation. Gille's heart faltered as she recognised him as the dark-haired man who had once sought to capture her. But his demeanour was different now, a plea in his eyes belied his hardened exterior.

Callum drew his sword and stood between her and the man. "We will not run this time. Prepare yourself to fight."

"I dinna want tae fight ye," he said, his voice low. "I've been followin' ye in these woods fer two days."

"Two days? That is impossible," Gille exclaimed. "We have not been wandering through the trees for that long." But in the man's eyes, she saw the truth. "Nay!"

"We still have time," Callum said, his voice softer now, but his body still tuned to possible danger. "Why have you been following us?"

"Gille, my daughter... the one ye saved when she was lost in the woods... she is failing. Ye must help her."

Gille hesitated, her mind torn between their search and the memory of the little girl she had once returned to Dunvegan village. Callum stood protectively in front of her, suspicion etching lines around his mouth. "How can we trust what you say is true? You were willing to harm us and helped burn down the forest last time we met to get what you wanted."

The man's face fell, but there was understanding in his eyes. "I regret my actions. I'll

sacrifice my own life tae ye right here and now if ye'll help my child." The dark-haired man stepped forward, placing the tip of Callum's sword against his chest.

Gille stepped around Callum. "There will be no need for sacrifice. If you promise we will be safe if we go with you, that will be sufficient."

"I promise ye'll be safe," the man said in a ragged voice.

Callum's body stiffened. "Gille—"

"A child's life is at stake."

Callum sheathed his sword and nodded. "I will be watching you very closely," he warned the man.

"The name is Declan," the man said. His eyes, once filled with a fierce determination, were now pools of sorrow.

Compassion replaced hesitation as Gille stepped forward. "Lead the way."

The single flame of the lantern illuminated their way as they hurried towards the village. The forest, though still bearing the scars of the fire, seemed to respect their newfound resolve. The trees parted as if yielding to an unseen force, their skeletal branches forming a protective canopy above them.

When they finally reached the village, it was bathed in torchlight, casting long shadows over the ground as they made their way to Declan's home. As they stopped at the door, Gille's heart pounded in her chest.

The door creaked open, revealing the young girl who was once a bundle of boundless energy and questions, lying motionless on a makeshift bed. Her skin was pale, her

breathing shallow.

Without a word, Gille knelt beside the child. Her hands hovered over the girl, a soft glow emanating from her palms. Gille closed her eyes and concentrated on pouring her life force into the child as she had with the fawn earlier that day.

Gille could feel Callum beside her. His presence was a welcome balm as her body grew heavy and weak. After what felt like hours, Gille felt a change in the child, a flicker of energy returning. The child's breathing had deepened, her colour coming back. Hope, like a fragile flower, bloomed in Declan's eyes. When the little girl finally opened her eyes, a weak smile graced her lips.

"Praise the saints!" Declan cried as he dropped to his knees beside his daughter. "Thank ye, Gille. Thank ye from the bottom of my heart. She's all I've got in this world."

Gille collapsed as a wave of exhaustion came over her. Callum caught her before she fully fell, his arms wrapping around her, pulling her tight against his chest. As he held her, a sense of peace washed over Gille. She had saved a life, but the greater battle was far from over. The curse still lingered, a dark shadow hanging over her own future. And they had lost two days in the process.

"Do not worry," Callum said as though reading her thoughts. "We are close to finding the beech tree. Regain your strength and we will continue our search."

Declan placed a kiss on his daughter's forehead then stood, moving to the hearth. He retrieved a wooden mug, and dipping a ladle into a cauldron that hung above the fire, he poured liquid into the mug then offered it to Gille. "Drink this. The bone broth will help tae revive ye."

Callum accepted the mug and held it up to Gille's lips. The rich broth warmed her as

she took tentative sips.

Declan helped his daughter into a sitting position before he filled another mug for her to drink. “Ye are lookin’ fer a beech tree?”

Gille nodded. “One with a hollowed-out trunk.”

“I know a few of those in the forest. I might be able tae help ye find the one ye’re looking for. ’Tis the least I can do fer saving my daughter.”

Callum eyed Declan warily. “How did you go from wanting to possess Gille for her magic, to burning down the forest, and now wanting to help her?”

Declan’s face filled with regret. “I was a fool, thinking only of the moment. The laird, yer brother, helped us all see the error of our ways. When we didn’t get what we wanted, we turned tae the British soldiers. Our blind ambition may have caused more problems fer ourselves and all Scottish people.”

A heavy silence hung between them, until Declan’s eyes filled with a newfound resolve. “I have made a grave mistake,” he confessed, his voice barely a whisper. “But I vow, from this moment forward, tae rectify my wrongs.”

Callum, his face etched with scepticism, regarded Declan warily. “Your words are hollow, Declan. Actions speak louder than words.”

Gille set down her empty mug and shifted her gaze between the two men. “Perhaps we can find a way to move forward together,” she suggested, her voice stronger now. She tried to stand, but her legs were not quite ready to support her yet.

Declan’s gaze met Callum’s. “Stay here tonight, rest; then at daybreak, I’ll guide ye tae the trees.”

Gille searched Callum's face for a sign of acceptance, and when she saw what she needed to see, she nodded. "Thank you, Declan, for your hospitality."

The man motioned to a doorway off the front room. "The two of ye take my bed fer tonight. I wish tae remain here with my daughter."

"That is not necessary—" Gille's objection died in her throat as Callum lifted her into his arms.

"Thank you," he said to Declan as he carried her from the chamber and set her gently upon the straw-filled mattress. He deftly unfastened her cloak and removed it from her shoulders, setting it at the base of the bed before backing away. "You need to rest."

She caught his hand, stalling his movements. "Where will you sleep?" she asked, looking about the hazy chamber for another resting place.

"I doubt I will be able to sleep, so I will stand guard," he said, his voice tight.

"I believe Declan is earnest in his desire to help, so there is no need for a guard. Besides, you need to rest as well." She scooted over, making a space for him beside her. "We can share."

"That would not be wise." His gaze moved from her feet upward. Raw hunger burned in his eyes.

A shiver tingled through her as she met his gaze. He smelled of sandalwood and musk. The seductive mix made her bold, clouding thoughts of anything but him. "I have been a prisoner in Fairyland and the forest most of my life. I have seen little and experienced less. If I only have three more days on this earth, then I do not want to spend them doing only what is safe, or wise."

His pulse beat wildly at his temple. She tugged him closer and just when she thought he would object, he relaxed. “Keiran, Aria, and Graeme told me a little about Fairyland and what Oberon did to them. I cannot imagine the horrors you have suffered at that fairy’s hands.”

“I do not wish to dwell on the past. The here and now is all that is available. I choose to focus on these precious moments, and I would ask that you kiss me again.”

He angled his head and lowered his mouth until she could feel his breath on her lips. Her eyelids fluttered closed, and she pressed upwards, taking what she so desperately wanted... to feel something other than fear. There had been enough fear in her life. It was time for something more.

*

Callum’s emotions warred inside him as he tasted Gille’s sweet innocence, as he wrapped himself in her touch. It had been far too long since he’d last kissed a woman. Far too long since he’d been unsettled by anything. And Gille unsettled him in every way.

From the moment they had first met in the forest, he had been assailed by unfamiliar emotions and feelings, half of which he could neither name nor identify. She did something to him he could not comprehend. Part of him wanted to hold her, to kiss her, and the other part wanted to run as far and as fast away from her as he could.

He broke the kiss and stared down into her face. Her gentle green eyes searched his, but it was the concern there that touched him deep in his heart. Callum reached out to lay his hand against the flush of her cheek. The softness of her skin never failed to amaze or warm him. Magic ran through her blood. She had been born to the fae, a race he used to tell himself he despised for all they had done to his family. But since he had come to know her, he could see she was no different than any of the

MacLeods. Fae blood also ran through them.

She watched him so intently that it made his throat tight. There was so much emotion in those green eyes of hers: the same desire that coursed through him reflected there. But he was, first and foremost, a gentleman. His mother and Lottie had both made certain of that. And he would not take advantage of Gille in this time of vulnerability. He sat back, then stood. “You said you were a prisoner in Fairyland.”

Disappointment flared in her eyes, so much so that he almost moved back to the bed. It took great strength to turn away and move to the opposite wall, putting some distance between them. “Was there ever a time you were free?” He shook his head, trying to clear his senses of the taste of her, the feel of her warm and willing in his arms.

“When I was young and not yet noticed by the fairy king, I used to run and play like the other fae children. That carefree life did not last long, however. As soon as Pearl tried to steal Aria into the human realm for the first time, Oberon took notice of us all and we were forced to hide in the shadows.”

“That sounds terribly lonely.”

She shrugged.

“I know a thing or two about loneliness.” Callum’s memories of being alone were still there, just below the surface. That emptiness inside, when stirred, had bordered on panic.

A frown touched her lips. “How could you be lonely in a castle full of people?”

“There were not others at the castle. Alastair, Tormod, and Orrick all fled after our mother’s death, taking many of our warriors with them and leaving Rowena and me

alone with a madman for more years than I care to remember.”

“Your father?”

“When he died, it was almost a relief. Then only Mrs Morgan, our chatelaine, Mrs Honey, our cook, Thomas Becks, our steward, and Lottie, our healer, remained with my sister and me.”

“What about the Grey Lady?”

Callum felt the corner of his mouth quirk upwards. “She was in the castle all those years Rowena and I were growing up, but we had no idea since our mother was locked in the Fairy Tower along with Gwendolyn and her siblings.”

Gille gasped. “Truly?”

He nodded. “So, you see we both suffered a kind of imprisonment, though I am certain your situation was far worse.”

“Then you must know how desperate I am to break my curse and finally live my life bathed in sunlight and surrounded by people who care about me.”

“Tomorrow we will find that pelt.” Callum clenched his fist at his side, fighting a sudden feeling of helplessness. In adulthood, it had become his custom to shape events in the way he wished them to go, not hope and pray that everything would work out as he wished. “I cannot believe we were lost in the woods for two days.”

She sobered. “Oberon will do everything in his power to keep us from succeeding.”

“Then we must do everything in our power to see that he does not.”

“Agreed.” Her voice held a hopeful tone once more. “When we find the beech tree and Lottie’s sealskin, then we will need to confront the selkies. We must apologise for past offenses against them and convince them to help us remember the song we need to break my curse.”

Callum hesitated a moment. “Would it not be better if we kept the pelt as leverage until they give us the song we need? Why surrender our only advantage against the selkies?”

“Nay.” Gille shook her head. “That will only make matters worse. The MacLeods and the selkies have a long history of animosity. Or do you not remember the last time we encountered the seals and their great desire to drag you beneath the waves?”

“I noted no acrimony.”

Her eyes went wide. “Now you are just being foolish. They wanted to hurt you, Callum.”

“Lottie will help them understand we mean no harm,” he assured her.

Once again, she shook her head. “The darker seals are ready to forgive, but not the lighter ones,” Gille whispered. “I have been the one in danger before, but now the threat is to you.”

He straightened. “I am willing to take that risk, Gille,” he said, his voice firm.

“I am not.”

His lips tightened. “We are getting ahead of ourselves. First, we must find the pelt. Then we will deal with the rest.” He lay on the floor in front of the entrance to the chamber and arranged his tartan around him like a blanket. “Right now, we need to

sleep.”

Gille took a deep breath and released it harshly, making her frustration with him obvious. He did not care. The selkies were not the only threat they would have to face soon. Oberon had made it clear he was watching them, determined to keep Gille trapped in his curse. For Gille to have any kind of future, they would not only need help from the selkies, but they also had to find a way to defeat Oberon once and for all.

Instead of relaxation, a wave of dread washed over Callum. The task seemed insurmountable. Could he and Gille possibly succeed where others had failed?

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A lastair watched Gwendolyn pace the great hall, her anxiety growing with each passing hour. “Two days,” she muttered, worry etched into her face. “Gille and Callum have been gone for two days.”

“I sent a search party into the woodlands yesterday,” Alastair said, taking her hand. “They should be back soon.” He forced her to stop. “Gille knows the forest, and Callum is familiar with Dunvegan. They will be well.”

“I want to believe you, but I cannot shake this feeling that something’s wrong.”

Alastair guided her to the table, where her breakfast remained untouched. “Please eat. Starving yourself will not help.”

With a sigh, she took a bite of apple. “Can we not send another search party? I would feel better knowing we are covering more ground.” She paused, her eyes narrowing. “There is something else?”

Alastair hesitated. “Yes, there is.”

“What?”

“Aria sensed Oberon’s presence two days ago.”

“Oberon,” Gwendolyn whispered, her face paling. “Will our lives ever be free of that fairy?”

“Aria, Pearl, and Graeme have gone into the woodlands to search for signs of the

fairy king or his minions.”

Gwendolyn straightened. “We need to ensure everyone in the castle is protected from his schemes, especially the children.”

Alastair touched the iron bracelet on her wrist. “Everyone, including the children, is wearing the talismans we made to protect us from the fae. Oberon cannot touch our people without hurting himself.”

Gwendolyn nodded. “There must be something else I can do to help.”

“The best thing you can do is continue to plan for the Beltane celebration in three days.”

Gwendolyn frowned. “How can we celebrate when Gille might not be with us much longer?”

“We must focus on the idea that we will successfully release her from the curse and defeat Oberon once and for all.”

Gwendolyn sighed. “You are right, even though it feels wrong to plan a party in the midst of all this chaos.”

Alastair kissed her forehead. “As laird and lady, it is our responsibility to protect our people and give them hope for the future.”

“Agreed,” she said, her face brightening. “Planning the celebration will keep me busy, but my mind will still worry about Gille and Callum.”

Alastair knew that feeling well. He had been trying to keep his mind off not only the scouting party he’d sent into the woods but also the others he had sent to track the

English soldiers' movements. At least the villagers had been easily placated by Marcus's generous financial support and by Alastair's explanation of the dangers the English posed to their way of life. They needed the protection of Clan MacLeod to have any future in this country at all.

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The first whispers of dawn crept across Dunvegan village, a gentle caress of light against the sleeping land. Gille was up and ready to go, eager to put their search behind them. Even so, she paused to watch the sun come up, igniting the sky with hues of pink and orange. She was not certain how many more sunrises as a fairy her future would hold, so she intended to enjoy every one of them to the fullest.

She memorised the nuanced colours of dawn, committing them to memory as she drew in a deep breath of fresh morning air. Perhaps even as a tree, she had to be aware of any dawn to come? This morning, she could smell the earthy aroma of peat, the scent of damp earth, the slight tang of the sea air beyond the forest, and the comforting smell of freshly baked bread.

Then the scent of sandalwood came to her as Callum stood beside her. The animosity between them over what to do with the pelt had vanished with the morning light. "Are you ready to find Lottie's pelt?"

"Will we find it today?" she asked, optimistically.

"We must believe we can and will succeed."

She turned to face him. "I do."

Declan exited his cottage then, with his daughter at his side. "We're ready when ye are."

“Then lead the way,” Callum said, taking Gille’s hand in his.

The group of four made their way to several beech trees with hollowed-out bases as the light increased. Yet none of the trees yielded the treasure they desired. By midday, the weight of their mission and the increasing desperation grew heavy in Gille’s chest.

As they pressed on, the sun began its descent, casting long shadows over the ravaged land. And still, the beech tree remained elusive. Despair was beginning to gnaw at Gille. Her memory of the forest and the trees was no longer reliable in this labyrinth of shadows.

Callum, sensing her distress, squeezed her hand reassuringly. “We will find it, Gille,” he promised, his voice steady. “I know we will.”

Then, a flicker of recognition ignited in her eyes. A distant memory surfaced, a fragment of a familiar shape. It was a long shot but hope flared. She pointed towards a blackened, twisted, form in the distance. “There,” she breathed, her voice barely audible.

Gille’s heart pounded in her chest. As they moved towards the tree, her hopes grew. The shape was undeniably that of a beech tree. The base was charred and cracked, but the upper part, miraculously, seemed less affected by the fire.

“Is this it?” Callum asked softly beside her. “Is this the one?”

With trembling hands, Gille reached out and touched the rough bark. A surge of Lady Janet’s memory flooded her senses—the feel of the soft moss, the shape of the peculiar knot. She traced the contours of the tree, her fingers finding every nuance of the burnt surface when suddenly her fingers found a hollow. With renewed vigour, she dug into the charred wood, her nails biting into the resistant material.

Finally, her fingers brushed against something soft. With a cry of triumph, she pulled it free. It was a bundle, wrapped in thick leather, lightly charred. As she unwrapped it, her breath caught in her throat. It was the sealskin, its rich grey fur still soft to the touch, despite the ordeal it had endured.

Gille thanked the tree for keeping the pelt safe then turned to Callum. “We did it!” A sense of relief swamped her.

“I’m pleased my stupidity did nae destroy the pelt. I’m so sorry tae have caused ye so much trouble,” Declan said.

Gille’s gaze dropped once more to the pelt in her hands. The sealskin was exactly as she had seen in Lady Janet’s memory, and a reminder of what a parent would do to save their child. She looked up and smiled at Declan, noting the remorse that etched lines around his mouth and eyes. “We all make mistakes, Declan. I have made many in my life.”

“Yer very kind, m’lady,” Declan said, pulling his daughter close to his side. “If there is anythin’ else I can do tae help, ye have only tae ask.”

Gille glanced up, noting that the first stars were beginning to appear, casting a magic glow over the ravaged forest. They had accomplished the first part of their quest, but now they only had two more days to negotiate with the selkies for the song they truly had no certainty would set her free or not. Gille swallowed roughly. She had to believe the song was the answer with all her heart, mind, and soul.

Callum reached for her hand, wrapping her cold fingers in his warmer ones. “We have to try,” he said as if reading her thoughts.

She nodded, then heard a faint rustling in the undergrowth that had survived the fire. Gille felt Callum’s sudden tension merge with her own before he instinctively

reached to touch the sword at his side. He lowered to a squat, ready to strike whatever danger loomed.

A figure emerged from the shadows, a small dark shape against the night sky. It was a wild boar with long tusks, its eyes glowing with an eerie light.

Though her heart pounded in her chest, Gille stayed Callum by placing her hand over his hilt. The male creature did not look like it wanted to attack. Perhaps it was injured as the fawn had been. Slowly, she reached out a hand, palm open. The boar hesitated; its ears pricked forward. Then, with a cautious step, it approached her, its wiry tail tentatively twitching. The rusty-brown boar looked healthy. Perhaps the animal had a different reason for approaching them as the guardian of the tree that held a special treasure.

Gille offered the sealskin.

“Gille, nay,” Callum objected. “We need that pelt.”

“It is all right. I believe he wants to approve of us before he will let us pass.” She continued to hold out the pelt as the animal took another step forward. “We are not going to harm the sealskin. We want to return it to its rightful owner,” she said in a calm, reassuring voice.

The boar sniffed the pelt carefully, then began to lick the leather. As it did so, its eyes softened, a look of peace washing over the animal. It nuzzled Gille’s hand, and a moment later nestled on the ground at Gille’s feet, relaxing.

“I think he approves of us,” Gille said as she and Callum exchanged smiles. Their shared moment was short-lived when another, more threatening sound came to them. Hoofbeats sounded in the distance.

“The English?” Gille asked, sudden fear in her voice as several dark, mounted shapes came towards them, cloaked in darkness. They were too close to run from, and there were no trees to shield them. Her cloak would only conceal herself, and not the others.

At the sound, the boar rose and stood beside Gille as though ready to protect her from their foe. Callum remained focused on the danger. “Go deeper into the woods and hide yourself and the sealskin,” he said, his voice laced with steel.

“Callum—”

“Go now.” He drew his sword, then a second sword from his back and handed it to Declan as the hoofbeats came closer. The boar must have been frightened by the show of weapons because it fled into the darkness.

“Go with her, my child,” Declan said to his frightened daughter.

Gille took Declan’s daughter by her hand and, clutching the sealskin in the other, fled the scene, leaving Callum and Declan behind. Two men against who knew how many foes. When she determined she and the little girl were a safe distance away, Gille dropped to the ground, pulling the girl with her, then concealed the two of them with her moss-covered cloak. With the forest as charred as it was, the moss would look out of place, but given the cover of darkness, it would be difficult for their enemy to see through her camouflage.

Gille peeked out from beneath the edge, watching as the men on horses approached. Suddenly, other softer hoofbeats than the horses could be heard coming from behind her. Gille’s breath caught. Would they be trampled? No sooner had the thought materialised than she saw the boar who had greeted her rush past, avoiding the space she and the little girl occupied, with several other boars in a pack, heading to support Callum and Declan against the shadowed invaders.

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Callum's hand tightened around the leather-wrapped hilt of his sword. He was a warrior, a protector. The odds were not in his favour, but he would defend Gille with his life, if that's what it took. He forced himself to relax, to lighten his stance and wait as the enemy approached.

Behind him he heard the staccato sound of hoofbeats against the soft earthen ground. A quick glance back made him start. A pack of boars. The animals stopped beside Callum and Declan, their snouts twitching, their eyes wary. Callum extended a hand to the boar that had greeted Gille and him earlier. The animal nuzzled his fingers, its rough fur sending a shiver up his arm.

Suddenly, the sound of hooves thundering through the darkness shattered the moment. A group of armed men on horseback burst into the clearing. The man at the front dismounted. "Hold," the man bellowed, his voice familiar.

Callum's grip on his sword lessened as his eyes widen in surprise. "Tormod?"

Callum's brother nodded, his expression softening. "I was not certain who or what we were approaching. I could only see shadows." Tormod's gaze strayed to Declan, and his expression became stern, then anxious when he saw the boars. They watched the men before them with curiosity.

"'Tis well, Brother," Callum said, stepping forward. "Declan is no threat. He was helping us."

"And the boars?" Tormod asked.

Callum sheathed his weapon, then accepted the return of the sword he'd lent to Declan. "It seems they are protecting us."

"Us?" Tormod asked, searching the area. "Where is Gille? When you did not return, we worried and came searching for you."

"I am here," Gille said as she and the little girl emerged from the shadows.

Tormod's gaze lingered on Gille's face for a moment before shifting to the leather-bound bundle in her hands. "You found what you were searching for?"

"Aye, right before you appeared," Callum said, his voice filled with relief.

Tormod waved one of his men forward with a horse that had no rider. "Then it is good we have come to take you home. We brought your horse, Callum. You and Gille can ride together. I will take the little girl, and Emery can take Declan with him."

Callum assisted the little girl and Declan on the backs of their horses before he mounted his own. He offered Gille his hand, but instead she handed him the package containing the pelt then moved among the boars, stroking each head. Callum's chest lifted with a swell of amazement at Gille's connection with these creatures.

During their days in the woods, he had seen Gille do strange and wonderful things, but this was something altogether different. With the boars, she had forged a bond that defied their wildness. While she was no longer the beast in the forest, she remained connected to the very essence of the woodlands and the inhabitants within.

If they failed in their mission, and Gille became a tree, Callum wondered if the plants and creatures of the forest would protect her even when he was too old to do so himself? At the thought, his chest ached. They still had two days to break the curse.

He would move heaven and earth to see that Gille was free of both the curse and Oberon for the rest of her life.

Gille finished saying her goodbyes and extended her hand to him to assist her up onto the horse. Before he could take her hand in his, a roar echoed through the woods, a sound filled with rage and frustration.

A swirling mist appeared, then as it cleared it revealed a tall man whose skin shimmered with a silvery glow, as if sprinkled with stardust. His eyes were a piercing sapphire blue. A crown of shimmering leaves adorned his head, and his robes, nothing made by man, but perhaps woven from moonlight and mist, flowed gracefully around him. Oberon's presence was both majestic and intimidating, a testament to his power as king of the fae.

Callum tucked the package inside the tail of his tartan then jumped from horseback to the ground to stand beside Gille, his heart pounding in his chest. "You have no authority in the human realm. Leave."

"I rule wherever I wish." Oberon glared at them, his eyes burning with malice. "You have found Lottie's pelt," he hissed, his voice like a venomous serpent as his gaze settled on the bulge beneath Callum's tartan. "You think to break Gille's curse, do you?"

Callum stepped forward, his voice steady. "We must."

Oberon scoffed. "And what of me? I desire that pelt for myself. It is powerful and could grant me untold power."

Callum straightened, knowing the pelt was safely out of the fairy king's grasp because of the iron band he wore on his left wrist. "I will never hand over this pelt to you."

Oberon's anger flared. "You dare to defy me? You shall regret this insolence. I will do anything, to keep you from learning the song that will break Gille's curse."

"A song?" Gille asked a little breathlessly. "I knew the song the selkies sang on the day we met was somehow a part of all this."

"Damn my loose tongue," Oberon growled. "You will never get the chance to learn anything further because when I am through with you, you will both be dead." With a flick of the fairy king's wrist, the forest seemed to rise against them. The skeletal trees twisted and turned, their branches reaching out like grasping hands.

Behind them, the horses whinnied in fear. "Go," Callum called to his brother and his men. "Save yourselves." His words were carried away by the wind as the burnt, disfigured trees bent towards Callum and Gille, their branches, whip-like tendrils, lashing out.

Callum drew his sword and swung, his blade biting into the wooden assailants. His weapon slashed through the branches, sparing him and Gille from a beating.

"No!" Oberon cried and, raising his hand once more, he swirled it in a circle at the forest floor.

No sooner did Oberon's motions stop than the ground trembled as unseen forces manipulated the earth, creating a deepening pit to their left and raising boulders on their right.

Callum took a moment to note that Tormod and his men, instead of retreating, kneeled in the dirt, sketching out how they meant to re-engage. Turning his attention back to the situation before him, Callum's mind raced. He could not wait for Tormod to save him and Gille. He had to work that puzzle himself and quickly. Boulders shifted and rolled towards them.

With a cry that was part anguish, part anger, Gille rose up, stretching her palms towards Oberon. Odd words erupted from her mouth as she called on the ancient magic within her. Her hands began to glow with the same ethereal light Callum had seen when she had healed both the fawn and the young girl. Instead of sweeping them into the pit, the boulders dissolved into dust.

Oberon's shriek of rage echoed all around them as he unleashed another assault, summoning a whirlwind of leaves and debris that swirled around the pair, obscuring their vision and lashing at their skin.

As the vortex closed in, Callum could hear Gille's breath coming in ragged gasps beside him. She was growing tired from fighting Oberon's magic. In that moment of vulnerability, she reached for his hand. She raised her other hand towards where Oberon had been before their vision was obscured. Callum searched her face and saw her eyes glowed with an intensity that rivalled the tempest around them.

A surge of power erupted from her, a counterforce to Oberon's magic. The whirlwind faltered, then dissipated, leaving behind a dead silence as Gille and Callum staggered before Oberon.

The king of the fae's eyes blazed with cold, calculating anger. "You will not succeed against me." He raised his hand, a flicker of power dancing at his fingertips.

Just as Oberon was about to strike, the pack of boars charged, their tusks gleaming in the moonlight.

Oberon's eyes flared, his expression a mix of surprise and annoyance. He re-raised his hand to defend himself, but the animals were too fast. They knocked him to the ground, their hooves pounding into his body.

Gille and Callum seized the opportunity. They turned and ran deeper into the woods.

Tormod and his men had taken to their horses and now waited nearby with the riderless horse. Callum mounted and drew Gille up in front of him before flicking the reins, setting the horse in motion. As they raced through the forest, they could hear Oberon's enraged shouts fading behind them.

"The boars." Gille's voice cracked, and a wave of agony passed over her features.

"They will find a way to survive, as will Oberon." Callum drew her back, holding her more tightly against his chest. The leather-bound package was safely nestled between their bodies. Perhaps all was not lost...

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Gille watched as Callum led them through the forest to return Declan and his daughter to Dunvegan village. A sliver of moonlight guided their way through the charred trees and underbrush. The skin on Gille's back crawled, signalling how vulnerable it felt to be out in the open. The rigidity of Callum's chest behind her and the arms around her told her he felt it too. She should be alert to dangers, but she could not help but steal a glance back at Callum's face.

She could not read his emotions as easily as his body language. He glanced down at her briefly, offering her an encouraging smile that disappeared as quickly as it had come when he returned his gaze to the path ahead.

He'd admitted to loneliness over the past many years since his mother had died and he'd been left alone at Dunvegan. As he was the only male still in residence, she suspected the running of the estate had fallen to him at an early age. Had he had training? An adviser? Or had he been forced to determine how to move forward on his own much as she had in Fairyland?

Callum had not said as much but she suspected he'd had a hard, harsh life trying to

navigate the estate and tempering his father's brutality while that man had lived. Not to mention the guilt Callum must bear over the death of his mother because of his father's neglect. He'd had every right to be self-absorbed and angry when they had first met. And yet, in the days since then, he had gentled. He'd shown her that side of himself last night when he had kissed her. She craved more warmth and tenderness, having received little of those things herself over the nineteen years of her life.

Oberon was determined to rob her of any joy, warmth, and happiness she might find in her future—with the MacLeods or anyone else. Yet, it was the fairy king's obsession with vengeance that strengthened her resolve to succeed. She might only have two more sunrises to undo the curse upon her, but she had to believe that was all the time she needed to see the task completed.

She turned her attention back to the forest as they delivered Declan and his daughter to their cottage before moving on. They rode hard and fast until the gates of Dunvegan Castle came into view. The portcullis rose, giving them access to the front courtyard before it closed behind them once more.

They dismounted and while Callum secured the horse, Gille tried to remain upright. She hadn't realised how much her battle against Oberon in the forest had drained her energy. But now that the threat had passed, her legs trembled beneath her. She moved back towards the castle wall, leaning against the sturdy walls for support.

The evening torches had been lit, casting a pale-yellow glow across a courtyard that teemed with activity as the men dismounted. Others waited to take the reins, leading the horses to the stables. Alastair, Orrick, and other men spilled from the castle to greet those who had returned.

As Gille watched the exchange of happy greetings, someone brushed past her, touching her shoulder for a moment. A strange sense of warmth spread through her, and a surge of strength returned to her body.

Gille looked around, her eyes scanning the courtyard, not seeing anything unusual. Yet, a strange presence lingered in the air. She had not felt anything like that since leaving Fairyland. After several minutes of searching, Gille finally shook her head, dismissing the sensation as a trick of her exhausted mind, even though she did not feel quite so tired anymore, for which she was grateful.

Callum approached with Alastair and Orrick, cutting off further thought. “We are so pleased you have returned safely, and with the object of your search,” Alastair said. “Let us go inside. Gwendolyn awaits. She is eager to make certain you are unharmed. She has laid out a meal for you.”

The hour was late, well past suppertime, but at the mention of food Gille’s stomach grumbled loudly. “Thank you. Were we truly gone for two days?”

Alastair nodded. “What happened to you both out there?”

Callum’s dark gaze met hers. “Oberon. But we were successful in retrieving the pelt.” He lifted the parcel for his brother to see.

“Well done,” Alastair said, then sobered. “Somehow, I knew we were not quite done with that fairy.” He waved them forward into the castle. “We can discuss this more once you have eaten.”

Together they moved up the stairs, and into the great hall where a cheery fire crackled in the hearth. The table on the dais and another below had already been set with bread, fruit, cheese, and tankards of malty-smelling ale. At the sight of them, serving maids carried platters of savoury-smelling meats to the tables.

Callum held out a chair for her at the table on the dais. When she was seated, he settled beside her, and she placed the leather-wrapped parcel between the two of them. Alastair and Orrick joined them, as did Gwendolyn. At the lower table the men

who had been a part of the search party sat, awaiting the meal.

“It is pleased I am to see you, Gille,” Gwendolyn said. “I was worried when you did not return as planned, but Alastair tells me the extra days were worthwhile. That you were successful.”

Gille nodded just as the food was served. She ate sparingly despite her hunger. All around her were the sounds of people celebrating their success. The noise eddied and swirled past her, leaving her filled with restless energy instead of peace. They still had so much to accomplish, and only two more days to do it in.

She was spared from further contemplation as another presence appeared in the chamber. A white mist rolled from the doorway to the dais before solidifying into the more substantial form of Lady Janet. She appeared unchanged from when they had left two days prior. Clearly, the restoration of some of her memories had helped keep the ghost from vanishing into the spirit realm for now.

You found Lottie’s sealskin. Pleasure warmed Lady Janet’s grey eyes. My memories helped?

“Aye,” Callum said.

We must give the sealskin back to her immediately.

Callum frowned. “We may need to use it as leverage—”

A shuffle sounded at the doorway as Lottie appeared, the colour in her cheeks bright in her otherwise pale face. Hastening into the chamber, Lottie stopped beside the ghost; her gaze fixed on the leather-bound package on the table. “My pelt.”

“Aye,” Gille said, pushing the parcel closer to her.

“I can return to my true form, tonight. I can see my family again,” she said in a voice so hushed the words were nothing more than a whisper. Yet the flare of her eyes revealed her fear and excitement. She came forward to accept the package, but Callum placed his hand over the leather, stalling her.

“We need something from you in exchange for your pelt,” Callum said in a brusque tone that startled Lottie. She jerked her hand back.

“Nay,” Gille objected, as her stomach knotted. “We cannot make such demands. If she helps us, it must be of her own free will.”

I agree, my son. Lottie has already sacrificed much to be with us over these past many years.

Callum removed his hand. “As you wish.” His displeasure was obvious in the clipped tone of his voice.

Lottie touched the package tentatively, sliding the leather aside to reveal her pelt. Tears welled in her eyes. “It is exactly as I remember it.” Her fingers reached out to graze the soft grey pelt with a silvery sheen. “Thank you,” she said, her voice barely a whisper. “I ... I do not know how to thank you.”

Gille smiled. “I am happy you will be able to return to your family after you have helped the MacLeods so much over the years.”

“Aye, Lottie,” Gwendolyn said, “thank you.” Others murmured agreement with her sentiment.

Lottie nodded, her gaze fixed on the pelt. “I ... I must go,” she said, her voice trembling. “I must return to the loch.”

Gille reached out and placed a comforting hand on Lottie's. "We understand," she said.

Callum stood. The look in his eyes said he would still seek a promise from Lottie for help. "Before you go, may I ask you something?"

Lottie looked up; her eyes filled with questions. "What is it?"

Callum explained their situation, telling her about what Oberon had said about a song that could break Gille's curse. "We need your help to remember the melody and the words," he said. "We had hoped you might convince the other selkies to help us remember."

Lottie hesitated; her expression filled with doubt. "I do not know if they will help, and I am not sure how to get them to agree," she replied. "It's been so long."

Gille nodded. "We understand," she said, her voice filled with a hint of desperation. "But I need your help. Please, can you ask?"

Lottie sighed and her eyes filled with sadness. "I will try," she said, "but I am certain there will be a price for that assistance."

Callum's body tensed beside Gille's. "What is it?"

Lottie looked at him, her eyes filled with a strange intensity. "The Fairy Flag," she said. "We want the Fairy Flag."

Callum's face paled. "The Fairy Flag is a sacred relic of the MacLeod clan, passed down from generation to generation."

Lottie shrugged, her previous trepidation seeming to have vanished. "It is the only

way,” she said. “If you want us to help you, you must give us the Fairy Flag.”

Gille knew the MacLeods would never part with their precious relic, but if they did not, she would remain cursed.

Callum looked at Gille and his eyes filled with remorse. “We cannot give you the Fairy Flag,” he said to Lottie. “But we can give you something else.”

Lottie raised an eyebrow. “What?”

Alastair stood. “We can offer you anything you want,” he said. “Anything at all.”

Lottie’s eyes narrowed. “Anything?”

Alastair nodded. “Anything,” he repeated.

Lottie hesitated, her gaze shifting between Callum and Alastair. Finally, she spoke. “If anyone knows the song you seek, it would be Minerva, the selkie queen. She has always longed to possess the Fairy Flag, but in its absence, she would also accept one of your children as tribute.”

Gwendolyn’s face went pale. “Nay!” she cried. “You cannot ask such a thing. The sacrifice of a child... it is unthinkable.”

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“Where have you been?” a familiar voice called from the shadows at the back of Titania’s chamber.

Titania narrowed her gaze, searching for the man who dared to violate her private space. Oberon had promised her ages ago that she could use this room as a refuge. “You should not be here.”

Oberon stepped into the light. His eyes filled with suspicion. “I asked where you have been.”

“When have I needed to account for where I go or what I do in a day to you? You are not my keeper.” He would be even more furious with her if he knew she had visited the MacLeods, had helped Gille regain her strength with a secret brush of Titania’s hand against the girl’s shoulder, that she was the one rejuvenating the cursed fairy’s powers so that she might have a chance of protecting herself against Oberon’s rage.

Aye, Gille, Aria, and Pearl had tried to obliterate him. It was not the first time other fairies had tried such. If Oberon were not so unreasonable, then perhaps his own people might not frequently revolt against him.

His gaze narrowed. “I will remain here until you answer my question.”

“If you must know and spoil the surprise,” Titania said, moving to where she had laid three stems of bluebells. She gathered the delicate bell-shaped flowers in her hands and offered them to her husband. “I went to the human realm to pick these for you.”

The anger fled from his face as he gazed upon his favourite flowers. “You got these

for me?” Surprise laced his words.

“Aye, my love.” Satisfaction rode through her. Oberon had been in a foul mood for the past year, ever since he had cursed Gille, and Titania had grown tired of always walking cautiously around him so as not to become the focus of his anger. So, when the veil between the human and fairy realms had started to thin as Beltane neared, she had taken advantage of the distraction.

Oberon suddenly frowned, even as he clung to the precious flowers. “Don’t you ‘my love’ me. You know I dislike you going to the human realm. Doing so could have dire consequences.”

Titania scoffed. “Consequences? Please. I have been going to the human realm for centuries without incident. I know what I am doing.”

Oberon stepped closer, his voice rising. “The human world is a dangerous place. There are forces out there that would do us harm.”

“Enough!” Titania interrupted; her voice filled with frustration. “I shall go to the human realm as I please until the veil closes again. And if you try to stop me, I will leave you and your petty kingdom and stay in the human realm forever.”

Oberon’s face darkened. “You would not dare,” he said, his voice low and menacing.

Titania met his gaze with defiance. “Oh, but I would,” she replied. “I’ve had enough of your controlling ways.” Until that moment, she had not been certain she would help Gille further, but now Titania knew she would. Aiding the poor cursed girl was one thing. Defying her overbearing husband was quite another. Since Oberon did not look like he would soon leave her presence, she turned and left her room.

“Get back here, Titania. We are not done discussing this.”

“Oh, but we are,” she said, striding out into the silver sky speckled with a thousand stars that always bathed Moonstone Castle. She intended to head back to the human realm this moment. Just let him try and stop her.

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“I will not sacrifice one of my children or any MacLeod to the selkies,” Gwendolyn exclaimed, pacing back and forth in the great hall. “I am sorry, Gille—”

“I would never ask that of you.” Gille’s stomach roiled as she turned to Lottie. “Has this family treated you unkindly in all the years you were with them?”

“Nay,” Lottie said as she clutched her pelt to her chest.

“They have already experienced the loss of a child to the fairies. How can you ask such a horrible boon of them for the selkies?”

“’Tis not me. ’Tis what the selkie queen has said she wanted,” Lottie explained with an apologetic tone in her voice.

“Is there anything else Minerva might want instead? Something else beside the Fairy Flag or one of their kin?” Gille begged.

Lottie considered the question for a moment, as though trying to recall the many conversations she must have had with her people over the years. Finally, her face brightened. “A moonstone. Minerva is convinced that moonstone, a variety of feldspar, can be found on Healabhal Mòr.”

“You know this, how?” Gille asked.

“It is Minerva who swears moonstone can be found at the flat-topped edge of the

taller of the two peaks. She claims to have witnessed a shimmering, iridescent flare that can only be produced by moonstone.”

“Why moonstone?” Callum asked as his gaze narrowed.

“One moonstone can protect an entire pod of selkies from those who would steal their skins and hold them hostage. Our family group would be protected from travellers to the shores of the loch, villagers, even the MacLeods. That would make the selkie queen very happy, indeed.”

Callum turned to Gille. “The MacLeod’s Tables are less than a day’s ride from here. We could retrieve the moonstone and return here before the sun sets tomorrow.”

“That would leave one day to discover the missing words of the song,” she said, swallowing roughly.

Callum took her icy hands in his. “One day can be enough for us to retrieve the moonstone and return to break your curse.”

“Far better to sacrifice a stone than a child,” Gille agreed, nodding her approval.

“Agreed,” Alastair, Gwendolyn and Callum chimed in. Even Lottie looked pleased with the decision.

Gille was relieved they had come to an agreement, but she knew she would bear the brunt of the consequences if they failed.

The guardsmen returned to their meal while those on the dais abandoned their half-finished food and looked to Lottie. “Are you ready to return home?” Alastair asked.

Lottie nodded, her features a mix of fear and hope. “It has been so long. I hope my

children remember me.”

“You would be difficult to forget, my dear friend.” Callum moved to the healer’s side and drew her into a loving embrace. “Thank you for everything you did for me over the years. I stand here today because of your sacrifices. I will never forget all you have done. And I promise that the MacLeods, now and in the future, will protect the selkies from both human encroachment of your underwater realm and anything mankind might do to threaten your habitat.”

“Thank you, Callum. That means everything to me,” Lottie said, tears in her eyes.

In silence, Alastair and Gwendolyn led Gille, Callum, Tormod, Lottie, and Lady Janet down to the edge of the water. The setting sun painted the loch in hues of gold and orange, its surface rippling like a mirror shattered into a thousand pieces. Gille thought it was a perfect reflection of her own emotions. Lottie’s torment had come to an end, while Gille’s continued, her hope of success fading with each passing moment.

The MacLeods stood at the water’s edge. Lottie’s eyes filled with a mix of determination and trepidation. She was about to become a selkie once more, returning to her true family.

Gille, Callum, Alastair, and Gwendolyn watched as Lottie shed her human clothes and slipped into the selkie pelt she had worn as a young woman. The transformation was swift, her human form fading as her selkie form took hold. Her hands changed to flippers. Her feet into a tail. Her body now encased in the silvery-grey pelt, she waddled into the water. A heartbeat later she vanished beneath the waves.

“She is gone,” Gille whispered, her voice barely audible. With Lottie’s departure, her own chances of reclaiming the words to the song lessened, that was, unless Minerva accepted the moonstone as compensation for Lady Janet’s misdeeds.

“We have done the right thing, haven’t we?” Callum asked, his eyes filled with uncertainty.

“I hope so,” Alastair replied, his voice barely a whisper.

Gwendolyn turned to Lady Janet, who hovered at the water’s edge. “You must feel a sense of relief to see Lottie returned to her people.”

“I never meant for Lottie to stay with the MacLeods for so long. Had I not died, I hope I would have released her once I remembered where I stowed her pelt.”

Gwendolyn’s gaze shifted to Gille. “Perhaps that is why all this is happening now. So that Gille could help you remember and so that we had some way to retrieve what we need to break Gille’s curse.”

Lady Janet nodded, her ethereal form shimmering in the twilight. Instead of a reply, she lifted a ghostly arm, pointing to the water. The loch began to churn as a pod of silver-skinned seals emerged from the depths, their eyes intelligent and curious, fixed on the MacLeods.

The largest of the seals came towards them, her big body half in the surf, half out. There was no forgiveness in her wide eyes, only anger. I am grateful you sent Lottie home, but one kind deed does not undo the years of anguish you have caused.

As the seal spoke, Gille turned to glance at the MacLeods along the shore. Could they hear what Minerva said? None of them seemed to hear anything other than barking.

Gille looked back at the seal. “Will the gift of a moonstone help you to see past your feelings about the MacLeods, help Lady Janet find eternal rest, and help me to remember the lyrics of the song of the selkies?”

I cannot know until I see the moonstone and feel its power , Minerva replied, her eyes growing darker in the fading light.

The selkie was being secretive. Before they wasted time searching in vain, Gille wanted to know exactly what they could expect from such a stone. “How will this moonstone help Lady Janet pass on to her final reward?”

The selkie queen waddled closer. The ghost is already halfway there with you weaving her memories together so that she could recall where Lottie’s pelt was hidden, then returning it to her.

“Halfway does not get Lady Janet where she needs to go,” Gille argued.

Minerva’s gaze narrowed. Lady Janet’s fate is coiled with yours and mine, Gille. Finding a moonstone is the only way to help us all get what we want.

Gille bit down on her lip, trying to conceal her growing desperation from the selkie queen. “If that is the solution, then we shall bring you a stone you cannot resist.”

You can try ...she said before waddling backwards until she was engulfed by the water and vanished.

“That seal was talking to you, was it not?” Callum asked.

“Aye,” Gille said. “She said she is not certain the moonstone will be enough compensation for her to reveal the song we need.” Gille’s vision blurred as she watched Minerva and the other seals depart. She tilted up her chin and kept her back straight, refusing to give in to her tears. She would not shed a single tear for her fate that was entirely in the hands of others.

It took only a moment for her vision to clear. When it did, her gaze connected with

Callum's, and she swallowed roughly. He saw all the emotions she struggled to hide: fear, desperation, sadness, and hopelessness. Instead of coming to her side, he turned to his brother Alastair.

"If Minerva does not accept the gift of the moonstone, I want to use the last magic of the Fairy Flag to break Gille's curse."

"It is up to me to decide how the Fairy Flag is used to aid our clan. Besides, the flag can only be used to call forth the fairy legions to aid the MacLeods in a time of great need," Alastair said, his tone sympathetic. "I doubt it would work to break a curse. If we used the flag, we would be wasting the last magic the cloth contains."

"Alastair—" Callum implored.

"Nay, Callum. We will not discuss this further. We need to place our hopes that Healabhal Mòr will provide us what we need."

Her throat tight, Gille turned her gaze back to the water of the loch as the last vestiges of yellow and gold on the horizon vanished, giving way to the silvery grey of night. The wind ruffled through her hair, sending it into wild disarray around her face. She reached up to tuck the errant strands behind her ears. With this sunset only two more days remained. She drew a breath and let it slide out like a whisper of promise that they would succeed. And if not, then she would slow down and take time to enjoy every sensation left to her until sunrise on the third day.

Transfixed by the deepening darkness and the twinkling stars overhead, it was a moment before she realised Callum was talking to her. She shook her head, clearing her thoughts.

Callum took two steps closer, and she swayed towards him. He reached for her hand, his touch a caress. "Do not give up."

Instead of a response, a soft whisper of breath escaped her as she stared up into his eyes. She wanted to kiss him here along the water's edge. To let their breath mingle with the softness of the night. Yet she knew she could not kiss him here, not in front of the others no matter how desperately she longed for the comfort it might bring.

"I will never give up," she finally replied. "We must succeed in our goal to break my curse, despite the obstacles of time, a moonstone Minerva would accept, and Oberon."

They had to succeed, or she would die trying. For death would be a more welcome end than an existence on the edge of life as a tree in the forest that could only observe and never participate in lives moving on around her. She had done this in the forest over the past year. A century or more in such a state would be a nightmare more horrific than anything she had suffered in the shadow realm. Aye, death would be a welcome choice if it came to that.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:46 am

At dawn, Callum and Gille, accompanied by Alastair and Graeme and a small contingent of men, departed Dunvegan Castle. The tools they needed for digging were tied to a separate horse that travelled with them. Callum sat his horse as he looked at the woman on horseback beside him.

Gille had left her cloak behind today, opting for a woollen riding habit instead. As they made their way to the gate, her gaze shifted to the rising sun. “Do you believe we will find a moonstone?”

“Aye, but not just any moonstone. A special moonstone. One that will compel Minerva to help us,” Callum said as his voice turned hoarse. God willing, they would find what they needed quickly and put an end to this woman’s torture. Callum was startled at the thought. When had his thoughts so shifted that he now considered her more woman than fairy?

Her beautiful green eyes met his and the faintest smile touched her lips. A warm sensation filled his chest, and he brought his horse alongside hers until his legs brushed Gille’s. He wanted to reach out and wrap his arms around her, to pull her to him and press a kiss to her lips.

Gille’s breathing grew rapid as evidenced by the rise and fall of her chest. He could smell the soft scent of heather soap that lingered on her skin. If he leaned closer, he could press his lips to hers, but he clutched the reins in his hands, resisting the temptation. Just as quickly he realised he did not want to stop resisting her any longer. “May our search be a quick one,” he whispered.

She swallowed roughly as she nodded.

What had flared between them last night was now a burning need. Such desire was something he had not felt before, something magical, something he had waited for his entire life...

A smile came to her lips, as if she understood his thoughts.

He leaned towards her.

“We are ready to move out,” Alastair announced in an authoritative tone, breaking the moment.

The muscles of Callum’s stomach knotted as he jerked back in his saddle.

Disappointment flickered in Gille’s expression as Callum released a similar sigh of regret, flicked his reins, and set off towards the gates, taking his frustration with him. Gille followed. Perhaps leaving Alastair to wonder what madness had possessed the two of them.

As they cleared the gates, the riding party turned to the south-east, heading for the two flat-topped peaks of Healabhal Bheag and Healabhal Mòr in the distance. The MacLeod’s Tables would hopefully provide them a moonstone before the two-day deadline. That stone was all that stood between them and acquiring the song that would break the curse and free his mother and Gille.

They rode through the moorlands for what felt like hours, until the sun rose, turning the long grass into an endless expanse of muted gold. It took another hour to finally reach the base of Healabhal Mòr, the shorter of the two peaks. The horses were left to graze on the grass, willowherb, and brambles along with a herd of red deer who seemed undaunted by their presence.

Callum made sure that Gille remained near him as they made their way up the steep

grassy slopes. By the time they reached the summit, the sun was at its zenith and Callum's stomach began to rumble.

"Mrs Honey sent along a picnic," Alastair remarked with a smile as he and many others heard the gurgling noises emanating from Callum's empty stomach.

Callum shook his head. "We should start our search while we still have a lot of daylight left to us. If Minerva saw the reflection of moonstone from the water below, it seems only logical to start our search there." He started towards the edge closest to Loch Dunvegan.

Gille stalled him with a hand on his arm. "Callum, take a break for some refreshment. Our search might go more swiftly if we are all not so famished when we begin."

He could not argue with her logic. He nodded, and moved back to the saddle bags, unloading the meal their cook had sent along. It did not take long to spread out a large blanket, then to lay out the savoury meat pies, chunks of cheese and bread, slices of tart apple, and skins of ale that had been prepared for them.

"This is not the first meal the MacLeods have had on this summit," Callum said. "There are several legends surrounding the MacLeod's Tables, one of which claims that in the sixteenth century, the chief of the Clan MacLeod was believed to have boasted, at a banquet held by King James, that he had a much grander table than the king. Sometime later, the MacLeod chief invited the king and his guests to a banquet on the top of Healabhal Mòr, thus proving his point."

"Truly?" Gille asked with a hint of suspicion. "It hardly seems an appropriate place to invite a king."

Callum shrugged as he shifted his gaze to Alastair. "What say you, Brother? Truth or tall tale?"

“Who is to say for certain, but we both know that many of the legends surrounding the MacLeods do tend to be true,” Alastair said as he gathered his food and took a seat on the rocky ground.

Callum chose a seat near Gille, who gazed about her at the view.

“What is true is this: on a clear day like today from the top of this peak, you could see a spectacular view of Loch Dunvegan with its many islands.” He looked at the sky overhead and noted golden eagles sailing above them. “All that is missing from this picnic is music floating on the breeze.”

“Perhaps a bagpipe?” Gille teased, knowing he meant to play his mandolin.

“Nay,” Callum objected with a grimace. “That instrument is far too loud for my tastes.” He stood and retrieved his mandolin from where it had been tied to his horse. He played a couple of Scottish folk songs, which brought forth cheers and clapping from the others while they continued eating. Then to Gille he said, “Before we get back to our search, I want to share with you a song I recently learned from Gwendolyn. It has been passed down through the generations of our family and originally came to us from your mother, Pearl. Perhaps you know it? ‘The Fairy Lullaby.’”

Her brows came together. “Nay.”

“Ho-ro-veel-a-vok, bone and flesh of me. Ho-ro-veel-a-vok, blood and pith of me,” he sang as he played the haunting melody. “Skin like falling snow, green thy mail coat. Live thy steeds be, dauntless thy following.”

All conversation halted as those gathered listened to the story of a fairy in a green kirtle who came to Dunvegan to quiet the laird’s half-fae child. Gille closed her eyes and listened, as her hair danced about her face in the afternoon breeze.

As the melody continued, Gille frowned, fighting to connect the sounds she heard with something that had been locked in her brain. The wind gusted just then, and she felt a brush against her shoulder. She opened her eyes, to see only Callum and the others. When the last note faded, a memory surfaced. “That melody.” She hummed what Callum had just played. “It is similar—nay, it is the same tune—as the song of the selkies. How can that be?”

Callum put down his mandolin. “Are you certain?”

“Aye.” Excitement flared in her eyes. “All we need from the selkies are the words, and we will be able to break my curse and free your mother.”

Eager to get started in their search for the moonstone, they quickly cleaned up the remains of their meal. The search party broke into groups of two and dispersed in different directions, each taking tools with them. Gille and Callum began their search along the rim of the peak, seeking a rock that exhibited a milky, bluish lustre that appeared to float just below the surface of the stone. The reflected light would only exist in the presence of other light, so it was important to make the most of the waning daylight.

They moved across the rocky terrain, seeking anything that shimmered, but only finding plenty of dark-coloured basalt. Before frustration set in, Callum grabbed the pickaxe he had brought and started digging into the rock, hoping to find what had so far remained hidden.

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The rhythmic sound of the axe biting into the rocky soil echoed all around her as Gille knelt on the ground, out of striking range. She separated the rock Callum had worked loose with her hands. She knew she should focus on the rocks sifting through her fingers, but instead she lifted her gaze to see Callum had removed his shirt and

unpinned the tail of his tartan so that it hung down around his legs. She should look away but found she could not. He was bare to the waist, his bronzed back tapering to narrow hips. His arms and shoulders rippled with thick, bunched muscles as he swung the pickaxe in graceful arcs.

Gille had never seen a man's bare arms before, let alone an entire naked male torso. The sight sent her heart racing even as it brought heat to her cheeks.

He looked up then and caught her staring. His pickaxe thudded heavily against the ground. Her breath caught at the raw desire she read in his eyes. His expression held the same hunger burning inside of her.

"I cannot think or breathe." The words were a whisper and a promise as he came to her side. He took her hand in his as he led her over the summit, until they were out of sight. Then his hands were at her waist, kneading her flesh through the soft fabric of her gown.

The heat of his body reached out to her, claiming her. "Kiss me," she said, as he cradled her in his arms and did as she asked. When their lips finally parted, they were both breathing hard. Warmth crept up Gille's throat and across her breast as something inside her began to tighten and ache. "We should get back to the search." She tried to pull away but could not find the strength.

"One more kiss," Callum replied as his hands moved up her back, pulling her closer before he caught her lips with his once more.

She sighed with pleasure and closed her eyes, relishing the feel of such delicious and little-known sensations. The kiss went on, spun out, and she almost gave herself over to it, until the memory of why they had come to this place returned. She broke the kiss, and stepped back, away from temptation. Her breathing came in ragged gasps as though she had run up the hillside once more. "Callum." Her tone was as ragged as

her breath. “We must continue our search.”

His breathing matched her own. “My apologies.” His smile filled with the same pleasure they had exchanged moments before. “You are just so enchanting.” Then his smile faded, and tension once again descended over his face “That is odd,” he said, moving past her towards what looked to be a cave in the side of the peak.

Callum entered the darkness then came back to the opening. “This cave goes on for quite a way, I think.” His smile returned; this time it was filled with hope.

He reached out his hand. Gille hesitated for a moment, her heart pounding in her chest. Then, with a deep breath, she accepted it, allowing him to draw her into the opening. Inside, darkness surrounded them, but Callum dropped her hand and withdrew something from his sporran. A scraping noise sounded, then a flare of light illuminated the rock around them.

“A flint and candle?” she asked, amazed he had thought to pack such. The wax would give them an hour, perhaps a little longer to explore the cave.

“The last few years have taught me to be prepared for anything.” Their voices echoed in the cavernous space. He held the candle out, illuminating the rock beside them. Flecks of silver caught the light and flared. Gille gasped at the sight. Perhaps a moonstone would do the same.

They pressed deeper into the space, until they came to a large, open chamber. In the centre of the chamber, bathed in the soft glow of candlelight, was a shimmering stone.

Gille’s eyes widened in disbelief. It was a moonstone, more beautiful and radiant than she had ever imagined. She reached out to touch the clam-sized stone, but as her hand neared the stone, a sudden gust of wind swept through the chamber, extinguishing the

candle.

The cave was plunged into darkness, and a chilling silence descended. Gille could hear the distant rumble of the waves and the mournful howl of the wind. She felt a deep sense of unease as Callum fumbled with the flint and stone, trying to reignite the candle. Suddenly, Gille knew they were not alone in the cave.

A faint glow began to emanate from the moonstone, illuminating the cave in an ethereal light. As the light grew brighter, a figure emerged from the shadows, her form indistinct at first, then her body shimmered with an otherworldly light.

Callum stopped trying to light the candle and drew his sword. "Halt!"

The woman ignored his warning as she stepped closer to Gille until the woman's piercing blue eyes connected with her own. Instant recognition dawned. Titania, queen of the fairies, stood before them.

Gille gasped at the sight. Titania's delicate features seemed out of place in the ruggedness of the cave. She wore a gown woven from gossamer threads and adorned with vibrant flowers, and a crown of shimmering dewdrops adorned her head. There was no malevolence in her slight stature, but the fairy queen had fooled Gille before, looking like an ethereal beauty when her magic had stung like a barb.

"Why are you here? What do you want?" Gille dropped into a defensive stance, ready to fight. She and Callum had found a moonstone, and she was ready to do whatever she must to make sure they left the cave with it. "Have you and Oberon not tortured me enough for one lifetime?"

"I never tortured you, Gille. I was playful, and perhaps unkind a time or two, but never vengeful like Oberon. I was, and am now, your ally." Her gaze shifted to Callum then back again. "You have come for the moonstone," she said, her voice

echoing through the cave. “But it is not yours to take.”

Gille’s heart sank. They had travelled so far, endured so much, only to be denied the prize she sought. “Please,” she said. “That moonstone is the only way to break the curse that threatens my life. A curse Oberon placed on me.”

“I know what he has done to you.” Sadness entered Titania’s eyes. “I want to give you the stone, but it is not mine to give. I could only lead you to this place where you must do the rest.”

She paused for a moment; her eyes fixed on Gille. “You must prove your worth to the guardians of the moonstone. Only then can you claim the stone.”

“How?” Gille asked as desperation tightened her chest. “What must I do? I have very little time left to me.”

The woman gestured towards the cave entrance. “Outside on the face of the hillside, there is something that must be rectified before the moonstone’s guardians agree to part with their treasure.”

“What say you, Gille?” Callum asked beside her. She knew he would fight the fairy queen if she asked, but Gille also knew the fairy’s magic was stronger than her own. And Callum could be injured, or worse if they did not do as Titania asked. She had said she was an ally. Could they trust her? Titania was as much a trickster as her overbearing husband.

Gille hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to do. Then, with a deep breath, she turned to Callum. “We must leave the moonstone here, for now.”

He nodded and sheathed his weapon. “If this is a trick and it costs Gille her life, then be warned that I will not rest until I avenge her.”

“So handsome and fiery. I can see why you like this one, Gille.” Titania laughed, a musical chime carried on a gentle breeze, filling the air with joy and wonder. “Go now and do as I ask. There will be no need for vengeance.”

Callum relit the candle and after a glance back at both the moonstone and Titania, he took Gille’s hand and led her back to the entrance. As they emerged into daylight, Callum extinguished the candle and returned it to his sporran while Gille looked about at the barren terrain. She could see nothing but moss, lichen, and grass growing from the rocky ground. Perhaps if they walked for a distance, they might find something?

The sun was starting its descent towards the horizon as they traversed the desolate landscape, until they stumbled upon a small, dying fern. The fern had been here on the mountainside for a time, though she could not say how long. Its fronds were gnarled and browning, curling in upon themselves.

“What is it, Gille?” Callum asked. “Is this what you were meant to find?”

“Perhaps.” Gille knelt beside the suffering plant, feeling a strange connection to the fern, as if it were calling out to her. The fern roots were withered and dry, starved of nourishment. “Do you have water?”

Callum removed the strap attached to the skin of water he carried and offered it to Gille. She poured all of it over the base of the plant. Then, she began to loosen the soil around the fern, allowing the liquid to penetrate deeper.

As she worked, the fern seemed to respond. Its leaves, which had been shrivelled and brown, began to turn green, and a faint glow emanated from its stalks. She had not needed to use her magic to restore the plant. It had only needed some loving attention as did most living things. It was a lesson the forest had taught her.

Several minutes later, the fern was fully restored, its fronds vibrant and healthy. A sense of peace washed over Gille, and she knew she had completed the guardians' task.

She and Callum looked into each other's faces, newfound hope lighting their eyes. When they returned to the cave, as they approached the entrance, Callum prepared to relight the candle. Suddenly the moonstone began to glow brighter than ever, illuminating the cave.

Titania appeared once again, and her smile filled with approval. "You have proven your worth to me and the moonstone's guardians," Titania said. "The stone is yours."

"Why are you helping me?" Gille asked, puzzled by the fairy's behaviour. When she had lived all those years in the fairy realm, no one except Aria and Pearl had helped her break free of Oberon's abuse.

Titania shrugged. "Partly because it irritates Oberon to know you have an ally. And, because I acknowledge I should have done more when you were younger. You had justification in wanting to send Oberon into the beyond where he would not hurt you ever again. There are days I wish to send him there myself."

"How do we stop him from doing what he did to me to someone else?"

"We teach him a lesson." Titania shimmered, her words echoing in the cave. She held the stone out to Gille and, as she accepted it, Titania vanished from sight.

Gille cupped the clam-sized glowing blue stone in her palm, feeling a surge of power course through her. The stone was extraordinary. Larger than any moonstone she had ever seen, and radiating not just light, but also a magical force that should satisfy Minerva's requirements a hundred times over.

But that surge of energy and excitement faded as quickly as reality settled upon her shoulders. “We only have one day left to us,” Gille said, her throat tight. “Will it be enough time to convince Minerva to help Lady Janet and me?”

Callum moved to stand before her. Determination lit his eyes. “Now we have what we need. With it we can make the most of the time left.”

“Then why am I suddenly afraid?”

“Because of the unknown.” He took her hand. “I am with you until the end, Gille. All the MacLeods are with you. We must move swiftly now. Come.”

Gille nodded as her fear merged with a blossoming hope. Until the end. The words held both an ominous and hopeful tone.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:46 am

It was late afternoon when the travelling party returned to Dunvegan. Gille watched impatiently as Callum handed over their horses to the waiting stableboys, then together they raced down to the shores of the loch.

The sun, a fiery orb, dipped towards the horizon, casting long, dancing shadows across the loch. Gille and Callum stood at the water's edge. The gentle lapping of waves against the shore provided a soothing rhythm but Gille did not feel at all serene.

"Minerva," Gille called.

"Lottie," Callum shouted.

After several long moments passed and the water remained undisturbed, they called out again. "Where are the selkies?" Gille asked, her eyes fixed on the shimmering water, searching for any sign of seals. Typically, the creatures would be basking in the late afternoon sun, their sleek bodies glistening in the fading light. But today, the loch seemed unusually quiet.

"I do not know," Callum offered. "Minerva should sense the moonstone we bring."

Gille sighed. Obviously, Minerva did not feel the same pressure to complete this task that Gille did. She and Callum stood in silence for several more minutes, their gazes fixed on the empty water. The absence of the seals was a disappointment, but she knew they were there, somewhere. All she had to do was wait them out. In the meanwhile, she should take a moment and breathe in the beauty of the water, the sea beyond, and the slightest hint of salt lingering in the air. Those were memories she

could hold on to in case...

“Let us come back later,” she said, refusing to let the rest of the thought form. She had to remain hopeful.

Two hours later they returned and called out to the seals once more. When their attempt yielded similar results, they waited another hour and tried again.

Gille’s throat tightened as she forced back her desperation. “Should we launch a boat? See if they come to capsize us? At least we will have gained their attention.”

Callum shook his head. “It is growing late. Gwendolyn has plans for us this eve. We have tomorrow.”

With no other option left to her, Gille nodded, and she and Callum returned to the castle through the sea gate. But instead of joining the others inside, Callum paused and turned to Gille. “There is somewhere I want to take you, somewhere I have avoided for years, though now it seems the only place I want to go.”

Gille nodded and followed him to a stone building alongside the back of the castle. In silence, they entered a chapel. It was not grand, but the late afternoon sunshine poured through the stained-glass window above the altar, filling the space with a sense of peace.

Callum led Gille to the altar and knelt. She did the same. When she saw him close his eyes, she assumed he prayed. For herself, what did a person who had never prayed before say to God? Would he care what weighed upon her soul? Would he help her in overcoming any other obstacles that came her way if she only asked? Or should she pray for something other than herself?

She closed her eyes and concentrated on the peace that filled the chapel. When her

mind was as still as it was likely to get, she plunged through her chaotic and exhausted thoughts, digging for an inkling of how to ask for that for which she probably had no right to pray.

Despite all, concepts came to her. She asked that no matter what happened to her tomorrow, the woodlands would continue their regrowth until they were once again a glorious sanctuary for both people and every living thing that ought to be there. Thinking on a grand scale, she asked for peace between the English and the Scots. She prayed both sides could find a middle ground so that no more men had to die on battlefields. But then, she started to question her own choice. Was that something she, who had no experience praying, could ask?

Instead, she sent up a prayer of gratitude for Callum who had brought a sense of joy back to her life. And she asked for this place's god to watch over her during the night, the following day, and into the sunrise on the seventh day. Whatever happened, she would accept, and was thankful she would not face the challenges before her alone.

When she opened her eyes, it was to see Callum smiling at her, his eyes filled with the same peace that had settled inside of her. "Are you ready to go inside?" he asked, standing, then extending his hand to assist her to her feet.

"I am now," she said, honestly. "Thank you for bringing me here."

Outside, the sun was beginning its descent, casting long shadows across the rear courtyard as Callum and Gille returned to the castle.

The moment they stepped into the castle it was to be greeted with a cacophony of sounds coming from abovestairs. As they made their way towards the great hall, they heard the clinking of dishes, hurried footsteps, all interspersed with laughter. The great hall was a hive of activity, bustling with preparations for a celebration.

At the noise and activity, anxiety crept inside Gille as time slipped forward. With an effort, she tried to pull back the peace she had experienced earlier in the chapel, remembering her prayers. With her next breath, she relaxed, allowing the sights and sensations to flow through her instead of jarring her nerves. She would live in the moment. She could spare an hour or two for a bit of celebration, especially with Callum at her side.

The air was thick with the scent of roasting meat and spiced ale. Long tables, laden with platters of food and tankards of drink, stretched across the room. Musicians were tuning their instruments, their melodies mingling with chatter and laughter. The servants were scurrying about, setting the tables and polishing the silverware.

Gwendolyn saw them and came to their side. She wore an exquisite gold gown that made her light red hair look like it was highlighted by spun gold. “There you are. We are about to begin.”

“What is all this?” Callum asked with a frown.

Gwendolyn gave them an apologetic smile. “My attempt to stay busy. We have decided to have a pre-Beltane feast and dance in your honour, Gille. Or am I wrong in assuming you have never celebrated Beltane before?”

“As the seasons did not change in Fairyland, there was no need to celebrate the arrival of summer.”

Gwendolyn’s smile grew. “Then you are in for a treat. The MacLeods know how to celebrate in style. There will be special events tonight and over the next two days.”

Anguish shot through Gille momentarily at the idea of not being present, that she would be at the end point of her curse instead. She forced the thought away, giving no life to negative thoughts. She had to stay positive. “That sounds lovely.”

“Lovely... Oh, aye. You two must hurry. I had your clothing for tonight set out in your chambers. Go now and change. We are about to begin.”

With no other choice, Callum and Gille hurried upstairs to their chambers to change. “Should I come to your room and take you belowstairs myself?” Callum asked.

“Nay. I do not wish to make you wait. I will meet you in the great hall.”

At his nod, she entered her bedchamber and shut the door then startled to find a maid waiting for her.

“M’lady said tae wait fer ye here,” the young maid said in a nervous voice.

Wanting to put the girl at ease, Gille offered her a friendly smile. “Thank you for your assistance. I am grateful for your help, especially with my hair.”

The maid giggled, then hid her amusement behind her hand just as Gille stepped before the looking glass. Her face was tinged with ash and her hair was a wild tumble with several leaves sticking out of the unbound length. They had travelled hard on their return, moving through the woodlands and beneath the burnt trees. “Good heavens,” she exclaimed at her own image. “You have your work cut out for you.”

The maid bobbed a curtsy. “It’ll be my pleasure tae see ye in that beautiful dress.”

Gille glanced at the green dress laid on the bed and gasped. It was the most beautiful gown she had ever seen. Where had Gwendolyn found such a thing in so little time? Gille made a mental note to thank her when she next saw her. There was no further time for reflection as the maid stepped forward and began removing Gille’s riding clothes. Then after washing her face and body in a basin at the bedside, the girl changed her into the fresh gown and set about styling her hair.

Half an hour later, Gille glanced once more into the looking glass. Her reflection was almost unrecognisable. The maid had helped her into the shimmering green silk gown with a low neckline that offered a tantalising hint of the creamy flesh beneath, and a diagonally wrapped bodice adorned with intricate embroidery that emphasised her tiny waist. The silken fabric moulded itself to her hips then flowed gracefully to the floor.

Her glossy red hair was swept back off her forehead, almost concealing the white streak, and held in place by an emerald clip, then left to fall artlessly about her shoulders and midway down her back, where it ended in luxurious waves and curls that gleamed brightly in the dancing candlelight. And her eyes, she could not reconcile the change in them as they reflected the colour of her dress. They were neither jade nor emerald, but a startling shade somewhere in between.

In that moment of stunned silence, Gille realised how much she had changed since first coming to Dunvegan. Her cloak would look as foreign on her in the moment as Lottie's sealskin had looked when she had donned it along the shores of the loch. Yet the sealskin was Lottie's true nature. Gille's cloak had been crafted as a disguise, an adaptation she had made to ensure her survival in the wilderness.

Her true nature was not that of a beast, despite Oberon's spell, but something that had been forced upon her until Callum had helped her break free. Tonight, she had an opportunity to be herself and enjoy what would be a first for her—a big celebration. She smoothed the silken fabric across her hips with a satisfied smile. "Thank you for your help, Mary," Gille said to the maid.

Mary returned her smile. "I hope ye have a good time, miss. Ye look like a fairy princess, ye do."

Gille laughed. She was far from a fairy princess, but the MacLeods had certainly made her feel special. Gille dismissed the maid, then moved to the trunk and sorted

through her garments there until she found a silk pouch Gwendolyn had lent her and slipped the moonstone inside. With a pin she secured the heavy pouch to the waist of her petticoat. She wanted the stone always on her to make certain it remained safe.

Then, after smoothing her gown back around her hips, she left her chamber and made her way downstairs, determined to enjoy herself to the fullest despite the endpoint of her curse. It was a possibility she could not ignore. As she reached the doorway of the great hall, she paused and drew a deep breath. Instead of letting nervousness and fear overwhelm her, she would focus on the present moment and enjoy the celebration. For tonight, at least, she would allow herself to be swept away by the magic of Beltane in the presence of the MacLeods.

Soft candlelight bathed the great hall in a warm, intimate glow as Gille entered. The sounds of revelry mixed with the savoury scents of meat and spiced ale. But all of that faded into the background as Gille turned, her heart pounding, and met Callum's gaze. His dark eyes searched her own with an expression of awe and wonder, and she knew everything had changed.

She was no longer the beast he had known. The transformation had been complete, and she was a woman, standing before him in a gown that felt both foreign and strangely befitting.

Callum came to stand before her. "Gille..." he breathed, his voice filled with a reverence that sent a shiver down her spine. His eyes traced the lines of her dress then returned to her face. Admiration lit his eyes.

"You are... breathtaking." He took her hand and raised it to his lips before offering her his arm and guiding her to a seat at the table on the dais where the family was seated.

To Gwendolyn, Gille said, "Thank you for everything you have done for me. This

gown is the most beautiful piece of clothing I have ever worn.”

Gwendolyn’s smile was radiant as she gazed upon Gille. “You look lovely. I knew that dress would be perfect on you,” she said as Alastair, Tormod, Orrick, Keiran, and Graeme nodded their approval.

Rowena and Marcus offered smiles of admiration while Fiona, Isolde, and Rosalyn all welcomed her back from the day’s journey.

Aria and Pearl came to stand on either side of Gille, smiling at her with joy in their eyes.

“Sister,” Aria said, “everything is finally starting to go your way, and I could not be more pleased.”

For a heartbeat, Gille tensed, fearing that Aria’s words might tempt fate to start throwing even more obstacles at her again, until she remembered her earlier vow to only focus on the positive tonight.

Pearl leaned in and pressed a kiss to Gille’s cheek.

“I always knew you were a beauty,” her mother said with pride. Then a heartbeat later, joy dimmed more towards regret on her face. “Seeing you happy in this moment, I can finally forgive myself for forgetting all about you while you were banished to the forest,” Pearl said haltingly. “You know I would do anything to remove this curse from you if I could. ’Tis yet another thing that I feel guilty about. I did not protect you from Oberon as I should have.”

Gille squeezed her mother’s hand. “You have nothing to feel guilty about. Oberon made certain no one would remember me, and the fairy king wanted revenge. If not me, he would have found you or Aria.” A lightness came to Gille’s chest. “I am glad

he chose me and not either of you.” She truly meant the words.

“You are very forgiving, Daughter.” Pearl’s eyes misted, and a tear ran down her cheek. “I wish there was some way Aria and I could repay you.”

Gille squeezed her mother’s hands again, then released them. “Promise me this, if I do turn into a tree on the morning after Beltane, remember me as I am now, happy and content.”

A second tear joined the first on Pearl’s cheek. “I promise,” she said, then drew Gille into a quick embrace before stepping away. Her mother’s eyes filled with sadness and a tentative hope as she turned to Callum. “Protect her and make certain the curse is broken before...”

Callum nodded. “I will.”

Any further conversation was made impossible as Mrs Honey and her staff entered the room, carrying platters heaped with even more food to add to the already overburdened tables. Callum held out Gille’s chair before taking the seat beside her. Soon, the solemn conversation she’d had with her mother was replaced by good food and levity. When all had eaten their fill, the tables were cleared and then pushed back to make room for dancing.

The musicians who had been warming up earlier began to play, weaving a sparkling refrain through the chamber. Voices hushed as a dulcimer, a lute, a harp, and a bagpipe chimed a steady beat. A cheer rose up as they began a country dance, and two lines formed. Men and women joined in pairs.

Callum grimaced at the sound of the bagpipes. “Why do they always bring in the pipers?” He stood.

“Are you going to get your mandolin and show that piper how it is better done?” Gille said with a laugh.

He shook his head and extended his hand. “Let the piper have his moment. I have something far more important to do.”

“What is that?”

“I want to dance with you.” His expression was tender, his voice warm and engaging. She placed her hand in his and allowed him to lead her into the lines of dancers just as the music started. The steps were easily learned, but when she misstepped, Callum helped her find her footing.

The room spun before her in a whirl of colours. She drew a deep breath and let joy flood her spirit. She could feel the heat of Callum’s presence as he took her arm in a promenade. And felt her own cheeks warm as she let the rhythm of the music move through her body. A swirl of air caused by the dancers brushed against her fevered cheeks. She had missed so much of what life had to offer, both while she had been imprisoned in Fairyland and while banished to the forest. She did not want to miss out any more on the simple joys of living.

After three country dances, Gille was about to ask for a respite when the music changed its tempo to a more soothing and much slower pace. Callum held his arms open and Gille walked into them. His right arm slid around her waist, bringing her close against the solid strength of his body. The music swelled and the rhythm of the dance lent itself to fluid, sweeping motions. His left hand closed around her fingers, engulfing them, and suddenly she was whirled around the chamber as if they had not a care in the world.

Gille felt a warmth spreading through her, a contentment and peace she had never experienced before. She wanted to hold on to this feeling, to forget about tomorrow,

or the sunrise after that. But darker thoughts intruded on the moment. Was her destiny to become a part of that to which she had been banished?

Her steps faltered. Callum did not seem to notice, as he continued to twirl her about the chamber. The candlelight overhead suddenly became glaringly bright, the sound of the music too loud.

She had fought destiny before when Oberon had sent her to the Shadowlands to die. It was her strength of will that had helped her survive, to avoid the dangers lurking there, and to reach the human realm where she had met Callum and the MacLeods. The fighter in her began to rally one more time. At first light, they would go to the shores of the loch to see Minerva. If the selkie queen yet avoided them, then they would find a way to force her out of hiding. For Gille was not about to give up the life she had recently found, not without a fight.

She would meet her fate head-on for herself, for Callum, and the MacLeods. She would use her strength, her determination, and her love to break her curse. Gille startled at the thought, not of breaking the curse, but of the idea of love. A smile came to her lips. Love. She did love Callum. Had loved him since she had first seen him in the forest, despite his demands and his arrogance. He had braved her beastly exterior and asked for her help. And when she had been threatened by the villagers, he had stood beside her.

Joy cascaded through her, rippling, forming circles of radiance. The dangers ahead did not matter, not if the outcome was that she could be a part of Callum's life beyond two more sunrises. Love.

She bit down on her lip, studying Callum as they made another sweeping circle around the room. Should she confess her feelings? After another series of twirls, Gille decided that her emotions were still too fresh to verbalise, but that did not mean she could not show him what was in her heart. Even so, she manoeuvred the two of them

out of the centre of the chamber and towards the side of the room, until they were alone.

“Callum.” There must have been something of her feelings in her eyes, because his movements ceased and the world narrowed to the two of them, standing before each other. “Take me abovestairs.”

A silent moment passed, then another. She put everything into her glance. That which she could not yet put into words. That which told him all she hoped for, wanted with all her heart and soul and body. What she knew she needed regardless of what the future brought.

His fingers, wrapped around her own, suddenly trembled. “Are you certain?”

“I have never been more certain of anything in my life.” Drawn to him, Gille held her breath and pressed up on her toes, bringing her face closer to Callum’s.

His arms tightened around her possessively. His smouldering gaze dropped to her lips, and Gille felt her body ignite at the same moment his lips captured hers. His hands urged her even closer, to meld her pliant body against the rigid contours of his.

With a silent moan, she slipped her free hand up his chest, her fingers clutching his broad shoulder, her body arching into his. A shudder shook his powerful frame. A heartbeat passed before he lifted her into his arms and carried her from the great hall, up the stairs, and into his bedchamber. With his foot, he shut the door behind them then carried her to the bed, setting her gently atop the coverlet.

Over the thunder of her heartbeat, she gazed at the man before her, gilded by the firelight, with desire in his eyes, and committed the image to memory. In case this moment was all she would ever have...

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:46 am

C allum read the desire mixed with a hint of desperation in her eyes. He stepped closer. "Are you afraid?"

"Nay. I want to be here with you." Gille's features softened as desire lit her eyes.

"There is nowhere else I would rather be than with you right now." He drew a deep breath of the earthy scents of heather, pine, musk that were uniquely hers. And he wanted more. He wanted so many things when it came to Gille. He wanted her trust. He wanted her companionship. He wanted to wrap her in his arms and protect her. And right now, he wanted to touch her as he never had before.

As though reading his thoughts, she smiled, and all reservations he might have seen in her eyes vanished. "I want you to touch me. I want you to love me." She lifted her face to his and laid a soft kiss upon his lips. Her fingers fumbled with his jacket, his waistcoat, then his shirt, until he stood bare-chested before her.

He drew her to him and with a groan raided her mouth. He tasted her thoroughly, leaving no doubt that he wanted more. Heady with desire, he loosened the stays of her dress and slipped it over her head before sending it to the floor. When he moved to loosen her petticoat, she stopped him, removing a silk pouch, which she placed beneath a pillow. "The moonstone," she said. "I want to keep it near us." She shrugged. "To be safe."

"I had hoped you would do such," he said as his fingers returned to her petticoat. He released the bow, then grabbed the fullness, pulling it over her head and sending it to the floor atop her dress.

He divested himself of his shoes and stockings, his breeches, and drawers before settling beside her once more and pulling the bed curtains around them, creating a private chamber that was only theirs.

Reaching for her, he pushed her chemise over her arms, past her waist until it pooled at her hips, leaving her upper body exposed to him. He brushed his fingers gently over her breasts, then came back to engulf the tender fullness to find her nipples peaked and straining with a need that etched itself plainly on her skin. When he brushed his thumb across her nipple, she gasped her pleasure.

Callum bent his head, and his mouth hovered over one breast while his hand cupped the other. Gille bit back a cry as she arched her back, pressing herself more fully into his sensual caress. His teeth bit gently on the nipple he had brought to full arousal.

She groaned, her fingers entwined in his hair, pulling him closer. His body trembled, a storm of desire surging within them both. In the soft, diffused light filtering through the curtains, he looked down at her. Her fiery-red hair cascaded over the pillow, a seductive invitation. His gaze traced the curves of her body, the smooth skin that mirrored his own.

Why had he spent so many years condemning the fae? They were sentient beings, with hearts, minds, and emotions that mirrored those of humans. They drew magic from nature to protect the world around them. Perhaps humans had once possessed such abilities but had lost them by forsaking the magic inherent in the world?

Sensing his hesitation, Gille pressed closer, her fingers tracing the contours of his back. “What is it, Callum?”

“I apologise for treating you so unfairly when we first met,” he confessed. “My obsession with saving my mother clouded my judgement. I should have come to the forest to free you from your curse before asking for your help.”

She reached up, her touch gentle on his cheek. “If you had not come, I would still be trapped in misery. And without exploring your mother’s memories, we would not be here, together.”

Her words were balm to his soul even as desire burned within him, a fiery intensity that threatened to consume him as he tasted the sweet nectar of her lips again while he fully removed her chemise, which had been pooled around her hips, leaving her naked to his gaze and his touch.

Her lips moved along his jawline, down his neck, across his collarbone, igniting a passionate response. “Let us live for this moment, and for all the moments to come,” she whispered.

He knew she referred to their waning time together if they failed tomorrow, but instead of dwelling on the possibility, she wanted to stretch each moment into eternity, and he would happily follow along.

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Her hands were trembling, Gille realised. From that first challenging look in the forest, she had felt a connection to the man in her arms that promised something profound. Whether their connection would be a fleeting passion, or a lifelong bond remained unknown. But Callum MacLeod, equal parts musician and warrior, would challenge her in ways no one else ever had.

In this moment, he challenged her to let go of trying to control the uncontrollable, to simply feel. To let her body, guided by his touch, reach the unreachable. With a breath, she surrendered as his warmth, his essence, his hands explored her breasts, her abdomen, and lower to tease the soft curls at the apex of her womanhood.

Glorious ripples of pleasure coiled through her. And when he slid lower, deeper, until

two fingers gently entered her core and began a rhythmic stroking, she cried out. A hot throbbing inside her built almost to the point of pain, yet it wasn't. Only an odd emptiness remained as he pulled his fingers away to shift over her.

Callum lifted her, cradling her hips in his hands. "Wrap your legs around me," he commanded, his voice low and urgent.

She did as directed, and with extreme care, he entered her. She gasped, her body arching against his as she clung to him. His hands held her securely, sealing them together. A momentary stretch soon shifted to a surge of pleasure.

He withdrew and thrust again, his movements deliberate and powerful. She met each thrust with equal fervour, her body trembling with desire. A low groan escaped his lips as he lifted himself up on his arms.

She gazed at him; his eyes filled with a raw passion she had never seen before. His body was sculpted, perfect, as beautiful as any fae she had ever seen. With her hands, she traced the contours of his hips, guiding him deeper. The sight, the feel, the scent of him overwhelmed her senses. She cried out as she reached the precipice of ecstasy. Her legs wrapped around him, fusing their bodies together as she surrendered to the overwhelming sensations roiling through her.

Their pleasure mingled with the hazy darkness as they reached their peak together. Their bodies shook with the force of the ecstasy that rippled through each nerve, vessel, and fibre of their beings.

As the aftershocks subsided, she too seemed to share the sense of peace that cascaded through him. She held him tightly. His breath was laboured. He looked down at her, a strand of hair falling over his forehead. She brushed it away. "That was everything I had ever hoped for, even if it was a stolen moment before our true challenge begins," she said, her breathing returning to normal. Even if this was their only moment

together, it would be enough.

He nodded, kissing her again as he settled beside her.

As the silence of the night drifted around them, Gille's thoughts turned to what still lay ahead of them. Doubts crept past the passion they had just shared. She swallowed roughly as she turned towards Callum. His features were as serious as her own. "Do you believe we can accomplish all we must tomorrow?"

He lifted on his elbow to look at her. "We must believe we have all the time we need."

She forced a smile. "I know. I am trying to remain positive, but so many forces are working against us—"

"The MacLeods will stop at nothing to make sure you succeed. Everyone has offered to help us tomorrow. Only once you are free of your curse will the Beltane celebration continue. Besides," he said with an arch of his brow, "what happened to living for the moment?" He bent and kissed her, and she couldn't help but smile. He was trying to divert her attention, for which she was grateful.

"Perhaps I should try harder to distract you." He chuckled. "I suddenly have the urge to see if I can wipe all worrisome thoughts from that active brain of yours." He leaned down and ran his tongue over her nipple.

Heat stung her cheeks as her body responded immediately. She felt herself readying, warming once more at the very thought of him hard and hot within her. She inched back and clamped her hands into fists so she wouldn't be tempted to touch him. "Let me say this first."

He smiled. "You like the idea of me distracting you, then?" He reached for her and

pulled her against him.

“Callum!”

“Talk quickly.” He turned onto his back and lifted her on top of him, sliding inside her. His hips moved upward, and she gasped at the fullness and the pleasure.

His face was flushed, his eyes glazing with an expression of primitive pleasure.

She could not talk, she could not think as he thrust deep, quickening the rhythm. This joining was incredible, basic, elemental. In only moments, wave after wave of pleasure washed over her.

An instant later she could feel Callum spasm again and again within her, shuddering helplessly as he poured his seed into her body.

She collapsed on top of him. His hips still moved yearningly, as if he could not stop even though he had reached his satisfaction again. A moment later he lay still, breathing heavily, his hot flesh nestled against her own. Satiated, she settled beside the man she loved. She had not said the words, and neither had he, but she hoped tomorrow there would be time for that and so much more.

Tomorrow.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:47 am

Mist hung low over the water, obscuring the view, as Gille, Callum, the MacLeods, and Pearl approached the loch the next morning. The entire family, including Lady Janet, had been waiting for her and Callum in the rear courtyard. They heard birds twittering in the trees. Gulls soared over the water's edge, their high-pitched mews a welcoming sound, as the sea animals searched for their morning meal.

Despite the serene setting, Gille's heart pounded in her chest. This was it. The moment they had worked towards for the past six days. They needed Minerva's help to break Gille's curse, and now with the moonstone in their possession, they might accomplish that task.

As they reached the shore, they spotted several seals on the rocky outcropping in the distance. Gille searched among the seals sunning themselves on the rocks. "There," Gille said as she noticed Lottie's familiar pelt. She was a beautiful creature, her fur glistening in the morning light. But when her gaze turned to Callum and Gille, her eyes narrowed, and she slid into the water.

"Lottie," Callum called out, but the woman-turned-seal-once-more ignored him. Sadness lingered in his eyes for a moment before he turned his gaze to the distance. "It matters not. Minerva is the only seal we should concern ourselves with today."

Gille touched Callum's arm. "It is well enough to feel sad that the woman who helped raise you may no longer remember you."

"But I do." The sound of Lottie's voice, slightly more guttural than in the past, came to Gille as a silvery head bobbed to the surface closer to shore. She turned to see if Callum had heard.

The joy on his face told her he had. Perhaps touching the moonstone had given him the ability to hear the seals speak. “How is your return? How are your children? Is it strange being in the water again?” He paused and added, “Where were you all yesterday?”

Lottie laughed, the sound more bark-like than the trill it used to be. “Same Callum. Full of questions. Aye, it is strange swimming and not walking. My children remembered me, for which I am grateful.” She hesitated. “Minerva kept us all away from shore yesterday until she could think the situation through. She wants the moonstone, but she is still angry at the MacLeods for taking me from her.”

“We finally righted that wrong,” Callum said.

Lottie bobbed her head. “Minerva is pleased I am back in the pod, but not happy that I keep asking her to help you without any conditions.”

“Conditions?”

Lottie’s gaze narrowed. “She wants more from you both to grant you the words you need from the song of the selkies.”

As they were talking, a large, dark shape emerged from the depths of the loch. It was Minerva, the selkie queen, in her seal form, surrounded by four other seals. She was a fearsome sight, her eyes glinting with malice. “Well, well, well,” Minerva said, her voice a deep, guttural growl. “Lottie tells me you found a moonstone.”

“Not just a moonstone,” Gille challenged, palming the iridescent stone in her hand. “A special moonstone. One that should satisfy your requirements.”

Minerva narrowed her gaze and leaned forward. “Let me see it.”

Gille held up the moonstone, allowing it to catch the early morning light. Its surface shimmered with a soft, iridescent blue glow. As it caught the sunlight on its curved surface, the colours seemed to shift and change, from the lightest blue to an almost inky black, like the ebb and flow of the tides, as if the moon itself were trapped within the stone, casting its ethereal light upon the world. The stone thrummed, its magic reaching out to both Gille and the selkies.

Minerva's eyes widened, anticipation flaring in their depths. "I did not truly believe you could retrieve a stone, any stone. But that one? It is magnificent."

"Then it should serve as payment for the words to the song of the selkies," Callum replied.

Minerva's eyes narrowed again. "You think I will just give them to you? No, you must earn them."

A knot of fear tightened Gille's stomach. Only hours remained before she would cease to exist. Minerva knew how desperate she was, and the selkie queen was exacting everything she could from the situation.

"Nay. No more games. We did what you asked." Callum balled his fists at his sides. His brothers came to stand beside him.

"Then we shall say goodbye." Minerva turned around, preparing to dive under the waves.

"Wait!" Gille called, resigned to accepting whatever new challenge would be put before them in the waning hours of her curse. It was then that she saw it, a flash of relief in Minerva's dark gaze. The selkie queen might bluster, and demand, but it was clear to Gille that she also needed their help, though she would never ask for it. "What do you require of us? We will do one last thing but no more."

Minerva must have sensed what Gille had seen because for the first time, the seal's demeanour changed as she waddled onto the shore. She stopped before Gille and her body began to writhe and twist, her sleek form contorting. Her sealskin, once smooth and glistening, began to crack and peel, revealing a soft, human-like body beneath. Her pelt sloughed off, leaving behind a shimmering residue that became a silky dress that caught the wind, whipping around her as her webbed feet retracted, converting into delicate toes. A long, flowing mane of seaweed-green hair erupted from her head, cascading down her shoulders. Her eyes, once piercing and cold, softened, taking on a human warmth.

As the final transformation completed, Minerva stood tall, a majestic selkie queen, her beauty a testament to the magic of the sea. But instead of the young, vibrant woman Gille had expected, Minerva was old, and frail, with a hint of desperation in the lines that wreathed her eyes and mouth.

"Perhaps it will be easier for us to talk like this," Minerva said, her gaze passing over Gille and shifting to Lady Janet. "Only in the presence of a moonstone can I change form without moonlight."

Lady Janet drifted to the water's edge. Minerva. She bowed her head. These words are long overdue, but I am so very sorry for taking Lottie away from you, for causing your pod grief, and for putting your own family at risk.

Minerva nodded and appeared to accept the apology. "At least you had the sense not to tell anyone about Lottie. Not even your own family. That helped to keep my pod safe from others who would steal our pelts."

Gille stared at the women before her. Her chest tightened, her breath stuttered, and an odd sensation raced down her spine. "Our fates, yours, Lady Janet's, and mine, have always been linked, have they not?" she demanded of Minerva.

After a brief hesitation, Minerva nodded. “The maiden.” She waved her hand at Gille. “The mother.” Her hand continued towards Lady Janet, then came to rest in front of herself. “And the crone.”

Gille frowned. “But they controlled heaven, earth, and the underworld.”

Minerva offered her a sympathetic smile. “And we are a fae cursed in the human realm, a human caught between the spirit realm and the afterlife, and a selkie who longs to protect her pod before she hands over her rule to her daughter, Lottie.”

“I am your daughter?” Lottie gasped in the water behind them.

“Aye. Your memory has yet to fully return,” Minerva said. “Once we each complete our unfinished tasks, we will oversee the earth, the afterlife, and the sea as we were always meant to. We will all get what we want when your curse is broken.”

“Then help me do that by giving me the words to the song,” Gille pleaded. It appeared time was running out for all of them.

“If I only could,” Minerva said sadly. “The moonstone is the key to all of this. You must take it to a place along the coastline, near the village of Elgol, and use it to illuminate the words you need that are etched onto the walls of Spar Cave.”

“Why place the words where none of you can access them?” Gille asked.

“The cave used to be accessible to the selkies, but no longer. And will only be accessible to you for one hour either side of low tide.”

“Where is Elgol?” Gille asked, with rising panic.

Marcus stepped forward. “I can get us there in my ship. The Cliodna is still anchored

just off the coast of Dunvegan. We can take rowboats and be on board in less than an hour.”

“And when is low tide?” Callum asked, his voice suddenly strained.

Marcus pressed his lips into a thin line as he studied the shores of Loch Dunvegan. “As it is now sunrise, and the tide here is high,” Marcus said, “it is likely at noon the tide will be low, which means we have from approximately eleven o’clock to one o’clock to access the Spar Cave.”

“Can you make it to Elgol in that time?” Rowena asked her husband.

His features pinched. “Only with the best of winds in our sails.”

“Or with waves at your stern,” Pearl said in an encouraging voice. “I still have some magic left to me. Since I can control the sea, I will make certain you arrive in time.”

Marcus looked startled for a moment, but then nodded. “I will have my men ready the ship.”

“Thank you, Marcus.” Callum clapped Marcus on the shoulder. “You are a good man. I am sorry I ever doubted you.”

“I will have Mrs Honey gather supplies for a meal that can be prepared on board,” Gwendolyn said, turning to her husband. “You and I will be on that voyage with them.”

Alastair looked to Tormod and Orrick. “Can I leave the two of you in charge of the castle? With the English so close and on edge, I do not want all of us away at the same time.”

“You can count on us,” Tormod said. “With Orrick, Isolde, Graeme, and myself, we can afford to spare Aria if she wants to travel with her sister and mother.”

“I do,” Aria said, offering the men a grateful smile. “I have missed so much of Gille’s life. I want to be with her now, when it really matters.”

Minerva stepped back into the waves. “I can only wait in the loch for your return once the moonstone is on that ship,” Minerva said with a hint of sadness in her voice. “But I am thrilled you will be taking such a special moonstone to a place where it will keep all the selkies safe, or at least as safe as they can be until a new threat comes along.” She turned to Lottie. “That will be your burden, my daughter.”

“I gratefully accept the challenge of protecting our people. For I know what it is like to live on the land and in the sea.”

Since I am bound to the borders of Dunvegan, I must stay behind. Lady Janet floated back and forth, her agitation obvious.

“Your presence is necessary here, Mother.” Callum stood close to his mother, close enough to lend her comfort without touching her ghostly mist.

How am I in any way necessary? I am a ghost.

“You are still our mother, and as such you are worried about your children, and perhaps about the outcome that affects you greatly.”

At Callum’s gentle words, Lady Janet calmed. When did you become so grown up and wise?

Callum returned her smile. “I have been for a long while. It just took everyone time to notice.”

Lady Janet chuckled. All right. Enough of placating your mother. Off you go to save the day.

At Lady Janet's words, the burden of what she, Callum, and the others were about to do settled around Gille's shoulders. No longer was it merely Lady Janet and Gille's fates that were tied to their success today. Minerva's fate hung in the balance as well, as did the fate of the selkies, the forest, and the MacLeods.

Gille drew a deep breath of the salty air and held it a long moment before letting it slide from her lungs. She had to be brave. She had to bear the burden of this one last quest. All the pieces were aligning, they simply had to see this trip through to the end. Hopefully, by sundown, it would all be behind them.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:47 am

As Marcus had predicted, less than an hour later Gille stood on the quarterdeck of the Cliodna with a compass in her hands. They were to sail to the south-east along the coast of the Isle of Skye, navigating through the waters of Loch Dunvegan and then into the open sea.

While she waited for them to get underway, her gaze shifted to Callum who helped prepare the ship for their departure, rolling up the rope ladder and securing it over the ship's rounded deck edge. Alastair assisted the crew in raising and securing the anchor while Gwendolyn, Rowena, and Aria were below deck seeing to the supplies.

Marcus stood at the helm, shouting orders to his crew. Men dressed in blue and white striped shirts with red handkerchiefs tied loosely about their necks hurried across the deck in response to his commands, unfurling sails and tightening ropes. The ship lurched forward then picked up speed as the white canvas caught the wind, propelling them to the south-east.

When they were out in deeper waters, Pearl raised her hands from her position at the stern and with a chant as ancient as time itself, enchanted the water beneath them. The ship picked up speed, sailing swiftly around the receding coastline of Skye.

The wind whipped tendrils of Gille's hair about her face and tugged at her skirt as Gille grasped the railing before her with one hand and drew the length of a MacLeod tartan Callum had lent her about her shoulders with the other. The ship rose and fell with the waves. Each downward motion brought a new surge of tangy sea spray over the bow of the ship. Just like the ship they were all pressing forward towards new horizons.

With a hand, Gille secured her hair to glance at the sun as it began its march across the sky. They had much to accomplish this day, but in keeping with her vow to remain positive, she had to believe that working together they would be successful.

With renewed hope, Gille leaned against the railing, relaxing into the moment, watching the endless greenish-black water that stretched before her. Instead of the disquieting feeling she would have expected, the isolation brought her a sense of peace. Gille closed her eyes. The stillness of the moment settled around her. She listened to the song of the wind stirring the sea. Very soon, the lyrics she needed would be hers and she could make plans for a future that extended beyond one more sunrise.

Gille thought back to her life a mere six days ago when she was trapped in the forest, alone. She opened her eyes and smiled. Despite the damage to the forest, she was happier now. Stronger, more positive, more in control of her life, and less consumed by her possibly imminent death. She had enjoyed her time with the MacLeods, with Callum. It was because of them and the friendship they extended that she had changed from the beast of the forest to the woman she was now—the adventurer sailing to find the last piece of the puzzle that would give her everything she had ever wanted. A family, love, and hope for her future.

Leaning on the railing, she gazed at the endless expanse of sea. The voices of the crew working below blended into a low steady hum. After a long while, Gille pushed away from the railing and went to join the others.

What should have taken them six or more hours to travel almost two hundred miles, had taken them less than five when the sheltered bay of Elgol came into sight. The sun had reached its zenith as the eight members of the travelling party climbed down the rope ladder and into a lowered boat. Gille clutched the knapsack in her lap that contained the moonstone and writing implements as they rowed towards shore.

“Just as I had hoped. We have arrived at low tide,” Marcus said, rowing them towards a promising inlet along the shore. “That gives us one hour, give or take, to find the cave and accomplish what we must.”

The search to find the cave was not difficult. As soon as they landed on the rocky beach and secured the boat, they saw a wider inlet with vertical sides that led to a cave in the distance.

“Careful,” Callum warned, taking Gille’s hand as they traversed the rocks, covered in slippery seaweed, to the cave’s opening.

“I have heard of this cave by its Gaelic name, Slochd Altimen , which means nursing cave. The cave itself does not flood, but the entrance fills with water and cuts off access in or out. If we become trapped, we will have to wait twelve hours until the tide drops again,” Marcus warned.

Gille’s heart pounded in her chest as she gingerly tested the stability of the rocks beneath her feet. They did not have twelve hours to spare. If they missed the tide, she would become a tree within the cave. Fear tempered Gille’s excitement. This was only one more challenge that they would overcome.

When they reached the cave, Gille saw two openings. The one on the right was filled with water, but the one on the left appeared above water, but was shrouded in darkness, its mouth yawning open like a gaping maw. “It is so dark,” Gille said with a frown.

A moment later, Alastair and Marcus lit two torches, then held them towards the opening. The flickering light illuminated the jagged walls and the inky darkness beyond. With a deep breath, Gille stepped into the cave, her heart pounding.

Callum followed close behind, as the torches cast dancing shadows on the walls. As

they ventured deeper into the cave, the darkness seemed to swallow them whole, leaving them feeling small and insignificant in the cavernous space.

Initially, the cave was muddy, but as they followed the curve in the path, they found themselves in a vast cavern made of calcium carbonate. The ceiling of the cave was a breathtaking spectacle, adorned with a multitude of stalactites that hung like icicles frozen in time. Some were thin and delicate, while others were thick and imposing, their surfaces etched with intricate patterns. The light from the torches danced and flickered, illuminating the stalactites in a dazzling array of colours. It was as if they were gazing up at a celestial forest, each stalactite an upside-down looming tree reaching from the heavens towards the cave floor.

But to reach the stalactites beyond, they had to navigate a flowstone staircase. Although it looked slippery, it was surprisingly easy to ascend. At the top of the naturally formed staircase the cavern was a breathtaking sight, its walls adorned with intricate formations of rock and mineral. The air was cool and damp, carrying the scent of earth and stone.

Their torches flickered and danced, casting eerie shadows that seemed to writhe and contort. As they ventured deeper, they discovered a hidden chamber, its darkness pierced only by the faint glow of their torches. In the centre of the chamber was a small pool of crystal-clear freshwater, its surface shimmering like liquid silver. Beyond the pool, a narrow passage led to another deeper chamber, its darkness shrouded in mystery. The sight of these hidden pools and white limestone walls, illuminated only by the flickering torchlight, filled Gille with a sense of wonder and awe that soon slipped to concern.

She turned around, searching every white-coated surface before her. “I do not see writing on the walls of any of the chambers. And where are we supposed to place the moonstone?”

Callum frowned as, beside her, he searched the chamber. “The moonstone is a symbol of the moon and its celestial power. Perhaps we should place it near the pools of water because water is connected to the selkies.”

“Or, perhaps we should position it on one of these rock formations to help it shed its light on the hidden knowledge we need,” Aria added, moving to a rock that had a flattened surface the exact size of the moonstone in Gille’s knapsack.

Indecision coiled inside Gille. Both locations seemed appropriate. However, something deep inside told her Aria was correct. Since they could not see the words of the song, they would have to trust they were there, finding a way to illuminate them.

Gille opened the knapsack and removed the moonstone, then cupped it in her hand. With a deep breath, she stepped towards the rock formation. Carefully, she placed the rounded stone on the white ledge. As soon as the moonstone touched the surface, the walls of the cave began to vibrate and the stone cast dancing shadows on the cavern walls with a light of its own making. The glow intensified, illuminating the surrounding area with a soft, ethereal light.

As the light grew brighter, the words of the selkies’ song began to appear on the cavern walls, etched into the very fabric of the rock. The words seemed to glow with an inner light, as if they were alive and pulsating with energy. Gille’s heart raced with excitement as she gazed upon the ancient script, her eyes tracing the flowing lines. She imagined the words spoke of wisdom and knowledge of the sea.

Gille raced back to her knapsack, and clutching the ink, quill, and parchment inside, she quickly copied what she saw, just the shapes and scrolls of the words, as now was not the time to try to understand the archaic writing that might fade too soon. When she had finished, she studied the ancient script, and a new panic settled in her stomach. “We have what we need, but I cannot read a single word.”

“Perhaps I can help you.” Her mother came to her side, her eyes filled with a knowing smile. “I recognise the language. It is the ancient tongue of the selkies.” Pearl began to sing the words of the song, her voice carrying a haunting melody that echoed through the cavern. As Pearl sang, Gille felt a strange tingling sensation in her chest, as if the words were somehow resonating within her. When Pearl had finished, the glowing words faded, and the walls of the cave returned to normal.

“That is it then,” Callum said with triumph in his voice. “Is the curse broken?”

Gille’s chest tightened at Callum’s expectant gaze. “I feel no change. Nothing is different.”

“Perhaps there will be no change, as you are still the same person,” Gwendolyn offered.

“We might have to return to Dunvegan,” Pearl said. “Only once the song is sung with you, Minerva, and Lady Janet present will the magic change all of your fates?”

Callum nodded. “That seems a reasonable assumption.”

Gille agreed. “Then let us return there before we are trapped in this cave.”

“We have time,” Marcus said. “I have been monitoring the rising tide. The entrance is still safe for us to pass through.”

In silence, the others prepared to leave, but Gille turned back towards the moonstone, giving it one last look, before she joined the rest. She hoped the selkies would somehow gain access to the stone, and it would serve to protect them from losing their pelts to other humans who would never return the selkies to the sea.

A short time later, Gille stood on the deck of the ship. As the Cliodna turned away

from the shore, a chilling sight caught her attention on the port side. “A ship!” Gille shouted, alerting the others who were busy unfurling the sails and preparing for their return voyage.

At the helm, Marcus lifted his looking glass, focusing on the quickly approaching vessel. “It is a British warship.” He pursed his mouth. “And her cannons are trained on us.”

Her heart in her throat, Gille clutched the railing as she suddenly saw cannons gleaming ominously in the afternoon sunlight. Panic laced through Gille, and Marcus and his men seemed bothered by the sight.

Marcus must have sensed her distress because he said, “This is not the first ship my crew and I have had to outrun. Go below deck. This is going to be a choppy ride home.”

“We will not fight them?” she asked, easing her grip on the railing.

“Taking on the British navy would not be wise if we want to return to Dunvegan in time.” Marcus offered her an encouraging smile. “I have express permission to be in these waters as a privateer. We can sort all that out, once you are safely returned to Dunvegan.”

“Thank you, Marcus,” she said as she moved from the quarterdeck to the main deck below. Despite Marcus’s assurances, the air was thick with tension as two cannonballs whistled through the air, narrowly missing the port side of the *Cliodna*. The crew seemed unrattled as they went about their duties, putting out more sails for speed, but Gwendolyn and Aria gasped, their faces pale with fear. Gille clutched the railing, her heart pounding in her chest.

Pearl, her eyes filled with determination, took her position at the stern of the ship.

With a wave of her hand, she released a burst of magical energy that propelled the ship forward, leaving the British vessel trailing behind. The wind whipped through Gille's hair as the ship raced across the water, the waves churning around them. The British ship pursued them, even if at a slower pace.

Five and a half hours later, the Cliodna returned to Dunvegan. The travelling party, minus Marcus and his crew, rowed ashore to finish what they had started earlier that day.

A large Beltane fire had been set along the beach but would not be lit until sundown. A glance at the horizon indicated that event would be no more than two hours from now.

When the travelling party landed on shore, they stepped out of the boat and hurried towards the castle. As they went, a rustle sounded as the birds left the trees for the sky. Gille stared at the horizon. Something did not feel right. She tried to push the feeling aside. Her task was to find Lady Janet and sing the song in the presence of Minerva before anything else could distract them.

The castle was silent, the air heavy with anticipation. But anticipation of what? A battle with the British ship seemed far more likely than Marcus had indicated when that ship caught up with the Cliodna, or were the residents of the castle busy preparing for the Beltane feast after they broke the curse?

"Something's amiss," Callum said beside Gille as they entered the very strangely empty castle through the rear door, echoing her earlier sentiment.

It was then that Gille heard the clashing of swords coming from the front courtyard. Callum's hand moved to his sword as he and Alastair raced in that direction.

What had happened at Dunvegan while they had been gone?

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:47 am

Gille and Callum stepped into the front courtyard to see chaos unfold before their eyes. English soldiers, their red coats gleaming in the evening light, clashed swords with the MacLeod clan, their kilts stained with blood. Without a thought for his own safety while his clan was in trouble, Alastair drew his sword and stepped into the fray.

Callum turned to Gille. Anguish reflected in his gaze, mirroring her own. He drew a sharp breath. "I must help them."

"I know." She nodded jerkily as pain tightened her chest. "If only my magic and I could." She dropped her gaze to the earth at her feet as a tear slid down her cheek. Would their path ever be free of obstacles?

"You must proceed with singing the song. Nothing can stop you from that course." He brought her gaze back to his with a finger beneath her chin.

Gille stared at the man before her. A breeze ruffled his hair, and the evening sun cast him in a pale gold light. Her breath caught as a sense of quiet wonder replaced her sadness. He was so handsome. His eyes were not just brown, as she had always thought. They were the colour of the earth after a rain, in that moment between storm and calm. And just like nature, he was always changing, never the same. Evolving. Obstacles were just that—a moment where new challenges arose for them to conquer. He would fight the battle in the courtyard while she would fight to break her curse.

She reached up and brushed a lock of hair back from his eyes. Her fingers strayed to the strong, straight line of his cheekbone and followed it in a single brushing stroke. Words, dozens of them, pushed through her mind, but none of them came to her

mouth. What could she say to the man who had rescued her from the forest and given her hope for a better tomorrow? He had given her back her laughter and made her smile when all she had wanted was to bury herself in her cloak and hide. She owed him so much.

“It is time,” she said, feeling brave once more. Time to confront the English and time to step into their future, whatever that might be. Callum started to turn away, but she pulled him back towards her. She pressed a kiss to his lips, lingering there for only a heartbeat before she pulled away. “I love you,” she whispered against his cheek. “I expect no words in return, but I wanted you to know before you go into battle what is in my heart.”

He pulled her tightly against his chest. “There will be plenty of time to speak of such things when we are through.” He released her. “Until then.” His brown eyes filled with promise.

Gille swallowed back the sudden lump that came to her throat. Aye, there would be plenty of time after she broke her curse. She hurried towards the castle. She had to call Lady Janet to the water’s edge. She made it no farther than the sea gate when Lady Janet appeared.

Were you successful? Lady Janet asked, floating beside Gille along the pathway as they turned back towards the water.

“Aye,” Gille replied, clutching the parchment with the song’s lyrics and Pearl’s translation. “We are ready to proceed.”

Could we wait for my children? Lady Janet asked, her voice tinged with despair. I’d like to say goodbye.

Gille understood the sentiment but pointed out the fighting in the front courtyard.

“With the English attacking, ’tis impossible for your sons, Aria, or Isolde to join us. And Gwendolyn, Fiona, Rowena, and Rosalyn are caring for the wounded.”

Regret crossed Lady Janet’s not-fully human features. Then we should proceed, and I shall hope I have time before I pass to the afterlife to tell them I love them one last time.

At the water’s edge once more, Gille called, “Minerva.”

The waters of the loch stayed silent for a moment before the green-blue water rippled, and a sleek, dark shape emerged from its depths. Minerva, her seal form glistening with beads of water, hauled herself to the edge of the surf. Her large, expressive eyes filled with caution as she scanned the surrounding area. “We heard unusual sounds and sensed another ship in the distance that is not the Cliodna . What dangers have you brought back from your mission with you?”

“An English warship followed us home,” Gille confessed as the ship in question suddenly sailed into view, just off the harbour where the Cliodna was anchored.

Minerva’s eyes flashed with anger. “The English and their cannonballs threaten my people as well as yours.”

She turned her gaze towards the sky. It would be an hour or more until sunset. Even so, to Gille it appeared as if the world around her held its breath, waiting for her to sing the song that would free her, Minerva, and Lady Janet. “The song—”

“Must wait until we are safe,” Minerva snapped.

“What can we do?” Gille asked, tamping back her disappointment. Would she ever be free of the curse?

“Help me call the other seals. We must get them out of harm’s way before those two ships start firing cannonballs at each other and hitting my pod instead.”

*

The evening took on a surreal quality as Callum clutched the sword in his right hand, then drew his dagger from his belt with his left and raced towards the battle. He blocked out the words Gille had just uttered. He could not let anything distract him from his immediate purpose. Once the battle was over, if he survived, he could explore the warmth that had filled his chest and the emotions that lay in his own heart.

Callum dived into the battle as the clangour of steel against steel sounded above the shouts and cries of men and horses. Callum fought alongside Alastair, the two of them making their way towards where Orrick, Tormod, and Isolde fought.

Before Callum could make his way to the three of them, a dark-haired Englishman stepped before him and lunged.

Callum parried and spun to the right, but the redcoat brought his sword around in a sideways sweep. Callum was ready. His blade arced up and back, stopping the slice. As the swords collided, Callum kicked, catching his opponent in the stomach and sending him staggering backwards.

The Englishman kept his feet. “Good.” He grinned at Callum. “A worthy opponent at last.”

Callum dashed a hand across his brow to keep the sweat from rolling into his eyes. He kept his body low as he watched the Englishman’s body for the next attack and cleared his mind of all else except survival. In a heartbeat, the dark-haired man charged with the force of a raging bull.

Callum blocked the strike. At the blow, the sharp ringing of steel filled the air, and it took Callum a moment to recover his momentum to strike again. His sword arm was aching, his body bruised, cut. He was more used to playing his mandolin than wielding a sword, but despite his lack of practice and the pain radiating through him, he pressed the attack. His sword clashed against the Englishman's once, twice.

The man's eyes filled with rage, and he lunged forward.

Callum blocked the strike, then slashed again and again as the air grew choked with dust. His breathing was ragged as he paused just long enough for the Englishman's blade to sweep in an arc across Callum's shoulders, severing the tail of his tartan. Callum lurched back just in time to spare his body, then spun out of the way.

It took a moment for Callum to regain his footing, but when he did, he brought his sword up and sliced through the man's sword arm, exposing muscle and bone. The man dropped to the ground, crying out in agony.

Callum had no time to mourn the fallen man or offer aid as another Englishman entered the fray. Duty compelled him to fight his way through the courtyard. Men who charged him fell like leaves before a gale. Yet, as one fell, another took his place, then another, and another. But Callum prevailed, his movements growing increasingly confident.

In the distance, near the open gate, Callum spotted Lieutenant Gilbert. Their eyes met across the chaos of the battle. Again, driven by duty, Callum strode forward to confront a man he had hoped would not become his enemy.

Callum stood face-to-face with the lieutenant and his jaw clenched with anger. The English officer had dared to invade Dunvegan Castle, the sacred home of the MacLeods. "Why are you here when we had reached an agreement?"

“We were simply following orders,” he replied.

Callum scoffed. “Orders from a king who knows nothing of our traditions, our way of life.”

Gilbert smirked. “Perhaps, but that was before you revealed your true nature, MacLeod. You and your men have been attacking our troops from along the shoreline. That was confirmed this morning when I watched you sail out of the harbour on your brother-in-law’s ship.”

Alastair’s scouts had reported that the English were close. Now Callum knew just how close they had been. “Was there any such attack while we were gone?” Callum asked, keeping his sword at the ready.

“No,” the lieutenant replied, lowering into a fighting stance.

“Then how can you accuse us of something for which you have no proof?” Callum raised his sword in a salute.

Lieutenant Gilbert offered him a sneer in response. “Why else would you be out there if not for no good?”

Callum shook his head. “Any peace between the English and the Scots is doomed to failure if you do not rely on facts.”

The lieutenant narrowed his gaze as both men circled each other. “What facts?”

“You knew that Marcus just arrived back at Dunvegan. You were there when he returned. And you also had to suspect his ship was somewhere close by, has been close by since his return. If you were spying on the MacLeods, you would know this.”

The lieutenant's blade arched towards Callum in a disembowelling sweep, the blood grooves on the weapon whistling their deadly melody. "What does all that have to do with anything?"

Callum dropped back and let the blade swing through the empty space where his body had just been. "Did any attacks occur in the last few days?"

"Yes," the lieutenant said as his weapon swung wide. "Last night there was an attack on the forty-first regiment near Portree."

Callum jumped inside to open space and drove his elbow into the Englishman's face. With a half turn, the razor edge of his sword cut across the lieutenant's sleeve, laying open a swathe of the red uniform and exposing the arm beneath. "How do you suppose we sailed all the way there and back to leave shortly after sunrise today?"

Lieutenant Gilbert's sword slashed again, aiming for Callum's thigh.

"The fact is that it cannot be done." Callum, spun and came around, kicking the lieutenant from behind, forcing him to the ground on both knees. The Englishman's sword thumped against the earth and rolled an arm's length away. His opponent knew his head was within the reach of Callum's sword.

The lieutenant's face paled.

"If that is why you are here, fighting the MacLeods tonight, I suggest you call off your men. And work on gathering better information before your men suffer any further injuries."

The Englishman nodded. He knew now he had made a grave mistake coming after the MacLeods.

Callum picked up the lieutenant's sword before helping him to his feet.

The lieutenant signalled to his flagbearer to call off the attack. The call went out. At the sight of the lieutenant standing beside Callum, with his weapon in the Highlander's hand, the other Englishmen ceased their fighting.

Callum released a ragged breath and looked around him. There were no holes in the castle wall, no damage to the gate. "How did you get into the castle?"

The lieutenant shrugged. "Your own people opened the gates for us."

"Nay. Our people are loyal." Callum's eyes narrowed.

"One of them was more than happy to take the gold I offered."

"Describe them," Callum demanded, his voice low and menacing.

The lieutenant remained silent until Callum lifted his sword, threatening to strike. "Long white hair, blue eyes. An odd-looking man, wearing a green tunic with leaves embroidered around the edges." He frowned. "Or were they real leaves? Hard to tell. It all happened so fast. Said he wanted to do whatever he could to stop Gille from her task."

Callum's blood ran cold. Oberon. That traitor. The fairy king had meddled in MacLeod affairs for the last time. He would pay for his crimes. But even as he vowed revenge, Callum could not help but feel a sense of despair. Would the fairy realm never stop meddling in the lives of the MacLeods? Callum tried to rekindle the hatred he once had for the fae, but the feelings remained out of reach.

His anger at the English lessened as his thoughts shifted to Gille. Oberon had done this to stop her from succeeding. And every moment he spent here, with this

Englishman, meant the fairy king was that much closer to his goal.

“If you have no objection, I will gather my men and depart,” the lieutenant said, stepping away from Callum.

“Not so quickly. Your duties here are far from over,” Callum replied. “A British warship will soon be approaching our coast. You must convince them to withdraw.”

The lieutenant’s eyes widened. “Me? How?”

Callum shrugged. “With your life on the line, I trust you will devise a plan, and swiftly.” Without waiting for a response, Callum led the lieutenant across the courtyard to where Alastair was speaking with Graeme.

“Ensure the English retreat,” Alastair instructed. “If necessary, follow them to their horses. Afterwards, we must tend to the wounded and the fallen.”

“It will be done,” Graeme replied, his face hardening with determination. He hurried past Callum and the lieutenant to attend to the task.

Alastair’s gaze, filled with anger, fixed on the lieutenant. “I trusted you.”

“Your trust was misplaced,” the lieutenant replied, straightening. “We are, and always will be, enemies until your country acknowledges King George as the rightful sovereign.”

“Politics belongs in the courts,” Alastair retorted. “Right now, my people’s well-being takes precedence. The ones you attacked.” His gaze narrowed. “How did you breach these walls?”

“It was Oberon,” Callum explained. “He allowed the English to pass through the

gates.”

Alastair’s anger intensified, tightening his jaw. “We will first deal with the English, then it is time to end Oberon’s meddling in our lives.”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the air was torn asunder by a thunderous roar. The earth trembled beneath their feet. On the opposite side of the castle, a cloud of dust and debris soared into the sky.

“The English warship is attacking from the coastline,” Alastair said, his face suddenly pale.

“You might have stopped me and my men, but there are thirteen other regiments in Scotland at present and more arriving every day.” Lieutenant Gilbert gave Alastair a smug smile. “Unfortunately, the MacLeods have also caught the attention of the British navy.”

The thunderous boom of another cannonball striking the curtain wall was followed by a deafening silence, broken only by the frantic beating of Callum’s heart. He turned to Alastair. “What should we do?”

Alastair drew a ragged breath as the castle doors flung open and a torrent of terrified people poured into the courtyard seeking safety. The air was thick with smoke and dust as cries of distress mixed with panicked shouts. Some ran towards the nearest hiding places, while others fled past the English soldiers and out the open gates, hoping to escape the wrath of the English invaders at the coastline.

Alastair motioned for Tormod. When his brother came to his side, he said, “Take this man to the loch and see if there is anything he can do to prevent further damage to the castle and our people.”

“I have no power over the captain of that ship,” Lieutenant Gilbert said. “We will only end up blowing ourselves up along with your castle.”

Tormod reached for his dagger and pressed it against the lieutenant’s back. “You had better start thinking of a way to intervene.” When Alastair turned back towards the castle, Tormod asked, “Where are you going?”

Alastair paused and turned back. “To do something I never wanted to do.” His features were taut, pained. “Our sanctuary is no longer safe. If I do not stop that warship, there will be nothing left of Dunvegan or our clan.”

Callum nodded, feeling a sudden sympathy towards his brother. He could no longer play the role of diplomat. And while Alastair was forced to solve the situation with the English as only a laird could, Callum would go to Gille. He had to reach her before either the English or Oberon did.

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Just as Minerva had foretold, a thunderous bang sounded, followed by a deadly whistle as a cannonball plunged into the water. The impact sent a towering geyser of water soaring into the sky. Another cannonball hit, then another. The evening silence obliterated as the surface of the water was churned into a frothing maelstrom.

Minerva had been right to have the three of them focus on moving her pod to safer waters. Nowhere in the loch or even on the beach seemed safe. Gille covered her head with her hands and ran farther down the beach with Lady Janet floating behind. At least the ghost was safe from the debris that flew her way as another cannonball sailed over her head to hit the rear curtain wall of the castle.

Gille glanced back at the damage the cannonball had left in the rock face. She had counted on Oberon's intervention, on this, the last night of her freedom. The English attack was a cruel surprise, a devastating blow to her plans.

Tears streamed down Gille's face as another cannonball struck the wall, sending golden stones crumbling onto the shore. Her hopes, her dreams, were disintegrating with the ancient stones. Was this truly the end?

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Alastair burst into the drawing room, his heart pounding. The Fairy Flag, a beacon of hope and his heritage, hung between the windows. But his destination wasn't the flag itself. He moved to the portrait of his father, a familiar painting that concealed a secret.

Gently, he lifted the portrait, revealing a hidden panel. With trembling fingers,

Alastair slid the panel open, to expose the wooden chest inside. A heavy weight settled in his chest as he retrieved the chest and set it on a chair. Inside lay the real Fairy Flag, a precious artifact he'd been forced to conceal from those who sought to steal it.

He let his fingers trace the worn, yellowed cloth, feeling the lingering magic. One more wave of power could turn the tide against the encroaching English. He'd never wanted to be the laird who squandered the last of their magic, but the fate of Clan MacLeod hung in the balance. Protection from their enemies was why Aria and Gille's mother, Pearl, had gifted them the flag centuries ago. Perhaps she'd foreseen that it would one day save not just her daughters, but the entire clan.

"Alastair?" Graeme's voice was sharp as he burst into the chamber, his grip tightening around the flagpole. "Nay," he breathed, his gaze fixed on the flag.

"We have no other option, Graeme," Alastair insisted. "We must use the last of the magic to save Dunvegan and its people." He took the pole from Graeme and tied the flag to it, his fingers trembling. "You are the flagbearer now, as your family has always been. I cannot force you to wave it, but I see no other way. Perhaps... if I wave it instead?"

Graeme straightened, his shock fading. "I am the flagbearer. If this is the only way, I am willing to sacrifice myself for everyone else."

Alastair swallowed, a lump rising in his throat. "You are the bravest of the brave, Graeme. I am honoured to call you both friend and brother."

Graeme returned the sentiment with a nod. "Shall we?"

With a heavy heart, Alastair walked beside his friend as they made their way down the stairs and out onto the rear courtyard. Outside, they were forced to dodge debris

that flew around them as they made their way to the crenellations. Without hesitation, Graeme clutched the flagpole and unfurled the flag. The wind caught it, whipping it out into the twilight. As the flag billowed in the breeze, a strange ethereal glow seemed to emanate from it. A hush fell over the courtyard and the shore below as the MacLeods watched in awe.

Graeme raised the flag high. In that moment, something extraordinary happened. The air crackled with energy, and a shimmering shield seemed to form around the castle. The cannonballs from the warship flew towards the castle, but as they approached the invisible barrier, they seemed to lose their momentum, veering off course and splashing into the water. The MacLeods cheered, their spirits lifted by the miraculous sight.

Then Graeme's body began to glow with the same shimmering light, and before he was fully engulfed in the strange glow, Alastair grasped the flagpole from Graeme's hands, praying that it would be Alastair who was taken from this world and not his friend.

The glow around Graeme fizzled and died. The flagbearer turned to Alastair. "I am still here," Graeme said with a hint of awe.

"As am I." Alastair, still clutching the flag, did not feel any sort of tingling magic racing through him, and no odd light appeared around him. Had his intervention somehow kept Graeme in the human realm while still benefitting from the Fairy Flag's magic? "Yet the magic seems to have worked."

The two men turned back to the water to see the warship retreat into the fading light. "We are saved," Graeme cried, clapping Alastair on the back.

"So, it would seem," Alastair replied, knowing the flag's magic would not last forever. The English would surely regroup and find another way to attack. But for

now, he had bought his people some time. And, as cheers went up around the castle, Alastair knew he had made the right choice.

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Silence enveloped the loch. A chilling realisation struck Gille as the sounds of battle from both the shore and courtyard abruptly ceased. Her heart raced. A flicker of relief mingled with dread. Had Callum and his companions prevailed? Were any injured, or worse? She forced the dreadful thought away. She had to stay focused on the task that had been restored to her.

Gille and Lady Janet waited at the shoreline for Minerva and her pod to return to the loch's now tranquil depths. When the large seal emerged at the water's edge, her dark eyes bore witness to the exhaustion caused by the battle they had all endured. Gille knew they should wait for Minerva to recover, but time was a cruel adversary. Only eleven hours remained before the first rays of dawn would break the horizon.

As the sun began its final descent, casting long, dancing shadows across the loch, the water seemed to transform. The once vibrant blue hues deepened, blending seamlessly with the hues of the twilight sky. The air was still and quiet, save for the occasional splash of a fish or the distant call of a bird. It was a moment of serene beauty, a peaceful respite from the chaos that had existed only a short time ago.

"Are you ready?" Gille asked the others.

At Minerva and Lady Janet's nods, Gille unfolded the parchment and began to sing the ancient song of the selkies. Her voice carried across the water, the ancient words echoing through the twilight. But as the final note faded, Gille felt a sinking sensation.

Lady Janet continued to float at the water's edge, her ethereal mist unchanged.

Minerva remained trapped in her leathery pelt. Her form as rigid as before.

“It did not work,” Gille said, her voice filled with despair. She clutched the parchment tightly, fighting back the tears that threatened to overwhelm her.

A mist appeared at the water’s edge, its form indistinct in the twilight. As it materialised, Gille leapt back, recognising the familiar silhouette. It was Oberon. With a sinister grin, he approached her, his eyes fixed on the paper clutched in Gille’s hands. Before she could react, he snatched the parchment from her grasp. With a flick of his fingers, the paper ignited, the ancient words reduced to ashes that danced and twirled in the wind.

Oberon’s face twisted in a cruel smile. “Of course, the song was useless,” he taunted. “Minerva must be in her selkie form for the magic to take effect. And she cannot transform until nightfall.”

Gille, Minerva, and Lady Janet exchanged terrified glances. Oberon turned to Gille. “I must say I underestimated your determination.” He shrugged. “But I cannot let you succeed.”

“Why? Why does my life even matter to you? I am not the first person who has ever challenged you and won, however temporarily.”

His gaze narrowed and he raised his hand to strike her. “Do you see any of the others still alive?”

Gille’s eyes filled with a fierce resolve. “You may have taken the parchment,” she declared, her voice trembling slightly, “but I memorised the words.”

Oberon, his face contorted with a cruel smile, laughed. “Those words will do you little good when I am through with you. You are nothing more than a mere speck of

dust in the grand scheme of things. You will never defeat me.”

Gille refused to be intimidated. She straightened, challenging him. “Your powers might be stronger than mine, and far more varied, but I have something you do not. The power of love and hope on my side. And that, Oberon, is a force more powerful than any dark magic you can wield.”

He laughed. “We shall see about that.”

Before Oberon could strike, Callum burst through the trees, his sword drawn. “Leave her alone,” he shouted, charging towards Oberon.

At the sight of Callum, relief and joy filled Gille. He was safe. His face was shadowed with fatigue and pain pulled at the corners of his eyes, but he was alive.

Her joy evaporated a heartbeat later as Oberon summoned a weapon before Callum’s came down, blocking his strike. The violence in Oberon’s gaze told her one thing—the fairy king meant to kill Callum.

She had to do something. It was then she remembered the dagger Callum had given her, the one secreted against her thigh. She drew the weapon and, her heart in her throat, Gille waited for Oberon to draw back, then she lunged forward.

Before his blade made contact and Gille could strike, Minerva launched herself at Oberon, the seal’s head striking the fairy king with a force that sent him tumbling into the water.

The other seals, sensing an opportunity, surrounded Oberon, their bodies forming a barrier around the fairy king. Oberon’s angry cries echoed through the falling darkness as, with a concerted effort, the seals pushed him away from the shore, propelling him out into the deeper waters.

As Oberon disappeared, Minerva turned to Gille. “What were you trying to do? Get yourself killed?”

“I was trying to help Callum.”

Callum sheathed his weapon as their gazes met and locked. For a timeless moment, she stared into the depths of his dark eyes and felt a rush of warmth tease her cheeks. Whenever he drew near, she could not look anywhere but at him. Her heart fluttered as he pulled her close and brushed his lips across her forehead. “Promise me you will never do that again,” Callum insisted, his voice firm.

Gille pulled back, her expression hardening. “Try to defend you?” she countered, her tone laced with a hint of accusation.

“Attack your enemy before I can teach you how to defend yourself properly,” Callum added, as though they had all the time in the world.

“I would like to learn how to wield a dagger effectively,” Gille replied, her voice filled with determination.

“Not against me, I hope,” Callum teased, trying to lighten the mood. “Not anymore. Unless I deserve it.” But she sensed the underlying tension beneath his words. “Oberon is not an enemy to take on without some skill.”

Gille raised her chin and shifted her gaze between Minerva and Callum. “Oberon has grown accustomed to women, both fae and human, not resisting when challenged. And he might have been right at one time. Most of us have submitted tamely. We did not know how to fight back. I do not want that to be me. Not anymore. When he shows himself next time, I want to be ready to defend myself.”

“I can teach you some defensive moves against assailants who are larger and stronger

than you,” Callum replied, his tone softening.

Gille’s eyes widened. She hadn’t really expected him to agree with her. “The mere idea of being able to defend myself effectively against Oberon makes me feel more in control,” she admitted.

Callum gave her a slow smile as he appraised her from head to toe. “The thought of learning how to wreak mayhem makes you glow. What an extraordinary woman you are, Gille,” he said, his voice filled with admiration.

“Not special, just realistic,” Gille replied, her lips set in a grim line. “I sense Oberon is not through with us tonight. The next time we meet, it will be in a battle to the death. We must be ready.”

Callum nodded. “At midnight, Minerva can change into her selkie form. We have until then to prepare.”

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Gille and Callum stood facing each other on the shores of the loch while the others prepared for the pending celebration. Gille smiled when Callum, his muscles rippling beneath the thin fabric of his muslin shirt, held a wooden stick in his hands. She gripped a similar weapon. He would teach her to fight, but not with real weapons until he was certain of her skill. So, sticks would have to do.

“Remember,” Callum instructed, his voice firm but gentle, “it is not about brute strength. It is about using your agility and quickness to your advantage.”

Gille nodded, her eyes focused on Callum. She took a deep breath and lunged forward, her stick raised. Callum parried her attack with ease, his movements fluid and precise.

“You are being too predictable,” he said, smiling. “You need to vary your attacks.”

Gille tried again, this time feinting to the left before striking to the right. Callum blocked her attack, but she managed to slip past his guard and land a glancing blow to his chest.

“Good,” Callum praised. “Keep it up. You are lighter and more agile than any man—either fairy or human. Use that to your advantage.”

Many attempts later and as the moon climbed higher in the sky, casting long, dancing shadows across the loch, Gille felt a surge of confidence. Even with a stick and not a dagger, she might be able to at least distract the fairy king for a moment or two.

They continued to spar until Alastair and Gwendolyn came down to the beach to light

the Beltane fire. In a moment of distraction as the flames licked hungrily at the dry wood, and a pop sounded and sent sparks flying, Gille managed to disarm Callum, leaving him momentarily defenceless. With a swift movement, she lunged forward and tackled him to the ground.

Callum laughed. "I am impressed. You have improved a lot," he said, gaining his feet. "Keep practising, and you will be a formidable opponent."

Gille smiled, feeling a sense of accomplishment. But as quickly as it had come, her smile slipped. All the while they had been practising, she had felt as though someone was watching from the shadows. Yet looking around the beach where the fire pushed back the darkness, she could see nothing out of the ordinary. Perhaps it was Oberon, waiting in the shadows for the right moment to attack once more. For she knew without a doubt that the fairy king would try to stop her from breaking the curse later that night. At least she had a few new skills to help her when the moment arrived.

In the meanwhile, she could spend every moment from now until Minerva could transform worrying, or she could try to live in the moment and enjoy the festivities around her. Callum was with her, and soon the other MacLeods would be as well. If Oberon came for her, she would not be alone. Determined to find a sliver of joy in this night, Gille concentrated on the activity around her.

Once the fire had been lit, it seemed like the entire castle emptied onto the beach. Everyone from kitchen maids to stable hands mingled about the Beltane fire alongside the villagers, the castle's warriors, and the MacLeods. All were celebrating that not only had the MacLeods triumphed over their enemy and the castle still stood, but only three of the warriors had been wounded. Those three were gathered around the fire with everyone else after Arabella had tended to their injuries with the skills she had learned from Lottie.

Alastair planted the Fairy Flag in the beach, its pole firmly rooted in the soil and

rocks. The flag, a symbol of their victory, added to the festive atmosphere. After that, the cattle were brought out and paraded about the fire pit and the roaring flames, to protect them, the people who cared for them, and the crops that fed them, the next few hours could be spent indulging in frivolities.

In those precious hours, Gille would pretend to be like anyone else here on Beltane Eve, playing games, feasting, and seeking the protection the fires were said to ensure, such as warding off fairies. One particular fairy came to mind. Most of those gathered knew nothing of the challenge that lay ahead for Gille this evening, and she preferred it that way. She did not want others to look at her with sadness or pity if she failed.

Once more she forced her thoughts back to the moment, gazing at the tables from the great hall that had been carried down a path they had cleared through the rubble to the beach. The tables were laden and overflowing with roasted lamb, oat cakes, bread, cheese, and creamy custard as well as strawberries, apples, asparagus, and radishes. Jars of honey were interspersed between the platters, allowing the revellers to sweeten their own food. Ale was poured into tankards and shared liberally with the crowd. Off to the side of the tables was a May bough, a branch from a rowan tree, which had been decorated with yellow-gold marigolds, ribbons, and painted shells.

Gille inhaled deeply, the heavy night air filling her lungs. Darkness mixed with silver moonlight that was broken only by the red-gold flames that danced towards the sky. The wind carried the musical strains of bagpipes across the shore, blending the sound with the chatter of excited voices.

She closed her eyes and allowed the music and magic to wash over her, until she felt herself relaxing, swaying to the rhythmic beat of the pipers' song. When the pipers' song died down, Gille opened her eyes to see Callum reach for his mandolin. He played a traditional folk song with a lively tune. When the last note died away, those gathered clapped in appreciation. He set his mandolin aside and settled beside Gille once more. She smiled at Callum with a newfound appreciation. "Thank you for

allowing me to be a part of this night,” she said.

Callum returned her steady gaze. “It is I who should be thanking you,” he replied. “I have been to many Beltane celebrations, but this is the first one that means more than just drinking my fill of ale by the fire.”

As the pipers started another lively tune, the others laughed and raced to the fire, forming a giant ring around the flames then began dancing to the left before shifting to the right.

“Dance with me.”

When she nodded, instead of leading her to the dancers, Callum gave her a long, slow kiss that spoke the words he did not say aloud. It was enough for now. Perhaps someday he would tell her what she longed to hear.

He broke the kiss and took a hand, pulling her into the ring of dancers, locking his arm through hers. They moved to the left and then the right in rhythm to the music. When she missed a step, forcing Callum to do the same, a giggle worked its way up inside her.

With a mischievous grin, he quickened his steps. She matched him step for step until they were both laughing. The bonfire spun before her in a whirl of orange and red against the velvet backdrop of night.

Gille smiled as bittersweet joy filled her. Her situation was dire, her future unknown, and still she and Callum had found a way to live in the moment. She tipped her head back. A thousand stars glittered in the night sky. She said a silent prayer that she and Callum would be together longer than just a few more hours. Nothing would make her happier than spending every precious moment with him at her side.

After several songs, the pipers took a break and the dancing subsided. “It is time to decide who will jump the Beltane fire,” Tormod said.

“To leap across the fire three times is a custom as old as Beltane itself,” Callum explained as his brothers continued to playfully argue about who would jump this year.

“You got to jump last year,” Orrick said, with a laugh. “That should disqualify you tonight.”

Alastair and Keiran approached with tankards of ale in their hands. “Afraid of a little competition, Tormod?”

“Never from you,” Tormod blustered, and Alastair and Keiran laughed.

Callum and Gille watched as Gwendolyn gathered oat cakes, breaking them into as many pieces as there were people celebrating. When she was done, she placed them in a bonnet. Alastair carried one portion to the fire and set it amongst the coals near the edge of the fire until it burned black. When the task was complete, he removed it with a clam shell, then waited for it to cool before placing it in the bonnet along with the other pieces.

The revellers surged towards Alastair and Gwendolyn, eager to play the game. One by one they plunged their hands into the bonnet. Each unburned cake that came forth drew a relieved sigh or a groan of disappointment.

When Tormod dipped his hand inside the bonnet, it seemed as though everyone held their breath, until he pulled out an unburned portion then they cheered. “Ah, maybe next year.” Tormod waved Orrick forward. “Your turn this year.”

When Orrick reached for his lot, he also drew an unburned cake. “’Tis not to be this

year. So, who will it be?”

Graeme and Aria, Rowena and Marcus all picked unburned cakes. Even Keiran, Alastair, and Gwendolyn came up with nothing to show for their efforts. When all had drawn their lot except for Callum and herself, a collective gaze shifted to the two of them.

“Shall we draw together?” Callum asked as his challenging gaze connected with hers.

She nodded, accepting his dare. As their hands dove into the bonnet, his brushed against hers while trying to find one of the two scraps inside. Warmth flared where his fingers touched. They both lingered there for a moment before pulling their pieces out.

Gille spread her palm to reveal an unburned cake, and her gaze flew to Callum’s hand. There on the flat of his palm was the black cake.

The crowd cheered, “The King of the May!” Tormod and Orrick swept in and lifted Callum onto their shoulders and paraded him around the fire. A heartbeat later, Gille gasped as she, too, found herself hoisted aloft, joining the parade. “To the king and queen of the night.” A second cheer went out as the pipers began to play a wild, spirited tune.

Gille and Callum found themselves thrust together and then parted again and again on their journey around the fire. Excitement bubbled up inside Gille, not just at the merrymaking, but at the sensual way Callum looked at her whenever they came together. And a responding honeyed heat flared within her.

Gille suddenly wished they were anywhere but here, alone and undisturbed. As if reading her thoughts, Callum reached for her hand, his fingers intertwining with hers. The two of them were twirled about the fire, their gazes locked, the intimacy of their

touch intensified by the swirling music and the heat of the flames.

The moment was broken as they were suddenly lowered to the ground, standing before the fire. A chant of “jump, jump, jump” echoed through the crowd, mirroring the pounding of Gille’s heart. Callum was pulled away, turned towards the flames. “You must show us how it is done, mighty King of the May,” the crowd chanted.

With a final look at Gille that spoke volumes of his regret, Callum parted the crowd, giving himself room to run. The fire had shifted from ravenous flames to a bed of coals, searching for a new source of fuel.

Gille held her breath as Callum coiled his body. Before he raced for the flames, he spared her one last look, a look that told her he did this for her, and her alone.

Gille’s heart stumbled in her chest as he raced forward and leapt over the fire, high above the flames. Then he turned and completed a second jump, then a third, and a cheer rose from the crowd. “The king is triumphant!” A mug of ale was pressed into his hand by Tormod as he and his brothers drew Callum away from the fire to celebrate his victory. Gwendolyn and Fiona came to stand beside Gille, watching the men as they made merry and sang to the pipers’ song.

“‘Tis a rite of passage in this family—jumping the fire,” Gwendolyn said with a hint of laughter in her voice as she watched Alastair imitate the way Callum had set his face as he had accomplished the deed. “It has been hard for Alastair to see Callum as the man he now is. Tonight changed all that. You changed all that.” Gwendolyn’s gaze shifted to Gille. A gentle smile tugged at her lips.

“Only a blind man could not see the way the two of you look at each other. You care about Callum, do you not?” Fiona asked carefully.

“Aye,” Gille admitted. She had no reason to lie to the two women who had helped her

so much since coming to Dunvegan. “Though I do not know if he feels the same way.” She brought her suddenly trembling fingers to her mouth, as if doing so would hold back a tide of emotions that suddenly swamped her.

Fiona and Gwendolyn’s gazes filled with compassion, as if they knew all the things Gille did not say, all her fears, all her hopes for a future that might never be hers.

Gwendolyn placed a hand on Gille’s arm, lending comfort. “The MacLeod men are warriors; their bodies are honed by years of training and battle. They are fierce and fearless, their courage a legend among their people. Yet beneath their hardened exteriors, they carry a depth of emotion that few dare to glimpse. Our husbands, and your Callum, feel things deeply, their hearts as tender as their muscles are strong. But expressing their emotions is a challenge, a vulnerability they are reluctant to expose. They have been taught to mask their feelings, to bury them deep within, to present a stoic facade to the world.”

“Until someone comes along who changes all that,” Fiona said with warmth in her gaze. “For Callum, that person is you. Give him time and he will say what you long to hear.”

“I do not have time,” Gille replied, her voice barely a whisper.

She shifted her gaze to the darkened horizon, the weight of her situation pressing down on her. “Only a few hours more, at best, unless my curse is broken.” She pressed her lips together to hold back the tide of emotion that threatened to overwhelm her.

Gwendolyn offered an encouraging smile. “There was a time, not so long ago, when both Fiona and I thought we would never be free of the misery that surrounded us. We both felt as though we were doomed. But then, just when things looked their worst, Alastair and Tormod helped us reach for the happiness we craved. We each

found our happy ending, and you will too.”

“Have faith.” Fiona squeezed Gille’s hand then released it.

The words helped steel Gille’s resolve. Have faith. She did have faith in Callum, in the MacLeods, and in her own determination. They had gathered all the right pieces to solve this puzzle, they simply needed to put everything into play.

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“It is time,” Callum said as midnight approached. The Beltane celebration had died down and many of the castle’s residents had returned to their beds. Only the MacLeods remained along the shoreline staring into the remnants of the fire that had earlier burned so brightly.

When Minerva broke through the surface of the water she waddled onto the beach, Gille’s heart filled with anticipation. She watched in fascination as Minerva’s body transformed. Slowly, her seal pelt began to shift and change, its grey fur sloughing off. Her body elongated, her limbs stretching and morphing. Her tail disappeared, replaced by legs that shimmered with a silvery light. Her face softened, her features becoming more human.

When the transformation was complete, Minerva stood before them, a beautiful older woman with flowing green hair and dark, piercing eyes. A faint shimmer of moonlight played across her skin, giving her an ethereal glow.

Gille exchanged an excited glance with Callum. For a heartbeat she let reality slip. There was something unreal about the moment that she longed to hold on to. Something peaceful, something hopeful. Something that said there would be more nights like this with Callum at her side. Moments when nothing else mattered.

Callum put his hand over hers and stared into her eyes, extending the serenity of the moment. They would need all the serenity they could gather in the next few minutes if the song worked, and hours if it did not.

“Are you ready?” Callum asked, breaking the moment.

Gille nodded, as she released Callum's hand and went to stand at the water's edge with both Minerva and Lady Janet. She closed her eyes, blocking out all distractions, and started singing the words she had committed to memory. As she sang, the air around her seemed to vibrate with a magical energy as the veil between the human, spirit, and fairy realms thinned.

Gille's heart pounded with hope, but as the final note faded, she opened her eyes. Despair washed over Gille as she realised the song had failed to break the curse. Minerva remained in the form of an old woman, and Lady Janet remained a ghost.

"What about 'The Fairy Lullaby'?" Callum offered, his voice tight. "You had wanted to sing the two songs together."

The memory flared, and Gille cursed herself for not remembering sooner. She turned to Gwendolyn. "Will you sing with me? The tune is the same, only the words are different," she pleaded.

Gwendolyn nodded, her eyes filled with a flicker of hope. "Aye," she replied. "It is worth a try."

Callum reached for his mandolin and prepared to play. With a nod of gratitude, Gille and Gwendolyn began to sing as Callum played the melody, their voices blending in harmony. The ancient words of the selkies, combined with the lullaby given to the MacLeods by the fairies, and Callum's human ability to play, echoed through the night.

When the song ended, a hush fell over the shore as those gathered watched Gille, Minerva, and Lady Janet with expectation. Their anticipation was rewarded as Lady Janet's ghostly image began to fade, her ethereal form slowly dissolving into the mist. A collective sigh of relief escaped the MacLeods as they realised their mother's time in the human realm had finally ended.

“Mother,” Alastair said, his voice trembling as he and all her children gathered around her. “It is finally time for you to leave us. You deserve peace.”

His siblings nodded in agreement, their eyes filled with tears. They had grown to love their ghostly mother, but they knew she belonged in the afterlife.

Lady Janet smiled sadly. “ I know, my children, ” she replied. “ But it is difficult to leave you now that the moment has arrived. ”

“We will miss you,” Rowena said, her voice choked with emotion.

“But you must go,” Tormod insisted.

Orrick grabbed Keiran and Callum’s hands, holding them tightly. “You deserve to be at peace.”

Lady Janet nodded, her features fading further into mist. “ I will ,” she said. “ But before I go, I want you to promise me something .”

Her children gathered closer, their attention focused on their mother.

“ Promise me that you will always remember me ,” Lady Janet said. “ And that you will carry on the traditions of our clan .”

Alastair, Tormod, Orrick, Rowena, Keiran, and Callum nodded solemnly. “We promise,” they said in unison.

Lady Janet smiled, her ghostly form beginning to fade. “ I love you all ,” she said, and with a final wave of her hand, Lady Janet vanished into the mist, her spirit finally free from the earthly realm.

Her heart in her throat, Gille watched as the ghost disappeared. All their efforts had been worthwhile. Lady Janet was finally at peace.

A cry of joy from Minerva shifted their focus to the selkie as she stepped from the edge of the water and onto the beach. Her hair, once green, had transformed into a flowing cascade of silver. Her eyes, which had always been dark and mysterious, changed to a pale blue. And, her skin no longer glowed, taking on a pale, unblemished cream beneath the seaweed dress that covered her breasts and hips.

“It worked,” Minerva declared, her voice filled with wonder. She turned towards the loch to see the pod had gathered there. Lottie lurched forward, coming to rest at her mother’s newly human feet. “I can leave my worries to you, my dear.” She reached down and stroked her daughter’s silvery pelt. “With the changing of our roles, the selkies will have newfound protectors in the MacLeods.”

“I understand, Mother,” Lottie said with a catch in her voice. “But I will miss you.”

“Miss me?” Minerva laughed. “I will be with you every night when you transform and come upon the shores of the loch.”

“It will be different,” Lottie said sadly.

“Aye,” Minerva replied. “But this is what is best for you and for our people.”

Lottie nodded, then scooted back towards the others in the surf. They lifted their heads and barked a final farewell before disappearing into the water.

Minerva smiled, then squealed as she raced across the beach, displaying her newfound freedom. A gasp sounded when she stumbled over a rock and fell. Keiran hurried to her aid, lifting her to her feet.

Minerva paused, holding on to Keiran's arm, as she looked down at her knee. A small trickle of blood appeared on her skin. She smiled. "I am human."

"What will you do now?" Keiran asked, leading her back towards the others.

"I was hoping to stay with you all so that I can remain close to my family."

"We wouldn't have it any other way," Alastair said, as a cheer went up.

A hush fell over the beach. All eyes shifted to Gille.

Obviously, the song in three parts had worked for Lady Janet and Minerva. Did that mean it would work for her? She waited, trying to sense a change. When a tingling sensation came to her fingers, she stretched her hands before her. A shimmering light appeared at the ends of her fingers, but before it could spread up her arms, a dark mist blew across the water and enveloped her. A chilling laugh echoed through the air as the mist consolidated into Oberon.

The sound of steel against leather filled the air as the men drew their swords. Callum charged forward with an angry cry.

Oberon raised his hand and sent Callum flying backwards across the beach, then did the same to the other men before they could attack.

Isolde and Aria balanced on their feet, waiting for the right moment to strike as the air became charged with tension. "Release her," Aria growled. "You have no right to be here. Go back where you belong."

"And let your sister succeed? I think not," Oberon sneered. "Someone must pay for what you all did to me. I almost died."

“But you did not,” Aria countered. “You could have taken what we did to you as a warning. That perhaps you needed to change your overbearing ways.”

“Change?” His eyes bulged. “You expect me to acquiesce to your expectations of me? Me? Ruler of Fairyland. Maker of mischief. Master of magic?”

With a wave of his hand, the women flew backwards, joining the men.

Oberon turned to Gille, his face contorted with hatred. Fear fluttered in her stomach as she met his gaze. “You will pay for your insolence,” he hissed, his voice laced with venom.

While Oberon had been talking to the men, Aria and Isolde, Gille had discreetly inched up her skirt, her hand wrapping around the hilt of the dagger at her thigh. As Oberon stepped closer, she drew her dagger and aimed for the fairy king’s heart.

Oberon struck her weapon away with a flick of his hand, sending it spinning to the ground. But the blood that spilled from a wound on his arm told her she had struck him. He howled in pain, grabbing her hands with one of his own, his grip cruelly biting into her flesh. His eyes, glowing with a sinister light, fixed on Gille. “You thought you had won, didn’t you?” he taunted. “But I am not so easily defeated.”

With his other hand, he extended his palm towards the horizon, beginning to recite ancient words. As he raised his hand, a sinister energy began to gather in the air. The sky erupted in a fiery display, the dawn coming with a blinding intensity. The world seemed to freeze for a moment, the air thick, suffocating. Then, with a deafening roar, the sun burst over the horizon, casting its harsh light upon the land.

A searing pain shot through Gille as the light touched her skin. Her flesh began to harden, her limbs stretching and morphing. Her hair turned into leaves, her fingers transforming into gnarled branches. With a final, anguished cry, Gille was consumed

by the transformation, her body becoming a towering beech tree.

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Callum watched in horror as Gille transformed. His heart shattered into a million pieces, the pain almost unbearable. He had failed her, failed their love. He did love her, he realised as the most profound sense of joy countered his pain. He'd never had the chance to tell her how he felt, to show her one last time what she truly meant to him.

Now, she would live out her days along the shores of the loch, a constant reminder of his failure. His heart ached with a deep, consuming sorrow. He had lost her, and he knew he would never be able to forgive himself. Tears streamed down his face, blurring his vision. He sank to his knees, his body trembling with grief, allowing his tears to fall upon her bark.

As he stared down at the form Gille had become, a part of him hoped she could hear his silent plea for forgiveness. He would spend the rest of his days caring for her, hoping that somehow, she could feel his devotion even from beyond.

With his next heartbeat, his grief shifted to something else. The need for revenge. He tensed as his hand found his dagger, ready to exact penance for the fulfilment of Gille's curse. He flexed, ready to strike, then paused when a small root lifted from the ground, covering his hand. A voice, Gille's voice, drifted across his mind. Revenge is what trapped me here. Do not let that sentiment continue.

Before Callum could react to the slim branch that touched his flesh, evidence that Gille was still somehow with them, a shimmering portal opened beside the tree. Titania, the queen of the fairies, stepped through, followed by several male fairies. Her face was flushed with anger as she glared at Oberon. "How dare you get in the way of true connection, true love," she exclaimed, her voice filled with venom. "Your

actions have caused great harm.”

Callum looked beyond the newly arrived fairy to see Alastair and Tormod circulating amongst the others, gathering the iron bracelets from their arms. Callum had to keep himself from smiling. Where their swords had been ineffective against the powerful fairy king, the simple protective pieces could very well be their best defence. His gaze connected with Alastair’s, a brief nod communicating that he understood what he had to do.

Titania’s gaze locked with Oberon’s. “You will no longer interfere in the lives of the MacLeods,” she declared, her voice filled with authority. “I have grown quite fond of them in the past few years, and I will not have you meddling with them any longer.”

Oberon sneered. “I will do as I please,” he replied, his voice dripping with arrogance.

Titania’s eyes narrowed. “We shall see,” she said, her tone laced with a hint of menace. With a wave of her hand, she summoned a shimmering barrier that enveloped Oberon, trapping him in place.

Alastair and Tormod took advantage of the moment, tossing Callum the bracelets. While Oberon remained suspended, Callum quickly secured the iron bands around both of the fairy king’s wrists and up his arms.

Oberon cried out in pain as the metal singed his flesh and weakened him so when the barrier faded, he was too weak to do anything but stumble forward, leaning against the woman who had betrayed him. “I’ll have your head for this,” he growled.

“No, you will not.” Titania smiled as she signalled the other fairies to come forward and secure Oberon with ropes about his waist. “I am making the decisions now. Instead, you will be taken back to Fairyland and locked in a tower for as long as it takes for you to change your ways.”

As Titania's men secured Oberon, Titania approached Alastair. "Your bravery in sacrificing yourself for your clan, and for Graeme, is truly commendable. You used the last of the Fairy Flag's magic to save your people."

"It was my duty as a leader," Alastair replied modestly. "I simply did what was necessary."

Titania arched an eyebrow. "As a reward for your leadership and Oberon's part in provoking the English attack, I will restore what you lost. The castle wall will be rebuilt, and the Fairy Flag will be renewed."

With a flick of her wrist, the golden stones scattered on the beach rolled uphill and reassembled the wall. The Fairy Flag then shimmered and glowed. "The MacLeods may use the flag's magic once more, but this time, no one will need to pass into Fairyland. The flagbearer will be safe."

Alastair's face lit up. He bowed to the fairy queen. "Thank you for your generosity, Titania."

"Your gratitude is appreciated," she said. "By preserving fairy lore, you ensure the fairies' magic endures. Belief in our existence is vital to our power."

Alastair nodded solemnly. "The MacLeods will dedicate themselves to preserving fairy lore on Skye and beyond."

As her men escorted Oberon away, Titania looked upon the MacLeods. "I will miss watching all of you." She turned to Callum. "Especially you and Gille," she said with a wink, then turned to go.

"Wait," Callum cried out. "You must change Gille back. If you care for her then you cannot leave her like this."

Titania stepped into the portal, and as she started to disappear, she said, “You need no other magic than love to set her free.”

What did she mean? He did love her and that hadn’t been enough. Callum’s throat tightened as he turned to Alastair. “The Fairy Flag. Please let us use its newly restored magic to reverse Gille’s curse.”

“That will not be necessary,” Alastair said, motioning for Callum to turn around.

Callum turned, his heart in his throat at the sight unfolding before him. Bathed in the golden light of sunrise, the branches of the beech tree softened, its leaves transforming into shimmering strands of hair, devoid of her previous white streak. The bark peeled away, revealing the smooth, delicate skin of a woman until Gille emerged. He had thought her beautiful in the past, but now she was transformed as nature endowed her with more grace and elegance than before. And the leaves that had once been her hair now adorned her head like a crown, a symbol of her resilience and strength.

Callum approached her, his eyes wide with wonder. His heart filled with a love so profound it seemed to transcend words. “Gille,” he whispered, his voice trembling with emotion.

Gille lifted her face to his and her magnificent green eyes filled with tears. “We did it. We broke the curse.”

Callum took a step closer, his hand trailed along the curve of her cheek. She leaned into his touch and looked up at him then. Gratitude brightened her eyes, bathed him in an unfamiliar light. His chest tightened. Images of their time together tumbled through his brain. He saw her bathed in sunlight as they searched the forest, wreathed in moonlight as they celebrated Beltane Eve. He saw her lying against the coverlet of his bed with desire in her eyes, waiting for him to pull her into his arms, wrap her in

his warmth, and reveal the greatest mystery of life to her.

An emotion both intense and primal surged inside him. It was an emotion he had never expected to feel after all those long, lonely days tending the castle while his brothers were away. He let the emotion form, swirl inside him, warm him in places that had dulled to anything other than survival. It burst from him on a breath and seemed to fill the very air around him. “I love you,” Callum said, his voice firm and unwavering.

“And I love you,” he heard her say over the thunder of his heart. She blinked back tears. “I had never thought I would hear those words from you.”

His lips came down, claiming a kiss that was both urgent and gentle. When he pulled back, he smiled down at her. “I might not have said the words, but tell me you felt them in my touch, read them in my eyes, heard them in my voice.”

She returned his smile. “Every day since we first met.”

He brushed his lips across her brow and smoothed her hair back from her cheeks. “If I have not said the words enough, then I promise you will hear them every day. I love you, Gille. Always and forever. I cannot image another sunrise without you at my side.”

“I can think of no place I would rather be,” she replied, her voice filled with warmth.

And as if in response to their newly made commitment, the charred, skeletal remains of the trees regenerated until the woodlands were once again the lush and vibrant landscape they had been before the fire.

With a sense of wonder, Gille and Callum watched the sun continue to rise. Pink and golden light flared, sending the warming rays of the sun over them. Callum pulled

Gille against his chest as they looked out over Loch Dunvegan. The water, still and calm, mirrored the colours of the sky, shimmering like liquid fire.

“This sunrise was almost stolen from us,” Gille said with no hint of dismay, only a newfound hope in her voice.

“It is a gift. This new day and all those to follow.” Callum held her close, never wanting to fear he would lose her again.

“Perhaps we should make a habit of this, coming out every morning and watching the sun rise, to remind us of what almost slipped through our fingers.”

Callum agreed, his heart filled with a sense of peace and contentment. As they watched the sun climb higher in the sky, they knew that their love was stronger than any challenge that might come their way.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 9:47 am

Callum and Gille paused their journey through the forest near Dunvegan. Callum dismounted, then assisted Gille, and together they ventured into the heart of the forest, where Gille had made her home before that.

Earlier that morning, the couple had exchanged marriage vows amidst their loving family. It was a day Gille had dreamed of during her isolation in the forest, filled with acceptance and affection.

Tomorrow, Gille and Callum would sail on the Clidna with Marcus, Rowena, and their young son for a honeymoon adventure. Callum's sister and brother-in-law had promised to share breathtaking sunrises with them.

While Gille was eager to explore new horizons with her husband, she knew that no sunrise, no matter where they travelled, could ever surpass the magical sunrises they had already experienced together at Dunvegan.

Their leaving was the reason for their trip to the forest today. There was one task Gille had yet to accomplish to put her old life, and the curse, behind her. When they came to the place beside the old beech tree that had once sheltered Lottie's sealskin, Gille stopped and reached for the bundle she had tied to her back.

With a sense of finality, Gille unfurled her cloak and laid it gently on the forest floor. She brushed her fingers over the supple leather that she had camouflaged with a patchwork of moss, leaves, and vines. This cloak had seen her through a difficult time, but it was time to let it go. To give it back to the forest she had created it out of.

She knelt beside her garment, her heart heavy with emotion. Callum lowered himself

beside her. “This cloak is a part of you,” she whispered to the trees above her and the vegetation below, her voice barely audible. “I give it back to the forest, from whence it came.”

As she spoke, the cloak seemed to meld with the earth, its fibres intertwining with the roots of the ancient trees. A ripple of energy spread through the forest, a subtle hint of magic that seemed to invigorate everything around where she and Callum knelt.

Bluebells, wood anemone, bog myrtle, and thistle rose up from the forest floor and bloomed, their vibrant blues, white, yellows, and purples contrasting with the lush green of the mossy forest floor. Birdsong filled the air, a joyous chorus that echoed through the trees. Red deer, pine martens, and wild boar, drawn by the magical energy, emerged from their hiding places, their curiosity piqued.

As the sun shone overhead, casting dappled light through the boughs of the trees, Gille and Callum watched in awe as the forest transformed around them. It was as if the very essence of the land had been rejuvenated once again with the gift of Gille’s cloak.

“There,” she said, sitting back on her heels. “It is back where it belongs.” She paused, wondering how long the two of them would be away from this special place and all who lived there. “How long will we be away?”

Callum stood and helped her to her feet. “How does two months sound?”

“It sounds wonderful. Long enough to see many things, but also long enough to miss what we left behind.”

Callum pulled her into his arms, holding her against his heart. “If you are worried about the forest, we can ask Aria to come watch over it?”

“Will you be bored being gone so long, or worried about neglecting your business

affairs?”

“Alastair has taken back most of the estate dealings since his return, and the few I still oversee, Tormod has agreed to take on,” Callum said, then added, “When we return, Tormod and Fiona will head to their new home at Ulster Castle as the construction is nearing completion.”

“What about Orrick? Will he feel put aside by your choice of leaving Tormod in charge of your affairs?”

Callum shook his head. “Orrick and Isolde leave tomorrow for Dunshee Castle. With more English regiments coming into the Highlands every day, they wanted to get back to their castle and prepare the English prisoners there for travel. The MacLeods do not need to be caught harbouring English captives. When we return from our honeymoon, Marcus will sail with them to Spain or perhaps Iceland. He is not certain which, but he intends to give them enough funds to start a new life.

“That is kind of him. Marcus has very deep pockets.”

“The man is richer than all of us combined as a result of his treasure-hunting days.” Callum laughed. “Does it bother you that I am nowhere near as wealthy?”

“We have everything we need.”

“Aye. We do.” He gathered her close and pressed a possessive kiss to her lips with a reverence that touched her soul. “What about Keiran and Rosalyn?” she asked when she caught her breath.

“Alastair is teaching Keiran how to run the estate. When Tormod leaves, he will pick up the business I oversaw for the estate. He and Rosalyn will be an integral part of Dunvegan in the future.”

Gille nodded. "That is good. Keiran needs Dunvegan to continue to heal him after living in the fairy realm for so long." It seemed every one of the MacLeod children was settled in a new life, except for Callum. "And what about you?" she asked not bothering to hide her concern. "With your mother finally at peace, and your business affairs being turned over to Keiran eventually, I worry that you will be at a loss."

"It will be difficult for me," he said dryly. "Without poring over estate papers or worrying about my mother, how shall I occupy my time?" he added as his hands slid to her waist and over her thighs, caressing her, reminding her of the intimacy they had shared last night.

Heat flooded her cheeks. "I am being serious, Callum."

He instantly sobered. "You like it here in the woods?"

"Of course. This was my home for a year," she reminded him. "Though I like it better now that I may go beyond its borders without fear of turning into a tree."

"And you would be happy staying here at Dunvegan?"

"As long as I knew you were content."

He pressed a kiss to her nose before releasing her only to sweep her into his arms. "Hide your eyes. I have a wedding surprise for you."

Gille did as instructed and buried her face in the folds of his tartan. She could tell by the crunch of leaves on the forest floor that he took her into the nearby clearing that overlooked the loch. He stopped, then said, "Open your eyes."

Gille looked around. At first, she could see nothing, then she narrowed her gaze, seeing someone had outlined the boundaries of a space with rocks.

“If you agree, we will build a home here and start a new life together.”

As the wind whipped through her hair, Gille stood beside Callum on the windswept cliff overlooking the loch. Her heart raced with excitement as she imagined their children playing in the lush gardens, their laughter echoing through the halls of their future home.

“It is more than I could have ever dreamed of,” she whispered, her voice barely audible over the roar of the wind.

Callum took her hand, his eyes filled with love. “I want us to build a family here, Gille. A family that is different. A family that bridges the gap between humans and fairies. I want our children to grow up here, surrounded by the beauty of the isle, and to learn to protect everything that lives here.”

Gille’s eyes filled with tears of happiness. “I would love that, Callum. More than anything.” She moved into his open arms, knowing it was where she wanted to stay forever.

“I want to start an endowment, to make good on our promise to Minerva and to Lottie, to protect not just the seals, but all animals that live off the land and the sea. Marcus has agreed to be our first investor.” He gazed into her face, waiting for her approval.

She nodded, not trusting her voice as she thought back to all the pain she had endured over the years, all the challenges she had overcome. Yet, it was going through these trials that had brought her to this moment. The love she now held in her heart, the family she was building, and the boundless happiness that awaited her were a testament to her resilience. The misery she had endured would be repaid a hundredfold, as she was about to embark on a life overflowing with joy and fulfilment beyond her wildest dreams with the man she loved.

Overwhelmed with emotion, she finally managed to say, “It is more than I ever dreamed possible.”

Callum drew her close, pressing another kiss to her lips. “Love makes anything possible, my dearest. Anything at all.”

The End