



Tangled Up with the Highlander (Secrets of A Highlander's Heart #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: He thought he would never love again... Then he fell for the lass he must give up to save his clan.

Desperate to keep his children and clan from starving, Laird Alasdair MacLachlan joins the ranks of mercenaries searching for the missing lass of a powerful clan. The mission seems simple—find the lass, return her to her family, and claim the hefty reward. But when fate throws bow and arrow wielding Sorch MacGregor in his path, he's about to discover how complicated one mule-headed, beguiling beauty can make things. For a man who has lost and loved and has no interest in doing either ever again, he's confounded by the desire the opinionated woman awakens in him, and he's shocked to discover his heart might not be permanently frozen after all. But his duty to his family and clan must come before all else, and that means sticking to the plan. Or is that just an excuse to avoid burying his painful past and taking a risk on a new future? One thing is certain—if he doesn't figure it out soon, Sorch MacGregor will be lost to him forever.

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Dunstaffnage Castle, Scotland

He had to protect the lass.

Arrows whistled past Archibald Stewart as he clutched Margaret Stewart to his chest with one hand and urged his beast into an all-out gallop with the other.

“Want Mama!” Margaret cried, her chubby little toddler hand curling around his bicep as she pressed her wet face into his neck. “Want Mama. Want Mama.”

He didn’t know a blessed thing about calming crying bairns, but he cast his mind to the times he’d seen Lady Stewart do such a thing for one of her children. He wished he’d paid more heed, devil take it, but by the gods, he didn’t think there was any reasonable way he could have ever imagined he’d be in a position to soothe a wailing child. He was a lifelong stablemaster wed to the barn, not a wife. And he had liked it that way.

But now treachery had changed everything.

Now he had a new job, given to him by his laird this night, and he would give his life to see it to completion if need be. But he needed to stay alive long enough to get little Margaret away from her family’s besieged stronghold and safely hidden, as Laird Stewart had bid him to do.

Behind him, the thundering of horses’ hooves pounded in his ear, and even as he

urged his destrier faster, toward the distant shores of Broadford and the inn where he planned to sleep, Archibald glanced over his shoulder to see how many enemy warriors were in pursuit. As he did, arrows struck him in the side of the neck and in his chest, right above his heart. Fiery pain shot through him and sent sparks of heat from his neck and chest, and through his veins, to every part of his body. He let out a grunt as he turned back around, and his grip on his horse's reins loosened a bit as his hand went numb.

"God's blood," he muttered. He was in real trouble. He had to get the arrows out, but he couldn't slow his destrier with four warriors chasing him. He needed to pull the arrows out as he rode. He glanced down at the fiery red hair on Margaret's head. She had her face turned now so that her right cheek was pressed against his chest, and he could see her rubbing her nose, which was cute and upturned like her mama's. Could a two-year-old bairn follow directions? He didn't know, but he had to try.

He pulled air into his lungs, and the wheeze of his breath made him grimace. That wasn't good. He'd been a warrior once, before he'd gotten older and Laird Stewart had kindly moved him to the position of stablemaster, but in all his years in the stables, he had not forgotten the sounds of dying men. They wheezed.

"Margaret," he said, sounding like a raspy wench. When the little lass did not turn her face up to him, he took another breath to try again as he reached the edge of the woods where, with a little luck, he'd lose his pursuers in the thick canopy of trees. "Margaret," he said again, the numbness in his hand inching its way up his arm. With a will he didn't know he still possessed, he managed to keep his grip closed enough to maintain his hold of the reins. He scanned the shadowy trails as the trees flew by them, trying to decide which one provided the best hope of achieving his goal. Both trails to the left would lead him to Broadford, but the farthest one wound down by the river and was more overgrown. It was longer, but it offered the best cover. He pulled the reins far enough to lead the horse onto the trail, but he broke a sweat with his effort and his grip loosened even more. He had to remove the arrows from his body.

He didn't know if it was the one in his neck or chest that was causing him to go numb, but it didn't rightly matter. He'd pull both out.

"Margaret!" he growled, and the lass started wailing once more. "Shh, lassie!" he hissed. Her crying would lead the enemies straight to them if they got close enough. What had her mama called her? He searched through his mind, which was a lot like walking through sludge, but then he recalled what he needed. "Mags," he said, doing his best to make his tone soothing. "Mags, I need ye to be a good lassie and aid me," he said, urging Lionheart up the hill by tapping the beast in his sides. "Mags, look at me, lassie," he tried again as they crested the top and started around the winding path. He glanced down to find the child's large gaze fixed curiously on him. He let out a sigh of relief that made him cough and caused Margaret to pucker her lips. "Old Archibald is in trouble, Mags."

"Ye did a nay-nay?" she asked, sucking her cheeks in like he'd seen her do when she was at the stables watching her eldest brother Ross have his riding lessons.

He smiled at her question. "Aye. I turned around like a fool and got myself shot by the enemy."

"Bad men. Mama says bad men. I want mama." Her voice held a quiver, but he did not dare look down at the lass. They were nearing the section of the trail where it split, and he needed to ensure Lionheart galloped toward the right. Though if any animal was smart enough to choose correctly, it would be his faithful horse.

"Yer mama is right and braw. I need ye to be braw. And dunnae cry. I'll get ye a treat at the inn, but only if ye stay braw, aye?" he finished, guiding Lionheart onto the right trail, which immediately swallowed them in shadows as the remaining twilight was blocked by the large overhanging tree limbs. He took a chance and stole a look over his shoulder once more. The surge of relief at the bare trail behind him made his skin tingle. He turned back around but did not slow. He dared not. He may have lost

the enemy for now, but that didn't mean it was for good. "I have to let go of ye, Mags, but I need ye to wrap yer arms around me and hold tight. Can ye do that?"

"Aye," came an eager reply.

"Wrap yer arms around me now," he instructed as Lionheart raced deeper into the shadows of the thickest part of the woods.

Margaret's arms came around his waist, and then she surprised him by wrapping her legs around him, too. He released his hold on her but kept his hand close until he felt fairly certain she wouldn't fall. When she didn't, he brought his good hand up to his neck, and his fingers met with the slick warmth of his blood. He'd not worry now. He didn't have the time or luxury to worry. He felt around the arrow, judging it wasn't too deep, and, gripping it and clenching his teeth until they throbbed, he gave a mighty yank. White-hot pain shot through his neck and exploded in his head as the arrow dislodged from his flesh. Immediately, warm trails ran down his skin. The blood flowed fast and free.

Throwing the arrow into the darkness, he reached down to the edge of his plaid, jerked it clumsily off as Lionheart pounded over rough terrain, and then did his best to wind the plaid around his neck. He panted, and little specks of white light appeared in his vision. He blinked several times, and when he opened his eyes, he realized they'd exited the deep part of the woods for the river trail. The temperature dropped near the water, and even at the fast pace they were traveling, the loud buzz and chirps of the night creatures filled his ears along with the rapid thumping of hooves. It was an oddly soothing cacophony.

"I tired," Mags said, drawing his attention to her. She was still gripping him tightly with her little arms and legs, and her cherub face was turned up to him. There was just enough moonlight that he could see her eyes had indeed drooped with her need for sleep.

“Ye can sleep soon, lass,” he said, and prayed it was true. He hoped removing the next arrow would bring the feeling in his hand back, so he could properly clutch the lass. “Hold tight just a minute longer, aye?”

“Aye, Papa,” the little lass said in a groggy voice.

Archibald’s heart squeezed. He knew little Mags was exhausted and confused, but hearing her call him Papa did something funny to him. If he’d ever had a daughter, he would have wanted her to be just like this pretty little lass. She was sweet-natured, though he had seen her stubborn side in her interactions with her family. No, not stubborn—independent. Her independent streak would likely serve her well, if her mama and papa were killed this night by the treacherous Lord of the Isle, a man who had turned out to be a wolf in disguise and not any sort of true friend to little Margaret’s father. If their deaths came to pass, she’d have to be kept hidden until things settled. She’d no longer have all the servants she was accustomed to as daughter of a great laird, and it could be a while before she ever did again.

Pain pushed the thought away, and Archibald realized he was having a hard time keeping his thoughts on the task at hand. He looked down at the arrow sticking out of his chest and his blood-soaked tunic. He tried to take a deep breath before pulling the arrow out, but it was like trying to get wine from an empty wine skin. Fear curled in his gut. He was dying. He didn’t know how he knew, but the truth of it settled in him. He had to get the lass out of these woods, and it was especially important to get her branded tonight as her papa had instructed. If the worst should happen and she was separated from Archibald, her family would know her by the L3 on her arm. L3. L3 . He repeated it over and over, not remembering the exact meaning, and he gripped the arrow and pulled again. It resisted, but he didn’t quit. He couldn’t.

He tugged harder and groaned at the god-awful pain of it. The head of the arrow ripped his insides apart as he pulled it out. It finally released, and he grunted as a wave of black washed over him and sucked him under.

“Papa, Papa, Papa, Papa!”

The wailing woke him up. Archibald was utterly disoriented. It was dark, and he was being jostled, and everything seemed to burn with pain. Then he recalled where he was and what he’d been tasked with, and he glanced down, seeing a tear-streaked face in the moonlight turned up to him. Margaret’s lip trembled, and she was clutching him.

“Shh,” he said, the slur of his words clear to him in his ears. “I’m all better now.” He tried to reach for Lionheart’s reins. He must have let them go when he’d passed out, but they had hooked on the sheath of his dagger. He tested his fingers, flexing and curling them with effort, and found that he could use his hand a bit better than before. He reached for the reins, hissing with pain at the movement. He grasped them and wound them around his hand should he pass out a second time.

He glanced behind him, sure he was going to see the enemies closing in, but darkness greeted him and nothing more. When he faced forward again, he was surprised to see the break in the woods, which dumped them on the path leading straight to Broadford. Fighting against the urge to close his eyes and give in to sleep, which beckoned him away from the pain, he pulled Margaret more securely to him and gave Lionheart a sharp tap to the sides, signaling the beast to run with all his might.

Lionheart did not disappoint. He took off, grass and dirt flying up on either side of him as he raced down the path toward the sea village and safety. The horse had an instinct for night riding and was an excellent jumper, so Archibald had to do little more than hold the reins, which was a very good thing because after being jostled, his entire body pounded with excruciating pain and his breathing was so labored he felt as if someone were holding a plaid over his nose and mouth. He was hot but also cold, so he suspected he was feverish as sweat dampened his skin. He summoned the strength to sing a tune to the lassie, and he was pleased that she quieted. By the time the village of Broadford came into sight, Margaret was slumped against him, asleep.

He prayed he correctly remembered where the tavern was, and he turned Lionheart down the cobbled road that led to the edge of the sea. He smelled the water before he could see it. Tucked between a church and metalsmith shop sat the Boat of Garten Inn. He remembered it clearly from the last time he'd traveled through here to visit his sister five years prior.

As he led Lionheart to the inn, a new sort of heaviness overcame his limbs and deep coldness set in, as did an urgency to see to the lass's welfare. A man holding a torch came toward him when he stopped in front of the inn. If Archibald had to guess, he'd say the man was younger than he was, but not fresh in years. He looked to be around thirty-five summers with a head still full of black hair, but a face lined around the eyes and forehead indicating he had seen many a day in the sun and likely a plate full of life's troubles. His thick eyebrows turned down, giving him a look of wariness that matched that of his dark eyes.

He inclined his head and said, "I'm Dougray, the stablemaster." His gaze travelled slowly over Archibald, eyes widening, Archibald assumed, at his blood-soaked tunic. Dougray's attention fell to Margaret, and he smiled, then focused back on Archibald and frowned. "Trouble find ye and yer daughter upon the road?"

"Aye," Archibald replied. "We were attacked."

The man nodded and spit. "Damn thieves swarm those woods."

"Aye," Archibald agreed, because it was the truth, though not the particular truth of his plight this night. "Ye dunnae happen to have a healer in residence, do ye?"

"Nae a healer exactly, but Martha, the innkeeper's wife, kens a thing or two about the arts, and she's been working to learn more."

Relief hit Archibald, and he went to dismount, but he didn't have the strength to do so

and hold the sleeping lassie. He was, in fact, dangerously close to succumbing to darkness, if the waves of heat, the sweat on his body, and the specks of light dancing in his vision were any indication. “Can ye take the lass from me while I dismount?” He didn’t want to give Margaret to a stranger, but he felt like he might drop to the ground, and he’d hate to fall while holding her.

“I’ll do ye one better than that, my lord. I’ll carry the wee lass into the inn for ye. Ye look as if ye’re about to drop off that horse.”

Archibald chuckled softly at that, but that little motion shot pain through his body. “I’m nae a lord,” he said, handing the sleeping Margaret to the man after Dougray had tied up Lionheart. Archibald watched as Dougray carefully took the little lady in his arms. He held her in a way that reminded Archibald of how his laird had held his daughter, as if she were the most fragile thing in the world.

“Ye have children?” Archibald asked, more sliding off his horse than dismounting, but even that effort made the world tilt for a moment, so he leaned against Lionheart until the ground righted itself once more.

“Nay, but I have three sisters, all younger than me, and I did my share of holding the little lasses.” Those words eased Archibald immensely. “Can ye walk into the inn yerself?” Dougray asked.

“Aye,” Archibald said. He wasn’t certain he could, but he had his pride. When Dougray turned toward the stairs, Archibald was relieved to find he felt steadier than he had a moment ago. In fact, he was suddenly full of energy once more, and that scared him. He’d seen enough men die to recall that many had a burst of energy before death. He unhooked his satchel from the horse, and then he turned to follow Dougray up the stairs. As he walked, he considered all he needed to do.

The inn was quiet, as the hour was late. There weren’t any patrons in the downstairs

parlor, but a fire was crackling, and the inn smelled of citrus and bread, which made Archibald think suddenly upon the sweet treats his mama used to make him as a young lad. He was still reminiscing as he followed Dougray to a desk where a woman with pale blonde hair stood. As she looked up from what she'd been writing, her brown eyes went wide, and her lips parted. She fluttered a hand to her mouth, aghast at the blood on his tunic and neck. He was sure he looked close to meeting his maker, which he probably was and was why his next words were so important.

“My daughter and I were attacked by bandits.”

“Oh, my gracious!” the woman exclaimed and rushed around the desk to hold her arms out to Dougray. “If ye will let me take the lass, I’ll tend to her wounds.”

“She was luckily nae wounded,” Archibald whispered so that they would do the same. He didn’t want to wake Margaret. What he needed to do would cause her pain, and he’d rather her be asleep when it began.

“Thanks to the gods!” the woman exclaimed, shoving a lock of her blonde hair behind her ear before she took the lass from Dougray. “How can I aid ye?” the woman asked, even as she looked down at Margaret, who was still sound asleep.

“Do ye have a room to let for the night?” he asked.

“Aye,” she said. “I can take ye up directly. We’ll settle the details later when ye’re feeling better. If ye need my aid, I ken a bit of the healing arts.”

“I’d be grateful if ye could clean and bandage my wounds, and possibly bring up some food for the lass for when she wakes.”

“Aye,” she said, glancing down at Margaret once more. He could see a smile pulling at her lips. “I’ll take ye up to yer room and then go gather my supplies, as well as

some food. Come on, then,” she said, and she turned, but as she did, he saw her lean down and smell Margaret. She grinned. “I just love the way little children smell like sunshine and goodness. I wish, well—” She gave a shake of her head. “It dunnae matter what I wish.” She turned on her heel with a glance back at him. “Follow me.”

“I’ll take good care of yer destrier,” Dougray said to Archibald’s back.

He paused and looked to Dougray for a moment. “Thank ye,” he said, meaning it, and because he was sure he’d not ever ride his faithful horse again, he said, “His name is Lionheart. He’s a verra loyal horse.” With that, he continued behind Martha, up the stairs and down a short hall, then through the door she’d opened while still holding Margaret.

He entered the sparsely lit room, and the first thing he saw was the burning fireplace. He would need to utilize that momentarily to brand Margaret. His stomach knotted at the thought of doing as her da instructed, but it had to be done, and better now than later. Though he was feeling surprisingly better, he didn’t trust it, and he could leave nothing to chance. As Martha settled Margaret on the center of the bed and pulled a coverlet up to her little chin, he sorted how to best ask for what he needed and decided to be direct. The woman seemed a kind sort, honest. He prayed he was judging correctly, given Margaret’s welfare could be in her hands for a time.

“If I wrote a message to my sister in the next town over, do ye have anyone who could take it to her? I could pay them coin and tell them exactly where to find her.”

“Aye, Dougray could do it,” she said, glancing from Margaret to him. “Is that where the two of ye were traveling when ye were attacked?”

“Aye,” he said, sitting down because suddenly his legs didn’t feel as strong as they had.

“And ye need yer sister to aid ye?”

He nodded. “With the lass until I’m stronger to travel.” That wasn’t a total lie. He wanted to know a message was going to his sister about Margaret, who she was, the circumstances of why she had to be hidden, and how she could not be brought out of hiding until it was safe. When her father was settled once more in his home as laird, she could return. Or, if her father had been killed, Archibald would discover if there were more enemies than the Lord of the Isles, and figure out where to send her until her older brother could rise up and one day reclaim the lairdship when he came of age. Archibald would write it and seal it. That was the best he could do.

“I’ll gather ye something to write with—”

“There’s nae a need,” he said. “I’ve some supplies.” His laird had insisted he bring a quill and parchment. It was as if Laird Stewart had known it might come to this when he’d had him bring the branding iron and the missive supplies.

“I’ll go collect the supplies to treat ye, and then I’ll return.”

The lady had kind, worried eyes, and he knew she meant well, but he needed her away long enough for him to brand Margaret and write his missive. He tried to think of what to say to keep her gone long enough, but his thoughts were suddenly like slippery fish. He pushed his fingers to his temple and inhaled a long breath, catching the thought. “If ye’ll bring supper as well.”

“Ye’re certain ye dunnae wish me to treat ye first?” she asked, her gaze wandering slowly over him and stopping at his neck. He resisted the urge to touch it.

“Aye,” he replied.

“As ye wish,” she said, and with a parting glance at Margaret, she turned and exited

the room.

The moment the dark wood door closed behind the lady, he took his satchel off his shoulder and plodded to the only chair in the bedchamber, where his heavy limbs fell to a seat. Was his breathing becoming more labored? It certainly felt like it. After digging around for a moment, he withdrew what he needed to write to his sister and set to penning the missive, explaining who Margaret was and what to do for her. As he was leaning over the parchment, a drop of blood dripped onto the paper and then another. He raised his hand to his neck, and his fingers met sodden material. He'd bled through the plaid he'd tied around his neck. That couldn't be good. A sense of urgency filled him, so he quickly sealed the completed missive and set it on the tiny wooden desk in the room.

He then retrieved the branding iron from his satchel, heated it to the appropriate temperature in the fire, and went to the bed to kneel beside the sleeping lass. He carefully pulled the coverlet down and tugged her gown down to expose just her right shoulder. "Forgive me, lass," he whispered and set the iron to her bare skin.

She awoke instantly, eyes wide as a shriek of fear and pain ripped from her. Sickness rose inside him. Never in all his years had he done harm to a woman or child, and though he knew the brand was necessary to ensure she could be identified should the worst occur, it made him ill. He finished the L and then the 3, as her wails filled the room, and then he gathered her, squirming and flailing, into his arms.

He was sweating and panting as he stumbled around the room, searching for a water basin. He finally found one and tripped his way toward it while the room tilted left and right. "Shh, Mags. Shh. I'll wet the hurt, and it will start to feel better." He found a rag in front of the basin, dipped it in, and pressed it to her injury. Her wails continued with high-pitched shrieks as he tried to soothe her. Whatever strength had come back to him seemed to be stolen by what he'd just done. He made his way to the bed, fearing he might fall while holding her, but he managed to sit and then lay

back, bringing her with him.

His body pulsed to life with pain, and before him, images flashed as if they were real and touchable. His mama, who was long dead, and his papa appeared. Madge was next, and that made him sigh. He'd loved her as a lad, and she'd loved another. His old dog and the fastest destrier he'd ever owned, whom he'd lost in battle ten years prior, appeared. The images came and came, and he lay there, holding the lass and soothing her as best he could until his tunic was soaked with her tears. Her wailing finally gave way to soft, muffled crying, which eventually changed to babbling "mama, mama" and occasional sniffing.

She was going to be all right.

He'd done all he needed to. Dougray would get the missive to his sister, and she would come for Mags.

He was too tired to keep his eyes open a moment longer. He shut them and let the sweet dark oblivion take him.

"Dougray," Martha said.

The stablemaster, feeding the injured stranger's horse, stood upright. "Aye, mistress?"

"When ye finish with the horse, come up to the second floor, far corner room. The stranger has a missive for ye to take to his sister."

"Aye, mistress," Dougray said with his typical compliance. Of course, he could be no less than compliant. He was stuck here for life, just like she was. She'd foolishly chosen to wed her husband and give him all the power men were accorded over their wives and their property, and Dougray had once tried to steal food from the inn to

feed his starving sisters. His sentence for the crime, from the crooked town leader, who was a friend of her husband's, had been either hanging or a life service to her husband. Dougray had chosen life service, and she knew he sent most of the pitiful coin he received from kindly guests to his sisters who were now wed, but poor.

"I imagine he may give ye coin for yer troubles," she added, eyeing the stranger's beast. It looked to be a fine destrier, the sort that belonged to a man with plenty of coin. Mayhap the Highlander would give some coin to her as well in thanks for her care of him. She didn't care what he had said, he needed tending immediately with that blood seeping from his neck. And the poor wee lassie needed a woman watching out for her tonight with her da injured so. With these things in mind, Martha hurried away without waiting for a reply from Dougray, and collected supplies, and quickly gathered some supper because the wee lassie might wake and be sore fussy if her belly was empty. Martha's arms were so full that she couldn't see in front of her, but that hardly mattered. She knew the way. She rushed up the old, narrow wooden steps, each one squeaking beneath her weight. The steps needed to be repaired just like everything else at the inn. If only her husband were not so lazy.

"Where are ye going?"

Martha nearly jumped out of her skin at the sound of her husband's curt tone above her. She had to adjust the armload of supplies even to see him. There he was, the usual scowl on his face, his tunic dirty, his hair unkempt, and his startling blue eyes—his best feature and the reason she'd fallen for him—narrowed at her. She wished to heaven she'd listened to her da and not wed Robbie, but it was far too late now. She'd gotten nothing for marrying him except heartache. No children and no love or kindness.

She gritted her teeth. "Why are ye out of bed?"

"I heard wailing. Did ye let a room to someone with a bairn whilst I was abed?"

God's blood! She wanted to shove her husband out of the way to go see about the wee lassie, but she knew better than to do that. "Aye, a man came in injured, and he has his daughter with him."

"Ye ken how I feel about wailing children," he grumbled.

She did, and she barely resisted rolling her eyes. She vowed that the gods had denied her a bairn in her belly because her husband disliked children so.

"Why did ye rent to a man with a bairn?"

"He gave us double the price," she lied, not feeling the slightest qualm about the deception. She wasn't normally one to lie, but she wasn't about to let her husband set the man and the lass out. It wasn't about the Highlander; it was about the lassie. Martha couldn't say how she knew, but her gut was telling her that the lass was going to need her.

A satisfied smirk twisted Robbie's lips. "Double, eh?"

She nodded, even as she imagined smacking the smirk off her husband's face. She'd stick a coin in the penance jar tonight for her thoughts, just in case her uncharitable thinking about her lazy, greedy husband was the thing keeping her from getting with child. "I s'pose they can stay, though 'tis nae natural for a man to travel with a child without the mama. 'Tis a woman's job to care for a child, nae a man's."

If the man upstairs was anything like Robbie, the gods would see fit to end his life and then she could care for his lass. She blinked, surprised by the thought, but then excitement coursed through her. She didn't wish for the man's death, and she'd do all she could to see to his welfare, but if he did happen to die, wasn't that fate bringing her the daughter she'd been praying for? Of course, she'd have to convince Robbie, which would unfortunately involve his hot mouth on her, sending a shudder of

revulsion through her body, but she would do it willingly to keep the lass. Of course, she was way ahead of herself. The man was still alive, and she was a decent healer, so he'd likely stay that way. And then there was the missive he wanted to send to his sister, and that woman would no doubt want to take the lass if her brother did pass on.

"Why are ye still standing here?" Robbie demanded. "Go shut that wailing child's mouth."

She didn't bother to remind him that he'd told her she was not to leave his presence unless dismissed. He'd shouted at her and threatened—with a shake of his fist—to teach her a lesson the next time. She didn't need any such lesson. She was smart enough to stay put until her husband gave her leave to go. She'd seen beaten wives, and she didn't care to be one of them. So she nodded, said nothing, and raced up the stairs two at a time, until she was at the Highlander's door.

She knocked, but when he didn't immediately answer, she threw it open and cried out. The lass was sitting on top of his chest, red-faced and wailing, and the man was lying there, arms spread wide and unmoving. Martha dropped everything she was holding and raced to the bed. One look at the Highlander told her he was dead. His eyes were open wide and rolled back, his mouth was agape, and a line of blood ran down the side toward his neck, which was also covered in blood. Just to be certain, she pressed her fingers to his neck to feel for life the way her mama had taught her. There was no faint beating there. A wave of sadness for the man washed over her, but then she looked to the little girl and hope filled her.

"Yer papa's dead," she said, "but I vow I'll take care of ye." She scooped up the child and went to give her a hug, but the lass squealed in pain. Frowning, Martha set her back on the bed to examine her, noticing her nightdress had been pulled down from one shoulder. She gasped at the fresh brand. Her gaze flew back to the bed, and there by the dead Highlander was the branding iron he'd used on his daughter. Horror nearly choked her, and whatever sorrow she'd felt disappeared. The man had been a

monster, even though he'd seemed a good sort. She scooped the lass up and looked at the bonny little girl.

"I think this was meant to be."

"Want mama. Want mama," the child said, tears filling her startling bright eyes.

"Shh," Martha said and gave the lass a peck on her smooth forehead. "I'll be yer mama now. I wager ye're hungry."

The child stopped crying and nodded. Martha walked with the lass in her arms to the door, scooped up the food, and carried her back to the bed to unwrap the sweetbread. She gave it to her, and as the child started to eat, Martha gathered her healing supplies and tended to the lass's wound. When she was done, she rose from the bed. The child ate the meat Martha had given her, and Martha took a moment to glance around the room. She saw the missive on the desk, marched over, and picked it up. She broke the seal and slowly read it.

Each sentence made her heart pound harder in hope and dread. This child was a laird's daughter, and he and his wife might well still be alive. Martha had to sit with the shock. She stared at Margaret Stewart with her fiery red hair and clear, silvery-blue eyes, and she knew what she was going to do. She also knew it was a sin, but she wanted a daughter more than she cared for her immortal soul. She would love her and keep her safe, and it didn't seem to her that Margaret's parents, if they were even still alive, could do that. Martha rose, took the letter to the fireplace and stared at the dancing flames.

"Mistress."

Dougray's voice behind her made her jerk. She folded the missive into her palm as she turned to face the stablemaster. With a wave of her hand to the stranger, she said,

“he’s died.”

Dougray’s warm brown gaze immediately went to the lass, Margaret. “What of the little lassie?” he asked, as his gaze fell to Martha’s hand holding the missive. “Did the man say who he was, who the lassie was, or where the missive was to go?”

Blast Dougray! He had honor, and she appreciated that, but it was a problem. She didn’t want to be cruel to him, but she was keeping this lass no matter what. Her heart hammered in her ears as she curled the missive tighter in her fist. “I read the missive, and it did nae have any information in it of who his sister was or even where she lived.”

Dougray’s skeptical look made her grit her teeth. “Nay even the lassie’s name?”

“Sorcha,” Martha said, smiling as she looked at the lass. She would be Sorcha. That’s what Martha had planned to name her daughter if she’d been so blessed by the gods.

“Sorcha what?” Dougray asked, and Martha’s patience snapped.

She pointed a finger at Dougray. “Dunnae ye fash yerself over it. I dunnae ken,” she lied. “What ye need to fash yerself about is doing as I say, Dougray, because the moment ye dunnae, I’ll tell Robbie I caught ye stealing again, and he will see ye hanged this time.”

Dougray nodded slowly, but his gaze was upon her hand, damn the man. “I dunna ken who the lass is or who her family is, so I’m going to keep her.”

“Aye, mistress,” Dougray finally said, pulling his gaze to her face where their eyes met. That was more like it. She smiled at him, not caring at all for how mean she had just been. She was a good person. She would be a wonderful mother, and if Martha did find Archibald Stewart’s sister—who truly had not been named in the

missive—taking the wee lassie to her would likely put her in danger. Of course Laird Stewart's enemies would look there! Archibald Stewart had not been thinking properly, probably because he'd been in such pain.

"Do as I say, and I'll see ye get extra coin for yer sisters each month."

Dougray's eyes lit bright. The man was a good brother. He lived for his sisters. "What would ye have me do?"

"Take this man and bury him," she said, glancing at the dead Highlander before looking back to Dougray. "The rest, ye'll ken when I do."

"All right, mistress," he said, moving toward the dead stranger on the bed. With a nod, she went to collect her new daughter, but paused long enough to toss the missive into the fire.

"Come on, Sorcha," she said, hefting her up on her hip. "I'll bathe ye gently and put ye in a nice soft bed. I'll sing to ye and lie there 'til sleep takes ye." And then, then she'd have to sell what was left of her soul to persuade her clot-heid of a husband to let her keep the lass. She looked back at the fireplace as she exited the room and saw the missive was gone. Good, it had already burned. "Ye need simply go along with whatever I say, Dougray," she said.

"Of course, mistress," he said without looking at her, so she turned on her heel with Sorcha in her arms and quit the room. Sorcha was hers now, and Martha was going to keep her.

1477

Broadford, Isle of Skye, Scotland

There was little peace to be found as laird of a clan in desperate times, but in the predawn hours, when the only clan members awake were the guards appointed to rampart duty, Laird Alasdair MacLachlan could order his thoughts in a way that escaped him during the day when he was always needed. His favorite place to do this was standing on the rampart looking out over his stronghold. There, he could assess all the ways his home and clan were in need. It wasn't a pleasant exercise, as the need was great and the coin little, but he did it. If he saw things had disintegrated to a dangerous level, he would finally make himself accept the widowed heiress Lady Elspeth's offer of marriage.

He surveyed the rampart first. It was crumbling in spots since the last storm, so he had to be very careful when walking along it so as not to misstep and fall into a hole. Plus, there were only five guards stationed upon the rampart when there used to be twenty. And down along the shore, where the torchers used to be stationed, there were none. Not a one .

Alasdair swiped a hand across his stubble with a sigh. Last year there had been five torch lighters remaining. Then it had dwindled to three, and now there were none. If enemies approached to attack from the sea, there would be no burning torches to warn them or to alert their allies, the Clan MacLeod, that they needed their aid. He didn't blame the men in his clan who had departed. There wasn't enough food in storage to feed them all through the winter, and so far, there was no solution except Lady Elspeth.

He couldn't fathom why the lady wanted to wed a cursed laird, but she did, and she'd been rather persistent about it. Her coin would solve his financial problems caused when his livestock had been all but destroyed by disease, but it would not thaw his heart. He didn't feel anything for her, nor had he felt anything for any woman since Mariot's death, and he didn't care to. It wouldn't be fair to the Lady Elspeth, even if she claimed she didn't mind. He did. He'd known the joy of love, the sorrow of loss, and the guilt of his failure to Mariot, and the torment of the last two were his constant companions.

A creak of a door sounded from behind him, then heavy thudding footsteps and a murmur of greeting as Calan, no doubt, passed the guard. Alasdair didn't turn from the barren picture before him to see if it was indeed Calan. He knew it was. Those thumping footsteps could only belong to his right hand and best friend. The man was not a quiet walker, but Alasdair supposed it was unavoidable given Calan's enormous size. Alasdair stood a half head taller than all men he knew except Calan, who towered over everyone. He was like a wide, very tall tree.

"The horses are ready," Calan said, leaning his elbows on the rampart rail, mirroring Alasdair.

Alasdair turned to glance at his closest friend. "Excellent. Then we'll depart." He started to push off the rampart but saw Calan's familiar scowl so he settled back down. "State what's on yer mind."

Calan gave him a dubious look. "Ye're certain?"

"Aye."

"Even if ye win the purse from the bow-and-arrow competition, it will nae be enough coin to solve the clan's needs."

“I ken,” Alasdair replied, rubbing at the knots that had just formed in his neck. “But the MacCleod Clan tourney is coming up and—”

“And that win would nae solve our problems, either. But yer wedding Lady Elspeth would.”

“How many times do I need to tell ye that I dunnae wish to wed again?” he demanded, irritation stirring.

Calan opened his mouth as if to speak, closed it, grunted, and opened it again. “I ken how ye felt about Mariot. Ye ken I do. But if ye’re waiting to meet a lass that ye feel that way for again—”

Alasdair laughed at that and straightened himself up. “Even if I thought I could feel that way again, I dunnae wish to.”

Calan gaped at him, but then he straightened and faced Alasdair with narrowed eyes. “I kinnae believe I’ve spent all my life looking up to ye.”

“What the devil is that supposed to mean?”

“I thought ye selfless. I thought ye would give yer life for yer clan. I thought ye would put the clan’s welfare above yer own always.”

The last statement made Alasdair’s blood sear his veins. “I have always put the clan’s welfare, the clan’s needs, above my own,” he bit out. “That,” he said, poking his oldest friend in the shoulder, “is how Mariot ended up dead. I put the clan’s needs ahead of hers, ahead of her desires, and ahead of my own.”

Calan’s expression softened, and he clasped Alasdair on the shoulder, which immediately cooled his temper. “I’m sorry, Alasdair. I ken that. I’m just fearful for

the clan, and I thought ye were nae taking the Lady Elspeth up on her wish to wed ye because ye dunnae feel for her how ye felt for Mariot.”

“Well, I dunnae,” Alasdair confirmed, kneading the knots that had gone from his neck to his shoulder. “I feel nothing for her. Nae even desire.”

“Nae even desire?” Calan repeated, shocked.

Alasdair shook his head. “Nae even the hint of it.”

“Well, ye could take a mistress. Many men do.”

The idea of dishonoring a wife went against everything that made Alasdair who he was. “Nay. I could nae do that, and I’d nae wish to, but even if I could, my lack of desire extends beyond Lady Elspeth.”

“Beyond her, ye say?”

“Aye. I’ve nae felt any wish to be with a lass since Mariot’s death.”

“Why did ye nae say so before?”

“’Tis nae the sort of thing ye go around saying.”

“Aye, I suppose there is that.”

“I tell ye now because I dunnae want ye to think I’m simply wishing to meet a lass that will take Mariot’s place.” There was nae such a lass anyway. He had grown up with Mariot. They’d been the best of friends when they were still in nappies, and their attraction and love had grown year by year until they’d wed. They’d never fought, and she had been the perfect companion, sharing his every like and dislike. “I have

nae accepted Lady Elspeth's offer because it would be condemning her to a life of indifference, and I dunnae think it fair to do that to her." And to be truthful, he did not ever want feelings for another woman to grow. This coldness within him seemed a fitting punishment for the crime of ignoring Mariot when she had begged him to stay. He had agreed to aid the Dark Riders who dwelled in the Ghost Woods to the north of their stronghold. One of their mythical riders had come to him, asking for help tracking the woman of one of the riders, who had been snatched. In exchange for his aid, they promised safe passage for his clan through their woods always, and that he could not pass up. Many warriors had been lost to the Ghost Woods in the past, when they'd ventured in to try to take a shortcut returning home from trade or battle, and this would guarantee their safety in the future. So he'd gone on the mission, putting the clan's needs first.

"Have ye told the lady and given her the choice?"

"Nay. I had hoped to find another solution, but if it comes to it, I will."

"Did ye have a plan beyond winning all the bow-and-arrow tournaments to fill our coffers?"

"Mayhap. I thought to visit my cousin whilst we are in Broadford. He has asked me many times in the past to join him on mercenary missions."

"Aye, I'm certain he has. 'Nae anyone can track like he, and ye kens that as does everyone."

"Well," Alasdiar said, "Mayhap I can earn enough coin that way."

Calan snorted at that. "Ollie will do unscrupulous missions. Ye'll nae. 'Tis why he can earn his keep that way."

“Asking him does nae mean I have to join the mission if I dunnae care for it.”

“And who will rule in yer stead if ye take a mission that carries ye away for a long spell?”

“Ye will,” Alasdair answered without hesitation.

“And what of the lass and laddie? Who will watch over them whilst ye’re gone?”

“Esmerelda, same as always, Calan.”

“’Tis what I fear,” Calan growled. “Mariot’s mama acts as if the children are hers. She has more of a hand in raising them than ye do.”

“That’s likely true, but she’s doing a fine job.” Much better than he’d do, and he wouldn’t say it aloud—he’d had a hard time facing it himself—but being around Beatie and Hew too much was painful. Beatie looked like Mariot, and Hew had her personality. When he spent time with them and they tried to sit in his lap or take his hand, the ache for Mariot was so deep and the fear that he’d lose them, too, was so great that it was easier to keep a distance most the time. It wasn’t because he didn’t love them; it was because he loved them so much. He would die for them. He’d leave them to go on missions, and, if necessary, he would wed to keep them fed, but that was only if all else failed. And beyond that, sometimes Beatie and Hew seemed afraid of him, and he didn’t want to cause them a moment’s pain or fear.

He looked out at the land, surprised to see the sun nearly breaking the horizon. They should have already started out for Broadford. He wanted to leave before his children woke so he would not have to bid them goodbye. “Enough talk. I want to reach Broadford, seek out my cousin, and get a good night’s rest before the competition.”

“I’ve a lot more to say on the subject of Esmerelda,” Calan said.

“I’m certain ye do,” Alasdair replied, turning on his heel and heading toward the rampart door. His friend was never at a loss for words, especially when it came to Esmerelda. Calan had never liked Mariot’s mother, but his dislike for her had grown immensely since Mariot’s death.

“Alasdair,” Calan grumbled from behind his back.

“Ye’ll have me to yerself on the trip from here to Broadford. Ye can state all yer opinions then, if ye can keep up with me.” Calan couldn’t, and he knew it, which was why a disgusted noise came from him.

“Ye only ride faster because I’m so much bigger,” Calan said as Alasdair took the winding, narrow stairs from the rampart to the courtyard.

“Ye ken that’s a lie. I ride faster because I’m a better horseman,” he teased, entering the courtyard and stopping short at the sight of his children standing by his horse in their nightclothes with their grandmama.

“I’m surprised to see the three of ye out of bed so early,” he said, sweeping his gaze over his son, daughter, and mother-in-law.

“We’re sorry, Papa,” said Beatie in her sweet young voice.

He kneeled in front of the daughter who had her mother’s big green eyes and her flaming red hair, and his chest twisted in on itself. “Sorry?” he asked, the word gruff because the grief was pressing in on him from all sides. When Beatie backed up a step and pressed herself to the side of Esmerelda’s leg, he instantly wished he’d done a better job controlling his tone. He swallowed the knot in his throat. “There’s nae a need to be sorry, lass.”

“Grandmama says that ’tis our duty to give ye parting good luck charms, so she

roused us out of bed, though the hour is sore early,” Hew said in a blunt manner that made Alasdair blink in surprise. He’d thought his son rather meek natured as his mother had been, but here he was, speaking his mind as Alasdair was inclined to do.

“Hew!” Esmerelda scolded. “I’ve told ye before, yer father does nae like sass talk.”

Alasdair frowned at that. He’d never said that, and moreover, Hew’s bluntness wasn’t back talk, but he’d not correct Esmerelda in front of the children. He’d speak to her when he returned.

Hew’s lip trembled, and it felt like a crushing weight on Alasdair’s chest. The piercing ache only his children could cause was one of the reasons it seemed easier to keep them at a distance. Still, he could not leave Hew like this.

“I verra much appreciate yer coming to see me off,” he said, which caused Hew to smile and alleviated some of the weight on Alasdair’s chest, making him scowl. It would not do to have his happiness so tied to that of Hew and Beatie, but it seemed the tether was there despite efforts to weaken it as much as possible.

“Come here, Son,” Alasdair said, holding out his arms and motioning to Hew, even though there was a part of him that wanted to keep the shield between them in place. “Give me what ye brought me.”

Hew came forward with tentative steps as he peeked out from under a lock of black hair that had fallen over his right eye. He held out his hand with a cautious look in his gray eyes. Alasdair clasped the smooth, white bezoar stone in the center of his son’s small palm, and as he took it, he traced a finger over a welt in the center of Hew’s palm.

Alasdair frowned. “What happened here?”

“I was bad,” Hew said, with a quick glance toward Esmerelda, who gave him an approving nod that sent a bolt of unease through Alasdair.

“How were ye bad, Hew?”

“I sassed Grandmama, so I got slashes with the rushes for forgetting my tongue.”

Alasdair felt his frown deepen. The crime did not seem to fit the punishment. It was yet another thing to take up with Esmerelda, but this particular thing would not wait. He locked his gaze on her. “I hardly think a little back talk deserves slashes on the open palm.”

“Hew said he wished ye were dead instead of Mariot,” Esmerelda said, her tone blunt and her look embarrassed. “I’m sorry ye dunnae care for what I did, but I told him ’twas nae for him to judge who was taken from this world. ’Twas for the gods to decide.”

Hew made a sour face. “I did nae mean—”

“Ye’ve done enough, Hew,” Esmerelda chided.

A familiar wave of guilt and shame washed over Alasdair. He drew Hew into his embrace, feeling overwhelmed with a desire to give back that which could never be returned to his children—their mother. Her smile. Her tender touch. The love she would have showered upon them. It was so unfamiliar to hold his son thusly that he felt awkward and clumsy, like he was trying to handle something fragile he had no business handling with his big, meaty fingers. But he pressed on, going against his need to keep them at a distance, gave Hew a squeeze, and whispered in his ear, “I’m sorry, Hew, that ye were left with me.” He rose swiftly because, to his shock and horror, his throat was tightening. He’d cried once when his wife had died, on the day of her death. He remembered well the way his throat had tightened, heat had

overwhelmed him, and he'd gotten sweaty, all of which was happening again. God's blood!

He turned for his destrier and snapped at the stable boy, "Bring me Gideon!" He already had the reins in his hand when he felt a tug at his tunic. He looked down to see Beatie looking up at him. She smiled, displaying two dimples that made his heart squeeze. Mariot had possessed dimples just exactly like Beatie's. "Papa, ye did nae take my good luck charm."

He kneeled in front of her and held out his hand. She was not as hesitant as Hew had been. She reached out and dropped a white bezoar in his hand, and then she grinned. "That's from Penelope."

"Is it now?" he asked and brought the stone close to his eye to examine it, as he shoved back the tide of unwanted feelings, knowing that his daughter had collected his good luck charm from his dead wife's goat.

Beatie nodded her head so vigorously that her red curls bounced on her shoulders. Before he realized what he was doing, he hooked one of her curls around his finger. "Have I ever told ye that ye look just like yer mama?"

"Nay," Beatie whispered, and it nearly killed him to see the yearning on her face for more words about her mother. He wanted to summon a story. There were a thousand of them, but the pain of remembering was too great.

"Well," he said, clearing his throat because of the catch in it, "ye do. Ye've her hair, eyes, and dimples," he finished.

As he rose to stand, Beatie caught his hand.

"Da, can I have a hug? Ye gave Hew one, so I thought, well..." She shifted from foot

to foot nervously, which was a terrible thing to see.

“Leave yer da be,” Esmerelda said, giving him the same reassuring look she’d been giving him since the day Mariot had died, the one that indicated his reactions were fine. That look had always been comforting, but today, it unsettled him, and he made a promise to himself to figure out why when he returned.

“Of course ye can have a hug, Beatie,” he said, drawing her to him as he’d done Hew. He circled his arms around his tiny daughter and clasped her against his chest. Warmth—and fear—rushed over him, but he stayed there until visions of burying Beatie, as he’d had to bury Mariot, flashed before his eyes. He set her aside ever so gently and mounted his horse.

“Da!”

He pulled the reins up on his horse and glanced over his shoulder. “Da, will ye bring us back a mama?” Hew asked.

“Dunnae be ridiculous,” Esmerelda answered as he stared at his son dumbfounded. “I’m yer mama now.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

The giant pig of a man glared at Sorch. "Move yer arse out of this line now, or I'll move it for ye."

"If ye lay a hand on me, Benedict, I'll shoot ye in the crotch and do all the lassies in this village a favor."

The keeper of the contestant list for the bow-and-arrow competition drew his lips back over his rotting teeth in a snarl. "Ye need to learn yer place, Sorch, and use that mouth of yers for something other than sassing." Benedict gave her a lecherous grin that made her skin crawl. "If ye'd like, I could show ye."

"I'd rather drink poison, thanks," she said as the man leaned so far over the stand that it tipped and a few of the coins he had collected spilled out at her feet. Sorch stared down at the desperately needed coin for a moment and forced herself not to bend down, scoop them up, and run. Stealing would not fix her and her sister's problems, and it wasn't enough anyway. She needed to win the prize money for today's contest fairly, and she didn't doubt she could. She was an excellent archer, far better than any man in this village. She'd watched enough contests from the crowd to know this to be true. And she had on her good luck twine that she wore every time she'd been victorious with the bow and arrow. She ran a finger over the rough twine that was wound around her right wrist.

When she looked up, she blinked in surprise. Benedict had moved around the stand, and there wasn't even enough room for air between them. He grabbed her by the waist, yanked her to him, and crushed his mouth over hers. He didn't taste any better than his rotted teeth looked. Around her, laughter erupted as she tried to shove him off, and then, suddenly, he released her. She stumbled backward, then leaned

forward, setting her hands on her knees while still clutching her bow in her left hand and her arrow in her right, gasping for air as she stared at the dirt and struggled not to toss up her most recent meal.

“I dunnae think the lass wishes for yer attentions,” came a deep voice with silken tones and an edge like jagged steel.

Sorcha pushed to a standing position, chest still heaving, and squinted against the bright sun. Her lips parted as she saw, standing before her, a man who’d been blessed by the gods. His midnight hair hung just below his ears in waves that made her want to run her hands through it. He had piercing blue eyes, the color of the sky that had cleared after a storm, but they held a look of barely contained danger. He had a strong jawline, a noble nose, and full lips, and he was tall—so very tall, like a well-rooted tree with solid branches. He stood with his legs spread and his arms crossed over his chest.

She gave a little sniff. If she was going to go all foolish over a man, it would be one like this, but she knew far better than to swoon over any man. Her mother had taught her that marrying and giving a man complete power over you was folly. Even if she had learned nothing from her mother, her years of dealing with her father and unwanted gropes from guests at the inn had taught her well. All she wanted regarding men was the means to serve them their due punishment should they hurt a woman, and that she would get when she opened her apothecary shop. She just needed to win the contest and the prize money. Then she could create the potions to serve the justice that her dear, sweet, departed mama never received.

“And I dunnae recall asking ye what ye think,” Benedict snarled.

She was about to open her mouth to tell the stranger she didn’t need his help, but he spoke before she could. “Are ye so wretched that ye must take from a lady because nae any will give to ye?”

“Of course he is!” she crowed. “Have ye seen his face or smelled his fetid breath?” she asked, pointing at Benedict’s pockmarked skin. She wasn’t one to make fun of others, but she’d warned Benedict time and again not to paw at her. When he reared back to slap her, she reacted without thought. She yanked up her bow, nocked her arrow, and drew back the string, the arrow pointing between his eyes. Around her, all the guffaws of the other men stopped, and silence fell. Benedict’s hand was suspended in midair between them.

“If yet think to hit me, ye best think again, Benedict,” she warned. “I’ll shoot ye between the eyes and the consequences be damned.”

He glared at her as his face turned red. “Ye’re nae worth my trouble. Go on with ye, Sorcha. Go back to yer da and dunnae come back here thinking to join a contest that’s for men. Ye’re only a woman.”

“How observant ye are,” she grumbled, keeping her bow at the ready as she backed up.

“Are ye scairt the lass will best us men?” the stranger demanded.

The oddity of a man defending her left her speechless and too curious for her own good. She turned to look at him and was struck again that the gods had sculpted him specifically to tempt feather-brained lasses. Beside him, she noticed a man even taller and bigger had stepped forward. He could have made a lass a clot-heid, too, with his brown hair and green eyes that danced with merriment, but she was not a lass who would be made a fool. The man had one hand on the hilt of his sword, as if he knew the other man well enough to know he’d take the confrontation all the way to a fight, if he must, but he shook his head at his friend, as if to tell his friend he really ought not to do so.

“Say one more word, Laird MacLachlan,” Benedict snarled and pointed at the black-

haired man, “and ye’ll nae be competing in this tourney, and from what I’ve heard, yer stronghold’s crumbling around yer feet, so I’m thinking ye need this win.”

Laird MacLachlan’s gaze cut like stone. He opened his mouth to speak, but his friend nudged him in the side, and he clamped his jaw shut so tightly, it flexed where his teeth ground together.

“Oh, shut yer trap, Benedict,” Sorchu piped up. She didn’t generally stick up for men—actually she never had because she’d never met a man worthy of it—but this man had tried to aid her, so the least she could do was ensure he could still compete. Besides, a plan to anonymously compete disguised as a man was forming in her head, so she didn’t mind pretending to be compliant with his ridiculousness. “I’m leaving. There’s nae a need to keep crowing about how I’m a lass and so ye dunnae wish me to compete.” She swept her gaze over the sorry lot of a dozen archers who’d shown up. She’d seen them all shoot but the stranger, and she knew without a doubt that she was better. “’Tis too bad ye have such a complex about yer manhood, little twig, ” she said, referring to the moniker the lasses in the village had given him, “that ye wish to keep lasses down.”

He lunged at her, but she skipped backward, swiveled on her heel, and raced away, leaving the roaring laughter of the men behind her. She stole a look back, half expecting him to be close on her heels, but he was sprawled on the ground and Laird MacLachlan was pulling his foot—the one he’d clearly used to trip Benedict—back toward himself. Their gazes met, and he winked. She nearly stumbled in surprise at the gesture, but she managed to stay upright and keep going, though the beat of her heart had changed. Oh surely, it thundered with her running, but in an odd fluttery way. “Nay, ye dunnae,” she grumbled, pressing her fingers to her chest. “He’s a man, and yer nae a fool. Fools end up wed and controlled.” And then her dearly departed mama’s words came to her as they often did. Keep control of yer destiny .

“Sorchu, ye kinnae do this!” Ada hissed beside Sorchu as she tugged on the tunic

she'd pilfered from their father's bedchamber. It hadn't been difficult, given, as usual, he was so full of mead that he was asleep in the middle of the day. She pulled the linen tunic the rest of the way over her head, wrinkling her nose and pressing her lips together to keep from gagging. Her father's clothing reeked of body odor and mead. The tunic passed over her eyes, and there stood her younger sister, frown line between her brows, lips puckered, and her brown eyes a shade darker than a moment ago.

Sorcha pushed the long edge of the tunic into the braies she'd borrowed from Dougray. "I am perfectly capable of doing this for ye, and I will do it," she countered Ada's objection. Ada's expression grew thunderous, so Sorcha took the opportunity to look down and assess the braies and whether they would stay put during the competition. Her da's braies, which she'd tried first, had been much too big for her, but Dougray had been made rail thin by old age, and though his braies were also too large, she would not be in danger of them falling down during the competition.

She took up the cap that she had also "borrowed" from Dougray, but as she lifted her arms to put it on her head, Ada snatched it and shook it at her. "I kinnae let ye do this. If ye are caught impersonating a man, they might lash ye, and if they dunnae, Da surely will."

Sorcha seized the cap from her sister, thrust it on her head, and began the laborious process of shoving her long, thick hair under it. If it weren't the dead of summer and far too hot, she would wear a cloak to further disguise herself. "If I win, I'll nae be staying put for Da to lash me ever again." She'd had just about all she could stand of her da lashing her when he got in his cups or when he was simply irritable because he was a miserable man at heart. She did everything around the inn, and still, it was not enough to please their father. He didn't even treat her as well as he did Dougray. The stablemaster got coin for what he put up with, but she got nothing. She did not wish to wed, but if she did, he'd certainly not let her because she was his built-in free cook and servant girl.

“Ye’d leave me?” Ada asked, looking every bit as aghast as she sounded. Her tone had pitched high, and she was now a worrisome shade of white.

“Ye’ll be leaving da, too, when I get the coin. I told ye.” And when a grin of pure joy tipped up the edges of Ada’s mouth, it was all the reassurance Sorch a needed that she was making the right choice. Not that she’d doubted it, but it was still nice to see that Ada was indeed excited and had not wavered a bit in her desire to wed Hamish. That grin alone was worth risking a severe lashing for entering the contest, enabling her sister to have the coin Hamish’s family required for him to be able to wed Ada.

Ada’s grin faltered and then slid into a frown before Ada started nibbling on her lip. She popped it out from between her teeth and said, “I kinnae let ye risk yerself for me.”

Sorch a dipped her fingers into the mud she’d put in a bowl and began to spread it on her cheeks and nose before rubbing it slightly to look more natural. She surveyed the results with satisfaction. Between Dougray’s clothing, her hair being hidden, and the mud on her face, she hardly recognized herself, and she felt fairly confident that no one else would either.

“Sorch a!” Ada bellowed and stamped her foot.

Sorch a dragged her gaze away from the cracked looking glass and met her sister’s worried one. “I’m nae asking yer permission. I’m telling ye what I’m going to do, and ye kinnae stop me. Ye want to wed Hamish, and Hamish wants to wed ye, but Hamish’s family needs coin so ye need a dowry. Da does nae have a dowry for ye, and he will nae even try to obtain one because he’s selfish and wants someone to pay him to wed ye.” A derisive sound came from deep in her chest. “Ye kinnae do anything about it, but I can. I’ll nae stand by and let ye lose the love of yer life—”

“But—”

“Nay, nae any ‘buts,’” Sorch a said. Ada opened her mouth to argue more. It was time to tell her sister the absolute truth. “The only reason I have nae left this forsaken inn before now is ye. Mama made me vow to take care of ye before she died because she knew Da would nae. I would have fled him and tried to open my apothecary shop much sooner, but I kenned it would be much harder to gather the needed coin for ye to wed Hamish if I did, and it has been clear to me since ye and Hamish first started ogling each other when ye were but ten summers, that he was the one for ye.”

“What about ye?” Ada asked. “Dunnae ye want to wed? Mayhap ye’ll need coin to wed a man.”

Sorch a snorted at that. “Firstly, I dunnae ever want to wed, and secondly, I’d nae ever wed a man who needed coin from me in order to wed me—” She cut her words off when she realized what she’d said and how it sounded, but when Ada’s face fell, Sorch a knew it was too late. “Ada, I did nae mean it like that. Hamish is wonderful, a good man, and perfect for ye.”

“But ye’d nae wed him because he’s poor.”

“Nay.” Sorch a shook her head. “I, well, I...” There was no easy way to say what she felt about Hamish’s situation. “I could nae wed a man who is controlled by his mama, but it does nae matter what I would nae do. Ye can, ye want to, and ye love him.”

Ada’s eyes narrowed. “I love ye, Sorch a, but ye see things as ye wish sometimes and nae as they really are, and ye most often do this with men. Ye’ve had several verra nice men show interest in ye, and ye found ridiculous reasons each of them were nae for ye.”

“What?” Sorch a gasped. “There’s nae a need to try to be mean. I was nae trying to injure yer feelings—”

“I ken ye were nae, and I’m nae trying to injure yers, but ye do have a habit of making men out to be worse than they are. I guess watching how Da treated Mama did that to ye, but Sorch, nae all men are Da. I dunnae recall mama warning us against wedding, as ye do, but—”

“’Tis nae just those things,” Sorch interrupted. “It was also all the groping men who come into this inn, and the men in town who grope and leer, and even the men who have offered for me, who dunnae ken a single thing about who I really am. They see a face that pleases them, and they think to themselves that they’ll be happy to bed me and lord over me.”

“Oh, Sorch!” Ada said in an exasperated tone.

“I’m sorry that I dunnae have faith in men as ye do. I honestly failed ye,” Sorch said, meaning it. “I promised mama I’d rear ye right, as the eldest, and I tried my best, but ye still got all featherbrained over Hamish.”

Ada reached out and gave Sorch’s arm a gentle squeeze. “Ye did try yer best, but the heart wants what the heart wants.”

“It does nae bother ye that Hamish does nae stand up to his mama for ye?”

Ada shook her head. “Hamish does nae defy his mama because he kens his family needs coin to survive, for their bakery to survive. He does what he does for the good of his family. He puts the family above his own wants and desires, nae matter how great they are, and I find that admirable.”

“Aye, but in doing that, the two of ye were nae going to be able to be together. He was looking for a lass with coin to offer to wed, and Da would have surely wed ye to the first and highest offer. Does it nae anger ye that Hamish would have allowed that?”

“Nay, because if he had disregarded what his family needed to survive and simply wed me as he pleased, then he would have left his mama and papa, and even himself, in a verra bad position, and that would have been selfish.”

Sorcha opened her mouth to say Hamish should have found a way to gain the coin his family needed and wed Ada, but she’d already said this so many times she knew Ada no longer listened. And, since there was no changing Ada’s mind, Sorcha did not want to put a permanent wedge between them. She would never even consider wedding a man who didn’t love her so greatly that he would allow nothing to keep them apart, no matter the hardship it brought. But, of course, that kind of man did not exist, so it was but one more reason she did not want to wed.

Sorcha looked down at her chapped, red hands. They were ugly. Her skin was peeling from years of cleaning the inn, cooking, and doing the laundry, and her nails were yellowed and broken from tending to the garden. The only thing she didn’t tend to was the stable, and she no longer checked in the customers or waited on them in the tiny dining room. Ada had done that for the last four years since turning fifteen summers. And their da did nothing but drink mead all day long and complain about how the two of them did things, and he’d done the same to their mama. No, she did not want a husband, and she prayed in that moment to every god she could think of, that Hamish would not be that sort of husband to Ada.

Sorcha glanced toward the rug in front of her bed. Underneath it, was all the coin she had managed to gain doing odd jobs for people when she was not needed at the inn. And since she was needed there nearly all the time, it had taken her five summers to collect the coin she had, and it wasn’t enough, nor did she have much more time to gain the rest. Hamish would be wed to another if they did not produce a dowry soon, and as tempting as it was to simply let that happen, she could not stand by and watch her sister’s heart break because she was foolishly in love. Still... “Ada,” Sorcha said with a rush of worry for her sister, “if ye ever want to flee Hamish, I’ll help ye.”

“He’s nae Da,” Ada said, repeating the words she always did. “Ye’ll see. And I vow one day, ye’ll meet a man that ye will nae be able to help being foolish for.”

Sorcha shuddered at the thought. “I’ll nae ever allow that.”

“Ye can raise yer guards as high as ye wish, but love is like water—it finds a way into the smallest cracks in yer heart ye dunnae even ken are there.” Bells rang in the distance, saving Sorcha from having to respond to such a ridiculous statement. She knew those bells. They were the ones announcing that the annual bow-and-arrow contest was about to begin. She’d dawdled too long. “I have to go, Ada, or I’ll miss the competition.”

“I’ll go with ye,” Ada said, and started after Sorcha as she was already walking toward the door.

Sorcha turned toward her sister. “Nay. Ye stay here. If Benedict sees ye, it may rouse his suspicions about me, and I need him to barely give me a passing glance.” That was true, but she had an additional reason for telling her sister to remain at the inn. If there was trouble, she did not want Ada involved. Lying to the keeper of the annual contest was punishable by a public flogging, and she did not want Ada to witness or be involved in something like that.

“Are ye worried?” Ada asked, her eyes wide once more and alight with fear.

“Nay,” Sorcha said, sounding more confident than she felt. “I’m nae worried one bit. I have thought of everything that could possibly go wrong, and it will nae.”

Page 4

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“I dunnae ken of any missions ye can currently join,” Alasdair’s cousin Ollie said in answer to his question. Alasdair sighed and pressed a thumb against his aching temple. He glanced at the dozen men standing around waiting for the contest to begin. The man, Benedict, was an arse. Not only for the way he’d treated the lass but because he was purposely making them all stand in the hot sun, giving himself an inflated sense of importance. Alasdair should say something, but after tripping the man, he knew he was dangerously close to getting himself barred from the competition. He could not do that, no matter how much he wanted to put him in his place.

“I told ye coming here was a bad idea,” Calan grumbled.

Alasdair shot a glare at Calan. “’Tis nae a bad idea because I will win the competition—”

“Then gods be willing another lass does nae come along that ye oddly feel compelled to champion,” Calan inserted, exchanging a grin with Ollie.

Alasdair exhaled slowly, irritated that Calan was right about the lass and his reaction to her predicament. It had been an odd and very strong response to a lass he didn’t even know, though he didn’t care to see any lass mistreated and it did seem unfair to him that she not be allowed to join in simply because she was not a man.

“Och,” Ollie said and waved his hand at Calan. “Quit teasing him. I’m glad to see ye interested in a lass again, Alasdair. It’s nae natural for ye to remain alone.”

Alasdair stiffened. “I’m nae interested in that lass or any other,” he said. “All I’m

interested in is getting enough coin to feed the clan through the winter.”

“Aye, well, sorry if I misspoke. I thought ye had finally come to a place where ye were over Mariot.”

That place did not exist, but he’d not say it aloud. Anyone who had never given their heart to another could not understand that he could not simply get over Mariot because she was gone. The person who once held his heart took a piece of it when she left, and the piece was so great that his heart simply did not work as it once had. Saying this to either of these men was pointless as neither of them had ever given their hearts to anything but warring and wenching. So, instead, he said, “If ye do hear of anything at all I might do for coin—”

“Actually,” Ollie said, his face brightening, “I do ken of something ye may be interested in. I kinnae pursue it now, given I’ve the mission for the McPherson clan I told ye about that will take me to England.”

“What is it?” Alasdair asked, shooting a glance toward Benedict to ensure the contest hadn’t begun, but no, the man still sat on his large arse stuffing hunks of bread in his mouth and swigging from his wine skin.

“Do ye ken the tale of the lost children of Sir Gilbert Stewart, the Lord of Lorn?”

“Aye. Of course. When Stewart’s castle was invaded by the Lord of the Isles, his children were nae ever seen again. Some say they were killed and burned to death, but others say Stewart, being wise and canny, sent them away to safety. I tend to believe they were burned to death because if they were nae, why would they still be in hiding? Or I suppose the children are nae children anymore, so why would they nae have returned to claim their rightful inheritance since it was proven recently that their father was nae a traitor as has long been thought?”

“One of the lost children returned,” Ollie said, grinning.

“When did this occur?” Alasdair asked. Either it had just happened, or he had been so preoccupied with his clan problems that he had not paid attention to the goings-on of the world around him. “Did ye ken of this, Calan?”

Calan shook his head. “But I’m nae surprised,” Calan said. “We are far removed where we live, and given the news dunnae concern us, it travels much slower. So when did one of the lost Stewarts return?”

“Oh, nearly a year and half ago,” Ollie said.

“Which lost child appeared, and what does it have to do with a mission?” Alasdair asked.

“The eldest, Ross Stewart, who’s now the Lord of Lorn, Laird Stewart.”

“Where was he?” Calan asked.

“Well, as I heard it, when the Stewart Castle was attacked by the Lord of the Isles back in 1460, the laird was astute enough to ken he’d been betrayed by his friend, and as such, he feared for his children and their future. So the night of the attacks, he sent each bairn with a different trusted person with instructions to go in three different directions, and told them to keep the children safe and hidden until he either sent word or they could ascertain for themselves that it was safe to bring the children home once more. The laird and his wife were murdered, as ye both ken.”

Alasdair and Calan nodded.

“Well, the eldest was carried off that night by Bran Stewart—”

“The Lord of Lorn’s right hand?” Alasdair asked.

“Aye,” Ollie replied. “Bran ferreted him away to the stronghold of the Northern Watch, and there he kept him hidden all these years as the tide had turned against the Stewarts, so Bran feared what would happen to the new rightful Lord of Lorn.”

“But then the King of England admitted ’twas not the Lord of Lorn who conspired with him so long ago, as everyone believed,” Alasdair said, inserting the history he knew.

“Aye,” Ollie said. “We all came to find out it was the Lord of the Isles who had been conspiring to oust the king years afore, and knowing the honorable Lord of Lorn would go against him and try to stop him, he framed and murdered him.”

All three men spit toward the ground to show their lack of respect for the ousted and disgraced former Lord of the Isles.

“I’m surprised the men of the Northern Watch, given how secretive they are, would allow Bran Stewart to hide away there all those years—and with a young lad, at that,” Calan said.

“Bran’s brother is head of the Northern Watch,” Ollie supplied, “and I suppose Bran likely sought him out, but he changed his name and that of the lad’s to protect them both, until the truth of matters with the Lord of Lorn came to light.” Ollie shrugged. “Anyway, the truth has a way of finding people, whether they want it to or nae,” Ollie continued, “and the truth found the Lord of the Isles. I dunnae ken the rest of the story because the new Lord of Lorn did nae offer it.”

Alasdair drew his gaze back to Ollie, as he had looked over to see if the contest was about to begin, but Benedict didn’t look any closer to getting off his arse than when Ollie had begun the tale. Impatience niggled at Alasdair, but he reminded himself that

if was were not trying to exert what little power he possessed to make himself feel better about being tripped earlier, then there would not have been time for Ollie to tell this story, and Alasdair may have never heard of whatever opportunity was at hand. Though in true Ollie style, the end of the tale was painfully slow.

There was a part of Alasdair that wanted to know how his cousin came to be sharing tales with the new Lord of Lorn, but the gods only knew how long that story would take to unfold, and then Alasdair may never learn of the mission that could provide the coin to save his clan. So, instead of asking a question that could lead Ollie astray, Alasdair asked, “What exactly is the mission, Ollie?”

“The Lord of Lorn is trying to find his missing siblings. He sent Bran Stewart, as well as a dozen of his other warriors to uncover traces that would lead to his younger brother and sister, but so far, nae anyone has been successful in locating them.”

“Have any clues been discovered regarding the whereabouts of either sibling?”

“Aye,” Ollie said, his green eyes twinkling, “which is why I was privy to the meeting Laird Stewart called. “There has been some evidence of the whereabouts of the laird’s sister, Margaret Stewart, but as of yet, there has nae been any traces of the younger brother, Graeme.”

“I assume ye were invited to the meeting because of yer great reputation as a tracker and a mercenary,” Alasdair said, trying to hurry things along because out of the corner of his eye, he could see Benedict finally rising from his seat.

“If that were the case,” Ollie said, “ye would have been invited because we all ken ye are the best tracker there is in Scotland. I think it was more that clues of the lass’s whereabouts all point here, to the Isle of Skye.”

“Which particular area of Skye?” Alasdair asked.

“Well, if anyone knew that, the lass would surely be discovered by now,” Ollie replied. “But the trail that Bran uncovered apparently went cold after it led him here, and Bran took a fall from his horse and broke his leg, so he had to abandon the search for the lass nearly five months ago. Since then, the laird has had dozens of his warriors scouring this area but nae to any avail, so now he wishes to offer a reward for his sister’s discovery and safe return to the Stewart stronghold.”

“Is the reward great?”

“It would feed yer clan for at least the next three years as well as shore up yer defenses and fix yer crumbling stronghold.”

Alasdair and Calan whistled at the same time, and Alasdair said, “If the sum is that great, it would draw back the warriors who left for fear of starvation.”

“I dunnae ken the new Laird Stewart, but he sounds like a generous man to offer a reward for the return of a sister he dunnae ken and who could well be wed and then nae be of any worth to him,” Calan said.

“A woman’s worth is nae measured simply by the strong alliance her marriage can bring,” Alasdair said, irritated with Calan’s view. But in fairness, it was the view of most men he knew. He had happened to be raised by parents who did not believe women should be married off to a man simply to strengthen the clan.

“I kinnae speak with any certainty to Laird Stewart’s character. I only spent a few hours in his presence, and I was one of many, at that. He seemed nice enough at supper and he took gentle care with his wife, whom he could nae seem to tear his gaze away from. What I can speak of with certainty is that his sister was apparently betrothed at birth to Brody Campbell, who is now Laird Campbell, and he has nae wed as of yet and has agreed to wed Margaret Stewart if she is alive and her innocence is intact. That union would make the Stewart and Campbell clans the

strongest in the Highlands.”

“It sounds as if Laird Stewart does nae simply wish a reunion with his sister after all,” Alasdair said, a sour taste in his mouth.

Ollie cocked a bushy red eyebrow. “Does that mean ye dunnae wish to hear the rest of the details that would help ye identify the lass?”

“How does Laird Stewart remember what his sister looks likes if they were separated at such a young age?”

“Bran Stewart remembers her well, as do other servants in the castle.”

Alasdair nodded as he thought of his clan and his children. There was no choice but to learn the details, search for the lass, and then return her to her brother. It could be, he reasoned, that she would be eager to be reunited with her family. It could be also that she was already wed, so there would be no chance of returning a lass to a home to be forced to wed a man she did not wish to wed. It could be that she would be thrilled to be presented with the opportunity to wed a great laird of a powerful clan, no matter what he might be like.

A chuckle from Calan filled the silence between the men. “This is too easy!” Calan exclaimed.

“How do ye suppose?” Alasdair asked.

“If our searching leads to naught, we can simply procure a lass, take her there, and say she’s the long-lost sister.”

Alasdair thumped Calan on the side of his head. “That is nae only dishonorable, but I feel certain there is something in place to prevent such treachery.”

“Aye,” Ollie said. “As I was told by Bran Stewart himself, Margaret Stewart will have an L3 branded on her arm—it should have been given to her by whomever ferreted her away. The L is for property of the laird, and the number is for her place in line as heir.”

Calan scowled. “Well, that does nae mean it would be impossible to present a different lass and say she’s the one.”

“Stop suggesting that,” Alasdair growled and thumped his old friend upside the head again.

“Laird Stewart gave us other markers to look for as well.”

“Such as?”

“Hair like a flame.”

“The lass’s hair could have changed colors,” Alasdair said.

“Aye, but they think it unlikely,” Ollie said, shrugging. “And she will have blue eyes.”

Calan took a step away from both men. He was putting himself out of reach, no doubt because he was about to say something clot-heided again. “Nae either of those traits makes it impossible to follow the alternate plan I offered, should we be unable to find the lass.”

Alasdair scowled at Calan. “Are there any other traits that would identify her?”

Ollie nodded. “One dimple on her right cheek—” Calan opened his mouth to say something, but Ollie held up a silencing hand “—and she’s missing a toe apparently.

She was swimming as a bairn and cut it on a rock. It got infected and had to be cut off to save the leg.”

“Which toe?” Calan demanded.

Alasdair snorted. “Would ye truly cut off a woman’s toe to pass her off as the missing Stewart lass?”

“Only if she wished it,” Calan said with a wink.

“Well, ye would be out of luck because Laird Stewart would nae tell us which toe was missing. He said, in fact,” Ollie continued, smirking at Calan, “that’s how he’d prevent anyone from thinking they’d bring a lass who was nae his sister.”

“How many men were called to this meeting?” Alasdair asked, looking now to the cobbled streets of the village that he now noticed were teeming with warriors.

“Two dozen,” Ollie supplied. “And I can assure ye they are all here on Skye stopping every red-haired, blue-eyed lass they see and demanding to see her toes.” All three men burst out laughing at that as the bell began to chime, announcing the contest was about to begin.

Alasdair clapped his cousin on the shoulder. “Thank ye for telling me, and rest assured that if I do discover the lass and return her for the reward, I’ll share it with ye.”

Ollie nodded. “I ken ye will, which is why I told ye. If I could get out of my mission, I would.”

“Why can ye nae get out of it?” Alasdair asked, rising to make his way to the contest.

“’Tis for the king,” Ollie offered.

“Oh, aye?” Alasdair said. “It must be important.”

“It is,” Ollie responded but offered no more, which wasn’t really a surprise, given his discretion was one of the reasons he was offered so many missions.

“Best of luck to ye, Ollie. When do ye depart?”

“Oh, soon enough,” Ollie replied. “In fact, I need to be returning home to ready myself or I’d stay to watch ye compete.”

“Well, I’m glad I came to find ye at yer cottage and ye walked with us for a short visit.” The other contestants were already lining up, and there, in the middle of the line, was the lass from earlier. Oh, she was dressed as a man, and her hair was hidden with a cap pulled so low that he couldn’t even see her eyes, and she’d caked mud on her face to disguise it, but as she had lifted her bow to practice he saw that tan twine was wound around her right wrist. It was too much of a coincidence that the lass from before and the slight man before him would both have twine wound around the same wrist. Alasdair swept his gaze over the contestants, but no one else seemed to notice the twine or the significance of it. It wasn’t surprising. Most men would not notice such a thing, but tracking as he had for years made him especially observant.

“Hey! Are ye going to walk yer arse to the line to take yer place in the contest or nae?” Calan asked, snapping Alasdair out of his musings.

He gave a nod, bade Ollie farewell, and strode toward the line and the lass. Benedict stopped in front of her and said something, then moved along. As Alasdair grew closer to the line, their gazes met, and she flinched before going instantly pale and fluttering a hand to her head to no doubt make certain her cap was in place.

She recognized him and feared he recognized her. He had a surprising urge to reassure her, so he leaned close to her and said, “Dunnae fash yerself. Yer secret is safe with me. ’Twas the twine that gave ye away.”

Her lips parted in shock and she instantly drew her hands down and slipped off her twine, holding it so that it could no longer be seen. “I’m a fool,” she muttered under her breath, and he wasn’t entirely certain if she was talking to herself or him.

“A fool for wearing the twine?” he asked, voice low.

She nodded. “’Tis my lucky twine my mama gave me,” she said, cheeks staining red with her admission. “I’ll surely lose since I’m nae wearing it.”

The misery in her voice made him want to comfort and protect her, just as he had earlier. “Well, ye’re holding it, so I believe it can still be lucky, and I’m certain yer mama will agree.”

She frowned at him. “My mama is long dead,” she said, her tone low, but not so low he did not pick up on the note of sadness in her voice.

Before he could offer his apologies, Benedict bellowed, “Take yer places.”

Alasdair inclined his head to the space to her right. “Do ye mind?”

“Why should I mind?” she asked, her voice pitching a fraction higher and the blush from her cheeks travelling to her neck. He found himself instantly curious whether the blush colored any of the skin hidden in her clothing, and the thought surprised him.

“Well,” he said, “I thought my presence might befuddle ye,” he said in a teasing voice that also shocked him. He hadn’t teased a lass since... since... well, since

Mariot. It had to be the heat outside and his lack of food since their journey that was making him act so oddly.

A derisive noise came from her chest, and he thought his comment irritated her, except her lips tugged upward in a half smile for a breath before she managed to control her mirth.

“Listen up, men,” Benedict said. “The dummy targets are tied around the trees in front of each of ye—” Benedict motioned down toward the end of the embankment. There, rushes had been stuffed into bags to form shapes of men. The bags had heads, arms, and legs, and they had been painted with eyes, a nose, a mouth, and a heart with what looked to be red berry. “I’ll give ye specific instructions for each round. Ye only move to the next round if ye win or tie the shot. Do ye all understand?”

A chorus of ayes went up as Alasdair nocked his first arrow and aimed his bow at the tree in front of him. “Whoever wins the most rounds wins the contest. If there be a tie, we will have a speed contest. I have the final say as to the winner, and I have the only say. Arguing with me will nae help ye. The horn blow is the start. Yer first shot is to hit the right eye dead center. Get ready.”

Alasdair drew his arrow back, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw the lass do the same, her chin jutted with determination. He had no fear that she’d best him, but he was curious if she was any good. He’d seen a lass once before who could outshoot most men, but she’d been the only lass he’d ever met that could do so, and she’d been the youngest of six sons who had all treated her as a boy.

All talk fell away and left in its wake only the rustling of leaves by the faint breeze, the lapping of the loch water against the embankment, and the steady breathing of the men hoping to take the prize. Suddenly, a deep horn split the silence, and Alasdair took a half breath to aim before releasing his arrow. It flew half a measure ahead of any other arrow, then hit the target in what appeared to be dead center of the right

eye. He'd soon know for certain.

From somewhere behind Alasdair, Calan let out a whoop, presumably because he judged Alasdair's shot as dead center as well. Beside him, the lass grumbled, "God's blood!"

He looked to her arrow, judged it to be nearly at center and then glanced at her. She chewed on her lip, and her right hand balled into a fist of frustration. "What would ye do with the coin if ye won?" he asked, feeling a surprising surge of regret that he'd bested her.

She turned her head toward him, and he wished he could see her eyes to judge the depth of her worry. He didn't like to be the cause of her anxiety, even if he had to do so for his clan. Likely it would be better not to know how desperate her plight, because if it was truly horrid, that was going to make it much more distasteful to best her. Presently, the only thing visible was the tip of her nose, which had a smattering of freckles on it. "Why do ye care?" she asked, her tone short.

He didn't take offense. Her tension rolled off her. Her question was fair, but he didn't have an answer for her. He didn't know why he cared. He should not. She was a stranger, and her plight was not his concern. Except there was something inside of him, some needling something, that needed to know. He stole a glance toward Benedict to ensure he had not returned from judging the targets. Benedict still trudged along toward the targets, moving side to side as much as forward, hindered by his excessive weight.

Alasdair brought his attention firmly to the lass once more and took one step closer to her so as not to be overheard. "If ye are willing to risk the lashing ye'd get if ye were discovered by Benedict, then ye must be in dire straits."

"Ye like to hear of other people's troubles, do ye?" The irritable sarcasm strumming

through her dripped from every word.

“Nay, lass. I thought mayhap I could help.” He frowned at the words that left his mouth. He had not even known that was what had driven the original question, but there it was: his once-persistent need to come to the rescue of any lass in need. What a damned inconvenient time for it to resurrect itself.

“How can ye help me?” she demanded in a whisper-shout that would have been comical if the desperation in her tone was not so obvious. He opened his mouth and closed it, trying to think what to say. He had to look like a fish gasping for its last breath. “’Tis as I thought,” she said, her voice derisive. “Ye kinnae aid me. Ye still intend to try to win the next round, do ye nae?” He opened his mouth to confirm that he did, but she said, “If ye want to aid me then lose it. Ye’d be one fewer person I’d have to concern myself with besting.”

“I thought ye were confident ye could win,” he said, parrying the hostility she was shooting at him.

“I was,” she said, “but I did nae expect ye, and I dunnae have my lucky twine on,” she said, wiggling her left hand where he could see she’d balled the twine for safe keeping.

He grinned then, and the spontaneous happiness was so foreign that he touched a cheek to make certain he was indeed doing what he thought he was.

“Ye are the finest shot I’ve ever seen,” she grumbled.

He started to thank her, but Benedict bellowed, “The winner of the first round is Laird MacLachlan. Prepare for the next round, which is to hit the left eye dead center,” Benedict finished as he raised the horn to blow it.

Alasdair quickly situated himself to shoot, nocked his arrow and drew it back right as the horn was blown again. He didn't hesitate. He released his arrow but was shocked to see another flying beside it. He was usually a breath ahead of everyone else. The two arrows flew well ahead of the others, and they struck the targets at the exact same time, both appearing to land dead center.

When the lass gasped her excitement, his heart tripled in beat, but not for fear of losing the contest. He felt certain he'd hit his target dead center, but he was glad she had a moment of happiness. He'd glimpsed her chapped hands, and he suspected her moments of happiness were few and far between. He glanced toward Benedict, saw that he was trudging to the targets to examine them, and he looked toward the lass, who turned her head toward him at the same moment.

"I've bested ye." She didn't sound boastful, only factual.

"Nay," he said in as gentle a tone as possible, "I dunnae think ye have, but I must admit I was surprised to see yer arrow sailing next to mine. Who taught ye to shoot? Yer da?"

She snorted at that. "All my da has ever taught me is to stay away from men with a belly full of mead, and he's always got that, so I've spent my life staying clear of him or tending to bruises when I forget."

He instantly hated her father. "Is that why ye've entered the contest?" he asked, knowing full well that learning more about her, discovering anything that might further tease out his instinct to protect her, was very dangerous for him.

"Aye, but getting away from my da is nae the only reason. I need to get my sister away as well."

God's blood . He'd done it now. A war erupted once more between what he needed to

do for himself, his family, and his clan, and what she needed.

“Laird MacLachlan is the winner again!”

“Nay!” she cried out, and her despair took away any enjoyment that was to be found in the victory. The man to the other side of her turned to look her way, Alasdair knew it was because her voice had been a little too loud, a little too feminine, and she was in danger of giving herself away.

“What are ye staring at?” he barked at the smaller man. He didn’t normally use his size to intimidate, but in this case, he’d make an exception.

“Nae anything,” he quickly answered and turned away.

To the lass, Alasdair said in a low tone, “Ye need to keep yer voice down. ’Tis distinctly feminine.”

“Why do I care?” she choked out, the tears in her voice obvious and like a punch in his gut. “Ye’re going to best me. A lashing will nae be the worst I face if I’m caught.”

Fear for her streaked through him. “Then ye should take care and keep yer voice down.”

A single tear fell down her face through the dirt she’d undoubtedly rubbed on it. He had the surprising urge to reach out and brush her tear away, but Benedict saved Alasdair from himself by bellowing, “Prepare for the third round, which is to hit the heart in the middle.”

Alasdair took his stance once more, nocked his arrow, and drew it back along his bow. The horn blew, and he waited one half a beat, then released his arrow. It flew a blink of an eye behind the lass’s arrow, as he knew it would. He’d decided to give her

this one round. He had to take the competition, but he could give her this one moment of hope. That was better than none, wasn't it?

"Thank the gods," she said, her voice low with relief soaking every word. "I best ye, this time," she said, her voice still low. "I... I did nae think I could, but I believe I have. I—" Her words jerked to a halt, so he looked to her. She was nibbling on her lip and shifting back and forth where she stood. "Why have ye entered the competition? Do ye have a dire need, or is it for one more win, one more bag of coin to add to yer overflowing coffers?"

The worry in her voice was obvious. She had a good heart, and she was as conflicted as he had been a moment ago. She wanted to win, needed to win, but to do so at the detriment of another was a bittersweet victory, indeed. "It's simply another win," he lied, not wanting her to be burdened with guilt as he was. He would best her, so he could give her this.

She nodded. "Ah, then." Her relief was as loud as a crack of lightning.

"McPherson, ye are the winner!" Benedict bellowed the false name the lass had given.

Beside him, she grinned ear to ear as the men around them grumbled. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Calan waving at him. When their gazes met, Calan mouthed, "What. Are. Ye. Doing? Think of the clan."

Irritation flew through Alasdair. There was never a moment he was not thinking of the clan, but he understood Calan's worry. "Dunnae fash yerself," he mouthed silently back, meaning it.

"If I win this next round," the lass said, drawing Alasdair's attention back to her, "it will only be ye and me left in the competition." There was so much hope in her voice

that he was now assailed by regret that he'd given her false hope. He'd made the wrong choice. He'd let her win a round to spare his own feelings of guilt. He'd had hope for a long life of love with his wife and look where that hope had left him. Empty. Broken. To have no hope, to have never met Mariot, sometimes seemed as if it might have been better, but then that would mean no Beatie and Hew, and that would not do.

"I'm going to best ye in the next round lass," he said, gently.

Before she could answer, Benedict called out, "Prepare for the fourth round. The target is the mouth, dead center."

Once again, they all prepared, but the mood was quiet and a tension ran through the group, as most of them knew they had to win this round, or they'd be out. "Shoot," Benedict called out, and as Alasdair started to release his arrow, the lass groaned, as if something were wrong. He ticked his arrow a bit too much to the left, and he knew, before the arrow lodged in his target, that he was not dead center. He didn't look to his target first, though. He looked to the lass, who was grinning from ear to ear. Her face turned toward him, but her eyes were still hidden. "Dunnae ever underestimate a woman with a purpose."

"Ye tricked me," he said, shocked, a tad irritated and a bit impressed. It was a strange mixture of emotions.

"I did nae trick ye," she said, her voice smooth and confident. "I used the weapons at my disposal. Tis the two of us left in the competition," she said.

"There's just me," he replied, having to harden himself against the tug to soften. He had his clan to think of.

"McPherson is the winner!" Benedict called out.

The lass cried out, “aye!”

And then things happened in a blur. The man beside her grabbed her by the shoulder, twisted her toward him, and said, “ye distracted the rest of us on purpose.” He swung his fist at her before Alasdair knew what was happening. She ducked, the man’s fist grazed her cap, which fell backwards off her head. Red hair tumbled over her shoulders in a wild disarray of silken waves. His breath caught in this chest at the enticing sight she presented. His long dormant desire flamed up hot and consuming as chaos erupted.

The man lunged toward her again, other men bellowed, and Alasdair inserted himself between her and the man who seemed intent on hitting her. “If ye touch her,” Alasdair seethed, “ye’ll answer to me.”

“Sorcha MacGregor!” Benedict bellowed as he strode toward them. “Ye are in for a thrashing now!”

“I hope yer staff rots off!” the lass bellowed back, and she turned, no doubt to flee. Alasdair stole a glimpse over his shoulder to see if she could get away, and behind her was a guard. He went to grab her but got only a handful of her tunic, which ripped down the length of her right arm from shoulder to wrist. She gasped, clutched it at the shoulder, and twirled out of the guard’s reach to run away. He turned back around in time to stop the man who had tried to hit her from going after her.

“Back up, or ye’ll find my dagger in yer gut.”

“And mine,” Calan said, moving to stand by Alasdair.

“I’ll deal with Sorcha MacGregor, I swear it,” Benedict bellowed, “but now, prepare to start again. The first competition is now invalid.”

Cheers went up around Alasdair, and he and Calan exchanged a look before Calan said, “Will ye protest?”

“Nay. I can easily best these men.”

“Aye, I figured ye’d say that. The only true competition was that flame-haired lass.”

Calan’s casually offered description of the lass was like a smack across the face that woke Alasdair up, and he blinked at the possibility that had just entered his mind. Flame-haired lass. Ollie had said the missing sister of Laird Stewart was red-headed. No. Alasdair was grasping at threads out of desperation for coin, but still, he couldn’t simply dismiss the possibility. She’d also had blue eyes, though Scottish lasses with red hair and blue eyes were not a rare occurrence.

The competition was called to a start once more, so he dismissed the foolish idea that the lass Sorch a could in any realm of truth really be Margaret Stewart. But when the five new rounds were over and he was declared the winner, Benedict dropped the coin purse while handing it to him. Alasdair bent down to pick it up and stared in surprise at Sorch a MacGregor’s good luck twine. She must have dropped it in the final scuffle. He picked it up along with the coin and stared at it as he thought about the lass once more. He didn’t remember a dimple or if she had bright blue eyes, and certainly, he’d not seen all her toes, but what he did remember was that she’d been quick to grab her torn tunic sleeve on her right arm, and that fact, for a man who’d been reared to track since childhood, was too much to ignore.

This little piece of string was the perfect excuse to seek her out and silence the questions in his mind. He could say he had done so to return it to her, and while he was there, he would look for the other markers Ollie had told him. And if it was her, well, he’d do what he must for the survival of his clan, despite the bitter taste it left in his mouth.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

“Where does the lass Sorch MacGregor live?” Alasdair asked Benedict.

“Ye need nae worry she’ll go unpunished. I’ll be visiting her da momentarily, and I vow to ye, he’ll give her as sound a lashing as I would. He’s a heavy hand.”

Despite not being overly surprised after what the lass had mentioned about her father, disgust still balled in Alasdair’s belly, though he could not show it. “’Tis good to hear,” he lied as he glanced at Calan, who looked as revolted as Alasdair was, though if she did turn out to be Margaret Stewart by some gift of the gods, then there would be much less guilt associated with taking her from a home where she had been abused rather than a loving home.

“Did ye hear me?” Benedict asked, interrupting Alasdair’s musings.

“Aye. I still wish to talk to her da.”

“That red hair of hers caught yer eye, did it nae?” Benedict asked with a lecherous grin that Alasdair didn’t care for.

“Aye,” Alasdair lied to allay any suspicions.

“He’ll nae part with her,” Benedict added. “Unless ye have a king’s ransom, and we both ken ye dunnae have that.”

“We’ll see,” Alasdair simply said.

“I’m telling ye, the man will nae let Sorch go. There have been at least a half dozen

men in this village that have asked for her hand, and her da has refused every one of them.”

“The lass falls in love quite a lot, does she?” Alasdair commented, hearing a thread of sarcasm in his tone. He cleared his throat to rid himself of the unwelcome feelings.

Benedict snorted at that. “Nay. She turned them all down, verra rudely if ye ask me, afore they ever approached her da, but they persisted. Do ye ken why they did?”

“Because she’s just about the bonniest lass any of them have ever seen,” Calan supplied. Alasdair found himself turning a narrow-eyed warning gaze upon his friend. The look was meant to keep Calan from entangling himself with the lass, though Calan could not know the ridiculous idea of Alasdair’s—that Sorchas was Margaret Stewart, betrothed of Laird Campbell, who would by that union be head of one of the most powerful clans in the Highlands.

Alasdair rubbed his tense neck. He’d not ever heard a sour word regarding Laird Campbell, and usually when a man was rotten at his core, word got around. And besides that, Margaret Stewart’s happiness was not his responsibility. It was her brother’s.

“Sorchas MacGregor is part ban-druidh, if ye ask me,” Benedict announced.

No one had asked the clot-heid, but Alasdair refrained from stating the obvious.

“The lass is nae a witch,” Alasdair said.

“’Tis nae natural for a lass nae to wish to wed, bonny as she is.”

Alasdair had no notion why the lass may not wish to wed, nor would he allow himself to care about something that did not involve him. “Nae wishing to wed does nae

make the lass ban-druidh. Now, where is her home?”

“Down this road and take a right at the church. Ye’ll see the Boat of Garten Inn at the end of that road.”

“Thank ye,” Alasdair said as he turned on his heel and strode toward his horse, effectively cutting off the conversation.

Calan gave him a questioning look, and he discreetly shook his head at him. He’d explain why they were going to Sorcha’s home when they were out of Benedict’s hearing. They found their horses, mounted, and got no more than two breaths down the road when Calan demanded, “What are we doing?”

“’Tis probably unlikely, but what if the lass Sorcha is actually Margaret Stewart?”

Calan laughed at that. “I wish it were that simple to save our clan as well, Alasdair, but ye are grasping at something that is nae so.”

“Aye,” Alasdair agreed, “likely, but I have an unsettled feeling about the lass.”

“Why? Because ye bested her in the competition?”

“Nay, ’tis nae just that.” Though he did feel a measure of guilt for taking away her chance to aid herself and her sister.

“Just because the lass has red hair and blue eyes does nae make her the missing Stewart sister,” Calan said to which Alasdair nodded. “Besides,” Calan continued. “Ollie lives in this village. Dunnae ye think he’d ken of the lass?”

“Possibly, but mayhap nae,” Alasdair replied. “Ollie is away from his home far more than he is here.”

Silence fell between them for several moments, before Calan said, “It kinnae be this simple.”

A tinge of hope underscored his words. “It undoubtedly is nae, so dunnae get too optimistic about it. Ye ken me. When I get something in my gut I kinnae let it go.”

“Aye. I ken. So we will go and see the lass, but what will be our reason for going there?”

Alasdair held up the twine as the horses clopped along and grinned at Calan, whose eyebrows dipped together in confusion. “A piece of twine is our reason for seeking out the lass?”

“’Tis her lucky twine, given to her by her dead mama.”

“Ah,” Calan said, “now I understand things more clearly.”

It was Alasdair’s turn to frown in confusion. “What is it ye understand better?”

“I did nae ken why ye were letting yer competitor best ye in a round, but had he, I mean she, told ye about her dead mama before ye let her best ye?”

“She had, and the twine was how I kenned right away that she was the same lass we’d met earlier but was disguised as a man.”

“I did nae ken it until her cap was dislodged,” Calan said, sounding disgruntled.

“Dunnae fash yerself about it. I likely would nae have if it were nae for her leaving the twine on.”

As the horses clopped along, Calan said, “Say this lass is the lost Stewart sister. She

is nae just going to depart willingly with us.”

“Mayhap she will,” Alasdair said. “She told me her da did nae treat her well.”

“Ye spoke more to this lass in the short time ye stood beside her than ye have to any of the lasses from our clan since Marriot passed. Mayhap ye are ready to—”

“Nay,” Alasdair said, spotting a dilapidated inn at the end of the road. It was so neglected that the building actually seemed to be leaning. Any decent traveler surely didn’t wish to stay there.

“Ye dunnae even ken what I was going to say,” Calan protested.

“Aye, I do,” Alasdair, said, studying the inn where Sorcha lived. The walls were crumbling, and there were several holes in the stone. The closer they drew, the more he noticed—the bottom step was missing and the front door did not shut properly, so all manner of bugs could easily enter the inn as well as the cold in the wicked winter months. The door to the inn opened, and four men stumbled out, singing a raucous song. By the disheveled look of them, they’d spent their night drinking mead or wine or both, and had not seen a wash basin in many moons.

“What was I going to say?” Calan demanded.

“Ye were going to suggest I might be ready to leave my grief behind, and I’m nae.”

The front door to the inn flew open with a bang, and a burly man strode out with a lass flung over his shoulder. From the long red hair that cascaded from her head and the way she bellowed, Alasdair had no doubt that she was Sorcha.

He pulled his horse to a stop, reached behind him and pulled out his bow and arrow, and he nodded to Calan to do the same. “Ye there!” he called down the short distance

that still separated him from the man and Sorcha. The man stopped and looked Alasdair's way. The grin on the man's face instantly disappeared as he took in Alasdair's and Calan's arrows, which were trained on him and his friends, who had also stopped walking. "Set the lass down or I'll shoot ye."

One of the man's companions started to reach for his sword, so Alasdair released an arrow that struck the man in the arm wrapped around Sorcha's backside. He released her with a howl, and she thudded to the ground.

As Alasdair approached, Sorcha stood and set her hands to her hips and glared down at the man. She still wore her torn gown, and the ripped right sleeve exposed her upper arm near the shoulder. There on her smooth skin was a brand—no longer red as it must have been the day the hot iron was used to put it there, but it was a shock all the same to see the L3 that marked this woman as the lost sister of Laird Stewart. Behind him, Calan's muttered "God's blood," told Alasdair his friend had seen it as well.

The man made as if to grab her ankle, and Alasdair snapped out of his shock fast enough to notch another arrow and take aim. "Dunnae make me kill ye," he said.

The man slowly lowered his hand and looked to his companions, who stood frozen, as Calan still had his bow and arrow trained on them, and said, "I'm nae willing to give my life to bed the lass."

"Aye," the man's companions murmured agreement.

"'Tis a good choice," Alasdair growled. "Now get along with ye all."

As the men filed away, Alasdair met Margaret Stewart's gaze, and immediately Ollie's description of her eyes came to mind—blue. Ollie was a clot-heid. Margaret Stewart's eyes were not simply blue, and Alasdair couldn't believe he was only now

fully noticing the astonishing color. Silver streaked through the bright blue of her eyes, and dark long black lashes framed her eyes as well as perfectly shaped eyebrows. She had eyes so astonishingly lovely that he stared, momentarily entranced. As he stared at her, a blush stained her fair skin, and she narrowed a suspicious gaze on him. “If ye’re thinking to let a room here, it’s going to cost ye a great amount of coin,” she said. “I ken how much coin ye won, and dunnae ye mistake that I mind relieving ye of some of it.” A smirk turned up the corners of her mouth just enough that a dimple appeared in her right cheek. He felt his lips part in further shock. How had he missed these obvious signs of her true identity?

He stared for a moment and swallowed. “Is it nae customarily good manners to thank someone when they have rescued ye?”

“Aye,” she said, “but ye cheated me out of winnings, so ye’ll nae get a thanks from me today.”

“I won the contest fairly.”

“I did nae get to finish it,” she said. “Had I, I’d have won.”

“Ye would nae have,” Calan piped up. “Alasdair let—”

Alasdair held up a silencing hand to his friend. There were far more important things to address than whether the lass would have bested him or not. For instance, did she know anything of her history or had it been kept hidden even from her? Did she know she was Margaret Stewart? Did she know men were searching for her? Surely not, for if she did know who she was, he could not imagine why she would not have fled this life already. “I did nae come here to let a room.”

“What the devil did ye come for, then?” she demanded.

“Where’s yer da?” he asked, instead of immediately answering her question. Alasdair was going to take her. There was no doubt of that in his mind. By her own mouth, her father was abusive, and by Benedict’s own words, her da would never let her go without a great monetary gain, and Alasdair wasn’t about to offer any coin to a man who abused his daughter.

“Why do ye want to ken where my da is?” she asked, her eyes narrowing further.

“I’m just curious why yer da was nae protecting ye from the likes of the man who grabbed ye.”

She laughed a deep-bellied laugh. “Protect me?” She gasped between peals of laughter. “The man offered my da a large purse of coin to bed me, so he took it.”

Shock yielded quickly to fury. “Has yer da done this afore?” he asked, thinking of her pending betrothal to Laird Campbell. If she was not an innocent, then Campbell would not wed her, which perhaps was best if she really did not wish to wed. She could at least return to the bosom of a better family.

“Oh, aye,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hand, as if her father’s neglect of her was nothing.

His nostrils flared with his scalding anger. “Is yer da inside?” he asked.

“Aye.”

“Hold the lass here,” he said to Calan, who nodded as Alasdair brushed past her, but when she called to him, he turned, one foot on the second stair. “Aye?”

“If ye’re here to tell my da what I did, I beg ye—”

“Nay, Sorchu,” he answered. “I’m nae here to bring ye trouble. I’m here for ye.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

The dark-haired stranger's words surprised and disappointed her, and until that disappointment squeezed her chest, she had not even realized he had made an impression upon her. She snorted at her foolishness, thinking perhaps there was a man in this world who treated women with a modicum of respect and caring.

Anger shot through her body, and she balled her left hand into a fist and shook it at his back as he turned away from her. "I dunnae care how much coin ye give my da, I'm nae lying with ye!" she bellowed as he strode up the stairs and threw open the door to the inn with so much force that it slammed against the stone with a rattle before banging shut once more.

When it was obvious he had no intention of acknowledging what she said, she lifted her skirts to race after him, but his companion grabbed her by the arm in a viselike grip. "Ye have to stay here, lass."

She glanced to the brown-haired, green-eyed devil beside her. "I dunnae have to do anything ye say," she bit out and tried to twist out of his grip, but he tightened his hold.

"I'm sorry, lass, but Alasdair told me to keep ye here."

"Do ye always take commands from other men?" she asked, trying to goad him into releasing her.

He smiled with an annoyingly patient look. "From my laird, I do," he replied evenly.

Ah, that was right. She recalled now that the black-haired warrior had been called

Laird MacLachlan. “Just because yer friend is a laird, it does nae give him the right to buy my body,” she said, knowing full well all men thought they had such a right to buy or take what they wanted.

“He does nae want yer body,” the man replied.

“Well, I’m nae going to wed him, either!” she declared hotly.

The man full on laughed at that. “He does nae wish to wed ye, either, lass.”

She frowned at that, now utterly confused. “But he said he was here for me.”

“Aye,” the man replied with a confirming nod. “He’s here to return ye to yer home.”

“Return me to my home?” she asked, sure she had not heard correctly.

Green eyes met hers. The man frowned. “Well, aye,” he said hesitantly. “To yer real family.”

She froze, her mother’s deathbed confession coming back to her.

Someday, Sorch, her mother had whispered as she lay dying, someone may come for ye.

Why would someone come for me, mama?

Ye are mine. The gods brought ye to me when I had no hope of a bairn, and they gave ye to me. They gave me hope, and they gave ye safety. Dunnae go with them. Dunnae let them take ye. They were bad, bad people. They did this to ye, her mother had said, whispering frantically with a spurt of sudden strength as she traced a finger over Sorch’s brand she’d had as long as she could remember. They hurt ye. Yer birth

family hurt ye. Ye must stay here. Ye must stay with Ada.

These men were here from her birth family. They had somehow found her. Real fear flooded her at the thought of being torn from her sister, the only person in this world she loved. Her father may be the devil, but he was the devil she knew. She ripped her arm from the man and raced up the stairs toward the very home she'd been desperately scheming to flee, but just as she got to the door, it swung toward her, hit her in the forehead, and the world around her went black.

She awoke to a horrid throbbing pain in her head as her body was jostled at a jarring pace. She struggled to open her eyes. They felt stuck closed, as if someone had put honey on the inside of her eyelids so they'd not properly open. When she did manage to lift her heavy lids, her vision was fuzzy and all she saw for a long moment were shadows and hazy scenery. When her vision cleared, she frowned at the darkening forest around her. It had been sunny when she was last awake.

Trees blurred by her at an alarmingly fast pace. Her heartbeat raced and fear sprung up inside her. Where was she? She tried to recall what had happened, but the pounding in her head made it near impossible to order her thoughts. As she scanned the passing landscape, she frantically looked for a landmark she recognized, and when she could not locate one, her pulse became so fast she felt faint and the world tilted for one moment before it righted, and she released a scream.

"Ye're awake, I see," came a voice from behind her and then an arm she had not even registered was lying across her abdomen, and heavily muscled thighs sat on either side of her own. God's blood! She was trapped! She screamed again and tried to twist out of the arm around her, but it tightened across her midriff.

"Stop screaming please," came the deep voice again, but now it was louder, near her ear, and the press of an unyielding chest against her back ratcheted up her fear even more, but then she recognized the voice to be that of Laird MacLachlan—Alasdair, as

his friend had called him.

“Ye took me!” She gasped, squirming more, but all it did was cause her breasts to rub against his arm. She stilled, and a blush heated her from head to foot. “Ye stole me from my home!” She tried as discreetly as possible to inch upward so her breasts were no longer resting against his warm arm.

“I would think ye’d be grateful,” he replied, not even bothering to deny that he’d taken her.

“Grateful? Grateful! ” she sputtered, astonished at his audacity. “Ye knocked me out and stole me from my home!” she bellowed over the pounding of hooves.

“I did nae knock ye out,” he said, his warm breath tickling her ear and neck as he spoke. “Ye ran into the door as I was coming out of it.”

She opened her mouth to protest but clamped her jaw shut as the memory flooded her brain. He was right. She had run into the door, but still... “Ye snatched me!” she accused again. He had taken her against her will, no matter how it had come to pass. He wasn’t squirming out of his no-good rotten deeds with slippery explanations.

“I took ye from a man who abused ye.”

“Ye must take me back!” she insisted, worry for her sister and what could happen to her in Sorcha’s absence filling her. “I’ve a younger sister. I told ye. ’Tis my job to protect her.”

“I hate to tell ye so bluntly, but she’s nae yer sister,” Alasdair fairly shouted over the noise of the pounding horse hooves.

She jerked at his words. According to her mother’s deathbed confession, her birth

father was dead and so was her birth mother, so she couldn't fathom how he could possibly know that she was not a MacGregor by blood. "I dunnae ken how ye come by the knowledge of my nae being a true MacGregor—"

"Ye ken who ye are?" he said, his voice full of incredulity.

"I ken I'm nae a MacGregor, but I dunnae ken who I belonged to by birth. I ken they were bad. Verra bad. They branded me to sell me," she said, a shiver passing through her as she repeated what her mother had told her.

"Nay, lass," he said, his right arm tightening around her and his left hand pulling up on the reins of the horse to slow it to a stop. "Yer family did nae brand ye to sell ye. Yer da was Laird Gilbert Stewart, and he ordered ye branded so they could find ye. Ye are Margaret Stewart."

"Nay," she said, shaking her head. "Nay," she repeated, because if that were true, the dying words of the woman she'd thought of as her mother her whole life were a lie. "My name is Sorcha, and my birth family was evil."

"Nay, yer name is Margaret, and yer family was nae evil," Alasdair said firmly, sliding off the horse and taking her with him.

Margaret? Margaret? The word pounded continuously through her brain, but she shoved it aside for the moment and all the questions that went with it. "What are ye doing?" she demanded.

"I should think it obvious," he replied, turning to face her. Her breath lodged in her chest, and heat swept through her. His powerful, well-muscled body towered over her. The rich outline of his broad shoulders strained against the thick material of his plaid. He stood with the air of a man full of self-confidence. His long legs were spread the width of his shoulders, and he crossed his arms slowly over his chest as he

glanced down at her.

“I mean,” she tried again, “why have ye dismounted? I told ye, I have to return to my sister, and I also told ye that the family of my blood is a bad family. Ye have false information. I dunnae ken why after all these years they have sent ye for me, but I dunnae want to go to them.”

“I told ye,” Alasdair’s travel companion said as he brought his destrier to a halt beside her.

She glared up at the man who looked as happy as a cat who’d just caught a rat. “Ye told him what?” she demanded, because she suspected the cocksure man’s statement had something to do with her.

“I told him,” the man said, dismounting, “that ye’d nae be reasonable.”

“Ye dunnae even ken me,” she snapped. “So ye kinnae ken whether I’d be reasonable or nae, ye, ye—”

“Calan,” he said, tipping his head to her. “And I dunnae need to ken ye. Ye’re a woman, and women are unreasonable creatures who are driven by emotion and nae logic.”

“That’s nae true!” She glared at the man as he dismounted as well.

“It’s nae?” He motioned to Alasdair. “I’d wager ye turned down all yer marriage offers because ye think all men are horrid.”

She darted her gaze between Alasdair and his friend Calan. “How do ye ken I turned down marriage offers?”

“Benedict likes to gossip,” Alasdair supplied with an apologetic look.

She nodded, knowing that was true enough. “’Tis nae any of yer concern, sir,” she said looking to Calan, “why I turned down the offers.”

He smirked. “And do ye think all men are horrid?”

She had to get away from these men and back to her sister. She could not be dragged across the country to a family that had branded her. She couldn’t let a handsome face and a good deed that, on further contemplation, had probably been calculated by Alasdair to sway her into trusting him. But simply demanding to be returned was not going to get her what she wanted. She’d have to escape. And to do that, she’d have to make them think she was going to cooperate so they would lower their guard. But she couldn’t appear overly cooperative right away. Alasdair did not look like the sort of man to be easily duped. He had a sharp, probing stare, as if he could read her inner thoughts with a look.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

Sorcha inhaled a long breath and chose her next words with calculated care. “I have only ever kenned men whose only use for a woman is how the lass can benefit them, but mayhap,” she said, giving a delicate shrug of her shoulders, “I’m wrong.” I’m nae. “Mayhap,” she continued, rather pleased with how earnest she sounded. She added in a nice, convincing thread of weariness and cast her gaze downward to portray an overtaxed, uncertain lass. Honestly, she wanted to glare at both men. Alasdair had seemed nice enough, but more the fool was she. A nice man would not take a lass against her will. Nice men did not exist.

“Mayhap my birth family is nae as horrid as I was led to believe,” she went on. “I’m so verra tired, and it’s all a shock, having ye appear and say ye were here to take me back to my family, and then, b-b-being snatched by ye.”

The distraught tone in her voice was not a complete act. The name the man had told her was hers was resounding through her head again. Margaret. Margaret. Margaret . Why had her mother not told her what her real name was before she died? Had she not known it? Sorcha squeezed her eyes shut on a wave of nausea, and when she opened them again, Alasdair and Calan were exchanging a look of concern. She had to swallow a sudden bubble of hysterical laughter. She’d set out to convince them she was distraught, but by the gods, she was. She had to get back to her sister, but she also wanted to get back to her father and demand answers. If what these men said was true, why had her mother and father kept her with them if they knew she came from a good family?

She’d asked her father about her mother’s confession after she died, and he’d confirmed she was not his by blood, but he’d vowed they had no knowledge of who she really was. Was that true? She had to know, because if it wasn’t true, if they had

known who she was, the mother she'd loved had deceived her and lied to her, and yet—she swallowed the rising nausea down—and yet, she knew her mother had loved her. The woman had treated her with care and kindness all her life. So why would she have kept the truth of who she was from her on her deathbed?

Sorcha could feel Alasdair and Calan staring at her, but she did not care. She pressed her fingertips to her pounding temples. Why had her father kept the truth from her all these years if he knew it as well? Had he actually loved her in his own twisted way and feared losing her? Ridiculous hope rose. She had longed to be loved by that man for so many years, and she had thought she had finally shed that yearning, yet here she stood willing to take some twisted shard of hurtful love. For what gain? She would never stay with him now, and yet, to think he had possibly loved her in some way, well, that was a comfort of sorts. She was disgusted at her weakness, and she didn't want to care whether her father had known the truth or not, yet she had to know.

“Margaret,” Alasdair said, setting a hand to her elbow. She shook it off.

“Sorcha,” she said, her voice cracking. “My name is Sorcha.”

“Yer name is Margaret, lass,” he said, his tone suddenly gentle. Not only did a wave of nausea wash over her again, but it was so strong this time that the ground under her seemed to tilt. When Alasdair gripped her elbow, she did not shake him off for fear she might actually fall to the ground. Her name was Margaret. Margaret Stewart. If the man was to be believed, then she was not Sorcha, she was Margaret.

She squeezed her eyes shut once more, but in her head there was a very clear picture of her as a young lass sitting by her mother as she lay dying. She clearly recalled the shock her mother's words of warning had caused, but Sorcha's grief over losing her mother had consumed her and pushed aside any thoughts of who she might be. She'd not questioned it ever again, not even in the worst of times with her father. Was it a

purposeful betrayal of the worst sort or a twisted grasp to keep her with him? She had to have the answer.

“Margaret,” Alasdair said, squeezing her elbow.

It took all her strength to shrug him off and open her eyes. A gaze full of concern met hers. She was not such a fool as to believe this man held any true worry for her. That hysterical laughter threatened to erupt again, forcing her to swallow multiple times to keep it down, but in its place a question popped out. “How do ye ken I’m Margaret Stewart?” He opened his mouth to answer, but fear washed over her, and she shook her head. “Dunnae answer.”

Understanding seemed to fill his eyes. “We’ll set ye up a shelter, and ye can rest while we make camp and forage for food.”

“That would be much appreciated,” she said, careful to keep her relief out of her voice.

“When ye’ve had some rest and some food in yer belly, mayhap then ye’ll let me tell ye what I ken of yer family. Then ye’ll see ye are going to a better place.”

There was an inherent strength in his face. A dangerous kind, she decided. One that made her want to believe and trust him, but she knew better. She didn’t even trust her father, but she was still like a dog, longing for any scrap of love. So she simply nodded and gave him the words she suspected he was searching for. “Mayhap ye’re right,” she said, because though she wanted to be convincing, she found it was the best she could offer.

“Come,” he said and held out his hand to her.

The gesture surprised and confused her, but to keep up the charade, she took his hand.

A jolt coursed immediately through her fingertips at the contact of his warm skin on hers. Long, solid fingers curled around her hand, and it was surprisingly comforting. He walked ahead of her a step with his arm extended, and she trailed behind him, finding she could not tear her gaze away. He had the purposeful strides of a man who was used to getting much done. She wondered for a moment what being laird of a clan must be like, but then she pushed the question away. It served no good to wonder about him.

He stopped in front of a rock and released her hand. But then his palm came to her elbow to guide her, she realized with shock, to sit down. He was a contradiction. He'd taken her against her will, but she had the feeling he had justified it because he'd decided he was delivering her to a better life. If she coupled that with the concern he was showing for her comfort, it made it difficult to fear him or even despise him. However, she didn't need either emotion to escape, and she needed to do that for certain.

He silently waited for her to get situated and as he turned on his heel with a nod, she found herself watching him move about in front of her, building a shelter where she could sleep. As he fastened plaids to trees and sticks to create a makeshift roof and walls, her mind wandered to fantasies she'd not indulged in for ages. There had been a time when her mother was still alive, that she would fantasize about a handsome warrior coming through the village when she was a properly grown lass, falling in love with her, and sweeping her away to his castle to live happily ever after. But as the years had gone by and all the men she'd encountered had shown themselves to be pigs, she'd understood why her mother had warned her repeatedly never to wed a man and give him power over her, and she'd come to believe the only person she could count on to rescue her was herself. If she had met this man in another circumstance—no. It was foolish to allow such thoughts.

“What are ye shaking yer head at?”

Alasdair's voice broke her musings. She looked up from the ground and found him directly in front of her. Her body reacted in the strangest way again with warmth sweeping through her. She followed his long, well-defined legs up his body to his hips, where her gaze stuttered, then stalled. He had at some point removed his tunic and plaid, so that all he wore were his braies, which clung to his hips.

She inched her gaze over his hip bones to his carved abdomen and up further over his broad chest to his face. He held a torch, which flickered in the cool breeze, shadows dancing on his skin. She blinked, feeling the heat of his intense stare, though in the growing darkness, it was hard to read his expression. She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. "There was a pesky bug around me," she lied.

His eyebrows hitched up, and she held her breath, thinking he might call her a liar, but instead, he nodded and motioned over his shoulder. "Supper is ready."

She inhaled, smelling roasting meat. She'd been lost in the past for longer than she'd realized. "Rabbit?"

He nodded. "Aye. And a hunk of bread and wine. Come," he said, offering his hand to help her up.

"Ye're verra polite for someone who took me against my will," she said, taking his hand. Immediately, she was struck with that same tingling sensation when his skin met hers.

"I'm nae a bad person, Margaret."

"Sorcha," she corrected. She didn't care for how much she liked the feel of her hand in his, so she tugged hers away.

"Yer name is Margaret," he replied in the same gentle tone as before.

“So ye say,” she grumbled, taking a seat around the fire on one of the logs Alasdair and Calan must have situated there.

He took his seat opposite her, leaving the one nearest her for Calan, who joined them before she was settled. She felt awkward about taking a stick of meat she’d not even helped hunt or prepare, so when Alasdair retrieved a stick from the fire and handed it to her, she took it gratefully.

“Would ye like me to tell ye what I ken of yer family?” he asked as he handed a wine skin to her.

She took that gratefully as well. She was parched from their travels. She wanted to say it didn’t matter what he knew because she would return home to her sister, no matter what he told her. Yet, she found herself wanting to know.

She had, as a lass, dreamed at times that her mother had been wrong about her true family, and that somewhere out there her real mother and father were searching for her. But no one had come, and she didn’t care for the hope bubbling inside her. It was as foolish as the hope that her father had loved her in a way, twisted or not.

Something in her voice must have betrayed her curiosity because Alasdair said, “Yer father was laird of the Stewart clan, as I told ye.”

Was, she thought. So, he is dead. She did not care. He’d been a bad, evil person. Hadn’t he? She did not care. She did not care, and yet, there was a part of her that did. She wanted to destroy that weak spot. “I dunnae care,” she said, but devil take it, her voice wobbled.

“Yer mama was Isabel Stewart.”

Despite trying to steel herself from feeling any emotion, a lump formed in her throat.

She turned her mother's name over in her mind. Isabel Stewart. Isabel . Sorchu raised a trembling hand to her head. Had her red hair come from her mother? She blinked at the unexpected and unwanted sting of tears behind her lids and willed them away, but while she could control her physical reaction, she could not tamp down her mental one. She blinked again. Had she gotten the unusual color of her eyes from her mother or her father? She'd never allowed herself to consider such things, and she didn't know why she was allowing it now. It was foolhardy.

"I dunnae care," she said again, trying to add more force to her voice this time, but when a sympathetic look crossed Alasdair's face, she understood she'd failed.

"Yer mama and papa were killed when their home was attacked."

"By whom?" she asked, cursing herself for the question that had slipped out. It meant a part of her did indeed care, despite her not wanting to care at all.

"By John of Islay, the former Lord of the Isles, and yer da's once closest ally and friend."

"Well," she said, thinking of what Martha had told her, and despite now knowing her words and intentions were questionable, it was all Sorchu had to cling to, false or not. She felt she was drowning in a stormy sea. "He must have done something evil to this John of Islay, just as he did to me."

"Are ye an ill-informed fool?" Calan demanded, drawing her attention to him for a moment. He was glaring at her.

"Calan," Alasdair snapped. "Curb yer tongue. Margaret is ill-informed of politics because the man whose house she lived in neglected to speak of such things with her."

“I told ye my name is Sorcha!” she snapped, as embarrassment washed over her. It was true that she knew precious little about the political goings on in Scotland. She knew who the king was, but beyond that, she did not know much else.

“Yer name, whether ye choose to use it or nae, is Margaret,” Alasdair said and the patience in his tone annoyed her.

“I will nae ever be Margaret Stewart!” she said, knowing she sounded like a petulant child.

To her surprise, he nodded, and a long moment passed before he spoke. “It is hard,” he finally said, “to let go of things we knew, even if they do not serve us.” She didn’t like that he sounded as if he understood her pain, and she tensed, expecting him to prod her more. Instead, he said, “John of Islay was plotting to overthrow the King of Scotland with the English king and some other Scottish lords. I imagine yer da uncovered the plot. Yer da had always been verra loyal to the king, but John was clever. I do believe John must have feared yer da would tell the king of the plot to overthrow him, so he went on the offensive and accused yer da of treason. He stormed yer da’s castle, yer home, under this pretense. When the battle was over, yer parents were dead, and ye and both yer older brothers were missing.”

“How do ye come by this information?” she asked, feeling that bubble of hope she’d been trying to repress getting bigger. Did she have brothers who were alive? She was afraid to even consider it, let alone ask.

“Everyone kens of John of Islay’s betrayal,” Calan answered. “The King of England was recently desperate for aid from our king, and to get the help he required, he finally gave the names of the Scottish lords who had planned to betray our king’s father when he reigned. John of Islay was one of the betrayers named, and it became known then that he had also betrayed yer da.”

Her heartbeat quickened, despite trying to breathe evenly to keep it steady. She curled her fingers toward her palms as her emotions lapped up against her insides like storm waves. She feared they'd overtake the boundaries she was trying to maintain.

“My cousin Ollie is a mercenary,” Alasdair said, his head tilting more toward her to look her fully in the face. Shadows played across his chiseled features, and her pulse quickened yet more, but this time, she instinctually understood it was attraction to this man that was doing it. Apparently, her foolish body had overruled her more sensible head.

“Yer eldest brother, Ross, who is now laird of the Stewart clan,” he said, “enlisted mercenaries to help find ye.”

Hope didn't just bubble up, it filled her, but so did more questions. “Ye said my brothers and I were missing?”

“Aye.” Alasdair nodded. “Stewart just recently returned to claim his rightful spot as laird of the clan. He'd apparently been taken into hiding the night of the attack by your da's right hand, Bran, who ferreted yer brother to the Northern Watch. Do ye ken what the Northern Watch is?”

“Aye,” she said, her mind turning with all Alasdair was saying. If this was all true, what did it change for her? What it didn't change was the fact that Ada was her sister, and she had to return to the only home she'd ever known to protect her. She was the only person Ada could rely on. “They give safe passage through the woods around their stronghold, and they serve the king as his wishes.”

“Aye,” Alasdair said with a nod. “Yer brother, I'm assuming, came out of hiding when it was discovered that yer da was nae a traitor after all. I dunnae ken for certain how it all occurred, and what I do ken, I only ken because Ollie was at a meeting of mercenaries yer brother called to search for ye.”

“Why search for me now? After all these years?”

She did not miss the quick look that Alasdair and Calan exchanged. “Yer brother did nae ken who he was, just as ye did nae, and he did nae ken of ye or yer other brother, Graeme.”

Two brothers. I have two brothers .

If this was all true, she could not simply accept it, and yet, what if it were true? What if she did have a brother, a laird no less, looking for her because he wanted to bring her back into the fold of the family she’d been ripped from. She pictured for a moment a large great hall with a crackling fire. There were chairs circled around the fire where she and her brothers, and mayhap their wives if they had them, would talk after dinner each night. There was a space in that great hall that was cleared every night for dancing.

“Lass?”

She blinked, realizing she’d been lost in a ridiculous fantasy, and her face heated when she met Alasdair’s gaze once more. Rather than explain she’d been recalling the dream that used to see her through hard times with her da, she asked, “Was Graeme hidden away as well?”

Both Calan and Alasdair nodded. “Aye,” Alasdair said, “as far as we ken, but we only ken what Ollie learned when he was called to the meeting with yer eldest brother. I imagine,” he added, taking a swig from his wine skin, “that when Ross learned who he was, and about ye and yer brother, he started searching for ye, and since he has been unable to find ye, he called in mercenaries to aid him.”

“And what will ye get for delivering me to this family?” she demanded. She was not so naive to think he was doing this out of the goodness of his heart. No man’s heart

was that pure.

He stared at her for a long moment that seemed to stretch and stretch, and he finally said, "Coin, lass. I will get coin."

He was uncomfortable with the fact that he was delivering her somewhere for money, for gain for him. She could hear it in his tight tone. But she was confused. Did it mean he had more of a conscience than most men? Did it mean he was possibly a good man who had to do this deed for some reason? She had the clot-heided urge to tell him it was all right, but of course, it wasn't. He was forcing her somewhere against her will, so she bit her tongue. He abruptly stood and turned away from her, tugging a hand through his hair, and she watched as he strode toward the woods, toward darkness.

He was almost at the edge of the woods when Calan called out to him. "Where are ye going?"

"To clear my head," Alasdair snapped but did not turn around or stop.

Calan made a derisive noise, and when Alasdair was gone, she once more looked to his friend, who had resumed eating and drinking but was staring at her with accusing eyes. She glared back, but Calan only narrowed his eyes upon her.

"What?" she demanded. "I suppose," she said slowly, trying to order her own tumbling thoughts and guilt filling her head, "ye believe I should feel relieved that yer laird feels remorse for taking coin to force me somewhere I dunnae wish to go." When Calan did not respond and simply kept staring with his lips pressed into a thin line, it kindled her temper. "Ye kinnae lay blame at my feet for yer laird doing a harmful and selfish deed and profiting from it!"

Calan threw his half-eaten stick of meat into the fire and leaned on his elbows to glare

at her more. “How is it harmful to ye to be returned to yer rightful family?”

She opened her mouth to remind him of her sister, but he waved a hand at her. “Alasdair would nae have taken ye from the life ye had, nae matter how much he needs the coin, if he did nae believe he was delivering ye to a better life. As far as I can see, ye’ve been neglected, abused, misused, and from what I hear, yer da will nae allow ye to leave even to wed because he wants to continue using ye as his free servant. Why would ye want to stay with him?”

“I dunnae know,” she replied. “I had plans to open an apothecary shop.”

Calan’s jaw fell open. “A shop? Alone? Live alone?” When she nodded, he looked aghast. “Devil take it, lass, who will protect ye from unwanted attention? Who will watch over ye should ye fall ill? Do ye nae want bairns?”

She once had, but she’d given up the dream. Was she being ridiculous? Mayhap, she could go home and help Ada, then travel to her birth family and get to know them. Nothing said she had to stay.

“Ye’ll be living in a great stronghold,” Calan went on, “and ye’ll nae ever want for anything. And ye’ll have people to care for ye should ye need them.” She nibbled on her lip and imagined the scene around the fire in the great hall with her brothers and their wives again. “And ye’ll be a great lady, wed as ye will be to Laird Campbell,” he added, taking a long swig from the wine skin he’d just picked up.

“Wed?” she repeated, trying not to sound as appalled as she felt. He was lucky she had not screamed it. He winced and regret crossed his face, and she knew in order to get any more information from him, she’d have to convince him that the prospect of a forced marriage to a stranger was pleasing to her.

“Wed to a great laird!” she exclaimed, nearly gagging on each word. “How

wonderful!” How horrid . “I never imagined yer laird was trying to do me such a service.” She’d imagined it, but then she had begun to question if she was being too jaded, if she was being too harsh, if mayhap Alasdair was a rare thing known as an honest man. Ha!

Calan smiled. “Aye,” he said. “’Tis why yer brother wishes so desperately to bring ye home. Ye were apparently betrothed to Laird Campbell as a bairn, and when it was discovered ye may well be alive, he agreed to honor the betrothal. So, when ye are wed to Laird Campbell, yer clan will become one of the strongest and greatest in the Highlands.”

Tears burned behind her eyelids. She was a fool. A fool for believing for one moment she was wanted simply out of love and not to be used as a commodity for the gain of a man. And she was an even greater fool for allowing herself to feel even a breath of compassion for Alasdair. She would escape him, and she would return home to aid her sister and confront her father, and discover once and for all if there was or had ever been any love for her in that man.

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It took him a while of pacing, a swim in the water, and sitting and staring at the moonlight until Alasdair concluded what he needed to do. He had to tell the lass the truth of what he knew about her situation, though, undoubtedly, it would increase her resistance to being returned home. But he didn't feel there was a choice. To withhold the information from her meant making himself a liar, and he'd not do that for any amount of coin.

He sat upon the rock for a long spell after making his decision, and he tried to sort out how to explain things to her so she could see that though she'd be wed, it would surely be a better situation than she could have ever hoped for otherwise. Or mayhap it would be that her brother would decide she was not required to wed Laird Campbell after all.

He did not know, and he could not allow the uncertainty to sway his decision. He had his clan to think about. She was a stranger. She was not his responsibility, and she would be fine. Nay, better than fine. She would be a great laird's wife, and if nae that, she would be the sister of a great laird, with a belly full of food daily, a warm home that wasn't crumbling at her feet, and an army of warriors to protect her. That was more than he could give to his own children if he didn't return her home.

The choice was made. It was not a bad one. It was not dishonorable. He was not delivering her to death or ravishment. He was delivering her to a pampered life. He jerked up, irritated that he was still sitting and debating it when he should be resting for the journey that would come early on the morrow. He was agitated that she'd managed, without even trying, to make him feel guilty about what he had to do and to make him feel as if he was trading a part of his honor to do it.

He strode back toward camp but stopped halfway there, the guilt pressing so heavily upon him that he knew there was something else he needed to do. He craned his head back and stared up at the full moon. An unexpected memory of Mariot when she'd been nearly ready to birth their children came to him. They'd lain in the woods one night, and she'd told him she hoped their children would inherit his ability to track, lest they ever need to find each other; his skill with bow and arrow, lest they ever need to defend themselves; and his honesty, so their souls would stay pure and they'd all meet again one day.

Her words echoed in his head, and he could have sworn he heard her voice on the wind. Tell her the truth. Tell her the truth.

He inhaled a long, steady breath and looked toward the path that led to camp, led to her. He would tell Margaret that her brother intended her to wed. He didn't feel right keeping the truth from her, whether it was his business or not. The reassertion of the decision settled the disquiet in him.

He picked up his pace, eager to unload his secret, but when he entered camp and saw only Calan sitting by the dying fire, worry seized him. He glanced toward the makeshift shelter he'd made for Margaret, but he couldn't tell whether she was inside or not. He stopped in front of Calan, who was closer to him than Margaret's shelter, and he glanced down at his friend. "Please tell me the lass is inside her shelter, and ye did nae let her talk ye into letting her go off alone to wash, relieve herself, or some other excuse to escape us."

Calan yawned as he looked up at Alasdair. "I'm nae a clot-heid. She's in her shelter, but she will nae be trying to escape us," he said, grinning now and holding a wine skin out to Alasdair. "Sit, have a drink, and relax."

He ignored the outstretched wine skin and Calan's words. Instead, he strode to Margaret's shelter, intent on seeing for himself that she was inside. The need to know

was nearly overwhelming, and he was certain it was because if she did escape them and he could not find her again, this chance to aid his family would be lost. He parted the hanging plaids on the side of the shelter and glanced inside. It was so dark he could only make out her outline at first, but the steady rhythm of her breathing reached him immediately, and as his eyes adjusted to the lack of light within the shelter, her legs came into view.

Curiosity slid his gaze to her feet first. There, in perfect view, was her foot that was missing a toe. Not that he had needed more proof that she was Margaret Stewart, but if he had, her it was. Next, he brought his gaze up to her legs. They were bared, and as he inched his gaze up the long, slender shape of them to the rounded curve of her hip where her skirts were bunched, and the dip of her small waist, and further still to the swell of her breasts hidden beneath the rough material of her gown, searing desire gripped him. He stepped back, let the plaids fall back into place, and stood there a moment to give himself time to let his lust cool. Why he hungered after this woman now, he could not explain, nor did it matter. It was an emotion he could not, would not, act upon.

He turned on his heel and strode back to Calan. He sat opposite of where Calan now lay on his plaid by the fire and took up the half-full wine skin, tilted it back, and drained the remaining contents. “How long has she been asleep?”

“I kinnae say,” Calan replied in a tone made sluggish with weariness. “I did nae watch her fall asleep, but she went to her shelter after we had a nice little chat.”

Alasdair swiped a hand across his mouth, set down the wine skin, and stared at his friend, who had a pleased look on his face. That look made Alasdair uneasy. Calan had a knack for stirring trouble, though he never meant to. “What was the talk about?”

Calan propped himself up, rummaged through a travel bag beside him on the ground,

and produced another wine skin.

“Calan,” Alasdair said, his patience waning.

“I’ve nae ever seen ye so eager to speak of a lass except Mariot.”

Alasdair stiffened, feeling almost as if he had somehow betrayed his wife. Then he shrugged off the ridiculous emotion. “I’m nae eager to ken anything about Margaret beyond that she is still in my possession.”

“‘Tis nae what yer eyes said.”

Alasdair frowned. “I dunnae have any notion of what ye speak, and besides that, eyes dunnae talk.”

“Sure, they do. Ladies’ eyes often say, ‘I’m interested, please kiss me’ or ‘I’m irritated.’ And yer eyes said, ‘I desire ye.’”

“I certainly dunnae desire ye,” Alasdair said.

Calan scowled. “Ye ken exactly what I’m referring to. Ye want the lass.”

“I want her as any man would want a beautiful lass,” Alasdair snapped.

“Except ye’re nae any man. Ye’re a man who has been in mourning for six long years, and ye told me yerself afore we started on this journey that ye’d nae been interested in a lass in any way since Mariot’s death.”

Alasdair couldn’t deny those words, and the inability to do so created a deafening silence, so he snatched the wine skin from Calan’s hand and drained the contents.

“Calan, just tell me what ye said to Margaret,” Alasdair demanded.

“I told her she should be grateful to ye and happy because he were delivering her to be wed to a great laird.”

Alasdair groaned. “Calan, God’s blood.”

“She was thrilled.”

“Calan!” Alasdair said on another groan, as he half stood, certain that if he looked in on Margaret again, she’d be gone, though he had a clear view of her shelter from where he’d been sitting and no movement had come from it.

“I tell ye, she was happy.”

Alasdair glared down at his numbskull of a friend. “Have ye forgotten about all the offers of marriage Benedict told us she’d turned down?”

“Nay, but those offers were nae from a great laird. This offer pleases her.”

Alasdair could feel his frown deepen. “I dunnae sense that Margaret is the sort of woman to have a need to wed a great laird.”

“Well, that shows ye how little ye ken of women. They all want to wed great lairds. Why, even ye have someone who wants to wed ye, and ye’re nae a great laird; ye’re just a laird.”

Sometimes talking to Calan could make Alasdair tired. The man could speak circles around most people. “I think I should be offended,” Alasdair said, sitting once more, but this time, he kicked his legs out in front of him to get more comfortable.

“Ye should nae. Ye are a ‘great laird’ in every sense. And ye have prevailed and found the coin needed for our clan, but lasses often see greatness in wealth, and though ye be rich in honor, wit, and looks, most lasses prefer their wealth in cold, hard coin.”

“As Mariot was the only lass I ever really kenned, I dunnae have the knowledge to draw from to ken if ye’re right or wrong.”

“Trust me,” Calan said, tugging his plaid up over his legs, scooting into a half-lying position, and crossing his arms over his chest. “I’ve intimately kenned enough lasses in my life to tell ye with certainty that I’m correct. Lasses like Mariot are a rare species. Lasses who choose a man based on things other than riches are few and far between, and Margaret is nae such a lass. Her voice dripped delight when I told her we were delivering her to wed a great laird.”

“Well, then,” Alasdair said, aware that the information he’d just gleaned should relieve him, but it didn’t. He had an odd sense of disappointment about the discovery, which made little sense. “I suppose we can rest easy this night, then.”

“Aye,” Calan agreed and shut his eyes. “Good thing, too, because I’m as weary from our travels as the winter is long.”

Alasdair was also, but long after Calan’s steady snoring filled the silence, he remained awake with his attention trained on Margaret’s shelter. He found himself tense for a long time, certain that Calan was likely wrong about her and that at any moment, the plaids hanging over her shelter would rustle and she’d try to slip out into the night.

But the plaids didn’t rustle and she didn’t stir, and his tension that she would gave way to a new worry, disappointment that she hadn’t. The realization bothered him greatly, but it also allowed him to close his eyes and steal some of the sleep he so

desperately needed.

Something buzzing in his ear awoke him. It wasn't a slow drag from deep sleep but a hard yank into full alertness. His eyelids opened with a snap to bright daylight. He blinked, grabbed for the sword still sheathed at his hip, and scrambled to his feet, turning in a full circle before he remembered that he was in the woods with Calan and Margaret Stewart.

A glance at the fully-risen sun in the sky told him he'd slept far too long. A look down to the ground showed Calan still asleep with his mouth agape. Alasdair nudged him with his foot as he looked toward Margaret's shelter. He let out a breath, seeing the plaids were still in place, but when moved his gaze away from her shelter to where their horses had been tied, he found his destrier still tethered, but Calan's was pacing back and forth, dragging the rope that had been triple knotted around the tree.

"God's blood!" Alasdair swore so loud that Calan popped full upright to his feet in one breath.

"What?" he asked, looking around with the dazed look of someone still clutched by sleep.

"Ye and yer loose tongue and my own damned foolishness," he bit out, striding toward Margaret's shelter, but he knew in his gut he'd find her gone.

"What?" Calan called behind him.

Alasdair didn't answer. Instead, he threw back the plaids to reveal the empty space and his temper exploded, along with fear for the lass. He swung toward Calan while sweeping a hand toward the shelter behind him. "'Tis empty, ye clot-heid," he replied, striding to his destrier and working to untether it.

Calan appeared beside him a moment later, grabbing at the reins of his own horse. “How did Torian get—”

“I’ll tell ye how,” Alasdair interrupted, mounting his beast and scowling at Calan, who was mounting his. Once Calan was settled on his horse and looking at Alasdair, he let his friend have it. “She tried to take him. He likely bucked her, and if we find her injured, so help me God, I’ll beat ye within an inch of yer own life.”

“She would nae—” Calan started, but Alasdair was in no mood to listen to more of Calan’s supposed words of wisdom. The man was a clot-heid, and so was Alasdair for taking advice from a warrior known for wenching, whether he was his closest friend or not. All Calan knew of women was how to talk them into bed.

“She did,” Alasdair growled. “Ye were wrong about her and what she wants,” he said, as misplaced pleasure slid through him. But that did him no good. In fact, it made things a great deal more difficult because she’d clearly lied to Calan so he would not watch her closely, allowing her to escape. And it had worked, but what Margaret did not know, could not have known, was that Calan’s destrier didn’t tolerate any rider but Calan. The beast would let you mount, but he’d buck you off eventually. It seemed almost a trick to prove a point. Alasdair’s horse would not even let another rider on, so if she’d tried Maximillian first, she’d likely gotten bitten for her efforts.

He glanced toward the dirt and grass, searching for the way she had gone, and he found it immediately. Hoofprints outlined in the dirt and grass led east, away from the camp and back toward the Boat at Garten Inn. He gave Maximillian the signal to gallop, Calan and Torian following close behind, and Alasdair shook his head at their foolishness. As they raced back the way they’d come the day before, images of finding her thrown and injured on the trail flashed in his head, and then a worse possibility occurred to him. She could be dead.

She could have fallen from Calan's horse and hit her head or twisted her neck in such a way that killed her. His heart pounded viciously with the possibility, and ice coursed through his veins. He urged Maximillian faster and told himself that the black fear descending over him was for his clan, but the words did not ring true. There was something else. He couldn't name it, but it didn't matter in that moment.

He was about to take the trail to the right, the one they'd leisurely cantered down yesterday, but he pulled up on the reins and brought his horse to a stop at a branch that looked freshly broken. He scanned the ground around them, looking for signs as his da had taught him so many years before, as his da had before him. Tracking ran through Alasdair's veins nearly as thick as his blood.

Dread hardened in his chest as he dismounted and kneeled to run his fingers over the first set of horse hooves, then a second, and then a set of footprints. Tiny feet. Female feet. Feet encased in the poorest excuse for shoes that he'd ever seen. He then traced a finger over another set of footprints, a much larger set, a man's.

His breath caught. Margaret had indeed taken Torian, but then someone had taken her.

"What have ye found?" Calan's voice came from above Alasdair.

"Someone has taken her," he said. Uttering the words aloud tightened his chest further and made his heart beat faster.

"Another mercenary?"

"Possibly," Alasdair said, mounting his horse.

"Can ye see the direction they took?" Calan asked.

“I dunnae need to. They’ll be taking her to her brother as fast as they can to get the reward.”

“Then let’s go. We need to find them so we get the coin,” Calan said.

Alasdair was more concerned about Margaret’s welfare than the coin, but he’d keep that little bit of truth to himself.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

“I have to relieve myself!” she shouted at her captor, and it wasn’t even a lie.

They’d ridden hard through the remainder of the night, and they had not stopped even when a torrential rain had taken the sky hostage or when the sun had finally risen. It was now fully out and beating down on Sorcha, and her head ached from dehydration. Yet, her bladder had not been relieved since the night before.

When the man didn’t slow the horse, she tried again. “If ye dunnae let me relieve myself, I’ll be doing so on ye momentarily.”

That got the result she needed. Her captor pulled his horse to a stop, and as she started to dismount, so did he. “What are ye doing?” she demanded of the stranger.

He cocked his thick red eyebrows at her. “Ye dunnae think I’m going to allow ye to wander off alone, do ye?”

“How far do ye possibly think I could get before ye overcame me on yer horse?” she demanded, amazed at the lack of fear she felt. But considering this was her second time being snatched in less than two days, she supposed she was numb to it. And this man had told her plainly he didn’t want to harm her, and his actions had supported that. He hadn’t been rough with her, and when she’d tried to escape him and she’d gotten him in his groin, he had not retaliated. In fact, he’d told her that he wished he didn’t have to take her, but that he had no choice.

“I dunnae care to think how far ye might get, which is why I’ll be coming with ye.”

The finality of his tone told her there was no arguing with him. Of course, she

planned to escape, but she also did not relish the thought of a strange man watching her relieve herself.

With a huff, she strode past him toward the woods, shoving thick brush out of her way as she went deeper and deeper. The crunch of sticks behind her let her know he was close behind. She scanned the forest. Where could she relieve herself and escape the man? A breeze began, and the smell of water came to her on the wind, and with her back to her captor, she smiled. There was water ahead, and she fully intended to use it to rid herself of this man.

“Ye say ye dunnae have a choice but to snatch me, but yer verra actions are yer choice. Ye are choosing to force me somewhere I dunnae wish to be in exchange for coin,” she said striding fast toward the water. She hoped her conversation would distract him, so he’d not consider she might use the water to try to flee.

“I did nae snatch ye for coin. I dunnae get any coin for where I’m taking ye. I keep my head.”

“Yer head?” she stopped, turned, and faced the man. He had a friendly face, and a familiar look about him. Something about his eyes seemed familiar. “Do I ken ye?”

“Nay, though we likely passed each other at one point in the village. When I am nae on a mission, I live there.”

She felt her eyes go wide. “Ye live in my village?”

“Aye,” he said with a chuckle. “But I’m rarely ever there, and I could hardly believe it myself when I followed Alasdair to ye.”

Her brows dipped nearly together, so deep was her confusion. “Ye ken Alasdair?”

“Aye. He’s my cousin.” That was it! This man’s eyes were the same shape as Alasdair’s.

“Ye stole me from yer cousin? That’s despicable.” She was perfectly aware that she should not feel incensed on Alasdair’s behalf, and yet, she foolishly did.

The man’s cheeks turned red. “Well, lass, men do despicable things when their lives are threatened, I suppose, and I did nae steal ye. He dunnae own ye. I simply used him to find ye, given his record for tracking.”

“His record for tracking?” she asked.

“Aye. He’s the best.”

“Alasdair is a mercenary as well as a laird?”

The man shook his head. “Nay, he is nae a mercenary, but he’s still the best tracker I’ve ever seen. ’Tis why—Well, I... I tried to find ye myself after the meeting with yer brother. Of course, under the guise that I was bringing ye back to him.”

“Of course,” she said, not bothering to hide her sarcasm.

The man’s lips pressed into a thin line of displeasure, or mayhap it was guilt. Despite having snatched her, he didn’t seem like a horrid person, only like a person with a keen wish to stay alive, and how could she fault him for that?

“When I could nae, I was given a sennight more to find ye afore I lose my head. I made my way here to gather my belongings so I could flee. Running into Alasdair was a coincidence. I saw him, and I thought he could probably find ye.”

“Why nae simply ask yer cousin for his aid instead of tricking him?” she demanded.

“Because I could nae trust that he’d allow me to take ye if he found ye, and I could nae risk him crossing me.”

She gasped. “Ye think he’d choose to gain the coin rather than aid ye in keeping yer head? He must nae be a verra good man!”

“Nay,” the man said. “I feared his honor would get the best of him, because I ken just how deep it runs.”

“His honor?” she repeated, chuckling. “He took me! He was going to force me to a home I dunnae remember, to be wed against my will. Where is the honor in that?”

His jaw clenched, and his eyes narrowed slightly. “Ye dunnae ken him, so ye kinnae speak of his honor. Despite his own dire circumstances, I could nae be certain he’d allow me to take ye if he found ye or forced ye home himself for the coin. And as I said, I wish to keep my head.”

She stared at the giant of a man. He must have hardly ever been in their village. He was so tall, it would be impossible to pass and not notice him, so she knew she’d never seen him.

“Ye dunnae appear to be a man who’d feel threatened by another,” she said.

“Well, the king is nae just any man.”

“The king!” she exclaimed.

“Aye. I’m a mercenary who has done many a mission for the king, so when he got wind of yer brother’s reappearance and then his plans for ye—”

The wary look he gave her caused her to speak up. “I ken of the plans for my future,”

she bit out.

He nodded. "Well, the king is nae pleased with an impending alliance between yer clan and the Campbells."

"The king feels the clans will become too powerful?" she guessed.

"Ye're clever."

"Aye." She smirked. "Imagine! A lass who is clever. How extraordinary! Am I to be killed, then, because the king dunnae wish the alliance to proceed?"

He frowned. "If ye were simply to be killed, dunnae ye think I'd have already done the deed?"

"Good point," she replied, and her body relaxed a bit at his words. "What are the king's plans for me?"

"To wed ye to one of his trusted warriors, one whom he controls and one who will owe him for delivering a union with a clan such as yer brother's."

"I'd rather ye kill me than be forced to wed," she grumbled.

"Is that what ye told my cousin? Is that why he was nae watching ye as vigilantly as he should? 'Tis unlike him to be careless."

She shrugged. "I've nae a clue why he was nae watchful of me," she said, trying not to ignore the regret that had been tugging at her ever since she'd fled Alasdair. "How'd ye come to follow yer cousin?" she asked, shifting from foot to foot. The pressure on her bladder was now quite great, but the more she spoke with this man, the more relaxed he'd become, and she needed his guard to be lowered so that he'd

let her out of his sight. Mayhap, if she could make him believe the idea of wedding a warrior was enticing, he'd think he didn't have a need to watch her. "What I told yer cousin," she said, talking slowly because she was figuring out how to spin her tale, "is that I've nae any wish to wed for the benefit of a brother I dunnae ken and who is only searching for me because I could gain him a strong alliance. But for the king, I will wed."

She had to bite the fleshy insides of her cheeks to keep from grimacing at her own words. Wed for the king! Ha! What had the king ever done for her?

A slow smile turned up the corners of the man's mouth. "Ye were raised with a great loyalty?"

Yes, yes, she was. She was raised with a loyalty to herself and her sister because there was no one else looking out for their interests, but she didn't say any of that. She widened her eyes and batted her lashes. She had seen enough lasses at the market do this to vendors to know men could sometimes be turned soft by a woman who seemed helpless. "Aye. My papa always said our first loyalty lies with our king." He'd never uttered the word loyalty in his life, and his allegiance was to mead and wine.

She held her breath for a moment, sure the gods would strike her down for such a bald-faced lie, but nothing happened. She exhaled a slow breath of relief. He was staring at her as if he was trying to make up his mind so she said, "What is yer name?"

"Ollie MacLachlan. Why?"

She shrugged. "Well, I figure if I'm to travel with ye and ye're to watch me relieve myself, I ought to ken yer name."

He glanced past her toward the water and then back, probably judging if he could trust her. He couldn't, but she sincerely hoped he thought so. "Can ye swim?" he finally asked. Oh, he was clever. He'd thought of her plan to jump in the river to escape him. She had to be very careful with what she said.

"Nae very well," she replied, hoping the truth would serve her best. She could not swim well, and it had been a very long time since she'd last tried, but she could not let that deter her.

"Fine. I'll walk ye to the edge of the embankment, then turn my back so ye can relieve yerself. But I warn ye, I'm a strong swimmer, and if ye jump in to flee, I'll simply retrieve ye, and then I'll tie ye to me until the day we part. Ye would nae want that, would ye?"

"About as much as I'd care for the pox," she assured him with blunt honesty.

That elicited a chuckle from him. "Come," he said and motioned her to follow.

She started behind him, her shoes sinking in the grass, soaking wet from the earlier heavy rain. As they moved closer to the embankment and deeper into the woods, droplets of water fell from the tree branches. She brushed a drop off her nose, and apprehension swirled in her belly, growing with each step. The steady rush of water caressed her ear. Surely, it was not so deep, not so fast?

Ollie stopped in front of her and then turned toward her. "We're here. I'll just wait for ye," he said, stepping around her and giving her his back.

She glanced at the water and frowned. It flowed fast, and from here, she could not make out the bottom of it. Dread knotted her stomach, but she had little choice but to proceed. She took a fortifying breath. "Could ye take five steps forward? I'm embarrassed for ye to hear me relieve myself." That was only a partial lie. If she was

pausing long enough on dry ground to relieve her bladder, certainly she'd not want this man to hear, but the release of her bladder would have to wait until she hit the water.

She reviewed her plan in her head. Dive into the water. Swim downstream. Then swim to an embankment and make her way east and home. It was the only plan she had. She prayed she would not drown. She could feel herself trembling, and she curled her hands into fists. Her nails dug into the sensitive flesh of her palms, and she stood that way for a moment, contemplating the rest of her plan. This part she did not like, but she had little choice. She had to daze him so he didn't immediately follow.

Biting her lip, she bent down as quietly as possible, retrieved a stone big enough to daze Ollie but not to injure him gravely, and she stood. "Almost done," she called out, reared back her arm, aimed as she would for shooting her bow, and flung the stone at him. It hit him square in the back of the head with a thud. The loudness of it snatched a gasp from deep within her throat, and as he fell forward to his knees with a grunt, then sideways, lying perfectly still, black fright seized her.

She'd killed Ollie MacLachlan! She'd killed a man. She couldn't move. She stood there, every limb frozen, heart thumping rapidly, leaping forward at an alarming pace. "Ollie!" she called out from where she stood, but the man did not so much as twitch. She glanced behind her at the water, at her escape, and then back to him to his still form. She could not simply leave him, if she'd injured him gravely.

She forced herself to move, but her legs barely held her up they trembled so. She reached Ollie after what seemed an interminably long time. Somewhere in the distance, a flock of birds squawked, then flew upward to blanket the sky as if something had frightened them from their place in the woods. She didn't have time to fear what might be out there, as there was too much to fear right in front of her.

She reached a shaking hand toward Ollie's shoulder, certain at any moment he'd turn

over, grab her, and give her a horrid lashing for throwing a rock at his head. But even when her fingertips grazed, then gripped his shoulder, he did not move. It occurred to her to check his head, so she slid her fingertips into his curly red hair, relieved when she didn't feel the slick of blood, but there was a horribly large lump on the back of his head. It was nearly the size of an egg already.

Tears blurred her vision, and she dashed them away. She turned him over, stuck her index finger under his nose, and nearly cried out when his warm breath wafted over his skin. She then pressed her finger under his chin to the vein that pulsed life through him. "Thank the gods," she muttered when she felt his pulse. She'd not killed him, merely knocked him out.

"I'm sorry," she whispered as she stood. She started to step around him toward the water, then stilled as a realization came to her.

She didn't have to jump into the water to escape him. She could make her way back to his horse, take it, and be far away from him before he stirred. She didn't hesitate. She picked up her skirts, twirled away from him, and began to run. Above her, the birds crossed the sky once more, squawking and making such a fuss that her skin prickled from the base of her skull down the back of her neck, leaving a trail of raised gooseflesh behind it.

Something was amiss. Something was disturbing the birds, and it set a chill in her lungs as she ran. She jumped the log she'd stepped over before, but her toe caught the edge of a stray branch and she went flying forward. She landed in the dirt, twigs, and gnarled tree roots with such force that her teeth rattled and little specs of silver filled her vision for a moment.

The tree roots had cut into her hands with piercing pain, and when she pushed herself off the dirt and turned over, she stared at the twin thin lines of blood that cut both her palms. It so surprised her that she sat there for one, two, three breaths, stunned, until

the birds flew overhead again, and then an owl hooted and another bird called out. It was as if the forest creatures were warning one another, or mayhap they were warning her.

“Margaret!” came a roar from somewhere ahead of her in the direction of Ollie’s horse.

“Margaret Stewart! Call to me!”

She knew that deep-timbered voice! The instinct to cry out in gladness at the sound of Alasdair’s voice alarmed her. She must have feathers in her head to feel relief that her other would-be captor was near and looking for her. Men were not to be trusted. Alasdair had snatched her for his gain and would force her to go where she did not want to go. She needed to remember that. With the thoughts in her head, she shifted direction, away from Alasdair and his cousin and toward her home and her sister. She’d need to be careful to stay as hidden as possible as she made her way there. If there were mercenaries other than Ollie who had found their way to her village, she didn’t doubt they’d try to take her if they realized who she was. Once she reached her home, she would confront her father about hiding the truth from her, and maybe—just maybe—she’d discover he had some feeling in him for her after all. She paused for a moment as fresh worry gripped her.

What if her father knew there was a reward for her? Would he try to take her to her brother, to Laird Stewart? She snorted at the question. Of course he would, but what if—what if he didn’t? What if he surprised her? She was a fool for the niggles of hope that rose, but she was not such a clot-head that she would confront her father empty handed.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

“Where is she?” Alasdair demanded again, his sword pointed at his cousin’s chest. When Ollie started to push up from the ground, Alasdair shook his head. “Nay, Ollie. Dunnae move.”

“Alasdair,” Ollie pleaded, but the beseeching desperate tone did nothing to thaw the hard block of betrayal in Alasdair’s chest. He could hardly believe the trail he’d tracked had been to his cousin.

“Unless ye have something more to add, I dunnae wish to hear it,” Alasdair bit out, and Calan, standing by Alasdair’s side, nodded his approval. “Ye betrayed me.”

“To keep my head!”

“Ye betrayed me,” Alasdair repeated. “We are blood. Ye should have confided in me. Instead, ye used me.”

“I did nae plan to use ye.”

“Is that supposed to soothe him?” Calan demanded.

Alasdair appreciated the angry disbelief in his friend’s voice.

“Nay, but I could nae think what else to do. I was desperate!” Ollie cried.

“Well,” Alasdair said, feeling no pity. “I’d say the best thing for ye to do is to make yerself scarce so ye can keep yer head.”

“And how am I to continue to earn a living as a mercenary if I make myself scarce?” Ollie demanded.

Alasdair leaned closer to his cousin and held the man’s gaze so Ollie could clearly understand his fury. “Ye lied to me. And ye attempted to use me to find a lass whom ye then took from me. Ye ken the dire position the clan is in, and ye did nae care. Ye could have talked to me. I could have tried to aid ye, but ye did nae give me the chance, so I dunnae care how ye earn a living. Dunnae attempt to take the lass from me again. If ye do, ye’ll nae see the sun rise in the Highlands the next day. Do ye ken me?”

“Ye’ve too much honor to kill me.”

“I’ll nae kill ye, Ollie. I’ll give ye to the Dark Riders, and ye and I both ken nary an outsider has ever entered their woods of perpetual night and stepped foot in the sunlight again.”

Ollie shivered at the mention of the riders who legend said were truly ghosts of warriors betrayed by loved ones. “If ye near the Dark Rider’s domain, they’ll take ye, too,” Ollie whispered.

“Nay, Ollie,” Alasdair said, the truth of the past, of his biggest regret, rising up to curl cold fingers around his chest. “They owe me a life debt, so mark my words, if ye come for her, I will be ready, and I’ll take ye straight to the Ghost Woods even if I have her in tow. And there I will leave ye for a life of eternal darkness and servitude to the Dark Riders.”

His cousin shrank back from him and stared at him for a long moment, trying, Alasdair was certain, to ascertain if he meant it. Ollie finally nodded. “I’ll nae come for her again. I vow it.”

“Goodbye, Ollie,” Alasdair said, rising. He turned, and without looking back, he strode to his horse and mounted it as Calan mounted his.

Calan looked at Alasdair. “Where to?”

“We’ll go back to her home,” Alasdair said.

Calan frowned. “Ye think the lass foolish enough to return to her da’s house?”

“Nae foolish,” Alasdair replied. An image of the lass as he’d first seen her came unbidden to his mind. Eyes lit with determination. Confidence in her expression. A delicate appearance in body contrasted by her wild abundance of molten hair. And then another image of her hit as she spoke of her sister. Love had shone in her eyes. “She’ll go back to protect her sister. It dunnae matter the cost to her.”

“Ye like her,” Calan said, matter-of-fact.

“I admire her,” Alasdair corrected.

“That dunnae bode well for what ye must do.”

“Nay,” Alasdair said with a sigh, “it does nae.”

Sorcha pointed the dagger at her father as he swayed with his normal overabundance of mead. Her sister stood on the threshold of the inn. The door was open so that Sorcha could see the sky had darkened. That black night fit her current mood. “Why did ye nae tell me who I really was?” she demanded again.

“I already told ye,” her father said, his words slurring. “I dunnae ken who ye are other than the burden Martha convinced me years ago to take on.”

Sorcha flinched at her father's cruel words. "If I'm such a burden" she said, her eyes stinging mercilessly with the need to cry, "why did ye nae rid yerself of me when mama died?"

Her father let out a loud belch and then a hiccup. "Because yer mama was right. Ye saved me coin with all the different jobs ye do around here."

"Do ye even love me at all?" she asked, tears blurring her vision. She hated that she'd asked the question, but she needed to hear the answer. He was not her father, and she'd known that for as long as she could remember, but he was the closest thing she'd had for a father, terrible one or not, and she'd loved him in that way that children had for their parents no matter how horrid they were. Her desire to flee him and life under his cruelty had not meant she didn't hold any love for him, and that meant her heart was still vulnerable, even after all the wounds he'd inflicted upon it. In this moment, her heart ached so badly she wanted to press her hands to it. Instead, she curled her fingers tighter around the hilt of the dagger she held.

"Enough of this wickedness, Sorcha," he growled. "Put down that dagger, and ye need to get to work. I dunnae ken where ye have been, but dishes have piled up, washing needs tending, the rushes need refreshing—"

"Da!" Ada interrupted, stomping her foot on the ground. "Sorcha was taken! Dunnae ye even care? Dunnae ye have a loving bone in yer body?"

He swept his dull gaze over Sorcha and Ada. "Taken? Who the devil would take Sorcha?" her father asked, frowning at her. "Ye've a right sassy mouth on ye, ye're far too opinionated, and ye do men's things like shooting. The only men who want ye are those who want to bed ye. So, were ye bedded?"

Sorcha's cheeks heated, and behind Ada, Dougray suddenly appeared. He distracted her just enough that before she knew what was happening, her father kicked her in the

hand and knocked the dagger from her grip. It clattered to the ground. He bent down, surprisingly swift for his mead-heavy state, and came up to point it at her. He stepped toward her and slid the dagger down her right sleeve and slit it open.

Her heart sank at the glee in his eyes. "I heard the strangest whisperings," he said, moving his gaze to hers. "I heard a lass was being searched for," he said. "It's all the chattering down at the market. They said Laird Stewart had offered a great amount of coin for the return of his lost sister. Imagine my surprise when I heard her description, and when I heard she carries the brand ye do and is missing a toe just like ye. I ken who ye are now, Margaret Stewart, and there is nae anything I ken about more."

She blinked at the tears that had begun spilling from her eyes as she looked at the man who had hurt her mother so many times with cruel words, lashes, and smacks across the face. "I ken who ye are, too," she said. "Ye're the poorest excuse for a man the gods ever created."

Her father's hand connected with her right cheek with so much force that she spun before falling to the ground. Ada and Dougray were by her side helping her up, even as she grabbed at the edge of her skirt to stop the flow of blood from her lip.

"Step away, Ada," her da snarled. Sorchu knew that angry tone of his, and when it was mixed with a belly full of mead, that meant danger. "She's got a lashing coming for daring to point a dagger at me."

"I'd nae do that, sir," came Dougray's voice from the doorway where Ada had been standing. She looked to the aged stablemaster. His dark eyes and heavy lids were in slits and his lip curled back from his teeth in a half snarl. She had always thought he'd never liked her father, but it seemed apparent now in the daggers Dougray's eyes shot him. He held up a piece of foolscap with torn, yellowed edges on three sides and on the other a corner was burnt. "I do nae think the Laird of Stewart would

care to hear ye lashed his sister,” Dougray said and locked gazes with Sorcha.

It took her a moment to get over the initial shock that he knew who she was, but then she swallowed and said, “How?” When Dougray started toward them while extending the aged missive in his hands, she felt certain she was about to get her answers.

“Halt there, Dougray,” her da barked, turning the dagger on Dougray. “If ye think I’m letting ye get the coin for Margaret Stewart,” he said, drawing out the name to make it sound of ridiculously exaggerated importance, “ye’d be mistaken. I’ll kill ye first. Hand over the missive,” her father demanded.

“Nay,” Dougray said, but heeded her father and stopped. “I’ve done enough evil when it comes to the lass.” Dougray looked to her, and she sucked in a sharp breath at the remorse in his eyes. “This missive,” shaking the missive clutched in his hands, “was written, I think, by the man who brought ye here. The bottom edge of the missive was burnt years ago, so his signature is gone, but it speaks of a young lass he’s charged with saving and it’s written to his sister, who, as misfortune would have it, he did nae ever name. But he says the wee lassie possesses red hair, and eyes of a stormy sky, blues and silver streaked through—”

Dougray paused, and Sorcha blinked at the tears that had spilled from her eyes and down her cheeks. “Shall I continue?”

“Aye,” she replied and her da for once in his life was silent. She supposed he wanted to hear the contents as well.

“It speaks of yer missing toe and talks of the brand L3 that ye possess, and that the man gave it to ye, much to his dismay, on order of yer da, Laird Stewart, so that there would be a hope of finding ye someday. Yer da was trying to protect ye and ensure he could bring ye back to him.” Sorcha traced a finger over the exposed brand on her upper arm. She was Margaret Stewart, and she was Sorcha. So much emotion rose in

her, she found it impossible to speak. Margaret was who she should have been. She tried to imagine that life, no doubt a kinder one, but she would never have known her mama or Ada, and that she could not imagine, even with all the hardship and heartache that had come with being Sorch MacGregor. Knowing who she was did not change the fact that she did not want to return to the Stewart stronghold and be forced to wed a stranger. But that was exactly what the current Laird Stewart, her brother, intended.

She swallowed repeatedly and found her voice as she stared at Dougray. Her father had moved to the side of her, his hand gripping her arm like a vise, and the dagger pointed toward Dougray. Behind Dougray stood Ada, eyes wide and lips parted. Sorch had told her sister all that had happened since she'd been taken, but Ada looked as shocked as Sorch felt about the missive.

“How did ye come by this missive?” her da demanded in a ruthless tone that told her his anger had risen to great heights. She tried to pull away from him, but he increased his grip so tightly that she whimpered.

Dougray's attention flicked to Sorch's father and then came back to Sorch. “Yer mama threw it in the fire, but I pulled it out.”

“That woman was a fool!” her da bellowed so loudly that Sorch jumped and tried once more to tug away, but her da shoved her, sending her flying sideways into a chair. She fell over it with a thud, landing hard on her hip and making stars dance in her eyes. Sorch let out a moan and squeezed her eyes shut on the shooting pain in her hip, but when her sister screamed, Sorch jerked her eyes open once more.

Dougray was staggering before her with the dagger in his chest. Her da had stabbed Dougray! “Da!” she cried out in horror, and pushed up with her palms to stand, despite the throbbing pain, but her da was over her, yanking her up even before she gained her feet. Above him, Ada was pounding on his shoulder. Finally, he released

Sorcha long enough to shove Ada with the same strength he had Sorcha. Ada went flying backward, tripping over the overturned chair Sorcha had knocked down in her fall, and Ada hit the ground with a groan.

Sorcha moved to run, but her da grabbed her by the arm once more. “Ye are going to make me rich!” he yelled. “I kinnae ken why yer foolish mama kept this secret from me, but I’m getting the coin that is due me.”

“Sorcha, ye must fight him!” Ada screamed from behind her, because her father was dragging her out of the inn. She was no match for his strength in his rage. She glanced behind her to see Dougray on his knees trying to remove the dagger and Ada trying to gain her feet.

Her da pulled her across the dirt like a sack of grain, cursing her mother as he went. It shocked her just how devastating it felt to know that he had no love for her at all in his heart. Her arms were too heavy to lift, and any words of protest were lodged in her throat. She’d been telling herself for so long that she did not care that he didn’t love her, that she’d almost convinced herself it was true. But it wasn’t, and she had known in the woods that it wasn’t.

Inside her, there had been a sliver of hope that someday the man who was supposed to be her father, supposed to protect her from all and love her, would somehow show her some gesture, mayhap even stand up for her, and show her love.

“Da!” Ada screamed, suddenly there pounding on their father’s back. “Ye kinnae take my sister away!”

“She’s nae yer sister!” their father bellowed back. “She’s been a burden all her life, and now she will finally bring me the coin yer mama vowed to me she would!” he bellowed, and each word was like a knife jabbing in Sorcha’s gut.

“Da, nay!” Ada cried out and grabbed at his arm.

Their father shoved her away so hard that Ada hit the ground with a thud and a cry of pain. That did it. That snapped Sorcha out of her stupor.

“Let me go!” she shouted, flailing her arms as Ada scrambled to her feet.

“Let her go!” Ada yelled as well. She attempted to grab their father’s arm again, but he backhanded her to the ground once more.

“Ye filthy swine!” Sorcha roared. She twisted in his grip and broke his hold long enough to step back and kick him in the shin. The back of his hand connected with her lip and split it open again. She doubled over with a cry of real fear. She stared at the dirt as blood filled her mouth, and she spat it out. To her left, Ada was still lying on her back. Tears leaked out of her sister’s eyes, and even in the twilight, Sorcha could make out the bloom of a bruise and swelling on Ada’s left cheek. Sorcha spat more blood out as her thoughts tumbled and landed on Alasdair. It was funny that she’d had more faith in a man she’d just met than she did her own father.

She breathed in quick, shallow gasps as a distant rumbling seemed to reach her, but she did not look up to see who approached. It mattered not. She took in her sister once more and knew what she needed to do. “If I come with ye willingly, will ye let Ada go and give her the dowry to wed Hamish?”

“Aye, aye,” her da assured her.

She didn’t believe him, but what choice did she have? Besides, he was going to drag her there no matter what, and at least once there, she could refuse to say the vows unless her brother, the Stewart laird, gave her sister the dowry she needed.

“Dunnae believe him, Sorcha!” Ada cried out, moving to get up, but her da shoved

her down once more.

“Touch that lass or her sister ever again, and I’ll kill ye,” came a familiar voice from above Sorcha.

She jerked up, took in Alasdair standing behind her father with his sword drawn and pointing at him, and her jaw fell open. Behind him stood Dougray, dagger removed, holding his tunic to his wound.

Her father swung toward Alasdair and then staggered backward, likely at the sight of the sword pointed at him. “Who the devil are ye?”

“I’m Margaret’s protector, that’s who the devil I am.”

Protector? She narrowed her eyes at him. “Ye’re nae my protector! Ye’re here to drag me to Laird Stewart to gain coin.”

He scowled. “Well, I’m currently protecting ye from this sorry excuse for a man,” Alasdair replied.

That was true enough. From what she’d seen of Alasdair so far, he was not the sort of man who would raise a hand to a lass, and this was not his first time protecting her. Contradicting emotions flooded her. She was both sad and grateful that a stranger defended her from her own father.

“‘Tis my daughter! Ye’ve nae any right to interfere.”

“Oh, so now I’m yer daughter, am I?” Sorcha said, incensed. “A breath ago ye were dragging me off to a brother I dunnae even ken for coin! And ye!” She pointed at Dougray. She looked up at him and demanded, “Why did ye nae ever tell me who I was?”

“Well, ye were just a wee bairn at first, and yer mama threatened to have me hanged by telling yer da I had stolen.” When her lips parted in shock that her mother would do such a thing, Dougray held up his hand and shook it. “I was vexed at first, too, but that woman loved ye with all her heart, and so later I did nae ever say anything because I could nae tear ye away from her. Then when she was gone, I was nae going to take ye from Ada. Besides that, I kenned yer mama and yer da had died, yer da—Laird Stewart—had been branded a traitor, so it was nae good for ye to return anyway. I am sorry. I did what I thought was right,” he finished, handing her the aged missive.

She took the thin paper in her hand and looked down at it, disappointed to see that the writing was hardly legible anymore, as the years had done their damage to the ink. She folded it and put it into the pocket of her skirts to read what she could of it later.

“I did nae ken of yer brother returning until I heard yer da bellowing about it,” Dougray said with sad eyes. “When I saw ye sneak back into the inn, I immediately retrieved the missive, and then I came upon all of ye here.”

“Do ye recall anything from the night I was brought here?” she asked.

“Yer da was upstairs, I do believe, near asleep with the drink.” Sorchu and Ada both snorted at that, and their da made a derisive noise. “A man brought ye here with him. He was sorely injured.”

“What did he look like?” Alasdair asked.

Dougray stared out into the night, as if trying to recall. “Bald headed. Dark eyes.”

“I imagine that would have been Archibald Stewart, stablemaster to Laird Stewart back then.”

“Ye kenned him?” she asked Alasdair.

“Nay me. My da, and my da was a great storyteller. He was verra descriptive.”

She nodded at the explanation and said, “Anything else, Dougray?”

“I aided yer mama in getting him inside, and later, I aided yer mama in getting his body out of the inn when yer da was asleep so he’d nae ken the man had died in the inn.”

“What?” Sorchas father bellowed. “Martha told me he rode off into the night.”

“Cause she knew how superstitious ye were about ghosts,” Dougray answered before looking at Sorchas once more. “I’m sorry, Sorchas, I mean Margaret, I suppose.”

She understood his confusion for she felt it acutely. “Sorchas,” she said. “Call me Sorchas. I may have been named Margaret at birth, but I kinnae simply think of myself as Margaret because of that.”

She closed the distance between herself and Dougray and gave the mans hand a squeeze. “Ye did what ye thought best. I dunnae ken these Stewarts, except to ken the laird wants me back to use me, just as men with any hope for power always wish to use women.”

“Ye’re mine to take, and that coin is mine to receive!” her father burst out. “I could have a serving wench and a decent cook for that money instead of ye!” The harsh reality of his words and the truth that he thought nothing more of her than a servant, brought tears to her eyes once more and sent them spilling down her cheeks.

“I dunnae ken why this should cause such an ache in my heart,” she murmured, pressing her palm flat against her chest. She stared at her father, willing him to take

back his words, willing the man she'd served hand and foot for as long as she could remember to show her some thread of love, but he simply stared back. "I dunnae ken why I'm surprised. I ken well that men care only for how women can be used for their benefit, never giving a thought to their wellbeing."

"That's nae true," came Alasdair's voice from her left.

She slowly turned to look at him. The man was too pleasing to look at by half, and if her heart didn't ache so, she might have enjoyed it, but now it angered her. He angered her. Well, his words did.

"Nay?" she spat.

"Nay," he repeated, his tone one that threatened to lure her into the foolish hope of believing in a man. "I would have given my life for my wife's without a thought for myself, but she is gone."

"How lucky she was in life, then," she said, refusing to soften. No one had ever been soft to her, after all. She saw him flinch, and it gave her a sinful pleasure. "I've nae ever met such a rare selfless man in my life, including ye." Guilt tugged at her, but she shoved back mercilessly. "Ye are here to collect me against my will and trade me for coin. Unless ye have changed yer mind and are willing to sacrifice yer own selfish wants for the good of myself and my sister?"

He flinched again, and then he stared at her for a long, silent moment that was finally broken by her father. "Ye may take Sorcha, as she is nae my real daughter, but by the gods, ye will nae take Ada from me. She stays with me! I need someone here to care for me, to cook, to clean, to—"

Sorcha slapped him, and when he drew back to return her hit, Alasdair caught his forearm. "I'll cut off that hand if it touches her face."

“Oh, ye can protect my sister in this moment,” Sorcha said as Ada began to cry beside her, “but what of her when ye have taken me away? Who will protect her then? Who will see to it that she can wed the man she loves? Nae him!” she spat out, pointing an accusing finger at her father.

Alasdair reached to his thigh and pulled a dagger from a sheath. And as he brought it up, she gasped at the jewels sparkling on it. “This dagger is worth a fortune,” he said, turning to Ada. “I want ye to have it and use it as the dowry ye need to wed the man ye love.” He held it out to Ada, but she simply stared at the outstretched offering as she sniffled.

“Alasdair,” Calan started, but Alasdair silenced him with a look that Sorcha suspected would silence any man.

“I would rather ye leave my sister,” Ada said, and the love Ada showed Sorcha created a huge lump in her throat.

Alasdair’s shoulder’s fell, and he said, “I kinnae do that.” He looked between the two of them. “I’m sorry.”

“Aye,” Sorcha said bitterly. “I’m worth more to ye than the dagger.”

A hard look settled on his face. “Nae personally ye’re nae, but I serve the needs of others, nae myself.”

She scoffed at that but turned to her sister. “Take it, and be wed with my blessing and love, and ask the gods to bring us together again someday.” The tears spilled faster over the rims of her eyes, matching the flow of her sister’s. “Go now,” she urged Ada. “Make haste to Hamish, for I dunnae trust Da to let ye go once I’ve been taken away.”

Ada hugged Sorch a fiercely. "I dunnae want to part with ye."

"Nor I with ye," Sorch a replied. She hugged Ada for a long moment, but when she saw Alasdair and Calan exchange a look, she suspected her time here was drawing rapidly to an end. "Go!" she ordered, pushing her sister gently away. Ada lingered for a moment and then, sobbing, took the dagger, turned on her heel, and fled into the darkness.

When Sorch a could see her no more, she looked between Alasdair and her da. "'Twas always a wonder to me why any woman would willingly wed and give control of her fate to a man, but more the fool am I, because even unwed women only have control of their fate until a man comes along and robs them of it." With that, she brushed past her da and Alasdair, marched over to his horse, who'd tried to bite her earlier, and surprised herself by mounting him without hesitation. She vowed not to speak one word to Alasdair MacLachlan unless it was a matter of life or death, and if it was his death, the man had better not look to her for protection.

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The vow was harder to keep than she had anticipated. On the first leg of the journey, Alasdair seemed just as content to travel in silence as she was, but by the time darkness had completely overtaken the sky, and her belief that they'd make camp came and went as Alasdair continued to drive his horse hard through the Highlands, she started to suspect either he was inhuman or purposely not stopping so she'd be forced to ask him to.

She made up her mind not to speak, no matter how desperate she got, but by the time the sun peeked up from the horizon once more, her eyes burned and her head pounded from lack of sleep. Her throat felt like charred wood, and her belly protested mightily at the lack of food and drink. Although, if she was to drink anything in this moment, she'd likely burst with the need to relieve herself.

When he rode them over a particularly rough patch of terrain and guided his destrier to jump a fallen limb and land with a thud, she could take no more. "Stop!" she cried out.

"What say ye?" he asked, his tone all innocent deception.

"I said stop! I need to relieve myself."

He brought his destrier to a sudden, jarring stop, and Margaret wasted no time dismounting. She was striding away from Alasdair and his horse before Calan had even brought his beast to a halt. She did not hear Alasdair behind her as she headed for cover, so she stole a glance over her shoulder as she neared a row of bushes. He raised his hand as if to let her know he saw her, and she swung away from his hot stare, her face flaming with embarrassment.

When she was finished, she trudged back to where they were already making camp. Alasdair stood in her path, legs spread and arms crossed over his broad chest. His black hair curled at his neck, and his bright blue eyes held a look she could not decipher, nor, she decided churlishly, did she wish to. What did she care what a selfish man like him thought?

She made up her mind to continue ignoring him and looked straight to Calan. “Are we sleeping here?”

“Aye,” Calan said as he gathered wood for a fire.

Her stomach rumbled as she watched him. She was afraid to take her gaze off Calan and look at Alasdair, because the one brief glimpse she’d gotten of him had caused an odd heat to pool in her belly and between her thighs. She ran the tip of her toe back and forth in the dirt, hoping Calan would offer a comment about food, so when he didn’t, she finally said, “How can I aid in preparing the camp? Shall I put up my shelter?”

“There’s nae a need,” he replied, motioning to where Alasdair was some distance away setting up a makeshift shelter. “Alasdair is doing it.”

“Oh. Well...” She supposed this was Alasdair’s way of offering a gesture of peace between them. Not that she really wanted to take it, but she was starting to get desperately hungry and thirsty, and Calan had turned his back on her. She trudged toward Alasdair, took a breath for patience, and said, “I can set up my own shelter, if ye like.”

“Nay,” he said without looking at her. The man was pulling the plaids tight, and each of his muscles seemed to ripple with his every movement.

“I mean, if ye need to go about hunting or building yer own shelter, I am capable of

doing mine.”

He stopped and slowly rose from the crouched position he had been in, then he faced her. Her blasted traitor heart turned over in her chest as his gaze caught hers. “Ye misunderstand me, Margaret.” The way her name rolled off his tongue made it almost palatable. Almost.

“Please call me Sorcha,” she said, and when he frowned and opened his mouth as if to argue, she said, “I have been Sorcha all my life. I ken I was born Margaret Stewart, but I do nae feel like Margaret Stewart.”

He nodded. “The time is nae yet right to let yer past go completely.”

She suspected that statement could have applied to both of them, but she pressed her lips together. “How’s that?” she managed, very glad her shocking attraction to this man—her captor—was not apparent in her tone because her body was reacting in a way she’d never experienced. Her breasts had grown heavy, her nipples hard, and there was a pain deep in her core near the spot that brought her pleasure alone in her bed at night.

“Ye will be sleeping with me.”

She jerked at that pronouncement. “I most certainly will nae!” she bit out, and then she feared she had misjudged Alasdair worse than any man before. She’d called him selfish, but secretly, she had harbored doubt. She’d called him dishonorable, but in truth, he had shown several moments of valor. And yet, he’d also taken her against her will, so it was not so simple as to just trust that he would not prove just as selfish, just as base as all other men she knew. “Need I remind ye that I’m to be the wife of a great laird? I doubt he’d take kindly to learning ye ravished me.”

Alasdair scoffed. “Ye flatter yerself, Sorcha. Ye’ll be sleeping with me because I

dunnae trust ye nae to run in the night like afore.”

Embarrassment and annoyance filled her. “So I’m supposed to believe ye dunnae want me? Ye will nae try anything with me? I’m just supposed to lie down by ye and close my eyes to welcome sleep?”

“That’s right,” he said, tugging on the last plaid he’d hung. “Pretend I’m nae there. That’s what I’ll be doing with ye, and it will nae take much effort.”

She knew she should be relieved, but her pride was wounded. Still, she’d rather dine with a snake than reveal that to him. “Well, it certainly will nae take much effort from me, either. If I were going to welcome a man into my life, I’d nae ever be so foolish as to invite one in who has no qualms about forcing a lass into a marriage she does nae want.”

Anger rolled over Alasdair’s face like a storm cloud. He clenched his jaw, opened and shut his mouth, and finally said, “Well, ’tis a good thing I’ve nary a wish to be invited.” Her stomach growled loudly. He arched an eyebrow at her. “Is there anything else ye’d like to discuss?”

Blast the devil of a man! He knew she was hungry, but she would starve before begging him to feed her, and since her bow and arrow were back at the inn, she had no way to hunt, nor any supplies. Left with no other recourse, she shoved back the plaid he’d just fastened to some low-hanging branches, and she entered the makeshift shelter. There wasn’t even a blanket on the ground! Misery filled her, but she lay down, curled into a tight ball, and glared at the side of the plaid. On the other side, his shadow loomed.

“Do ye need anything?” he called, baiting her. He was trying to get her to show weakness.

“Nae anything except for ye to sleep somewhere else.”

“Well, seeing as how I’m about to hunt some dinner and then settle in for a nice long supper and drink, I imagine ye’ll be long asleep before I return, so ye’ll nae even ken I’m here. But, Sorcha, dunnae try to escape. I’ll come for ye if ye flee time and again.”

She tried to imagine what it would feel like to have someone declare they’d always come for you because they loved you so much. A sharp longing blossomed in her chest that scared her. She’d thought she could live her life without love, but she was longing for it, and she’d likely never know the sweet taste of true love. She’d be wed to a stranger.

For a moment, she imagined Alasdair saying those same words because he loved her desperately, and she hated herself for the weakness. No, no, she hated him for making her imagine such a thing. “I despise ye,” she muttered, thinking he’d gone.

“Aye,” he said, surprising her, “I ken it well, lass.”

She lay there a long while after silence had fallen, turning his words over and over in her head and examining his tone. There was something in his voice that niggled at her, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. Fatigue finally overtook her hunger, and she slept.

“Are ye going to stay out here all night?” Calan asked, standing up and stretching.

“I was thinking upon it.”

“Ye’ll nae sleep out here because ye’ll worry the lass will escape again.”

Alasdair knew that well, but a sleepless night might be worth it to avoid the torture of

lying next to her. She hated him, and that bothered him. Furthermore, it irritated him that he cared.

“Ye’re avoiding her because ye’re drawn to her,” Calan said with annoying clarity.

“Do ye think I should find a different way to save the clan?” Alasdair asked instead of answering Calan’s statement. He was drawn to her, but he’d avoided thinking about it. This unforeseen, unexpected attraction did not matter. She was meant for another. It was one thing to consider not forcing her to go to her brother, but it would be quite another to... to what?

Therein lay the other part of the problem. What would he do with Sorchas if he didn’t take her to her brother? He couldn’t in good conscience return her to her da. If he kept her at his home, he knew his attraction would grow, and he’d want to bed her. And despite her protestations to the contrary, whether she wanted a husband or not, she needed someone to protect her, care for her, and love her.

Alasdair could protect her as a clan member, but that wasn’t the sort of protection the lass deserved. She deserved the undying devotion of a man who would give his life for her. Scour the earth for her. Lose his ability to love another at the loss of her. He could offer none of those things to her. An old familiar wave of grief washed over him, and he groaned.

“Are ye all right?” Calan’s voice broke the hold the past had on Alasdair.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “I’m sorry. I was lost in thoughts of the past .” And the present. But if he admitted that, Calan would draw conclusions that had no place being drawn. Margaret, no, he had to think of her as Sorchas as she wished, was not some lass who was going to lift his sadness and make his heart warm again, though admittedly, she did make other parts of him very warm, and he did have the urge to laugh a great deal around her, but that was because the lass was made of sass and

mounds of pride.

“There’s still the option to wed Elspeth,” Calan offered.

“Ye ken that’s nae an option I want to take.”

“Well, then yer only other option to gain the coin we need is to take Margaret to the Stewarts. I dunnae ken why ye’re even puzzling over it.”

“She wishes to still be called Sorcha,” Alasdair said.

“Are we bowing to her wishes then?” Calan asked.

“Aye, this one,” Alasdair replied, shoving a hand through his hair as he thought upon what Calan had said. He didn’t know why he was so bothered by it, either, except for the fact that the lass had made it abundantly clear she didn’t want to return there. Mayhap her wishes should not concern him, but they did. “Go on and take yer rest,” he said to Calan. “We’ll rise early to continue on with the journey to the Stewart stronghold.”

“I’m wagering we will nae,” Calan said with a snicker.

“Mark my words, we will. Given the two choices, the lesser evil is to take a lass to a good home rather than wed a woman I’ll nae ever feel anything for because I can nay longer feel.”

“That’s nae true. Ye feel something for the lass or we’d nae even be having this conversation,” Calan said before turning on his heel and striding away.

Alasdair leaned back against the log and stared at the crackling fire. He felt desire for her and guilt at feeling such a thing. His softer emotions, the ones he’d once

possessed that led him to love Mariot, had been permanently frozen by her death, and no matter how hot this unexpected desire for Sorcha may burn, it was not going to thaw the part of his heart that had been destroyed by Mariot's loss.

A gust of wind hit him, and a chill swept over him despite the fire. That coldness reminded him he'd not left his plaid or a blanket for Sorcha as he'd meant to. He rose, went to his beast to fetch a blanket, and then strode to the shelter where she was either sleeping or lying awake and freezing. "Sorcha?" He waited and no response came, so he pulled back the plaid hanging down and found her curled in a tight ball on her side, shivering but asleep.

He kneeled beside her and started to put the blanket over her, but then he paused. Moonlight filtered through the spaces where the plaids did not meet and streamed over her so that he could see her fairly well. Her hitched skirts displayed her shapely legs to her thighs, but he didn't let his gaze linger there. She was unaware of him looking at her in her sleep, so he felt it dishonorable. He moved his gaze upward toward her face, but to get there, he had to inch his way up the curves of her waist and shoulders, and along the slender column of her neck. She was exquisitely beautiful, but it was the expression on her face that hit him like a gut punch. Her brow was furrowed, and her bottom lip was sucked in, as if even in sleep she was troubled. He settled the blanket over her, hoping it would smooth her brow and release her lip, but instead, she moaned.

It was a noise of fear, and when she did it again and began to thrash, he thought she must be having a bad dream. Mariot had experienced bad dreams, and the only way she would settle was for him to hold her tight. But this woman was not his wife, and chasing away her nightmares was not his responsibility. He stared at Sorcha for several breaths as she thrashed and moaned, but he knew he could not simply leave her like this. He settled behind her, wrapped his arm around her and drew her toward his chest to hold her tight.

She stilled instantly and fell back into a sound sleep, and he lay behind her fighting back desire he had no right to feel. It was not the calm wanting he'd felt for Mariot. This need inside him was like an all-consuming storm that had come out of nowhere, whereas what he'd felt for Mariot had been a slow-building thing that had eventually burned bright. They were different; of course they were. One was love and desire, and this... this was just desire for a woman he would never have, for a woman who would soon be wed to another man.

To his surprise, jealousy hardened in his chest. He released her and started to put distance between them, but she curled back into a ball with a groan, so he closed the distance once more and wrapped his arm around her again. He was acutely aware of the soft roundness of her bottom pressed against him, the smoothness of her skin, and the scent of heather that lingered in her silky hair. He brought his nose close to the back of her head and drank in her scent. He'd forgotten how a woman's scent could affect him, as no woman's scent had ever affected him but Mariot's.

He squeezed his eyes shut on the memories of all he had lost. He didn't understand why being around Sorcha was making his past hammer at him. He'd managed to shelve the memories since Mariot's death, but now they were rising like ghosts. The question was whether they were there to haunt him or to be exorcised. But it was a question that would have to wait. Even with the hot embrace of need gripping him, sleep tugged like a tincture he could not go another moment without.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

Sorcha awoke with a start, and for a moment, she had no notion of where she was, but as the last bit of lingering sleep lifted, two realizations hit her: She was in the makeshift shelter Alasdair had made for her, and she was in his arms. She didn't move a muscle. She actually held her breath for a moment out of fear that he'd wake, and it embarrassed her to think what she would say. Why was he sleeping with his arms around her?

She wasn't surprised he was in the shelter. He'd stated his intentions and the fact that he did not trust her, but she was more than surprised he was so close. She'd never been anywhere near this close to any man. The closest she'd ever been to the hairier sex was when patrons of the inn had grabbed her without consent. That had infuriated her. That had made her body rigid and her breath come quick in fright.

This felt different. This felt safe. Of course, he was asleep, and all men were harmless when lost in the dream world. It was entirely too bad there was not a magic potion to put men to sleep when you wished. She might consider marrying if there were, so she could have bairns of her own.

Oh! She bit her lip on her errant thought. She rarely let her mind wander to her hidden desires, but just now, her secret longings had burst out from the cage she kept them in and reared their heads. She tried to shove them back inside, but it was no use. Her one lingering doubt about never marrying was that she'd never have bairns.

Of course, she knew it was possible to have a bairn without having a husband, but that was not something she'd subject a child to. To be brought up a bastard was a harsh life, indeed. She'd honestly never considered that she'd be missing anything else by not taking a husband, but she'd never experienced the tug of desire she felt

around Alasdair before. Now, as she lay with his arms around her and a sense of safety within her, her belly tightened and her breasts grew full, and that sharp, pleasurable painful yearning pulsed to life in her core and between her thighs. She bit her lip at the sad notion that she may never feel this safe, this protected, again. Though it was surely a false sense, and this much yearning could be fulfilled if a husband knew how to properly “worship at a woman’s temple.”

She didn’t completely know all the ways to worship or exactly what the phrase even meant, but she had some ideas. She’d heard women at the market gabbing about their temples being worshipped, and she’d seen enough to know it involved kissing and caressing, and a man thrusting and grunting while the woman groaned and thrashed. One night she and Ada had snuck into the stables and stumbled upon on Dougray with a woman and though the act had seemed shocking, it had been clear they were enjoying it, even though the wench’s head knocked repeatedly against the stable door. She did think it odd that the man was behind the woman where her face could not be seen, but after Dougray had realized they were there, he’d shooed them away with an assurance of, “This is how it’s done properly.”

Those memories swirled around her with Alasdair so close behind her and so warm and hard. The length of his body pressed against hers from his chest to his knees to his shins. They seemed like two pieces of a broken pot that had been fitted back together once more.

Would she writhe before him if they were to come together? Would she enjoy it as she did when she touched the spot she’d accidentally found between her thighs some moons ago? Would it be better than that? Surely, it must be, or if not, she supposed women simply had to agree to wed if they wanted bairns. She’d put that longing away because her fear of giving control of her life to a man was greater than the longing. And though Alasdair had not convinced her in the least he was no such man, she still found herself inexplicably drawn to him.

It was because of that attraction that she carefully turned ever so slowly to face him. She stared for a long moment at his chiseled face, which caused her heart to pound nearly out of her chest. She studied his strong profile and full lips, square jaw, and noble nose. His stubble had darkened since she'd first met him, and a lock of his inky hair fell over his forehead as he lay asleep. His arm was heavy on her waist, and she could see why. He had the well-defined muscles of a man who wielded a sword daily.

His broad chest was tanned from being outside training, no doubt, and there was a small dusting of dark hair that trailed downward. She followed that trail all the way to his braies, which had slipped just below his hip bones. He was not covered by the blanket as she was, so she could see the bulge between his legs where his manhood strained for freedom. Searing heat flooded her. She stared at his manhood, wondering what it might feel like inside her. Did it make a difference if you loved a man? It must, but she'd never know. She was to be bartered against her will, and she did not see how she could ever give her heart to a man who had forced her to wed him. That spoke of a man who did not want to give a woman any say in her own life, and she'd already had that with her da.

A clearing throat cut the silence, and her heart flipped in her chest. He was awake. She did not need to look up to feel his gaze upon her. He was awake and watching her ogle him. "See something ye like?" came a deep voice.

She forced her gaze to his, refusing to be cowed. "Aye," she said, her tone so throaty she winced. "I see ye're finally awake, and I'm starving. Let us hunt."

She scrambled up before he could consider why she'd been facing him and staring at him, and she was out of the makeshift shelter before he'd even risen.

"Good morning to ye," Calan called from where he was packing up his own makeshift shelter.

“’Tis nae a good morning,” she grumbled, stomping toward the woods, trying to outrun the fact that she was lusting after her captor.

Just as she reached the woods, a hand grabbed her from behind. She yelped as she was swung around to face Alasdair. “Ye need to take a care with all yer stomping. Ye’ll scare off our prey and awaken creatures best left sleeping.”

This! A man ordering her about as if he had the right was exactly why she didn’t wish to take a husband. She yanked her arm out of his grasp. “Ye’ve nary a right to tell me what to do!” With that, she turned away and moved into the thick brush of the woods and walked for a while in silence. As they went, the path became overgrown and hard to travel with tree limbs blocking the way, and she had to look down frequently because thick, ancient, twisted vines and tree roots covered the ground. She stepped over a log and right onto a limb that suddenly started slithering. Screaming, she bent down to swat it away when behind her came a roar.

“Nay, lass!”

Fear shot through her veins, and she pulled back, but it was too late, the snake struck out at her. She screamed, certain she was going to be bitten, when Alasdair’s arms appeared in front of hers, and the snake bit him instead.

“Foul creature!” he bellowed, slung it to the ground, and brought down a dagger to slice off the snake’s head. The cut was clean, and the head fell away from the strangely-patterned, reddish-brown snake.

She stood stunned for a moment, then grabbed his arm as she faced him. “Ye took a snake bite for me!”

“Aye,” he said simply. “’Tis my duty to protect ye when ye are in my care.”

The sense of honor this man had hit her hard. He was not so easily judged. She glanced down at his arm where he'd been bitten and cried out. His forearm was already red. "Do ye feel pain?" she asked, recalling a woman who had died at the market once after a snake bite.

"Nay, I'm fine," he replied.

She'd known a few other people who hadn't died after being bitten. Her mama had told her there was only one poisonous snake that lived in these parts as far as she knew, and it was usually not deadly unless someone had a special sensitivity to them. Worry spread through her like a weed as she stared at Alasdair's arm. Was it already swelling?

"Ye're certain ye dunnae feel pain?" she asked and looked up at him to find him grimacing. "Alasdair?"

"Maybe just a bit," he said, wincing as the words left his mouth.

That he would admit to any pain at all set off an alarm within her. "Have ye... have ye ever been bitten by a snake afore?" Her voice had drifted to a hushed whisper as an image of the woman who had died in the market came to her mind unbidden. Her eyes had been glazed over in death, and a line of white foam had come from her mouth.

When he shook his head, she began silently praying to the gods for his life as she thought about what she needed to do. "Sit down," she demanded.

"What? Nay. We need to gather food..." His words trailed off, and he swayed where he stood. As she watched him, it felt as if a hand closed around her throat to cut off her air. He was having a bad reaction already. She was certain of it.

“Alasdair,” she said, putting a hand on his shoulder and pushing gently on the giant of a man. “Sit down please. I need to tie off the area around the bite to try to stop the spread of the poison.” Then she would cut the wound, suck out the poison, and rub the head of the snake on it. Then she’d get him back to camp and cauterize the wound. For that, she’d need Calan to hold Alasdair down. Then, once all that was done, she’d return to the woods and hopefully find an ash tree. After the woman at market had died, Sorcha’s mama had told her that if they’d had quick access to the bark of an ash tree, they might have been able to save her, as it was said that the venom of an adder could not pass through ash bark. If Sorcha could find such a tree now, she could get some bark, grind it up, and add water to it to make a paste to rub on Alasdair’s arm, chest, neck and face so that the poisonous venom could not spread to his heart and head.

“I dunnae need to sit,” he said as he plunked to the ground with a hiss. “The ground tilted,” he mumbled, his words slurred.

She dropped to her knees in front of him as she snatched up his plain dagger, reminded for one breath of the jeweled dagger he’d willingly given up for her sister. “Alasdair, I’m going to tie yer arm off in two places to help prevent the venom from spreading through yer blood.”

His brow furrowed at her words, but then he went pale and grabbed at his arm. “Feck! Someone put fire in my arm,” he growled, rubbing fiercely at the now swollen, red site of the snake bite. Fear knotted in her belly as she looked at his arm. Up and down the length of it, red bumps had risen, and she had a sinking sensation that the venom was already traveling to other parts of his body. She looked to his neck and chest, and exhaled a shaky breath of relief that the bumps were not yet there.

She plunged the dagger into the edge of her skirt, ripped off one strip of material and repeated it to obtain another strip, all while she spoke to Alasdair. “I’m going to tie this material from my skirt right under the snake bite and at the top of yer arm, so that

hopefully the venom will nae go beyond those points.” What she did not say was that she hoped it would save his life, if not his arm.

When he didn’t respond, she looked up from what she was doing, and sheer black fright swept through her. His eyes had a glassy appearance, and he was holding his throat with his other hand.

“Kinnae breathe,” he choked out.

She dropped the dagger beside her and nodded, working as quickly as she could. Scrambling to her knees, she lifted his arm and slipped the first strip of material under it all the way up to where the last bumps were, just before the rounding of his shoulder. She took both ends of the material in her hands and pulled tight enough to hopefully slow the poison. Then she repeated the process just below the snake bite.

Once that was done, she picked up the dagger once more, looked at him, and she had to beat back the panic that threatened to riot within her. His lips were swollen. “Alasdair,” she said, her voice shaky. “How is yer breath?”

“Nae good, Mariot,” he said, squeezing his eyes shut.

Mariot? That had to be his wife who had died. Had the poison reached his mind and was now confusing him? The fear gnawed at her confidence as she raised the dagger to the snake bite. “I’m going to slice the bite open now in order to get the poison.”

“What?” he said, the word sharp, and his posture becoming rigid.

She needed him to stay as still and calm as possible, and she had only one idea of how to get him to cooperate. “Darling,” she said, hoping his wife had used that endearment, “I have to get the poison. Ye must let me. I kinnae live without ye. Ye must hold still for me. Ye kinnae leave me alone.”

He relaxed immediately and surprised her when he reached out his hand from his uninjured arm and cupped her cheek. “ Mo ghraidh, ye ken I will nae ever leave ye alone. I’ll do what ye ask.”

Mo ghraidh. My love .

A surge of jealousy shot through Sorcha. By the gods, she was jealous of a dead woman and the powerful love she’d shared with this man. “Verra good,” she said, willing herself to push the jealousy away and concentrate. She set the blade to his arm and slid it across in one sweeping motion.

He did not move, and when she looked to him, his glassy gaze was fixed on her. A tremor of longing went through her. She’d never thought she’d care if a man looked at her, but if the man loved her as Alasdair had loved his wife, if the man’s gaze was filled with the boundless devotion Alasdair’s was, then she wanted that to the depths of her soul.

Without a word, she wiped away the blood trickling from his wound, leaned forward, and pressed her lips to his skin to suck out the poison. It was the first time in her life her lips had touched a man. And yet, something else rose within her to join the fear for Alasdair. It was the same pull of desire she’d felt for him before. She set that aside as well. There would never be a time or place for such feelings for this man.

She focused on the task at hand, sucking out blood and poison, spitting it out and repeating the process, all the while glancing at Alasdair to check his appearance. When his eyes closed and he began to slump sideways, she feared she was losing him. She sat up, lips aching, and caught him just in time as he started to fall sideways.

“Alasdair!” she cried out, fearing he was near death, fearing she had been too slow. “Alasdair, please, please dunnae die.”

She stood, holding on to his arm and trying to get him to stand, and after much effort, panting and sweaty, she burst into tears and allowed him to slump all the way to the ground. She dropped to her knees once more, put her finger under his nose and waited for a warm waft of breath to wash over her skin. It took a moment, and it was barely there when she felt it, but when she did, she cried out in relief. But as she considered the impossibility of dragging him or carrying him back to camp to cauterize his wound, and that he might be dead by the time she found Calan and brought him back to retrieve Alasdair, her tears came so hard she was nearly blinded by them.

She released his arm and, bending down, pressed a kiss to his forehead. “I will return for ye. I vow it.” She stood and didn’t waste a breath before she started running, still crying, and because her tears were nearly blinding, she tripped over a log, fell to her knees, and was struggling to stand when a voice said above her, “What in the name of the gods is wrong?”

She looked up at Calan, blinking the tears from her eyes. “Alasdair is g-g-going to die.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

Sorcha raced back to camp carrying the ash bark she'd collected after she and Calan had returned Alasdair to camp, and she prayed to the gods that Alasdair was still alive. When the camp came into view, Calan was pacing in the distance and Alasdair was crouched on his knees, hands in the dirt, and appeared to be retching. Relief flooded her, and she pushed herself harder to reach him. When she got close enough to hear him, his words stopped her in her tracks.

"I need Mariot. I need Mariot. I need her. I need her."

"I'm here, mo ghraidh," she said.

Alasdair looked toward her but didn't seem to see her, and no wonder! Beads of sweat covered his brow and dripped down his chest. Undoubtedly, fever had set in. She turned to Calan to explain, but the look of understanding on his face told her no explanation was needed.

"Mariot," Calan said, addressing her, "Alasdair had been retching since he roused."

"'Tis a good thing. His body is trying to rid itself of the poison."

Calan nodded, though he didn't look convinced.

"Did ye prepare the dagger?"

"Aye," Calan said. "I doused it with wine, and it's ready to be set to the fire."

"I'll do that, and ye hold him," she said, nodding toward Alasdair.

“I can try, but he’s verra strong.”

“Ye must be stronger,” she insisted. “If I slip when cauterizing the wound, I could cut too deep and sever a blood supply. I’ve seen it happen afore, and that would certainly kill him if the snake bite does nae. Alasdair, ye will nae move when I cauterize yer wound, lest I should kill ye and ye abandon me in this world.”

Alasdair nodded, and he finally focused on her. “I’ll nae move, mo ghraidh. ”

“I’ll set the dagger to the fire, then,” Calan said.

She frowned at him. “What? Nay. We just agreed ye would hold him.”

“There’s nae a need,” he said in a confident tone, stepping close to her as Alasdair doubled over, retching once more. “Alasdair gave his word to ye—to Mariot—and he’d die afore breaking his word to her.”

That same ridiculous surge of jealousy over a dead woman resurfaced, and Sorcha ruthlessly shoved it away, nodded to Calan, and he moved to the fire to get the dagger hot enough. She kneeled in front of Alasdair just as he was sitting up once more. “Mariot,” he said, his tone ragged, “I’m dying.”

“Nay,” she said, her stomach clenching tight. “Ye’re nae dying. I’ll nae let ye die. I vow it.”

Calan kneeled beside her and handed her the dagger.

“Dunnae forget yer vow, Alasdair,” she said. “Ye kinnae move.”

“I’ll nae,” he said, the words full of fierce conviction.

She caught his gaze. “Keep yer eyes on me,” she said, having learned long ago it was much better not to look at what was being done to you. When he nodded, she looked down toward the wound and could feel the heat of his stare upon her. Clenching her teeth, she set the red-hot blade to the puffy, bloody wound and tensed for Alasdair’s reaction.

He did not move, nor did he utter a word. When the wound was properly cauterized, she looked up and found him staring at her, his brows dipped in obvious confusion. “Sorcha, Calan,” he said, surprising her that he had drifted back to reality.

“Aye?” they responded in unison.

Alasdair looked to Calan. “If I should die, Calan, protect Sorcha with yer life.”

“Aye, I will, but ye’ll nae—”

“Vow it,” Alasdair said in an intense tone.

“I vow it.”

With that, he nodded, satisfied, and his eyelids shut as he slumped sideways once more, caught by Calan this time before his head hit the ground.

Sorcha finished rubbing the last of the ash bark on Alasdair’s wound as he slept fitfully, and then she sat up. She scooted back toward the log Calan was leaning against as he finished cooking the rabbit he’d caught while she cared for Alasdair.

His worried gaze locked on her. “Is there anything else ye can do?”

She shook her head, fatigue pressing against her from every direction. “Nay,” she said, glancing toward Alasdair, who had settled for the moment. Looking at him now,

at his size and his solid build, it was hard to believe anything could bring this man down, let alone a snake, but he was obviously one of those unlucky people who were affected horribly by venom. “I’ve done all I ken to do, and now we just need to watch and wait.”

Calan nodded, brought the rabbit out of the fire and offered a chunk to her. Her stomach flipped, knotted at the thought of eating with Alasdair hovering so close to death.

He had shown her honor in so many ways, and she had disregarded it and only concerned herself with the fact that he was taking her to the family she did not know in exchange for coin. She still didn’t think that was right, but sitting here now, she wanted to know why he was doing it. She did not believe his motives were selfish. She believed they were complicated and that he was doing it for the good of someone else, as he’d implied. That didn’t make it right, but it made it easier for her to understand and forgive.

“Ye need to eat,” Calan said.

“I kinnae right now. Mayhap later. Will ye tell me,” she said slowly, “of Alasdair’s wife and how she died? And of why he is forcing me to a family I dunnae ken and into a marriage I dunnae want? I think,” she said, swallowing the lump in her throat, “I think he’s nae as dishonorable as I had believed.” No man who lacked honor would take a snake bite for someone else or even stand up for a stranger as he’d done in the shooting competition.

“Alasdair is the most honorable man I ken. Ye judged based on one act. Ye kinnae judge a man’s character, a man’s honor, without examining the motivations. He is nae motivated by self-gain. Everything he does is for his clan and his children, nae ever for himself.”

“He has children?” she asked, surprised but unsure why. He’d been wed, after all.

“Aye,” Calan replied, shoving a piece of rabbit into this mouth. “Twins. A boy and a girl, Hew and Beatie.”

“How many summers are they?” she asked, her attention trailing to Alasdair once more. He was tossing again, and she moved toward him and placed her hand on his forehead. He was burning up. She picked up the material she’d ripped from her gown, then the wine skin she’d used to collect water from the river, and poured the water over the fabric before placing the cool, wet material on Alasdair’s forehead and chest. When he sighed and settled almost immediately, she scooted back to lean by Calan again. When she looked to him to continue their conversation, she found him watching her with a surprised expression on his face. “What?” she asked.

“For a lass who finds a man dishonorable, ye are treating him with tender care.”

“I was vexed and jumped to conclusions that met my irritated state. As ye said, I see more clearly now that I kinnae judge the whole of this man on one action, especially given his other actions toward me.”

Calan nodded. “Hew and Beatie are six summers. And since ye’ll likely ask, their mama has been dead since the day they were born.”

Sadness made her chest ache. “Did she die birthing the bairns?”

“Aye,” Calan said.

“That must have been horrid for Alasdair to watch.”

“He was nae there, and that was worse. His guilt has made him unable to move out of the past and into the here and now. He certainly kinnae look toward the future.”

She frowned. “Why was he nae there?”

“He went on a mission to aid the clan.”

“Then I dunnae think he should harbor guilt for that. He’s laird, and he must think of the entire clan.”

“Aye. I agree. But Mariot had begged him nae to go. She had a fear of giving birth because her dearest friend died birthing her son.”

“Ah, I see now. She wanted him to stay to ease her fears.”

“Aye, and he blames himself that she passed. He thinks if he had stayed, if he had been there, she would have lived.”

He had loved her greatly. Calan didn’t need to tell Sorch a so. Alasdair had shown it in his delusions; hearing about his past now merely confirmed it. “Alasdair lives to serve his clan, to serve others?”

“Aye, he thinks always of each member of his clan first but of others too. The mission he went on back then did benefit the clan, but it greatly benefited the people he was aiding as well.”

Sorch a chewed on her lip for a moment while she considered Calan’s words. “He needs the coin my... my b-brother is offering for the clan, does he nae? Is that it?”

“Aye,” Calan said, confirming what her instincts had told her. “I dunnae think he wants to return ye to yer brother at all, given how adamant ye are against it, even though ye dunnae even ken what sort of man awaits ye as yer future husband.”

“I dunnae wish a husband,” she said, but even as she spoke the words, she realized

they felt less true than they had before she'd met Alasdair. He had shown her that good, honorable men did exist. There were men out there who were so devoted to their wives, so in love with them, that they loved them beyond death.

Calan gave her a knowing look. "I think ye are nae certain what ye wish, and ye need a husband. This world is harsh for women who are alone."

She could not argue with that, and it irritated her greatly. "I wish to open an apothecary shop, nae shackle myself to a man who will have control over me and nae ever let me do such a thing."

"Then ye must choose the right man," Calan said, and then his face flushed red in realization, she was certain, of what he'd said.

"Now, mayhap ye see why I dunnae wish to be dragged to a home I have nae ever kenned, to a brother I dunnae remember and who wants me to wed a man I dunnae ken so that it will bring him a great alliance."

"I see why, but it dunnae change what must be done, and, as I said, ye dunnae ken Laird Campbell. He may well be like Alasdair and be such a man who appreciates a wife with a sharp mind."

"Is that how Alasdair was with his wife?"

"Aye. He did nae rule Mariot; he ruled with her."

Oh, to be so lucky to have a husband like that, but she hadn't thought men like that existed, and she did not believe a man who had agreed to wed her without ever meeting her was a man who cared what she wished. "Why does he—yer clan, need coin so badly? Did something happen to empty yer coffers and take away the means to fill them again?"

“Aye, a plague swept through our sheep and killed them all, and that wiped out a large means of income. That was right after Mariot died, and Alasdair believed he was being punished for her death.” Calan shrugged. “The castle has fallen into disrepair, and many of the clan members, especially warriors who were welcomed at other clans for their fighting abilities, have left because food has been scarce. ’Tis fairly desperate now.”

Her heart swelled with understanding. “Delivering me is the only means he has to gain the needed coin.” It wasn’t a question but a statement.

“Nay,” Calan said, surprising her. “There is an heiress to a great castle that wishes Alasdair to wed her. If he did so, he would gain all the coin needed to replenish the clan coffers, fix the castle, and stock the food stores.”

“Why does he nae wed her?”

“He does nae love her,” Calan said.

She stilled in disbelief and rising irritation. “He will nae wed the heiress—”

“Lady Wallace,” Calan provided.

“Because he does nae love her,” she continued, “yet he is dragging me to an unknown home to be forced to wed even though I dunnae wish it?” And to think she’d been ready to absolve Alasdair for taking her against her will!

“That is nae what I am saying,” Calan replied. “He thinks it unfair to her to bind her for life to a man who will nae ever love her as he believes a man should love his wife, as he loved Mariot.”

“He believes he will nae ever love a woman again as he did his wife?”

“Aye,” Calan said quietly.

Alasdair had loved his wife so completely that even death could not break it. He did not think it possible for himself to ever love that way again, and he did not feel he could wed the heiress given that. And yet he was dragging her to wed a man she did not know. She wanted to hate him, yet it was not so simple. He was doing what he must to save his clan, and mayhap he had convinced himself that she could find love with the man she was to wed. Mayhap, she could. What if he was a man with the capability to love that Alasdair possessed? She suddenly had a small glimmer of hope. She still did not want to be wed to a man she did not know, but at least she now had an example of a man that had been good to his wife. Tears filled Sorcha’s eyes, and she quickly wiped them away but not before Calan saw.

“Why are ye crying?”

“I... I did nae think such men existed who would love so completely and unselfishly,” she said, embarrassed to have spoken such private thoughts aloud, but it was too late to take the words back.

“I dunnae ken what ye mean,” Calan replied, looking utterly confused.

She laughed at that. “Of course, ye dunnae. Ye’re a man.” And likely nae the sort of man Alasdair was, because that sort of man, she knew from her own experience, was a rarity. “It makes more sense to me now why Alasdair gave his dagger up for my sister.”

“I was shocked at that,” Calan admitted.

“Why?” she asked. “Ye have talked at length upon his selflessness.”

“Well, aye, and he is that, but that dagger was a wedding gift from Mariot.”

Her gaze flew to Alasdair, and at that moment, he groaned, rolled over, and began to toss up the contents of his stomach again. Sorch a scrambled to him, heart pounding, set her hand to his forehead and snatched it back with a cry. “He’s hotter than before!”

Calan hurried to her, crouched down, and felt Alasdair’s forehead as well. “What can be done?”

“I dunnae know,” she said, shaking her head.

“Mariot, Mariot,” Alasdair muttered, and his words, filled with so much misery and longing, struck a heart-wrenching realization in her.

“I fear his will to live is lost,” she said. “He wants to go to his wife.”

“Then we must remind him of why he should stay.”

“His bairns!” they said in unison.

“Listen to me, ye stubborn clot-heid,” Sorch a said, and though her words were stern she kept her tone soft. “Hew and Beatie need ye. They have lost their mama, and I ken how much ye miss her, but they should nae have to endure losing ye, too. I grew up with a horrid man for a da and my mama died when I was a wee lass. Ye dunnae want that for yer children. Ye must be there for them, and... and I ken ye love yer wife, but she dunnae need ye as yer children do. And I ken now the reasons ye are taking me to my family, and I forgive ye.” She thought mayhap guilt was weighing heavily upon him. She took his hand in hers and held tight. “So fight. Fight for yer children and yer clan, and, well, fight for me, because... because meeting ye has given me hope that I did nae ever expect to have, and if ye die, ye take that hope with ye.”

Page 14

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

The tunnel was dark, but at the end of it was a light brighter than any Alasdair had ever seen, and he was filled suddenly with the certainty that Mariot was just beyond that light, waiting for him. He walked toward it eagerly, but right when he was about to step into it, a soft but insistent voice resonated in his head.

Hew and Beatie need ye .

He paused at that. Hew. Beatie. An ache sprang up in his chest.

They have lost their mama, and I ken how much ye miss her, but they should nae have to endure losing ye, too.

The light parted, and there stood Mariot, ethereal in her beauty. He stepped a foot into the light toward her, but she held up her hand and shook her head. “’Tis nae yer time yet, Alasdair. The lass is right. Our bairns need ye. She needs ye.”

“I dunnae even ken the lass. She’s nae my responsibility.”

I grew up with a horrid man for a da and my mama died when I was a wee lass. Ye dunnae want that for yer children. Ye must be there for them, and... and I ken ye love yer wife, but she dunnae need ye as yer children do.

“She’s right, Alasdair. I dunnae need ye anymore. Let me go. Let yerself live.”

He recoiled at that. “I was nae there for ye.”

Mariot smiled slowly at him. “Ye were always there for me, Alasdair. Ye had others

ye needed to be there for, too, and ye did nae ever fail. So dunnae fail Beatie and Hew now. Dunnae fail the lass Sorchha.”

And I ken now the reasons ye are taking me to my family, and I forgive ye.

He smiled at those presumptuous words and glanced behind him. The tunnel was no longer dark. It was daylight, and he looked upon himself, lying on the ground in the woods near death. Kneeling in front of him was the flame-haired lass Sorchha and crouched beside her was Calan.

She took his hand in hers, and the warmth of her fingertips seeped into his skin as her fingers curled around the back of his hand with fretful pressure.

So fight. Fight for yer children, and yer clan, and, well, fight for me, because... because meeting ye has given me hope that I did nae ever expect to have, and if ye die, ye take that hope with ye .

He had two choices before him, past and present. One would be simple, the other fraught with complications and uncertainty, and both filled with loss. He squeezed his eyes shut and let out a roar.

Alasdair opened his eyes to daylight and Sorchha. She hovered above him, her hand clasping his to her chest, her hair swinging down on either side of her face in twin cascades of flame, her silver-blue eyes burning bright with relief. A sense of peace enveloped him, which he hadn't felt in a very long time.

“Ye're awake,” she whispered, tears falling from her exquisite eyes down the delicate slope of her lovely cheeks.

With effort, he raised his hand to her cheek and brushed away the tears. His whole body was engulfed in tides of weariness, but it didn't matter. He had something to

say. "Thank ye." He didn't know if it had been a fever dream or real, but she had beckoned him back to life, to his children, and he'd never forget that.

When he awoke again, shades of purple and myriad oranges and yellows had claimed the sky, but Sorcha was still there, crouched by the fire near him, holding a stick into it. He pushed himself to a sitting position, and he must have made a sound because she turned, her face alight with happiness. She stood and rushed to him, stick of cooked meat in hand. His stomach growled at the smell of roasted rabbit.

"Ye must stay awake this time and eat!"

"I intend to," he replied, his voice coming out like an old, creaky hinge. He frowned. It sounded like he hadn't used it in a long spell. "How long have I been asleep?" he asked as she brought a wine skin to his lips.

"A sennight. Now drink."

"A sennight?" he asked, but she scowled so fiercely and pressed the wine skin to his lips once more that he let the question go unanswered and took the drink he desperately wanted. The cool liquid slid down his dry, scratchy throat, offering relief. When he was finished drinking, he met her gaze. "Have ye been caring for the me this whole time?"

"Aye," she said, yawning, and that's when he noticed the dark smudges under her eyes.

"Have ye slept?"

"Oh, aye," she assured him. "Calan watched ye as well when he was nae hunting."

Alasdair looked around the campsite then, realizing he had not seen Calan since

awakening. “Is Calan off hunting now?”

“Aye,” she said, pulling a chunk of rabbit meat off the stick and holding it close to him. “Eat this. Ye must be famished. The only thing ye’ve eaten in a sennight is broth I made from a rabbit.”

The woman was one surprise after the other. “Ye fed me broth?”

“Aye,” she said. “’Twas the only thing I could get down ye and coax ye to swallow. I tried meat at first,” she said, “but I could nae get ye to chew it in yer sleep.”

He popped the piece of rabbit meat in his mouth and sighed with contentment. “Cooked to perfection.”

She grinned at him and handed him another piece of meat. “Thank ye. I did all the cooking at my da’s—I mean the man I called my da’s—inn.”

“It must be verra strange and exciting for ye,” Alasdair said between bites, “to learn who yer really family is.”

A sad look settled on her face that tightened his gut. “It would be more exciting if I did nae ken that my brother was searching for me simply to bring him a strong alliance.” Her words had him considering his fever dream and what he should do going forth. He’d harbored a great deal of guilt about Sorcha’s being forced to wed, and the fact that she had been caring for him so diligently only made his guilt heavier.

Soon, he’d be strong enough to travel again, and he would need to know what he was going to do with her by then. Before he could think more upon it, Calan came into sight.

His friend grinned at him and broke into a run, not stopping until he was leaning over

him, laughing and clapping him on the shoulder. "'Tis good to see ye awake!"

Sorcha stood, and Alasdair had to suppress the keen desire to grab her hand to keep her by his side. "Now that ye seem to be faring well and Calan is here, I'll go wash," she said, glancing at him and Calan.

Alasdair studied her for a moment, taking in more than her beauty. Her hair hung down her back and over her shoulders in a tangled mess of waves. She had a smudge of dirt on her nose, her gown was soiled, and her hands were red and chapped. He nodded, wanting to ask her if she'd stayed by his side the entire time he was sick, but he didn't want to embarrass her or sound presumptuous. "Stay to the trail," he said, thinking on the adder that had bitten him.

"Dunnae fash yerself," she replied. "I've been bitten afore, and I dunnae have the reaction ye do."

That was good. Still. "Please stay to the trail," he said again.

She grinned at him, and the sight of her smile lighting her face tightened his chest. "Well, since ye said please," she said in a teasing tone.

He watched her as she turned and made her way to the trail, hips swaying in a way that stirred his desire. When she disappeared from view, he turned his focus to Calan to find his friend's gaze steady on her as well. Calan looked to him. "She did nae leave yer side but to relieve herself, and hardly that."

He was momentarily speechless. "The entire time?"

"Aye," Calan said, sitting beside him. "She could have fled, ye ken. I had to go hunt for food for us, and there were a dozen times she could have fled, but she stayed and cared for ye, barely sleeping."

“Aye,” Alasdair said, an unexpected warmth filling him. “I saw her weariness.” His thoughts turned in his head, and when he knew what he wanted to do, what he needed to do, he spoke. “I need ye to go to Laird Campbell’s stronghold.”

“I’m nae surprised,” Calan said, grinning.

Alasdair frowned, unsure why what he was saying would make Calan grin. “I need ye to ascertain if he is a good man.”

Calan frowned. “What for? Are ye nae wishing me to bargain for ye to keep the lass?”

“What?” Alasdair shook his head with a chuckle. “Nay. Dunnae be a clot-heid. I have nae awoken from my sickness and suddenly decided I wish to wed again. I’m nae changed.” But the minute he said the words, he knew they were not the absolute truth. He was changed. Something in him had loosened a bit. He felt it. Like a door in his chest that had been slammed shut and locked was cracked open, but what that meant for the future, he didn’t know.

What he did know was he could no longer simply take her to her brother’s home without knowing who she’d be forced to wed. He had to ensure he was a good man.

“Ye’re the clot-heid,” Calan bit out.

“What do ye mean by that?” Alasdair demanded.

Calan stared at him for a long moment. “It dunnae matter,” he finally said. “Ye’ll nae hear me until ye’re ready, and that may well nae ever happen. What do ye wish me to do at the Campbell stronghold?”

“Find out what sort of man Laird Campbell is and whether he’s worthy of a lass like

Sorcha.”

“And if he’s nae?” Calan asked. “What then?”

“Then I’ll nae take her to her brother if she dunnae wish it.”

“If Laird Stewart discovers ye have his sister, ye’d start a war with a powerful man for a lass that dunnae mean anything to ye.”

“I owe her,” Alasdair said simply.

Calan snorted. “I hope some reason filters into yer thick skull, but I’ll nae hold my breath.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

“Where is Calan?” Sorchu asked upon returning to camp and finding Alasdair alone. She was going to box Calan in his ears for leaving Alasdair by himself. Whether he seemed better or not, he could relapse.

“I sent him to the Campbell stronghold,” Alasdair said, continuing to pack his destrier.

The news took her by surprise. “What for?”

He stopped what he was doing and turned to her. The sun shone behind him and glinted off the black hair that curled at the base of his neck. It made his hair, as well as his skin, glisten. She’d never seen a man more perfectly made than this one. “I told him to ascertain whether yer intended is a good, honorable man or nae.”

For a moment, she was so surprised, words failed her. Finally, she swallowed and asked, “Why?”

His eyes brimmed suddenly with what looked like tenderness. Was she imagining it? Did he feel the pull to her that she felt to him? He let out a slow long breath. “Because I owe ye. Ye stayed by my side and cared for me when ye could have fled. I wish to ken afore I take ye to yer brother if he is wedding ye to an honorable man.”

“Oh,” she replied, fighting back the disappointment. “And if he’s nae?”

“Then—” Alasdair motioned her to come close to him.

She walked toward him and stopped right in front of him. He surprised her by

gripping her around the waist. She thought he was going to set her on the horse to travel, but he did not. They stood there face to face, his hands on her hips. The pressure of each of his fingers singed her skin and stirred desire deep in her core. His touch, in fact, was almost unbearable in its tenderness. She knew he did not mean it in any such way, but her body didn't care what her head understood.

She had never yearned for a man's touch, but she did now. She wanted his hands on her body, exploring secret areas she had only recently discovered herself. Her thoughts were sinful, and nothing would ever come of the desire, but that didn't make it any less powerful. It didn't stop her breasts from becoming full or the ache between her thighs from pulsing to life, nor her waist from tingling at his touch.

His eyes darkened as he stared at her, and she wondered if he felt even a hint of desire for her or if all his desire had been extinguished, like his love, with his wife's death.

"If Laird Campbell is nae an honorable man, then I'll nae force ye to go to yer brother's," he said, picking her up off her feet and swinging her onto the horse as if she weighed no more than a saddlebag.

Her jaw fell open at his pronouncement, and it wasn't until he mounted behind her, took up the reins and clicked the horse into motion that she had the wherewithal to order her thoughts again. "What would ye do with me? Return me home?"

"If ye wish it," he said, the inside of his powerful arms rubbing the outside of hers as he gripped the reins to guide the horse. "But if ye dunnae wish to return there, then I would give ye a home."

"At yer castle?" she asked, dumbfounded.

"Well, nay," he said slowly, moving them into the woods and onto the trail. "Ye

would have a cottage on my land, as part of my clan.”

“What of the coin yer clan needs?” she asked, her cheeks burning with the foolish assumption that he’d been offering a place in his stronghold.

His legs tensed, as did his arms. “What do ye ken of my clan’s needs?”

“Calan told me of the plague that wiped out yer sheep and the troubles that have followed, and that ye need coin for yer stronghold and food storage banks.”

“Would ye want to return home?” he asked, and she half suspected it was to avoid her question. Mayhap he didn’t even know what he’d do.

“I wanted to start an apothecary shop there at the market,” she said. “So I would mayhap go home once more.”

“I dunnae believe that would be wise. There will be many men still searching for ye who will be more than willing to force ye to the Stewart clan if they found ye.”

“Mercenaries?” she asked.

“Aye, and yer da. If I’m nae there to remind him of his vow, he dunnae seem the sort to keep it.”

She snorted at the truth of those words.

“Why an apothecary shop?” he asked her as he guided the beast up a great incline.

She stiffened as she looked over the ledge. She was terrified of heights. She always had been. Before she knew what she was doing, her hands had found his thighs, and she gripped him with all her might. She expected him to ask what she was doing or

tell her to let go, but she prayed to the gods that he would say nothing. She didn't think she could loosen her fingers from her hold on his thighs even if she wanted to until they were on the downward part of the journey. Her heart pounded loudly in her ears, and heat consumed her. She'd experience this before, so she knew it was the fear of the heights making her body react, but knowing it changed nothing. She was having a hard time catching her breath, and her short gasps for air hit her own ears, but she could not seem to calm herself.

Suddenly, Alasdair slid an arm around her waist and pulled her backward, more securely between his thighs and against his chest. "I've got ye, lass."

She was mortified that he sensed her fear. "I'm sorry." The two words were an effort to say because her throat felt as if it had nearly closed.

"Dunnae be," he replied. His voice was soothing, making her relax against him. "We all have fears," he assured her. "'Tis nae anything to be ashamed of. Without fear, we could nae ever choose to be courageous, and choosing courage is what makes great men and women."

She felt her lips pull into a smile at the word women. This man. It seemed he was constantly proving to her that he was different. She nodded to let him know she'd heard him.

"Now," he said, his breath tickling her ear and her neck and beating back the fear clawing at her even more. "Tell me why ye wish to open an apothecary shop."

"My mama dabbled in the medicines. She would aid women in our village, and she taught me a bit, but when she became ill, there was nae anyone to help her. I watched her die, and I did nae ever forget it. I want to aid women, and a shop seemed the best way."

“My wife died in childbirth,” he said, surprising her with the admission.

“I ken,” she said softly.

“Calan told ye my entire life story whilst I was ill it seems.”

“Nay,” she said, aware of the thread of irritation she heard in his tone. “Nae yer entire history. Just enough to show me I’d judged ye too harshly.”

“That’s what showed ye, was it?” he teased.

Their easy banter made her even more comfortable, and she found she could loosen her fingers from the grip on his thighs, but she didn’t want to. “Ye showed me as well with yer actions.”

“Well, I’m glad ye dunnae think me evil any longer.”

“I’m sorry,” she replied.

“Dunnae be. We have both made mistakes regarding each other.”

She knew his mistake was forcing her to her brother, but she also knew he was doing his best to ensure he was taking her to a man who would treat her well. “Tell me of yer children, Hew and Beatie.”

“Did Calan talk of anything besides me?” Alasdair asked with a chuckle.

“Nae really,” she admitted. “I’m sorry about yer wife. I ken... well, I ken it pains ye still.”

“Thank ye,” he replied, the words gruff.

“I’m certain she kenned,” she added. “About ye having to leave during her birth.”

“Aye, she understood, but she still did nae wish me to go, and it is to my everlasting regret that I did nae, for once, put her above all else.”

“But ye were putting her and the entire clan above all else. Calan said yer mission that day ensured the safety of the clan.”

“Aye,” he said, and his body slumped a bit around her, as if talking about his wife reminded him more keenly of the guilt he carried regarding her death.

“If I were yer wife and I died, I’d nae blame ye for doing what ye had to.”

He was quiet for a long moment, and the only sounds she could hear were that of the horse’s clopping, and the wind whistling in her ears because of the great height. It was then that she realized her heart was no longer pounding viciously. Alasdair had managed to help her calm her fears, to beat them back.

“She spoke to me,” he finally said.

“Do ye mean the day she died?” Sorchu asked, confused.

“Nay. I did nae return home until she had passed from this life. I mean when I was ill with the snake bite.”

“Ah,” Sorchu said, understanding. “Ye had a fever dream.”

“So ye think it was in my mind?” he asked, and she could tell from his tone, he’d been asking himself that question.

“Nay,” she replied. “I think when someone is near death, the barrier between this life

and the next is lowered so that we can hear those we love who have passed, when before we could not hear them at all because we were so preoccupied with living.”

“I like that,” he replied, making her glad she’d spoken from her heart. “She did nae seem to be angry with me. She told me Hew and Beatie need me and that she was in a place where she no longer did. I’m certain I sound a fool.”

“Nay,” she assured him. “Ye sound wise for having listened to her. I imagine yer children will be verra glad to see ye returned whole and hearty.”

His body tensed again as before, and he said slowly, “More likely they will have hardly noted my absence.”

“That kinnae be true!” she exclaimed.

“It is,” he replied, his tone more guarded now.

“But ye said yer wife told ye in yer fever dream that yer children needed ye.”

“Aye,” he replied, “but I kinnae see how. I’ve thought upon it since I awoke. I think they are better off without me in their lives too much. Something in me is broken, and I dunnae want to pass that on to them.”

She didn’t agree. Something in him might have been broken, but the mere fact that he realized it now meant he was starting to heal. She could not decide whether it was wise to say such a thing or not, and before she could make up her mind, he surprised her by announcing, “We’re here.”

She looked forward and gasped. An enormous stronghold rose ahead of them, and it sat atop a very tall cliff. “That’s yer home?”

“Aye,” he replied, the pride in his voice obvious.

“Why must it be at such great heights?” she groaned.

“Ye’ll be fine,” he replied with a chuckle. “Look behind ye and see the journey we just undertook together. If ye can do that, ye can do anything.”

She glanced over her shoulder and felt like swooning. He’d kept her talking all while he’d wound her around the narrowest mountain ledge she’d ever seen.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

The inner bailey teemed with clansmen. Sorcha's palms were sweating, and her stomach turned with nervousness. She'd never seen so many people gathered in one place in her life, and they parted automatically as Alasdair led his horse into the courtyard. His clansmen smiled as they rode by them, calling greetings and news, and inquiring if she was his new wife. That part stiffened Alasdair's body around her and heated her cheeks, but she decided to ignore the good-natured ribbing.

"Are they always like this?" she asked, turning her head sideways so no one could read her lips.

"Aye," he said with a chuckle, "and I'm sorry about the wife comments. They ken better, but—"

"They wish ye to remarry," she supplied.

"Aye," he answered, the surprise in his voice obvious.

He started to slow the horse toward the middle of the courtyard, and as he did, Sorcha noticed a beautiful woman with flaxen hair walking toward them. Two children, a boy and a girl, flanked her. The boy had black hair and blue eyes that matched Alasdair's, and Sorcha knew at once that the young lad had to be his son. The girl had red hair, much to Sorcha's surprise, the color of hers, but her eyes were a bright shade of green. "Those are yer children," she said.

"Aye," he replied, and she could hear the pride in his voice. "The woman with them is my wife's mama, Esmerelda."

“Her mama?” Sorch a gasped. “She barely looks older than I am.”

“She’s forty-five summers,” Alasdair said, “And I imagine that’s quite a bit older than ye.”

It was, but still, the woman looked half her age. “She’s blessed by the gods,” Sorch a mumbled, tugging on her soiled gown. She suddenly felt very inferior to the stunning woman who was almost upon them. Esmerelda’s gown was made of the finest silk, her fair hair looked like spun gold, and her skin like alabaster. The only thing Sorch a thought detracted from the woman’s beauty were her eyes. They were bits of gray stone, hard and cold. The woman smiled at Alasdair as he dismounted, but when he helped Sorch a dismount and swept his hand toward her to introduce them, Esmerelda did not smile.

She swept a disdainful gaze over Sorch a and visibly pulled the children closer to her. “Who is this?” she demanded.

“Esmerelda, this is Sorch a MacGregor,” Alasdair said, his gaze resting on her. He quirked his eyebrows up as if to ask if that were the name she wanted to use. She gave her head a little nod. It was. She was not ready to be known as Margaret Stewart, and she wasn’t sure she ever would be, though she might not have the luxury of that choice for much longer. Alasdair had been very kind and accommodating by granting her wish, but her brother might not be so understanding. “This is Esmerelda,” he finished.

“Pleased to meet ye,” Sorch a said, curtsying.

The woman ignored her. “Who is she, and why is she here?”

“I’ll explain when we are alone,” Alasdair answered, to which the woman frowned. Out of the corner of her eye, Sorch a could see Alasdair scowling. She couldn’t help

but feel pleased that Alasdair didn't care for the way the woman was acting. Sorcha didn't care for the woman at all. Not only was she rude, but she was gripping the children's hands so hard that her knuckles were white and the children were squirming.

Sorcha turned her focus to the children. She was not surprised that they had not raced to greet their father, given the tight control their grandmother seemed to keep upon them, but Sorcha was surprised he'd not called them over to him to give them a hug. She stole a glance at him and blinked at the unexpected look on his face. It was a mixture of longing and discomfort.

"Papa," his daughter, Beatie, said, "we missed ye! Can we come hug ye?"

Sorcha frowned that the child would even feel the need to ask such a question. Had she misjudged the sort of man Alasdair actually was? Was he coldhearted to his children and withholding of his affections, as the man she'd called her da had been? The idea of it so incensed her for his children, that she blurted, "Of course ye can hug yer da."

"They kinnae!" Esmerelda snapped, her cold eyes lighting with a warning look. "Their hands are grimy, and Alasdair dunnae want their sticky fingers upon him."

A hush fell around them from the clan where a moment ago there had been a steady hum of pleasant conversation.

Sorcha knew everyone gathered was now watching and listening, but when she saw the reaction of his children, she could not summon the will to care. Beatie's shoulders drooped and Hew's lip began to tremble. Sorcha opened her mouth to blast the woman on behalf of the children, but Alasdair spoke.

"Of course, ye may come hug me," he said, kneeling. "And ye dunnae ever need to

ask again,” he added, holding his arms wide for both of his children and motioning them forth. Hew and Beatie launched themselves into his arms, and he encircled them and brought them close.

Sorcha watched the touching scene play out before her, but she could feel hard pricks of an icy gaze upon her. She turned her head and met the stormy disapproving stare of Alasdair’s mother-in-law. She was saved from having to make polite conversation because, at that moment, Alasdair said, “I will always welcome an embrace from my children, Esmerelda.”

The woman snorted in response, and Alasdair visibly tensed as he stood. Grinning from ear to ear, Hew and Beatie each grabbed one of his hands, and the sight warmed Sorcha through. It occurred to her that she had not been formally introduced to the children, and she could see the curiosity in their gazes. She bent down and smiled. “I’m Sorcha.”

“I’m Beatie,” Beatie responded with a shy smile.

“I’m Hew!” the lad piped up. “We were born at the same time,” he added with the sort of contagious enthusiasm only children could possess.

“So I’ve heard,” she said with a laugh as she straightened.

“Are ye to be our new mama?” Hew asked.

“Hew!” Beatie and Alasdair chided at the same moment.

“Of course she’s nae to be yer new mama!” Esmerelda snapped in such a loud tone that a hush fell over the courtyard once more. “She’s nae a proper lady, by the looks of her,” the woman added.

Sorcha's face heated at the slight, given that it was true.

"That will be enough from ye, Esmerelda," Alasdair snapped. "Sorcha is a proper lady and the betrothed of Laird Campbell."

"Oh, aye!" Esmerelda said, her countenance changing immediately. She was all smiles, and a suspicion blossomed in Sorcha's mind. "Why did ye nae say so right away?" she demanded of Alasdair.

Sorcha's jaw slipped open at the look on Esmerelda's face as she gazed at Alasdair. Possession . If Sorcha had any coin to wager, she'd say Esmerelda was part of the reason Alasdair was uncomfortable with his own children.

"Please take Sorcha with ye and find her some gowns to wear."

"What of the children?" Esmerelda said.

When Alasdair looked as if he might reconsider, Sorcha said, "I'm certain Alasdair can figure out what to do with his own children."

Esmerelda looked appalled at the notion. "He's far too busy with clan affairs to attend to his children. That's what I'm here for, as my dear sweet Mariot would have been."

Alasdair opened his mouth as if he might protest, but then he promptly shut it and glanced down at his children, who both looked dejected that they'd just been robbed of time with their father. Sorcha felt disappointed for them. Esmerelda was a brilliant manipulator. Sorcha only hoped she could somehow figure out how to show Alasdair that his guilt was being used against him to keep him distanced from his children so he'd feel he needed his mother-in-law.

"Children, go with Esmerelda," Alasdair said in a quiet voice.

“But, Papa!” both children exclaimed as one.

“We want to stay with ye,” Beatie cried out.

“I want to learn to fight,” Hew added, pushing out his lower lip.

Alasdair laughed at that, and Sorcha saw an opening. “Why do ye nae take Hew with ye and Beatie can come with us? I could use help learning how to look like a proper lady.”

Alasdair nodded at that, took up Sorcha’s hand, to her surprise, and kissed the top of it. “A gown dunnae make a lady,” Alasdair said in a such a quiet tone that Sorcha was certain no one could hear but her.

“What then?” she asked as their gazes clashed.

“A good heart. And that, Sorcha, ye have in abundance.”

“I am sorry for my behavior,” Esmerelda said when they reached her bedchamber. “’Tis just that, well—” The woman’s eyes filled with tears, and she dashed them away, but they came faster than she could wipe them away. Sorcha stood speechless, unsure what to do. “Mariot was my only daughter, and, and if he weds again, I f-f-fear he will forget her.”

Regret swept over Sorcha that she had judged Esmerelda so harshly. “I am so sorry,” she said, intending to pat the woman on the hand, but Esmerelda gripped her hand as she sniffled so Sorcha felt compelled to say more. “From what I’ve heard Alasdair say of yer daughter, he’ll nae ever forget her or replace her.” She thought her words would please Esmerelda, given what the woman had just admitted, but instead Alasdair’s mother-in-law looked irritated by Sorcha’s words.

“Well,” she finally said, releasing Sorcha’s hand and drying her tears, “we shall see. Beatie, bring Sorcha a gown from the special trunk.”

Beatie’s eyes went wide. “Really, Grandmama!” the lass exclaimed with excitement.

“Aye,” she said in a sweet tone that was more like the one Sorcha had always imagined a grandmother would use to speak to her granddaughter. “Sorcha is an honored guest, and as such, she deserves the finest gowns we have to offer.”

The little girl went over to the trunk, opened it, and pulled out a gown of silvery blue. “Is this one special, Grandmama?”

“Oh aye,” the woman replied, smiling almost gleefully. “It is indeed. Go on behind the dressing screen and try it on. ’Tis nae ever been worn.”

“I kinnae take such a fine gown!”

“Ye must,” the woman insisted, sweeping her gaze over her. “Ye’re in rags.”

Sorcha touched her soiled, torn gown. “This is my best gown.”

“All the more reason ye should take this one.”

“Ye’re certain?” Sorcha asked as the woman handed her the gown. “I can borrow another, one that has already been worn? Mayhap one that is nae so fine?”

“Ye must let me do this for ye for telling me that Alasdair will nae ever replace my Mariot or forget her.”

An odd thread in the woman’s voice unsettled Sorcha, but given that she’d already jumped to conclusions about Esmerelda, and the eagerness with which Beatie was

looking at her, Sorcha took the gown, went behind the dressing screen, and tried it on. She slipped the dress over her head, and it slid down her body, cool and smooth. She ran her hands along the fine silk, and she began to tremble.

She had nae ever cared what a man might think of her, but as she stood there, she could not help but wonder if Alasdair would find her fetching in the gown, and it made her feel vulnerable. It was dangerous, surely, to have such a thought regarding a man. Nothing could break your heart quite the way caring what someone thought of you could.

Her thoughts drifted a moment to the man she'd known as her father. She'd tried for years to get him to love her, and every time he had rejected her. Her resolve not to care had hardened a bit more. Had she become so hard that she was guarded still? She feared she might be after she'd initially misjudged Alasdair, and how she was so unwilling to go to her brother.

She resolved to try to lower her guard a bit each day. She'd start now with Esmerelda and take her offering at face value—as a way of saying she was sorry. And she'd try her hardest not to worry that she was a fool for doing so.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

The great hall was teeming with conversation and laughter, and Alasdair had a trencher of hot food and a full goblet of full wine before him. His children were sitting where he could see them at the end of the dais, well and hearty, but he had the sensation that something was missing. The minute the great hall door opened and Sorcha glided inside, his gut clenched, and he realized what he missed. It made his entire body go stiff. He'd already been hopelessly attached to a woman once in his lifetime, and he was still reeling from the loss of her.

The closer Sorcha came, the more his chest tightened and his gut knotted, so that he finally reached for his goblet of wine and downed the contents to settle his unease. The chatter among his clan seemed to grow, and he imagined they were talking of Sorcha. Her hair tumbled over her shoulders in red, glistening waves, and the gown she wore fit her curves to perfection. He couldn't tear his gaze away from her as she drew near, and when she was almost to the dais and he could clearly see the details of the gown she donned, and it was like a hit to his gut.

He turned to Esmerelda, who sat to his left, and snapped, "Esmerelda."

She stopped the conversation she was having and looked to him. "Aye, Alasdair?"

Just then, Sorcha reached the dais, and though he didn't want to make her uncomfortable, he had to say something. "Why in God's name did ye give Sorcha Mariot's wedding gown to wear?"

"I did nae think it would matter to ye. Ye seem over yer grief," she said, giving him a long, pointed look that irritated him so greatly the blood in his veins grew hot.

“My grief has nae magically disappeared, Esmerelda.”

“I can go change,” came Sorchas voice from in front of him.

He looked to her and winced at the concern and the flush of embarrassment on her face. He should not have said anything, but he was so surprised by her appearance in Mariots wedding gown. “Tis fine,” he said, but even to him, his words sounded choked.

“I insist,” Sorchas replied. “This gown is much too fine for me anyway. It is clearly to be worn by a great lady, as yer wife was.”

Her words underlaid what he’d seen in all her actions: a generosity of spirit and of heart. Mariot would have loved Sorchas, he realized with sudden clarity.

“Papa,” Beatie said to the right of him. He glanced at his daughter, who looked from him to Sorchas and back. She blinked her big green eyes and smiled tentatively. “The gown Lady Sorchas wore here is the finest one she owns. Mayhap she wants that one back?”

He thought of the tattered gown Sorchas had been wearing and the shoes that barely protected her feet, and he shook his head. He caught and held Sorchas gaze. “Mariot would have been thrilled to give ye her finest gown to wear,” he said quietly. “She had a very generous heart, just as ye do.”

Sorchas smiled shyly at him. “Ye’re certain?”

“Aye, more than certain. ’Tis time to change a few things around here,” he said, stealing a glance at Esmerelda and finding a disgruntled look upon her face. He suspected she’d meant to stir trouble, but he was uncertain why. Did she fear he’d forget Mariot? Or replace her with Sorchas? He needed to find a private moment to

talk with her and soon.

“Papa, can Lady Sorchas sit by me?” Beatie asked with a hopeful expression.

“The dais is for family and honored guests only,” Esmerelda said in a scolding tone, angering Alasdair.

He clenched his teeth together to keep from snapping the woman’s head off. He would speak with her first thing on the morrow, if not tonight. “Sorchas is an honored guest,” he said, quickly rising and maneuvering out of his seat to descend the dais. He was aware of many eyes upon him, from his children to Esmerelda to members of his clan, but he was driven by the need to make Sorchas feel comfortable when he suspected how unwanted she’d felt much of her life.

He held his hand out to her. “My lady, allow me to assist ye to yer seat.”

She blinked in clear surprise and the loveliest shade of pink stole over her cheeks, making him very glad he’d followed his gut. She placed her small hand in his, and he closed his fingers over her delicate bones. That same spot in his chest that had felt like it loosened before, like it had opened just a bit, did so again. He led her to the dais, intending to sit her on the other side of Beatie, but Beatie jumped up at they approached.

Grinning, she said, “Ye can have my seat so ye can sit by my da.”

By the worshipful way his daughter was looking at Sorchas, he suspected his sweet lass was hoping she might stay around. It occurred to him that he had done a poor job indeed of talking to his children about their mother since her death, but talking of Mariot made his throat swell.

“That’s so sweet of ye, Beatie, but I am positive yer da would want to sit by ye.”

Beatie shook her head. “Nay. I dunnae usually get to sit beside him upon the dais because Grandmama says I chatter too much and that it irritates Da.” Alasdair looked at Esmerelda as his irritation heated up once more. He noted the frown Sorcha directed her way, too. “I only got to sit by Da tonight because I disobeyed my order to wait in my bedchamber for Grandmama to fetch me for supper because, well—” the lass looked at him with eyes full of worry “—I missed ye, Da. I’m sorry!”

He released Sorcha’s hand and bent down so he was face to face with his sweet daughter, who looked so much like her mama it was sometimes painful to gaze upon her, but tonight, he found it surprisingly comforting. Why had he not understood before that he’d never forget what Mariot looked like because Beatie was her exact image? He hugged his daughter to him. “I’d be honored to have ye sit by me this night and all others, Beatie.”

Her gaze popped wide. “Really, Da?”

“Aye,” he said, “and dunnae ever let anyone tell ye different,” he added pointedly and in a loud enough tone that he knew Esmerelda could hear it.

When all three of them were seated, he resumed his meal. As Sorcha started hers, he found himself thinking of how she had responded to Beatie’s request. She’d been generous and quick to make sure the lass understood her worth, and he greatly appreciated and admired that.

He looked to her, as she was easily seen over Beatie’s head, and she met his gaze. She quirked her eyebrows up at him and offered a warm smile. For a lass who had not so much as even owned a decent gown and slippers, she exuded warmth and happiness. Admiration tugged hard, along with curiosity. What else had she never had or experienced? As he pondered the question, one of the serving girls appeared with a platter of custards and set one down in front of each of them.

Sorcha frowned at hers. “What’s this?”

“’Tis custard,” Beatie responded. “Have ye nae ever had custard?”

Sorcha shook her head.

“What sort of things did ye eat for dessert at yer home?” Alasdair asked.

“Oh, we did nae eat desserts. There was rarely enough coin in the coffer for food, let alone luxuries.” She shrugged. “Or that’s what my da always said, though I would nae think a dessert would be verra expensive to create.”

“’Tis nae,” he said, because she was looking at him expectantly and he felt compelled to answer. “Because if it were, we’d nae be having it.” He didn’t think he needed to say more for her to understand, since she knew the state of his own clan’s coffers.

She nodded and pressed her lips together for a moment, then let out a disgruntled sigh. “Well, ’tis nae a surprise given the amount of coin he needs for all the mead and wine he drinks.”

“Try the custard!” Hew urged from the other side of Alasdair.

Sorcha smiled indulgently at the lad, and that generous smile made Alasdair’s heart twinge. She tasted the custard and gasped, and he found himself delighted to see her pleasure. Apparently Hew and Beatie enjoyed her happiness as well, because they both began to giggle and clap. “It’s delicious!” she said with what seemed to him to be genuine enthusiasm. “What’s in—”

“My favorite dessert is fruit and nuts,” Hew hollered.

“Mine is sweet meats,” Beatie sang out.

Joy flooded Alasdair so unexpectedly he jerked at the warmth in his chest. He could not recall the last time he'd felt this happy or seen his children this engaged.

“Both of ye apologize this instant for interrupting!” Esmerelda snapped, bringing Hew and Beatie to instant silence, and Alasdair to stunned silence as well. “What have I told ye?” Esmerelda demanded.

Alasdair would have said something in that moment to get her to stop chiding the children, but he needed to know exactly what she'd told them. He was seeing more and more that she was likely not the best choice to rear his bairns.

“Only speak when spoken to,” Hew and Beatie responded at the same time and in twin whispers.

White-hot anger flowed through Alasdair, and he opened his mouth to correct the mess unfolding, but Sorcha spoke, drawing his attention to her face. Her eyes danced with dangerous ire, and she had the force of it focused on Esmerelda. “That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard,” she snapped. “Beatie and Hew—” Sorcha looked to his children “neither of ye need to wait for me to speak to ye to talk.”

“Ye are nae their mama,” Esmerelda ground out.

“’Tis true,” Alasdair said, “but neither are ye.” He didn't experience even a twinge of remorse for his harsh words after how she'd spoken to Hew and Beatie and what she'd told them. “But I am their da,” he continued in a ruthless tone, “and my children dunnae have to wait to be spoken to before they speak. Dunnae tell them as much again, Esmerelda.”

Anger simmered as he stared at her, but some of it was anger at himself. What sort of father was he that he hadn't even known his children's favorite desserts? He was the sort of father who'd put a wall between them, and he suddenly wanted to rip it down.

But there was another part of him that feared if he fully opened his heart to them, he'd never recover if he lost one of them as he had their mother.

"I'm sorry, Alasdair." Esmerelda sounded so genuine and so miserable, and she looked it too, that he did then feel guilt for his harshness. She was dealing with her own sort of guilt, and she had been a tremendous help after Mariot had died, and he needed to remember that. "I thought I was doing what would please ye," she said, her voice holding a wounded inflection. "'Tis how Mariot was raised by her da, and ye seemed to think she was just fine."

He had to clench his teeth against the pain that stabbed at his heart. He'd never known this about Mariot, but then again, why would he have? They'd not had the chance to discuss childrearing. Would they have fought about how to raise them?

"What are some of yer other favorite things?" Sorcha asked, looking at the children but not before her understanding gaze met his. Did she realize he was in pain? Lost in the past? Somehow, he thought she did, and he was very grateful she did not judge him for it. Lady Elspeth, for all her many claims that she didn't care if he could nae ever give her his heart, mentioned often how he should not dwell on his past.

"I like to skip stones in the water!" Hew said, and the pride in his voice made Alasdair smile.

"I like to shoot bow and arrow," Beatie said.

He blinked in surprise, and when he saw Esmerelda looking as if she might scold Beatie, he shook his head at her. "Who's been teaching ye to shoot a bow and arrow?" he asked, suspecting it was Calan.

"Calan," Beatie confirmed, then squinched her brow. "Where is he? He vowed to me that when he returned home, he'd continue my lessons."

“I’m certain he will,” Alasdair assured his daughter. “He’s off on a mission for me, but in the meantime, if ye wish it, I imagine Lady Sorcha would be happy to teach ye what she kens of the bow and arrow. She’s the finest shot I’ve ever seen,” he said, glancing to Sorcha. Her beaming smile made his gut clench.

She peered at him intently for a long moment, as if he was some strange creature she’d never encountered, and then she said, “Yer da is a far better shot than I am, and though I am happy to work with ye, ye would do well to get yer da to teach ye what he kens as well.”

“Da?” Beatie asked, looking dubious. “Ye’re too busy as laird of the clan, aye, Da?”

“Of course he is!” Esmerelda said.

How often had she done that since Mariot died? How often had she given him leeway to ignore his children or leave the rearing of them to her, and he’d willingly taken it? Not this time. This he could do for Beatie. “Nay,” he said, “I’m nae too busy, Beatie. I’ll teach ye.”

“Da!” Beatie exclaimed, clapping her hands. “I’m so excited! Can we go out tomorrow?”

“Aye,” he said, though truthfully, he did have a thousand things to tend to, considering he’d been gone. “I can go out for a short spell, but then I have to sit and hear the needs of the clansmen and women.”

Beatie nodded her head so vigorously, her curls bounced against her shoulders. “Mayhap Lady Sorcha could stay after and teach me?”

“I’d be honored,” Sorcha instantly.

He was surprised by the depth of feeling that gripped him at her kindness toward Beatie.

“I dunnae approve of a lass learning to shoot,” Esmerelda grumbled.

“’Tis nae for ye to approve of,” Alasdair said, trying to keep his tone gentle.

“Mariot would nae have done such a thing,” Esmerelda said in a severe tone.

“Nay,” he said, making his own tone just as strict, “she would nae have. Sorchas is nae Mariot. They are different women, with different likes, minds, and pasts, and that does nae make one better than the other, Esmerelda.” The ferocity of his feelings surprised him, but now was not the time to examine it.

“I—Well, of course, Alasdair,” Esmerelda said, her voice faint once more. He winced. He kept forgetting her own grief and how hard it had been for her and all she’d done. He needed to remember that while also laying down some rules for her while she was still here in his home. “’Tis time for the children to go to bed,” she said, rising, and he found himself relieved that she would be leaving the dining hall.

“I dunnae want to go to bed!” Hew said.

“I dunnae want to, either,” Beatie added.

“One of my favorite memories of my mama,” Sorchas said to the children, “was when she would tell me a bedtime story.”

“That sounds lovely!” Beatie said.

“We dunnae ever get a bedtime story,” Hew added, to Alasdair’s dismay.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Sorch a frowning, and he could feel his own matching one. He'd assumed when Esmerelda put the children to bed, she spent time with them.

"Will ye put us to bed tonight, Lady Sorch a?" Beatie asked.

"Oh, aye, please!" Hew begged.

They need a mama.

The thought came from nowhere and shook him to his core. He could not replace Mariot. He owed her to never even try.

"I would love to, if yer Da is comfortable with it."

He met Sorch a's inquiring warm gaze, and he surprised himself when he nodded. Allowing the woman to tell his children a bedtime story was not replacing Mariot. It was one story, after all.

"Well, I guess I am just nae needed tonight!" Esmerelda huffed and shoved away from the table to stomp down the dais. He let her go, feeling relief as she did.

"I'm sorry, Alasdair. I did nae mean to cause trouble," Sorch a said.

"Ye did nae," he replied, taking up his newly filled goblet and drinking a long sip before responding. "It seems trouble has been brewing, and I just did nae realize it."

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

“And then the fae gifted the little girl with the power to see into the future,” Sorchu said.

As both the children burst out with questions for Sorchu, Alasdair leaned back against the wood of the headboard. Contentment gripped him, and he felt the newly familiar sensation of a smile lifting the corner of his lips. He studied Sorchu and Hew and Beatie as they talked of the story she was in the process of weaving for them. The children sat on either side of her, Beatie under her coverlet and Hew on top of it so he could go to his own bedchamber when the story was over. Hew was moving his feet back and forth in obvious excitement, and Beatie reached over and grabbed Sorchu’s hand.

Sorchu’s eyes widened in surprise, but then she smiled, and Alasdair watched as she squeezed his daughter’s hand. She might as well have squeezed his heart, such emotion took hold of him. He didn’t just desire Sorchu; he liked her, he admired her, and she had awakened a longing in him he had believed would never stir again. It was inconvenient and troubling, given he was to take her to her brother for coin he needed for his clan.

“Please!” Hew wailed, followed by a similar plea from Beatie.

“Please tell us another!” Beatie added. “We can give ye something for a story!”

“Oh, aye?” Sorchu said, turning and winking at him, and that simple gesture made him hard as stone.

“I’ve a frog I can give ye,” Hew said.

“While that is verra tempting,” Sorchasaid in a serious tone that made Alasdair smile, “I dunnae have a proper place to keep a pet frog.”

Hew nodded in understanding.

“I’ve a mud pie I made!” Beatie announced with pride.

“Oh! Lovely!” Sorchasaid, “but”—she patted her stomach—“I’m full from dinner.”

Both the children burst into peals of laughter. “Ye dunnae eat mud pie!” Beatie exclaimed.

“Oh! Nay?” Sorchasked, all wide-eyed pretend innocence.

The children both shook their heads in emphasis. Hew had never seen them this happy or animated—or had he simply missed it because of the distance he’d set between them?

“Well then,” she continued, “Beatie, ye may trade the mud pie for one story from me tomorrow night—”

“Tonight, tonight!” the children protested.

“Nae tonight,” he said, as indecision flickered on Sorchas’s face, but he also noted the dark smudges under her eyes. They’d traveled far and fast, and she needed to recuperate.

Sorchashot him a grateful look before focusing the full force of her lovely gaze on Hew. “And, Hew, ye may teach me to dance at supper tomorrow night in exchange for a story.”

“We’re nae allowed to dance in the great hall at supper,” Beatie announced, making him wince.

“Whyever nae?” she asked, and when both children fell silent, Alasdair braced himself for the wave of grief that had always battered him when the memories of dancing with Mariot would come, but though flashes of memories came, the misery did not. He stilled in shock for a moment, but when Sorch a looked to him and quirked her eyebrows, he cleared his throat.

“’Tis my fault,” he said. “Their mama and I loved to dance, and I, well—” He was fumbling to find the right words—that he was unable to face the fact that he’d never dance with her again, but how did he admit such a thing?

“I understand,” Sorch a said, and the empathy in her voice told him that she truly did.

“Grandmama decreed we could nae dance,” Beatie announced, crossing her arms over her chest and scowling.

“Oh,” Sorch a replied, her forehead wrinkling and confusion flooding her gaze as she looked to him.

His neck heated with embarrassment. “I—She decreed it for me, as she could see ’twas painful for me to watch.”

Sorch a pursed her lips together. “Avoiding pain does nae make it go away,” she muttered.

Slightly disgruntled by what she had said, he got up from the bed and motioned to Hew. “Come on. Time to make yer way to yer own chamber for sleep.”

Instead of protesting, Hew gave a big yawn, and then he shocked Alasdair when he

wrapped his arms around Sorcha, squeezed her, and gave her a peck on the cheek. “Thank ye for the story.”

She turned toward Hew and said, “My pleasure,” before giving Hew a peck on the forehead and a hug in return. Regret assaulted him at these little moments he’d been missing. Regret and embarrassment. Hew scrambled toward him and started off the bed, but Alasdair caught his son by the shoulder.

“Do I nae get a hug as ye gave to Sorcha?”

Hew’s eyes widened with surprise. “Aye!” he said, eagerness punctuating the one word.

“Me too! Me too!” Beatie cried, running across the bed to launch herself at him. He pulled her to him and gave them both ferocious hugs and kissed them on the forehead, before setting Hew down on the floor.

“Now off to bed with ye both,” he said, hoping his voice did not betray the emotion that was clogging his throat.

Hew skipped out of the room, and Beatie nestled under her covers once more. He met Sorcha at the bedchamber door, and they walked out together. As he closed the door, it struck him that he’d never put his children to bed. He turned to her. “Thank ye,” he said, the two words sounding choked to him. He thought she might ask for what, but she simply nodded, which he was glad for. “I’ll show ye to yer bedchamber.”

“Ye can point me in the direction,” she said. “I’m certain ye’re tired.”

“Nae too tired to show ye to yer chamber.” Plus, he found he was reluctant to part with her.

“All right,” she replied, a blush staining her cheeks.

He motioned her ahead, setting a palm to the small of her back to guide her, and he stared in amazement at the gently curved spot. He had forgotten how small things on a woman could be so beguiling. They walked in silence through the corridors, lost in thought. When they reached her bedchamber, that same reluctance to part gripped him, so that when she turned to him, their faces so close he could see how her dark lashes nearly touched her eyebrows, he had a nearly overwhelming urge to kiss her and make this sliver of a moment last.

He was fighting the urge when she quirked her mouth and spoke. “May I be blunt?”

“Aye,” he replied, glad her words had quelled the battle within him.

“I ken I dunnae ken ye well, or yer mother-in-law or children, but sometimes people who dunnae ken ye can see things that ye kinnae.”

He frowned. “And what is it ye see?”

“Yer mother-in-law has enabled ye to live in yer grief.”

“Ye’ve seen that, have ye, in yer short time here?” he asked, his words snapping.

“Aye,” she said and held up her right hand, which was in a fist. She shot up her index finger. “The declaring there is nae to be dancing.” She held up another finger. “Always putting yer children to bed and nae persuading ye to help.” Unhappiness with himself tangled with irritation at her pointing out his weaknesses and faults. “Allowing ye to withdraw from them.”

“Ye have a lot to say for a woman who barely kens me and my children,” he growled.

“Aye, but I see what ye either dunnae or have been hiding from.”

“Are ye implying I’m fearful?” he demanded.

“Ye are verra braw,” she said. “I’ve seen it with my own two eyes. But when it comes to yer grief, ye have chosen to allow it to conquer ye, and that is cowardly.”

He felt his lips twist with annoyance, partly because, he suspected, she might be right and partly because he wanted to deny it all.

“As a woman, I must tell ye, if I died and left children behind, there is nae anything I’d want more than to ken their da was showing them the love I couldn’t.”

“Ye dunnae have children, so how can ye ken what ye would want?” he bit out, overwhelming defensiveness gripping him.

“Just because I dunnae have bairns of my own, does nae mean my heart kinnae tell me what I would feel,” she said, her tone firm and her look disgruntled. He opened his mouth to argue, but she spoke over him. “Ye have amazing children,” she said, deflating a measure of his brewing anger. “I feel certain yer wife would be heartbroken to ken ye are nae truly a part of their lives because ye are scairt of losing them.”

The words were too close to the truth. He wasn’t prepared to face it and fix it, especially now, standing in front of a woman he desired. He stepped around her and opened her door, allowing it to swing open and smack the wall behind it. “I think ye should go to bed now.”

She pressed her lips together, then narrowed her eyes. “I ken well ye are used to telling everyone what to do, but I’m nae one of yer clan who has to listen to ye.”

“I could simply throw ye over my shoulder and toss ye to yer bed.”

“Ye would nae dare.”

He actually thought he might if he wasn't afraid he would hurt her. He growled and glared at her, but she didn't seem the least bit concerned by his dark mood. Was that because she was used to her father? The thought was sobering. She crossed her arms over her chest, drawing his attention to her high breasts, much to his irritation. He jerked his gaze away and up to her face. “I imagine ye'll say yer peace even if I tossed ye out the window, so go on.”

“Yer mother-in-law is little better than my da. She has her own particular cruelty and desires, and I do believe she has kept ye in yer grief longer than ye would have allowed yerself to dwell there.”

Anger pounded his temples. He was angry at himself for the walls he'd created, and he was angry at her for saying things aloud that he did not want to face, and he was angry at the gods for taking Mariot. If he replied to what Sorcha had said just now, he wasn't sure he could control the grief he'd managed to keep tamped down for six long years, so he turned on his heels and strode away. But he hadn't reached the end of the hall when she called out to him.

“Ye kinnae outrun grief, Alasdair. It always catches up to ye. Believe me, I ken this well.”

He wanted to turn then, to go to her and take her in his arms and comfort her in whatever grief had taught her such a lesson, but he kept walking. It wasn't his place to comfort her, and if let himself touch her, kiss her, he suspected he'd not want to let her go. He'd keep walking, and that way, this one wall, the most important one, would stay firmly in place.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

He could not say how long he tossed in his bed, but Sorchas words kept running through his head, keeping him awake, despite a desperate desire to sleep and quiet the truth. Yet, the time had come that the truth could no longer be silenced, and the reckoning had been brought upon by a slip of a lass. He sat up, tossed his coverlet away, moved off the bed, and started to pace his room. His rapid footsteps back and forth matched the galloping thoughts in head, and each lap across the room brought the same question to mind. Was it possible there was no way to guard himself against Sorchas? She seemed to be slipping through cracks he could not see, had not even known were there.

Her intense gaze was imprinted on his brain. Her radiant smile warmed him when he thought of it, and he could picture clearly the way it curled up the tips of her lips. He tugged a hand through his hair and stilled, bringing his palm to his nose and inhaling. Her heather scent clung to him and hardened him with yearning once again. The physical desire that was drawing him to her wasn't even the most compelling thing. It was the way she had been with his children. It was her honesty, her loyalty for staying with him when he was sick, and her blunt analysis of his life, his grief, and his interaction with his children and Esmerelda.

He bent down, picked up his braies and considered Esmerelda. Everything pointed to change being needed when it came to her, but was Sorchas right? Had Esmerelda been purposely guiding him to linger in his grief? If so, to what purpose? He tugged on his braies, put on his plaid and sat. He needed to clear his head before he faced the day, Sorchas, and most importantly, his children.

Flashes of yesterday came to him. His children at supper talking and laughing exactly as he'd once imagined they would with him and Mariot. His children cuddled in bed

with Sorcha between them weaving a bedtime story, eagerly asking her questions and giving her hugs. His vision blurred, and he blinked several times to clear it of the tears filling his eyes. He had imagined so many moments that would occur as a family with Hew, Beatie, and Mariot, and though none of them would ever happen, he had denied himself and his children all the moments of joy, love, and bonding that could fill their lives.

No more. Sorcha was right. He could not outrun grief. He had tried, and it blotted out all possibility of living until he let it in, felt it in his bones, and accepted it was now part of what made him who he was. But that didn't mean it was your life. That's what he had gotten wrong. He sat there and breathed slowly in and out, remembering all the times he had shared with Mariot from the day he'd met her to the last day he'd seen her alive, belly swollen with Hew and Beatie and a radiant smile on her face.

The sorrow and pain that had been with him for so long, that had wound its way through his body like a creeping vine, began to wither. He could breathe in a way he had not done in years. Sorcha was right about another thing. He had built a wall between himself and his children because he was afraid of losing them, but in keeping them at a distance, he had not really had them in his life as he ought to, and they had not had him in theirs.

He didn't know what would happen with Sorcha, but he knew there was a big part of him that hoped Calan would come back and tell him her betrothed was no good. Then he could in good conscience offer Sorcha a place here with his clan if she wished it, mayhap even in his home, his bed, his life, if they both wished it, and if the gods had such a fate in store for them. He no longer cared that he'd not gain the coin he needed for returning her to her brother. He'd find another way to fill his coffers, even if he had to constantly seek out tourneys in which to compete. And he was not going to allow another day to pass where he kept a distance between himself and the two people he loved most in the world. If he were to lose them now, he'd look back and see that there were precious few memories of them all together as a family, and that...

that would kill him.

He stood and made his way quickly to Beatie's room to see if she wanted to break her fast with him and shoot her bow and arrow, before all the needs of the clan took over his day, but the only person in Beatie's room was one of the servants. "Where is Beatie?" he asked the lass who was fluffing his daughter's bed.

"She went down to the great hall with Lady Sorcha."

He nodded and quickly made his way out of his daughter's bedchamber and to the great hall, which he found teeming with clansmen and women. But the dais, where Beatie and Sorcha would have sat, was empty. He turned to exit the room before he was called to listen to someone's complaints or request, and he nearly knocked Hew over.

Hew glistened with sweat and a pink flush stained his cheeks. "Good morning, Da," he said, an uncertain look upon his face.

The solid hand of regret squeezed Alasdair's heart. He bent down and scooped up his son as he should have been doing all these years. "Good morning, Hew. Where are ye coming from?"

The boy's chest rose and fell in short, rapid breaths, no doubt from running. "The courtyard," Hew said, giving Alasdair a quick hug and then squirming as if wanting to be put down.

Alasdair was reluctant to let Hew go. Now that he'd lowered his guard, he wanted to soak up these moments with him. But he set him down and kneeled in front of him. "What are ye doing in the courtyard?"

"Learning bow and arrow with Beatie and Sorcha."

“Why are ye in here if the three of ye are training outside?”

“I’m getting provisions,” Hew said, pride in his voice. Alasdair quirked an eyebrow, and Hew said, “We’re all thirsty.”

“From yer hard work?”

“From our laughing,” Hew supplied.

Eagerness flowed through Alasdair. He wanted to see the three of them laughing like that in the courtyard during archery training. He helped Hew gather wine and water from the spring bucket and they headed outside. “I did nae ken ye were eager to learn bow and arrow, Hew.”

“Oh, I was nae, Da, but Lady Sorcha is pretty,” Hew said with a shrug.

“That she is, Son. That she is,” Alasdair agreed and stopped short as the door opened and displayed Sorcha and Beatie in full view.

Sorcha stood behind Beatie and was obviously helping her adjust her hold on her bow and the alignment of her arrow. The sun filtered over Sorcha in such a way that her hair looked like dancing flames in the yellow-orange glow of the morning. A breeze caught the edge of her skirts and moved it at the edges so that he got glimpses of her ankles. Never had such innocent glimpses of snowy skin been so enticing. The now familiar heat Sorcha produced in him kindled to life immediately.

She turned her head toward them, and she smiled tentatively. He understood why. He’d acted like a petulant child the night before. With Beatie still looking ahead and Hew’s head bowed to fiddle with the things he was carrying, Alasdair mouthed, I’m sorry.

The grin that instantly lit Sorcha's face was nothing short of a miraculous display of a giving heart. She winked and waved them over at the same time. Once he was standing in front of her, so close to the perfection of her flawless, delicate features, he found himself wondering if she was as perfect everywhere else. But now was not the time to wonder such things. Mayhap there would never be such a time.

"Da!" Beatie exclaimed before he could even greet her. "Look what Sorcha has taught me." Beatie raised her bow up just a bit, nocked her arrow, took a steadying breath, and released it. It flew toward the target a bit too far to the right, but it was a good shot, nevertheless.

She glanced up at him, grinning. "Did ye see that?"

"Aye," he replied, looking to his daughter and then to Sorcha, who was gazing with open fondness at her. The look of pride on her face made words catch in his throat for a moment. He could not believe that this woman would have such a stake in the success of a lass she just met. It spoke volumes about the depths of caring Sorcha held in her heart. He wanted to plunge into those depths and see how deep they went.

"Beatie," he started, "if ye'll move yer bow just a tad to the—"

"If ye dunnae mind me being so bold," Sorcha interrupted him with a questioning look. He gave a quick nod for her to continue. "If ye'll nae tell her exactly what to do to line the shot up but ask her how to line it up, she will have to figure it out on her own, and then she'll truly learn it."

"A verra good point," he said. He stepped close to his daughter, which also put him very near Sorcha. He was keenly aware of everything about her—her slow, measured breaths that he could just hear, her heather scent, her hair falling down to her waist—he had to concentrate and focus on Beatie. "Ye tell me what ye should be doing."

“I checked my grip,” Beatie stared. “’Tis proper.”

He glanced at her and could see it was. “All right. What else?”

“Sorcha said stand with my feet as wide as my shoulders.”

“Aye, what else?”

“My weight even on both feet,” she said, her voice a bit hesitant as if she was unsure.

“Aye,” he encouraged, caught Sorcha’s gaze and found her grinning encouragingly at him. “What else?”

“Face my head forward! I want to try to shoot again!”

“Go on then, lass,” he said with a chuckle. He stood and backed up a step so he and Sorcha were shoulder to shoulder. They stood in silence for a moment simply watching Beatie together. She tried another shot, which still went too far to the right, and then she tried another and another. He leaned toward Sorcha, and her shoulder grazed his arm. The impact shot down to his hand and made his fingers curl. “How many times has she tried this shot?” he asked in a whisper.

Sorcha turned her head to his to answer, and her face was so near his, he could feel her heat. The desire to kiss her was so strong it nearly drove him to his knees. “At least a dozen,” she whispered back.

He nodded and took in his daughter again. “Ye ken what it is?” he whispered to Sorcha as he watched Beatie again. Her frustration was obvious in her jerky rapid movements, the clenching of her jaw, and the pressed line of her lips.

“Oh, aye,” Sorcha replied in a low tone. “I ken. I was trying nae to tell her so she’d

learn it herself, but she's overly agitated now."

"What if we demonstrate to her the two things she's doing wrong," he suggested, glancing toward Sorchas.

Her eyes lit, and she nodded. "Beatie," she said. "Look at me." Beatie paused what she was doing and turned to look at Sorchas. Sorchas took out an arrow, raised her bow, nocked the arrow, and drew it back. "Watch me. My arm will nae move until the arrow meets the target." She released the arrow, and it flew to hit the center of the target.

"I dunnae understand!" Beatie wailed.

"I want to have a turn!" Hew cried out.

"Ye must wait patiently for yer turn, Hew," Sorchas said, to which Hew nodded immediately, making Alasdair chuckle. Hew had not been known for quick obedience in the past, but let a pretty lass request it, and his son was like an eager pup.

Alasdair stepped behind Sorchas, his chest brushing her back and her bottom grazing his upper thighs. Yearning coursed through him, but he dismissed it to concentrate on his daughter. He raised his finger to where Sorchas still held up her arm, and he traced the tip of his finger down the length of it. When she shivered beneath his touch, his concentration wavered.

Gritting his teeth, he said, "If ye keep yer arm in place until yer arrow meets the target, it helps ye to maintain complete focus. Try it." He stepped back because if he stayed that close to Sorchas any longer, he wasn't entirely certain that he could stop himself from kissing the back of her very inviting neck.

Beatie stood just in front of Sorchas, raised her bow, nocked her arrow, and released it,

keeping her arm up as Sorcha had. Her arrow flew much straighter this time, and when she yelped in excitement and threw up her arms in happiness, he began to laugh, as did Sorcha.

“Did ye see?” Beatie exclaimed, withdrawing another arrow. Alasdair and Sorcha were still laughing as Beatie demanded again, “did ye see?” before swiveling toward them, arrow in hand and sharp end pointing toward Sorcha.

“Beatie!” Alasdair called the warning, but it was too late. The tip of her arrow slashed across Sorcha’s thigh, cutting easily through the thin material of her skirt.

Sorcha cried out in surprise and stumbled backward into him. He caught her, steadied her, and turned her toward him, glancing down at the injury. Crimson already stained her skirt. Behind her, Beatie had started wailing, and though Sorcha had gone immediately pale, she straightened up, took a long, steadying breath, and said, “Ye dunnae need to cry, Beatie. ’Twas an accident, and I’m fine.”

“Ye’re a clot-heid, Beatie!” Hew bellowed.

“Hew!” Sorcha said, her tone sharp with reprimand. “An accident does nae make yer sister a clot-heid. Offer yer apologies, please.”

“I’m sorry,” Hew grumbled.

Alasdair stared in amazement. Sorcha managed to correct his children in a kind, yet effective way, much as he had always thought Mariot would have done, but quite different than Esmerelda’s cruel reprimands. “Are ye certain ye are all right, lass?” he asked, his heart beating a steady tattoo of concern.

“Aye,” she said with only a hint of a tremor in her voice. “’Tis nae anything a proper healing paste and a good gulp of wine kinnae fix.”

“Can ye walk to the healing room?” he asked. “If nae, I can carry ye.”

“Ach, nay. I can walk.” She pulled away from him and he released her, but he could see the stain spreading on her skirt. “Mayhap we should tie off the wound?”

“Aye,” she said, glancing around. “I dunnae have anything to—”

He quickly took off his plaid and kneeled in front of her to lift her skirt.

“What are ye doing?” she exclaimed.

“Locating the wound,” he replied, though even as he slid his hand up her silken skin, he recognized instantly the danger in his actions. He’d wanted her before, and it grew to a ravenous yearning now. But when he revealed her wound, desire disappeared in place of concern. “God’s blood,” he grumbled at the slash on her leg.

“It looks much worse than it is, I assure ye.”

He knew she was somewhat of a healer, so he nodded and wrapped his plaid tightly around her leg before knotting it off.

“I’m awfully sorry, Sorcha” Beatie whimpered.

“’Twas an accident, lass. Just remember nae to hold yer arrow out like that from now on. And if ye and Hew will go fetch some wine and bring it to the healing room, I’d be so verra grateful.”

“I’ll run all the way there!” Beatie exclaimed.

“I’ll run faster,” Hew offered.

“There’s nae a need for that. Just meet us there,” Sorchu said.

As Beatie walked away, Alasdair stepped to Sorchu’s side. “Are ye certain ye can walk?”

“Aye,” she said, but when she put her weight on the leg, he could see her clench her teeth, so he made a quick decision and scooped her off her feet and into his arms before she could protest.

She gasped. “What are ye doing?”

“I’m nae letting ye walk on that leg when ye’re clearly in pain,” he said, aware he liked the feeling of her nestled against his chest far too much. He started out of the courtyard and toward the stairs that led to the healing room.

“Well, ye must put me down before we enter the healing room,” she said, sliding her arms around his neck. “I’d nae want yer healer thinking—”

“We dunnae currently have a healer,” he interrupted, taking the stone stairs two at a time. He paused at the door to the healing room, shifted Sorchu to his left side to free his hand, and then opened the door.

“What happened to her?”

“I sent her away after my wife’s death,” he said, surprised by how he’d not even hesitated to tell the truth of it to Sorchu. He’d not spoken of it to anyone since that day. He waited a moment for grief to wash over him, but it didn’t come.

“What have ye all been doing for a healer, then?” she asked.

“The neighboring clan, Clan Lamont, had a healer we often called upon,” he said,

setting her gently on her feet. He was loath to release her, but she pulled gently away and turned toward the shelf that held rows and rows of glass bottles and began to pluck them up, examine them, and put them back in their places.

“Ye said ‘called’ upon. Ye dunnae any longer?”

“She passed recently,” he said.

Sorcha took another bottle from the shelf, brought it close to her face, and then turned to him with the bottle still in her hand. “Are ye ready for another healer?” she asked.

Her words made him realize she’d known exactly why they did not have another healer here, and it was a relief rather than a discomfort to have someone understand so well without him having to say a word. “Ye’re verra intuitive,” he said.

She smiled slowly at him, and his chest tightened. “Thank ye. I suppose having to read my da’s moods for so many years made me especially good at deducing things people dunnae say.”

“I’m sorry ye had to do that,” he said, meaning it.

She set the bottle down, and he glanced at it and arched his eyebrows at her. With a musical laugh, she said. “Lint. It will aid in stopping the flow of blood.” She turned back toward the row of shelves so that her back was to him, and he found his gaze dropping low to the gentle swell of her hips. His fingers tingled to trace that swell. “I suppose I could be angry at the path my life took,” she said, picking up bottles, examining them, and putting them back, “but I believe in fate, so there is little point in anger. This is the way my life was supposed to go, and there is a reason for it.”

He stood there thinking about her words as she examined a few more bottles, and he tried to think of losing Mariot as how his life was supposed to go. He wasn’t entirely

certain he agreed, but he didn't have a rush of anger about it as typically would. "I dunnae ken if I believe in fate," he finally admitted.

Sorcha turned back to him with another bottle in her hand. "Do ye nae believe that fate brought yer wife into yer life?" she asked gently.

"Oh, aye, most definitely," he replied right away, then stilled, scowling at her. "Ye tricked me."

"Nay." She shook her head. "Ye are just bringing things into the light that ye had to keep in the dark before to protect yer heart."

"Protect my heart?" he asked, picking up the bottle she'd set down. He turned it over, trying to figure out what it was. "Animal grease?" he guessed.

She nodded and surprised him when she reached out and touched her fingertips to his chest. "When the pain is at its heaviest, we protect ourselves so our hearts will nae break. If we shelter ourselves from some of the pain, keep it in the dark, if ye will, then our hearts may get cracks, but we can mend them as we become stronger."

"And what have ye done to shelter yerself from pain?" he asked. The urge to know was nearly overwhelming.

She bit the edge of her lip and got a faraway look in her eyes for a moment. After a long pause, she brought her gaze to his and released her lip from the hold she'd had on it. "I told myself I would never wed."

Her words were very quiet, and she did not say more, but she didn't have to. He realized he understood what fears she'd kept in the dark. "There are men out there who would worship ye," he said, his words gruff to his own ears. "There are men who would treat ye as ye deserve."

Her eyes widened just a bit. “Men?”

He’d been thinking of himself, but he couldn’t allow that—not yet anyway. “Mayhap yer betrothed. And if nae him, then...” He could not voice aloud what had entered his mind. Now wasn’t the time, and there may never be a time, but if what she believed about fate was true, then it would be revealed to them both eventually. “What is the animal grease for?” he asked because he didn’t want her to press for the truth he’d left in the dark.

“The animal grease will protect the wound from anything that might get in and cause an infection,” she said, turning toward the shelf once more, but this time, she plucked a bottle off the shelf right way, turned back around, and wiggled it between them. “This is honey. It will help heal the wound.”

“What do ye need me to do?” he asked.

“Well,” she said, a blush stealing over her cheeks, “I normally dunnae have a weak stomach, but the prospect of looking at my own wound and then rubbing the necessary things on it does turn my stomach. If I direct ye, could ye do those things?”

“Aye, of course,” he said.

He followed her as she moved toward the table on the far side of the room. When she tried to get onto the table, he set his hands on her hips and lifted her onto it. She was light and warm and soft, and he wanted to bury himself in her. Instead, he released her and went back for the two bottles she’d been unable to carry over. When he started back toward her, he paused as she raised her skirts to her upper thighs and delicately removed his blood-soaked plaid.

He quickened his pace to aid her, set the bottles down beside her, and took the plaid from her hands without asking. She released it without a word, so he figured her

stomach had already turned queasy. “Does it hurt terribly?” he asked as he unwound the plaid as gently as he could.

“Nae terribly,” she said, her tone reassuring. That she sought to make him feel better was yet another example of her selflessness. “’Tis mostly just a dull ache with an occasional bite of sharp pain.”

He surveyed the wound, an angry red cut, and picked up the lint bottle, opened it, and asked, “Should I just blot the cut with the lint?”

“Nay. Set it on the wound, then we’ll give it a bit to stop the bleeding.”

He did as she instructed, then sat up, and was surprised to see her pallor was rather gray. “Are ye all right?”

“Aye,” she said, but her voice sounded weak. “I feel hot.”

He stood up and moved around her. He lifted her hair, twisted it into a knot, and began to fan her neck. She made a sound of bliss, and that sound, combined with staring at her lovely neck, awoke once more his desire for her, but it also awoke something else—the forgotten joy of doing such simple things for a woman he cared for.

The thought froze his hand in mid-fanning motion for a moment. He cared for her. He didn’t know when or how it had happened, but it had. He stared at the back of her neck in shock. He cared for a woman he was supposed to let go. The irony of it made him grimace.

“That feels wonderful,” she said, unaware of the storm she’d caused inside him.

He swallowed the hard knot of desire in his throat. “I hope it’s helping.”

“Aye,” she said and then leaned her head back so that it rested on his chest, and her face was lifted to his. Her eyes were open at half mast, slits of kindness and warmth. Her ruby-red lips were parted invitingly, and it was an invitation he was unable to resist. He was made of flesh and bone, after all.

One touch of her lips to his was all he wanted. Or that’s what he told himself. He leaned over her, waiting for her to protest, but desire burned in her own gaze and it fueled his need beyond anything he could possibly control.

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She knew what he was going to do as he leaned toward her. She could stop it, but nothing in her wanted to. Whatever regret might come, it was worth this moment. His warm lips touched hers in a gentle brush that sent the pit of her stomach swirling. One moment he was behind her, and in the next instant, he was standing in front of her, pushing gently between her thighs while his hands slid into her hair to cradle her head.

He tilted her head back ever so gently as his lips came to hers once more. This time, the kiss held more pressure, but it was slow and drugging, and caused need to sing through her veins. As his demanding lips began to caress hers, she was shocked by her response. For someone who had believed for years that she did not want or need a man in her life, every argument she'd whispered to herself, along with the warning of her mother, crumbled under his gentle touch.

Her lips went between his with each tug and nip, and sensations she'd never experienced burst to life within her. Heat flamed at her core and coursed through her veins to her breasts, her heart, her head. She ran her hands up his solid arms as he kissed her, then traced his tongue along the crease of her lips, asking without words for her to open her mouth for him. She did, and when his tongue met hers, and they twined and tasted, she could no more have stopped the moan that escaped her than she could quit breathing.

She left his arms to splay her hands over the wall of his chest, and beneath her fingertips, his heart pounded a hard rhythm that made her gasp. His lips left her mouth to trail fiery kisses down one side of her neck, across her collarbone, then up the other side of her neck to find her mouth once more. This time, she parted her lips without his having to ask, and she tugged him closer to her, even as her leg protested

the movement.

Their kiss went from one of control to one of wild, frenzied, devouring kisses. Her lips throbbed, her core throbbed, and she felt certain in that moment that she would expire if she did not get some release, so when his hand fell to her breast and he rubbed his thumb over her hard nub, she nearly came off the table at the exquisite pleasure it caused. But then the door creaked, and they were apart as fast as they had come together, except now they both panted and stared at each other with a look of knowing that no matter what happened in the future, there was this one moment, this one extraordinary kiss that would tether them together for life.

“Da?” came Beatie’s voice.

“Sorcha?” came Hew.

Sorcha’s gaze clashed with Alasdair’s, which was equal parts desire and panic. He stood to the left of her now, his hair disheveled and his breathing still labored enough that she could see each rise and fall of his very muscular chest.

“Just here, Beatie and Hew,” Sorcha responded, because Alasdair didn’t appear that he was going to. He gave his head a little shake, like a clearing of the cobwebs, just as Beatie appeared in the room holding a wine skin with Hew behind her.

She entered the room, eyes wide, and her forehead puckered with worry. “I brought the wine,” she said, holding up the wine skin as she walked toward the table. She held it out to Sorcha. “Are ye going to die?”

“Aye, are ye?” Hew asked.

“Nay,” Sorcha assured them as she took the wine skin, opened it, and tipped it up. The liquid slid down her throat, relaxing her. She drank more heartily than she would

normally, but between the wound on her leg and the kiss, she needed to settle her nerves. When she was finished, she started to secure the wine skin again, but Alasdair took it from her and took a full drink himself. When he was done and he had lowered the wine skin, their eyes locked and a knowing look passed between them. Apparently, he needed to settle his nerves as well.

The thought made Sorcha smile. That she could rouse his desire made her warm, and as their gazes held and her heart squeezed, she sucked in a sharp breath when a new feeling invaded her: affection. She liked him a great deal. Actually, she suspected she more than liked him. She had developed a deep affection for him in the short time she'd known him.

He'd opened her eyes and shown her that not all men were created the same, and he had given her hope for a future she'd long ago shelved. But was it foolish hope? She was about to be taken to a stranger to wed, but what if... what if Alasdair changed his mind? What if he decided he wished to keep her here? Keep her as his? The idea was very appealing. She tried on his name in her mind. Lady Sorcha MacLachlan.

Oh, she was a featherbrain! Sharing one kiss—albeit a very passionate one—did not mean anything had changed. Except for her, it had. She didn't want him to take her to wed Laird Campbell, and it wasn't simply because she didn't know him. She wanted him to want her to stay. She was, she realized, now desiring the sort of love and devotion it would take a man six years to recover from losing. She wanted the sort of love he'd had for his wife.

“What are the two of ye doing?” Beatie asked.

Startled, Sorcha looked to Alasdair, who appeared just as uncertain about what to say as she felt.

“With the bottles,” Beatie added.

Sorcha let out a sigh of relief and saw that Alasdair did as well.

“Well, yer da put lint on my cut to stop the bleeding. Now he’ll remove the lint and put on honey to heal it, and then he’ll add a layer of animal grease to protect the cut from getting dirty again.”

“Can I help?” Hew asked.

“Me, too!” Beatie.

“Ye can watch,” Alasdair responded before Sorcha could.

As Sorcha once again pulled up her skirts to reveal her cut, Beatie said, “Da, how do ye ken healing ways?”

His surprised chuckle made Sorcha smile. “I dunnae ken them, Beatie. Sorcha does.”

“How do ye ken them?” Hew asked her.

“My mama taught me some of it,” Sorcha responded. “I have lovely memories of looking for healing herbs with her in the woods near our home.” She gave a wistful sigh.

“I dunnae have any memories of my mama,” Beatie said, her voice dropping low.

Sorcha wasn’t surprised that Alasdair had avoided speaking of his deceased wife with his children, but she also knew speaking of her would help him heal, so when he looked like he was going to refuse his daughter’s silent plea, she said, “Now would be a perfect time for yer da to tell ye some stories. It would aid me tremendously in keeping my mind off what he’s doing.” Her breath caught in hopes that she had not gone too far, so when amusement danced in the eyes that met hers, she released it.

“Yer mama taught me to swim,” he said as he picked the lint from Sorcha’s cut. She gritted her teeth against the pain, not wanting to interrupt his story, and she looked to him. A small smile turned up his lips, and it did not appear to be one of sadness but the sort that came along with a fond memory.

“Ye could nae swim?” Beatie asked eagerly.

Alasdair shook his head. “Nay, I could nae. I was scairt of the water because my cousin Looki told me creatures dwelled in it. So, yer mama told me she would nae allow me to kiss her until I conquered my fear, and then she helped me to do so.” As he spoke to Beatie and Hew and told them the story of going to the loch every day with Mariot, Sorcha pictured the scene of this small woman teaching the brawny warrior to swim. She didn’t feel that same slither of jealousy she had before, just a deep longing to have stories with someone she loved that she could one day share with her own children.

“What did ye do when ye could nae find her?” Hew demanded loudly, interrupting Sorcha’s silent musings.

Sorcha glanced down at her leg, surprised to see it slathered with the animal grease and honey. Alasdair’s touch had been so light and his rich voice so deep and soothing that she had not even noticed her pain. Alasdair was staring down at Beatie and Hew, and he bent over suddenly, scooped them both up, and looked directly at them. “I searched all night, and when I learned that Laird Duncan had taken her, I gathered all my warriors and went to wage battle.”

“Against the Duncan clan?” Sorcha exclaimed, now caught up in the story. They were one of the largest clans there was and well-known for the ruthless, dishonorable way they fought.

“Aye,” Alasdair said, his intense blue gaze meeting hers.

“Da would have risked everything for Mama!” Beatie exclaimed.

“That’s right, Beatie,” Alasdair replied, kissing his daughter’s forehead. “I would have given my life for yer mama’s.”

“But the gods are nae ready for ye, Da,” Beatie said with conviction. “They were ready for Mama because her purpose here was done.”

Sorcha could see a faint sheen in his eyes, so that she knew he was struggling to hold back emotion. “And what do ye think her purpose was?” he asked.

Beatie tilted her head in silent thought for a moment. “Well,” she finally said, “to give life to Hew and me, of course. Oh, and to teach ye to swim so ye’d nae drown.”

Sorcha and Alasdair chuckled at that.

“Also,” Hew said as Alasdair set them both on their feet, “to find a good mama for Hew and me. One who has red hair and blue sparkly eyes.”

Sorcha stilled at those words, as did Alasdair, who stood suspended, halfway crouched still from setting his children down. A blush heated Sorcha’s cheeks as he stood, his focus still on his son.

“The gods told ye this, did they?” he asked, standing all the way up.

Hew scoffed. “Dunnae be silly, Da! We figured it out on our own,” he said with a grin.

Alasdair grunted at that. “I see,” he finally said.

“Do ye want to be our mama?” Beatie suddenly asked.

Just then the nooning horn sounded, saving Sorcha from having to fumble through an answer. Beatie gave an excited yelp and scrambled toward the door, looking back at the last minute before exiting the room. “May I be excused? I’m famished and Cook promised to make a mince pie for me and Hew.”

“Mince pie!” Hew squealed and ran after his sister.

The room fell silent as the children left and the horn stopped. Sorcha found herself staring at the back of Alasdair’s head of dark hair as he was looking at the door Beatie and Hew had gone through. Sorcha knew he was probably not turning around because he didn’t know what to say to her after what his daughter had asked, so she decided to make it easy for him so he’d not worry about injuring her feelings.

“Children,” she said slowly, searching for the right words, “fixate easily on whomever is in front of them and has shown them interest,” she said as Alasdair turned toward her.

She was going to say more, but the heartrending tenderness in Alasdair’s eyes stole her breath and her words. He stepped toward her, closing the distance between them, and her heart pounded hard in her chest. He raised his hand and tucked back a strand of her hair. “I am wishing,” he said slowly, his voice deep and silk-lined, “that I will hear news that yer betrothed is nae worthy of ye, and I am wishing that Calan takes his time returning so I will have more time with ye.”

The joy she felt warmed her all over. She swallowed the emotions clogging her throat. It wasn’t a declaration that he’d die for her, scour the ends of the Earth for her, give up everything for her, but it was the perfect declaration for now. “I’m wishing that, too,” she admitted.

A slow, triumphant smile turned up the corners of his lips as he stepped even closer. His warmth invaded her, and his manly scent surrounded her. “Ye have awakened

me, Sorcha. Ye have awakened me when I thought I'd sleep forever."

His words, the awe in his voice, made her heart ache. "And ye," she said, her words coming out husky, "ye have stirred a longing in me for things I had believed impossible."

They both fell silent, staring at each other. Was he wondering, as she was, what was possible for them? Was there any sort of future? She did not want to ask him to give up his means of saving his clan, and if he offered it, could she take it and stay with him, knowing he was putting his clan, his children, in continued jeopardy? She didn't have answers yet, but after the time she had spent with him and what had already been revealed to her, she felt certain answers would come. She prayed they were the ones she wanted.

There was nothing she could do in this moment but lower her guard, open herself up, and pray for the best. She might come away with a shattered heart, but a shattered heart was infinitely better, she now realized, than one that had never been warmed by desire, by longing, and, she felt certain, by love.

So she rose on her tiptoes and wound her arms around his neck. He, in turn, put his hands on her hips as he tilted his face down to look at her. "We kinnae ken what fate has in store for us," she whispered. "But we have here and now, so let us nae waste the time."

He answered her by claiming her mouth for a ravishing kiss. There was nothing slow or gentle about this one. There was an urgency of two people who knew they may be living on borrowed time. Their tongues tangled and retreated, and did so again before he moved on to tracing the fullness of her lips with his tongue. Fire began to spread through her, leaping from her heart to her breasts to her loins. His hands moved from her waist to her bottom, and he was lifting her off her feet when the door slammed open.

He jerked away from her, and she from him, and they both turned to see Esmerelda standing there. The look that passed quickly over her features was unmistakable disgust. Alasdair jerked at the look so she knew he saw it as well. Esmerelda saw his reaction to her also, if her flinching was any indication. She flicked her gaze to Sorcha, and for one breath, Sorcha could have sworn hatred danced in the woman's eyes. But then a resigned, sad look came over her.

"I supposed it was inevitable that ye would forget Mariot," the woman said before turning and leaving the room.

The arrow of guilt was well aimed and fired. It struck Alasdair, if Sorcha had to guess, straight in the heart. He stepped back from her, tugged a hand through his hair, and said, "I'm sorry for her words."

Whether he was apologizing to her for Esmerelda or for withdrawing, she did not know. She opened her mouth to ask when a rap came at the door. "Laird, 'tis Ewan. Ye are needed on the training field."

The look of relief that came over him was the answer to the question she'd not yet voiced. He wanted to escape her. Mayhap even if she could remain here, his guilt for wanting again would always live between them and keep them apart. That was not the sort of husband she desired. Now that she knew she did indeed want a husband, she wanted no less than the sort of love that was consuming, unwavering, and unconquerable even by death.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

Esmerelda's words struck a nerve so deep that Alasdair could not rid himself of the ache in his chest or the fear that his mother-in-law's words would come true and he'd forget Mariot. That was something he could not allow. He could not speak to Sorch a of it, because to speak to her, he needed to be able to offer explanations he did not yet have. And he did not speak to Esmerelda of what she'd said and how she'd aided him, whether knowingly or not, in dwelling in his grief because he wanted to be certain he could refute her claim that he had forgotten Mariot by allowing time to pass and proving to himself that he would not. Nor did he speak to her of the misplaced disgust he'd seen on her face when she discovered him kissing Sorch a. That, he suspected, was more about her and her fears than him and Sorch a, but he would speak to her eventually.

So, as one day led to two, then to three and four, he chose to live in a new routine that included spending time with Sorch a and a great deal of time with his children as well as attending to his duties as laird. He sensed a slight withdrawal from Sorch a at first, and he understood it because he felt it in himself as well. He wasn't certain how to overcome it, though, until the fourth night.

"Da, can we please have dancing in the great hall?" Beatie asked from her seat to the left of him at the dais.

"Aye," he answered quickly, grasping at the chance to draw Sorch a close as well as test his own capacity to live in the present without forgetting the past. He sensed Esmerelda scowling at him from her seat, and a quick glance to his right proved he was correct. Sorch a, who sat to his immediate right, had her head tilted down as she pushed her food from one side of her trencher to the other. Regret assailed him that she was uncomfortable. He knew he was partly to blame, and he was hoping he could

set it right. “We can have dancing,” he continued, “if Sorcha will agree to dance with me.”

Sorcha glanced up, a beaming smile on her face, and locked gazes with him. He could feel whatever tension had been between them melting away. “I’d love to dance with ye... after ye dance with Beatie.”

Beatie jumped up squealing with delight and clapped her hands. Alasdair grinned and leaned over to whisper in Sorcha’s ear. “How did ye ken she wanted to dance with me?”

“Oh,” she said, her warm breath wafting over his neck and sparking the hot bolt of desire that she always did, “a lass can sense what another lass wants, especially one who is staring adoringly at her da.”

He turned then to look at her, and Sorcha turned to face him at the same time so that their noses brushed. “I need ye,” he blurted because he was certain of it now.

Her eyes widened, and she nodded. “I need ye, too,” she whispered.

“Da, da,” Beatie said, tapping on his shoulder. “Can we tell them to clear the floor for dancing?”

He nodded, forced himself to break his gaze with Sorcha, and stood. “Tonight, we dance in celebration of our guest, Lady Sorcha.”

The cheers that erupted were so deafening that the walls of the great hall seemed to vibrate, and soon Alasdair was on the dance floor swinging a laughing Beatie around, while beside him, Hew was doing to his best to trample all over Sorcha’s toes. Sorcha was grinning, not showing even a hint of displeasure.

He watched them for a moment, his son laughing and Sorch a grinning, staring adoringly down at Hew, and he knew Mariot would be pleased to see someone care for Hew and Beatie and bring a gentleness to their lives, a tender touch that only a woman could offer. And as he danced with Beatie, he recalled moments dancing with Mariot.

“Da, was Mama a good dancer?”

“Aye,” he said, looking down at her. He finished the dance, then sought Sorch a out, whom Hew had commandeered into the next dance.

“Might I cut in?” he politely asked his son.

Hew stopped his trampling on Sorch a’s toes and looked from her to Alasdair. “If it is all right with Sorch a.”

“Well,” she said, “I’m certain yer da kinnae dance near as well as ye, but I did vow it to him. And what did I tell ye a moment ago?”

Hew scowled. “One should always keep their vows.”

Sorch a nodded. “Now off ye go because ye vowed to yer sister ye would dance with her as well.”

“I only said it because she bugged me.”

“Aye,” Sorch a replied, understanding in her voice, “but ye did say it.”

“Oh, all right!” Hew grumbled, then turned away to find Beatie.

Alasdair took Sorch a’s hands to begin the steps of the dance, and as they moved, he

said, “Thank ye.”

“For what?” Sorchu asked.

“For treating my children with kindness and for nae telling Hew he was smashing yer feet,” he teased.

She chuckled at that. “He means well. But he needs to be taught how to dance properly.”

“Could ye teach him?” Alasdair asked, because he selfishly wanted to watch those lessons.

“Aye,” she said. “It usually takes a bit of time, but I’ll do my best with the time I’m here.”

“What if ye did nae leave?” he asked, stopping and drawing her away from the other dancers to the side of the room.

“What do ye mean?” she asked, frowning.

It was a good, fair question, and he was not yet entirely certain of the answer. “What if ye stayed as part of my clan?”

“What of the coin ye need for my return?”

“I’d figure out something else.”

She nodded slowly, though she didn’t look entirely convinced. “And what would I do if I stayed?” she asked gently.

“Ye could be the healer,” he said, offering the first, the easiest thing that came to mind.

He thought he saw her shoulders drop a bit, but she offered a small smile. “When ye first met me, that would have been an offer I jumped at,” she said.

“But now?” he said, hearing her hesitation.

“Ye awoke a yearning in me that I had silenced out of fear, and I am no longer willing to live in fear. I am ready,” she said, “to let go of the fear that no longer serves me.”

He smiled that she recalled what he’d said to her before, even as disappointment crashed over him. “Ye wish to meet yer betrothed and see if he is a good man?”

She slowly licked her lips before she spoke. “I wish,” she said, “I wish to find the sort of love ye have for yer wife.”

It was not lost on him that she said have and not had, and he appreciated it to the depths of his soul. He thought that she was hinting she wished to find it with him, and though she had awakened desire in him and the longing to have a woman—specifically her—in his life once more, he wasn’t certain he could love again the way he’d loved Mariot.

He opened his mouth to say what he’d been thinking, but she pressed a finger to his lips. “’Tis all right. Ye dunnae have to speak it. I can see it here,” she said and touched his face.

“Sorcha,” he said, realizing she saw his uncertainty.

“I’m tired,” she replied. “I think I’ll make my way to bed.”

“I dunnae want to hurt ye,” he said, meaning it.

“’Tis all right. I told ye, I’d rather take chances now and feel the warmth of living life than dwell in coldness.”

“Do ye wish me to walk ye to yer bedchamber?”

She shook her head. “Nay. I’d prefer a bit of time alone.”

“Fine, but I will watch from a distance to ensure ye get there safely.”

She didn’t argue. She didn’t even acknowledge what he’d said. She turned away from him and made her way out of the great hall. He followed from a distance, through the passageways, up the stairs, and to the corner of the second-floor hallway. He stood there until her bedchamber door closed, and then he turned and made his way to his own bedchamber.

He spent the better part of the night staring at the ceiling, wondering how he could know if he might possibly be able to open himself up enough to love the way he once had. Sorcha deserved no less, so he made up his mind that he would keep a distance until he thought he might be able to give her what she wanted, what she deserved. Keeping his distance was achievable, but not watching her, even from a distance, was impossible. He found himself staring at her every morning from his solar as she worked with Hew and Beatie, practicing archery in the courtyard. And when he came in from training every afternoon for the nooning meal, he found himself conveniently walking by the healing room where he could see Sorcha teaching Beatie the healing arts, and he found himself watching her with utter fascination as she danced in the great hall every night with Hew and with other clansmen. After a sennight of keeping his distance, he awoke in the foulest mood, and it was his son who gave him the opportunity he had not realized he was waiting for.

He went to the great hall to break his fast, and Hew was there gathering food onto a trencher. “Where are ye going?” he asked, but he already knew because Hew, Beatie, and Sorchu were in the courtyard training every morning and breaking their fast there.

“To Sorchu and Beatie,” Hew said in a cheerful voice.

“Do ye need help with the trencher?” he asked his son, who looked as if he would drop the food-laden trencher at any moment.

“Nay, I’ve got it.”

“I insist,” Alasdair said, telling himself it was only because he knew Hew was going to drop it. But the moment they entered the courtyard and Sorchu looked up from what she was doing with a grin on her face, his heart jerked in his chest and he knew he’d made an excuse just to be near her once again.

“Hew, dunnae tell me ye dragged yer da to the courtyard because ye could nae carry one wee tray of food?” Sorchu called out to them.

“Nay!” Hew responded, despite Alasdair trying to silence him with a warning look. “Da insisted.”

Sorchu’s eyebrows shot up, but she simply nodded. “Well, ye can set the tray there then,” she said, motioning to a log.

He did as she asked, but then he stayed, not wanting to leave them, and he watched as she instructed Hew first and then Beatie.

“What do ye think, Da?” Beatie asked after shooting at the target.

“Ye’ve made fine progress, but there are a few things that need improvement.”

“Like what?” Sorcha demanded, sounding incensed.

“Well,” he moved close, eager for the chance to be nearer to her. “Ye have taught her well how to keep her attention focused, but ye could all three work on the strength of yer arms, which would make yer shots go farther and faster.”

Sorcha pressed her lips together as her gaze fell to his arms. “We are nae all built as ye are,” she said dryly.

“I’ll be strong like Da one day,” Hew piped up.

“I want to be stronger than Da!” Beatie said. “Sorcha, dunnae ye want to be stronger?”

When she did not answer but looked wary, he could not help but prod her, because if she took up Beatie’s challenge, he realized he had a perfectly good reason to see her every morning. “Aye, Sorcha,” he said, instilling a teasing note to his voice. “Do ye nae think ye can get stronger?”

“Aye, but—”

“Excellent!” He didn’t want to give her the chance to back out. “We shall meet here every morning to do our exercises.”

“What are they, Da?” Beatie asked, hopping up and down.

“Watch me,” he replied, and then he set his palms on the ground and his feet out behind him so that his body was parallel to the ground. “Once ye are in this position, ye simply lower yerself at the elbows almost until yer belly touches the ground.”

The children immediately got into position, but Sorcha gave him an incredulous look.

“I kinnae do that!” she exclaimed.

“Well, ye certainly kinnae if ye dunnae even try,” he shot back.

“I mean,” she huffed, “I dunnae think my arms will hold my weight thusly.”

“I’ll hold ye at yer belly and aid ye in lowering ye,” he suggested, and when she still looked at him with a dubious expression, he added, “unless ye are scairt.”

“I’m nae scairt!” she snapped and got into the parallel position he had shown them. Both Hew and Beatie had attempted the arm-strengthening exercise only to flop on their bellies in fits of giggles.

Sorcha scowled between him and the children as her face turned red from the position she was holding. “I’m glad this is so amusing for the three of ye,” she grumbled.

“Ye must try, Sorcha!” Hew said as he attempted it again, this time with success.

“Aye!” Beatie agreed as she tried it again and failed.

Sorcha tried it alone the first time, and he could see the strain by the bulging veins in her neck and the redness of her face. She fell on her belly with a smack against the ground, to her chagrin, Hew’s delight, and Beatie’s coos of encouragement.

He started to reach for her, but she shrugged him off, and as she jutted her jaw, he knew determination had blossomed within her. She tried thrice more, failing each time alongside Beatie’s failed attempts, and Hew, grinning, lowered himself and pushed himself up. “Boys are stronger,” he pronounced, making Alasdair wince.

“Well, lasses are cleverer with herbs,” Beatie shot back.

“Prove it!” Hew responded.

“I will!” Beatie announced, jumped up and then started tugging Sorch a up. “Come, Sorch a! We must show them how much cleverer we are with herbs.”

Groaning, Sorch a lumbered up, shot a scowl at Alasdair, and then laughed as Beatie dragged her off toward the healing room.

“Da, we kinnae let them think they are smarter than us,” Hew said, jumping up. “Come on!” he added, running away before Alasdair had even gained his feet. Once he was up and walking toward the healing room, he realized his mood was much lighter than when he awoke. It was being with Beatie, Hew, and Sorch a. He knew it without a doubt; what he still didn’t know was if he could love again in the way he had.

The children were already arguing by the time he reached the healing room, and yet, there was still a happy lightness to the interaction. Hew and Beatie stood on one side of the table as Sorch a stood on the other, showing them how to dress a wound with lint. They each tried it, and Beatie, who had been in the healing room with Sorch a almost daily, did a better job, but when Sorch a showed them how to grind a paste, Alasdair pronounced himself the winner.

“The only way to ken the winner is to put the paste on a pretend patient,” Sorch a announced, “and whichever one stays put the best is the winner.”

Alasdair didn’t hesitate. He sunk his fingers into his cold sticky paste and wiped them across Sorch a’s lovely cheek. She gasped at him as the children broke out into fits of giggles. “Ye’re cut on yer cheek,” he announced.

Her eyes twinkled mischievously as she brought her own fingers, covered in paste, to his forehead and wiped the cold, sticky mixture across it. “Ye’re cut on yer

forehead,” she said.

Hew treated Beatie on her arm, and Beatie treated Hew on his leg. “Now,” Sorch a pronounced, “we must all jump around to see whose paste will stay put the best. And as they did, Beatie’s and Hew’s pastes crumbled away, and then went Alasdair’s. Sorch a threw her arms up with an exclamation of joy, and Beatie threw herself into Sorch a to hug her, which sent Sorch a stumbling into Hew, who knocked all three of them into Alasdair. They all went flying to the ground in a crumbled heap of laughter.

He could not recall the last time he’d laughed so hard. He chortled until his eyes watered and his belly ached. And finally, when the noon horn was blown, he managed to get himself under control, as did everyone else, and one by one they stood and made their way out to go to the great hall. Beatie and Hew skipped ahead of Sorch a and himself, and he let them, glad to be alone with her.

“Ye have wonderful children,” Sorch a said with a husky whisper.

He stopped, grabbed her by the hand, and pulled her close before putting a quick peck upon her lips. The desire had been uncontrollable, but he didn’t want the children to see and get their hopes up. “Ye are wonderful, Sorch a.”

She smiled, but he noted it did not reach her eyes as before. It was the lingering question, he understood, of whether he could love with the depth she deserved and needed. Instead of offering stumbling words when he did not yet have the answer he sought, he said, “Would it be acceptable to ye, if I met the three of ye in the courtyard in the morning to train ye again?”

“Aye, but only if ye also come here afterward. If ye’re going to trounce me out there—” she said, waving her hand toward the courtyard, “I wish to return the favor in here.”

“Gladly,” he replied, meaning it, and then, as they started to walk again toward the great hall, their hands brushed, and instinctively, he caught her hand and held it.

She didn’t pull away but allowed him to hold her hand until they got to the great hall door, when she tugged away with a smile, and said, “I’d nae want the children to be confused if—”

“Aye,” he agreed, not wanting to hear the possibility of leaving in her voice.

They entered the great hall, but he was immediately swept into clan commotion, and it took him a great while to even reach the dais. She was seated at the far end, well away from his chair, and he was left to sit with Esmerelda on one side of him and Beatie, who was talking animatedly to Hew and Sorcha, on the other.

“Ye like her,” Esmerelda said, surprising him not only by saying the words but by the note of kindness in her voice, which contradicted how she’d acted before.

He faced Mariot’s mother. “I do,” he said, deciding it was time to speak blunt truths. “I have lived too long in grief, Esmerelda.”

He expected her to argue, but she nodded. “Aye, and I’m sorry for my part in it.” It was his turn to nod. “I was in my own grief, and I suppose I took some measure of comfort having ye there with me.”

“’Tis nae good for the children,” he said. “They are happier than they have been in a long time.”

“Nay, ’tis nae good for the children,” she agreed. “They need a mama, nae just a grandmama.”

He nodded, not caring to voice the rest of his concern. That he could not give them a

mother if he could not love wholeheartedly again. “They have me now, and I am present. I see them, and I want to be with them.”

“Aye, of course, but when ye kinnae be, they need someone.”

He would not argue the point with her, and he wasn’t about to give her a reason to stay. She may be showing remorse now, but he still believed it was time for her to return to her son’s stronghold. “I imagine yer son and his wife are wanting ye home now to aid in raising yer other grandbairns.”

“Oh, I think they are getting along just fine without me,” she said.

He sighed. She was not going to make this easy. “Esmerelda—”

“Da!” Beatie said.

He looked to his left to see her standing there with Hew. “Aye?”

“Can we go dance?”

“Aye. I’ll join ye,” he said. The talk with Esmerelda could wait until tomorrow. Plus, he wanted more time with Sorch. But when he stood, he didn’t see her. “Where is Sorch?”

“She went to bed,” Beatie supplied. “She said she was exhausted from all the arm work ye made us do.”

He hoped it was that, and as he made his way to the dance floor with the children, he found himself thinking of her and all the ways she had already changed his life and the children’s. As they danced, he missed seeing her smile and hearing her laughter, and the simple touches the dance allowed. He made up his mind by the end of the

night to ask her in the morning to stay a bit longer, if Calan returned soon, so there would be more time for him to untangle the knots his grief had created.

He saw the children to their bedchambers after a story and then made his way to his own, and he was just about to lie down when a knock came at his door. The head of the tower guard stood on the threshold. "Aye?" he asked Geoffrey.

"I'm sorry to bother ye at the late hour, Laird, but riders are approaching, and I thought ye would want to ken."

"Aye, I do," Alasdair said, picking up the weapons he'd just unsheathed and setting them back in place. "Are they flying banners?"

"Aye, one is ours, one is the Stewart clan, and one is the Campbell clan."

His chest clenched tight, and a wave of nearly consuming anxiety swept through him, giving him the answer he'd been searching for. He could love wholeheartedly again. He just prayed it was not too late with Sorcha.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

Sorcha couldn't sleep for thoughts of Alasdair. Every waking moment her head was filled with him, and it seemed she would not get any rest. She punched her pillow, flipped from one side to the other, and with a heavy sigh, decided to give in to the invading feelings. Alasdair had indicated he wasn't certain he could love the way he once had, but she wasn't so sure. Though, she did recognize she might just be seeing things she wanted to see.

Still, there were so many ways he displayed the capacity for great love without even realizing it. First, he had brought her here to his home out of the selfless need to ensure she could wed a good man. And even before that, he had risked his life for her, a virtual stranger, several times. And every day she was in his home, he'd done all he could to ensure she felt comfortable here. These were not the actions of a man incapable of a full open heart. Just look at the way he took such care with his children and how he had now thrown himself into being a part of their lives.

She knew he had dozens upon dozens of responsibilities that could keep him occupied from the time he woke to the moment he laid his head to rest, but he'd taken time out of his busy day to train with Beatie and Hew, and then went with all of them to the healing room. And he had dressed her wound himself! She was certain there were many women in the castle he could have called upon to come to the healing room and see to her wound, but he hadn't. He had done it all himself.

And she had seen with her own eyes that he was starting to shed his grief with laughter and smiles, dancing with her and the children, and speaking of Mariot. He was capable of great love again. She felt it in her bones. Whether that great love would be with her was another question. But why should she care? Well, she knew why as she lay in the safety of the quiet, all alone with nothing but the stark truth in

her heart. She had fallen in love with Alasdair.

She loved him. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment on the glory of it, but she also feared how hurt she would be if it did not work out. Her heart thumped in her chest, ears, and head, but she forced her eyes open to the moonlit room, took a deep breath, and accepted that there may be great pain. Yet, she knew without a shadow of doubt that she would take the risk. She would take all the colors life had to offer over the dull life of safe routine that she had planned for herself.

She didn't want to go to her brother's home, but she did want to meet him and see the home she had been taken from, where she had been born and had lived, for a time, a happy life. She most definitely did not want to wed a man she did not know, and if she had any say in it, she was not going to. But could she stay here if Alasdair could never open his heart fully to her? No, she did not think she could. Could she return home and open the apothecary shop as she had planned? She could, but she would never be satisfied with that life now that her heart had been opened wide. She had two options: speak with Alasdair and tell him how she felt, and in doing so, hope it helped to open his own heart, or go with her brother and try to persuade him to let her have time to choose her own husband. She would start with Alasdair.

"Sorcha," a woman's voice called before a rap came at the door. "Sorcha, 'tis Esmerelda."

Sorcha buried her groan in her pillow.

"I've come to collect ye and take ye to the solar. Yer betrothed and brother have arrived for ye."

Panic rioted within her as she sat up. She'd not had enough time to speak with Alasdair! She had to try before she was taken away.

“Might I come in?” the woman asked in the sweetest tone Sorcha had ever heard her use.

She supposed it made no difference at this point. The sooner she could speak with Alasdair the better, and with Esmerelda’s help, she could get the back laces of her gown done much quicker, so she called out, “Aye,” as she scrambled from the bed, glad she’d gone to bed with her léine on.

The door opened just as Sorcha tugged up her gown and presented Esmerelda her back. “Would ye lace me up?”

“Aye,” the woman replied and stepped behind Sorcha, who felt a tug as she pulled at the laces of Sorcha’s gown. “Yer betrothed is verra handsome,” she said.

“It does nae matter to me,” Sorcha answered honestly.

“Ye dunnae wish to wed him?”

“Nay, I dunnae wish to wed a man I dunnae ken.”

“Many marriages start between strangers,” Esmerelda said. “’Tis how my own started.”

Sorcha already knew that, and the information did not sway her opinion in the least, but to be polite, she asked, “And was it a verra happy marriage?”

“I got safety out of it, and a beautiful son and daughter,” the woman answered. “What more can a woman ask for?”

“Surely ye jest!” Sorcha exclaimed, turning toward Esmerelda, but the serious expression on the woman’s face told Sorcha she indeed did not jest. “Ye saw yer own

daughter's marriage, I am certain. I ken it was full of love."

"Aye," Esmerelda agreed. "Mariot was a verra lucky woman. Most of us dunnae get that."

"Alasdair is a special man," Sorcha said, her heart squeezing with the words.

The woman gave her a long, scrutinizing look, and her eyes darkened with an emotion Sorcha could not read. "Aye, he is. He would take on an insurmountable burden to aid ye, even if it hurt the clan, because his honor makes him feel obliged."

The woman had clearly seen how Sorcha felt about Alasdair. It must show on her face. She took a deep breath before speaking to calm herself. "I would nae ever stay simply because his honor makes him feel obliged to aid me."

The look that came over the woman's face now, Sorcha recognized immediately as dislike. No matter how Esmerelda had tried to disguise it, she did not like Sorcha. Sorcha was almost certain it was because Esmerelda thought Sorcha would be the reason Alasdair moved on, but it honestly did not matter.

"He will nae ever give his heart to ye the way he did to my daughter. Ye dunnae appear to be the sort of woman who'd be at peace with that."

"Well, 'tis nae for ye to say what Alasdair would do," Sorcha replied. "'Tis his words I'll have." And with that, she turned from Esmerelda, even as the woman called to her, and she raced toward the solar.

Esmerelda's footsteps tapped in rapid succession behind her, but she increased her pace, reaching the closed solar door a good seven paces before Esmerelda. She was about to shove it open, when a deep male voice, one she did not recognize, filtered from the door with talk of her and halted her movements.

“Yer nae returning my sister to me without first ascertaining if Laird Campbell is a good man holds much weight with me.”

Sorcha’s breath caught, and she placed her hands on the door. Alasdair had the perfect opportunity to declare his feelings for her.

“I owed that much to yer sister,” Alasdair said. “She saved my life, and I owed her this much.”

All the air emptied out of Sorcha’s lungs, as did most of her hope that Alasdair would ever care for her the way she wanted him to. Behind her, Esmerelda’s inhalations and exhalation whooshed in Sorcha’s ears. Her humiliation burned her face and neck.

“Well, as ye can see, I am a good and honorable man, and I will treat Margaret with respect and kindness,” came yet another voice, which she assumed belonged to Laird Campbell.

“I dunnae ken ye from one meeting,” Alasdair began, and that bubble of hope that had almost completely withered sprang to life in Sorcha once more. “But I trust Calan, and he has spent a good deal of time ascertaining yer character and vouches for ye, so if Sorcha does indeed wish to go with ye, I will nae try to stop it.”

“And we will get the coin, aye?” came Calan’s voice.

“Calan,” Alasdair snapped.

“I told ye at the beginning of this conversation that ye would,” the voice she thought was her brother’s said.

Whatever hope she’d still had withered and disappeared. Alasdair had ensured he’d get the coin, and he’d said plainly if she wanted to go, he’d not stop it. Those were

not words of a man who would scour the ends of the Earth for the woman he loved.

She pushed herself off the door, straightened her shoulders, raised her hand to the door, and knocked.

“Enter,” came Alasdair’s voice.

She slid her trembling hands down her gown and through her hair to bring some semblance of order to it. There was nothing here for her, and she was going to be leaving with a brother she did not know and a betrothed she did not want. All that she could do was try to gain time from her brother to get to know her betrothed, and then, if she did not care for him, to mayhap be allowed to pick another.

With that in mind, when she entered the room and her gaze first found Alasdair’s full of honorable concern for her, she was infuriated. She jerked her eyes from him and looked over at Calan, who offered a small smile, and then to the man who stood next to him, who bowed immediately.

When he came up, he stepped toward her, took her hand, and kissed the top of it. “I’m Laird Campbell, yer betrothed.”

Her lips would not form words. They were frozen in place, so she moved her eyes from him to the man next to him, and the familiarity in his face made her feel weak in the knees. “Laird Stewart?” she managed, her voice cracking under her shock and the emotions warring within her.

“Nay, lass,” the tall black-haired man said, his green gaze displaying a kindness that made her legs tremble a bit less. “I’ll nae ever be Laird Stewart to ye. I’m yer brother,” he said, stepping close to her. “I’m Ross, and ye should always call me ‘Brother,’ unless ye’re vexed with me; then call me ‘Ross.’” That made her laugh and a bit more tension melted away.

“We’ve come a long way to get ye, and I’ve been looking for ye since nearly the day I discovered who I was. I—” His voice caught on emotion that shocked and warmed her. “I prayed to the gods this day would come. I... I did nae remember ye, but seeing ye now, by the gods, I do.”

She was surprised how his words affected her. Tears sprang to her eyes, and a knot formed in her throat, which she had to try several times to swallow past to speak. “I... I dunnae remember ye.” She saw his shoulders fall, and between that and his words, she knew he was a good man. She felt it in her bones, and she prayed he would understand why she might want to choose her own husband.

He held out his hand to her, palms up, and she understood in that moment, he was giving her a choice to take his hand or not, and that was yet another gesture that eased her. She took his hand, tears blurring her eyes, and he drew her toward him and smiled at her. “Mags,” he said, his voice hoarse. “Mags, ye were a stubborn little lass. Are ye still?”

She did laugh then, a full hearty one that took a moment to get under control. “Aye,” she finally said. “And as part of that willfulness, I request ye call me Sorcha.” His eyes widened in surprise, so she explained. “I ken Margaret was the name given to me, and the one ye kenned me by, but I have only ever kenned myself as Sorcha, and I kinnae simply think of myself as Margaret or this Mags—”

“We called ye Mags as a term of endearment,” he said in a somber voice that tugged at her heart.

She nodded. “Aye, I ken that, but I dunnae have that memory at all, and there is so much change for me already, if ye could just allow me to be called Sorcha—”

He held up a hand, and an understanding smile tipped the corners of his mouth, slowing her heart, which had begun to beat rapidly. “Ye will be called Sorcha until ye

wish to be called Margaret, and if ye dunnae ever wish it, that is fine as well. Yer name does nae change who ye really are. We are blood. The bond is unbreakable.”

His words relieved her greatly and moved her. “Thank ye.”

He grinned. “I’m used to bargaining. My wife is stubborn, too.” Sorcha laughed at that, and her brother’s grin grew wider. “She is verra eager to meet ye and was beside herself that she could nae journey with us to fetch ye, but she’s with child, ye see.”

“Oh, that’s verra grand!” Sorcha exclaimed, meaning it.

Ross grinned. “Aye, it is. Ye will be an aunt!”

That made her lips part with yet more shock. She would be an aunt. It was hard to comprehend it all.

“I’m anxious to get back to her, as ye can imagine.” She was so pleased and heartened by his words and the obvious love she heard in them. “If it’s acceptable to ye, we will leave at sunrise on the morrow. I ken this is fast, so if there is a reason to stay longer...”

She drew on the iron will that had gotten her through all the years of living with the man who she’d called Da, and she did not look at Alasdair, despite every part of her wanting to. She kept her attention focused on Ross and prayed to the gods that Alasdair would speak up, would give her a reason not to go, but heart-shattering silence greeted her.

“Nay,” she finally managed past the ache in her throat. “There is nae a reason to linger.”

“Excellent,” her brother said. “I’m certain ye have questions about how ye came to be

taken away from our home...”

“I do,” she said, “but my mind is awirl, and I am uncertain I can even properly voice them right now.”

“That’s understandable,” Laird Campbell said, drawing her attention to him. “Though, I’d verra much like a moment alone with ye, if ye would grant it?”

Despite her resolve, her eyes found Alasdair’s, but his lids came down swiftly to veil whatever emotions he might have and he turned away. It was crushing. She wanted to crumble to the ground, but she straightened and focused on Laird Campbell once more. “We can walk on the rampart if ye wish it?” she offered. Mayhap the man wanted to break the betrothal. She knew there were unusual circumstances that bound them, but surely if all parties agreed, they could dissolve the ancient agreement.

“That’s acceptable,” Laird Campbell said.

“Sorcha, do ye wish me to accompany ye?” her brother asked, giving her additional hope that he might relent to her desires if she could speak with him.

She shook her head. There was no harm that could come from a simple walk on the rampart, and she didn’t wish to make things harder than they already were.

Laird Campbell drew near her, and unlike her brother, he did not ask to take her hand; he simply took it. His actions sent a warning tremor down her spine. He led her to the door and out into the corridor and didn’t speak until the door closed behind him. He was a tall man, with a head of shocking red hair that nearly matched hers in color, but he had dark brown eyes.

“I was verra surprised to learn ye may be alive,” he finally said as he guided her down the stairs to the door that led to the courtyard and the rampart.

“Aye, I’m certain ye were, my lord.” She had chosen the words purposely, hoping he’d correct her as her brother had and tell her to call him by his given name, but he simply kept strolling until they were in the courtyard.

“Ye might even say I was unhappy about it. I kinnae say I had a wish to wed.”

She paused in walking, feeling hope in his words. “If ye dunnae wish to wed—”

“Dunnae fash yerself, lass. I’m laird now. My da died right after yer brother returned from the dead, making me laird, and I ken well I need to produce an heir and keep my clan strong. Our marriage will ensure we both have the strongest clans around.”

“Mayhap there is another lass ye could wed to strengthen yer clan?” she suggested as they climbed the rampart steps.

Once they were at the top, he stopped and turned toward her. “Ye dunnae wish to wed me?”

He seemed to be simply seeking the truth, so she gave it. “I dunnae ken ye,” she said, “and I wish to ken the man I wed.”

“Well, there’s nae a better way to ken a man than to kiss him,” Laird Campbell said, and before she could lodge a protest, he pulled her to him and planted a kiss on her mouth. It wasn’t a particularly unpleasant kiss, but it did not have the effect on her that Alasdair’s kisses had. Moreover, the man had not asked; he’d simply taken what he wanted.

She broke free and would have stepped out of his reach, but he caught her forearm. To her right, a movement caught her eye, and there, standing in the courtyard looking up at them was Alasdair. He did not call out a warning to Laird Campbell not to touch his woman, he did not storm the rampart to protect her, he did not say a word. He

simply turned on his heel and walked away, and with him, he took the last thread of her hope, but not her stubborn nature.

She faced Laird Campbell once more and slapped him. “Ye kinnae simply take what ye want,” she grumbled.

“Aye, lass,” he replied, “I can. Ye are my betrothed, and therefore, ye are my property.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

It seemed a fitting morning for Sorcha to leave him. Rain drizzled from the sky, and there was no sun to be found. Gray sucked up all the space in the sky, and the dark start to the morning fit Alasdair's mood. He stood at his solar window, close enough to watch her depart but far enough back that she would not see him as she had yesterday when he'd not been able to stop himself from following her and Laird Campbell.

Finding her kissing him still caused a red haze to descend over his vision, which only strengthened when he thought of that man's mouth on hers, his hands on her body, his claiming her in a way Alasdair had wanted to, but it was not what she wanted. That much had been obvious from the moment she'd entered the room and had barely looked his way. And how could he blame her? Before her stood a future of the ultimate comfort with one of the richest lords in the land. Or, she could have a life with him, a man who had been trying to figure out how to get the coin needed to keep his clan from starving in the winter when all the food would run out.

And winter seemed to be approaching as of this day. Sorcha's departure was leaving behind gray, cold, and an absence of joy, and he could not help but wonder if she would have considered staying if he'd realized sooner that he loved her with his whole heart?

The door creaked open, causing him to turn away from the now empty courtyard and toward the door. Esmerelda, the last person he cared to see, stood there. "Ye made the right decision, Alasdair."

"What decision is that?" he asked, crossing the room to his desk and picking up the full wine goblet the serving girl had left for him. He took a long sip and then set it

down as the wine trailed a warm path down his throat. But it failed to rid him of the chill that had gripped him since Sorcha had walked away hand in hand with Laird Campbell.

“Letting that lass go.”

“She was nae mine to keep,” he said, already weary of the conversation before it had begun.

“She’s the sort of lass who needs to be pampered, but I’m nae,” Esmerelda said, surprising him.

His thoughts filtered suddenly back to the months after Mariot had died, when Esmerelda had stayed and encouraged him to cling to his grief. It had become a habit. And when he had made feeble attempts to bond with his newborn bairns, she’d always assured him she was giving them everything they needed. He didn’t know if this was about him and some sort of misplaced desire for him, or if this was about the loss of Mariot, but either way, the woman had to leave. Today.

“Geoffrey!” he bellowed, because the man was never far. And within a breath, a rap came at the door.

“My lord?” Geoffrey called.

“Enter,” Alasdair commanded. He motioned to Esmerelda. “Esmerelda needs escorting back to Castle Lochart today.”

“What?” she exclaimed.

“Wait outside, Geoffrey. She will be out shortly, and ye are to take her to her bedchambers to pack her trunk, then back to her home without delay.” Once Geoffrey

had quit the room, he focused on Esmerelda. “I dunnae ken what ye have been about, plotting to keep me in my grief, completely taking over the rearing of my children, and I suspect doing all ye could to drive Sorch a away, and I dunnae honestly care. It does nae change anything now, and because ye gave Mariot life, I will give ye this pass for yer sins against me and the children, but dunnae return here, Esmerelda, ever, for the greeting ye receive will be an escort to my dungeon where ye will stay until I call yer son to fetch ye once more.”

“Alasdair!” she gasped. “I simply tried to fill the emptiness Mariot left.”

“Mayhap ye did in yer own twisted way, but ye kinnae fill Mariot’s void. Nae anyone can. I need a fresh start with someone who will nae try to make me forget her but will understand she is in my heart, and that there is more than enough space for them as well.” When she opened her mouth to say more, he held up a hand to silence her. “Someone like Sorch a,” he said.

“I’m nae much older than that wench!” she exclaimed.

He recoiled at the revealing truth of her dark words. “Ye are Mariot’s mama. Ye are the grandmama to my children, and that is all ye will ever be to me.”

“I brought yer heart back to life!” she nearly shrieked.

He stood up, came around his desk, and took her by the elbow. “Nay,” he said. “Ye nearly aided me in freezing it solid. Sorch a melted it.” And then she’d left him. Inhaling a breath, he guided Esmerelda toward the door that was already open. Calan stood there with his dagger drawn. “Laird?” he said, looking between them.

“’Tis fine. Esmerelda is just departing,” he finished, handing her over to Geoffrey. “Ye ken what to do.”

“Aye, Laird,” Geoffrey answered and tugged Esmerelda away as she began to wail.

Alasdair was four steps into the solar once more when Calan spoke. “How could ye just let her go?”

Frowning, Alasdair turned to Calan. “Ye dunnae ken what Esmerelda had been up to.”

“What?” Calan waved a dismissive hand. “I’m nae speaking of Esmerelda. I’ve been telling ye for an age that she needed to return home, but ye refused to see it because to see it meant ye had to face how ye felt and all that needed to change. How could ye let Sorch a go? It was obvious to me by the way ye watched her that ye care for her, and ye foolishly offered nae to take the coin for her.”

“I would have gladly given up the coin had she wanted to stay with me.”

“I think she did. She looked to ye several times, and ye would nae meet her gaze.”

“I did nae want her to feel she had to stay.”

“Ye lie to yerself,” Calan rebutted. “Ye were scairt to show her how much ye wanted her to stay. Ye are scairt because if ye truly acknowledge how much ye want her, ye will have to face how much losing her might hurt.”

“Ye spout nonsense!” Alasdair thundered, even as Calan’s words hit targets he hadn’t known were there. “She kissed her betrothed. She made her choice!”

“Da!” came Hew’s and Beatie’s voices as they scrambled from around the door where he suspected they’d been eavesdropping.

“Sorch a did nae kiss the bad man!” Hew blurted.

“He kissed her,” Beatie offered, “and then she slapped him.”

“She slapped him?” he asked, astounded.

“Aye!” they said in unison.

A black realization descended on him. Calan was right. He’d been afraid, even though he knew he loved her. Or perhaps because of the depth of his feelings, he’d let her go for fear of one day losing her. He had not outrun his grief. It had led his every action up until this very moment. No more. “I need to go get Sorcha.”

“Aye,” Calan agreed, “if she’ll have ye.”

Her sadness was so heavy, Sorcha thought it a wonder she was still upright on her horse. She was glad to be left alone to ride, so when her brother turned back to her from the front of the line, she was still struggling to push her dark mood away when he reached her and fell in line beside her.

“What ails ye?” he asked, his tone gentle and his gaze kind.

“Ye will nae like what I say,” she said, thinking how her da used to smack her when she spoke her mind, and she feared Laird Campbell would prove much the same as her da.

“I am so glad to be reunited with ye, Sorcha, and I ken ye dunnae ken me yet, so I will tell ye a truth I hope ye come to believe. I will nae ever fault ye for speaking the truth to me or harm ye in anger.”

She nodded, believing his words. “I dunnae... I dunnae wish to wed Laird Campbell.”

“Ah,” her brother said, nodding. “Because ye dunnae ken him.”

“That is a small part of it. I would have been willing to ken him, given Alasdair let me leave.”

Her brother blinked at her in surprise. “Ye like Laird MacLachlan?”

“I love him,” she said without hesitation. “But he does nae love me, or he would nae have let me go.”

Suddenly, a thundering filled the air and rumbled the ground. Sorcha’s heart leaped in fear as her brother called the riders to a halt, and they circled around her, drawing their weapons to protect her. She noted Laird Campbell was not at the front circle but the second one, proving to her he was indeed of little worth. She could just see between the men encircling her, so that when Alasdair came into view, she cried out in surprise.

“Weapons down,” her brother called.

Laird Campbell broke from his place in line and rode toward her brother. “What do ye mean weapons down? The man has clearly come to claim yer sister!”

“I certainly hope so,” her brother said, winking at her to her shock. “She loves him.”

“Well, I’ll nae let her go,” Laird Campbell growled. “We’ve a betrothal, and I want the union.”

“Ye want the warriors and land that come with her, Campbell, nae her, and besides that, Sorcha does nae want ye. And whether MacLachlan is here to ask for her or nae, I’ll nae force my sister to wed a man she does nae wish to wed.”

Laird Campbell withdrew his sword and pointed it at her brother, even as her brother did the same, and all around them, her brother’s men, as well as Campbell’s, drew

their swords upon one another.

“What have we here?” Alasdair asked as he rode up with a dozen warriors.

“Here, we have a disagreement,” her brother said in a nonchalant tone, as if a sword were not pointed at his heart. “Laird Campbell wants my sister, but my sister wants ye,” Ross said with such shocking bluntness that Sorcha gasped at how close his nature matched hers. “The question is, do ye want my sister? Is that why ye are here?”

“Aye,” Alasdair said, looking to her, and that’s when she saw the overflowing love in his gaze. “I want ye, Sorcha. I want ye more than I’m scairt of wanting ye. It just took me a spell to get here.”

Her heart felt as if it would explode with happiness.

“If ye’ll have me, I’ll spend my lifetime showing ye how much I love ye.”

“She’ll have ye,” her brother pronounced, and then with the swiftest move she’d ever seen, he had Laird Campbell off his horse and on his back with his sword pointed at the man’s chest. “Campbell, I see two choices for ye: walk away from the betrothal to my sister or engage in a clan war with me. I’ll win. Ye ken it as well as I do. Nae only do I have more warriors than ye, I’ll have my new brother-in-law’s warriors to aid me.”

Laird Campbell looked mad enough to spit steel. “I’ll walk away, but ye’ve made an enemy for life. Both of ye.”

“As ye wish,” her brother said.

“For Sorcha,” Alasdair replied, “I would gladly fight a hundred wars.”

Ross removed his sword, and Laird Campbell scrambled up and onto his horse once more. With a whistle to his men, they rode off to the left and, Sorcha assumed, toward his home.

Alasdair rode to her and dismounted, then came to stand by her side. “Sorcha, will ye have me as yer husband to love ye with all I am from now until my last breath?”

“Aye,” she said, sliding off her horse and into his arms, which he wrapped around her to hug her tight. She pressed her lips to his. “I will have ye this day, and the gods willing, this night,” she added wickedly because she simply could not resist.

“I heard that!” her brother bellowed. “I’ll be seeing ye to yer new home, but I’ll nae be leaving until I see ye wed.” He eyed them both, and they all burst out laughing. This, she thought, standing there, was more than she had ever dreamed. Here was a man she loved and a brother she suspected she would come to love. Alasdair hugged her again, and then he and Ross were gripping forearms and laughing. This, she thought on a contented sigh, was the dream she’d long ago quieted, brought back to roaring life.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:04 am

Sorcha stood in the courtyard after her wedding with Beatie holding one hand and Hew holding the other, her brother and her new husband in front of the three of them facing one another.

“I insist ye keep the coin,” her brother said to Alasdair for the fourth time.

Alasdair shook his head yet again. “Nay, Stewart. I will nae take coin for my wife.”

Sorcha rolled her eyes. “I’ll take it,” she finally said, determined to end the argument so she could get on with her wedding night.

Both men looked to her in surprise, and she set her hands on her hips and served them both a look she’d been told by Ada could freeze water. “What do ye expect? I’m a practical, stubborn lass. We need coin. Do I have a dowry?”

“Aye,” Ross answered, “but it is far greater than this amount of coin.”

“Excellent,” she replied, glad to find that Alasdair was letting her speak for herself, letting her speak her mind. “We can settle all that when we come to meet yer wife and Alasdair joins the search for Graeme.”

They’d spoken at length on the ride back to the castle. She knew how her father had been betrayed by his best friend, how she and her three siblings had been taken by trusted, loyal servants in three different directions to save their lives, how their parents had been killed, and how, for years, her father had been wrongfully thought a betrayer of the king. But that had been cleared up, Ross had been found, and now she had been found, too. The only sibling still missing was Graeme, who was older than

she was but younger than Ross.

“A fortnight,” Alasdair confirmed, “and we’ll be there.”

Ross nodded, and after hugging her, he and Alasdair gave each other good-natured slaps on the back. Hew and Beatie hugged their new uncle, and Ross and his men rode off toward his home.

Alasdair stepped behind her and encircled her in his arms. “Well, Lady MacLachlan, what would ye like to do with the rest of our night?”

She turned toward her new husband, and there, with Hew, Beatie, and Calan watching on, she planted a kiss on his lips. Twining her arms around his neck, she said, “I’ll give ye one guess.”

With that, Alasdair tossed her up and over his shoulder to squeals of laughter from the children and hoots and hollers from Calan.

“What are ye doing?” she gasped, laughing.

“I’ll give ye one guess,” he teased, striding away from the cackling group to the castle door.

“What will the servants say?” she giggled as he closed the door he’d opened with his foot and took the stairs two at a time.

“I imagine they’re preoccupied gossiping about that kiss ye gave me,” he replied, reaching the second floor with remarkable speed and entering the bedchamber just as she thought of a witty rejoinder. But before she could utter it, he set her on her feet, face to face with him.

He cupped her face in his large hands, and the look he gave her was so galvanizing it sent a tremor through her. “I love ye,” he said. “I love ye so verra much that it frightens me because I ken what losing someone ye love this much does, but I would rather love ye to the depths I do and risk everything, than nae love ye at all.”

She nodded, tears of joy clogging her throat.

“If we were ever parted again, I would search until my dying breath for ye, fight a hundred battles for ye, give my life for ye.” He claimed her mouth with a hot, hungry kiss that she gladly returned. When he pulled away, he said, “Ye gave me back my life.”

“And ye gave me hope,” she said, finally finding her voice. “Ye showed me nae all men are alike, and ye showed me I could trust ye. I love ye. I love ye with everything I am, for everything ye are.”

He ran a finger down her cheek and slid it down her neck to trace her collarbone and each swell of her breasts. Her flesh prickled at his touch, and her blood coursed through her veins like a raging river. He slipped a finger inside the bodice of her gown and tugged the material down to expose her breasts. Cool air washed over her skin, and he lowered his mouth to her breasts. When his tongue flicked over her sensitive bud, heat infused her everywhere. Instantly, it pooled in her belly and between her legs as desire came to life. Each flick of his tongue over her nipple sent spirals of pleasure through her that built to an almost unbearable need, so much so that she found herself pushing his head closer to her breast.

He took her bud in his warm, wet mouth and sucked it into the depths, eliciting a guttural moan from her and causing her to dig her nails into his shoulders and throw back her head. His long pulls on her nipple grew harder and faster, building an immense pressure inside her and making her heart pound so hard she could hear nothing else but the beat of it in her ears. His hand delved under her skirts to tug

down her unmentionables, and as he did, his hot skin grazed her outer thighs, causing her to nearly scream.

Before she knew what was happening, he backed her to the bed and gently laid her down. He kissed her neck, her face, and her lips, only to come back to her breasts the moment she was flat on the bed. Her body tingled from the contact of his mouth to her aching nipple. The harder he sucked, the more pleasure came, until she felt as if she were a bow drawn so tight she would snap.

“Alasdair!” she cried, knowing she was demanding he enter her, take her, make her his. She ached for him in a way she had not known was possible.

He rolled away for a moment, and she cried out her frustration, but when she looked to him, she saw he was ridding himself of his clothing. In a breath, he was naked and between her thighs. She set a hand to his chest to take him in. He stilled immediately, massive chest heaving, thigh muscles bunched, jaw flexed so tight a rigid line was pronounced. He wanted her as desperately as she wanted him, but with just a touch, he’d stilled for her.

Love spread through her, warm and welcome. “I love ye, Alasdair.”

He bent down and brushed soft kiss to her lips before claiming them for a more ravishing one. When he broke away, he said, “I love ye consumingly, Sorch.”

“Make me yers,” she said, thinking he was waiting for her to give him permission.

A slow smile tipped up the corners of his mouth, “My love, ye were mine the day we met.”

With that, he entered her slowly, filling her and pausing for one breath before he took her mouth again and kissed her fully as he entered her all the way. It pinched for a

breath, and he stayed still, clearly giving her time to adjust to him, but after a moment, she tapped him and their eyes locked.

“The pain will fade?”

“Aye,” he said, his voice husky with the strain of holding himself back. “The pain will fade, and pleasure and joy will follow.”

She suspected he spoke of more than this act, and it made her smile. “Go on then,” she told him, “let us find the pleasure and the joy together.”

“Ah, my love, my heart, we will. This day. Tomorrow. Always.”

They lay after, entwined in each other’s arms, her head on Alasdair’s chest, her leg thrown over his, and his hand running down the length of her hair as their breathing returned to normal. Sorcha had a thousand thoughts clamoring in her head, but two were louder than the rest. She looked up to catch Alasdair staring intently at her. “What is it?” she asked him, because he had such a serious expression on his face.

“Nae anything,” he said, but the depth of emotion in his tone and eyes said differently.

“Alasdair, it is something.”

He traced a finger across her forehead and over her right cheekbone. “Ye are just so verra beautiful that sometimes I am speechless when I look at ye, and I kinnae believe I have been blessed to find ye, to feel what I do for ye.”

She pressed her hand to his chest and scooted upward to kiss him briefly. When she settled back against him, she said, “I’ve made two decisions if it pleases ye.”

He gave her a peck on her nose. “Ye’ve a mind of yer own, so I’ve nary a doubt that ye will make decisions many times during our long life together that may nae exactly please me, but ye can make them, as ye have free will, and we will talk them through. Aye?”

Love flooded her for this man. She pressed a kiss to his heart and looked at him once more. “Aye. I’d like to give a portion of my dowry to my sister and her husband, so they might have some comforts. Would that be acceptable?”

“Aye, on one condition.”

She frowned at him. “What condition is that?”

“Let us bring them here for a nice long visit.”

Now, she kissed her incredible husband on the lips. “I was going to ask about that, just nae this night.”

He smiled at her. “I thought ye might wish that. Mayhap they’d wish to stay and live with us?”

“I would love that, but Ada’s husband is close with his family, so we will have to see.”

Alasdair nodded. “All right. What is yer other decision?”

She lay a hand on her belly and smiled at Alasdair. “If we’ve made a bairn tonight, and she is a lass, I’d like to name her Mariot Margaret, if that is all right with ye.”

“Lass,” he said, his voice husky, “I did nae think I could love ye more, but ye have just proven me wrong. It pleases me greatly, Sorcha. Thank ye.”

“Nay,” she said, pushing up toward him so their lips could brush once more, “thank ye for showing me how to leave the things behind that no longer served me, so I could embrace the things that fill me like love and ye,” she added teasingly.

To that, he responded by flipping her onto her back and filling her again with him, with love.

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Not even her careful preparations could prepare her for the barbarian who rescues her. Don’t miss the USA Today bestselling *Highlander Vows: Entangled Hearts* series, starting with the critically acclaimed *When a Laird Loves a Lady* . Faking her death would be simple, it was escaping her home that would be difficult.

One

England, 1357

Faking her death would be simple. It was escaping her home that would be difficult. Marion de Lacy stared hard into the slowly darkening sky, thinking about the plan she intended to put into action tomorrow—if all went well—but growing uneasiness tightened her belly. From where she stood in the bailey, she counted the guards up in the tower. It was not her imagination: Father had tripled the knights keeping guard at all times, as if he was expecting trouble.

Taking a deep breath of the damp air, she pulled her mother's cloak tighter around her to ward off the twilight chill. A lump lodged in her throat as the wool scratched her neck. In the many years since her mother had been gone, Marion had both hated and loved this cloak for the death and life it represented. Her mother's freesia scent had long since faded from the garment, yet simply calling up a memory of her mother wearing it gave Marion comfort.

She rubbed her fingers against the rough material. When she fled, she couldn't chance taking anything with her but the clothes on her body and this cloak. Her death had to appear accidental, and the cloak that everyone knew she prized would ensure her freedom. Finding it tangled in the branches at the edge of the sea cliff ought to be just the thing to convince her father and William Froste that she'd drowned. After all, neither man thought she could swim. They didn't truly care about her anyway. Her marriage to the blackhearted knight was only about what her hand could give the two men. Her father, Baron de Lacy, wanted more power, and Froste wanted her family's prized land. A match made in Heaven, if only the match didn't involve her...but it

did.

Father would set the hounds of Hell themselves to track her down if he had the slightest suspicion that she was still alive. She was an inestimable possession to be given to secure Froste's unwavering allegiance and, therefore, that of the renowned ferocious knights who served him. Whatever small sliver of hope she had that her father would grant her mercy and not marry her to Froste had been destroyed by the lashing she'd received when she'd pleaded for him to do so.

The moon crested above the watchtower, reminding her why she was out here so close to mealtime: to meet Angus. The Scotsman may have been her father's stable master, but he was her ally, and when he'd proposed she flee England for Scotland, she'd readily consented.

Marion looked to the west, the direction from which Angus would return from Newcastle. He should be back any minute now from meeting his cousin and clansman Neil, who was to escort her to Scotland. She prayed all was set and that Angus's kin was ready to depart. With her wedding to Froste to take place in six days, she wanted to be far away before there was even the slightest chance he'd be making his way here. And since he was set to arrive the night before the wedding, leaving tomorrow promised she'd not encounter him.

A sense of urgency enveloped her, and Marion forced herself to stroll across the bailey toward the gatehouse that led to the tunnel preceding the drawbridge. She couldn't risk raising suspicion from the tower guards. At the gatehouse, she nodded to Albert, one of the knights who operated the drawbridge mechanism. He was young and rarely questioned her excursions to pick flowers or find herbs.

"Off to get some medicine?" he inquired.

"Yes," she lied with a smile and a little pang of guilt. But this was survival, she reminded herself as she entered the tunnel. When she exited the heavy wooden door

that led to freedom, she wasn't surprised to find Peter and Andrew not yet up in the twin towers that flanked the entrance to the drawbridge. It was, after all, time for the changing of the guard.

They smiled at her as they put on their helmets and demi-gauntlets. They were an imposing presence to any who crossed the drawbridge and dared to approach the castle gate. Both men were tall and looked particularly daunting in their full armor, which Father insisted upon at all times. The men were certainly a fortress in their own right.

She nodded to them. "I'll not be long. I want to gather some more flowers for the supper table." Her voice didn't even wobble with the lie.

Peter grinned at her, his kind brown eyes crinkling at the edges. "Will you pick me one of those pale winter flowers for my wife again, Marion?"

She returned his smile. "It took away her anger as I said it would, didn't it?"

"It did," he replied. "You always know just how to help with her."

"I'll get a pink one if I can find it. The colors are becoming scarcer as the weather cools."

Andrew, the younger of the two knights, smiled, displaying a set of straight teeth. He held up his covered arm. "My cut is almost healed."

Marion nodded. "I told you! Now maybe you'll listen to me sooner next time you're wounded in training."

He gave a soft laugh. "I will. Should I put more of your paste on tonight?"

"Yes, keep using it. I'll have to gather some more yarrow, if I can find any, and mix

up another batch of the medicine for you.” And she’d have to do it before she escaped. “I better get going if I’m going to find those things.” She knew she should not have agreed to search for the flowers and offered to find the yarrow when she still had to speak to Angus and return to the castle in time for supper, but both men had been kind to her when many had not. It was her way of thanking them.

After Peter lowered the bridge and opened the door, she departed the castle grounds, considering her plan once more. Had she forgotten anything? She didn’t think so. She was simply going to walk straight out of her father’s castle and never come back. Tomorrow, she’d announce she was going out to collect more winter blooms, and then, instead, she would go down to the edge of the cliff overlooking the sea. She would slip off her cloak and leave it for a search party to find. Her breath caught deep in her chest at the simple yet dangerous plot. The last detail to see to was Angus.

She stared down the long dirt path that led to the sea and stilled, listening for hoofbeats. A slight vibration of the ground tingled her feet, and her heart sped in hopeful anticipation that it was Angus coming down the dirt road on his horse. When the crafty stable master appeared with a grin spread across his face, the worry that was squeezing her heart loosened. For the first time since he had ridden out that morning, she took a proper breath. He stopped his stallion alongside her and dismounted.

She tilted her head back to look up at him as he towered over her. An errant thought struck. “Angus, are all Scots as tall as you?”

“Nay, but ye ken Scots are bigger than all the wee Englishmen.” Suppressed laughter filled his deep voice. “So even the ones nae as tall as me are giants compared te the scrawny men here.”

“You’re teasing me,” she replied, even as she arched her eyebrows in uncertainty.

“A wee bit,” he agreed and tousled her hair. The laughter vanished from his eyes as

he rubbed a hand over his square jaw and then stared down his bumpy nose at her, fixing what he called his “lecturing look” on her. “We’ve nae much time. Neil is in Newcastle just as he’s supposed te be, but there’s been a slight change.”

She frowned. “For the last month, every time I wanted to simply make haste and flee, you refused my suggestion, and now you say there’s a slight change?”

His ruddy complexion darkened. She’d pricked that MacLeod temper her mother had always said Angus’s clan was known for throughout the Isle of Skye, where they lived in the farthest reaches of Scotland. Marion could remember her mother chuckling and teasing Angus about how no one knew the MacLeod temperament better than their neighboring clan, the MacDonalds of Sleat, to which her mother had been born. The two clans had a history of feuding.

Angus cleared his throat and recaptured Marion’s attention. Without warning, his hand closed over her shoulder, and he squeezed gently. “I’m sorry te say it so plain, but ye must die at once.”

Her eyes widened as dread settled in the pit of her stomach. “What? Why?” The sudden fear she felt was unreasonable. She knew he didn’t mean she was really going to die, but her palms were sweating and her lungs had tightened all the same. She sucked in air and wiped her damp hands down the length of her cotton skirts. Suddenly, the idea of going to a foreign land and living with her mother’s clan, people she’d never met, made her apprehensive.

She didn’t even know if the MacDonalds—her uncle, in particular, who was now the laird—would accept her or not. She was half-English, after all, and Angus had told her that when a Scot considered her English bloodline and the fact that she’d been raised there, they would most likely brand her fully English, which was not a good thing in a Scottish mind. And if her uncle was anything like her grandfather had been, the man was not going to be very reasonable. But she didn’t have any other family to turn to who would dare defy her father, and Angus hadn’t offered for her to go to his

clan, so she'd not asked. He likely didn't want to bring trouble to his clan's doorstep, and she didn't blame him.

Panic bubbled inside her. She needed more time, even if it was only the day she'd thought she had, to gather her courage.

"Why must I flee tonight? I was to teach Eustice how to dress a wound. She might serve as a maid, but then she will be able to help the knights when I'm gone. And her little brother, Bernard, needs a few more lessons before he's mastered writing his name and reading. And Eustice's youngest sister has begged me to speak to Father about allowing her to visit her mother next week."

"Ye kinnae watch out for everyone here anymore, Marion."

She placed her hand over his on her shoulder. "Neither can you."

Their gazes locked in understanding and disagreement.

He slipped his hand from her shoulder, and then crossed his arms over his chest in a gesture that screamed stubborn, unyielding protector. "If I leave at the same time ye feign yer death," he said, changing the subject, "it could stir yer father's suspicion and make him ask questions when none need te be asked. I'll be going home te Scotland soon after ye." Angus reached into a satchel attached to his horse and pulled out a dagger, which he slipped to her. "I had this made for ye."

Marion took the weapon and turned it over, her heart pounding. "It's beautiful." She held it by its black handle while withdrawing it from the sheath and examining it. "It's much sharper than the one I have."

"Aye," he said grimly. "It is. Dunnae forget that just because I taught ye te wield a dagger does nae mean ye can defend yerself from all harm. Listen te my cousin and do as he says. Follow his lead."

She gave a tight nod. "I will. But why must I leave now and not tomorrow?"

Concern filled Angus's eyes. "Because I ran into Froste's brother in town and he told me that Froste sent word that he would be arriving in two days."

Marion gasped. "That's earlier than expected."

"Aye," Angus said and took her arm with gentle authority. "So ye must go now. I'd rather be trying te trick only yer father than yer father, Froste, and his savage knights. I want ye long gone and yer death accepted when Froste arrives."

She shivered as her mind began to race with all that could go wrong.

"I see the worry darkening yer green eyes," Angus said, interrupting her thoughts. He whipped off his hat and his hair, still shockingly red in spite of his years, fell down around his shoulders. He only ever wore it that way when he was riding. He said the wind in his hair reminded him of riding his own horse when he was in Scotland. "I was going to talk to ye tonight, but now that I kinnae..." He shifted from foot to foot, as if uncomfortable. "I want te offer ye something. I'd have proposed it sooner, but I did nae want ye te feel ye had te take my offer so as nae te hurt me, but I kinnae hold my tongue, even so."

She furrowed her brow. "What is it?"

"I'd be proud if ye wanted te stay with the MacLeod clan instead of going te the MacDonalds. Then ye'd nae have te leave everyone ye ken behind. Ye'd have me."

A surge of relief filled her. She threw her arms around Angus, and he returned her hug quick and hard before setting her away. Her eyes misted at once. "I had hoped you would ask me," she admitted.

For a moment, he looked astonished, but then he spoke. "Yer mother risked her life te

come into MacLeod territory at a time when we were fighting terrible with the MacDonalds, as ye well ken.”

Marion nodded. She knew the story of how Angus had ended up here. He’d told her many times. Her mother had been somewhat of a renowned healer from a young age, and when Angus’s wife had a hard birthing, her mother had gone to help. The knowledge that his wife and child had died anyway still made Marion want to cry.

“I pledged my life te keep yer mother safe for the kindness she’d done me, which brought me here, but, lass, long ago ye became like a daughter te me, and I pledge the rest of my miserable life te defending ye.”

She gripped Angus’s hand. “I wish you were my father.”

He gave her a proud yet smug look, one she was used to seeing. She chortled to herself. The man did have a terrible streak of pride. She’d have to give Father John another coin for penance for Angus, since the Scot refused to take up the custom himself.

Angus hooked his thumb in his gray tunic. “Ye’ll make a fine MacLeod because ye already ken we’re the best clan in Scotland.”

Mentally, she added another coin to her dues. “Do you think they’ll let me become a MacLeod, though, since my mother was the daughter of the previous MacDonald laird and I’ve an English father?”

“They will,” he answered without hesitation, but she heard the slight catch in his voice.

“Angus.” She narrowed her eyes. “You said you would never lie to me.”

His brows dipped together, and he gave her a long, disgruntled look. “They may be a

bit wary,” he finally admitted. “But I’ll nae let them turn ye away. Dunnae worry,” he finished, his Scottish brogue becoming thick with emotion.

She bit her lip. “Yes, but you won’t be with me when I first get there. What should I do to make certain that they will let me stay?”

He quirked his mouth as he considered her question. “Ye must first get the laird te like ye. Tell Neil te take ye directly te the MacLeod te get his consent for ye te live there. I kinnae vouch for the man myself as I’ve never met him, but Neil says he’s verra honorable, fierce in battle, patient, and reasonable.” Angus cocked his head as if in thought. “Now that I think about it, I’m sure the MacLeod can get ye a husband, and then the clan will more readily accept ye. Aye.” He nodded. “Get in the laird’s good graces as soon as ye meet him and ask him te find ye a husband.” A scowl twisted his lips. “Preferably one who will accept yer acting like a man sometimes.”

She frowned at him. “ You are the one who taught me how to ride bareback, wield a dagger, and shoot an arrow true.”

“Aye.” He nodded. “I did. But when I started teaching ye, I thought yer mama would be around te add her woman’s touch. I did nae ken at the time that she’d pass when ye’d only seen eight summers in yer life.”

“You’re lying again,” Marion said. “You continued those lessons long after Mama’s death. You weren’t a bit worried how I’d turn out.”

“I sure was!” he objected, even as a guilty look crossed his face. “But what could I do? Ye insisted on hunting for the widows so they’d have food in the winter, and ye insisted on going out in the dark te help injured knights when I could nae go with ye. I had te teach ye te hunt and defend yerself. Plus, you were a sad, lonely thing, and I could nae verra well overlook ye when ye came te the stables and asked me te teach ye things.”

“Oh, you could have,” she replied. “Father overlooked me all the time, but your heart is too big to treat someone like that.” She patted him on the chest. “I think you taught me the best things in the world, and it seems to me any man would want his woman to be able to defend herself.”

“Shows how much ye ken about men,” Angus muttered with a shake of his head. “Men like te think a woman needs them .”

“I dunnae need a man,” she said in her best Scottish accent.

He threw up his hands. “Ye do. Ye’re just afeared.”

The fear was true enough. Part of her longed for love, to feel as if she belonged to a family. For so long she’d wanted those things from her father, but she had never gotten them, no matter what she did. It was difficult to believe it would be any different in the future. She’d rather not be disappointed.

Angus tilted his head, looking at her uncertainly. “Ye want a wee bairn some day, dunnae ye?”

“Well, yes,” she admitted and peered down at the ground, feeling foolish.

“Then ye need a man,” he crowed.

She drew her gaze up to his. “Not just any man. I want a man who will truly love me.”

He waved a hand dismissively. Marriages of convenience were a part of life, she knew, but she would not marry unless she was in love and her potential husband loved her in return. She would support herself if she needed to.

“The other big problem with a husband for ye,” he continued, purposely avoiding, she

suspected, her mention of the word love , “as I see it, is yer tender heart.”

“What’s wrong with a tender heart?” She raised her brow in question.

“’Tis more likely te get broken, aye?” His response was matter-of-fact.

“Nay. ’Tis more likely to have compassion,” she replied with a grin.

“We’re both right,” he announced. “Yer mama had a tender heart like ye. ’Tis why yer father’s black heart hurt her so. I dunnae care te watch the light dim in ye as it did yer mother.”

“I don’t wish for that fate, either,” she replied, trying hard not to think about how sad and distant her mother had often seemed. “Which is why I will only marry for love. And why I need to get out of England.”

“I ken that, lass, truly I do, but ye kinnae go through life alone.”

“I don’t wish to,” she defended. “But if I have to, I have you, so I’ll not be alone.” With a shudder, her heart denied the possibility that she may never find love, but she squared her shoulders.

“’Tis nae the same as a husband,” he said. “I’m old. Ye need a younger man who has the power te defend ye. And if Sir Frosty Pants ever comes after ye, you’re going te need a strong man te go against him.”

Marion snorted to cover the worry that was creeping in.

Angus moved his mouth to speak, but his reply was drowned by the sound of the supper horn blowing. “God’s bones!” Angus muttered when the sound died. “I’ve flapped my jaw too long. Ye must go now. I’ll head te the stables and start the fire as we intended. It’ll draw Andrew and Peter away if they are watching ye too closely.”

Marion looked over her shoulder at the knights, her stomach turning. She had known the plan since the day they had formed it, but now the reality of it scared her into a cold sweat. She turned back to Angus and gripped her dagger hard. "I'm afraid."

Determination filled his expression, as if his will for her to stay out of harm would make it so. "Ye will stay safe," he commanded. "Make yer way through the path in the woods that I showed ye, straight te Newcastle. I left ye a bag of coins under the first tree ye come te, the one with the rope tied te it. Neil will be waiting for ye by Pilgrim Gate on Pilgrim Street. The two of ye will depart from there."

She worried her lip but nodded all the same.

"Neil has become friends with a friar who can get the two of ye out," Angus went on. "Dunnae talk te anyone, especially any men. Ye should go unnoticed, as ye've never been there and won't likely see anyone ye've ever come in contact with here."

Fear tightened her lungs, but she swallowed. "I didn't even bid anyone farewell." Not that she really could have, nor did she think anyone would miss her other than Angus, and she would be seeing him again. Peter and Andrew had been kind to her, but they were her father's men, and she knew it well. She had been taken to the dungeon by the knights several times for punishment for transgressions that ranged from her tone not pleasing her father to his thinking she gave him a disrespectful look. Other times, they'd carried out the duty of tying her to the post for a thrashing when she'd angered her father. They had begged her forgiveness profusely but done their duties all the same. They would likely be somewhat glad they did not have to contend with such things anymore.

Eustice was both kind and thankful for Marion teaching her brother how to read, but Eustice lost all color any time someone mentioned the maid going with Marion to Froste's home after Marion was married. She suspected the woman was afraid to go to the home of the infamous "Merciless Knight." Eustice would likely be relieved when Marion disappeared. Not that Marion blamed her.

A small lump lodged in her throat. Would her father even mourn her loss? It wasn't likely, and her stomach knotted at the thought.

"You'll come as soon as you can?" she asked Angus.

"Aye. Dunnae fash yerself."

She forced a smile. "You are already sounding like you're back in Scotland. Don't forget to curb that when speaking with Father."

"I'll remember. Now, make haste te the cliff te leave yer cloak, then head straight for Newcastle."

"I don't want to leave you," she said, ashamed at the sudden rise of cowardliness in her chest and at the way her eyes stung with unshed tears.

"Gather yer courage, lass. I'll be seeing ye soon, and Neil will keep ye safe."

She sniffed. "I'll do the same for Neil."

"I've nay doubt ye'll try," Angus said, sounding proud and wary at the same time.

"I'm not afraid for myself," she told him in a shaky voice. "You're taking a great risk for me. How will I ever make it up to you?"

"Ye already have," Angus said hastily, glancing around and directing a worried look toward the drawbridge. "Ye want te live with my clan, which means I can go te my dying day treating ye as my daughter. Now, dunnae cry when I walk away. I ken how sorely ye'll miss me," he boasted with a wink. "I'll miss ye just as much."

With that, he swung up onto his mount. He had just given the signal for his beast to go when Marion realized she didn't know what Neil looked like.

“Angus!”

He pulled back on the reins and turned toward her. “Aye?”

“I need Neil’s description.”

Angus’s eyes widened. “I’m getting old,” he grumbled. “I dunnae believe I forgot such a detail. He’s got hair redder than mine, and wears it tied back always. Oh, and he’s missing his right ear, thanks te Froste. Took it when Neil came through these parts te see me last year.”

“What?” She gaped at him. “You never told me that!”

“I did nae because I knew ye would try te go after Neil and patch him up, and that surely would have cost ye another beating if ye were caught.” His gaze bore into her. “Ye’re verra courageous. I reckon I had a hand in that ’cause I knew ye needed te be strong te withstand yer father. But dunnae be mindless. Courageous men and women who are mindless get killed. Ye ken?”

She nodded.

“Tread carefully,” he warned.

“You too.” She said the words to his back, for he was already turned and headed toward the drawbridge.

She made her way slowly to the edge of the steep embankment as tears filled her eyes. She wasn’t upset because she was leaving her father—she’d certainly need to say a prayer of forgiveness for that sin tonight—but she couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d never see Angus again. It was silly; everything would go as they had planned. Before she could fret further, the blast of the fire horn jerked her into motion. There was no time for any thoughts but those of escape.