



The Dark Highlander's Heart (Thorns Of The Highlands #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: In the face of duty, can their forbidden love survive?

Having conquered his past demons, Bryan's loyalty to his laird and friend is unwavering. As Captain of the Guard, he's willing to go to extreme lengths to fight the looming threat of the McGregors to prove his worth to Laird Alex—even if it means betraying his own beliefs and abducting a lady.

Katherine, often overshadowed by her older sister Romily, possesses a kind and gentle spirit. Her quiet compliance shatters when she learns of her sister's imprisonment by the Oliphant Clan. When the Oliphant Captain takes her back to his clan, her determination and loyalty will be swiftly tested.

Instead of prejudice and animosity, she finds unexpected kindness and care in Oliphant Keep, especially from Bryan. However, duty outweighs desire, and Katherine becomes a pawn in the delicate peace between the McGregor and Oliphant Clans. Bryan must stifle his growing feelings and let her go, while Katherine faces a heart-wrenching choice between family loyalty and the greater good. Can love truly flourish when honor demands sacrifice?

Total Pages (Source): 26

PROLOGUE

“N o, no, ye’re doing it all bloody wrong!”

The voice of Laird Angus McGregor was as harsh and brittle as the morning frost that clung to the branches of the trees surrounding him. His icy breath created clouds around his thick red beard, and his skin was pale from the deep chill in the air.

He was addressing his firstborn child, Romilly, as she swung a sword that was far too big for her tender age of ten. She had attempted to shave a series of smaller branches off the bough of a denuded willow tree, as he had instructed—a strike which would have required tremendous skill and precision. Instead, she’d lost control of the weapon completely, clumsily smacking a large patch of bark off the trunk.

Her nine-year-old sister, Katherine, watched from a short-distance away, as she often did during Romilly’s grueling training sessions. It wasn’t that she was genuinely interested in all the sword-swinging, archery, and other forms of martial combat that their father insisted Romilly undertake; indeed, she wasn’t certain Romilly herself was interested in them either, beyond simply trying to make him happy.

No, it was merely that they were sisters, and so if Romilly was to bear the shame and agony of being put through her paces, then Katherine felt the least she could do was show some solidarity.

There was, perhaps, some part of her that occasionally wished Angus would make Katherine train for a while. This was partially because she wished to relieve her older sister of the burdens he placed upon her, and also because it might mean he would

give some of his attention to his younger daughter instead of largely ignoring her.

“Again, lass, again!” Angus insisted hoarsely. “And this time, do it as I showed ye!”

“The sword is so heavy,” Romilly muttered, trying to heft it again.

“But yer will should be strong enough tae lift it!” he snapped. “Now stop whinging and do it!”

Romilly’s face became a mask of grim determination. Her teeth were clenched so tightly that Katherine could see the muscles twitching in her jaw. Her eyes burned with the desire to prove herself to her father, and with a loud yell, she raised the blade and brought it down at a sharp angle. In doing so, she managed to clear most of the twigs she’d been aiming for.

“Aye, that’s better, right enough,” Angus grumbled. “But it still needs work.”

“I still dinnae see why it matters that I learn all of this,” Romilly said under her breath. “Ye keep telling us ye’ll have a son one day, and that he’ll be yer heir. I cannae be a soldier or a laird, so why bother teaching me these things?”

Angus snatched the sword from her hand and thrust it deep into the icy ground. Then he bent to one knee, so he could put a hand on his daughter’s shoulder and look her directly in the eye.

“‘Tis true, ye shall never lead an army tae war, nor shall ye rule over our clan,” he told her earnestly. “But when yer brother is born someday, he’ll nay have tae rule alone. He will have ye tae guide and help him in all matters. He will have a strong, cunning, loyal sister tae rely on for whatever he might require.” He held up a finger. “This will be of particular importance when ye are married tae the son of another clan. Ye shall play the part of the dutiful wife, but all the while, ye will remain truly a

McGregor, and the instrument of our will in whatever way we require.”

Romilly nodded solemnly, as she always did when their father spoke of his long-term plans for his children. “I’ll nae fail ye, father,” she promised.

Angus nodded briskly, rising again. “I know ye won’t. Someday, lass, ye will help us conquer all of our rivals and enemies so that we may become the most powerful clan in all of Scotland. Now, let us continue yer lessons, shall we? Pull the blade from the ground.”

Romilly seemed full of renewed vigor and purpose. She gripped the handle of the sword and pulled at it fiercely, grunting and growling. At first, Katherine was certain that the blade would remain where it was, for with her skinny arms, it seemed impossible for Romilly to free it from the hard earth.

But through sheer force of will, Romilly managed to loosen the blade enough to pluck it from the ground.

Katherine applauded, and Romilly smiled at her—but if Angus noticed Katherine’s presence at all, he gave no sign. He simply clapped Romilly on the back proudly.

“Well done, lassie! Ye see? Strength of arm means little compared to strength of heart, and ye have more than enough of that. Even if ye never cross swords with another, ye shall always be my warrior.”

Had Angus ever spoken words of kindness or encouragement to Katherine? If so, she could not recall them. From the moment of her birth, when Angus saw that he had another daughter instead of the son he’d so desperately wanted, all of his attention went to Romilly.

In some ways, Katherine thought that his tutelage of Romilly might be his way of

practicing for when a son did finally arrive. The more time passed without that happening, though, the more it appeared as though his heir might never be born; the more it seemed like he was drafting Romilly into that role, in case his dearest wish was never granted.

Not that anyone dared to speak that possibility aloud.

Another hour passed, and by the time the training was done for the day, Romilly's lips were blue and her teeth chattered. However, most of the willow's thin branches lay on the snowy forest floor, like the severed limbs of unlucky opponents.

Angus and Romilly walked back to the McGregor Keep together, with Katherine tagging along behind. Every few minutes, Romilly glanced over her shoulder to make sure Katherine was still keeping pace with them, and Katherine was tremendously grateful for that. Their father ignored her so firmly, and more often than not, their mother Annabel spent her days locked in her bedchamber due to her frequent and terrible headaches. Between the two of them, Katherine sometimes felt like little more than a gloomy phantom wandering the corridors of their sprawling fortress. There were times when she wondered: If I were to simply vanish this instant, how long would it take for my mother and father to notice? Hours? Days?

Romilly was generally the only person who took any notice of Katherine, and even then, her attentions were mostly committed to their father's instruction of her.

Katherine went to her room to play with her dolls (for at least they kept her company, even if they could not answer her when she spoke to them). She expected to remain alone for the remainder of the afternoon, and so she was surprised and delighted when Romilly came to see her. The older sister was fresh from a hot bath, and although her hands were still trembling from her earlier efforts, she seemed refreshed and happy.

“Did ye see how well I did today?” Romilly asked, sitting down next to Katherine. “He was pleased with me! He mostly hid it, of course, as he always does, but I could still tell!”

Katherine nodded. “Aye, ye were in fine form today.”

“Thank ye for coming tae watch me. ‘Tis appreciated, especially in such dreary weather.”

Her younger sister shrugged. “It’s so ye’ll know our father isn’t the only one who’s proud of ye. Even if ye are the only one he is proud of,” she added with a sigh.

Romilly took her hand, squeezing it. “He will come to see yer worth someday, Katherine. I am sure of it. And even if he never does, I do. And when my time comes tae serve this clan, I’ll have ye by my side.”

Katherine fervently hoped this prediction would come true someday.

Somehow, though, she doubted it.

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The years passed, and by the time Katherine turned nineteen, it was abundantly clear that the future Romilly spoke of would never come to pass.

By then, Angus had ceased to hope for a male heir, and became all the more obsessed with preparing Romilly to act as his implement of subtle conquest. He would observe her physical training all day, and by night, the two of them would adjourn to his study so that they might conceive their schemes until well past midnight. Sometimes Katherine would press her ear to the door as they spoke, and the details of their plotting often chilled her to the bone. They talked of destabilizing other clans from within through an arranged marriage, and wove such dark webs of manipulation and violence that Katherine could scarcely believe her ears.

Annabel's headaches grew more severe and constant, until she remained in her chamber day and night, rarely emerging even to eat. Angus did not seem to notice. He had long since given up on enjoying her company, and now his every waking moment was dedicated to his firstborn daughter.

Romilly's attentiveness to her younger sister waned, replaced with an almost maniacal focus on pleasing their father and ensuring the clan's supremacy. Gone were the days when she offered any support to Katherine whatsoever. Like the rest of the family, she barely seemed to notice her sibling's presence at all. On those rare occasions when she did, it was generally with annoyance and disdain, as though Katherine was distracting her from far more important matters.

And so Katherine roamed the castle aimlessly most days, quietly gathering sewing

implements and bits of fabric, whistling to herself as she did so. When she managed to collect enough of them, she went to the stables, selected a suitable horse, and rode to various villages in the McGregor lands. There, she would gather a dozen or so of the young lasses together and instruct them on how to sew more intricate and lovely patterns than their mothers could teach them.

When Katherine began this practice, many of the mothers objected, for they felt it was presumptuous for someone else to teach their daughters how to sew. They initially believed that it was Katherine's way of calling them inadequate and beneath her. However, they were in no position to refuse, for she was still of the clan's ruling family, even if her fellow McGregors did not think she was of much account.

None of that reflected what was in Katherine's heart, though. She merely wished to help, to make herself useful in any way, to feel as though her life had some purpose. When she sensed the mothers' displeasure, she made sure to tell them that she found the dress patterns they used to be perfectly adequate as well. She merely wished to show the young ladies how to create more elaborate clothes, like the ones worn by nobles. In doing so, they might adorn themselves with fancier attire, and feel better about themselves as a result.

After a while, when the women saw that Katherine's intentions were good, they were happy to have their daughters in attendance; indeed, many of them remained to watch and learn as well. Some of them even embraced it to the point that they became dressmakers themselves, and their husbands would ride to more distant towns and farms to sell them.

All of this made Katherine happy, but more than that, it gave her something to do. It presented a serviceable excuse to put the castle and its disagreeable inhabitants behind her, and forget her troubles for a while.

So she went about her business on a rainy and dreary day, riding to one of the nearer

villages and inviting the girls to the dryness and warmth of a barn so they would not be soaked and chilly during the lesson. They were delighted to see her as always, and for the next few hours, they watched her examples and listened to her teachings, hanging on her every word.

It was good to have anyone's prolonged attention, though Katherine would not admit that to herself as a motive for conducting these lessons. It made her feel less like a listless phantom overall.

Katherine knew she needed to leave soon, but the idea of returning to the stronghold pained her so that she searched for excuses to remain a while longer.

"Bonnie, how has yer father's leg been faring?"

"Quite well, thank ye fae askin'!" the young girl chirped.

He had injured himself rather badly the previous month while trying to remove the stones from his field, and so had been unable to tend to his farm or chores for a while.

"And ye, Fiona?" Katherine turned to one of the skinnier lasses, with a thick head of frizzy red hair. "Have ye yet managed tae secure the affections of that lad ye had yer eye upon?"

Fiona's face turned a deep scarlet, and she peered down at the ground bashfully. "Hamish has begun tae notice me, I think."

At this, the other girls squealed with delight, causing poor Fiona to blush even more fiercely.

But eventually, her time with these lasses ended, as it always did, and Katherine had to say her farewells and return to the castle. Every time she did, she wondered if any

of her family would notice if she simply rode in the other direction, away, forever.

She doubted it.

She had always had such musings with regard to her mother and father, but now she harbored those same doubts about her sister too. Romilly barely seemed to acknowledge her existence anymore, despite their former closeness.

These thoughts continued to traipse through Katherine's troubled mind as she took in the familiar sights on the road back home. There were few dwellings along the way, just the occasional tree or farm, and the overall silence of it could sometimes feel oppressive to her. She supposed it was merely that she dreaded her inevitable return to the stronghold.

This time, as she approached it, she saw a strange sight awaiting her; Romilly, standing by the front gates with her arms folded and a judgmental countenance.

"Been off to see those silly peasants again, have ye?" Romilly sneered when Katherine drew close enough to hear.

Katherine dismounted, her brown hair blowing gently in the breeze as she gazed at Romilly quizzically. "They are good people," she retorted, "and besides, what business is it of yers? My activities do ye no harm."

"They harm our entire family," her sister snapped, "for we are rulers, and not meant tae consort with a pack of lowborn ninnies! Because of ye, our people take us less seriously than they ought tae. Teaching them tae sew dresses and weave rugs will nae help our clan win battles or gain power!"

"There is more to life than such pursuits," Katherine told her quietly. "Far more. I pity ye, that ye do not see it."

“And I pity ye, that ye would prefer tae behave as a servant lass than a proper lady! Ye must learn yer place, Katherine! Ye must do more tae serve yer family!”

“My ‘family’ barely acknowledges my existence most days,” Katherine informed her archly. “Yerself included.”

To her surprise, Romilly’s face softened somewhat.

“‘Tis because we know ye have no interest in our affairs. But if that changed, if ye demonstrated that ye were willing tae take a more active role in things, then ye would be included. Sister, I know ye believe I dinnae care about ye, but I assure ye, nothing could be further from the truth. If I appear harsh, ‘tis only because I dinnae wish tae see ye follow the wrong path in life.”

“I know,” Katherine conceded. “I simply wish ye didnae feel the need tae be so bloody spiteful about it.”

She knew the words had been a mistake as soon as they left her mouth, but it was too late to take them back.

Romilly’s expression hardened again. Katherine was struck—not for the first time—by the similarities in their brown eyes, and by the differences as well; for although they were the same color, Romilly’s always seemed darker somehow, as though shadows perpetually clung to their edges.

“Spiteful, am I? Very well, do as ye please, and tae the devil with ye!” With that, she turned and stalked away.

Katherine sighed. For the briefest of moments, it seemed to her as though she might have her sister back. But then the moment vanished like a snowflake in the palm of her hand, and now she felt more alone than ever.

Later that evening, she joined the rest of the family for supper. It was one of the rare occasions when their mother chose to venture from her chamber, and so she felt it would be appropriate for her to attend as well, even though she had no appetite and was—as usual—largely ignored by the others.

As she picked at her supper, though, she slowly noticed that her father was watching her. She met his gaze, raising an eyebrow.

“Do ye intend tae starve yerself, is that it?” he growled.

“Mayhap I do,” Katherine shot back. She did her best to keep her expression neutral, but inwardly, she was quite hurt. He had barely spoken to her for weeks, and this was what he finally chose to say?

“Very well,” Romilly chimed in. “In that case, I shall ensure it doesn’t go tae waste!” She reached across the table and snatched Katherine’s plate away.

This was more than Katherine could bear. She’d had enough of tolerating her family’s meanness toward her. “Give that back! It’s mine tae eat or not, as I please!”

“In fact it is mine ,” the laird snarled, “along with everything else in this damned castle, tae do with as I wish. Ye forget yerself, Daughter.”

“Why should I not, when everyone else seems tae have forgotten me?” Katherine countered hotly.

“If ye refuse tae eat, then it ought tae go tae yer sister,” Angus insisted. “She will need all of her strength in the days ahead, and so it must be nourished. ye may sulk above an empty plate for all I care.”

“I should much prefer tae ‘sulk’ in my room!” Katherine replied, standing.

“Sit, Katherine,” Annabel said, rubbing her temples at the pain in her head. “Dinnae cause problems.”

“ye hear the way they speak tae me, ye see the way they treat me!” Katherine balked. “And ye accuse me of ‘causing problems’?”

“Yer sister spoke tae us of yer journey today,” her mother groaned. “Ye have been told over and over that it displeases us when ye mingle with the lowborn rubbish of the villages and farms.”

“At least it makes me feel useful!” Katherine retorted. “What is there for me here, but tae be ignored and mistreated?”

“There is the prospect of a marriage to a lad who will better our prospects and strengthen our clan,” Angus informed her. “That is what ye should be focused on, rather than wasting yer time with those who are beneath us.”

“Or perhaps I ought tae focus on war, bloodshed, sabotage, and other such acts of savagery, as ye and Romilly do!”

Angus’s eyes blazed, and he stood, his face twisted with rage. “Such endeavors may displease ye,” he rumbled, “but they shall save this clan.”

“Why does this clan need tae be saved?” Katherine demanded. “Are we doing so poorly that we are required tae drag other clans down? Is more money or land worth the sacrifice of our honor?”

“There is honor in power, and there is honor in victory,” her father told her. “Ye are of an age where ye ought tae understand that by now.”

“I understand is that all of yer plotting and scheming will likely end with my sister’s

imprisonment or death one day.”

“I am prepared tae take any risk, make any sacrifice, for our people,” Romilly said coldly. “Can ye say the same?”

Katherine did not know how to reply to such madness.

As it turned out, however, she did not need to. Angus gestured to one of the servants at the door. “Escort my youngest daughter tae her room, and be sure that she stays there. Nay more venturing out among the peasants for her, and no more back-talk either.”

Katherine did not need to be led. She went to her chamber and slammed the door behind her, wondering if she would forever feel like a prisoner in her own home.

Katherine stood in the courtyard of Castle Oliphant, surrounded by hundreds of members of that clan; all of them roaring loudly and shaking their fists in the air.

How had she gotten here? She did not know.

However, when she peered over the heads of the spectators in front of her, she was horrified to see a hooded executioner standing next to a stone. There was dried gore on his clothes, and in his meaty hands, he gripped the handle of a huge double-bladed axe.

The main doors to the castle swung open, and Laird Alex emerged, his yellow hair gleaming in the afternoon sunlight. His hand was clamped around Romilly's upper arm.

Katherine's sister looked as though she had been dragged through the brambles and briars of hell itself. Her hands were bound in front of her. Her hair was tangled, her dress was in tatters, her pallor was ghostly, and her eyes were wild and full of fright. Her fingertips were bloody, with many of the nails broken off.

"Let this be the fate of all traitors," Alex bellowed to the crowd. "All McGregors!"

Katherine opened her mouth to scream, but no sound would come out. She tried to run toward her sister, but no matter how many people she pushed past, Romilly seemed no closer.

Romilly was forcibly shoved down, her head pressed against the flat stone.

The hooded man raised his axe; brought it down hard; Katherine could hear its swish as it cut through the air.

And before the blow landed, she sat up in bed, wide-eyed, gasping for breath.

A nightmare. That was all it had been, despite how real it felt.

For the rest of the night, Katherine found herself unable to sleep. She tossed and turned, still burning with the injustice of her family's words and actions, and the hideous imagery her mind had just conjured.

When the sun rose and she, at last, conceded that slumber would not visit her, Katherine rose and dressed. As she prepared for the day, she wondered why she bothered to make herself presentable in any way, or even leave her chamber at all, knowing that her presence was unwanted.

She opened the door, and found Romilly waiting for her in the hall. The flinty look was gone from her older sister's eyes, and her face reflected a ghost of the tenderness she had once shown for Katherine.

"I am dreadfully sorry we quarreled at supper last night," Romilly told her earnestly. "I didnae behave myself as I ought tae have."

Katherine wished she could simply accept the apology—since those were rare indeed coming from her sister—but her anger and hurt were still too near the surface for her to allow herself that.

"Ye didnae stand up for me when our parents heaped their rebuke upon me needlessly, either."

Ah, there it was; Romilly's more familiar expression of pitiless dismissal returned, and she crossed her arms.

"That is because ye dinnae show them the respect they are due. They ask so little of ye, and still, ye fail this family in every way ye can."

"So little?" Katherine balked. "Tae one day agree tae marry some fellow I've never met, only tae plot against him and his clan? Tae dishonor myself so shamefully?"

"Yer honor is nothing compared tae the honor of the McGregor Clan," Romilly huffed. "They have told ye that many times, and so have I. Ye are simply being selfish."

"'Tis nay the life I desire, nor the life I deserve. If my only choices are tae fling away any chance at happiness in this life by obeying father or tae spend it locked away in my room, then I'll choose the latter! I wish tae spend my days helping people, not bloody ruining them."

Romilly sighed. "I once felt as ye did, Sister, though it may be difficult for ye tae believe. Then I grew up, and came tae understand that my needs are naught compared tae those of our people. Ye and I were fortunate tae be born into the family that rules over this clan. That has afforded us a great deal of privilege, and with it comes tremendous responsibility."

This only made Katherine all the more angry. "How dare ye speak tae me as though I am some ignorant child? I am old enough tae know my own mind and heart, and tae listen tae the dictates of my conscience. I dinnae believe that loyalty tae family is enough tae justify hideous deeds."

Her sister's eyes burned with fury, and she stomped her foot. "In that case, I may as well tell ye that father has said if ye haven't changed yer mind, ye may remain in yer

room for the rest of this day, and the next, and the day after, until ye have come tae yer senses!”

“Very well,” Katherine withdrew into her room and slammed the door. She heard Romilly’s footsteps retreating, and when they had faded entirely, she threw herself back on the bed with tears in her eyes.

Could she be in the wrong, she wondered? She did not wish to entertain the notion that following one’s conscience could be a mistake, but it seemed as though her entire world was intent on making her believe otherwise, and she felt she could only fight against everyone’s constant insistence for so long. How many more years could she truly bear the scorn of her own family?

Katherine tried to remind herself that there were those who appreciated her and her efforts; the villagers and farmers, for example, who had attended her sewing lessons and thanked her profusely. The gratitude in their eyes had nourished her on days when she felt she had nothing else to cling to.

But it always had to end eventually. She always had to return to the castle sooner or later, and when she did, she knew that she would have to endlessly attempt to justify her activities to her family. It exhausted her soul and wore her down.

Her stomach growled loudly, and she wished she could take breakfast. But she knew this was part of her punishment, so she rolled over and cried into her pillow, feeling utterly forlorn.

Hours passed, though she did not bother to count them, for she knew time would remain meaningless as long as she remained confined. As the sun began to descend in the west, however, she heard a knock at her door at last.

Her heart clenched into a tight fist at the thought that it might be her father, come to

insult her more. She was certain it would not be her mother, for no doubt the woman was plagued by yet another of her headaches.

When she opened the door, though, she was surprised to find Romilly on the other side with a small plate of food. “I thought ye might be ravenous by now,” she said, keeping her expression neutral. “So I brought ye this. I managed tae sneak it out of the larder.”

Katherine wished she could stand on principle, for she was still sore of heart from their previous exchange. Her empty belly would not allow it, though, and so she accepted it and allowed Romilly to enter.

“Am I tae assume that our father wishes me tae remain in here for the foreseeable future?” Katherine asked.

“He does, aye,” Romilly confirmed, sitting on the edge of the bed. “However, I believe there might be a way tae convince him otherwise.”

“Oh?” Katherine raised an eyebrow.

“He is sending me out tomorrow on a mission of the utmost importance,” her sister explained. “If ye agree tae come along and assist me, it would prove yer worth tae him at last, and his treatment of ye would improve. I’m sure of it!”

“What sort of mission?”

“One I cannae reveal to ye until I have yer word that ye will join in it,” Romilly replied.

“I cannae agree to any such thing without knowing more,” Katherine exclaimed incredulously. “No sane person would!”

“Ye could simply trust yer sister ,” Romilly urged. “Ye could choose tae believe me when I tell ye that the cause will be righteous; that all will be well, for I shall protect ye. That it is for the good of the clan, and will earn our father’s favor.”

Katherine shook her head. “Nay, to commit to such a thing would be sheer madness. I know ye care for me, Romilly, and that ye are earnest in yer assurances. Even so, ye must understand how poorly our father is using ye for his own ends. Ye are not a blade to be wielded, ye are a woman with a mind and heart of her own!”

“Aye, I am, and I have chosen to give both to our clan and its welfare,” Romilly countered. “I had thought that, with a bit more time to think it over, ye might make a similar choice. I see now that I was mistaken.” She rose from the bed and headed for the door. “Perhaps, when I return victorious, ye will finally see how stubbornly wrong ye have been. Until then, there is nothing more I can do for ye. Rot in this chamber endlessly, and see if I care!”

And with that, she left again.

Katherine was disheartened, but at least she was no longer starving, and that helped her outlook slightly. She’d been having fights such as these with Romilly for years, and she supposed she could survive this latest one, even if it hurt her.

Over the next weeks, Katherine remained confined, with nothing to occupy her attention apart from staring at the wall. Servants brought food—albeit infrequently, no doubt at her father’s insistence—and Katherine pleaded with them to allow her a few books. The contents of Angus’s library were meager indeed, for he did not much enjoy reading, but anything would have been better than the ennui that was crushing Katherine from all sides. They staunchly refused for fear that they would face punishment if they made the lass’s imprisonment any easier.

So she continued to sit in her own woe and uncertainty, until at last, one of the

servants informed her she was allowed to leave the room.

As she did, she felt a bit light-headed due to her sporadic eating schedule and general lack of exercise. Nevertheless, she forced herself to walk a straight line to her father's study, and knocked upon the door.

"Come in," he called out gruffly.

When she entered, he afforded her the briefest of scowls, then continued to review the papers upon his desk. "Now that ye've been released, Daughter, I should think ye'd find someplace else tae occupy yerself."

Katherine took a deep breath, steadying her nerves. "I wished tae thank ye for freeing me," she told him. This was a lie, for it was his spite that had confined her to begin with—rather, she had another, more important reason for visiting him, one she knew she ought to work up to.

He grunted, his bushy eyebrows drawing together. "I dinnae suppose I could have kept ye there indefinitely, no matter how thick-headed ye've chosen to act. If ye're determined to disappoint us and neglect yer duties, so be it."

"Neither of those are my intention."

"Aye, but both are the result of yer damned selfishness," he snapped. "Now, if ye've no further reason tae take up my time..."

"I do, in fact." She summoned her courage. "Is Romilly back yet? She had mentioned that ye would send her somewhere, tae carry out an important task."

"And she agreed," he cut in. "And did so with neither question nor complaint, as a good daughter should."

“Might I know where she has gone?”

Now he looked up again, and squinted at her. “Why on earth would ye need tae know such a thing?”

She met his gaze with difficulty. “For my own peace of mind, that’s all.”

Angus stood slowly, bristling. “I find that yer inquiry raises grave doubts in my mind. That, indeed, it makes me wonder, were I tae confide in ye, would ye then use that information tae sabotage yer sister’s efforts?”

Katherine felt the blood drain from her face at such an accusation. “How could ye believe that of me?”

“Because ye have shown no loyalty,” he roared. “Because ye are a wretched and disobedient lass who believes the sun ought tae rise and set based solely upon yer childish sense of right and wrong, instead of what ye owe yer family and yer clan. Because our priorities are so damned apart from each other’s that I feel as though ye are little more than a stranger haunting this castle; one who takes up food and space and does nothing tae earn it.”

Katherine’s lower lip quivered. She had no words in response to such an onslaught. She had long suffered his ire and disapproval, and she had almost come to believe there was nothing left for him to say that could hurt her so deeply.

She was heartbroken to discover how wrong she’d been.

“Now leave my sight at once,” he growled, taking his seat again and returning to his scrolls. “Do as ye please, for ‘tis all ye’ll ever do anyway. Just do it away from me so that I might attend tae my duties.”

Katherine turned and left his study, her eyes brimming with tears.

She did not know where she would go or what she would do. Her instinct was to walk through the castle gates, and continue until she found a cliff of suitable height to fling herself from. Her own existence had been dismissed as utterly useless, and that was a blow from which she did not believe she could recover.

As she walked out into the courtyard in a daze, however, she was sharply interrupted by a commotion at the gates. A messenger rode through, looking flustered and red-faced.

“Lady Romilly has been imprisoned,” he announced breathlessly, dismounting and running past Katherine. “She is in the dungeons of the Oliphant Clan!”

The shock of the news hit Katherine like a bucket of icy water, and she reeled slightly, forcing herself not to swoon.

It seemed her worst fears had come true.

Bryan Black, the captain of the guard for the Oliphant Clan, whistled as he made his way down into the dungeons.

In truth, the happy tune on his lips in no way reflected the feelings in his heart.

Rather, he forced himself to whistle jauntily, especially when passing the sentries on the way into the dankness and gloom. It represented his best effort to hide how uneasy it made him to venture down there—from others, and from himself as well.

He was not accustomed to feelings of fear, having guarded the Oliphant Castle for so many years. He'd patrolled the borders of the land, clashed with bandits, even faced death upon fields of battle. He was largely known by his fellows to be unflappable, able to smile and laugh in the presence of danger. It was a facade he'd worked hard to cultivate; not out of ego or fear of being thought weak, but largely because he felt he owed it to those under his command. No one willing to take up arms in defense of their clan ought to see his captain cowed, and feel a sharper panic as a result.

The dungeons, though. They were another matter entirely, not that he'd ever confided those feelings to anyone.

It would have been easy enough for Bryan to blame the harsh chill in the air, the maddeningly constant sound of dripping water, the moans, and screams of the prisoners, or even the skittering rats and spiders for his dread. And true enough, all of those things contributed to it in their own small ways.

But more than any of that, it was the idea of the accursed place.

Bryan had long since made peace with the notion of his own death. His entire purpose was to lay his life on the line for his clan, and he accepted the risks gladly. It might come from an arrow in the line of duty, or from being captured and executed. Even injuries that would leave him unable to walk or function on his own did not necessarily frighten him, for he'd seen such fates befall comrades, and he had likewise seen them endure.

The notion of losing freedom, though, or being forever condemned to a hellish place of shadow and sickness and misery, sent a shudder through him; one he couldn't seem to shake.

He knew he would never spend a day in these dungeons as a prisoner, naturally, given his loyalty to his laird. That did not guarantee that he would not see the inside of some other clan's dungeons in the fullness of time, and in his most private moments, he fervently prayed he would never be taken alive.

Therefore, it was to conceal all of that doom in his mind that he made his best effort to appear cheerful and carefree, for he had business with one of the prisoners.

Not that he expected a different result from the ones he'd gotten the previous dozen or so times he'd made the trip down to see her.

Oh, Romilly McGregor was a stubborn one, and no mistake. She was hard as a coffin nail, so much so that Bryan had to admire her on some level. Most men would have gladly confessed by now to earn better living conditions for themselves, let alone women. Still, there she sat, time after time, implacable, unwilling to concede even the smallest piece of useful information. Her face remained stony, but for the blackness of the sheer hatred in her eyes at the sight of him.

I might just as well have saved myself the walk down here , Bryan thought, as I am certain of the outcome .

Except that wasn't true. Laird Alex had specifically ordered him to make another attempt, and Bryan could no more disregard an order from him than he could spontaneously detach one of his own limbs.

He stopped just outside the cell, took a moment to compose himself, then entered.

Romilly sat on a slab of cold stone in her fraying and filthy dress, her hair matted, her skin pale and chafed, her fingernails chewed down to the bloody quick. Her back was straight, though, her shoulders squared, her posture defiant as ever.

“Come tae waste a bit more time with me, haven't ye, Captain?” Her tone was almost cheery.

Bryan suppressed another shiver. How could she remain so damnably calm in such surroundings? For that matter, how could he be expected to?

“I dinnae find our time together tae be a waste at all,” he replied, keeping his tone casual. “I have been most impressed by ye, as it happens.”

“Oh?” She laughed hoarsely. “Not by my looks, surely, for despite the dearth of looking glasses down here, I can be reasonably sure those departed me some weeks ago. It has been roughly a month, since my imprisonment, has it not?”

Yes. A month had indeed passed since Romilly McGregor's treachery had been revealed, and she had been clapped in irons. Bryan would not give her the satisfaction of confirming that, though. He was well aware that being unsure of the passage of time was one of the defining punishments of this ghastly place. It unsettled him all the more.

Instead, he said, “Nay, not yer looks. Yer strength of heart. I have known few people who would endure such hardship as ye have, and remain resolute.”

“Ye have known few McGregors, then,” she answered, “for we are none of us weaklings like the Oliphants.”

“Weaklings, eh?” He rocked back and forth on his heels, as though calmly discussing the weather. “Well, despite any weaknesses ye may feel we possess, we still seem tae have prevailed over ye in the current situation.”

“Only momentarily,” she sneered.

Bryan stopped rocking, his eyebrows raising slowly. “Do ye mean tae say that ye intend escape, or that yer father intends invasion of our lands tae retrieve ye?”

For a moment, it looked like she might be about to respond, but then she set her jaw and looked away, remaining silent.

Inwardly, Bryan cursed himself for not taking things more slowly. If only he had eased into it instead, he might have tricked her into giving an answer. But he’d come to know that look of tight resolution on her face enough times before to know that the interview might as well conclude, for she would offer no further words—except perhaps for oaths and curses.

As he stood up, he decided to try once more anyway, if only so he could assure Alex that he had, “Lady Romilly, yer steadfastness is remarkable as ever, and ye have a sharp mind to go with it. We could use someone like ye on our side when the fighting begins. For that matter, perhaps with yer help, we might avoid bloodshed entirely.”

At that, she smirked, and there was an evil gleam in her eye. “There will be bloodshed, by the gallon. Oliphant blood. Yers shall be first, if I have any say in the

matter, but either way, ye shall die along with all of yer kinsmen!”

He sighed. So much for that, then.

Bryan plodded back up the steps to the main floor of the castle, and as he did, he felt the tight gauntlet of anxiety around his heart loosen. He hoped this would be the final time Alex would order him to speak to a prisoner, at least for a good long while.

When he reached the top of the stone steps, he was surprised to find Alex waiting for him.

“How did it go?” the laird inquired.

“Oh, it was bloody marvelous,” Bryan quipped. “She gave a tearful apology for trying tae murder yer bride, Isla, and she drew out a map of all the weaknesses in the McGregor defenses. Then she danced a hornpipe and sprouted wings from her.”

“Aye, ye’ve made yer point,” Alex chuckled wryly. “Still, the attempt had tae be made.”

“She’ll never talk tae us,” Bryan said more seriously. “If we’re tae have a chance against the McGregors, we shall need tae come up with a different strategy.”

“And we’d better do it soon,” the laird mused. “We’ve no way of knowing when or how they will come for us.”

“We can assume it won’t be as an army in full force,” the captain replied. “Their armies would nay be a match for ours, especially now that ye have allied us with Isla’s clan. Laird Angus may be a swine, but he’s clever enough tae know that. He’s used his oldest daughter as his weapon, bribed our own people tae betray us from within. His methods are devilishly subtle.”

“That is what makes them so dangerous,” Alex agreed. “And ‘tis all the more reason for us tae act quickly, before he has a chance tae do it again. If only we could end this peacefully somehow.”

“We still have not told Laird Angus that Romilly is in our dungeons. Perhaps if we do, he’ll be willing tae negotiate for her release? Perhaps he’ll forswear any violence?”

“Even if he did, we could nae trust him. He is not a man known for his honor, and he would nae hesitate tae offer his word with every intention of breaking it later. Meanwhile, we’ll have given up our only bargaining token.”

“We must take some action, that much is obvious. What shall we do? Kidnap the other daughter?” he asked jokingly.

Alex raised an eyebrow.

Bryan laughed incredulously. “That is yer plan?”

“Why not?” Alex replied. “It seems ye were right all along in saying that we must be willing tae do something drastic to stop a war before it starts. Angus used one of his children tae strike at us, and he might just as easily use the other as well. We can eliminate that possibility if she is in our custody. Then Angus shall have no remaining legacy tae call his own, and he will have tae agree tae our terms. Aye, and stick tae them too, for now he’ll know that his daughters are nay safe from us.”

“Dinnae mistake me, Laird Alex, for I am always happy tae hear ye agree that I was right about things,” Bryan quipped. “However, it seems tae me that the plan might be easier said than done. How can we be sure that such a mission can be carried off with no danger tae the younger daughter’s life? That would be a tricky bit of business, it seems tae me.”

“It is,” Alex agreed, “which is why I intend tae send the only man who could be trusted with such a delicate mission.”

It took a moment for Bryan to understand what Alex meant. When he did, his eyes widened.

“I would not risk asking it of anyone else. I understand how important it is for nothing tae go wrong. And there are no other soldiers or guardsmen who have shown yer talent for stealth. Which is how this must be accomplished, else we ensure open war after all.”

“Let me be certain I understand ye,” Bryan said slowly, still stunned by the strangeness of the request. “Ye are ordering me tae ride into enemy lands, sneak into the McGregor Stronghold, into the bedchamber of one of the laird’s daughters, and steal her off into the night? Ye expect me tae achieve all that, and without anything going wrong?”

“Almost.” There was a twinkle in Alex’s eye. “Ye shall ride into their lands, that part is true enough; I have no doubt at all that ye can do so while escaping detection. I have seen how ye can make yerself nearly invisible to enemies when that is what ye wish tae do. However, ye shall not need tae infiltrate the McGregor Stronghold, for Lady Katherine will not be within it when ye spirit her away.”

“How on earth can ye know such a thing?” Bryan demanded with a laugh. “Do ye have the birds and squirrels of the McGregor Clan working as yer eyes and ears?”

“Angus is nay the only one who can use spies tae suit his purposes. I have learned from certain less-than-loyal members of the McGregor Clan that on certain days, Lady Katherine rides out tae the villages and farms tae instruct the young women in sewing and other such skills. She remains there until just before the sun sets, more often than not, and then rides back tae the stronghold. ye shall catch her in transit,

where the path is distant enough from people tae ensure ye are not caught at it.”

“Are we tae believe she would travel unguarded on these excursions?” Bryan challenged doubtfully. “That she would make herself vulnerable tae such an attack?”

“That is what I have heard, aye.”

“And if ye’ve been lied to? What if there’s a struggle, and she’s injured or worse in the attempt?”

“If ye find the task impossible, ye may simply return and say so,” Alex told him evenly. “I trust ye tae make yer best effort short of that, as ye always have.”

There was nothing else for Bryan to say; it was clear that Alex had made up his mind, and he would do all he could to see it through, such was his absolute loyalty to his laird. Even if the details of the plan sounded like madness to him.

“Very well,” Bryan sighed. “I shall set off tomorrow at first light.”

“Excellent.” Alex nodded, clapped the Captain of the Guard on the shoulder, and walked off.

Bryan contemplated the task at hand for the remainder of the evening, still doubtful that he would succeed. What sort of laird would allow his youngest daughter to ride about without guardsmen, knowing that his older daughter was likely being held captive by a bitter rival?

If Angus cared so little for Lady Katherine’s safety, then how likely was it that he would involve her in any schemes against the Oliphants? Would that not make his errand folly?

That was not the only disquieting notion in his mind, though.

This was a lass who was open-hearted enough to spend time with the lowborn of her clan, assisting them. Could that be the same lass who would engage in villainy at her father's behest?

Had he counseled decisive action before? Yes, certainly. In his mind, that had taken the form of riding toward the McGregor Stronghold in force, and negotiating peace at the point of a sword if need be. He had believed that sheer numbers and intimidation might have done the trick, and he'd prepared himself for that.

But this? A man alone, risking his neck to grab a woman during daylight?

No, he did not like this mission one bit.

The sun rose upon the next day, and when it reached its zenith, Lady Katherine made her customary journey to the same towns she always visited. The people who gathered were even happier to see her than usual, for they had greatly missed her company during the previous month when she'd been imprisoned in her own room. She was glad of that; it made her feel as though she had done the right thing after all, sticking to her principles instead of giving in to her father.

The old laird had been even more miserable and mean-spirited than usual since word came of Romilly's imprisonment. He rarely slept or ate, and he spent most days wandering the corridors with his appearance in disarray pale, haunted, muttering to himself like a madman. From the few words Katherine could catch as he passed, it seemed he was fretting about the fact that he had not received any demands from the Oliphants—or, indeed, any direct word from them whatsoever, no acknowledgement that they even had Romilly in their dungeons.

He could not seem to make sense of that, and from what Katherine could tell, he

worried day and night that a message would finally come in the form of Romilly's head. For what else could they possibly intend by keeping her so long without word, except as a prelude to execution?

At one point, she took her father firmly by the shoulders, forcing him to look into her eyes. "Father, won't ye at least try tae negotiate with them for her freedom? Won't ye send any message at all tae break this-this stalemate?"

He peered at her as though her head had fallen off mid-sentence. "Are ye daft, lass? Tae do that would be as good as an admission of guilt. How else could I claim that I know they have her? And once such a thing is confirmed, once they know I've tried to meddle in their affairs, how do ye think they'll bloody respond? For God's sake, have I raised some sort of simpleton? Do ye nae know that that's exactly what they want us tae do?"

Katherine saw that it was hopeless to try to reason with him, and so she released his shoulders and allowed him to toddle along on his way, mumbling and weeping to himself. Angus was desperately trying to think his way out of this quandary, and the mental labor was evidently driving him insane.

Despite their past problems, Katherine still hated to see her father wasting away in such a fashion. She was equally dismayed that the small amount of time her mother had previously spent outside of her room had dwindled entirely. Now she never emerged, and the meals the servants brought her were generally sent back uneaten.

Finally, Katherine could stand it no longer. She was terrified that her mother would suffer a lonely and terrible death from grief and self-neglect, and so she tried the door one day and found it unlocked.

"Mother?" She took a step into the dark room, then another. "Mother, are ye ill?"

Annabel was lying on the bed, but when she heard these words, she sat bolt upright, exclaiming, “Romilly? My darling lass, are ye home?”

Then she saw that it was Katherine, and her face twisted into a mask of horror and rage.

“Get out,” she shrieked, grabbing a hairbrush from the table next to her and flinging it at Katherine. “Get out of here at once. Go!”

The brush hit Katherine’s forehead, and she cried out from shock, withdrawing immediately. She barely made it to her room before crumpling to the floor in tears, and she never made such an attempt to check on her mother again.

The only small comfort Katherine could take from any of it was that with her parents so distracted, neither of them heaped their customary abuse upon her. However, she was every bit as worried about Romilly as they were, and the panic and despair of it all gnawed at her spirit until she felt she could abide it no longer.

She fantasized about riding off on her own, going to Castle Oliphant, pleading before Laird Alex, finding some way to bring Romilly back. If she were able to do that, not only would her sister be safe, but her mother and father would finally appreciate her. Angus could no longer sneer that his youngest daughter was worthless, that she merely took up space while doing nothing for her clan.

Then all of them could live together, happily ever after.

She wept as these scenes played themselves out within her mind, for she knew that they would never come true. She had no idea what she could possibly say to the notoriously hard-headed Laird Alex, not if he had caught her sister in the act of something vile toward the Oliphant Clan. And clearly he had, else he would not have detained her.

And what, then, would stop him from tossing her in the dungeon next to Romilly?

The situation seemed hopeless, but during the few hours she could spend with the young lasses of the McGregor Clan, she was able to keep from dwelling on it too fiercely. She hated seeing the sun lower in the sky, for she knew it meant she would have to return to the bleakness of the castle.

So she put it off as long as she could, finding new excuses to remain, new inquiries to make about the women's loved ones, new sewing patterns and techniques to suggest. She waited until the underside of the swollen red sun touched the hilltops, staining them liquid gold. She even contemplated staying longer still, and riding back after dark. Why not? No one at the stronghold would miss her, and bandits rarely prowled these lands.

Still, she knew it would be irresponsible, and that she needed to remain clear-headed and strong while her family collapsed all around her. She said her goodbyes at last, reminding herself that she would return the next day, and the one after that.

Katherine mounted her horse and rode toward the stronghold, feeling herself wither inside as she drew closer to it. There was little upon the path, except for a horse stable at the halfway point near a copse of trees. Sometimes, when there was no one around to see, Katherine would whistle at the horses and delight in hearing their chorus of neighing in response. It had lightened her spirits when she was younger, made her feel deliriously silly.

Today, though, nothing felt humorous to her. She was merely tired, and sad.

Even so, as her horse galloped past the farm, the others greeted her with loud enthusiasm. It made her feel as though she were a familiar and welcome sight to them, and part of her was wistfully cheered by that, for it was more than she could say about the members of her own family.

Their chortles and snorts filled her ears even once she had passed the stable.

That was why she did not hear the frenzied hoofbeats behind her until it was too late. By the time she had a chance to peer over her shoulder, a muscled arm clamped around her waist and swept her out of her saddle.

Katherine could scarcely draw breath to scream before the powerful arm closed around her midsection, forcing the air back out of her sharply. With his other hand, her assailant produced a musty sack, putting it over her head. The hood was a grisly reminder of her previous nightmare, it drew a quivering groan from her.

Then he slipped what felt like a length of knotted rope around her wrists, tightening it. The entire abduction could not have taken more than five seconds, and now she was helpless, struggling, trying to cry out while he turned his horse and rode hard away from the stronghold.

Toward Oliphant territory.

Her darkest horrors seemed to be coming true. The Oliphants had dispatched someone to capture her as well, to further punish her father for whatever fiendish thing he and Romilly had plotted against them.

“Please,” she gasped, flexing her wrists against her bonds. “I have done nothing, I have taken nay part in the laird’s plans, whatever they may have been!”

“Ye may be telling the truth,” the man answered in a neutral tone. His mouth was next to her ear, and the strange warm tickle of his breath made her skin feel as though ants were crawling upon it. “However, that will likely matter little tae the man who sent me.”

“Tell me, I beg ye, is my sister alive?”

He let out a dry chuckle. “She lives, aye, and with a vengeance. And so shall ye, so long as ye dinnae cause any trouble.”

“But how is she? Has she been hurt?”

There was a tight pause. “We Oliphants dinnae harm innocent women. Pity ye and yers cannae make that claim.”

Katherine did not know what to make of his second remark, but she was flooded with relief that Romilly still lived.

“Will I be allowed tae see her?” she asked.

“That will nae be up tae me. Now, I have a handkerchief with me tae stifle ye. Will I be needing it?”

Katherine shook her head quickly.

“Good. Then we’ll have silence from ye until we’ve crossed over into Oliphant lands.”

Katherine did not know whether her captor was joking about the handkerchief. However, she was in no hurry to find out, so she remained quiet until they left her homeland. By then, night had fallen, and the moon was high. Now and then, the shrieks of owls pierced the gloom and echoed across the hillsides, their sounds giving voice to the sharp pangs of terror that Katherine dared not utter aloud.

What sort of man would drag an unarmed lass off into the night? How could his assurances with regard to her safety possibly be trusted?

What evil things might he do to her along the way to Castle Oliphant if he took a

mind to?

Katherine had no way of knowing precisely when they had crossed the border into Oliphant lands, due to the sack on her head impairing her vision. Nevertheless, she kept her mouth shut, trying not even to breathe too loudly until she felt the horse slow to a stop. Still, it seemed too soon for them to have reached the castle.

“Surely, we have not arrived yet?” she inquired, her voice muffled. She did her best to keep the abject fright from her tone. She worried that it might encourage him to terrorize her further if he knew he was able to get under her skin.

Her captor yanked the sack off her head, and she peered around her into the gloom of the evening.

“Nay,” he answered flatly, “but my horse has a thirst, and I thought ye might as well.” He gestured to a stream which reflected the moonlight, making it appear as a ribbon of shimmering silver.

The man dismounted, then offered a hand up to her so that she might do likewise despite her bound hands. She hesitated for a moment, wondering if this might be some ghastly trick in the offing. Perhaps he meant to jerk her down roughly so that she would fall face-down in the dirt, and he might enjoy a good laugh at her expense.

But for the first time since he’d scooped her from her own steed, she was able to get a proper look at him. He appeared to be in his early twenties, with chestnut-brown hair that rakishly hung to his shoulders. He was, easily, the tallest man she’d ever encountered, for starters. She supposed that ought to have made her all the more wary

of him, due to his imposing frame; there was a lithe grace and power within it that barely seemed contained, like the body of a dancer rather than a fighter. His physique was supple, calling to mind the image of a spruce branch, meant to bend instead of break.

She caught herself blushing at these mental comparisons, and wondered whether she was going mad, admiring a man who she ought to be terrified by. It was his eyes most of all, though, that kept her from trembling before him in fright.

They were a piercing green, like a pair of keen-faceted emeralds, catching and reflecting all the rays of the sunlight into a hypnotic ring of verdant hues. She saw guile in them, but no malice or violence, nothing that made her feel threatened.

Isn't that terribly peculiar? she wondered to herself. I do believe I would fear my own father's wrath and contempt over that of this stranger who has whisked me away!

"Drink, if ye will," the man said. His voice was a rich yet lilting baritone, as though it was never wholly far from amusement, no matter how serious the matter at hand. "I can assure ye, I didnae somehow poison the whole blasted stream the last time I passed it, anticipating tricking ye, or anything so nefarious as that."

Katherine allowed herself a wry half-smile at the fellow's droll jest, though her heart was still pounding at the strife and uncertainty of her situation.

"That would be quite a feat indeed. Might ye have accomplished it, I would surely die, knowing the Oliphants' inventiveness might well allow them tae prevail against my father's clan."

"Och, so it's yer father's clan, now that ye're my captive?" he chuckled. "Allow me tae guess; ye've always hated the man, ye've lived as a prisoner in yer own home yer entire bloody life. Why, ye've always truly been an Oliphant at heart, and if we'll

merely treat ye as an honored guest instead of tossing ye in the dungeons with yer vile sister, if we'll only make ye privy tae our most secret plans against yer brutish father, ye'll be a positive boon tae us. Ye'd swear it! Something like that, aye, as ye judge me tae have been born by the light of the last full moon?"

"I shall endure most of that smirking tirade without comment or complaint, for ye are more correct than ye know in yer estimation of my loyalty tae my father," Katherine shot back. "But I'll nae stand for my sister being called 'vile,' and certainly not by a man who wages wars by snatching up innocent women!"

"It is my goal tae prevent a war so it need not be waged," he responded indignantly.

Again, she wondered if she was going mad after all, for did she not detect a trace of genuine offense in his tone at his honor being questioned?

"I'll gently snatch a woman and not harm a hair on her, which, I remind ye, I have not, nor have I truly threatened ye. My only intention is tae prevent the butchery of hundreds, perhaps more, on the battlefield."

"Ye speak as a leader, though ye are nae Laird Alex," Katherine mused. "Were I tae surmise, I might come tae the conclusion that ye are the Captain of his Guard."

He raised an eyebrow slightly, but the gleam in his green eyes betrayed him – she could tell he was far more impressed than he wished to let on. "Aye, I am Bryan Black, Laird Alex's Captain and most loyal servant. yer intellect is quite remarkable, Lady Katherine. And yer manners are far more genteel than Romilly's, I shall commend ye for that."

"Again, I'll remind ye that I shall not abide the slander of my sister!" Katherine countered hotly.

“Oh nay?” He crossed his arms, tilting his head mildly. “And how do ye intend tae express yer displeasure?”

“Aye, taunt a woman who’s bound and helpless,” she spat. “ Then tell me of yer clan’s honor, and yer own. I’m sure Romilly receives the same hideous treatment in her confinement.”

At this, Bryan threw his head back and laughed. However, Katherine was surprised to hear no trace of cruelty in it. He seemed to be actually delighted, as though someone had told him the best joke of his life.

“What the blazes is so funny about that?” she demanded.

“Only that it is she who does the taunting, every time I visit her,” he explained jovially, “and I’m the one who generally feels helpless by the time she’s done with me. Ye really ought to hear some of the things she’s said to me, they’re downright unseemly! Cut me to the quick, they did!”

The corners of Katherine’s mouth twitched in spite of herself at the sincerity of his amused yet wounded tone. “She can have a tongue with a tang, at that,” she admitted sheepishly. “She has earned it through too many years of my father’s envenomed words dripping into her ear.”

“But ye would have me believe it was different for ye?” he challenged.

“Believe what ye will,” Katherine answered icily. “I am yer captive either way, it seems, and ye and yer laird will do as ye will with me. Ye claim ye have nae threatened me? Already ye lie, for upon taking me, ye informed me that I would remain unharmed ‘as long as I dinnae cause any trouble.’ What harm, then, would ye visit upon me if I tried tae escape yer clutches? How far would ye go tae bring me tae yer laird as a prize?”

“I shall take yer feet, of course.”

The reply stunned her, and she blinked. “Eh?”

He shrugged casually. “Well, it seems like the easiest solution, does it not? How can ye run without any feet? Go on, picture it! Ye’d look ridiculous in the attempt.”

Katherine peered at him uncertainly for a long moment, then noticed the slow rising of the corners of his mouth, and once again, the mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

“Ye are joking,” she said flatly.

“Aye, I am.” His grin faded slightly, his gaze growing earnest. “Laird Alex and I agree that this scheme will only succeed if ye are kept safe from harm in every way, and that if there were the slightest risk of anything otherwise, it would nae have been prudent for us tae come and take ye at all. I’d prefer ye not test me by plotting tae leave my company at the first opening which presents itself, but ye may be assured that if ye do, ye will be dragged back alive and in one piece—though by no means happier with how ye shall be restrained the remainder of our journey, if ye take my meaning.”

“I suppose I cannae ask for anything fairer than that,” she conceded.

“I’m delighted tae hear it. Now, will ye have a drink from the stream? I wish tae cover far more ground before we stop for the night, and I will as soon ye not faint from thirst along the way. It will make it all the harder for me tae keep ye on the horse with me.”

“How very practical of ye,” she replied with a smirk.

As she got to her knees, Katherine asked herself why she was inclined to believe

Bryan's insistence that no harm would come to her. For that is the ultimate lure of an animal into a trap, is it not? Presenting a situation that appears harmless, so the creature will be baited into coming along without a fight?

Katherine had not received the tutelage Romilly had from their father in the ways of sizing up potential threats and enemies. The captain's countenance seemed pleasant and amiable enough to make him seem like a good-natured fellow, rather than some cold-blooded or sinister sort. And when he'd promised her safety, there was no lying in his eyes, only a genuine desire to make the rest of their travels together continue without incident.

She thought she'd seen a glimmer of fascination in them. Perhaps even a touch of something else as well?

So she asked herself, could someone be talented enough in deceiving and manipulation as to fool her so completely? Could a man's soul be dark and cynical enough to drape itself in such a convincing mask?

Perhaps. Katherine had never been face to face with danger before. She had nothing to compare it to. She had, indeed, walled herself off from it as much as possible in refusing to carry out the wishes of her father or sister.

Now, it seemed, she might be about to pay the ultimate price for that decision.

If only ye were here , Romilly, perhaps ye might be able to tell me , she thought bitterly. But if ye were, then likely none of this would be happening .

Katherine brought her hands together, filled her palms with the water, and brought it up to her lips. It was fresh and cool, and feeling it upon her skin began to soothe her nerves somewhat.

However, there was another disquieting thought which rushed and babbled in her ears along with the gush of the stream over its stones, constant and maddeningly insistent, no matter how she wished she might ignore it.

Whether she chose to believe in Bryan's promises regarding her safety or not, the fact remained that she was entirely at his mercy.

For as she could not match her sister in divining friend from foe, neither could she hope to free herself from Bryan through tactical cunning, martial skill, or even swiftness. Their father had trained Romilly and neglected Katherine.

Now both were in the hands of the Oliphants, with no hope of the second aiding the first or even alerting the McGregor Clan of their enemies' intentions.

When she finished drinking from the stream, the captain did likewise, as did his horse.

"I'd nae wish tae drink after him," he informed her with a wink, "lest the essence of horse linger in its flavor."

"If such are yer concerns," Katherine informed him primly, "then I daren't tell ye what sorts of foul things the fish get up to in streams."

He laughed loudly at that, and she was startled to find herself joining him. It gave her a peculiar tingle, having been able to make her captor laugh.

But was that because some part of her felt it might increase the likelihood that he would treat her well on the journey, and continue to see her treated well when they reached their unfortunate destination? That if she continued to appeal to his better humors, he might even take pity upon her and let her go?

Or was it because some other part of her—situated further back, in the shadows of her heart—thought it might cause him to lower his guard, so he might afford her a chance to escape after all?

Would she make the attempt despite her ignorance in matters of stealth or strategy, asking herself the whole time what Romilly would do in her place?

These thoughts weighed heavy in her skull like smooth and icy stones as Bryan helped her onto the horse again, then joined her there. The moon shone down, and the lonely silence of the horse's hoofbeats drummed out across the moors and mists.

Katherine had no way of knowing how much time passed before they stopped again. She tried to occupy her mind by counting off the seconds as they turned into minutes, if only so she might quiet the panic in her mind. However, the chaotic thoughts of her unhappy future in the clutches of the Oliphants continued to win out, and so she lost count over and over again until she gave up entirely.

She wondered if Romilly would have been able to keep her composure in similar circumstances, and whether her older sister might have already managed to suss out some weakness in Bryan which could be properly exploited to her advantage. At the very least, Romilly might have used her wilderness skills learned from their father to properly determine the route they were taking, in case there might be anything along the way that might prove useful in terms of escaping and evading recapture.

Katherine did her best. She peered around discreetly as they rode, looking for elements of their surroundings that might potentially be used to her benefit. It was no use. All she could discern was a lot of scenery blurring around her as the horse galloped past it with great haste.

She was no warrior, and that made her little more than a victim.

For his part, Bryan privately allowed himself to be impressed by how Katherine was behaving under pressure.

Oh, he could feel her frenzied heartbeat through her back as it pressed against his chest, right enough—she could not hide that from him. Outwardly, though, she was

holding herself under far tighter control than most people in her position could be expected to exhibit. She had ceased asking silly questions, having learned that they would largely only lead to vague answers from him in return.

Instead, she was wisely remaining silent, and, from what he could determine, she was taking in their surroundings as much as possible without turning her head too much to either side.

Even so, the smallest movements she made were carefully cataloged by him, and admired.

She could claim to her heart's content that she hadn't been a loyal pupil of her father and older sister, but he had a difficult time believing that. She was sharp of mind and clever of tongue, and he knew it was entirely possible that she might be every bit as diabolical as her older sister. He decided then and there that he was not inclined to turn his back on her for the remainder of the journey to Castle Oliphant.

And yet...

Bryan discovered, to his own surprise, that there was some part of him that hoped she was telling the truth.

He knew he couldn't take that chance, of course. He couldn't afford her any less than his full vigilance, for to do otherwise would be disloyal to his laird, and he would sooner have faced death than failed in his duty to his clan. If there was even the smallest possibility that she was a threat, then she would need to be watched over accordingly.

Even so, he had a strange certainty that if it turned out she was a genuine enemy of the Oliphants, someone devious and dangerous, it would disappoint him deeply. She seemed so level-headed, so frank and perceptive, that she seemed interesting to him.

Her outward beauty was part of it, Bryan had to admit.

She was a striking woman, perhaps the loveliest he could remember ever having seen. She was short and willowy, with brown hair, large brown eyes that seemed as bright and curious as a bird's, and sharp, elfin features. He did his best not to stare at her, but it was difficult for him to cut his gaze short, especially when they were so close together for such long periods of time.

Still, he knew it was more than that. It was the earnestness with which she had managed to defend her sister without necessarily condoning Romilly's behavior or actions. Katherine really did seem as though she were a luckless innocent, woefully caught up in the middle of her family's ghastly machinations.

And either way, what difference does it make to me? he thought, trying to clear his mind of what was currently cluttering it. Whether she was a pawn of her father's or blameless in the whole endeavor, he had been charged with delivering her to Laird Alex so that he could use his best judgment, and that was what he intended to do.

Except he knew that there was more to it than that, whether he wished to acknowledge it or not.

Because if she was guilty of being in league with Laird Angus, then during her time of confinement at Castle Oliphant, she would almost surely make some attempt at sabotage, escape, or both. It would be Bryan's job, he knew, to continue to watch over her in the event that this should come to pass.

And then whatever comfortable accommodations they had arranged for her would be traded for a cell in the dungeons next to Romilly's.

That was the hated idea that lurked in Bryan's mind, the one he wished to banish but found he could not; the notion that both McGregor lasses would end up side by side

in that hellish stone prison below, their baneful natures combining into a fiendish maelstrom. One Bryan would be expected to descend into in an attempt to secure more information for Alex, that the young laird might use it to weigh his decisions regarding the possible war to come.

Most of all, though, Bryan simply found that he loathed the mental image of Katherine's beauty marred and tangled as Romilly's had become, against the backdrop of pitiless stone walls and rat-choked drain pipes.

He shivered, and that was when she spoke at last, "Do ye feel a chill, Captain? For it seems warm enough tae me out here."

"I felt nae chill," he replied with uncharacteristic brusqueness. "Ye must have imagined."

But the words died in his throat as heard hushed voices ahead. He peered through the darkness, and could barely make out a half dozen or so men sitting at the edge of the woods near the path. He drew the horse to a stop, watching and listening as keenly as he could, and hoping he'd halted in time to prevent them from hearing their approaching hoofbeats.

After a few moments of tense silence, Katherine dared to whisper, "Bandits, perhaps? I dinnae recognize any of the voices as belonging tae McGregor soldiers."

Bryan wanted to believe she was telling the truth, if only because there was no way McGregors who were pursuing them could have arrived here before them so handily.

However, that did not entirely eliminate the possibility that they might be Laird Angus's men, and that they had been dispatched before the abduction, on some sinister mission within Oliphant territory. Perhaps they meant to burn the outlying farms by night, or continue on to infiltrate the castle and commit acts of stealthy

assassination.

The longer he listened, though, the more certain he became that he recognized the voices; as those of several of his own guardsmen.

“Rory?” he called out incredulously, coaxing the horse forward again. “Barclay?”

He heard the men rise and draw their swords. “Who is it? Who goes there?”

Bryan rolled his eyes. “‘Tis I, yer captain! Wondering why I bothered tae instruct any of ye in matters of stealth, merely tae come upon ye sitting here being loud enough tae alert anyone on the road of yer presence.”

The men emerged into the moonlight, looking up at their commander.

Barclay was a tall, thin, reedy fellow, with wispy red hair and front teeth that protruded crookedly. That, combined with his far-apart black eyes, made him appear as some damnably large bedraggled rat that had crawled from the banks of a river.

For his part, Rory was as short and compact as a stump, and roughly twice as stubborn. To complete the image, his skin was as dark, chafed, and gnarled as tree bark. He did not so much “walk” as barrel forward obstinately on his stubby legs. There were those who might find the grizzled old grump comical, until they saw him swing a double-sided axe in the heat of combat, taking his opponents’ legs out from beneath them and then bringing the blade down upon their faces to finish the job. He had served generations of Oliphant guards—indeed, there were no living members of the corps who could recall a time before him.

Together, the pair represented Bryan’s most trusted lieutenants. Which was why he was mildly stunned at the incautious behavior he’d caught them at.

But Rory was unreadable as ever, while Barclay blinked up at Bryan unapologetically. “We meant tae find ye returning by the road, Captain. Or rather, I mean tae say, we meant for ye tae find us.”

“Laird sent,” Rory grunted. He rarely spoke in complete sentences, as though conserving as much of his breath for battle as possible. “Bring ye back while ye rest on the way.”

“Didnae find me up tae the task after all, is that it?” Bryan inquired wryly.

A half-smile twitched on Barclay’s lips, and he snuffled mirthfully. “Laird Alex said ye’d say that, right enough! Laird Alex said for me to say that ‘twas nothin’ of the sort, only that once ye’d crossed the border, there was nae further need for ye tae operate alone.”

“We watch her,” Rory rumbled. “Ye rest.”

“Sure, an’ ye didnae ‘spect Laird Alex would ‘spect ye tae ride there an’ back straight, wi’ no chance tae stop a bit?” Barclay guffawed.

“I suppose I’d planned tae tie her tae a tree or the like, if I needed rest along the way,” Bryan mumbled sheepishly. He saw Katherine’s withering look and held his hands up defensively. “I didnae say I was looking forward tae the prospect, merely that it seemed my only option.”

“Then mayhap I ought tae thank these men for appearing when they did,” Katherine informed him archly.

Barclay shot her a dark look. “I’d nae be so bloody quick tae say that, lass. Laird Alex said we had tae see ye were hauled back tae the castle alive, but he didnae say we had tae like it, nor be especially kind aboot it.”

“McGregors.” Rory’s nostrils emitted a volcanic huff. “Scum.”

Katherine stiffened and bristled, but whether it was from fright or indignation, Bryan could not tell. In her case, he suspected that both might be true at once, like the startled reaction of some beautiful fine-bred mare.

Either way, he thought it prudent to intervene before the matter escalated. “There’ll be none of that talk,” he admonished them sternly. “She is coming along without struggle, and she’ll be shown all respect until she gives us reason tae do otherwise. She may yet be blameless in all this, we cannae yet know for certain.”

“She’s a McGregor,” Rory huffed again. “Blame enough.”

“I say it is not,” Bryan countered quietly, all trace of mirth gone from his voice. His eyes met Barclay’s implacably. “And I say that short of the bonds around her wrists, she shall be treated as no less than a diplomatic envoy being transported safely tae Castle Oliphant. If I decide that even the bonds are no longer a necessity, ye lot will comport yerselves just the same. Do ye intend tae disobey my orders, Barclay? For if so, ‘twould be the first time. Likely the last one as well.”

Barclay and Rory maintained steady eye contact with their commander, but some of the other Oliphant men behind them exchanged confused and doubtful looks.

Bryan risked a glance in Katherine’s direction to see whether this insistence on his part might be putting her at ease. Her expression remained neutral, though he still saw the glimmer of fear in her eyes and noted her pallor in the moonlight.

“Nay,” Barclay said, loud enough to make the point that he was not only answering his captain, but informing the others to stand down as well. “Every man among us is loyal to ye without question, as ever was and will be. We merely wished tae ensure that this ‘lady’ didnae have her hooks in ye in some way, is all.”

“Women.” Apparently, Rory felt that no further word or phrase was required to clarify his position on the matter.

“At any rate,” Barclay continued, mustering a jovial tone, “we brought provisions from the castle, an’ we were just aboot tae tuck in. Here, we brought a portion for ye as well, in case yer own had run out.”

“It has, and I thank ye,” Bryan replied genially, hoping that they might be able to put that brief bit of tension behind them.

He had trained and served with all of the men assembled, and trusted them with his life in battle several times over. None of them had ever given him any reason to believe they could be disloyal; no, not for all the gold in Scotland, nor for promises of power from every laird in the land.

Still, Bryan could not help but remember that one of the key traitors in Romilly’s plot against Laird Alex had been one of Bryan’s own guardsmen; one he would have likewise trusted.

He hadn’t spoken of it to anyone, but his belief in his own ability to command had been shaken after that. His soldiers had unfailingly followed his commands as ever, and had shown nothing but the utmost respect and deference to him that they always had.

That did not prevent him from wondering, in his most private moments, whether they might secretly ask themselves how they could continue to serve a man whose judgment had been so fatally flawed that it had nearly cost them the life of their laird.

Barclay handed the rations of brown bread, salted pork, and a turnip over to Bryan, then produced his own and began to devour it.

Bryan was about to do likewise when he glanced at Katherine again. “Where is her portion?” he asked.

Barclay frowned at him incredulously. “We didnae bring any for her. Why would we? She’s a bloody prisoner!”

“I thought I had made myself clear in that regard,” Bryan reminded him. “She is not tae be mistreated in any way.”

“None for her,” Rory grunted, finishing the last few morsels of his own rations.

Bryan tried staring them down, but inwardly, he was uncertain of how far he ought to take this. He’d never had to discipline any of them by force before, and he certainly didn’t want to start now. He could not allow them to openly disrespect him further, but neither could he allow them to think his desire to protect a McGregor outweighed his loyalty to his own clan.

His stomach grumbled, and at that moment, he knew precisely what needed to be done in order to best defuse the situation.

“Here,” he said, handing his food to Katherine. “She shall have mine, then, and we’ll say no more about it.”

As he placed the items in her outstretched palms, he realized how difficult it would be for her to maintain a grip on it all while eating properly with her wrists bound. Without a word, he produced a dagger and cut her bonds, then looked in the direction of Barclay and Rory, as though daring them to protest.

“Ye do not fear she might do ye harm?” Barclay inquired. His tone was mild, but there was intense curiosity, and suspicion, in his beady eyes.

Bryan smirked. "Not so long as I've got six fiercely loyal and stout-hearted fellows such as yerselves tae protect me from her."

Barclay held his gaze for a few more moments, then sauntered a short distance away and supervised the lighting of a campfire. The others followed him, as though collectively making a point. If Bryan was determined to embark on this folly, then he was on his own.

Bryan tried not to outwardly betray his consternation at the gesture. However, they were still close enough that they could come running if there was trouble.

And he still believed they would do that, despite their current fit of pique.

"Thank ye," Katherine said quietly, beginning with the salted pork.

From the way her nose wrinkled as she tore the tough meat with her teeth, she was used to far more refined cuisine. Nevertheless, she gave him a grateful nod and continued, taking a rough bite from the bread as well.

"It was the least I could do," he replied. "As I said before, ye are safe with me, and so long as ye dinnae attempt escape, yer comfort is of paramount importance tae me."

"Aye." She glanced up at him, and her eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. "Ye did say that, didn't ye? And now ye've had yer chance tae prove it as well."

Bryan's brow furrowed in confusion. "What do ye mean by that?"

She peered at him shrewdly. "Well, 'tis rather convenient, is it not? We come across a cadre of yer men along the route ye've chosen tae return by, and there's an altercation in which ye take my side over theirs, thus allowing ye tae earn my trust. Lull me, like a sheep being gently lured tae its slaughter. How could I possibly doubt the intentions

of one who would stand up tae his own men in order tae defend my honor?" A mocking tone was creeping into her voice.

"It's nae too late for me tae take the food back for myself," Bryan reminded her dryly. Not that he had any real intention of doing so.

"Go on, then," she challenged between bites from the turnip. "Dismiss my suspicions. Tell me I am a silly lass, and know nothing of the ways of men and their honor."

"I would never dream of it," he chuckled. "Rather, I applaud yer keen reasoning, and have from the very start. Most of my own men could nae have proved their worth as strategists so thoroughly as ye have, contemplating things from every angle."

"Now ye resort tae base flattery tae further quell my suspicions." But there was a gleam in her eyes that seemed to indicate that she was slowly letting her guard down.

She wanted to believe in his good intentions. He was sure of it.

He wanted nothing more than to validate them—though, as a warrior and tactician, he knew that he would generally be expected to exploit such a connection with a prisoner instead.

Bryan hoped it wouldn't come to that.

He hoped to form a true bond with her so that she would cooperate fully and not end up in the dungeon that so frequently haunted his nightmares.

"Keep yer suspicions," he invited with a shrug. "Ye are more than entitled tae them, though I shall continue tae prove myself tae ye as best I can."

"Oh?" She sounded unconvinced as she finished off the last crumb of bread. "How,

precisely, do ye intend tae do that?”

“I shall instruct a pair of my men tae keep watch over us for the next few hours so that we may get some sleep while ye remain unbound.”

Katherine’s eyebrows went up. “Ye would do that?”

“Aye, in point of fact, I would.” He raised an eyebrow. “Now I would nae expect that tae buy yer trust in one fell swoop, but mayhap it will purchase a small sliver of it? Enough that ye might go on and get some rest so that I may as well?”

She nodded slowly, then settled on the ground, cradled in the raised roots of a huge willow tree. Bryan did likewise nearby, gesturing for Barclay to send a couple of men over to watch them. Barclay hesitated for a split second, then nodded, ordering two of his comrades to stand guard. They hopped to their feet and strode over at once.

“Be at peace, Captain,” one of the men intoned gruffly. “No harm shall befall ye this night, nor shall this lady make her escape.”

“I would expect nothing less from ye,” Bryan replied sincerely.

As he closed his eyes, he addressed Katherine one final time before submitting to slumber, “For what it’s worth, my lady, I believe that yer sharpness of intellect would be a tremendous boon tae any clan, and certainly tae ours.”

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Katherine remained awake for a while after that, blinking up at the stars in the night sky that seemed caged behind the bars of the willow's branches. Had that sentiment been calculated? One more bit of flattery to win her over?

Or had he meant it?

She caught herself wishing he had, for if so, then it would mean she might finally be warmly accepted by a clan after so many years of being coldly dismissed by her own.

But Romilly would surely have something to say about that, her brain reminded her. And no doubt ye shall be seeing her soon enough .

Eventually, she managed to drift off to sleep. It was far easier for her, she knew, than it would have been if she had attempted it with her wrists bound together. However, it was still quite a challenge persuading her eyes to remain wholly shut when she was being watched over by a pair of Oliphants with surly expressions.

She knew that Bryan had given them direct orders not to mistreat her, and she had every confidence that he meant to ensure they carried those orders out, whatever it took. Nevertheless, she still could not fully bring herself to shake off the feeling that the moment she allowed herself to sleep, the sentries might attempt to attack or abuse her in some way. And might at least partially succeed before Bryan managed to rise and stop them.

There was also some part of her that was frightened of sleep because of the

nightmares she had been plagued with of late. It appeared to her as though many of them were likely about to come true, and she did not wish to endure a mental preview of her coming tribulations.

Still, she finally succumbed to slumber, for she could fight it no longer after the long and anxious day she'd passed.

When she awoke, there was dew beneath her hair, and the sun was already up. She was pleasantly surprised to recall no dreams whatsoever. Despite her anxiety due to her captivity and the uncertainty of what lay ahead, she did feel considerably more rested than she had before.

There were two different Oliphant sentries guarding her, and neither of them said a word to her. They merely motioned to the others that she was awake as she leaned on the tree's stability to help herself get to her feet. The guards glowered at her and tensed, as though expecting her to flee at any moment.

"Ye may relax yerselves," she informed them, yawning. "I know I would not get far before ye caught up with me, and that I would be a sorrier lass for it during the remainder of our ride."

Bryan had been conferring with the other Oliphants, and when he saw she had risen, he strode over to her, looking fully refreshed. "I hope ye passed the night well enough," he said pleasantly. "Do ye need a bit of time tae compose yerself, or shall we continue on?"

Katherine briefly considered telling him that she did require a bit more time, just so she might have a chance to take a look around and see if there was anything that might aid in an escape attempt—and, more to the point, to stall before having to face whatever fate awaited her at Castle Oliphant.

But ultimately, she knew there was no use. She could not outrun them, she could not outfox them, and she certainly had no hope of outfighting them. Her best option in terms of eventually making an escape would be to simply go along with them, pray they did not imprison her out of hand, and earn enough of their trust later on to plot something workable.

If, indeed, escape remained her intention.

There was some part of her that wondered whether she might somehow join in the Oliphants' efforts to prevent an all-out war from occurring between their two clans—presuming, of course, that they were being truthful in stating this intention. Was there some way she might see to it that no one on either side needed to lose their lives in combat?

In doing so, would she earn the respect of her father? Or simply more of his scorn, since he had schemed violence and conquest against the Oliphants for as long as she could remember?

Perhaps he would disown her. Perhaps her own sister might as well.

If the Oliphants turned out to be as honorable and welcoming as Bryan had indicated, though...

She tried to tell herself it was foolish to hope that this man, who had grabbed her off the main road in her own clan's lands and whisked her away, could be telling the truth. Even so, her hope continued to poke its head up.

“Nay, we may ride when ye and yers are ready,” she answered mildly. “And thank ye for cutting my bonds last night so that I could eat and sleep more easily. If ye feel the need tae replace them today, I will not object.”

Bryan studied her face for a moment, then shook his head. “So far ye have given me no reason tae believe ye intend trouble, or harm, and out of respect, I shall leave ye unbound. I ask that ye dinnae make me regret it.”

“Not that ye have any compelling reason tae believe me, but I will not, ye have my word.”

“Very well.” He led her to his horse, helped her up onto the creature, then joined her as he had before. The other Oliphants were trying not to be obvious about it, but it was clear that they were sneaking glances at him and wondering among themselves whether he had grown too fond of his own captive. If he noticed this or was bothered by it, though, Bryan gave no sign at all.

They rode for many more hours, until the sun had passed its zenith. During that time, they did not stop again to take refreshment or allow their horses to drink or rest. This told Katherine that they must be getting close.

Just as she began to scan the horizon, searching for the spires of Castle Oliphant, a massive stag burst forth from the edge of the forest near the side of the road. Its fur shone gold and bronze in the midday sun, and it lowered its crown of antlers and charged forward toward the convoy of Oliphants with a blind fury.

Bryan drew his horse to a sharp halt and raised an arm, commanding the men who rode behind him. “Hold!”

The horses skidded to a stop, but they had all been riding at high speeds, and the foremost ones slid upon blankets of fallen leaves due to their momentum. Which placed them directly in the path of the frenzied stag, now seconds away.

Bryan acted without thinking; he threw his arms around Katherine—her scream still quivering in her throat—and heaved them both to the left. They tumbled from the

horse together, and when they landed in the dirt of the road, their bodies collided tightly and knocked the breath from each other. Bryan was on his back, and Katherine touched down directly on top of him.

The moments that followed seemed to stretch out into eternity. The hoofbeats and panicked screeches of the animals overlapped, creating a hideous roar that felt like dirty fingernails scraping against Bryan's eardrums.

Then he was inches away from the infinite dark pools of Katherine's eyes, and he felt all else fade away within seconds as he sank into them like a stone. There was mystery there, but there was also comfort, which he could not explain.

Barclay called Bryan's name several times, but Bryan could think of little else but her intoxicating scent in his nostrils, like roses and honey, or the feel of her chest heaving against his own.

We fit together .

It was a peculiar thought that glided across his mind, but nevertheless too clear to be denied. And was it his imagination, he wondered, or did her face seem to repeat those same words to him, as clearly as if they'd been inked across her fair brow?

A few more moments, though, and the insistent calls of Bryan's soldiers broke through his reverie. He turned to look at the road ahead.

The stag had pierced two of their horses quite badly, but Bryan's horse had apparently escaped injury. The stag itself lay dying by the side of the road, its side heaving sharply, bleeding from several lethal bolts that had been fired by the Oliphants whose steeds had escaped injury.

Still, two men were now without horses.

And Bryan and Katherine remained in the dirt, feeling more exposed and foolish with each passing moment.

As he prepared to roll aside and stand up, Bryan noticed something; Katherine's wrists were pressed together as she braced herself for the impact, and now they were mere inches away from the dagger that was sheathed at his side.

Her eyes met his, and so each knew that the other had noticed it at the same time.

She could snatch the blade from its scabbard. She could press it to his neck in a flash. She could kill him, or try to take him prisoner; either way, she could perhaps secure her own freedom. It would take no skill, no fortitude, no particular cunning.

Just desperation, and the will to act at that moment.

He continued to gaze into her eyes, searching for that intention, that will to do whatever it took to get away. Searching for the ruthlessness it would require. Not out of fear of his own life, but from the need to have been right about her innocence in all of this, her lack of ill intent.

Katherine took a deep breath, and withdrew her hands to a safe distance.

Bryan pulled himself to his feet, then offered a hand so that he could help Katherine rise. She took it, brushing the dust from her garments and trying to act as though nothing unseemly had occurred, but the high blush of her cheeks betrayed her.

"Ye saved us both," she breathed.

He inclined his head down toward the dagger. "I suppose ye just did as well."

"What shall we do wi' two of our horses mortally pierced?" Barclay demanded.

“Ride double,” Rory snorted.

“He’s right,” Bryan agreed. “It will take us longer, but so be it. Those without horses, choose men to ride with.”

“Seems our riding company will nae be nearly so pleasant as yer own,” Barclay murmured. Some of the other Oliphant soldiers snickered.

Bryan raised his eyebrows, not allowing himself to rise to the bait. “Perhaps if some among ye bathed more regularly, that mightn’t be the case. Now be about it, for we are already late in our return, and Laird Alex is bound tae worry.”

They were mounted and ready in under a minute, and so they continued down the road.

“Why should I believe that ye are nae privy tae the evil schemes of yer father and sister?” Bryan asked suddenly.

The question caught her off guard. “Well, if I were ye and my position involved distrust in the name of my laird, I suppose I would nae have any good reason tae believe it.”

“Then provide me with one,” he countered insistently. “Convince me.”

She let out a surprised laugh. “Do ye wish tae find some reason tae believe me, or ye wish tae see how well I lie?”

“Let us say it is the first.” His tone was indifferent, but she could sense a curious urgency beneath it. “What sets ye apart from them?”

She shrugged, deciding that the truth would be her best ally in this situation. “‘Twas

our father who set us apart. When he became certain that he would never have a male heir, he chose tae spend all of his time teaching my sister how tae seize power. Training her tae fight and kill, teaching her how tae use diplomacy and friendship as poisoned blades in the name of expanding our territories and riches. He never had any use for me, for he always deemed me worthless and beneath his notice. After a while, so did she.”

“And what if they had invited ye tae join in their plots against us?” Bryan asked slowly. “Would ye have helped them destroy us, to gain their favor?”

“I cannae say,” she answered simply. “Can any daughter, deprived her whole life of her father’s love, truly say what she might have been willing tae do tae win it from him? I can only tell ye that whenever I heard them speak their malice with regard tae yer clan, it appalled and sickened me. I wanted no part in their bloody strategies.”

“Not that ye would be willing tae share any of those overheard strategies with us, perchance?” His playful tone had an edge to it that Katherine could not ignore.

“I cannae,” she told him, “for I have none tae share. Only their hatred, which ye already know of, and Romilly’s involvement, which ye clearly exposed some while ago.”

Bryan grunted, sounding unsatisfied. They rode the next several miles in silence before he spoke again, “Why did ye not reach for my dagger?”

“‘Reach for it?’” She laughed. “I believe we both know I’d have done far more than ‘reach’ for it. I’d have had it tae yer throat before ye could have moved a finger!”

“Very well, let us say ye are right,” he agreed irritably. “Why did ye not seize it?”

“Because establishing trust means more than one party making the opening gesture,

as ye did by cutting my bonds,” she replied quietly. “It requires the second gesture, the one from the other party, or it can go nowhere.”

He considered this for a while, then nodded. “Fair enough, my lady. Now, coming over the hill, ye shall see our destination in view at last!”

As the horses reached the crest of the hill, a strange thought took hold of her mind; so suddenly and ferociously that she felt as though she was being shaken back and forth in the jaws of a wild cat.

If only things had been different between our two clans, I might have enjoyed having him for a suitor and groom. Perhaps that might have been enough to ensure peace between the Oliphants and the McGregors.

Perhaps it would have been enough to make me happy for the rest of my days .

In the light of day, Katherine was able to fully take in the sights of the Oliphant territory for the first time in her life.

She had never ventured here before, not even during the days, which now seemed so long ago, when Romilly had been betrothed to Laird Alex. Even then, she’d known that the wedding plans had been made under false pretenses; that it had always been intended as a series of steps which would ultimately lead to the downfall of the Oliphants from within, once Romilly had been properly installed as the lady of the clan.

Then Laird Alex’s famed intolerance of imperfection had put an end to that, requiring other, more brutal means.

The entire time, though, Angus had bidden Katherine to stay away from the Oliphants, at least until the day of the planned wedding, when it would have been

unseemly for her not to be in attendance. Katherine had initially assumed this was because he saw them as a potential danger to her.

Later, she came to understand the truth. That, in fact, he had been more concerned that she might prove to be a danger to their plans with her guileless nature and unwillingness to participate in schemes that would result in bloodshed and strife.

Therefore, she took in the farms and estates of the Oliphant lands with fresh eyes—and was amazed by what she saw.

What had she been expecting, based upon her father's description of the Oliphants and their relentless evil and malice? Looking at them now, she realized that ever since she was a wee lass, her mind's eye had responded to these stories by conjuring images of a bleak and desolate land. The sort that might be presided over by some evil warlock from a fairy tale, where the sky was always dark, the people toiled as slaves, and the ground was stony and unable to give forth more than the most meager of scrubby crops. A place of ignorance and misery, populated by near-savages who would do whatever it took to steal the glory of their neighbors for their own.

Katherine looked around, wide-eyed, and astonished, at the sights which greeted her instead.

The sky was clear and blue, and the sun shone down cheerily on the prosperous families who worked their farms. The crops were bountiful, and the valleys and hillsides bloomed kaleidoscopically with a hundred different kinds of wild flowers, each more beautiful than the last. The manors were welcoming, with servants singing merrily as they went about their chores, and pillars of white smoke drifting from the chimneys.

The villages were teeming with artisans going about their labors, and the taverns and inns appeared busy indeed, with travelers of all sorts coming and going; merchants,

minstrels, envoys, and other assorted wanderers, all of whom appeared happy to be there.

And in the distance, growing larger and more awe-inspiring with each passing moment, was Castle Oliphant.

Again, Katherine had always imagined it as a dread and somber place, with forbidding spires reaching up into a malign sky, and ramparts bristling with soldiers in evil-looking spiked armor.

But it largely consisted of a main tower of sturdy, sun-bleached blocks, surrounded by a high wall that likewise gleamed white in the sunlight. There were sentries, of course, and they were armed with what appeared to be crossbows, but they conversed casually as they stood their watch, clearly not expecting any violent visitors.

“Do ye like what ye see, my lady?”

Bryan’s words, whispered in her ear, startled her slightly. As she admired her surroundings, Katherine had nearly forgotten the circumstances by which she was viewing them. His warm breath tickled her earlobe slightly, sending a ticklish shiver down her back.

“It’s breathtaking, tae be sure,” she admitted. “I had never imagined the Oliphants lived in such splendor. Truly, ye are a fortunate clan.”

“Ah, we are rewarded not so much for good fortune as for hard work,” Bryan replied proudly. “Generations of lairds have worked tae ensure a bright future for our people. Some, perhaps, more effectively than others,” he added with a slight grimace.

“Ye speak of Laird Alex’s father,” she guessed. “He who provoked the enmity between our clans tae begin with.”

“A rather jaundiced account,” Bryan said ruefully. “He was nae the best of our lairds, by a far piece. But he continued the strength and prosperity of the Oliphant Clan during his rule, and that, in itself, was a mighty feat indeed.” He realized something, and chuckled.

“What amuses ye?” she inquired.

“Ah, only that as ye come readily tae the defense of yer sister despite her shortcomings, so I still instinctively defend my former master in the face of his own. Perhaps we are not nearly so different as either of us would have thought.”

She was struggling to keep her expression as unreadable as possible. Her body language was tight, her posture rigid to the point of quivering.

She was a woman at war with herself. Over her fondness for him.

Her desire for him; she was increasingly sure of it.

Their party drew close enough to the ramparts to attract the sentries’ notice, but the men on the wall recognized their fellows almost immediately and did not bother to aim their bows.

“Open the gates!” one of them cried out. This order was echoed among several of the others, and seconds later, the heavy iron gates of Castle Oliphant swung open to greet and admit them.

When the guardsmen saw that Katherine was with them, a raucous cheer went up among them. Barclay waved to them, grinning. However, Katherine noticed that Bryan did not acknowledge their revelry.

“Surely, ye can show yer appreciation to them, heedless of how it might appear to

me?” she asked innocently.

He snickered. “I merely see no need to gloat under the circumstances, my lady. I have succeeded in my mission, and that is reward enough for me.”

She did not answer, but she was impressed by his humility.

Alex awaited them in the courtyard, along with several others. Katherine recognized the laird from the portrait of himself he’d commissioned to send to Romilly during their brief courtship. He was a striking and serious-faced man with blonde hair that shone like a halo in the sun. Next to him was a woman of fair but solemn countenance, and by her raiment and the way she stood so close to him, Katherine guessed that this must be Lady Isla, who had succeeded in marrying Alex, despite Romilly’s intervention.

Another man stood with them, and Katherine did not recognize him. He had a vaguely cherubic face and dancing blue eyes, and looked delighted to see Katherine in captivity.

If, perhaps, a bit confused.

The procession came to a halt in the center of the courtyard. Bryan dismounted, and once again, he offered his hand to help Katherine do the same. She took it, and, in reaching out to him, confirmed that she was unbound.

“Captain,” the blonde man said jovially. “It appears as though yer errand went well, better than one might expect!”

“It did, tae be sure,” Bryan replied. He turned to Katherine and gestured to each of them in turn, as though introducing them to a respected ambassador from a faraway country. “Lady Katherine McGregor, this is Laird Alex Oliphant, his wife, Lady Isla

Oliphant, and Kirk Oliphant, cousin and chief advisor tae Laird Alex.”

“A pleasure to meet ye,” Katherine spoke up, offering a demure curtsy.

Alex cleared his throat, confused. “Aye, ‘tis a pleasure tae have ye here at Castle Oliphant. We hope tae make ye feel like a guest during yer stay, albeit one who is here under duress.”

Kirk and Isla chuckled quietly, and Alex’s face turned several shades of red.

“If the rest of the Oliphants are half as gracious tae me as yer captain has been,” Katherine replied smoothly, “then I have nae doubt that I shall indeed feel welcome. yer castle is magnificent, Laird Alex, truly. I am pleased that chance has finally afforded me a proper view of it, even if the circumstances cannot quite be called ideal.”

Her gentility took Alex wholly by surprise, and the laird turned to Bryan. “Captain, while our new friend is situated in her chambers, perhaps we might have a word?”

“Certainly, sir.”

Alex led Bryan out past the gates, and they perambulated the perimeter of the castle side by side. It took Alex a while to speak, and during that time, Bryan waited patiently. He knew that it was always better to allow Alex to gather his thoughts, rather than rushing him into a conversation and perhaps provoking his ire.

Finally, Alex said, “Ye saw no reason tae bind her?”

“There was no need,” Bryan answered. “She was restrained at first, aye, but then it became clear that she was interested in exchanging gestures of trust tae make her journey more pleasant. I saw no reason not tae oblige her, and she gave me none.”

“When ye say she was willing tae offer reasons for ye tae trust one another, did ye get the sense that she did so with an eye toward gaining the upper hand? Either out there, or once she arrived here?”

“I would never entirely rule that out, Alex,” Bryan assured him, “for keeping ye safe is my most sacred task, and to do that means never disregarding even the smallest possibility. And to be sure, the bloodline she comes from is poisonous beyond measure. But if ye ask whether I believe her desire for peace tae be genuine; if ye ask whether I believe she is, in fact, not in league with her serpent of a father, then my answer would be aye.”

“Interesting.” Alex stopped mid-stride and stroked his chin, considering this. After a few moments, he said, “Ye would vouch for her, then?”

“I would. I do.”

Alex nodded. “Then ye shall continue tae be responsible for her while she is our guest .”

“Me? But my duties involve keeping our soldiers trained and sharp, and keeping the ramparts and borders safe.”

“Others may attend to those tasks. Men of yer own choosing, so that ye may be sure they are up to the responsibility. There is no one whose judgment I would trust more than yers with regard to this lass and her motivations. If there is even the slightest chance that she is in league with Laird Angus, or means to offer her sister a means of escape, I know ye will see it and stop it.”

“I shall, sir, of course.”

Privately, Bryan found himself rejoicing at the task he’d been assigned, for it would

mean more time spent with this fascinating McGregor lass.

Once Bryan and Alex entered the castle again, Bryan immediately went in search of Katherine. Having staked his own reputation on her, he felt it would be prudent to begin his observation of her as soon as possible. As it turned out, she was not difficult to find. He came upon her in the massive Oliphant library, surveying the shelves with an expression of wonderment.

“Do be careful among these tomes,” Bryan chuckled. “This collection belongs tae Laird Alex, and he holds it dear indeed. There was some trouble with Isla when they first met, and she accidentally spilled a bit of wine on one of his precious maps.”

“Well, I dinnae seem tae be holding any wine,” Katherine replied primly, “and as it happens, maps dinnae interest me.”

“Oh?” He raised an eyebrow. “What sort of thing were ye looking for, then?”

“More than anything, I was merely browsing,” she informed him, “for in truth, I have never before seen a library like this one. My father’s is sorely lacking by comparison.”

“That does nae surprise me in the slightest,” he said dryly. “It has always been Laird Alex’s belief, as was his father’s, and mine as well, that books are windows tae the world that lies beyond our own narrow experiences. They lend wisdom and perspective. Qualities which, I am sorry tae say, yer father is sorely lacking.”

This offhand insult to Laird Angus was meant as a subtle test, so Bryan could see

whether she reflexively came to her father's defense when he was insulted. When they were on the road together, she had insisted that she was not aligned with his mad schemes and violent intentions. Now that they had arrived, and her defenses might have lowered a bit, it seemed a good time to more fully determine what side she might be on.

But she simply shrugged. "ye may well have a point. He is a man of limited vision, tae be sure. Perhaps if he were able to read the wondrous volumes collected here, he might not find it quite so necessary tae wage war against ye, or the other clans."

"Does he scheme against other clans as well?" Again, Bryan did his best to appear nonchalant, as though he was making idle conversation with her.

Katherine shook her head. "He used tae, but now he focuses almost entirely on the undoing of the Oliphants. Romilly's capture might have had something tae do with that."

"Would ye say he is more invested in seeing her safely returned, or in avenging himself upon us for capturing her in the first place?"

She gave him a faint half-smile. "Do ye mean tae ask whether his desire tae see the fall of the Oliphant Clan is greater than his concern for his own children's safety? Is that it?"

Bryan felt as though he had overstepped, and was embarrassed. He cast his eyes downward, grinning awkwardly. "I suppose I meant something like that, aye."

"From the way ye speak and think of us, one would almost believe we McGregors were naught but a pack of bloodthirsty ogres squatting in caves."

She giggled, and the sound tickled Bryan's ears like the delicate tinkling of wind

chimes. It was a sound he found that he adored, and felt he might enjoy getting used to if afforded the opportunity.

“Not at all,” he harrumphed uncomfortably. “But ye are clearly a formidable lot, and not tae be underestimated or trifled with.”

“Which is why ye have resorted tae such a desperate measure, is that it?” she challenged. “Kidnapping Laird Angus’s other daughter? Sends a powerful message, does it not? ‘Submit, or we shall end yer bloodline for good and all?’”

“This implies that we would kill ye in cold blood. As I have said, that is not in our nature.”

“Nay, ye would merely hold us both indefinitely,” she retorted.

She was toying with him, that much was obvious. However, he knew there was more to it than that as well; she was probing him, trying to determine the most likely outcome for herself and her sister.

He supposed he could hardly blame her for that. If he had been captured by an enemy, he would naturally be doing all he could to learn about their intentions and capabilities as well, so that he might gain the upper hand.

Was that her intention here? Did she intend to game him?

Well, he supposed determining that was part of his duty as he understood it. Again, though, he was troubled by the fact that he wanted so badly to believe she was innocuous; that her comments were without guile or strategy.

“I am certain it will nae come tae that,” he said in his most reassuring voice. “Laird Angus may not be known for being even-tempered or reasonable, but even he will

nae abandon both of his children when they need him tae come tae his senses.”

“Will he not?” she teased. “It sounds as though ye are more familiar with his temperament than I am.”

“Do ye believe he will remain obstinate in this circumstance?” Bryan prodded. “And if so, is that not all the more reason for ye tae come tae our side and assist us in ending this peacefully, no matter what it may take?”

“Ye make a good point,” she conceded. “Then again, I only just arrived here less than an hour ago. Perhaps a better tactic might be tae wait for the gravity of my current situation tae set in more fully, before plying me in such an obvious fashion?”

Bryan’s embarrassment grew deeper. “Forgive me, my lady. I am nae a spy, a jailer, nor an interrogator by nature, and as such, the subtleties of these occupations escape me. As the captain of the guard, my duties are generally far more straightforward.”

“Make sure none passes through the gates who would do harm tae the Oliphants, and bravely lead yer soldiers into battle?” Clearly, she was having fun with him.

He found he didn’t mind too much. Her amusement was delightful to him, even if it was at his expense.

“Aye, that’s the long and the short of it,” he admitted.

“Then one might observe that snatching a young lady off the road and transporting her back tae the castle would generally likewise fall outside yer purview.”

“Ye are correct once again. I was assigned the task because Laird Alex felt my penchant for stealth, and my willingness tae do whatever it takes tae complete the tasks assigned tae me, made me more than suitable for that particular errand.”

“It seems he was correct, at that,” she observed. “Now ye have been sent tae watch over me? Tae make sure I behave myself? Perhaps even tae observe me closely enough tae learn where my true loyalties lie?”

“Ye are most perceptive,” Bryan replied with a smirk. “Aye, that’s true enough.”

“Very well. I shall count myself lucky, then, that I will find myself in such pleasant company during the remainder of my stay here. However long it may be.” She made a show of sighing wistfully. “Still, this arrangement does raise a question or two.”

“Such as?”

“Well, let us say that my father does remain obstinate,” she continued in a lilting tone as she perused the books on the shelves. “He is famous for his hard head, as ye well know. Perhaps he will stand his ground for months, perhaps even years. Will ye remain by my side that entire time?”

Bryan swallowed hard, wondering where this line of question was leading. “Aye, if those were my orders, I would follow them.”

“And what of when I sleep?” she went on doggedly. “Do ye intend tae remain in the room with me? Will ye watch me dress and undress, that ye may be sure I dinnae conceal some weapon upon my person, or secret messages tae be passed along tae my family? Or will ye take the risk of turning yer back to afford me modesty?”

He knew that she was playing with him as a cat does with a mouse, but still, he could think of no appropriate response.

“Suppose ye didnae choose tae take yer ‘observation’ of me quite so far, for reasons of propriety,” she giggled. “Would ye then be required tae stand guard outside the door of my chamber at all times? Would ye remain curled up in front of it all night

like a dog?"

"If my laird asked such things of me, I would carry them out without the slightest hesitation," Bryan retorted with a smile. "I dinnae believe it shall come tae that, though. Others may stand guard outside yer chamber in the hours when I slumber. They will ensure that ye dinnae escape, or have secret visitors without my knowledge. And should ye get the brilliant idea of shimmying down from the window, I have already instructed my guardsmen on the ramparts tae keep an eye on that side of the tower at all times." He coughed nervously. "As for, er, watching ye disrobe and the like, I dinnae think that will be necessary. If I thought ye were hazardous enough tae carry a concealed weapon and attempt an assault on one of us, I would nae have vouched for ye."

"Very trusting of ye," she intoned with mock solemnity. "Not that ye necessarily have any reason tae believe me, but it just so happens ye are correct. I abhor violence. I always have."

"If only the same could be said of yer sister," Bryan muttered. "At any rate, I have shown trust in ye, both on our journey and upon our arrival. I ask that ye prove yerself worthy of it, all jests aside."

"Again, I am flattered that ye would ask such a thing of me and choose to believe my response," she told him, "but for what it is worth, I have every intention of doing precisely that." She paused, then asked, "Although I am deeply appreciative of all ye have done for me thus far, may I ask another favor of ye? Nothing suspicious or sinister, I assure ye."

Bryan had a feeling he already knew what she was about to request. "Go on, then, by all means."

She turned her full attention to him, and he was once again struck by how dark and

lovely her eyes were. They reminded him of Romilly's, except that they seemed far more peaceful and hopeful, whereas her older sister's gaze was always dripping with ire and venom.

Just as he thought, it was her sister that was foremost on Katherine's mind.

"While I am here, might I be permitted tae visit with Romilly? I would like tae see for myself that she is safe and unharmed—not that I dinnae trust in yer words tae that effect. It would simply make me feel more at ease after being apart from her for so long."

Bryan nodded. "That is a perfectly reasonable request, and one I certainly expected. Ye shall be allowed tae see yer sister, certainly. But ye must know," he added quickly, seeing her face light up at this happy news. "I cannae permit ye tae be alone with her. I will be by yer side the entire time."

"That is entirely understandable, and certainly acceptable." Katherine was overjoyed, to the point that Bryan almost expected her to run forward and embrace him gratefully. "Oh, thank ye, thank ye! Ye are most kind and gracious!"

"Not at all." He tried to sound dismissive, but he worried that he might be blushing. "Anyone in yer position would ask the same, 'tis nae bother. We shall go down tae the dungeons together in a short while, after I have looked in on my guardsmen tae ensure they have nae grown idle in my absence."

It was a joke, but he did feel compelled to conduct a quick circuit of the ramparts and have a word with his people. Part of it was because he had not left his regularly appointed post for days at a time in quite a while, and having done so left him ill at ease.

Another part of it, one he wished he could deny, was that he was simply putting off

yet another unpleasant visit to the dungeons, the prospect of which still unnerved him grievously.

At least this time, I won't have to go and return from there on my own, he thought. He had Lady Katherine for company. He could hide his anxiety by focusing on allaying hers.

"For now," he went on, "ye ought tae go tae yer chambers and have some rest. I'm sure ye could use it, after all. Ye've endured quite a lot of excitement over the past two days."

"That's true enough." She gave him a curtsy. "Again, Captain, thank ye for being such a gracious host. I feel as though my stay here shall turn out to be a pleasant one, despite the conditions that prompted it."

"Think nothing of it," he grunted. "Now, if ye will excuse me, I shall take my leave."

Bryan departed, and though Katherine was tempted to remain in the library for a while longer, she decided that the best thing she could do as a show of good faith, to demonstrate that she did not mean to cause trouble during her stay, that she was willing to do as she was told, would be to go to her room as Bryan had suggested.

Besides, what he'd pointed out had been accurate. She had been through quite a dizzying ordeal over the previous night and day, and although the overall outcome was better than she had previously imagined it might be, the fact remained that it had left her feeling drained. She supposed a short nap would not be out of order.

Katherine found a servant, a young girl with a mop of curly red hair, and a smudge of hearth dust across the bridge of her upturned nose – and inquired after the location of her room. She had already been told upon her initial arrival, but she felt it would be a good idea to ask anyway so that people would know she intended to pass the time in

her chamber rather than wandering around and causing mischief.

The lass led her there personally, and asked if she needed anything further. Katherine assured her that she did not, and the servant withdrew without another word.

Katherine looked around at her accommodations, and was surprised to find them far more cheery and well-appointed than her room at the McGregor Stronghold. There was a writing desk with quills and parchment, a table and chair for dining, and a four-post bed that was lovely and inviting. She sat upon its edge and bounced up and down several times, appreciating its softness.

All in all, the space appeared to be arranged with the comfort of its occupant prioritized above all else.

She supposed that was the sort of thing most people would have taken for granted. However, in the McGregor home, function was paramount, with comfort far behind. Beds and chairs were hard and stiff, the better to harden the sensibilities of those who used them. That was what Laird Angus had always insisted upon; the better to raise children who would not expect the world to be soft and welcoming to them.

Children who had been taught to disregard pain or discomfort. Children who would be able to stoically endure, no matter what challenges they encountered.

The sort of children Laird Angus would have been proud of.

Aye, and perhaps he was able to mold one of his offspring accordingly, in the form of Romilly, Katherine thought mournfully as she reclined on the bed. She could never live up to those sorts of rigid standards. However, they were both prisoners of the Oliphants despite all of their father's hard lessons and harsh treatment.

Though her situation was certainly more appealing than Romilly's at the moment.

What would her sister look like when Katherine finally got to see her, she wondered? Her own dark visions and nightmares during the previous weeks had conjured forms of a filthy, crazed, skeletal Romilly, with half her hair fallen out and her teeth likewise due to malnutrition. A madwoman who had been a feast for rats, and other foul beasts that crawled and slithered. Perhaps there would be matted blood on her hair and skin from having hurled herself against the stone walls and iron bars in a frenzy.

And would the Oliphants bring healers to her, to tend to these wounds and conditions?

Before, she would have assumed the answer to be no. Now that she had spent some time with Bryan, she was not nearly so sure.

Although her movements were being monitored, the fact remained that she could leave her room if she desired. She could visit the library again, or perhaps familiarize with Castle Oliphant a bit more. She might even be allowed to wander its farms and villages a bit, as long as she was accompanied by Bryan Black.

Therefore, it is fair to say that I enjoy more freedom in my “captivity” here than I could often claim within my own home .

The emotions that came with that notion were somewhat confusing. There was plenty of sadness, certainly, at the realization that an enemy was willing to treat her more fairly, and demonstrate more trust in her, than her mother and father had been. Had this truly been how she was raised? And her sister as well? No wonder things had come to such a pass for both of them, having been spawned from such a pernicious household.

And yet...

Now that there was so much distance from that home, perspective came with it. She was seeing her own homeland and upbringing in a way she'd never been allowed to before. She had been raised to view all other clans as inferior to the McGregors in every way, and as potential enemies as well.

Here she was, in this pleasant place, full of happy clansmen who were led by a man who seemed to manage being strong with being fair; being loved and respected as well. A laird who ruled without relying on cruelty and intimidation, from the look of it. A laird whose agents were genuinely loyal to him, instead of merely in terror of the punishments he might choose to mete out.

Might she find this to be a more suitable home for her? Might she choose to assist the Oliphants, and thus prevent some needless war between them and her own people?

For such a war would be needless, of that she was certain.

She rose from the bed and went to the window, leaning out so that she might get a better view of the people in the towns a short-distance away. They seemed happy and healthy as they went about their business—not oppressed, not starving, not cursing the McGregors or dreaming up foul plots to conquer them or steal what was theirs.

If her father would simply cease his scheming against them, then Katherine was certain the Oliphants in turn would never cause the McGregors any harm at all. They could coexist without bloodshed.

And once that had been established and agreed upon, Romilly could be freed from the dungeons.

Is there anything at all that I might do to bring about such a favorable outcome? she asked herself. Is there any knowledge I possess, any valuable information I might pass along to the Oliphants, to aid them in preventing combat between our clans?

She hoped so.

But given how her father had largely shut her out of his plans, she wasn't so sure.

A deep and dreamless sleep overtook Katherine, and when the sound of a knock at the door woke her, she felt oddly refreshed, even if it took her a few moments to remember where she was. The rays of dappled sunlight that came in through the window were more crimson than they had been earlier, and they had changed position as well, indicating that several hours had passed and it was now late afternoon.

Another knock, more insistent, this time, and she suddenly recalled her situation and knew that she had better answer at once to prevent the person at the door from assuming she had attempted escape after all. “Aye?”

The door creaked open and Bryan peered in. “I didnae mean tae disturb ye. Were ye able tae get some rest?”

“Indeed I was.” Katherine realized that she was still lying in bed—an improper way for a lady to greet a male visitor. She sat up sharply, clutching the bedclothes around her. “That is, er, it seems I got a bit too much rest! I ought tae be up, and making myself more presentable!”

His eyes surveyed her reflexively, and then he lowered them, grinning sheepishly. “If ye say so, Lady Katherine, though for what it’s worth, ye look more than presentable tae me.” He caught himself, and cleared his throat uncomfortably. “What I mean tae say is, where we’re going, yer personal grooming will nae exactly be judged too harshly. If ye still wish tae see yer sister?”

“Oh, aye, I do!” Katherine rose from the bed and smoothed out her dress eagerly.

“And ye are right, I dinnae need tae waste another moment fussing over my clothes and such, when those are moments I could be spending with her.” She quickly put an arisaide over her shoulders.

“In that case, permit me tae lead the way.” Bryan offered her the crook of his arm, as though inviting her to dance with him.

She accepted his arm, and he took her to the set of winding stone steps that led down to the main floors of Castle Oliphant, and beyond, into its deepest dungeons.

When they crossed the threshold that took them beneath ground level, Katherine could have sworn she felt a chill press in on all sides, like the cool of the grave. She was also surprised to feel the muscles in Bryan’s arm swiftly tighten and quiver beneath her grip, as though he had been plunged into a barrel of ice water.

She reasoned that this might have had something to do with the screams.

The sounds of them echoed and collided with each other in the stone passages up ahead; shrieks of pain and groans of dread, curses, and blasphemies muttered and whispered and roared, like the damned cries of Hell itself.

Katherine found herself listening keenly, trying to determine whether her sister’s voice was among them. As far as she could tell, it was not.

She turned to peer at his face, and even in the encroaching subterranean gloom, she could make out the tightness of his expression. He had the look of a man who was desperately trying not to show emotion.

“Surely ye have been down here many times before?” she inquired, frowning with confusion.

The question seemed to almost startle him, as though he had momentarily forgotten who was with him or what their reason was for visiting the dungeons in the first place.

“Aye, many times,” he confirmed with a shaky nod. “And yet my wits seem to desert me anew each time, as ye have apparently noticed.”

Katherine patted his arm gently. “There is no shame in it. All men have things which they fear, and many are not nearly so reasonable or understandable as this dreadful place. Fear of captivity is common enough, particularly among those who inflict it upon others.”

His eyebrows went up, and he laughed in spite of himself. “Ye claim that my fear comes from some silly sense of guilt with regard tae Romilly’s imprisonment? As though she does not deserve such a fate for the vile acts she committed?”

She held up a hand placatingly, privately appreciating how easily she was able to provoke him when she had a mind to. She hoped this might come in handy later, but more than that, she simply enjoyed bringing a look of consternation to that self-confident face of his.

“I make no such judgments, and the very last thing I would wish tae do is insult or offend ye,” she replied smoothly. “I merely point out that the work of a jailer is difficult indeed. Tae subject yerself tae such heinous conditions.” She made a show of shivering. “My sister is lucky, indeed, tae have one as sensitive and caring as yerself in charge of her keeping.”

“So,” he said, firmly changing the subject, “how did ye pass the time? Were ye able tae find anything in the library tae take tae yer room with ye?”

“I was unaware that I was permitted tae do so,” she answered, “but now that I know,

perhaps I shall avail myself of it before I retire for the night. With yer kind indulgence, of course. Now, will ye likewise tell me how ye have been occupied this afternoon? Plotting the downfall and demise of my people, I expect?"

"Quite the contrary," he corrected her. "Considering every plot available tae me that might prevent any bloodshed between us whatsoever. Ye have had a chance tae see our lands and people, Lady Katherine. Do we appear tae be such warlike beasts tae ye? Do we sound, and act like animals, eager to maim and destroy our neighbor?"

She scoffed. "I have barely been here a day, Captain. And while this place and its people do seem pleasant, far more so than I might previously have believed, given all my father told me of the Oliphants. I would be a simple-minded thing indeed if I allowed my opinion of yer clan tae be swayed so easily."

"Fair enough," he conceded. "Come, we have almost arrived."

They had reached a long corridor of dank and dripping stone, fashioned wide enough so that those who walked freely on the far-right side of it could avoid the grasping hands and flying spit from the prisoners caged on the left. The horrendous noise felt like ragged fingernails scraping Katherine's eardrums, and it took all of her self-control to keep from clapping her hands to the sides of her head as tightly as she could.

There were over a dozen men occupying the narrow caged chambers. They were dressed in rags and tatters, their flesh was ghostly, their teeth were yellow, their hair was tangled and filthy, and their eyes were as wild and inhuman as those of a frenzied flock of bats in the moonlight. Their pleas and threats mingled together into a single howl that was at once pitiable and monstrous.

"Now ye see why I tend tae shudder whenever I have tae come down here," Bryan remarked.

Katherine nodded slowly. The idea that her sister was confined in this awful place, surrounded by this terrible din all day and night—to say nothing of the noxious smells which filled the air—was almost more than she could bear.

At last, they reached the cell at the farthest end of the dungeon, where Romilly stood at the bars, waiting for them.

“Ye must pass all of these other cells to get to hers every time ye speak with her?” Katherine sounded horrified.

“Aye.” Bryan’s tone was grim. “I sometimes wonder if Laird Alex arranged it that way merely tae bedevil me.”

Katherine stared ahead at Romilly, her eyes still adjusting to the shadows of the dungeon.

Her older sister's condition was not quite as dire as Katherine had imagined; all of her teeth were still in place, and though her clothes were soiled and tattered, and her hair was a matted mess, her face was much the same as it had been the last time Katherine saw her. It was mostly Romilly’s eyes that had changed, for their sockets had turned deep and hollow, and what burned from within them appeared to be the worst sort of madness.

Had this place transformed her so grievously that it had infected her with that grotesque insanity which now seemed to hold her tightly in its grip? Or had it always been lurking within her, looking for an excuse to come out and show itself?

The thought was an ugly one, and Katherine did her best to push it aside, choosing instead to focus on her happiness at seeing Romilly again at all.

For her part, Romilly squinted through the bars of her enclosure at her approaching

visitors. When she saw who Bryan had with him, several different emotions seemed to wage war across her face all at once; confusion, relief, happiness, and concern.

“What is this?” Romilly exclaimed. “Did our father send ye as some envoy, tae negotiate peace in exchange for my release? Or are ye captured now, as I have been? Oh, please dinnae tell me they intend tae lock ye in this ghastly place alongside me.”

When Katherine got close enough, she reached through the bars to embrace her sister. Romilly hesitated a moment. She and Katherine had not shared a hug in many years, and Katherine had no doubt that doing so in this place seemed to her to be the height of strangeness and absurdity.

Nevertheless, Romilly relented, allowing herself to be held and putting her own arms through the bars to return the gesture. Bryan looked on with a neutral expression on his face, but Katherine did not care, given how relieved she was to see Romilly alive again.

Even in these horrid surroundings.

“‘Tis rather more complicated than any of that, Sister,” Katherine began hesitantly. “I was riding back from one of the villages when this man swept me off my horse and took me with him.”

“So,” Romilly turned to Bryan and snarled. “Not enough, then, for ye tae serve a hateful tyrant and endlessly torment and berate a woman ye hold captive. No, now ye have become an abductor of innocents. Naught but a loathsome and underhanded kidnapper. This is what the supposed ‘honor’ of the Oliphants has fallen to!”

“Ye are not one tae talk tae me of ‘honor’ or ‘innocents,’ witch,” Bryan shot back. “Not after the depraved scheme ye hatched with yer father, tae butcher a woman who had done nothing tae ye!”

Romilly made a point of ignoring his comment, and returned her full attention to Katherine instead. “So it’s true, then! Ye are tae be a prisoner here. Well, fear not, my sister. I have endured all this time, and I shall do everything in my power to make sure this wretched place does not break ye down any more than it has me.”

“She is not tae be confined tae the dungeon,” Bryan spoke up again. “We do not believe there shall be any need of that, based on her good behavior thus far.”

Romilly scowled at Katherine in disbelief. “Surely, this cannae mean that ye intend tae betray yer own clan? That ye mean tae assist this lot in bringing down the banners of our father, our family, our people?”

“Nothing of the sort, Romilly, I assure ye!” But even as she gave this answer, Katherine’s stomach twisted and clenched. The possibility of doing exactly that had occurred to her more than once since her arrival, and she had not yet settled on the matter one way or the other.

“It is simply that they feel they can trust me with more comfortable accommodations during my stay with them, rather than force me tae exist down here.”

“Ye mean they intend tae keep the daughters of Angus McGregor separate from each other,” Romilly screeched. “Aye, well, that makes terrific sense. Ye wouldn’t want us plotting together or anything so dangerous as that. Nay, better by far tae try tae turn us against each other.”

“No one is attempting tae do any such thing,” Katherine tried to explain in her most rational tone. Inwardly, she was growing more apprehensive by the moment. “They know better than tae try tae drive a wedge between us. Indeed, it is out of respect for our closeness that they have allowed me tae visit ye.”

Romilly shook her head fiercely, and the dirty strands of her hair whipped around her

face like a maelstrom.

“Oh, my poor little sister, do ye not see the depths of their scheming, their manipulation and treachery? They have not brought ye down here as any sort of courtesy, or because they respect our love for each other. Nay, they have allowed ye tae see me so that ye may be warned of what fate shall await ye if ye displease or disobey them. They want ye tae see for yerself the punishment for defying them. Katherine, ‘tis better that ye simply tell them now ye will have no part in their plans against our clan. That ye reject their offers of comfort and clemency, for they will never purchase yer loyalty. That they may as well confine ye here with me and be done with it, for all the good their sugared words and pretty gestures will do in winning ye over.”

“Ye merely wish tae share yer own misery with yer sister, ye spiteful hag,” Bryan spat. “Ye would deprive her of a warm bed and fine surroundings, and ye will do so in the name of yer family’s honor and her loyalty, merely so ye will nae have tae endure down here alone.”

“There, ye see?” Romilly pointed at Bryan through the bars, and it was the first time Katherine noticed that her sister’s fingernails were broken and ragged, as though she had been attempting to claw her way out of her cell through solid stone. “They think they can turn ye against me by saying such things. They believe that they can convince ye I am a madwoman.”

She drew nearer to the bars and gazed at Katherine imploringly. “But ye and I have known each other too well for them tae get away with that, isn’t that so, sister? Surely ye know that I am of sound mind? That I always have been?”

Katherine nodded reflexively, for the last thing she wanted was to add to her poor sibling’s torment.

Inwardly, however, she was deeply conflicted.

Yes, they had spent their childhoods together, but during that time, how close had they truly been? They'd been friends in the early years, but it was not long after that Romilly immersed herself entirely in their father's tutelage, to the point of neglecting Katherine almost completely—when she wasn't teasing her for being weak, or refusing to take part in Laird Angus's mad schemes.

Could Katherine truly say that her sister hadn't taken leave of her senses? That, indeed, she might not have been a bit of a madwoman all along, having been infected by their father's unhealthy obsession with the conquest of the Oliphants?

"I do not claim that ye have taken leave of yer sanity," Katherine assured her quietly. "I merely ask that, now that ye have a bit of distance from our father, ye ask yerself whether his motives have been worthy. Whether a war against the Oliphants has ever been truly necessary or warranted. These people have committed no crime against us. They dinnae attack our villages or set our farms aflame. Can our father make those same claims, or have we seen him carry out unprovoked assaults on neighboring clans in the name of strengthening ours? Can ye not see that it is madness tae continue these hostilities?" Katherine took Romilly's hand. "All ye need do is reject his dreadful teachings and work with me tae make peace, and ye will no longer be forced tae rot in this awful place. We could go home together!"

Romilly yanked her hand away with a look of disgust, as though she had accidentally shoved it into something revolting. "Listen tae ye! They have already poisoned yer mind; made ye talk like some sort of traitor, eager tae turn on her own kin! But why should I have expected anything else from a soft little weakling like ye, eh, Katherine? Ye, who never showed a scrap of the dedication to our clan that I have. Ye, who rejected our father's teachings at every turn. Very well! Be a coward and a disloyal whelp, and see where that gets ye."

Katherine took several steps back from the bars, feeling the blood drain from her face. No, she and her sister had not been nearly as close as she would have liked these past years. But even so, she had still been under the impression that she truly knew Romilly.

She saw now, to her abject horror, that she had been mistaken.

For this twisted and grotesque parody of her sister that stood before her confounded and sickened her. There was no reasoning with her, no appealing to her better nature, for all sense and morality seemed to have deserted her entirely.

Still, she could not abandon her to this setting without one final word, in an attempt at reconciliation. "I pray that ye will reconsider, Romilly. And until ye do, I shall continue tae visit ye here, and try tae convince ye that abandoning this hatred for the Oliphants is the right thing tae do."

As she turned and began to walk away, Romilly's baneful shrieks followed her. "Ye may save yerself the bother and never come back down here again if ye intend tae join the chorus of Oliphant voices that insist I must relent! For I never will, do ye hear me? In the name of our father, in the name of the McGregors, I will remain defiant even if it means I am to be confined here for a hundred years! My very bones will defy the Oliphants as the rats gnaw the last of the flesh from them! And with my final breath, Katherine McGregor, I shall call ye a vile betrayer!"

Katherine walked back up the stone steps with Bryan at her side, but she felt as though the pit of her stomach remained behind in the dungeons, cold and clenched.

Was she a traitor?

There was a part of Katherine that understood Romilly's disappointment in her, at least partially. She had just arrived at Castle Oliphant this very day, and already she found herself believing the assurances of her captors? Perhaps even seriously considering joining them in their efforts to prevent a war?

How could she have abandoned the ideals of her father so readily?

Perhaps because I always knew, on some level, that they were baseless, she told herself.

That might have been confirmed by the things she had seen since she came here, but it already lurked beneath the surface of her consciousness. She loathed to accept it, though, for fear of displeasing her family and finding herself more isolated from them than ever before.

"Just a few more steps." The sound of Bryan's voice startled her, for she was so ensnared in her own bleak thoughts that she had briefly forgotten he was with her. "We'll be out of this grim place in a matter of moments."

"Thank ye." Her voice was barely above a whisper, and she realized that her words had been swallowed by the rantings of the other prisoners. Her sister's voice had now joined their chorus of hateful babble, much to Katherine's dismay. She repeated herself again, a bit more loudly, not wanting him to think her impolite.

When they reached the main floor of Castle Oliphant, Katherine was grateful for the

sunlight streaming in through the windows, and the presence of the servants and nobles who populated the rest of the place.

Those people did tend to stare at her a bit, given her origins and her reason for being there.

Perhaps they are wondering what I have done to buy my freedom, rather than allow myself to be thrown in the dungeon with Romilly, she thought bitterly. And what am I willing to do to spare myself such a miserable fate?

This last thought came as a surprise to her, for until that moment, she had seen her cooperative nature in her dealing with these Oliphants as entirely voluntary on her part. She was inspired by what she had seen of this castle and its people, and the rational pleas of her captors that she aid them however she could in stopping an open conflict between the clans.

Now that she had seen the alternative, though, in the form of the dungeons...

Could her sister have been right? Could Bryan's true motivation for letting her see Romilly have been to use the dungeons as an implicit threat so that she would relent and tell them everything she knew about her father's schemes?

Not that she had much information to share with them in that regard.

"No doubt her words weigh heavy upon yer heart," Bryan said. His tone was full of concern. "But ye are no traitor, Lady Katherine, ye must know that. Ye have done nothing tae betray the McGregors. Ye would not be doing so even if ye do decide tae assist us, for it would spare the lives of a great many of yer countrymen from being needlessly wasted on the field of battle."

"Perhaps ye speak the truth," she answered slowly. "Even so, it's hard on my heart,

hearing such things from the mouth of my own sister. After this, she will forever see me as her enemy. I see that now.”

“Did she not see ye as an enemy before, when ye refused tae help her inflict grievous wounds upon our clan?” he inquired.

Katherine gave him a shrewd look. “I did not say that she had offered tae let me help her. And somehow, I doubt she would have told ye that either. Still plying me for information, are ye?”

He chuckled. “Aye, and being artless as ever in the attempt. I do apologize. Ye must understand my intentions.”

“Ye must be loyal tae yer laird, and that means informing him of my loyalties and intentions as accurately as possible. I understand that, Captain, and I dinnae blame ye for it.”

“Even so,” he said, “no doubt ye already feel put upon from all sides. I should be helping tae relieve that burden, not adding tae it. If ye would not object tae my company, perhaps we might take a walk around the outer walls of the castle? Observe the final rays of daylight before the sun disappears behind the hills?”

Katherine’s initial impulse was to reject his offer and return to her chamber so that she might go over the events of the day in her mind and attempt to make sense of her feelings about them. It felt as though she was being tugged in many different directions at once, and she feared the pressure of it all might drive her to the same madness which now seemed to consume Romilly.

But then she thought about all the time she had spent as a prisoner in her own bedchamber back home. Had such isolation ever improved her mental state before?

Or had it only made things seem all the more hopeless and unsolvable?

This way, at least, she would have more of a chance to learn about this captain of the guard, who had managed to intrigue her so thoroughly since their first, rather bizarre, encounter. He could attempt to discover the secrets of her mind and heart, but could she not make the same attempt regarding his? In passing more time with him, might she gain a better understanding of the nature of her abductors, and, in doing so, make a more informed decision about whether to aid them in their endeavors?

“That sounds delightful, thank ye,” she acquiesced. “By all means, lead the way.”

Bryan brought her out to the courtyard and through the front gates. Sure enough, the sun had set almost entirely. There was but a brief burnished sliver of it visible, staining the grass of the valleys a breathtaking shade of scarlet.

The scenery was certainly more captivating than that of Katherine’s homeland, which was largely ringed by pitiless mountain ranges. The ground was largely stony and parched, and very little grew there.

Could that have been my father’s reason for waging war all along? she wondered. Did he seek to improve the fortunes of our people by snatching the resources of other clans?

She supposed such a motivation made sense, and in some ways, might even be considered noble. But why not forge alliances with those who might help them instead? Why not promise military aid to those whose armies might not be as formidable, or arrange marriages for herself and Romilly that might have allowed for the import of food and supplies?

That last thought prompted a sour realization inside of her.

“It was the broken engagement, I believe, that caused my father and sister tae plot against the Oliphants,” she spoke up. “Our resources are sparse, and an alliance with yer clan through marriage would have improved our fortunes significantly. Once that was taken away, war became the only option left tae them.”

Bryan nodded slowly. “There might be something tae that, aye. And with regard tae the broken engagement, that was the fault of Laird Alex, tae some degree. His standards when it came tae everything, but most especially potential brides, were impossibly high. That led him tae reject certain avenues which might have benefited him in the long run. Sometimes quite foolishly,” he added with a humorless laugh.

Katherine sensed there was more on his mind, and waited for him to continue.

“On the other hand,” he went on, “whenever I visit Romilly in the dungeons, when I see the malice in her eyes, the way she speaks of our clan, I know that Laird Alex made the correct decision in ending their betrothal. For she was not the woman she presented herself as, nor would she have been a good wife for him in the long term.” His eyes shined with curiosity. “In all the years of yer upbringing, did ye truly never see any hint that violence against us was the main goal of Laird Angus and yer older sister? Can ye honestly claim that they only embraced it once the engagement had concluded?”

Katherine thought back to all the training sessions she observed between her father and Romilly; all the furious rhetoric he had drilled into his older daughter about the evils of the Oliphant Clan, how there could never truly be peace between them and the McGregors.

“Nay, I suppose not,” Katherine admitted in a small voice.

“There is no shame in coming from a family of dishonorable people, Lady Katherine,” Bryan told her tenderly. “It is not our parents or grandparents who define

us. Only our own actions may do that.”

“That is all quite easy for ye tae say,” she countered, feeling tears sting her eyes. “Ye were not birthed from a nest of plunderers and killers.”

“As a matter of fact, I was,” he said conversationally.

She turned to him, her eyes wide. “What do ye mean?”

“Precisely what I said.” He smiled at her, but the mirth did not reach his emerald eyes. “My father was a thief. There were even times when he murdered during the act of stealing. Sometimes because his victims put up too much of a fight, sometimes because he didnae wish tae risk anyone describing the features of the man who robbed them so he might be apprehended and hanged. We were forced tae move often, in order tae stay a step or two ahead of the mobs that would have seen him swing for his crimes. So it was difficult for me tae make friends or have any real prospects as a younger lad, with that shadow cast over me.”

“How utterly dreadful!” Katherine exclaimed. “I’m so sorry, I didnae mean tae make such assumptions without knowing the details of yer past.”

“‘Tis perfectly all right,” he assured her. “There was no way ye could have known. I had two older brothers, and our father instructed both of them in the ways of thievery. They took to his lessons well—too well, as it turned out. One is in a dungeon a long way from here, and will remain there until the hour of his death. The other had his head claimed by the executioner of that same territory.”

Katherine’s hand went to her mouth, and she turned quite pale again. She was scarcely able to believe her ears. “How were ye spawned from such horrors, yet able tae make such a life for yerself in the service of Laird Alex?”

“My father wanted that same life for me,” Bryan explained. “But I rejected it, and him. I knew in my heart that these things he did were wrong. Oh, he tried his best tae make me believe otherwise. He insisted that everything he did, he did for me and my brothers’ that he only stole the riches of others because he wished for us to have the best of everything, and to never know hunger. He tried to make me feel responsible for his evil deeds, and for a while, he succeeded at that. But in the end, my mind and soul were my own. I told him I would have none of it, and so he disowned me and cast me out tae fend for myself.”

Katherine was horrified. “What happened then?”

“I was too young tae fend for myself much, in the wilderness,” Bryan said, his voice tinged with regret. “Not an accomplished hunter or trapper, for none had ever instructed me in such pursuits. Nor had I learned any sort of trade. There were no apprenticeships for a lost and lonely boy who emerged from the forest, with no father he could name for fear of being associated with a heinous bandit.” He paused, as though too afraid to go on.

Finally, he hung his head and said, “I turned tae thievery myself after a while, I’m sorry tae say. The worst kind, in fact, for I tried tae pilfer a few coins from the collection box of a church. My belly had been empty for many days, ye must understand, and I could see no other way tae survive. Even as I reached into that box, I prayed as hard as I could for the Lord tae understand my plight and show mercy toward me. As it happened, my prayer was answered.”

“How so?” Katherine found herself spellbound by the man’s tale.

“The priest caught me at it, and took pity on me due tae my tender age,” Bryan told her. “He took me in and fed me, and we sat and talked for a long while. He didnae try tae fix what was broken in me with hollow verses from the scriptures, and I appreciated that, for it would nae have improved my position. Instead, he simply bid

me tae break the pattern of thievery that I had been caught in, and tae help some other poor lost soul do likewise if the occasion should ever present itself. And so I have, whenever it has.”

“How commendable of ye,” she said sincerely. “It seems ye do know something about what I have been going through. How did ye manage tae make such a life as this for yerself?”

“I gave the matter some serious thought,” he replied. “I had tae prove that I was not the man my father was. I had to distinguish myself, forge my own path in life. I had the knowledge of a thief, yet no desire tae practice that skill. I asked myself, then, how else might such talents be put tae good use? The answer seemed simple enough: I could help to catch thieves, as I was well aware of their tendencies. I came tae the Oliphant lands, and petitioned the laird at that time—Alex’s father, as it happens—tae allow me tae join the guardsmen, despite the fact that I was an outsider with no good name tae call his own.”

“And he did?”

“Not a bit of it!” Bryan laughed. “I was heartbroken, devastated, almost ready tae turn tae crime again. Instead, though, I chose tae give it one final attempt by proving my worth tae him. I waited for nightfall, then crept past the guards, snuck into the castle, and stole the goblet from the laird’s bedside while he slept!”

“Ye did not!” Katherine crowed incredulously.

“Aye, I did!” His eyes twinkled at the memory. “When he awoke the next morning and came down tae the Dining Hall for his breakfast, I was standing in front of the table holding the goblet. He was most indignant at first, tae put it mildly. He was known for his choleric temper, even more so than Alex. But it was clear that if the theft itself had been my motive, then I would nae have remained until morning. It was

also clear that I was wily enough in the ways of thievery tae contribute greatly tae his castle guard. I was hired on the spot, and within a few years, I had proved myself enough tae be appointed captain.”

“The other guardsmen must not have liked that much,” she guessed. “Seeing ye elevated tae such a position at a young age, when they had been at it much longer.”

“I earned their trust and respect over time, and when the moment came for me tae lead them, they were content with it,” Bryan informed her. “They show me loyalty tae this day.”

Those words recalled for Katherine the events of the previous night, when two of Bryan’s men seemed, at least briefly, to question his choices regarding feeding and untying her. The memory made her feel vaguely uneasy, but she did not mention it.

“My point, Lady Katherine,” he continued, “is that we all must make our own choices in this life. We must, each of us, decide what is right or wrong in our estimation, and where our loyalties ought tae lie. No one can choose for us, or demand that we follow their path. Yer sister chose tae commit vile acts against the Oliphants, and that is why she is in the dungeon. We have given her every opportunity tae free herself from it by cooperating, just as we have with ye. She has clung tae her decision nonetheless.”

“Ye must admit, there is something at least slightly admirable about her determination,” Katherine ventured.

Bryan sighed heavily. “Ye have taken her words tae heart. Nay, dinnae try tae claim otherwise. It is only natural for ye tae have been affected by them. She is yer sister, and she has called ye a traitor tae the McGregors. That must hurt, every bit as much as it hurt me when my own father called me a disappointment and a waste. When he said I was a craven fool for rejecting his teachings, and turning my nose up at the life of a thief. We are not made of stone, ye and I.”

“No,” she agreed. “I suppose not.”

“Even so,” he went on, “Ye must come tae understand that of the two of ye, she is the traitor tae yer clan, not ye. For, in attempting tae carry out the immoral and unreasonable orders of yer father, she has brought more suffering upon herself, and, ultimately, upon yer entire people, unless steps are taken tae prevent the war yer father wants so badly. She could be saving lives with her involvement. Instead, she chooses tae screech and accuse and threaten, like a caged monkey. She is wasting an opportunity tae save the McGregors. I pray that ye do not do likewise, for I fear that the future of our two clans rests entirely in yer hands now.”

These words shook Katherine, for that was more responsibility than she believed she could possibly bear. And surely, the Oliphant Clan could not be nearly so blameless as he would have her believe?

“Come,” he invited, “let us return to the castle before the night turns cold.”

She took his arm and followed him back to the gates, her mind still racing.

Somehow, she doubted that sleep would find her that night.

Alex leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers pensively. “Then ye feel that ye are reaching her, Bryan? Turning her tae our point of view, as it were?”

Bryan sat across the desk from Alex in the laird’s private study as the golden rays of morning sunlight streamed in through the window. The captain of the guard had passed a rather restless night, replaying his conversations with Katherine in his mind, and wondering how much he had been able to persuade her of the Oliphant Clan’s good intentions.

When he rose from bed at last, he did so with a renewed sense of purpose and determination where the lass was concerned. He did believe that she was starting to come around; that he’d made progress with her, and would manage still more progress with a new day and new opportunities to win her over.

For the sake of the clan, he reminded himself firmly as he performed his morning ablutions in front of a looking glass—and preened, perhaps, a bit more than he might have otherwise, in preparation for the time he meant to spend with Katherine.

And for peace. That is the reason I must succeed in gaining her trust and friendship. To contemplate any other purpose would be a distraction; one I cannot afford to entertain.

After making himself presentable, even somewhat dashing, Bryan sent a servant to request an audience for him with Alex at the laird’s earliest possible convenience. As soon as the servant returned to say that Alex was ready to see him, Bryan strode the

corridors of Castle Oliphant jauntily, whistling a cheerful tune.

He smiled as he greeted Alex, and told him all that had transpired between himself and Katherine the previous evening.

Now Bryan considered his laird's question carefully, not wishing to seem overconfident in his answer. "In fairness, Alex, she has just been here a short span thus far. This is all quite confusing and overwhelming for her, as it would be for anyone in her position. But following our chats, and especially after the visit with her sister, I can say with confidence that progress is being made, and far more swiftly than I'd have dared tae hope."

"How much longer, do ye think, before she will agree tae help us without reservation?" Alex demanded. He rose from his chair, restless, and began to pace in front of the window.

Bryan had seen this behavior from Alex before, during many other important conferences such as this one. Alex had a tendency to peer out the window at the farms and fields of his domain while he discussed matters which were vital to the Oliphants' future.

The captain knew this was because Alex's ability to see his people, to observe their daily lives and travels from his vantage high in this tower, played a large part in the decisions he made regarding their welfare. It helped him to visualize them, to predict how his choices might make their lives better.

Or, in some cases, how he might be putting those same lives at risk.

Bryan laughed uneasily. "'Tis nay like building a stone wall! I cannae calculate the outcome with that sort of certainty, much as I might like tae. I can only tell ye that I deem the results tae be promising so far. Another few weeks, perhaps a month..."

Alex sighed, exasperated. “We might not have nearly so long as that. Her father is a cunning old vulture, and not known for his patience or restraint. Who can say what sort of fiendish plan he might try tae hatch while ye’re courting this lass.”

Bryan’s face went somewhat red. “Well, ach, I wouldnae say I’ve been ‘courting’ her, merely trying tae carry out yer orders tae the best of my ability.”

“Aye, of course, ‘twas naught but a figure of speech,” Alex interjected absently, still staring out the window. If he detected Bryan’s discomfort at the choice of words, he gave no sign—rather, he seemed lost in thought. “Is there anything ye judge we might do tae hurry things along? Any gesture we might make, any assurance we can give her?”

“I’m still doing all that I can tae determine that,” Bryan assured him. “Ye can count on me.”

Alex peered back at Bryan over his shoulder with what appeared to be mild surprise. “Of course I can, Bryan. I’ve always been able tae before.”

“I still remain unconvinced that she ought tae be given so much freedom during her stay here, though,” Alex grumbled. “She is a valuable asset, and if she were tae escape, we might lose our only chance of preventing a war with the McGregors.”

“I tell ye, If we try tae tighten our grasp on this girl even slightly, or do anything which might be perceived as not having her best interests at heart, we’ll make her feel like a prisoner here instead of one whose better nature we are simply trying tae appeal tae. I have little doubt that she will instantly retract any hint of goodwill or cooperation toward us in that case,” Bryan informed him firmly. “It shall set our efforts back immeasurably. Indeed, I’d nay be surprised if such a tactic ended up with two stubborn McGregor lasses in our dungeons, which would be no good tae anyone.” He paused, then said, “Her heart willnae open tae us if we keep her hands

tied.”

“Huh! A rather florid sentiment for the likes of ye.” Alex considered this, then nodded slowly. “Aye. Perhaps ye are right. As I’ve said, Bryan, I trust yer judgment implicitly. That’s why I’ve entrusted her care to ye while she’s here. However, I would only caution that in yer optimism regarding her potential for cooperation, ye remain vigilant no matter what. After all,” he added ruefully, “we were recently deceived by one of our own, as ye may recall.”

Bryan’s heart sank, though he knew he deserved such an observation from his laird—indeed, probably deserved far worse. “Once again, Laird Alex, I owe ye my deepest apologies for.”

Alex waved him off good-naturedly. “Nay, old friend, I didnae mention it so ye could fall on yer sword again. ‘Twas not yer fault, and I dinnae blame ye for anything that happened because of it. If there had been any way tae detect the man’s disloyalty beforehand, I have nae doubt ye would have done so. I only meant tae say?—”

“That I must be fully on my guard, no matter how I wish for this endeavor tae succeed,” Bryan finished for him briskly.

“Aye. And no matter how engaging ye happen tae find the lass personally.”

Bryan raised an eyebrow. “What the devil is that supposed tae mean?”

Alex shrugged mildly. “Desire can come from peculiar places, Bryan. She’s a fetching woman, and no mistake.”

The captain let out an incredulous guffaw. “I’m the one who took her away from her homeland! The idea that she could ever see me in such a fashion is...”

The laird held up a hand to stop him from going further. “There’s no need to become defensive. I’m merely urging caution. Such lines between duty and the heart can become a bit difficult to keep one’s eye on.”

Those words continued to ring in Bryan’s ears as he left the laird’s study.

Was he being unwise in trying to get too close to Katherine? In trying to forge an intimacy which might sway her from her loyalty to her own clan, was he setting himself up to be tricked and used by her instead?

He knew that he needed to heed Alex’s words of warning.

“Bloody knife’s edge tae walk on, if ye ask me,” he muttered to himself.

Meanwhile, in her guest chamber, Katherine rose from her bed after a night of tossing and turning.

Her heart felt like it was being pulled in a dozen directions at once. There was the twinge of apprehension at beginning another day in unfamiliar surroundings—especially those teeming with Oliphants, whom her father had always spoken of as though they were nothing but a vicious pack of vermin.

How, then, could the truth she’d seen with her own eyes be so vastly different from that?

If anything, she felt she should be approaching the day with far greater fright and trepidation. That she ought to expect hostility, or at the very least, be on guard for any sort of subterfuge or manipulation on the part of her “hosts” in trying to solicit her aid against her own clan.

And yet...

More than anything, she found herself looking forward to the prospect of spending more time with Bryan.

Why did she feel so at ease with a man who had so rudely spirited her away from her homeland? She did not know; she only had a peculiar certainty that he meant her no harm, then or now. There was something comforting and warm about his presence. He seemed to take much of life in stride, and she appreciated the glint of genuine amusement in his eyes when she'd sparred with him verbally. He'd had a quick wit, too, and could clearly hold his own.

Which, again, ought to have made him seem more formidable to her, and therefore ought to have made her inclined to be more careful around him.

Instead, she found herself lifting her dress from the back of the chair where she'd draped it the night before and staring at it forlornly.

She'd been wearing it for two days. She'd been carried off struggling in it, for pity's sake.

Therefore, the garment looked, objectively, quite pitiful indeed.

Katherine knew that most people would probably consider it extremely silly for her to care about her appearance among her captors. When she thought of it that way, she supposed she found it rather silly herself! Still, the notion that she would have to don these same clothes, that Bryan would see her looking so rumpled made her heart sink

She did not have any other options at her disposal, though, so she pulled it back on anyway.

Just as she was finished dressing herself, and she was about to brush her hair, there was a knock at the door. She was partly thrilled and partly mortified by the idea that

Bryan might be the visitor; for though she longed to look upon his handsome features again, she did not relish looking unkempt and frumpy for him.

Still, she supposed it would be a terrible idea to keep him waiting. Too long, and he might imagine that she had escaped out the window.

Katherine giggled at the thought of herself shimmying down a rope improvised from bedsheets, and Bryan goggling down at her comically from the window. "Come in!" she invited, stifling her mirth.

The door opened, and to Katherine's surprise, a poised and lovely young noblewoman glided in, leaving a pair of guardsmen in the corridor behind her. There was something oddly familiar about her face, though Katherine could not quite place it.

Nevertheless, she curtsied demurely. "Good morning! I apologize, I was not expecting tae have any visitors."

"Except for the good captain, of course?" The lady smiled wryly, returning the curtsy. "Come now, Lady Katherine! Surely ye must have guessed that there would be others at Castle Oliphant who would be curious enough about our latest McGregor guest to introduce themselves."

"Nay," Katherine replied uneasily, "I suppose not."

But the notion hadn't occurred to her, and now that it had been pointed out, she felt the need to suppress a shudder. It was already difficult enough for her to keep from considering herself a prisoner here. Would she also have to allow herself to be treated as some sort of caged animal, to be gawked at whenever any Oliphant pleased?

Had her sister been subjected to the same dehumanizing treatment down in the

dungeons, she wondered?

“I believe we might have met once,” the lady continued pensively, “at a clan meeting held at the McGregor Keep, some ten years ago? Perhaps ye dinnae remember me, since we were practically bairns back then. I’m Lady Isla.”

This lit a candle in Katherine’s memory, for she suddenly remembered the clan meeting that Isla referred to. “Och, aye, of course! We once went riding together, as I recall.”

“We did, aye,” Isla affirmed. “Ye, me, and Romilly. ‘Twas a delightful afternoon. We laughed a great deal, in fact.” She sighed wistfully, but there was something shrewd about the way she peered at Katherine while reminiscing. “And who would have thought we’d all end up here, eh? With me wedded tae the laird of the Oliphants, yer sister as their prisoner, and ye?—”

“My place here is somewhat more difficult tae define.” Katherine forced a small laugh, though it was difficult for her to find the sentiment particularly amusing given the circumstances.

“It is, certainly,” Isla agreed. “For example, though I asked that two guardsmen accompany me here to yer room as a matter of caution, I had assumed there would already be others stationed outside yer door. As it turned out, there were none.”

Katherine blinked, surprised. She had assumed that Bryan had stationed at least two of his sentries to guard her room when she was inside it, especially overnight. “I suppose Captain Black didnae wish for me tae feel unwelcome. The better tae encourage my cooperation, that is.”

“Ye may well be right,” Isla said. “He’s a keen one, and generally good at reading people. With the rather woeful exception of the guardsman who ended up betraying

us to yer sister, that is. But then, I don't imagine anyone could have seen that coming, for the plot was so sinister in its execution. Then again," she added casually, "I suppose ye'd know all about that, for no doubt Romilly or yer father confided their scheme to ye prior tae executing it."

Katherine shook her head vehemently. "As I've told the captain, I was nae included in their mad schemes. I wanted no part in them. Tae this day, I'm still nae wholly certain what they were. Only that they must have been grave indeed, tae merit remanding my sister tae such a gruesome pit as the one she currently occupies."

Isla's eyebrows went up. "Then ye have no knowledge of what transpired? Of the hideous crimes Romilly committed?"

"Not at all! Surely, though, her deeds couldnae have been as foul as all that?"

Isla seemed genuinely taken aback by these words, and from her tone, she appeared to choose her next ones quite carefully, "Romilly conspired tae have me murdered in cold blood, Lady Katherine. Indeed, the sword was drawn and ready tae pierce me mortally. If Alex had not managed tae arrive in time—largely through sheer luck, mind ye—I'd be in my grave today. She believed that she deserved revenge for being jilted in her engagement tae Alex, and her father convinced her that if the plot succeeded, it would mean war between my clan and the Oliphants. A war which would have destabilized both clans, and thus allowed the McGregors tae divide and conquer."

As she spoke, the bitterness in her tone increased sharply, convincing Katherine that these were not idle words. This was a woman whose life had been threatened, and who still carried the fear and panic from that day with her—and might never find herself wholly rid of it.

Katherine did not believe this woman was lying to her. The notion that Romilly might

have actually engaged in such dreadful skulduggery, however, was almost more than she could bear.

“I knew my father must have entrusted her with some underhanded errand to harm the Oliphants,” Katherine breathed, “but I could never have imagined anything so horrid. That she would attempt to murder a woman who had not wronged her or our clan in any way?”

Isla nodded sympathetically. “It must come as an awful shock to ye, and I am sorry to be the one to tell ye. Alas, it is the truth, though I fervently wish it were otherwise. I was terrified by the ordeal.”

“I believe that ye were.” But Katherine was unable to leave it at that: “Surely, however, the Oliphants have committed their share of terrible acts as well? I cannae imagine any clan could have ascended to become one of the most powerful in Scotland if it were otherwise.”

Isla nodded slowly. “Ye have a point there, tae be sure. Alex’s father was not known for his kindness or forbearance, and my grandfather died at the hands of an Oliphant. This caused strife between our people for quite some time; strife which was meant tae be alleviated by my marriage tae Alex. And it has. So ye see, there may be any number of ways for the wounds clans inflict upon each other tae be healed.” She considered for a moment, then said, “At the risk of pressing ye in that regard?—”

“Ye believe that if I cooperate, that, too, might mend things between our clans.” Katherine laughed humorlessly. “Ye forget that my father is the only leader our clan has, with no sons to his name. And if I were to help the Oliphants in any way, he would never forgive it, or me.”

Isla’s tone was sympathetic. “I know it may seem hopeless tae ye now. I know ye cannae see a bright future in it all, and that’s understandable, lass, truly. However, yer

father is nae the first laird tae have no male heirs, and still, clans endure somehow. Things needn't be nearly so bleak as that."

"I hope ye're right." Katherine peered dismally at her own dress again, acutely aware of how disheveled she was.

This did not escape Isla's notice, and she appraised Katherine's outfit, raising an eyebrow. "Ye know, I've heard that Captain Black intends tae invite ye out on a ride this morning, tae show ye the Oliphant lands."

Katherine's heart leaped. "Really?"

"Aye, but," Isla shook her head. "We cannae have ye riding in those clothes. Or doing much of anything in them, in fact, until they've been seen to. Wait here. I believe our sizes are close enough, and any small alterations which need tae be made can be attended to by the servants. I'll bring a riding outfit, and some others as well, for ye tae borrow until we can arrange for ye tae have new ones."

Katherine was deeply touched, not to mention excited. "Oh, thank ye, Lady Isla! That is most kind of ye."

Within the hour, the women were pawing through a pile of lovely dresses; trying them on, and laughing together so merrily that the sound of it filled the upper rooms of Castle Oliphant.

As Bryan made his way up to Katherine's chamber, he found himself oddly anxious.

He had initially thought that inviting her to go on a ride with him to the village was a sound tactic; that if she had more of a chance to witness the daily lives of the Oliphant clan members, she would have additional proof that they were good and friendly people who meant no harm to the McGregors—or, indeed, anyone else.

He also could not deceive himself, however, in hoping that his charm might persuade her further as well.

The unspoken affection between them during some of their time together had been as palpable as it was unexpected. He hadn't thought that she could possibly have those sorts of feelings for a man who had essentially kidnapped her the way he had.

Still, there was no denying that there was desire hanging between them at nearly every encounter.

Could he sweep her off her feet enough to make her seriously contemplate turning on her own father?

And even if he could, would his sense of honor allow him to employ such a tactic?

'Tis not as though I am being false with her, or manipulating her callously, he thought as he neared her door. The feelings are mutual, after all. She is fair of face, swift of wit, and sweet of temperament. To be a true suitor to her would be ...

But that notion made him slow to a stop.

No.

His duty had been made clear to him: To guard her closely so she would not escape, and to attempt to sway Lady Katherine to aiding the Oliphants.

Laird Alex's words came back to him, and he knew that it could well complicate, perhaps even sabotage, his given mission if he were to confuse it with some strange courtship. It could lead to him dropping his guard, which could lead to her escape, which could compromise the safety of the Oliphants.

He needed to maintain his focus at all costs. He knew that.

So, Bryan would be charming, then, but within limits. He would befriend her without wooing her. He would win her over without seducing her.

A knife's edge , he thought again glumly as he rapped on the door.

Katherine opened it, and Bryan's breath caught in his throat.

She looked radiant.

Her hair had been washed, brushed, and beautifully coiffed, held up by jeweled combs and pins. She had shed the rumpled dress she'd been abducted in, in favor of a marvelous riding outfit of green and white that emphasized the marvelous curves of her body. She appeared fresh and rested, and he smelled perfume upon her.

"Well?" she asked with a small smile. "I heard that ye might invite me tae ride with ye this morning, and so I thought it best tae make myself presentable."

“Far more than merely ‘presentable,’ I assure ye,” Bryan said. His voice was hushed, and for the moment, all thoughts of propriety with regard to his mission had left him. “Ye look exquisite. And aye, I had indeed hoped ye would accompany me.”

“Ye trust me on a horse, then?” she inquired with a playful smirk. “Ye dinnae worry that I might break away and flee upon my steed?”

“I would run ye down easily,” he replied with a rueful smile. “And I would find a way tae subdue ye without harming ye. I would ask, though, that ye dinnae ruin a fine afternoon by testing me on that score.”

She laughed, and the sound was like wind chimes tinkling in his heart. He did not want to wait another moment to see her riding under the golden sunlight, with the breeze in her chestnut-colored hair.

“Come,” he said, extending a hand to her. “Let us away, that we may enjoy every hour of glorious daylight available to us.”

Katherine beamed at him and took his hand, and together they went to the stables to select their horses.

The stable hand, a kindly old man named Clyde, nodded and smiled at Katherine when she entered with Bryan. Bryan had visited Clyde earlier that same day, to tell him of Bryan’s plan to take Katherine out for a ride. He’d done so in order to ensure that Clyde would take it in stride, rather than gawking at their McGregor visitor or making any comment about her presence there.

Bryan wanted to make her feel more than just welcome in their lands. He wished to do all that he could to make her feel like she was one of the Oliphants. That their people would gladly embrace her, far more than her own family had.

He knew it would take time and patience. Nevertheless, he was determined to try.

“I’ve selected two of the finest creatures in our stables for ye today,” Clyde croaked happily. He tottered to a pair of lovely-looking steeds and took their reins, bringing them over. “I’d like for ye both tae meet Heather and Bluebell. They’re sisters I acquired from a traveler a fortnight ago, and from what I’ve seen, they’re the fastest we have. The most docile as well.”

“They sound delightful,” Katherine exclaimed. “May I ride Bluebell?”

“Certainly, lass,” Clyde helped her into the saddle.

Bryan mounted Heather. “Follow closely, now!” he admonished lightly. “Dinnae make me chase ye.”

“I won’t,” Katherine agreed, but there was a daring gleam in her eye, as though she might choose to make him ride after her at that.

He led her away from the castle, toward the nearest village. He did not dare pull ahead of her too much, for he knew she may yet challenge him to pursue her—either in jest, or perhaps not. Either way, he could take no chances.

But when he frequently glanced over at her, he found her keeping pace with him easily. Each time, she gave him a reassuring smile, as if to tell him that she had chosen not to flee.

Not yet, at any rate.

Bryan knew that word of Lady Katherine’s peculiar captivity at Castle Oliphant would have traveled among the villagers over the past two days, and he fretted mildly that she might not receive a warm welcome when they arrived. Still, he felt confident

that he could keep things under control and make sure they understood that she was to be treated as a guest rather than an enemy prisoner.

“These lands are beautiful,” she called out to him. “I feel that I am far more able tae enjoy the scenery, now that I am not trussed up on yer horse with an uncertain fate ahead of me.”

Bryan chuckled. “Aye, I hoped that would be the case.”

When they arrived in the village, Katherine did receive a few odd looks from the people there, but when they saw Captain Black at her side, they mostly just shrugged and went about their business.

She and Bryan dismounted and tied up their horses, and began to stroll through the avenues of the town. Katherine looked around, wide-eyed.

“What do ye think?” Bryan inquired mildly.

“It seems a wonderful place,” she replied quietly. “The lasses here are just like the ones back home, the mothers and daughters I helped with their sewing and the like.” She laughed to herself, bemused. “I’m not entirely sure what I expected tae see here.”

““The Other,”” Bryan suggested.

She blinked at him, confused. “I beg yer pardon?”

““Twas an unfortunate thing my own father tried tae impress upon me,” Bryan explained, “In order tae make me more committed tae thievery. It was too easy for me tae feel for the people we stole from, so he would come up with ways tae make me feel that we had nothing in common with them. That they were so different from us with their wealth and privilege; that they were nay even the same species as us.

Realizing the falsity of that perspective was a large reason I chose tae defy him in the end. Likewise, yer father taught ye that Oliphants have no commonality with yer people. That we are the enemy.” He snickered. “No doubt ye expected tae find a pack of savages, crunching on the bones of our own bairns as we plotted the downfall of the McGregors.”

Katherine nodded slowly. “Aye, something like that, I suppose.”

As they strolled through the market square, there were more curious and belligerent glances from the Oliphant clansmen, though most of them continued on their way in silence. Katherine did her best to ignore them, and focused her attention on the sights and sounds around her; the blacksmith’s hammer hitting red-hot steel, the smell of baking bread, the voices of the shopkeepers and farmers calling out their wares and prices.

She spotted a little girl, no more than eight years old, walking alone. She approached her carefully, not wishing to startle her. “That’s a marvelous dress ye have on, lass,” she said to the girl. “Did yer mother make it for ye?”

The girl shook her head, smiling proudly. “I made it myself! It took weeks, but I think it turned out well. Look!” She twirled, showing off the garment from all sides. “My mother taught me how tae do it, though.”

“Is she here with ye?” Katherine asked.

The lass nodded, then took Katherine’s hand. “Come, I’ll take ye to her. She sells candles. Perhaps yer friend might buy one for ye?” she added, smiling up at Bryan.

“Och, ye’re a shrewd one and no mistake,” the captain laughed. “All right, then. Let us inspect yer mother’s wares, and see if any of them are worthy enough tae decorate Lady Katherine’s chambers.”

There was a table set up nearby, covered with candles of various shapes and sizes. The woman standing behind it looked pleased to see the girl, but when she saw who was accompanying her, the smile faded immediately.

“Come away, child!” the woman said coldly, gesturing for the girl to get away from Katherine. “We ought tae have no dealings with the likes of her.”

“Why not, Mama?” the girl asked innocently.

The woman stared daggers at Katherine. “She’s a McGregor. They are brutes and killers, and naught flows within their veins but poison.”

These words stung Katherine bitterly, and she noticed that there were other Oliphant clansmen forming a crowd around them. Their numbers seemed to make them bolder in their hatred of her, and they muttered among themselves darkly.

So much for finding a new community for myself , she thought gloomily. They do not want anything to do with me, any more than my father wanted anything to do with them .

“There is no need for ire,” Bryan said slowly. “She does not mean harm to any of ye.”

“No more than her sister did either, I suppose,” a voice in the crowd called out sardonically. Several others chimed in, agreeing.

Katherine began to wonder whether it wouldn’t be safer for them to go back to the castle.

Then she felt a hand on her arm; small, dry, and papery, like the skin of a withered apple. When she turned to look, she saw a very old woman, stooped, her round face covered with deep lines. She was wrapped in a threadbare shawl, and looked as

though she might topple with the slightest breeze.

Even so, she smiled brightly at Katherine. “Come, child. My name is Fiona, and my home is not far from here. Take tea with me, and see that we are not all nearly so ill-mannered as my neighbor.”

“That is quite kind of ye to offer,” Katherine replied. “However, I am under guard, for reasons which are no doubt clear to ye. I cannot accept yer generous invitation without permission from my companion.”

“Oh, the good captain will agree,” Fiona assured her with a dismissive wave. “He knows I am a stubborn old thing, and will not take no for an answer.”

“Fiona speaks the truth,” Bryan chuckled. “Arguing with her has never benefited me thus far, and I doubt it shall this day.”

Katherine felt a brief flutter of anxiety at the notion that the old woman might intend to harm her. Bryan’s attitude toward Fiona allowed Katherine to dismiss the idea, though. Her presence was clearly important to the Oliphants, else they would not have gone to all the trouble of taking her from her homeland.

And if Bryan knew Fiona well enough to trust her, that was good enough for Katherine.

Fiona’s home was a humble yet cozy cottage at the edge of the village. The place was kept clean and pleasant, and Bryan built a fire in the hearth so that Fiona could put the kettle on. The house filled with warmth almost immediately, and Fiona rubbed her hands in front of the flames to warm them.

“Ye have a lovely home,” Katherine said sincerely. “Do ye have any family that stay here with ye?”

“Oh, I had a husband years ago,” Fiona answered conversationally, pouring the tea and serving it. “A son as well. They were good men. Alas, they were killed during a raid by yer clan.”

Katherine almost dropped the teacup in her surprise. “I am dreadfully sorry!”

The old woman shrugged lightly. “Such skirmishes between our two clans were common back then. It broke my heart, but at the time, I was far from alone. There were many other grieving people in town who had lost loved ones in such a manner, and we were there for each other in all the ways that mattered. We got through. We endured.”

“And now ye would have a McGregor in yer home?” Katherine asked, astonished.

Fiona chuckled gently. “Ye didnae kill my husband or son. Ye were not even born yet when it happened. What good would it do to blame ye? How would that serve to heal the rifts between yer clan and my own?” She shook her head. “Nay, such spite only leads to more spite. The violence must end somewhere, and there are only two ways for that to happen. The first is for one clan to exterminate the other completely, down tae the last man, woman, and child. I dinnae have any desire at all tae see such a gruesome outcome to things, do ye?”

“Nay, certainly not!” Katherine replied.

“There it is, then,” Fiona went on softly. “The other solution will only come through kindness, mercy, and forgiveness. There is no other path for us, would ye not agree?”

“I would, aye.”

But I’m not nearly so sure my father would , Katherine added inwardly.

They sat and spoke for a short while longer; mostly about the flowers growing in Fiona's garden, which were hearty and plentiful. The sweet scent of them drifted in through the windows, and Katherine breathed it in deeply.

Eventually, however, Bryan told her that they ought to get back to the castle. Otherwise, he feared that his fellow guardsmen—to say nothing of Laird Alex—might assume that she had attempted escape after all, and he had gone riding after her, or perhaps that McGregors had come to take her back by force.

It was a difficult reminder of the circumstances of her presence there, just when she had started to allow herself to forget them.

Nevertheless, she came along without complaint, for she understood the wisdom in his words.

She was silent for a great deal of the ride back to Castle Oliphant. Bryan saw that she was deep in contemplation, and though he wished to ask her what was on her mind, he felt it might be better to let her finish gathering her thoughts before inquiring.

At last, she asked, "Why did ye bring me to the village?"

"I see no reason why yer presence here should be confined tae yer chambers, or even tae the castle," Bryan replied. "As long as certain precautions are taken, ye should enjoy at least some degree of liberty tae?—"

"Nay," she interjected, shaking her head. "There was more tae it than that, I believe. Ye knew that Fiona would approach and invite me into her home."

"I certainly believed it was a possibility," he admitted.

"Then why?" she challenged again. "Tae make me feel guilt for the orders my father

gave which led tae her family's death?"

"Not at all," Bryan told her. "I did it because I want to put an end tae the warring between our clans at last, and wished to determine for certain whether ye do as well. I thought that introducing ye to Fiona might be a good way tae do that."

"I see. And do ye plan tae continue tae manipulate me thus while I am here?" she asked haughtily.

He sighed. "I intend tae do whatever it takes tae prove tae ye that we are nae yer enemies. If that means taking ye for a long ride on a sunny day tae introduce ye tae a kindly old woman who serves ye tea, well, then I suppose ye shall have to simply endure such horrors."

This made Katherine feel chastised. When she spoke again, the bitterness had left her voice. "Ye say ye wish tae end the warring. But ye are a warrior. Surely ye would prefer tae win a war instead, and in doing so, earn further glory for yerself upon the field of battle?"

He stopped short on his horse, and she was forced to stop as well and lead Bluebell a few steps back toward him. As she did, she realized that in coming to such an abrupt halt, he had given her a chance to get a head start on him and perhaps escape.

He was too smart a tactician not to know that, she knew. But he had done so anyway.

Another demonstration of his trust, but a genuine one, or merely a show to get her to let her guard down?

She did not know. Every time she felt as though she understood him thoroughly, he managed to surprise her again.

“ye are right,” he intoned solemnly. “I am a warrior, which means I have seen combat firsthand. None who have, and have taken the violence they have seen, would prefer more bloodshed. Not when they could put an end tae it instead. Not for all the glory in the world.”

His words were spoken so earnestly that she did not doubt him. Particularly when she saw the ghosts of those memories haunting his eyes; the things he had seen, the things he had been forced to do in order to survive.

“Very well,” she said. “But again, I must remind ye that the hands of yer clan are far from spotless. Ye Oliphants have shed innocent blood, just as we have.”

As she said it, she felt strange using the word we in that context. For as Fiona had pointed out, Katherine had had no part in any crime committed against the Oliphants, nor had she taken any delight from the horrid scheming of her father.

“I dinnae deny that,” Bryan conceded. “All clans have dark chapters of their past, no one can claim otherwise. The previous laird was far from perfect, tae be sure. Laird Alex is a different sort of leader, though. He has a good heart, even if he is forced tae hide it beneath gruffness and an iron will much of the time. Ye have seen for yerself that his people thrive under his rule, and ye have never seen the Oliphants needlessly take the lives of yer countrymen since he became laird.” He laughed mirthlessly. “No doubt yer father blamed many evil acts upon us, but have ye witnessed any? Or merely heard them secondhand?”

He had a point, and she knew it, though she hated to admit it. Her father had told her many tales about raids carried out by the Oliphants.

She had never seen any for herself, though. Nor any evidence of them. Nor had she heard any stories about such raids when she had visited the lasses in town.

She felt like a fool for never having questioned any of it before. At the time, it had not occurred to her that her father would lie about such hideous things.

“Tell me, then,” she said hesitantly, her voice barely above a whisper. “What would ye have me do? Tae aid ye, against my father? For ye must know that I wouldnae agree tae anything that would get any of my countrymen killed.”

“As I’ve said, ‘tis our wish tae avoid that,” Bryan replied.

He did his best to keep his tone even, but inwardly, he was jumping for joy. This was it! She had just taken her first real step toward cooperating with the Oliphants. And it had only taken a matter of days.

“All we would have ye do,” he went on, “is tae convince yer father that peace is in his best interests; a lasting peace, in which the Oliphant lands which were taken by previous generations of McGregors are returned.”

“But ye said that the aggressions of our ancestors ought to be put aside entirely, that we might forge a peace here and now,” Katherine protested. “Many of those lands have been tended by the current farmers’ fathers, or their fathers’ fathers. They supply what little provisions our clan can muster. My father would never agree tae such an offer if ye had a hundred of his daughters.”

“Aye, but he doesn’t have a hundred daughters, only the two,” he answered wryly. “And ye needn’t fret, for Laird Alex wouldnae allow yer people to starve. Ideally, we would wish for an alliance with the McGregors. We could find ways tae work together and share our resources, so neither of us would ever need tae resort tae pillaging or scheming against the other.”

Katherine was taken aback. “An alliance?”

These assurances seemed to encourage her, and Bryan was emboldened by it. “Indeed! And he wouldnae need tae fret about having no male heir, for the Oliphants would put a steward in place tae manage our affairs there. One who could help him with?—”

But the words died in his throat as Katherine’s eyes became stormy. Her hands clenched into fists at her sides, and her face turned red. “Then what ye truly propose is nae ‘alliance,’ but conquest! Och, aye, ye’ll ‘put a steward in place tae manage yer affairs, and our affairs as well! My father would no longer be laird, and the McGregors would no longer be McGregors, merely Oliphant lackeys under different banners.”

Bryan sputtered, protesting. “That is nae what I?—”

“And when my father dies, yer ‘steward’ shall rule over us, I expect,” she fumed. “An Oliphant, giving orders tae McGregors, leading them into battle for causes not their own. Such a thing would mean the utter ruin of my clan! Ye must be mad if ye think my father would ever allow it.”

“Perhaps ye are correct,” he said. “But all we ask is that ye propose it tae him, and assure him that it is the only wise choice for him tae make.”

“Would ye like me tae write tae him as pitifully as I can? Pleading with him, telling him that if he doesn’t acquiesce, then my sister’s life is forfeit and so is mine? Perhaps I ought tae have a cup of water next tae me as I compose it so that I might dip a finger into it here and there and drop fake tears upon the paper!”

“I would like ye tae write from yer heart,” Bryan answered, growing frustrated. “And assure him that it is the only way tae avoid all-out war; one which he would surely lose, and which would cost the lives of far too many of yer countrymen, to say nothing of mine. Ye are clever, Lady Katherine. Ye know that this is the only way we

can have a real peace between Oliphants and McGregors. One in which we need not fear plots being dreamed up and put into motion by a vengeful laird.”

“Ye do not believe he would abide by peace, then, having given his word?” she pressed hotly.

Bryan raised an eyebrow. “Ye now know the scheme he set into motion against Lady Isla. Do ye claim that Laird Angus is a man whose word ought to be trusted?”

Again, she hated knowing he was right, and having no rebuttal. Instead, she said, “I dinnae know whether I can write such a letter tae him in good conscience. I must consider it carefully.”

He nodded. “I understand.”

They rode the rest of the way to Castle Oliphant in silence. When they arrived, she dismounted and went to her room without another word. He did not follow, for he sensed that speaking to her further might hinder his case rather than help it.

Katherine closed the door to her chamber behind her, and when a servant girl knocked to ask if she wanted supper, she declined. The room had not stopped spinning since her return from the ride, and her stomach churned too anxiously for her to have any appetite.

She sat on the edge of the bed with her head in her hands, asking herself over and over, What am I to do? Oh, what am I to do?

12

Some distance away from the Oliphant lands, McGregor Keep towered somberly above the evening mist.

Any travelers who might have happened by just after dark and peered up to the highest window of the structure would have been met by a strange and terrible sight: A face so pale and drawn, and with a gaze so dark and wretched, that most would swear it was the visage of some grim and suffering phantom.

Which, in a way, it was.

Laird Angus McGregor had been sitting at the window for an interminable span of time, for in his state of perpetual confusion and horror, the hours and days blurred together.

His spies and soldiers periodically entered the bedchamber to offer updated reports regarding Katherine's fate. There was not much news. And what little there was did nothing to lift Angus's spirits.

"They say she has been taken."

The woman's voice in the doorway behind Angus startled him badly, particularly since it was not a voice he had heard in over a week; a voice he rarely heard at all, really, except when it echoed mournfully through the upper corridors of the keep, moaning for servants to bring food or medicine for headaches.

When he turned, he saw his wife Annabel standing at the door. In her white nightclothes, and with her gaunt and pallid face, and angry countenance, she too resembled nothing so much as a spiteful ghost seeking to avenge itself upon the living.

“Aye.” The word from him was little more than a hoarse grunt. He scrubbed his face with his palm, exhausted and dazed, and realized that he had not shaved in days.

“They say she has nae been placed in the Oliphant dungeons with Romilly,” Annabel went on. Her eyes were red, though whether it was from weeping or one of her blasted headaches, Angus could not guess. “Rather, she has been seen riding openly across their lands and villages with the captain of their guard. Wearing new clothes, no less.”

These were the same reports that Angus had already received, and so he grunted again.

“That is a small mercy, then, do ye think?” she asked. “That although yer scheming has led to the capture of both of our children, at least one of them is not chained in a dank chamber ‘neath the ground, surrounded by rats?”

“I did what I felt needed tae be done in order tae protect our clan and its future,” Angus retorted through clenched teeth. “And nay, ‘tis not necessarily good news at all that Katherine is being allowed tae roam freely. For it means she may have betrayed us.”

“That is still yer concern?” Annabel scoffed. “Yer petty little war against the Oliphants? Ancient grudges, still kept aflame by their laird jilting our firstborn? How can ye care about such nonsense, when we might never see our girls again?”

“I have always had duties greater and heavier than just my own bloody family!”

Angus snapped. "My first duty is to this clan! And though I love my daughters, I must now worry that one of them might be a traitor," he growled in frustration. "If only I could learn more of the details of Katherine's captivity, but my damned spies cannae get close enough! After what happened with Romilly, the Oliphants are too suspicious of faces they dinnae recognize, and even cautious around those they do."

"Oh, what difference does any of it make anymore, ye silly old fool?" Annabel demanded. "Ye cannae triumph over the Oliphants in open war, and yer idiotic machinations have only succeeded in getting our daughters captured and weakening our position all the more. I dinnae care whether every McGregor banner in the land is torn down and replaced with that of the Oliphants, we must put an end to this! We must do whatever it takes, agree to whatever is asked of us, if it will only bring our children home safely! Damn it, Angus, how can ye not see that?"

Angus hung his head. "Ye have never understood. Ye have never even tried, come tae that. Ye decided tae be miserable from the moment we were wed, and tae sequester yerself day and night whilst blaming yer 'headaches.' So do a favor tae us both, hen. Go back tae yer chamber, take yer powders and concoctions for yer blasted head, and leave the affairs of our clan tae me."

"Will ye petition for their return, Angus?" she challenged. "Will ye make concessions tae them if it comes tae that? Will ye, for God's sake, put yer pride aside and do what's right for yer daughters for once, instead of treating them like agents in yer fight with the Oliphants?"

"I told ye, I shall do whatever is required of me tae protect and defend this clan," Angus answered. "Beyond that, I owe ye no insight into my plans. Ye are nae my advisor, nae even a friend tae me. Merely a baneful presence which forlornly haunts this keep."

Annabel stood there a moment longer, as though she might try to speak again. Then,

seeing it would do no good, she shook her head slightly and returned to her chamber.

Angus hung his head, wondering what on earth he was meant to do next.

Any capitulation would be weakness. And any weakness would surely be exploited by the Oliphants. Perhaps his blasted wife did not care about Oliphant banners hanging from McGregor ramparts, but Angus did.

He saw no alternative but war, then.

If Annabel was right and their chances against the Oliphant horde were hopeless, then at least Angus would know that those McGregors who fell in battle would do so with honor defending their homeland, rather than cowering before Laird Alex.

He only wished there were some other way.

While Angus McGregor agonized over his situation, his younger daughter did likewise, all through the night and into the next morning. When the first light of dawn peeked through the windows of her chamber, she knew what she had to do, though she loathed and dreaded the prospect of it.

She dressed in one of the outfits that Isla had allowed her to borrow, and as she did, she wondered what would become of her after she spoke to Bryan about her decision. Would the dress be torn off her and returned to Isla? Would Katherine be forced back into the clothes she'd worn during her early days there so that she could wear them down in the dungeons in a cell next to her sister?

Katherine thought about when she had visited Romilly down there; her sister's matted hair and dirty face, and the sounds of screams punctuated by the squealing of rats. She desperately wished she could liberate Romilly from such a grotesque place, rather than joining her in it.

Unfortunately, there was nothing else to be done, and she knew it. So whatever happened as a result of her choice, she knew she would have to bear it with as much grace and dignity as she could muster.

She brushed her hair, then went in search of the captain of the guard. The servants she asked were able to direct her to him. He was strolling the walls of the castle, checking with his guardsmen to ensure that their night had passed without incident. She understood his reasons for doing so; surely her father would have heard of her abduction days ago, and that would make his scheming all the more dangerous for the Oliphants.

“Good morning, Captain,” she called out.

Bryan smiled when he saw her, then waved and approached. With the wind in his long dark hair and the sun creating a halo behind him, he looked especially dashing that morning, and thus the sight of him made her heart hurt, as she considered what she had to tell him.

“I hope ye passed a restful night, Lady Katherine?” he greeted her.

Katherine shook her head with a sad smile. “I have not had a moment’s rest since my arrival here, but my accommodations are not tae be blamed for it. They have been lovely and generous indeed.”

Bryan nodded sympathetically. “Aye. Somehow, I doubt ye had much rest before ye came here either, worrying about yer sister and the future of yer clan.”

“That’s true enough,” she admitted.

“Because of those concerns,” he pressed on, “I hope ye have given careful thought tae the choice put before ye? And have made the right decision?”

Katherine sighed. "I have made a decision I believe tae be the right one. I can only pray that I am correct in that. I cannae give ye what ye ask for, Captain. I cannae propose such a surrender tae my father. Not in good conscience, not when he would surely see me as a betrayer and disown me for doing so. Not when I know that it would mean the end of my clan's entire way of life."

"But it needn't—" he began.

She held up a hand to silence him, shaking her head mournfully. "It would. Ye may not know that for a certainty, but I do. Even if none of that were true; even if my father did agree tae such a thing, it wouldnae lead tae any lasting peace. Merely an Oliphant victory, and one that would remain fleeting so long as my father is alive to plot its reversal. The only way to keep him from turning against ye and starting another war eventually would be tae end his life, and that I cannae help ye do. So we are at an impasse."

"I see," he replied, looking disappointed. "I had hoped that during our time together, I had been able tae reach ye."

"Ye did," she assured him. "Ye made my choice more difficult than ye can imagine. But it is my choice nonetheless. Even if it means that I must join my sister in yer dungeons while ye make war upon our clan."

"We may not be able tae avoid war without yer help," Bryan told her firmly, "but the fact remains that ye are innocent, and so, unlike yer sister, ye have no place in our dungeons. 'Twould be wrong tae keep ye here any longer if no good can come of it."

A ray of hope gleamed in her eyes. "Then, surely ye dinnae mean that ye will release me?"

"The decision is ultimately Laird Alex's," Bryan said, "but as I've told ye, he is a

good man, and I am sure he will see things the same way I do. I see no reason why ye should remain here if ye dinnae wish tae.”

Katherine opened her mouth to tell him she did wish to remain at Castle Oliphant with him; as a guest rather than a prisoner, and perhaps as a woman he might woo. It was funny to consider that all other things being equal, a lady of her station would not be courted by a guardsman, not even a captain.

However, she was hardly a “noblewoman” here, was she? She belonged to a clan that was an enemy of the Oliphants. As such, her position was far more ambiguous, and so why shouldn’t she have Bryan Black as a suitor?

What good would it do to return to the McGregor Keep, knowing war was coming to them?

But sadly, she knew the answer to all of that. It was her home, it was where her family was, and so it was where she belonged.

If she did not return now, then, even in the highly unlikely event that her clan survived the conflict, there would never be any home for her to return to. She would be branded a traitor for having stayed with the Oliphants willingly instead of being there to support her father in his time of greatest need. She would never be forgiven, and as a McGregor, she would be considered all the more unwelcome by the rest of the Oliphant Clan.

Return was her only option, though she hated the thought of it.

So she curtsied and said, “Thank ye, Captain. Ye are a good man, and I am heartily sorry tae ever have suspected otherwise.”

“I scooped ye off yer horse and spirited ye away tae an enemy territory without so

much as a by-ye-leave,” Bryan chuckled. “If ye had not suspected me of being a man of questionable character, ye would have had tae be simple-minded indeed. In fact, ye happen tae be the cleverest lass I’ve ever known. Perhaps the bravest as well. I may lament yer decision, but I respect that ye made it, even assuming that it would lead ye tae the dungeons. That shows tremendous courage.”

Oh, how she wanted to change her mind and stay with him! At that moment, she could have grabbed and kissed him right there upon the ramparts.

But if she did, then she knew she would never be able to do what she felt was right.

“Again, thank ye,” she said hoarsely.

Bryan bowed to her, then took his leave, going directly to Alex’s study. When he got there, he found the laird staring out the window again, lost in thought. Alex almost didn’t hear Bryan’s knock, but when he did, he gestured for the captain to enter.

“I take it ye bring me more news of our guest?” Alex asked with a wan smile. “Good news, I pray, for I feel our time for making peace with Laird Angus is swiftly running out.”

Bryan nodded, clearing his throat. “She willnae aid us. I have explained to her that doing so is the only way toward peace, and that she need not be a traitor in the doing of it, but she is convinced that her father will cast her out just the same, and perhaps she is right. From what we know of him, Angus is an obstinate soul, and willnae see reason.”

Alex sighed heavily. “That cannot be the end of it.”

“I am afraid that it is.” Bryan paused, then added, “And since it is, Alex, I believe we have no choice but tae return her tae her homeland as soon as possible.”

Alex's eyebrows shot up. "Have ye taken leave of yer senses? After all that was done tae bring her here?"

"No one knows what it took tae bring her here more than I," Bryan reminded him, "and now I believe that no good may come from continuing tae keep her."

"But she has only been here a short while," the laird protested. "She might well change her mind."

"I have seen the determination in her eyes, and the conviction in her spirit," his friend informed him. "If ye have ever trusted me, Laird Alex, then trust me now. She willnae bend. Beyond that, all we can do is keep her against her will."

"Then why nae continue tae do that , at least?" Alex suggested. "We needn't imprison her, we can continue tae make her comfortable during her stay like civilized people. She still represents leverage against her father. She might still be used as a bargaining chip."

"The effort would be futile, I assure ye," Bryan answered. "If taking one of Angus's daughters has not persuaded him tae at least attempt a settlement, then having both of them willnae put an end tae it either. Perhaps if they had been male heirs, they might have been worth more tae him. Who can say? But she has made it clear that he willnae bargain for her, not even in the face of his clan's ruination."

"Of course she would say that tae be released," Alex retorted, exasperated.

Bryan shook his head. "She made this choice fully expecting tae be sent tae the dungeon for it. Her resolve is strong, Alex. I dinnae believe she ought tae be punished for that, do ye? Is that in keeping with the honor of Clan Oliphant? We never took the lass with the intent of harming her, and tae keep her here any further would be tae do her harm, if only by making her appear a willing traitor in the eyes of her own people.

We erred in thinking it would profit us tae take her. Let us not compound that error by holding her further.”

Alex slammed his fist down on his desk in frustration, hard enough to make the captain jump. Then he stood and paced the room furiously for several minutes, his brow furrowed.

Bryan waited patiently. He knew the laird well enough to know that it was unwise to interrupt his thoughts when he was like this.

At last, Alex said, “Very well. Ye asked earlier whether ye have ever had my trust, and the truth of it is, ye always have and still do. If ye genuinely feel that this is our best way forward in dealing with the McGregors, then I will trust in that as well.” He gave a small shrug. “Who knows? Perhaps in releasing her, we will at last demonstrate to Angus that we are honorable and therefore worth striking a deal with to avoid bloodshed. I doubt it,” he added ruefully, “but we can hope, at least. I trust ye intend tae take her as close tae the borders of our lands as ye can without risking an encounter with the McGregors? And that ye plan tae bring a cadre along with ye for protection?”

Bryan shook his head. “I’ll need to ensure she is close enough tae her home that no harm will befall her on the way. Otherwise, Angus shall blame us for it, and likely believe we turned her loose in an unsafe area on purpose. Likewise, if I come with other guardsmen, Angus might believe it is the first battle of the war coming tae find him, and respond in kind. I managed alone before, and though it will doubtless prove more difficult this time, I still shall not fail. Ye chose me for my particular talents in this regard, after all.”

“That I did.” Alex clapped Bryan on the shoulder briskly. “I still believe this is unwise, and I dinnae wish tae risk my finest warrior and friend on such an errand. But my faith in ye tells me I ought not refuse ye, and so I shall not. Go, and do what ye

must to return to us safely.”

Bryan bowed. “Thank ye, Laird Alex.”

He was pleased with Alex’s decision to allow him to release Katherine, and looked forward to relaying the news to her.

As he proceeded to her chamber, though, a troubling thought occurred to him.

Had he insisted on going with her to the border alone for the reasons he’d given, or simply because he hoped to steal a few more precious moments alone with her?

And if so, was he making a grave mistake which might endanger both their lives?

It was decided that Katherine would pass one more day and night at Castle Oliphant before setting out for the McGregor lands with Bryan. The journey was long, and it was preferable to spend as much of it in daylight as possible, Bryan reasoned.

Again, though, he was forced to wonder whether this was his true reason, or if he was simply eager to spend a bit more time with Katherine before releasing her. Whatever the reason, Katherine did not seem to mind. If anything, when the idea was put to her, she beamed and agreed immediately. Bryan was pleased at that, and they spent much of the remaining morning and afternoon together.

They strolled the opulent gardens within the castle walls, and marveled at the birds that congregated among the trees and flowers, each so colorful and delicate that they resembled nothing so much as glittering fragments of stained-glass come to life.

They walked the ramparts side by side for hours, ignoring the dubious looks from the guardsmen—no doubt confused and somewhat annoyed that their captain was spending so much time with a McGregor, and that he appeared to be having a marvelous time at that. Bryan pointed out every corner of the Oliphant lands to her, and told her everything that could be found there; the towns beyond the one they had previously visited, and which fields belonged to which families, and which roads led where.

“I hope I have a chance to see it all properly someday,” Katherine said breathlessly.

The sunlight picked up the auburn highlights in her silky brown hair, making it look

almost as though there was a crown of autumn leaves threaded within in. Her dark eyes shone happily whenever she looked at Bryan, and they stood so close together that her scent intoxicated him completely, like dew upon spring roses.

Their hands were so close that they brushed against each other here and there. Every time it happened, it sent lightning bolts crackling through Bryan's entire body.

Everything in her eyes, her voice, her posture, told him that if he were to kiss her, she would welcome it. She would reciprocate. She would fall into his arms, and perhaps agree not to leave Castle Oliphant after all.

But that would be a betrayal of his duty to his laird. He could not allow it. Not when the Oliphant Clan had taken him in as a youth, given him an opportunity to go from the son of a wretched thief to the captain of the guard for Scotland's most powerful clan.

His loyalty to the clan must be placed above all else. He knew that all too well.

So he resisted these temptations, and when it was time for supper, he dined with her in the scullery. Even though she was the daughter of an enemy, it still would not have been considered decent for him to pass the time with her in her chamber unchaperoned. This way, they were in full view of the servants at all times.

The meal passed pleasantly enough. As they talked and laughed, though, there were several times when Bryan glanced at the entranceway to the scullery, and saw Alex loitering there, watching the exchange.

Each time, Alex seemed to ask the same question silently; Must she truly go back? Can ye not persuade her, if given more time?

And each time, when he was sure that Katherine wasn't looking, Bryan replied with

an almost imperceptible nod.

He knew that this might have been less than honest of him. Perhaps he might have been able to change her mind if she stayed longer.

He feared, however, that if she did, it was more likely that she would change his mind; he would eventually be unable to resist her any longer, and would give in to his passion for her. There would be no success in his mission then, he was sure. His mind would be too clouded by his feelings for her to guard her as he needed to, or make a true case for helping the Oliphants without relying on their personal feelings for each other.

And even if none of that were true, was it in his nature to essentially hold her hostage until she espoused the views they wanted from her? How could they trust that she meant it if she eventually did say it, instead of just pretending to relent to gain her freedom?

No, returning her to her homeland was the only course of action that made sense. Even if knowing that made his heart ache.

Neither of them wished for the evening to end. But when the servants made it clear that they were retiring for the night—and that none of them felt particularly comfortable doing so while the captive McGregor was being entertained in the kitchen —Bryan had no choice but to say goodnight to her. He walked her up to her chamber, and lingered briefly at the door with her, knowing he could not enter, but wishing desperately that he could.

Neither of them got much rest that night. Both looked forward to the journey together, while dreading its inevitable conclusion.

The next morning, Katherine dressed in her own clothes again and went down to the

courtyard at first light. Bryan was waiting for her there, holding the reins to Bluebell and Heather. When he saw her, he gave her a nod and a wistful smile, gesturing to the horses.

Katherine nodded approvingly. The image of him seemed to double and triple before her, as her eyes filled with tears. She blinked them back, not wanting to cry in front of him.

Or in front of Isla and Alex, who were likewise waiting there to see her off.

“Lady Isla.” Katherine curtsied. “Thank ye again for lending me yer clothes. That was very kind of ye.”

“Would ye care tae take one or two of my dresses along with ye?” Isla asked kindly. “Tae remember us by?”

“A strange sentiment,” Alex chuckled. “A keepsake of the time during which she was detained by us against her will?”

“Not at all, Laird Alex, I assure ye,” Katherine said with a laugh. “I shall remember my time here fondly. And I would like nothing more than tae accept Lady Isla’s gracious offer. However, I doubt that my father would be particularly understanding with regard tae why I would choose tae wear the garments of his enemies.”

Alex placed a hand upon her shoulder, looking into her eyes solemnly. “All the more reason why ye must do whatever ye can tae make yer father see reason. Tae lead us into war would be the height of folly, especially when not a drop of blood needs tae be shed.”

“I understand that,” she replied miserably, “but as I’ve told Captain Black, I know my father well enough tae know that he will never agree tae the surrender ye have

proposed.”

“Then he must agree tae meet and discuss terms until we arrive at something he will agree with,” the laird insisted. “Something that willnae end in violence and death when none is necessary. Something that will allow me tae slumber soundly each night, knowing that he is not plotting my ruin nay matter what accord he might shake hands on. There must be a way tae prevent armed conflict, Lady Katherine. Please, promise me that ye will do all it takes tae reach him.”

“I can promise tae try with all my might,” she answered, “and so I shall. The stronger I try tae make such a case, though, the more he might think that I have turned against him entirely. So ye see, Laird Alex, no matter what I do, I fear that our clans are doomed tae do battle.”

Alex nodded gravely. “Very well. I was afraid of that, but nevertheless, I appreciate yer honesty. Safe travels, then. I shall continue tae hope that someday, ye might be our guest under better circumstances.”

Katherine smiled. “If there is to be any hope of people between the McGregors and the Oliphants, Laird Alex, it rests in that very fact; though my father may have long since given up on the notion of peace, ye refuse tae do so.”

He smiled in return, and nodded.

Katherine embraced Lady Isla. “I shall miss ye, my lady. I wish we’d had more chances tae speak. I feel as though I might have learned a great deal from ye.”

“As my husband has said, fate may yet grant us more opportunities tae converse,” Isla said quietly. “Who among us knows what the future will bring?”

“Come, Lady Katherine,” Bryan spoke up. “We must make the most of the daylight

available to us.” He sounded regretful as he said it, though.

Once again, she mounted Bluebell with his help, and then Bryan climbed atop Heather. Together, they rode out through the gates toward the sunrise.

When Bryan peered over at Katherine a short while after they’d been riding, he saw that her expression was subdued. “Is all well?” he asked. “Do ye need us tae stop for a moment?”

She shook her head, reaching up to wipe a tear from her eye. “‘Tis merely that I feel dreadful riding away from the castle when my sister is still imprisoned beneath it. I feel I should have done more tae petition for her release, or tae give her better accommodations.”

Bryan shook his head sadly. “I sympathize. I wish there were no need for her tae remain in that horrid place, and I have given her every opportunity tae prove that there is no need for it. But she has refused tae demonstrate anything other than spite and malice toward us. She has tried tae commit murder in cold blood before, and she has openly stated that she would do so again at her earliest opportunity.”

“I suppose ye’re right,” Katherine sighed. “I feel shame for not having made time tae visit her again, but I dinnae imagine that any good would have come of that either. She can be so obstinate, no one knows that better than I. She takes after our father that way, she does. But how am I tae persuade him the Oliphants dinnae mean him any harm, when I couldnae even make my own sister see it? Why must I come from a family of lunatics?”

“A question I happen tae have some experience asking myself as well,” Bryan chuckled mirthlessly. “But I found my place in this world, and found my way tae the sides of those whose company was far more suited tae my own. I believe the same shall happen for ye, if ye have the courage tae seek it out.”

She looked away for a long moment. When she spoke again, her voice was hoarse with grief. “I know what ye want. And by now, ye must know that there is a large part of me that wants it, too. But even if I were able to go back with ye, my guilt at forsaking my family would be too great for me tae bear. I must go back tae the place I belong, Bryan. Will ye bring me there safely?”

He nodded, though his head had never felt so heavy before.

They continued to ride, but as they did, Bryan snuck another glance in her direction. He saw grave uncertainty on her face, and wondered if she was struggling with the idea of returning to the castle with him after all.

Still, she rode forward resolutely. Toward the border between their lands.

And he kept pace with her, wondering if there might be anything he could say to her that could still change her mind and make her help the Oliphants, before it was too late, and she was in her father’s clutches again.

Bryan and Katherine rode side by side until the sun was directly overhead – pacing their horses carefully, each privately telling themselves that the fear of exhausting the creatures was what prevented them from hurrying.

Their eyes often met in lingering sideways glances, during which it seemed that they were wordlessly sharing a vision of a future that would never be. One in which they had more time together at Castle Oliphant, without any of the cares and conflicts between their clans hanging over their heads.

“It would be nice, would it not?” she remarked at one point. “Tae be riding out here together among the fields and forests as a merry picnic, instead of...” Her next words caught in her throat, and she fell silent again.

“Perhaps we might pretend that we are,” Bryan answered somberly. “And we cannae stop only because we have nae discovered the perfect spot for it yet.”

“Bluebell will need to rest soon,” Katherine pointed out, “and I imagine Heather does as well. Do I recall that there is a stream near here, running through a primrose meadow?”

His eyebrows went up. “Ye dinnae mean tae tell me ye remember that detail from when I brought ye here?”

She blushed slightly, looking away. “I, ah, did my best tae commit all I saw tae memory. In case I did find occasion tae escape.”

“Ye are incredibly wily,” Bryan said with an appreciative whistle.

“Ye keep sounding so terribly surprised when ye make such observations.” She batted her eyelashes at him innocently, then spotted the primroses nearby and broke into a wide grin. “There! We’ve found our perfect picnic spot, and the horses can avail themselves of the water and grass. I assume ye’ve brought along provisions enough for us as well? A fellow such as ye does nae become a captain, I imagine, without planning for such necessities.”

“True enough,” he replied with a jolly twinkle in his eye.

As they dismounted and allowed the horses to explore the meadow, it struck Bryan how easily she had been able to persuade him to stop after he’d mentioned that they shouldn’t.

The power she had over him... Perhaps it was better that she had decided not to remain after all.

They found an agreeable spot near the stream and sat, and Bryan produced the food that he had taken from the castle’s larder that morning: A loaf of brown bread; a pot of butter, rosy with fragrant herbs; several pieces of cold chicken; a pair of shiny apples; and, to Katherine’s amusement, a bottle of wine and a pair of goblets.

“We cannae indulge overmuch,” he told her. “We must keep our wits about us, in case danger should present itself. Even so, I thought ye might appreciate the chance tae make a bit merry before returning tae the dour company of yer father.”

“That was exceedingly thoughtful of ye. Thank ye. ‘Tis an awful shame, though; that part about us needing tae keep our wits about us, I mean.”

Bryan could see the desire burning in her eyes like coals. The way she leaned toward

him, the incline of her head, it seemed that every part of her except her mouth was pleading for him to kiss her.

It was not just her, either. The muggy song of the crickets filled the drowsy afternoon air, combining with the steady gush of the stream and the sound of Bryan's pulse throbbing in his temples. It was as though they were in some enchanted glade together, far away from the concerns of McGregors and Oliphants.

A place where anything could happen, and no one need ever know.

Bryan blinked and shook his head, trying to clear it. He realized that he had begun to lean forward toward her as well, and he stiffened, distributing the food between them. "At any rate," he said in a voice that sounded strangely breathless. "I hope these victuals shall prove adequate to yer appetite, my lady."

"I'm sure that they will, and that the company shall be even more nourishing." She straightened her back as well, but her eyes still glittered mischievously as they moved over his face and body.

She took a small bite from the apple, then asked, "Why did ye choose tae become a warrior?"

"I dinnae think of myself as a warrior," he answered. "I am the Captain of the Guard. I protect my laird from any who would do him harm."

"But there are times when those duties lead ye tae the field of battle," she pointed out.

"Aye," he affirmed, "but then I consider myself a soldier, not a warrior." He gave her a lopsided smile. "Sounds like a distinction only a madman would make, eh?"

"I suppose it does nae make much sense tae me, at that," she agreed.

“‘Tis been my experience,” he began, “that those men who call themselves warriors tend tae go looking for wars. They define themselves by their willingness and ability tae do violence.”

“Are all who lift sword and shield ‘neath the Oliphant banner like ye in that regard?” she inquired, mystified. “Are there any warriors in all of yer clan?”

“Och, aye, there are a great many!” he laughed good-naturedly. “Indeed, I’d say most of the guards under my command would call themselves by that name, and certainly a great number of the soldiers who go tae war tae preserve and defend our lands. They are good men, and good at what they do. I consider them tae be my boon kinsmen, and I am grateful every day to have such a preponderance of them in our clan. But for myself, I dinnae need bloodshed and the threat of death tae feel alive. I long for peace above all else. My laird most of all, but for myself as well.”

“Then why did ye choose a path which might lead ye tae cross swords with others?” she asked, sounding genuinely curious.

“I told ye where I came from,” he reminded her. “I had stealth, and I was gifted with a blade, and with my hands as well. With the particular set of knowledge and skills I had tae offer, this seemed the only honorable choice for me tae leave my life of thievery for good and all.”

Katherine leaned closer again and looked at him with narrowed eyes, nibbling on a piece of chicken. After a few moments, she shook her head decisively. “No, I dinnae believe that is the full truth of it at all. ‘Tis a fine enough reason, but I see another behind yer eyes.”

He gave her a wry grin. “Ye are clever, and nay, I’m nae a bit surprised by it. Ye are correct.”

He fell silent for a few moments, making Katherine believe that he did not intend to elaborate. Finally, though, he spoke again.

“Some of the things my father forced me tae do tae others in the name of survival remain with me tae this day,” he said slowly. “This may sound daft, but there were times when I felt like I was a butcher, carving off slabs of my own soul to sell. I felt that it wouldnae be enough for me tae simply escape from that life. I knew that if I ever did, I owed it tae the world tae use what that monster had taught me tae balance it out. In the service of something larger than myself, something that truly mattered. And I have,” he added simply. “I’m fortunate tae have the chance tae continue tae do that, every day that I awake beneath the Oliphant banner.”

Katherine considered this for a few moments, then gave him a shrewd and impish sidelong look. “Even so, Captain, if ye had been able tae pursue a wholly different path, what might ye have chosen?”

The question caught him off guard, and he chuckled. “Hmm. Not a merchant, that much is certain. My father and I plagued more than our fair share of merchants as they transported their goods from place tae place, and I wouldnae shoulder the burden of protecting those caravans from bandits for all the world. Too many things can go wrong. One crafty band of fellows sets their mind tae stealing from ye, perhaps they even persuade one of yer own guardsmen tae assist them in robbing ye. Before ye can blink, ye’ve gone from a rich man tae a pauper.”

“Aye, so not a merchant, then,” she replied impatiently. “That leaves every other occupation in the bloody world tae choose from!”

“I suppose I might have learned how tae sew dresses and other pretty things,” he teased. “If only a noblewoman such as yerself had chosen tae spend her free hours instructing me. Ah, what fine garments I might have created out of mere scraps!”

“Here now,” she giggled. “I’m trying tae be serious! I really want tae know. Where else might yer heart have led ye, if ye hadn’t walked the path which led ye into the service of the Oliphants?”

Bryan sighed and furrowed his brow, giving the matter serious thought. At last, he said, “I’ve always admired smiths. Working a forge is good, honest work, and it keeps a man’s arms and back strong. What’s more, a smith provides the weapons and armor that guardsmen wield tae protect their lairds and homelands. A smith must know his business well, in order tae ensure that such noble purposes are bolstered by blades and shields that willnae break against those of the enemy.”

“Ah, but ye might just as easily end up arming those whose intentions are less honorable, is that not so?” she pointed out. “For a sword can change hands easily, and cares not who swings it. Yer marvelous works might turn out tae be used for terrible deeds.”

Bryan stroked his chin. “I had not thought of that, but I suppose ye are right. ‘Tis a difficult question for me tae answer, my lady. In truth, I never considered other paths, for I’ve always felt so fortunate tae have been allowed tae walk this one.” He paused, then added, “Especially now that the path has led me here, tae this lovely glen, with the most radiant woman I’ve ever known.”

He felt light-headed, and nothing before him seemed to remain in focus, save for Katherine. His words had clearly touched her deeply, and she drew closer to him, her lips parting. For a fleeting moment, he believed she was leaning forward to confide some secret.

“I’ve always liked blacksmiths. The very first lad I fancied was a blacksmith’s apprentice.”

Then her mouth met his, and a thousand wildflowers bloomed within his soul all at

once.

Her breath mingled with his, as sweet and warm as a summer breeze over a field of daffodils. He felt her hands upon his chest, and briefly thought she regretted her decision and meant to push him away, perhaps even admonish him for not pulling back from her advances in the first place.

Instead, her fingernails raked the front of his tunic slowly and deliberately, relishing the solid and muscular contours of his body. He felt her body shiver with delight, and her kiss intensified. He cupped a hand behind her neck, pulling her even closer to him, embracing her tightly until they both ached from it. Still, it did not feel like enough, still they both wanted to keep squeezing each other until their two forms merged into one.

For that shimmering and all-too-short time, it felt as though all the rest of creation fell away, and the two of them were suspended in some joyful and infinite void where no worries could ever find them.

Then Alex's disapproving visage appeared in Bryan's mind, and his breath caught in his throat.

He was betraying his mission. He was allowing his feelings for this lass to overtake his duty to his laird and clan.

And after all they had done for him, he did not dare treat them so shamefully in return.

Bryan pulled away sharply then, and Katherine's eyelids fluttered open. They were startled, and filled with dismay.

"I cannae do this," Bryan told her gruffly.

“Ye want to,” she protested. “Just as I do.”

“Aye,” he confessed, “perhaps more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life. I find myself wishing that we might remain in this glade forever. And when we do leave it, it shall take every bit of discipline within me tae keep us moving steadily in the direction of yer homeland, rather than taking any excuse tae lengthen the journey and enjoy yer company all the longer.” He sighed. “But there is only one outcome before us now, and we both know it well. Ye shall return tae yer home, I shall return tae mine. Then the clans shall go tae war against each other, and like as not, we’ll never see each other again. I cannae bear tae let things between us go any further, knowing I will only lose ye.”

“That need not be the case,” she insisted. “When I tell my father of how kindly the Oliphants treated me; how ye chose tae release me, rather than keep me in captivity without any good purpose?—”

“Ye have told us how unreasonable and stubborn the man can be,” Bryan observed. “Tell me, Katherine, Do ye truly believe he will put any stock in yer account of things?”

She hung her head, discouraged. “Nay,” she admitted in a small voice. “‘Tis far more likely he will believe I freed myself by conspiring against ye in some way. Indeed, I would not be surprised if he makes a prisoner of me for it.” She shuddered miserably. “And even if he does believe my version of events, no doubt he’ll choose tae punish me anyway, merely because I returned without my sister.”

These words hurt Bryan’s heart bitterly, and he was seized by the urge to do as he had done days before; to grab Katherine, sweep her onto his horse, and ride hard for Castle Oliphant. To his mind, she had no business returning to the monster who would treat her so hideously, whether he was her father or not.

But she had made her choice. He could not rob her of it, no matter how greatly it pained him to help her see it through.

“There ye have it, then.” His voice sounded oddly strangled, and he tried to clear his throat. “The end of this is certain, and as such, we cannae afford tae indulge in silly fantasies that it might be otherwise. Come.” He began to return their provisions to the basket he’d brought them in. “We have paused in our travels long enough. We must continue onward, in order tae cover as much ground as possible before night falls.”

Katherine looked hurt, but followed his lead, helping him to clear away the picnic and retrieve the horses. Within minutes, they were riding side by side again, in silence, as each of them woefully contemplated a future without the other.

Suddenly, Bryan brought his horse to a stop, his eyes raised fretfully toward the sky.

Katherine likewise pulled on Bluebell’s reins. “What is it?”

He pointed upward, and when she followed his gaze, she saw what had caught his attention so suddenly; a column of thick black smoke, rising above the tree line from a few miles away.

“There’s a village in that direction,” Bryan said in a choked voice.

And without another word, he rode hard toward the smoke.

Katherine followed closely. She did not know for certain what sight would await them when they got to the source of the smoke, but based on all she knew of her father’s tactics and processes, she supposed she could probably guess.

As they approached the burning village, all of Katherine's worst suspicions were confirmed in an instant.

The thatched roofs of the town's shops and homes were in flames. The air was full of hoofbeats, and the screams and moans of the wounded or bereaved. The ground was littered with corpses, freshly hacked and bloodied. Some of them were being cradled by weeping loved ones. There was thick smoke everywhere, and the poor villagers choked and gagged on it. Even those who had not been injured fell to their knees, red-eyed and soot-smudged.

And hanging above all the carnage and devastation were the banners of Clan McGregor.

Those banners, and the brutes who held them aloft, were already retreating from the scene when Katherine and Bryan made it to the town. It was just as well, she supposed; for she knew that Bryan would not have been able to restrain himself from riding to the aid of the townsfolk, and outnumbered by the McGregor raiders, he would doubtless have fallen in battle moments later. She was darkly grateful that her father's men were so well-versed in the arts of terror and depredation, so that their heinous crimes had not taken long to commit.

Still, no one could deny the sheer devastation they left in their wake.

Bryan wisely chose not to pursue them. However, as he swiftly dismounted and charged toward the fray, Katherine briefly worried that he might, seeking vengeance

for his countrymen. He ran to the well, beckoning for any who were still standing and uninjured to join him.

“Bring buckets!” he cried out over the sounds of suffering. “Pots, flagons, anything that might hold water! We must douse the flames as best we can, before they spread further!”

Before she knew what she was doing, Katherine found herself at his side, grabbing buckets and other discarded receptacles from the ground. Within moments, a line had formed at her side. Under the captain’s leadership, vessels of water were quickly passed along, from the well to the crackling flames.

How much time went by as the ash-streaked hands passed the buckets back and forth, tossing the water on the smoldering areas? Katherine could not say. It felt like hours, but might have been mere minutes.

All she knew for certain was that by the time it was over, her lips were dry and cracked, her skin was red, her hands were blistered, her back was terribly sore—and the fires were out.

Despite their best efforts, though, it seemed there was little left of the village by the time it was all over. The place resembled nothing so much as a collection of charred kindling. Only a handful of structures were left recognizable, and even those would not be habitable without tremendous repairs. There were patches of leaves and grass that still glowed a wavering and malevolent orange from the lingering flames.

The most heartbreaking sight, though, was the crowd of displaced people.

Many of them were small children, who stared straight ahead; shocked and forlorn, shivering, inconsolable, while their parents and grandparents wept and shrieked all around them.

“This is monstrous!” Katherine balked. “How could my father allow such a thing?”

“I fear he did far more than merely allow it,” Bryan said wearily. He was out of breath, wheezing, his face red from the exertions of fighting the fire. “He surely ordered it. As a warning, no doubt, of further hostilities if we dinnae release his daughters.”

Katherine’s face turned deathly pale. “He would order the burning and butchering of innocents tae send such a message?”

“He ordered the murder of Lady Isla for far less,” Bryan reminded her, still panting. He reached up and used the sleeve of his tunic to wipe the soot from his forehead.

“I knew how hideous his hatred of the Oliphants was,” Katherine whispered in a strangled tone. “But I had no notion that he would ever commit such vile atrocities against those who dinnae deserve it. Against families, children!”

Bryan knew what he had to do at that moment, and though he hated to take advantage of her grief and horror, he understood that the stakes were far higher than that. The tragedy of their surroundings proved that.

He gestured around them. “This is precisely the sort of lunacy we are trying tae prevent by ensuring that yer father cannae inflict further terrors on our people. This is why we have sought yer aid so earnestly. We dinnae wish tae bring yer clan tae ruin, only tae see tae it that we can live in peace next tae the McGregors without fearing for our lives.”

The words hung in the air between them, as thick as the smoke. Katherine turned away and lowered her head, considering what she had seen and heard.

Bryan left her to her contemplation, for he knew that no good would come from

pressuring her further. Instead, he assisted the townsfolk in burying their loved ones for the next several hours, murmuring prayers over the deceased even as he more privately prayed that Katherine would be swayed.

By the time the bodies had been interred, night had fallen. Bryan did all he could to help the people build meager shelters to rest in, but materials were few, and none among them—not even the captain—had strength left to go to the nearby forests and chop wood for more substantial cover. Most were reduced to curling up on whatever grass wasn't charred, holding their younger relatives close, and crying themselves to sleep.

Bryan peered over at Katherine. She had done all she could in helping with the shelters, but the earlier exertions had left her weak. She was not used to physical labor, and even less accustomed to the gruesome things she'd endured that day. She remained white as a ghost, and her entire body was trembling.

He wanted to go to her, to comfort her. But he knew that for her to make the choice she needed to, she needed to be left to herself. Sure enough, after another hour or so, she approached Bryan.

"Ye did good work, helping these people after what happened," Bryan observed quietly.

"Dinnae say that," she retorted, her voice shaking. "If I had agreed tae help ye in the first place, perhaps this might have been avoided. But instead, I chose tae care more about my father's acceptance and my clan's pride... and now these people are without homes, and mourning losses no one should be forced tae bear."

"Ye chose as most would," Bryan reassured her. "None can judge ye for that. Ye knew only what yer father chose tae tell ye, so that ye might share his hatred of us."

“Lies,” she spat bitterly. “I see that now. I understand now how foolish I was tae believe them, without seeing the proof with my own eyes. I was blind tae the realities of allowing this horrid conflict tae go any further.” She took a deep breath, summoning all her strength. “I will not return tae that wretched devil of a man. I renounce all fealty tae him. I shall do whatever ye ask of me, that no more of this evil shall be inflicted upon the Oliphants in his name. If I might save the life of but a single child, it will have been worth it, even if it means I will never look upon my own lands again.”

She fell to her knees then, and wept, to Bryan’s surprise. “Can ye ever forgive me for my stubbornness, Captain Black? Can ye absolve me of the terrible guilt, knowing I might have stopped this from happening?”

“Come, come, there’s no need for that,” Bryan soothed, helping her to her feet again. “This might just as well have happened even if ye had chosen tae aid us sooner, and ‘tis not yer fault—only yer father’s, for preying upon those who cannae defend themselves. We must return tae Castle Oliphant at once, so that Laird Alex may be informed of what has transpired here. We must dispatch soldiers tae guard our borderlands and repel further raids. It will be a hard ride, and we willnae be able tae stop.”

But Katherine was already running to Bluebell and grabbing the reins. Bryan nodded to himself and followed, mounting Heather. Within moments, they were riding hard in the direction they’d come from.

He thanked the heavens that she had finally seen the light. He only wished it had not taken something so horrible to persuade her, but, he reasoned, at least the loss of the village would not have been in vain.

They rode for most of the night, and arrived at the gates of the castle less than an hour before the pale light of dawn caressed the surrounding hilltops. The guardsmen were

surprised to see Bryan back so soon, and even more surprised to see that Katherine was still with him. They opened the gates and allowed them in without question, as, even in the near-dawn gloom, they could see the urgency of his countenance, and did not dare delay him.

They dismounted in the courtyard, and although their legs were sore and their bodies weary from all they had been put through over the previous day, they ran up the stone steps to Laird Alex's private study.

Before they got to the door, though, they found Alex himself standing in the center of the corridor, waiting for them with folded arms. He looked as though he had risen from bed hastily; his clothes were messily assembled, his blonde hair was tousled, and his eyes were bloodshot and heavy-lidded. His brow furrowed with confusion and concern.

"I heard the commotion at the gates," he said. Though he may have been still shaking off sleep, his voice was as sharp and focused as ever. "Two travelers return, when only one was expected? And before the sun is up? What is the meaning of this?"

"There has been an unfortunate new development," Bryan informed him. "We shall tell ye of it, but first, we must find a place for Katherine tae sit and rest. She has been through so much."

"There's no need tae coddle me," Katherine protested, speaking over him. "None of this would have happened if only I had?—"

Alex raised his hands, quieting both of them. "We shall all adjourn tae my study and sit, and ye can tell me what has transpired this night. And Lady Katherine," he added. "Regardless of the circumstances, it is good tae have ye back in the castle. Ye are most welcome here."

Despite her exhaustion and shock, Katherine managed a tired smile of gratitude.

As it turned out, it was not difficult for Alex to figure out what had happened to them on the way to the McGregor lands. The ash streaked on their faces and clothes, and the thick smell of smoke clinging to them, told most of the story.

Still, he listened to their account of the raid, his frown growing deeper.

“Well, we knew there would be some sort of eventual retaliation for taking Angus’s daughters,” Alex said once they had finished. “We should have prepared for the worst. We should have deployed cadres of soldiers tae the outlying villages, rather than letting them fend for themselves.”

“By now, the victims of that raid will have found shelter in the neighboring towns,” Bryan pointed out. “They’ll spread the word, so that the other villages near the border will be prepared for more raids. And I shall send some of my men there tae join them, and bolster their defenses.”

“But what if next time, Angus sends his soldiers in full force?” Alex challenged. He turned to Katherine. “Do ye believe he might do so? Would he risk all-out war at this stage?”

“I dinnae know,” she answered honestly. “His state of mind was deeply troubled when last I saw him. My abduction might have driven him utterly mad, in which case?—”

“He might be capable of anything,” Alex finished for her, shaking his head. “And if his armies do arrive, then the men we send tae the villages will be forced tae fall back and defend Castle Oliphant. Even so, we cannot leave our people unprotected.” He slammed a fist down on his desk, frustrated. “Damn it, Bryan, what are we tae do?”

“Call Kirk and the rest of yer advisors tae consult with ye,” the captain suggested. “Whatever course of action ye choose, it will surely affect the rest of the clan, and so we’ll need their council.”

“Somehow,” Alex mused, looking at Katherine again, “I think this lass will be counted among my most valuable advisors in the days ahead.”

Messengers were hastily dispatched, and within two hours, the elders of the Oliphant Clan were assembled in the Great Hall of the castle. Predictably, news of the raid had already reached many of them, and a few had set out toward the castle on their own in anticipation of Laird Alex calling the meeting.

They took their seats around the table, and as they did, several among them looked askance at Katherine.

“Are we quite certain we ought tae be discussing our plans in front of her?” grumbled Barclay Acheson, the clan’s wealthiest merchant.

“My sentiments as well,” Rory Aitkin chimed in, shaking his head gravely. “Why is a McGregor at this table? Why, ye might as well bring her sister up from the dungeons and make it a matched set.”

There were uneasy chuckles from the others, but Alex’s expression remained neutral.

“The lass was meant tae return tae her homeland, was she not?” Barclay inquired. “Perhaps if she’d been transported there with greater haste, Angus would not have ordered the attack.”

“We have no way of knowing that for certain,” Alex told him sternly. “So such speculation serves no purpose. What we do know, however, is that after witnessing the raid, Lady Katherine has chosen tae help us prevent a war against her father—or

win one, if it comes tae that.”

Katherine shuddered at those words. She had not considered that it might already be too late to stop the bloodshed.

And if that proved to be the case?

How far was she willing to go to help the Oliphants defeat her own people?

She prayed it would not come to that.

“We are simply meant tae take her word for that, are we?” Rory challenged. “How do we know she won’t betray us at her earliest opportunity?”

Bryan cleared his throat loudly. “I have vouched for her. Ye have all trusted me tae protect our clan for many years, so I ask ye tae trust her, in my name.”

“Ye watch over her for a handful of days, and think ye can see into her soul?” Barclay snickered. “I find it more likely that her fair looks have turned yer head, Captain Black.”

“There are none who take the safety of this clan more seriously than I do,” Bryan retorted sharply. “I have proved my loyalty a hundred times over, and I will not have my sense of duty questioned.”

“Nor should ye,” Alex spoke up. “No one here has any right tae doubt ye, and I’ll not stand for it. I say Bryan’s motives are unimpeachable, and I say that Lady Katherine will be a valuable asset tae us. That should be more than enough tae satisfy all of ye. Unless, of course, there is anyone here who would care tae question my loyalties?”

Having been thus chastised, the men fell silent.

Still, none of them seemed to be entirely comfortable making direct eye contact with Katherine—or Bryan either, for that matter.

Several hours into the meeting, the men found themselves no closer to a solution, and try as she might, Katherine was unable to provide any information which might help them put an end to the hostilities with her father.

Eventually, Alex suggested that they adjourn briefly, to see if any new ideas might come to them. Katherine followed Bryan closely as he left the Great Hall, and the moment the others were out of sight, Katherine threw her arms around Bryan and kissed him passionately.

The gesture surprised him tremendously, but he surrendered to it immediately.

Her mouth was so soft and warm against his, and with her body pressed against him, he could feel her heart hammering fiercely. He embraced her reflexively, inhaling her scent once more, and she held him even more tightly. Her hands slid up and down his back, sending shivers of delight all through his body.

Though he wished the kiss could last forever, he knew that it would be bad for anyone to catch him at it. If they did, it would surely cause them to question his loyalties all over again. With great difficulty, he pulled his face away from hers.

“What on earth was that for?” he asked, mystified.

Even though she was exhausted after the previous night’s efforts, she favored him with a smile. “Ye defended me; ye put yer own reputation on the line tae do so. That’s more than my own family has ever done for me. Ye’re the kindest, bravest

man I've ever known, Captain Black."

He laughed gently. "After all we've been through, I believe the time has long since come for ye tae call me Bryan."

"Bryan, then," she giggled. "And ye must drop the honorific and simply call me Katherine."

"Then ye are the truly brave one, Katherine, not I," he continued. "It takes real courage tae do the right thing, even if that means going against yer own people. Ye are risking so much tae help us stop yer father. And no matter what happens in the days tae come, know that if yer clan does not welcome ye back, ye will always have a home here with us."

"Thank ye," she replied. "I hope there will be some way for me tae be accepted by my own people, but if not, it is good tae know I will not be entirely displaced."

"There must be some way tae resolve all of this," Bryan mused. "We will find it, I promise ye."

As he said this, he saw that the council members were beginning to drift back into the Great Hall. He took a couple of steps away from Katherine, so their intimacy would not be seen as suspicious.

"Perhaps I ought tae remain outside this time," Katherine suggested. "I've not been able tae tell ye anything useful so far about my father's defenses, and my presence does not seem tae be conducive to yer planning."

"Very well," Bryan agreed. "But remain close by, just in case there are any questions we need answered. Hopefully, we'll have an answer tae all this before too long."

But as Katherine waited outside the Hall, more hours ticked by. She heard raised voices several times, and the occasional thud of a fist hitting the table for emphasis. None of the sounds were particularly encouraging. She paced the corridor in a tight circle, hoping that they would make some progress before long.

At last, the door opened again, and the men filed out. Kirk Oliphant was the last one to leave the Hall, and as he did, he gave Katherine a doubtful look, shaking his head slowly.

“Madness,” he murmured before continuing down the corridor.

Katherine stepped into the Hall, where Alex and Bryan waited for her. The laird’s hands were on his hips. The captain of the guard looked confused, and not altogether pleased.

“Ye arrived at a decision, then?” she asked timidly.

“Aye, that we did,” Alex replied briskly. “We shall write tae yer father at once, and tell him that ye are tae be married tae an Oliphant man of noble breeding and station.”

Katherine blinked, shocked. “Forgive me, Laird Alex, but I seem tae have missed the part where such a fellow proposed tae me!”

“This must be a marriage of convenience, not of romance,” Alex informed her. “The best way tae ensure peace between our clans is tae join them through matrimony, as I tried tae do but failed miserably.”

“Then, who am I tae marry?”

“Kirk Oliphant,” Bryan said quietly.

“But we’ve barely exchanged two words since I arrived here!” she balked. Now his dubious expression and muttered comment upon leaving the Hall made more sense to her.

“He is the best candidate by far,” Alex pointed out. “He is my cousin, after all. Marrying ye tae him will show yer father that we dinnae mean tae insult him with this arrangement. Quite the contrary, in fact. Once our clans are joined, both shall benefit. We can share our resources with the McGregors, and in return, we can call upon them if we ever need their forces tae fight alongside our own.”

“Do ye believe it will work?” Bryan asked, peering at her intently.

Katherine did her best to put aside her own surprise, and disappointment, as she considered the question carefully.

“He will be outraged at first, naturally,” she began tentatively. “But tae learn that his daughter is tae be married tae the cousin of the laird, there is a chance that it might force him tae see reason at last, where all else has failed. I dinnae think he would prefer tae lead his armies tae certain death against the superior Oliphant forces. Not if there’s another way out. One that will spare his pride and allow him tae continue as laird of the McGregors.”

“‘Tis settled, then,” Alex said. “I shall compose a letter and send a messenger at once so that we may hear his response as soon as possible. I can only hope that he will rein in his temper and do the right thing for his clan, before this madness gets out of hand.”

And with that, Alex strode out of the room, leaving Bryan and Katherine alone together.

“May I assume, at least, that ye did not come up with this plan yerself?” she asked

with a stunned laugh. The notion of it was still too big for her to fully contemplate.

Bryan shook his head. “‘Twas Alex who arrived at this conclusion.”

“But why must it be Kirk? ” she demanded. “Why not...”

He gave her a forlorn smile. “Ye forget, my lady, that I am naught but a guardsman. One with a questionable past, at that. Yer father would take such a thing as a grave insult, and then war would be certain tae follow. Kirk is by far the most noble-born member of the clan, since he shares the laird’s bloodline. ‘Tis a fine match. Yer father must see that.” His smile faded. “That said, I am not altogether certain that this will put ye back in yer father’s good graces when all is said and done.”

Katherine sighed. “Nay, I should think not. He’d welcome Romilly back, of that I have no doubt. But he’ll not wish for my presence, as it will no doubt remind him that he will be related tae his bitterest enemies. Romilly will be released, will she not, if the wedding occurs?” she added, hopefully.

Bryan nodded. “It is clear that we dinnae mean tae execute her for her crimes, else we’d have done so by now. As such, ‘twould be unseemly tae keep her under lock and key once her clan is no longer a threat tae ours. Unless ye believe she will inflict further violence upon us?”

“She worships our father,” Katherine answered. “If he truly commands that the conflict cease, she will do as he bids.”

“That remains quite an ‘if,’” the captain observed with a pained grimace.

“Aye, there is too much uncertainty all around.” She searched his eyes. “Is this truly the only way, Bryan?”

“I’m afraid it is.” He reached out, taking her hands in his. “I wish it were otherwise. But of course, ye must know that, though we hope ye will help us in this way, we cannae compel ye tae marry him if ye refuse.”

Katherine thought about the village in the aftermath of the McGregor raid. She remembered the stricken faces of the townsfolk; the eyes of the children, staring mutely at the charred wreckage of the homes they grew up in. The agony they’d endured at the hands of her family was more than she could bear. She was deeply ashamed of her father’s actions.

And had she not promised to do whatever it took to prevent any more Oliphants from enduring such horrors?

Well, here was her chance. Her only chance, from the sound of it.

She did not dare say no.

“If this is the path tae peace,” she said, “then I will do what I must. ‘Tis up tae my father, and out of our hands now.”

Bryan’s mouth tightened into a thin line, and he nodded once. “I thought ye would say so. Good. It is settled, then, Lady Katherine.”

He lingered in the Hall a few more moments, and it seemed as though there was much more he wanted to say to her. She wondered if some part of him had hoped she would say no to the plan so that he would not be forced to watch her wed to another.

His sense of duty prevailed, though, and he turned and left without another word.

Katherine returned to her chamber and gazed out the window. After an hour had passed, she saw the gates open, and watched the messenger ride out toward the

borderlands. As she did, she found herself uncertain of which outcome she was truly hoping for.

If her father rejected the proposal, would that mean she and Bryan might find some way to be together after all?

No.

She wished it could be otherwise, but she knew it wouldn't be. Refusal would certainly mean open war, and once that started, Bryan's first duty would be to his clan, even more than before. His time and attention would be spent planning attacks and counterattacks, and leading his men into battle.

Worse still, it would mean he would need to distance himself from her even more. He hadn't been able to allow himself to act on his feelings for her because he hadn't wished to muddy the waters of his duty to the Oliphants. If war broke out, he'd need to demonstrate that sense of duty all the more fiercely. How would it look, if one of the clan's highest-ranked guardsmen was caught carrying on with a McGregor, even an exiled one?

And amid it all, there would be more raids and flames, more screaming and death. More terrorized women and children, more displaced families. More butchery and misery.

No, she could not bring herself to truly wish for her father to reject the overture. He had to agree. There was too much at stake for him to do otherwise.

When the messenger had disappeared over the farthest hilltop, Katherine lowered herself onto the bed. She thought that sleep would be a long time finding her, with all of the conflicting emotions raging in her heart.

But after everything she'd been through over the previous day, she fell into a deep slumber the moment her eyes closed. She remained asleep until late in the afternoon, when one of the servants brought supper to her. She had hoped that Bryan might come to look in on her, and was disappointed when the evening passed without any sign of him.

Eventually, she realized that there was a perfectly valid reason for this, though it saddened her: She was not a prisoner anymore, to be kept under observation by the most vigilant Oliphant guardsman.

Now she was something quite different. She was the betrothed of the laird's cousin—or at least, she was presumed to be thus, unless a negative response came from her father regarding the marriage solution. As such, it would be considered improper for another man to be alone with her in her chamber.

So she ate in silence, alone with her stormy thoughts. When she had cleared her plate, she went back to bed and wondered how she might pass the next few days while waiting for an answer to the message.

This time, it was far more difficult for her to rest.

When she rose the next morning, there was a knock at the door. Her heart leaped, for she thought perhaps she might have been mistaken in her assumptions the previous night, and that Bryan had come to look in on her after all. The sight that awaited her when she opened the door proved to be almost as welcome; Lady Isla, smiling radiantly.

“So! Not only do we have the pleasure of yer company for a while longer after all, but it seems ye will be joining the family. It has been very lonely ever since Alex's adopted sister, Lady Lorna, was married to the love of her life and left the castle. So I welcome this arrangement and ye in the family.”

Katherine laughed timidly. "So it would seem. Depending upon my father's answer, at any rate. I am still not wholly certain this mad scheme will dissuade him from his rage."

"Well, either way, we have done all we can," Isla replied reasonably. "All that is left is tae watch and wait. Which can often be the most difficult thing of all, so I thought ye might appreciate a bit of a distraction."

"Aye," Katherine tilted her head curiously. "That was most considerate of ye, thank ye. What did ye have in mind?"

"I thought ye might like tae get out of the castle for the day," Isla suggested. "We could ride to the nearest village? I understand ye made a friend there during yer previous visit?"

"That I did," Katherine laughed, fondly remembering Fiona. "I would enjoy seeing her again. But how did ye know about that?"

"Bryan mentioned it tae me," Isla informed her. "He saw how much ye enjoyed her company, and said ye might welcome a chance tae see her again."

Katherine's heart swelled at how considerate Bryan was, but it was yet another bitter reminder of the fact that she could never be with him. She tried to conceal her whirlwind of conflicting emotions from Isla.

"Excellent! Also, I thought we might bring along some bolts of cloth and sewing implements," Isla added. "I believe there are many young lasses in town who might benefit from learning some new patterns, and who better tae instruct them? I'm told ye did something similar in yer own lands?"

"Mostly because it was a good excuse tae leave my father's presence for a few hours

at a time,” Katherine chuckled ruefully. “Aye, that does sound like a lovely way tae pass the time.”

“In that case,” Isla informed her, “ye will be pleased tae learn that when I heard ye had come back tae us, I had the dresses ye’d been borrowing moved back in here.” She pointed to a trunk in the corner. “They are in there, and from now on, I’d be honored if ye considered them yer own. While ye get dressed, I will gather some food from the pantry for us to take with us, and I shall meet ye at the stables.”

The moment Isla had left the room, Katherine squealed and jumped up and down with delight, her anxieties momentarily forgotten. She threw open the trunk and pulled the fine dresses out one by one, running her fingers over their lovely material and selecting the best one for an afternoon ride.

When she’d settled on one, she put it on, slipped her shoes on, and ran down the steps eagerly. This attracted several odd looks from the servants and the other denizens of Castle Oliphant, but she paid them no heed, hurrying to the stables, where Isla was waiting for her.

“Och, aye, that outfit is most fetching on ye!” Isla remarked merrily.

“Thank ye again for letting me wear it,” Katherine replied, beaming and approaching Bluebell. The horse seemed to remember her fondly, and she stroked its muzzle tenderly.

“It appears as though Bluebell is happy ye’ll be remaining with us a while yet as well,” Isla giggled. She mounted Heather with the help of one of the stable hands, and Katherine did likewise with Bluebell. “Shall we ride, then? I’m sure Fiona will be even more delighted tae see ye than Bluebell is.”

Moments later, the two of them were racing their horses across the verdant

countryside of the Oliphant lands, shouting challenges out to each other and laughing with the wind in their hair.

17

As the village came into sight, it occurred to Katherine that she had never had this much fun with her own sister before. Romilly had always been so immersed in their father's lessons and schemes that Katherine could not remember the last time they'd had any fun together. Now, it seemed, she had found a surrogate older sister in the form of Laird Alex's wife. What a peculiar thing that was! Who could have predicted it?

Not Katherine, certainly. She knew she could never have foreseen any of this. Most of all, she could not have imagined herself feeling so happy and free while among these so-called "enemies of her clan."

When they stopped in the main square of the village and tied up their horses, Katherine could not help but notice that the townsfolk stared at her with the same suspicion and distrust they'd displayed during her previous visit. She chose to ignore it.

To her surprise, Isla did not.

"Och, I am astonished at ye, friends!" Isla addressed the villagers loudly, her mouth twisted in a sardonic half-smile. "In all my time among ye, I have known ye tae be friendly, considerate, welcoming people. Yet here ye stand, being terribly rude tae one who has been accepted into our fold by none other than Laird Alex himself. Tae say nothing of his bride, and the Captain of his Guard!"

Katherine blushed a deep scarlet, wishing that Isla had not chosen to make an issue of

it. Nevertheless, she was touched that her new friend was so intent on defending her, and she could not help but notice that Isla's words were having an effect on them. Their expressions were softening, and their eyes were tinged with remorse and shame.

“This lass has given up everything tae help us,” Isla went on. “She has agreed tae do whatever it takes tae ensure that her people dinnae threaten our lands again. She has sacrificed more than any of ye can ever imagine, and I'll nae stand here and allow ye tae make her feel like an unwanted outsider!”

The people stopped gawping and scowling. Most of them went on their separate ways, while a few among them even took a few steps toward Katherine and mumbled apologies before departing.

“There, ye see?” Isla asked, smiling at Katherine. “The Oliphants are a lovely and accepting people, truly. Every so often, they just need a bit of a shove in the right direction.”

As they continued to walk, Katherine noticed that the children of the clan were gazing at her—not with hostility, but with open curiosity, and even a touch of awe. The younger girls of the village seemed particularly intrigued.

“From what I've heard,” Isla confided quietly, “word has spread among the wee lasses that ye are a dab hand at sewing dresses and the like. No doubt they're hoping ye'll show them a thing or two. Do ye feel up tae it?”

“Aye, as a matter of fact, I do,” Katherine answered happily. “Do ye suppose they would mind if I gave them a few lessons in the town square?”

“One way tae find out, eh?”

The two women produced the cloth and sewing kits from the bags they'd brought along, and Katherine took a seat near the well at the center of the village. Within a few minutes, the children began to gather around her tentatively. Some of them gave questioning looks to their parents, who hesitated slightly, then glanced at Isla and nodded their approval. Some seemed to do so against their better judgment.

But they still did, all the same, and Katherine was touched.

They may not trust me fully yet, Katherine thought, but they certainly seem tae trust Isla, and that's a start. They're giving me a chance tae win them over.

Over the next two hours, Katherine demonstrated her best dress patterns to the children, helping them patiently as they tried to duplicate them individually with different fabrics. A few of them even found clever ways to customize these styles, and Katherine applauded their ingenuity.

By the time everyone had finished, each lass had at least one new garment to proudly show off to their parents.

Katherine looked over at Isla, who smiled and raised an eyebrow as if to say, See? They're not such a bad lot once they've gotten a chance tae know ye.

Eventually, supertime arrived, and the girls were called away by their mothers so they could wash up and help with the serving. All of them thanked Katherine for showing them how to sew new dresses, and a few of them even hugged her before scurrying off to their homes. These gestures deeply touched Katherine, and she found herself blinking back tears.

"Ye seem tae have impressed them tremendously," a familiar voice croaked happily.

Katherine turned and smiled at Fiona, embracing her warmly. "How long have ye

been standing there?"

"Och, I saw the whole blessed thing," the old woman laughed, returning the hug and patting Katherine on the shoulder. "I stood away a bit, so I wouldnae interrupt or distract ye. 'Twas a lovely sight, though, watching ye teach them. They'll be playing with those patterns of yers for weeks tae come, I shouldn't wonder!"

"I certainly hope so," Katherine giggled.

Fiona offered a slow and creaky curtsy to Isla, who returned the gesture. "'Tis been quite some time since I've had the pleasure of seeing ye, my lady."

"The pleasure is entirely mine, Fiona," Isla replied. "Have ye been well?"

The old woman shook her head wistfully. "We're none of us doing as well as we might, my lady, now that we've had tae take in so many of our neighbors whose homes were destroyed by the McGregors. Meaning no offense," she added to Katherine.

"None taken, I assure ye," Katherine assured her earnestly. "I am mortified by the actions of my kinsmen, and have pledged tae do all that I can tae make the violence cease."

"Aye, I'd heard something tae that effect." Fiona searched Katherine's eyes to gauge her sincerity, and nodded, clearly pleased with what she saw there. "Good. With ye on our side, we might just have a chance tae avoid bloodshed. For now, though, come with me. Let's get some supper in ye, shall we?"

"Oh, no, I couldnae impose on ye like that," Katherine protested. "Ye've just said ye've had tae take in more people tae feed, I couldnae add tae the crowd and fuss and bother."

“Ye’ll sit and eat with us, and that’s the end of it,” the old woman told her firmly.

“But surely people who have just had their homes destroyed by my father’s men willnae wish tae share a table with me.”

“Oh no?” She smirked knowingly. “Why, I think they might find it fascinating, tae say nothing of informative; tae be able tae ask ye about where ye come from, the sort of man yer father is, and the odds that things will get worse before they improve. More than that, they may take great comfort in knowing we have a McGregor on our side, tae even those odds somewhat.”

“Well, when ye put it that way, I suppose I dare not refuse.” Katherine chuckled uncertainly. “Lead the way, then.”

As they proceeded toward Fiona’s cottage, some things the old woman had said to Katherine came back to her, specifically that when two clans have such a long history of animosity toward each other, the only way forward is through forgiveness and mutual acceptance.

Was that the true reason Fiona was so adamant about having her over for supper, she wondered? Could seeing the face of a McGregor, seeing that she was just a person like the Oliphants, not some demon or ogre, light a fire of understanding within the hearts of those who were living with Fiona? The women and children who had been burned out of their homes, who had lost everything at the hands of McGregor thugs?

If meeting and dining with those people could be a solid first step toward peace between the clans, then Katherine was glad of the opportunity to do so.

There was some awkwardness, naturally, when she first arrived and Fiona’s houseguests recognized her. Most of them openly stared at her, and there was a bit of dark muttering among them.

Katherine chose not to allow any of that to bother her, though. Instead, she simply introduced herself to them, and asked them questions about their families as she helped to set the table. They were visibly surprised by this, and it put them off their guard.

“Ye have lovely children,” Katherine said to one of the women. A young lad and a younger lass hovered at her sides, and the girl spent half her time hiding behind her mother’s skirt.

The woman was thin and haggard, and Katherine noticed several scars on her hands and neck where she had been burned by the flames that consumed her house. Her expression was wary as she surveyed Katherine, but she was too polite to ignore the comment – so she nodded slowly. “Thank ye. His name is Auley, and she’s Ainsley.” She paused, then added, “I’m Amelia.”

“‘Tis a pleasure tae make yer acquaintance, Amelia.” Katherine gave her a small curtsy.

Amelia didn’t quite seem to know how to respond to such civility from a McGregor, so she returned the gesture before she knew what she was doing. “Here, let me help ye set out the dishes, my lady.”

“Och, there’s nae need tae address me with such formality,” Katherine assured her. “I’m nae a noble-born lass here. My station is no different from yers. In fact,” she added with a laugh, “I’d say yer station is rather above mine here, since ye, at least, are a true-born Oliphant. I’m, well, I dinnae quite know what I am here, and that’s the truth. A captive? A traitor?”

“A friend,” Fiona spoke up. “One who is welcome at this table. Now sit and eat, all of ye, before it grows cold.”

They sat together, and continued to talk and laugh as they learned about each other. By the time the meal was over, Katherine felt as though she had known these people her entire life. She could not remember ever having had so much fun with the members of her own family.

When she and Isla returned to Castle Oliphant, though, she found Captain Black waiting for her in the courtyard with a stricken look on his face.

She'd been having such a lovely time with Isla, Fiona, and the rest that she had briefly forgotten the rest of it; the plan for her to be wed to Kirk Oliphant so that the clans might be lawfully united.

Now, the sorrow in Bryan's eyes made it all come flooding back to her, and her heart felt as though there were cold and heavy chains wrapped around it.

"Forgive me, Lady Isla," Bryan said in a strangled voice. "Might I have a word with Lady Katherine?"

Isla's eyebrows went up quizzically. "Very well. I would only advise ye both tae remain here in the open while ye converse, for there are those who might suspect a more private talk between ye would be inappropriate, given her betrothal. I would also remind ye both that avoiding bloodshed with the McGregors is the priority of the day. Even if ye both wish it could be otherwise."

"Thank ye for yer wise words, my lady." Bryan's words were polite enough, but the tension beneath them was unmistakable.

Isla nodded and took her leave without further comment.

"Were ye able tae enjoy yerself a bit today with Lady Isla?" the captain inquired, trying his best to sound casual.

“Aye, it helped take me away from my cares for a few hours,” she answered demurely. “The Oliphants are a warm, kind, and welcoming people.”

“None know that better than I,” he agreed. “They accepted me into their fold when they had little reason tae do so. Which is why I take my duty tae them so seriously, and why I dinnae say what I am about tae say lightly.”

She shook her head. “Dinnae say it at all. Yer first duty is tae the people of this clan, tae keep them safe, just as my first duty is tae protect mine, by keeping them out of a war with the Oliphants. A war they would surely lose.”

“But tae marry a man ye dinnae love?” His voice was plaintive, his eyes full of pain and doubt. “There must be another way.”

“There isn’t.” Saying the words out loud hurt her deeply, mostly because she knew the truth of them in her bones. “We shall only drive ourselves mad in attempting tae find one, and delay the inevitable.”

“Ye would commit tae being the bride of a man ye barely know? All because the sworn enemies of yer father have asked ye tae do so? Why?” he demanded.

She sighed. “Tonight, I supped with some of those Oliphants whose village was destroyed by my father. I looked into their eyes, I heard their words. I met their families. They accepted me as one of their own. They had no reason tae do so, knowing that my clan is responsible for their misery and loss. How can I face them, knowing I didnae do all I possibly could tae prevent others from going through what they have?”

“But...”

Katherine put a hand up to silence him. “Is Kirk Oliphant a bad man, Bryan? A cruel

man? A drunk, a brute, a lout?”

“Nay,” Bryan admitted. “He can be a trifle irritating in his gregariousness, perhaps, from time tae time. But he is a good man, and a wise advisor tae Laird Alex. I have no doubt that he will treat ye well enough, even if the two of ye aren’t...” He swallowed hard. “Even if his feelings for ye pale when compared with my own.”

Katherine wanted nothing more than to reach out and touch Bryan’s melancholy face, or take his hand to comfort him. But she knew that there was truth in Isla’s words of caution. If people saw them getting too close, acting too intimate with each other, it could call the legitimacy of the engagement into question.

Which could lead to war between the Oliphants and the McGregors.

So she stood firm, her hands at her sides. “This is the right thing tae do, then, Bryan. And I shall bear the burden of it with grace and humility, so long as it prevents the need for violence. I ask that ye do the same. Dinnae make this more difficult for me than it already is, I beg of ye. ‘Tis not a death sentence, merely an arranged marriage. They happen all the time, and for far less crucial reasons than this one.”

And with that, she moved past him and walked into the castle without a backward glance. She knew if she looked upon his sad countenance again, her resolve might weaken.

During the next few days, Katherine largely busied herself by spending time with Isla, or making more trips to the surrounding villages so she could acquaint herself with the Oliphant clan members who lived there. She won them over slowly, with patience and kindness, and with Isla's aid, who encouraged them to trust her despite her lineage.

More than anything, Katherine did all she could to avoid running into Bryan Black. She feared that he might once again plead with her not to marry Kirk, and she did not trust herself to continue to deny him.

All she could do now, she reasoned, was make the best of her situation by enjoying her new friendship with the laird's wife, and wait for word to come from her father regarding the proposition of the marriage.

As it turned out, she did not have to wait long.

After three days had passed, a McGregor messenger rode up to the gates of Castle Oliphant, carrying a missive from Laird Angus. She watched his approach from her window. She even recognized the man—Bram, one of her father's closest and most trusted advisors. Angus had heeded his counsel less and less of late, as the laird's mind frayed at the prospect of war with the Oliphants. If Bram were the one who'd been sent, then clearly, Laird Angus meant business.

Katherine ran down the steps and into the courtyard just in time to see Bram finish conversing with Laird Alex, Kirk, and Bryan. Alex nodded and gestured that the

messenger was dismissed.

Bram mounted his horse once more, and he glanced at Katherine. His eyes narrowed, and though his expression was largely unreadable, it was not difficult for her to divine what he was looking at. Knowing her father, he had told Bram to report back regarding her appearance and temperament.

Tae determine where my loyalties are , she thought grimly. Tae see whether they are treating me as a captive or a collaborator .

She was suddenly acutely aware of the fact that she was wearing one of the beautiful dresses Isla had given her. Would Bram report that back to her father as well? That the Oliphants had furnished her with fine new clothes, to purchase her loyalty?

But she knew that fretting about the conclusions her father would jump to was largely a waste of time. He would do as he pleased. Her feelings on the subject had never swayed him before, and she doubted they would do so this time either.

Bram rode off, and the heavy gates swung shut behind him with a clang that sounded darkly final.

“What news, Laird Alex?” Katherine asked. Her voice trembled slightly. “Did my father agree tae yer terms?”

Alex shook his head gravely. “He says that he intends tae come and discuss the matter in person tomorrow. He sent the messenger ahead so that, upon seeing him and his guardsmen, we wouldnae assume we were under attack. But...” He trailed off and sighed.

“What?” Katherine demanded.

“The man he sent informed us that Laird Angus didnae look upon the proposal favorably,” Kirk said quietly. “He said that the laird would sooner fling his clan into war, see them cut down tae the last man, than find himself related tae an Oliphant.”

“I see,” she answered bleakly. “Is there no chance tae avoid bloodshed?”

“That is what our meeting with him shall determine, I suppose,” Bryan observed. He was having difficulty looking Katherine in the eye.

Not knowing what else to do, Katherine returned to her chamber. She tried not to stare out the window, knowing there was no point, that the sun would set and rise again before she’d catch sight of her father and his men coming over the hill.

Still, she could not help herself. In her anxiety, she did not know what else she could do. She went to the castle’s library a couple of times, hoping to find a book there which might distract her. But she found she could not focus on the words on the pages, and with each new trip, she became increasingly worried that she might run into Bryan.

She could not bear to see the mournful look in the captain’s eyes again. Not when their future was so uncertain.

Katherine received an invitation from Isla to dine with her and Laird Alex, but she politely declined, knowing she would be poor company due to her stormy mood. Isla understood, and had supper sent up to her.

“Remember, if ye change yer mind and would care for some company,” Isla said, “ye need only ask. I know how much ye have on yer mind right now, lass, but ye needn’t bear it alone.”

“That’s kind of ye, thank ye,” Katherine replied.

She sat and ate, and as she watched the sun sink over the horizon, she wondered what the next day would bring. If her father rejected the betrothal between her and Kirk Oliphant, what would happen then? Would she be free to pursue a relationship with Bryan after all?

No. Probably not.

Because if the proposal was rejected, then war would come next. And Bryan would require all of his focus to help the Oliphants win it.

Would she be left to her own devices, then? Expected to provide useful information about her father's tactics and defenses when called upon, and otherwise, left to drift and wander the corridors of the castle like a lonely phantom?

She did not know. She was frightened to find out.

So she slept poorly that night, and she rose long before dawn so that she could maintain a silent vigil at the window. Her breakfast was sent up to her, but she barely touched it. When the servant girl came to collect the plate from her, she must have reported Katherine's lack of appetite to Isla, for the woman came to visit her almost immediately after.

"I thought ye might prefer not tae await yer father's arrival alone," Isla said, standing at the window next to Katherine.

"Och, I'm sure ye have better things tae do than pass the time up here with me," Katherine replied bashfully.

Isla shrugged. "Such as? My husband rules over the clan day tae day, not I. I believe I can spare a few hours tae help put yer mind at ease. Or tae make the attempt, at any rate."

Katherine smiled gratefully. “‘Tis appreciated.”

They stood like that for another hour or more, until finally, the familiar banners of the McGregor Clan appeared over the top of the hills, and the sounds of drums and trumpets drifted over the fields.

On the ramparts below, the Oliphant sentries bristled, despite the fact that these visitors were expected, and that Laird Angus would have to be foolish indeed to stage an invasion with a mere two dozen soldiers accompanying him.

“I suppose I ought tae be in the courtyard tae greet him,” Katherine muttered. “Else he might assume I’m locked in the dungeon alongside my sister.” Then something occurred to her. “Will he be allowed tae visit with Romilly while he’s here, do ye think?”

Isla grimaced. “Difficult tae say. It would hardly soften his position tae see the state she’s currently in, would it? And I imagine Alex’s desire tae accommodate such requests will depend largely on Laird Angus’s temperament while he’s here.”

“Somehow, I doubt my father will be on his best behavior,” Katherine replied sourly.

The two of them walked down to the courtyard, where Alex, Kirk, Bryan, and the other heads of the clan waited to receive Laird Angus and his entourage. The gates opened wide and the procession—a carriage, surrounded by over twenty McGregor soldiers on horseback—came through. They came to a stop at the center of the courtyard, and one of the soldiers dismounted and helped Angus down from the carriage.

Katherine was surprised and disheartened by his appearance.

He looked even more like a desperate lunatic than the last time she saw him. His

tunic was dirty and rumpled, and his hair was wild and tousled, the roots visibly white. He looked as though he had aged twenty years in the past week or so, and his long, pale, spidery hands fidgeted with each other anxiously. His expression seemed frozen into a bleary and affronted scowl, as though he wasn't entirely sure where he was or how he came to be there, but he loathed it.

When his baleful eye fell upon Katherine, his frown deepened, and he gritted his yellowed teeth. "There ye are, daughter," he growled. "Curious tae see ye in such fine fettle, when one might have expected ye tae be rotting in the dungeons alongside yer sister. What might ye have done, I wonder, tae merit such kind treatment by yer captors? Revealed my secrets tae them?"

"Is that the sight ye would have preferred upon arriving, Father? Tae see me imprisoned in a dank stone chamber, tormented by rats and spiders? Would seeing me humbled thus give ye pleasure?" Katherine tried her best to keep her tone neutral, but in truth, being before him again, seeing the madness that had overtaken him, was making her shudder with fright and revulsion.

He had always been a spiteful sort, but at least he had been a strong and confident leader to his people. Now he was a haunted husk of a man, whose eyes darted to and fro as though expecting betrayal from every shadow and corner.

Angus's lip curled in a scornful sneer. "Better a loyal daughter in chains than a deceitful one who walks free."

"Enough," Alex spoke up firmly. "Ye have come tae confer with me about the future of our clans, not tae hurl insults at those we deem honored guests."

Angus nodded, as though his suspicions had been confirmed. "Very well. Lead the way, then, and let's have it over with. Ye will not object, I suppose, if my men remain armed?"

“So long as their blades remain sheathed, it makes no difference tae me,” Alex retorted. “I trust ye tae keep things civil while ye are here.”

“Oh,” Angus scoffed. “Do ye believe me tae be a man of my word?”

Alex shook his head. “I ken full well that ye are not. I only know ye’re clever enough tae understand that the moment a McGregor sword is drawn in anger within these walls, ye will have sealed yer doom and that of yer men before any of ye can make it out of the room.”

“Fair enough,” Angus grunted.

The group of men proceeded to the Great Hall, with Katherine trailing behind. She braced herself, expecting her father to taunt and belittle her further, but he did not afford her so much as a backward glance. It seemed he had said everything he needed to, and now dismissed her utterly.

A red wave of sudden anger crested sharply within her. I should not have tae marry a man I do not love simply to appease the ill humors of this wretched old goat! she thought. It is not fair! I wish ...

But she could not allow herself to finish that thought, for what would she wish for? That her father would lose his temper after all, and force Bryan and his guardsmen to kill him where he stood?

That would end the matter decisively enough, wouldn’t it? And then her clan would no longer be a threat to the Oliphants—she was certain that no other McGregor would take up the banner against the Oliphants as recklessly as her father had—and she would be free to marry whomever she pleased. It was a dark chain of thought, to be sure. She felt nauseated for entertaining such a despicable notion, even for a moment.

He was a dreadful old viper, she knew that much to be true. A menace to the clans that neighbored his lands, and a prideful monster who endangered the lives of his people by provoking a far larger and stronger clan.

He was all of these things, yet he was still her father. She could not bring herself to wish for his death, not when there might be some other way to resolve this.

When they reached the Great Hall, Bryan motioned for his men to follow McGregor and his guards inside. Then he lingered in the corridor with Katherine for a moment, speaking in a hushed tone, “Ye cannae be present for these discussions.”

“But why not?” Katherine balked. “It is my future being decided in there as well. ‘Tis only right that I am at least allowed tae listen.”

“Aye, that’s true enough,” Bryan agreed patiently, “but yer presence at the table might draw more ire from yer father, and prevent our talks from being as fruitful as they might be. Better for ye tae wait out here.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Ye have another reason for keeping me out, don’t ye? Ye believe there might be violence.”

“I wouldnae have thought so before I saw Laird Angus step off that carriage,” he replied fervently. “But now that I see what he has been reduced to, I think it might be best if I remained ready for the worst in there. Not that I truly think it’s likely tae come tae that,” he added quickly. “Just in case, I’d see ye spared such a terrible sight, and kept away from the danger of an errant sword or dagger.”

“I understand,” Katherine assured him.

Then she stood up on her tiptoes and planted a furtive kiss on his cheek, much to his surprise.

Bryan gave her a bemused smile, and for a moment, it seemed as though he might put his arms around her, but then he remembered himself. His smile faded, and he went into the Great Hall without another word.

The heavy oak door swung shut, and she began to pace in front of it.

Within the Hall, Alex, Kirk, and Angus took their seats. Angus's soldiers remained standing against the stone walls, and Bryan and his men did likewise.

"So," Angus began, steepling his bony fingers, "ye would propose tae marry my daughter tae a bloody Oliphant, eh?"

"Not just any Oliphant," Alex pointed out, gesturing to Kirk. "My cousin, and one of my most trusted advisors. 'Tis a worthy match, Laird Angus, and one that will allow us tae spare our people a great deal of needless bloodshed and hardship. Our clans would be united. We could help each other in many ways, and forge a lasting peace."

"I will see myself, and every member of my clan, consumed by maggots before I allow my bloodline tae mingle with that of the Oliphants," Angus spat. Then a cagey look came over him, and he added: "However, that does not mean it need come tae that."

"Ye have an alternate proposal, then?" Kirk inquired. "One that leads us down a path other than war?"

"Aye," the laird replied. "Just because I dinnae wish tae marry my daughters to Oliphants does nae mean I dinnae wish tae marry them tae members of other, more respectable clans. I cannae very well do that if one is in yer dungeons and the other has made some other arrangement."

The insinuation in the old man's voice turned Bryan's stomach, but he forced himself

to remain silent. It seemed they might be on the verge of terms, and he did not wish to ruin that.

Even if he was not overly fond of the direction the conversation was taking.

“Yer daughters’ return, then, in exchange for a lasting peace between us?” Alex pressed. “I’ll have yer oath on that, before witnesses? For if ye believe this is yer chance tae fool us into letting them go, only for ye tae plot more foul attacks upon our clan...”

“Nothing of the sort,” Angus assured him. “Ye snatched up Katherine, right out from under my nose. ‘Tis clear ye are brazen enough tae do so again if I dinnae hold up my end of the bargain. Nay, better tae have an end tae it. Not allies, but no longer enemies.”

“I would want tae have one of my people there for one year,” Alex said.

“We shall tolerate no Oliphant steward telling us our business,” the laird hissed, banging a fist upon the table.

“Nay, not a steward, nor an overseer,” Alex hurriedly went on. “Merely an observer. He will have no say in how ye rule over yer clan. He will merely be furnished with lodging in yer stronghold and allowed tae be present for meetings of any importance. We will have an oath from ye that he shall be safe among ye and yer people, and he will be permitted tae send and receive messages. All of this will simply be tae satisfy us that ye are done scheming against the Oliphant Clan for good.”

Angus considered this for a long moment. “That sounds sensible enough,” he finally agreed grudgingly. “In selecting the man for the job, I have three conditions of my own.”

“By all means.”

Every muscle in Bryan’s body was so tense it ached. Could this truly be happening? Could these two men be so close to reaching an agreement?

And would the result be that Bryan would never see Katherine again?

“First,” Angus began, ticking the points off on his fingers. “Ye must stand by yer word that yer man will not interfere in our affairs. He may live among us without fear, he will be treated as a guest, his messages will be allowed freely and without inspection, but the moment he gives an order in yer name and expects me tae follow it, he will be expelled, and our agreement will be nullified.”

“Aye, that’s acceptable,” Alex replied. “What else?”

“Second, I dinnae want yer observer tae be Kirk Oliphant,” he continued shrewdly. “Forgive me, but the thought of entertaining the man ye meant tae marry her off tae, does nay sit well with me.”

“That’s reasonable enough. And the third?”

To Bryan’s surprise, the laird pointed at him. “I dinnae want him tae be yer observer either. From what I understand, he bears a marked resemblance tae the description of the man who abducted Katherine. I’d just as soon make sure that such a man never cast a shadow on McGregor lands ever again, under any circumstances.”

“Good. Then we have an accord.” Alex turned to Bryan. “Captain Black, ye may inform the McGregor sisters they will be going home at once.”

As he left the Great Hall, Bryan was certain he knew why Alex had chosen him for this errand: The laird anticipated that Bryan would want the chance to say a proper goodbye to Katherine.

He was grateful to Alex for that, at least, though his emotions were churning within him, crashing against each other like waves in a storm. It seemed there would be no need for war. Wasn't that supposed to be enough to make him feel happy and relieved?

Hadn't he spent much of the past year dreading the prospect of leading men into battle against the McGregors? Hadn't he suffered nightmares of the men under his command dying needlessly; of having to convince the dead soldiers' wives and children that their sacrifices had not been in vain?

Now all of that had been avoided in the span of a single conversation between lairds.

And if that was not enough to satisfy him, he supposed he should be delighted that Katherine would not be forced to marry a man she did not love. He had been desperate for some other option to present itself, and now his prayers had been answered.

But if she had married Kirk, then at least she would have remained here, Bryan thought as he opened the door of the Great Hall and stepped out into the corridor. I would never have allowed anything inappropriate between us, but if nothing else, I would still have had the pleasure of her company.

Except he knew that in the end, that would have been worse. The kind of slow torture neither he nor Katherine would be able to endure for long. Not before their resolve eventually crumbled, and they did do something that would shame all parties involved.

No. This was what was best for everyone.

At least, that's what he told himself when he found Katherine waiting for him in the corridor. She looked so beautiful, so hopeful, that he almost could not bring himself to tell her. He had to, though. No matter how much it hurt, he knew it would still be easiest for her to hear it from him.

He hoped so, at any rate.

"That did not take long," she breathed, her eyes gleaming expectantly. "Were they able tae come tae an understanding?"

"They were, aye." There was a lump in Bryan's throat. "There will be peace, and ye willnae have tae marry Kirk Oliphant. Not only that, but yer sister is tae be released immediately."

Katherine's face lit up. "I cannae believe it!"

Then, realization dawned on her, and her smile faded. "So, that means I am tae return home, then? With him?"

Bryan nodded. "Aye. Ye and yer sister both."

She blinked, confused. "But he thinks I betrayed him while I was here. Why would he want me back?"

“Ye’re still his daughter,” the captain replied quietly, “and he still wishes tae marry ye off tae someone from another clan someday, tae strengthen his own position.”

She laughed faintly. “‘Tis strange. Once I came tae accept that I would likely be marrying Kirk. Well, I suppose I got used tae the notion of remaining here. I assumed my father wouldnae want me back. I’d given up on ever being accepted as a McGregor again.”

“Is this happy news for ye, then?” he asked hoarsely. “Tae be in yer father’s good graces again, when ye had abandoned all hope of it?”

Katherine shivered. “Somehow, I dinnae believe that being invited back will be quite the same as ‘being in his good graces.’ Nevertheless, it’s where I belong, isn’t it? I’m still a McGregor. The people here were kind enough to let me forget that for a short while, and I’ll always be grateful for it.”

“Yer father willnae be around forever,” Bryan reminded her urgently. “Perhaps, in our lifetime, the enmity between our clans will change.”

She smiled at him sadly. “Ye said it yerself, Bryan. By then, I’ll have been married off tae another. This is for the best. It will save countless lives, and all I have tae do is go home, and do as my father tells me.”

“There must be some other way,” Bryan insisted.

“Ye said that before, remember? And there was another way; the one ye agreed to. Now come, escort me down tae the dungeons so that I may tell Romilly we are tae be released.”

“Ye needn’t venture down there,” he told her. “I can tell her myself, and spare ye the unpleasantness of the place.”

“My sister was not spared from its unpleasantness these many months, and so I can endure a few moments of it. Besides, if I am not with ye, she might believe it is some sort of trick. She seems rather more suspicious than she was before she came tae be in yer custody.”

“Fair enough.”

The dungeon was even darker, danker, and more horrid than Katherine remembered as Bryan led her down there—or perhaps it was simply her mood that made it seem so. There was a part of her that still doubted her sister would agree to leave her cell. In her agitated mental state, Romilly might still believe that she was being freed under false pretenses and led to the chopping block after all.

Indeed, Katherine worried that nothing short of Laird Angus himself would convince her otherwise. And even then, given how deeply Romilly seemed to have plunged into madness and despair, she might believe that “their father” was simply an Oliphant in disguise, engaged in some creative mummery to deceive her.

Will her mind ever heal from all of this? Katherine wondered miserably. I don’t remember her ever being particularly stable, but now she seems tae be a shattered lunatic. Will her return home facilitate any sort of recovery, or is the sister I once knew gone for good?

These concerns continued to plague her as she reached the bottom of the stone steps, and Bryan led her to the cell at the end of the musty and cobwebbed corridor.

When Romilly saw them together, she gnashed her teeth defiantly. “So, yer collaboration with our enemies continues, eh, Sister?”

Katherine let that comment pass. “Our father has arrived tae parley with Laird Alex. An agreement has been reached, and ye are I are tae return tae our homeland this very

day.”

Sure enough, Romilly squinted at her doubtfully, just as Katherine had inwardly predicted. “This is some Oliphant deception.”

“Nothing of the kind,” Katherine replied.

“And what concessions were made tae allow such a thing tae come tae pass?” her older sister challenged.

“A promise of peace,” Bryan spoke up. “One of Laird Alex’s advisors will abide in yer stronghold for a period of one year, tae ensure that there will be no more plots against us. In return, ye will go back where ye belong, though such a fate is too good for ye, in my opinion, after what ye tried tae do tae Lady Isla.”

Katherine understood why he said it, but she wished he hadn’t. There was more than enough tension in this exchange already.

Strangely, though, his words seemed to earn a bit of trust from Romilly. “At least ye are honest about yer hatred for me,” she reasoned. “Sugared words would only have shown me otherwise. I will admit, however, I am quite surprised that yer laird would choose tae give up his bargaining pieces so freely.”

“It is because we are not jailers,” he shot back. “We have no genuine interest in keeping young ladies captive indefinitely. All we have ever wanted is tae live in peace alongside ye, without having tae worry that yer people will creep over our ramparts in the night with daggers between their teeth.” He raised an eyebrow. “We’ve received such assurances from yer father. For myself, I wouldnae mind hearing them from ye as well.”

“I do as my father commands,” Romilly retorted sullenly. “I always have, and I

always shall. Beyond that, I owe ye no assurances whatsoever.”

“Perhaps ye might direct them tae me, then, Sister,” Katherine suggested. “I would welcome them as well.”

Romilly glared at her. “If our father says there shall be peace, I will follow his lead. Now, ye said something about releasing me?”

Bryan sighed heavily. “That will have tae do, I suppose.” He produced the key to the cell and unlocked it, half expecting the demented woman to lunge at him and claw at his face the moment she was able.

Instead, though, she stepped out into the corridor, almost meekly, to his surprise. She looked around, as though uncertain of whether she might be dreaming. Then she peered at Katherine in disbelief. “That’s it, then? I am free?”

“Ye are free, Sister,” Katherine promised, taking her hand and squeezing it. “Now we are going home tae heal from all of this, and tae scheme against the Oliphants no more. Ye are tae be married tae a worthy lad from another clan.”

Romilly looked down at herself, and oddly, her face filled with mirth. It was a peculiar sight, given how filthy and haggard she looked. “Well, before we make a go of that,” she snickered, “I suppose I ought tae have a bath and do something with my hair, eh?”

The joke caught Katherine off guard, and before she realized it, she was doubled over laughing. So was Romilly, and the pair of them cackled until tears poured down their faces.

Bryan stared at them with a bemused expression.

Eventually, their mirth trailed off, and the three of them ascended the steps again and emerged into the courtyard. There, Laird Angus waited for them, along with the rest of his men. Clearly, he had no desire to remain at Castle Oliphant a moment longer than he needed to.

When he saw his oldest daughter freed, though, his mask of spite disappeared, replaced by relief, and even joy, the likes of which Katherine could not remember ever seeing on his face before. He staggered over to Romilly and embraced her warmly, ignoring the smell of mold clinging to her clothes and the spider webs hanging from her hair.

Romilly dared not say it, especially in front of the Oliphants, but she was deeply appalled by the state of him. He looked as though he'd spent weeks in a dungeon as well, one every bit as harsh and horrid as her own recent prison. What hell had he been through during her absence? Was guilt at being unable to free her the reason for his gray and ghostly appearance? Had it driven him mad?

"My beloved daughter," he crowed. "Och, I feared I would never see ye again. I feared that sooner or later, they would tire of imprisoning ye and order yer execution."

"Even if they had," Romilly replied, holding on to him tightly, "I would have done it all over again, with no regrets."

Alex and Bryan exchanged an uneasy look, but said nothing.

Then Bryan realized that, with all of these people standing around, he would not be able to say a proper goodbye to Katherine. Then again, even if they'd had all the privacy and time in the world, they still would not have been able to engage in the farewell he would have liked. It would have been terribly inappropriate for her, not to mention a gross dereliction of duty for him.

All they could do, then, was gaze upon each other as each moment brought them closer to being apart forever.

Gaze, and wish that they could speak what was in their hearts.

Rory Aitken waited in the courtyard as well, red-faced, fidgeting with his tunic and evidently wishing he could be anywhere in the world other than where he was about to be sent. Laird Alex had chosen him to remain with the McGregors for the next twelve months. Although he could be somewhat hard-headed, and although he hated the McGregors with a passion, Aitken was also one of the clan's most trusted and influential members.

As far as Alex was concerned, if neither Kirk nor Bryan could be dispatched for this endeavor, Aitken was the most suitable candidate.

Which still did nothing for Aitken's mood.

"Come, Daughters." Angus beamed at Romilly, then his smile curdled as he turned to Katherine. "Let us away at once. Hopefully, never tae return."

Aitken cleared his throat and took a few steps forward, addressing Angus. "Laird Angus, I would simply like tae say that despite the unfortunate history between our clans, I look forward tae this time we shall have together, and hope that my presence at the McGregor Stronghold will bolster our future endeavors in many?—"

"Aye," Angus interrupted, waving him off impatiently. "We'll have chambers furnished for ye when we get there. Until then, I hope ye have a horse of yer own for the journey, for ye'll nae be riding in my carriage. Now, let us not tarry further."

With that, Angus turned his back on the man and climbed into the carriage along with his daughters.

Aitken's mouth opened and closed silently a few times, like a fish who'd been pulled into a boat. Finally, he gave Alex a dark look, then mounted his own horse and hastened to keep up with the McGregors.

Bryan kept his eyes upon the carriage, hoping that before it was out of sight, he might catch one last glimpse of Katherine through the window. Instead, Angus's face appeared briefly, glaring at Castle Oliphant once more before drawing the curtain shut.

A large hand settled on Bryan's shoulder, snapping him out of his reverie. He turned and saw that it belonged to Alex, who gave him a sympathetic smile.

"All hope is nae lost, friend," the laird intoned quietly. "Angus willnae live forever, and in the fullness of time, who knows? Our clans might form an allegiance yet, or at least come tae some understanding that may allow ye tae see her again."

Bryan knew that Alex meant to comfort him, and so he did his best to smile and nod. Inwardly, though, he knew that what Katherine had said before was likely true: Even if that happened, she would be wed to another by then, and so they would never have a chance to truly be together as they wished.

Better to forget the entire thing, he supposed, now that it was resolved. Better to throw himself into his work, and pray that the peace with the McGregors lasted.

So he walked up to the ramparts and conferred with his guardsmen about their positions and shifts for the day, as he had so many times before.

Meanwhile, it took the rest of the day and night, as well as part of the next morning, for the McGregors to return to the stronghold. During the trip, Angus asked Romilly many questions about her time with the Oliphants; how she had been treated while in their custody; whether she had sensed any weaknesses in their defenses or

weaknesses of character in their leadership, and so forth.

“Alas, there is little I can tell ye, Father,” Romilly replied quietly, her eyes cast downward. “I was kept in the dungeon from the moment they discovered our plans against Isla. Captain Black visited on several occasions tae ask that I temper my hostility toward them.”

“Demanded, ye mean, no doubt,” Angus grumbled.

Romilly considered this, and remembered that no, he had not made any real demands of her. He had not browbeaten her for cooperation. He had only continued to suggest, again and again, that both clans might benefit if she put her anger aside and softened her attitude. She had staunchly refused every time.

She did not correct her father, though. She saw no point to it.

For her part, Katherine was somewhat surprised that Romilly did not volunteer additional information. Surely, after so many months in the captivity of the Oliphants, she had more to say about them than that?

Nevertheless, Angus’s questioning of Romilly continued. When this had gone on well past sunset and the carriage and its guards had stopped for the night, Katherine approached her father away from the others.

“Putting aside that ye dinnae seem eager tae see me freed from my captivity,” she began. “One might think ye could learn more from me with regard tae the Oliphants, since I had far greater occasion tae observe them than Romilly did.”

“Aye,” he sneered, “but why would I believe anything ye say tae be true? The very fact that ye were allowed tae move about the castle freely tells me that ye must have agreed tae collaborate with the Oliphants in some way. Ye ought tae be grateful I’ve

accepted ye back at all, under the circumstances. I should have let ye stay with them, since ye seem tae have favored their company over ours.”

“That is terribly unfair,” she balked. “I was taken against my will!”

“So it would appear,” her father shot back, “but I still wonder whether ye might have secretly arranged such a thing with the Oliphants, tae betray me. Either way, ye’ll remain silent for the remainder of the journey if ye know what’s bloody good for ye.”

He stormed away, leaving her in shock and disbelief. She wished he had left her behind, if this was how he intended to treat her. But it was too late for that. She knew he would not allow her to go back to the Oliphants now. If she asked, it would only confirm his suspicions.

And what might happen then?

They made camp, and Katherine slept restlessly. Whenever she stirred from her slumber and opened her eyes, she saw Romilly lying a short distance away, not sleeping either, but peering at her in the gloom, her expression unreadable.

Katherine wanted to ask her sister what was on her mind, but something told her that the time was not right to do so. Not with their father and so many of his men around them.

She rolled over onto her other side, shut her eyes, and tried to sleep again. When Katherine finally drifted off, Romilly stared at her even more closely.

Back when they were children together, Romilly had often made a habit of creeping into Katherine’s room and watching her slumber. This began shortly after Katherine was born, and continued until she was almost ten.

Their parents had sometimes quietly observed this behavior, and they smiled at it back then, especially Angus. He believed it was a sign that Romilly was already showing signs of being protective of her younger sister, as befit an older sibling.

But the truth was, Romilly had always simply been curious about Katherine's sleep. She noted the movements of the lass's eyes beneath their lids, the way she shifted positions throughout the night, the patterns of her breathing. She'd wondered what dreams were playing out in her sister's mind; whether they were pleasant or stormy, whether they were populated by fairies and elves from the stories their mother read to them, or if they were darkened by the long shadows of ogres who towered over her and scowled.

Ogres like our father .

The thought came to Romilly as suddenly and shockingly as a bolt of lightning, and likewise left a small, smoldering crater in her heart; one that continued to glow, no matter how hard she tried to stamp it out.

But there was truth enough in the notion, wasn't there? At least if one were to look at things from Katherine's perspective. Their father had always loomed large over his youngest child, yelling and snapping at her, making demands of her. Dictating who she needed to be in order to please him, and still refusing to be satisfied with her, regardless of what she did at his request.

When they were young, Romilly had not given his treatment of Katherine much thought. Why would she? Romilly was clearly his favorite, and she privately delighted in that, even if it was at Katherine's expense. She told herself that all fathers made demands of their daughters; that all fathers tried to mold them into young women who would do their clans proud.

What of happiness, though? Of tenderness and affection, of support and

encouragement? Were these not important factors in a father's love for his child as well? Why, then, had Romilly received such things while her less-fortunate sister had not?

These thoughts weighed heavy upon her brow, and when she found her own path to sleep, it was restless and filled with uneasy dreams; ones in which the same ogre who tormented Katherine now set his beady and disapproving eyes upon Romilly.

The morning's travel unfolded much as the previous day's had, with Angus doting on Romilly and largely ignoring Katherine. As the journey reached its conclusion, Romilly's glances in Katherine's direction during these interactions grew more frequent, until it was clear to Katherine that her older sister was becoming visibly uncomfortable with the imbalance in how they were being treated. There were even a few times when Romilly attempted to include Katherine in the conversation, but each time she did, Angus made a point of pretending he had not heard.

Katherine simply stared out the window of the carriage, and waited to return to the place that no longer felt like home to her.

As the gray and dreary edifice of the McGregor Stronghold came into view, Katherine suppressed a sigh of disappointment. She had been clinging to the hope that the sight of it would inspire happiness or gratitude in her; some sense of belonging she had lost sight of over the past week. She had hoped that she would feel differently about her homecoming when it actually happened.

Instead, all she felt was cold and hollow.

For her part, Romilly appeared delighted to be within sight of the stronghold. She put her head out the window of the carriage, beaming as they drew closer to it. "I didnae think I would live tae see it ever again," she exclaimed gleefully. "I thought I would be sitting in that cell for the rest of my days until they got bored of me and executed

me, at least!”

“I wouldnae have ever allowed such a fate tae befall ye,” Angus assured her gently.

It took all of Katherine’s effort not to scoff at that; to point out that the Oliphants could easily have hanged or beheaded Romilly a hundred times over in the past few months, and their father would not have been able to do a thing to stop it. That, indeed, he had not even seemed inclined to do anything to stop it during all that time. That based on everything Katherine had seen and heard from him in the weeks before her own abduction, Angus had been perfectly willing to stand his ground in his hatred and contempt for the Oliphants even at the cost of Romilly’s life.

But she was too weary to say any of these things. At that moment, all she wanted to do was go up to her old room and be alone for the rest of the day. If she could not be with Bryan, then at least she could have privacy enough to think of him, and remember the good times they had together.

Unfortunately, she had no idea how wrong she was.

As soon as the procession was in the courtyard of the stronghold and the spiked black gates had slammed shut behind it, Angus helped Romilly down from the carriage and a cheer went up from the McGregor guardsmen on the walls.

Katherine climbed down on her own, and before she could take another step, Angus pointed a finger at her and called out, “Guards! Seize her at once, and take her to the dungeons!”

“What?” Katherine could not believe her ears. “I told ye, I didnae betray ye!”

“She speaks the truth, Father,” Romilly spoke up urgently, looking every bit as startled by his order as Katherine did. “She may not have caused trouble for the

Oliphants while she was in their custody, but she is still yer youngest daughter. Ye mustn't?—”

“I will do whatever I please, for I remain the laird of this clan,” he thundered. “Mayhap Katherine proved herself a traitor while she was a guest of the Oliphants, and mayhap she did not. Either way, she should have shown solidarity with her sister, and her clan by resisting them every way she could. She should have passed that time in a cell next tae ye, rather than gaily cavorting around the castle and making a spectacle of herself in the villages!” He jabbed his finger at Katherine again. “Yer sister suffered while ye supped and laughed with the vermin who imprisoned her. Now it is time for ye tae know how she felt, languishing in that cell for months. And ye shall remain there for as long as I decide!”

Katherine was too stunned to respond. Her head felt as though it was full of angry hornets, and her legs felt like lead weights beneath her.

The guards who stood near her seemed likewise shocked by this turn of events, but given how furious their laird sounded, they did not dare refuse his commands.

As they seized her and started to drag her toward the dungeons, however, Aitken stammered and sputtered indignantly. “Laird Angus, this-this is outrageous. Surely, this cannot be necessary, this barbarism, against yer own daughter!”

Angus turned to face Aitken, livid. “Ye have been here all of two minutes, sir. Do ye already presume tae tell me how tae rule over my clan? Ye do recall my conditions with regard tae this arrangement, do ye not?”

Aitken’s lips drew into a tight line, and he nodded once, stiffly.

“I should bloody well hope so,” Angus snarled. “Ye are here tae observe, nothing more. Remember that, and dinnae ever question a command I give tae my own

people, or ye shall find yerself expelled from these lands at once without the luxury of a horse tae transport ye the rest of the way tae Castle Oliphant. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

"Ye do indeed, Laird Angus," Aitken replied quietly.

Angus nodded, then watched his men lead his youngest daughter to the cells beneath the stronghold. Aitken followed a McGregor servant inside, looking as though he would be most eager to retire to his room; away from the vengeful laird.

"Ye are aware, Father, that he will surely write tae the Oliphants at once and tell them of this?" Romilly said. Her tone was calm, but her eyes were filled with bewilderment and dismay.

"I am counting on it," he chuckled darkly.

"We have only just struck an accord with them," she pressed. "We have only just returned home, and already ye seek tae provoke them? Why?"

"Ye may not have seen the looks which passed between the captain of their guard and that slattern," he sneered. "But I most certainly did. Either something improper went on between them during her stay there, or they both wished that it had. Now he shall receive word that she has been imprisoned, and there will be nothing he or his smug laird can do about it, not without breaking the truce we negotiated."

Romilly was appalled by his machinations. "And if they choose tae act anyway?"

"Then we shall have war after all," he retorted, patting her shoulder, "and I shall engage in it with my loyal oldest daughter at my side, so that our odds of prevailing will increase a hundredfold. Come now, Romilly. Ye did not truly believe that our score with those scoundrels was settled, did ye?"

Romilly stood at the highest window of the McGregor Stronghold, observing mournfully as the messenger rode off into the distance with the missive from Aitken. The sky was stained a deep and tragic shade of scarlet, and it made Romilly think of the blood that would likewise stain the valleys from there to the Oliphant lands if her father's war came to pass.

How could he genuinely wish for such senseless carnage? How could he deliberately drag their people into a conflict they had no chance of winning, and all in the name of his terrible pride and arrogance?

Most of all, how could she have misjudged her father's character so completely all these years?

As she looked away from the window and began to pace the chamber fretfully, she had the bitter realization that the last question was far too easily answered. She was a grown woman and had been for quite some time, but she had spent her entire life seeing her father through the loving and awestruck eyes of a child. Even after she had grown to almost his height, he had continued to tower over her in her mind and heart. He was the mighty laird, his will was law, and he was utterly infallible. Every action he took, every word he spoke, every order he gave, all were only ever in service to the McGregors and their way of life.

She had seen him, never as a man with flaws and petty hatreds, but as a colossus standing astride his clan.

Now, at last, she saw him for whom he really was. And the reality of it threatened to break her.

Angus might demand that Romilly join the battles to come, for he had spent so many years teaching her the ways of the sword, the bow, and the target and dirk. Or, afraid for the survival of his precious legacy, he might insist that she remain within the relatively safe confines of the stronghold to watch the fighting helplessly from above.

Either way, Romilly knew that it amounted to much the same thing in the end: She would be forced to bear witness to the utter destruction of her clan. Her entire way of life would be eradicated in front of her, and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Was there?

As she bleakly pondered these outcomes, the messenger rode through the day and for much of the night so that he could deliver Aitken's letter to Castle Oliphant. Aitken had informed him of how urgent the missive was, but that was not the reason the rider hastened, for his loyalties were to the McGregors and not some wayward Oliphant.

Rather, the messenger had been charged to travel with all possible speed by none other than Laird Angus, who wished to ensure that the Oliphants were informed of his actions as soon as possible. He was eager to provoke Laird Alex, and to witness the results of that provocation.

Sure enough, when the rider was ushered through the gates of Castle Oliphant barely a day after Katherine's homecoming, it raised Bryan's eyebrows. What news could be so crucial that it precipitated such a hurried message from Aitken?

Bryan's mind swirled with the worst conceivable scenarios: That some terrible fate had befallen Katherine on the journey back to the McGregor lands; that she had been harmed or even executed by her own father upon their return to the stronghold.

He muttered an excuse to his second in command upon the ramparts and ran into the castle. He reached Alex's study just in time to see the McGregor messenger step inside and close the door behind him.

Despite his deepening sense of dread, Bryan did not dare knock or interrupt. He knew that despite their friendship, Alex would be angered by such a show of disrespect. So he waited outside the door as the minutes ticked by, doing his best to keep his breathing steady and his heart calm.

Surely, he was fretting for no reason, he assured himself. Surely, the messenger was merely dispatched to confirm that Katherine had returned home safely, and to reaffirm the newly negotiated peace between the clans.

After what seemed like an hour, the door opened again and the rider emerged. He marched down the corridor stiffly, avoiding eye contact with Bryan. His expression was grave.

The captain wanted to grab the man by his shoulders and shake him to demand answers, to insist upon news of Katherine's safety and spirits.

Then he heard Alex's voice call out to him dryly, somehow knowing he was hovering outside. "Ye may enter now, Bryan."

Bryan hurried into the study, shutting the door behind him as the messenger had done. "News of Katherine, I take it?"

Alex arched an eyebrow. "Ye really must return tae the habit of referring tae her as Lady Katherine, old friend. Ye know I dinnae care, but if others were tae hear..."

"What has become of her?" Bryan pressed, his voice strained.

Alex sighed and squeezed his eyes shut, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I ought not tell ye, for I fear I ken full well what it will drive ye tae do. But neither can I hide the truth from ye, for I have always held ye in too high esteem for that." He opened his eyes again, leveling them at Bryan. "Angus imprisoned Lady Katherine the moment they set foot within the stronghold."

"What?" Bryan exploded, his face turning red. "That bloody serpent!"

"Aye, he is most certainly that," the laird agreed wearily. "But, like most serpents, a cunning creature indeed. He knew that in doing so, he might provoke us tae break the treaty. Perhaps it might even be a test of a sort tae see if we take any interest in her captivity, since that could prove tae him that she collaborated with us during her time here."

But most of these words did not penetrate the red fog that had settled over Bryan's brain at the news of Katherine's imprisonment. "We must do something!" he exclaimed. "We cannae allow her tae sit in their dungeons. Not after she agreed tae help us, when she knew it would buy her nothing but grief and pain with her own family!"

"Ye would do that, then?" Alex challenged, folding his arms over his wide chest. "Ye would jeopardize the accord we've struck, force our people into war all over one lass?"

"She could have resisted us every step of the way since we brought her here," Bryan insisted. "She could have tried tae flee, she could have sabotaged us, she could have clung tae her loyalty for her clan and made us throw her in a cell next tae her sister. Instead, she risked her entire way of life for us. She did so because we assured her that we were her friends, that she could trust us and depend upon us when she needed it most. Now ye would have her rot in their dungeons for it? That is her reward for doing the right thing?"

“We are not all rewarded for doing the right thing,” Alex retorted. “That is nae the way of the world, and ye are too wise tae think otherwise. I am, of course, dismayed by this turn of events. However, I refuse tae play into Angus’s hands when our treaty was so hard-won.”

“Ye would honor a treaty with such a blackguard?” Bryan protested hotly. “A man with no honor of his own, a man who, based upon his actions, will surely violate the peace at his earliest opportunity?”

“And when he does, we shall respond in kind,” Alex answered patiently. “We cannae do so preemptively, though, else we give him precisely what he wants from us: A war.”

“One we would surely win!”

“But at what cost?” Alex shot back. “Tae our forces? Tae theirs, when they are being led into battle by a madman and a fool who does nae value their lives at all? I say again, we cannae do such a thing in the name of one lass, no matter how I wish we could.”

“A lass who was prepared tae sacrifice everything for a clan who’d sacrifice nothing for her in return,” the captain said bitterly. “Ye know how we felt about each other, Alex, she and I.”

“Aye, I do, at that.” Alex’s voice was full of regret. “Mayhap I ought tae have discouraged it. Ordered some other guardsman tae look after her while she was in our custody.” He sighed again. “Tae be honest, I had hoped that it all might work out for the pair of ye somehow. As Isla and I did eventually, against all odds. But it doesn’t seem that will be possible in this case, and now I fear it has led tae all the more heartache. Even so, this is how things must be.”

“I cannae accept that,” Bryan told him. “I willnae!”

The laird peered at him closely, and when he spoke, it seemed as though he was choosing his words most carefully. “Ye have long defined yerself by yer loyalty tae this clan, Bryan Black. And it has been most appreciated. I wonder, sometimes, whether I have told ye that enough these past years. But ye are yer own man. Ye must do as ye feel is right in all matters, for ye are the one who shall have tae live with yerself and the consequences.”

Alex gazed out the window again, looking down at the farms and villages which dotted the countryside. The people who relied upon his good judgment to live their daily lives in peace and harmony.

Bryan knew that the laird had more to say, and waited as patiently as he could. His blood was frothing in his veins, though, and every muscle in his body twitched and longed for action.

“If ye cannae stomach such an injustice against one ye care for so deeply,” Alex continued, “and ye intend tae intervene, ye must know that it must be without my support, or that of the clan. We must all be able tae honestly claim that we didnae know about or approve of yer actions, in order tae keep from being dragged into a bloody conflict.” He gave Bryan a significant look. “Ye understand what I am saying, do ye not?”

Bryan swallowed hard. He did know what Alex was saying. But admitting to it out loud was another matter entirely.

And to act upon it...

“I do understand, aye,” he answered quietly.

“Then I suggest ye take some time today and make yer choice,” Alex said, sitting at his desk and shuffling papers around. The message was clear; Bryan was dismissed.

He walked out of the study slowly and wandered the corridors of the castle for the next several hours, considering his options.

Who was he without his fealty to the Oliphant Clan?

That question was foremost on his mind, for he had defined himself entirely by that distinction his entire adult life. That loyalty, that sense of duty, had been meat and drink and man and wife to him. It had kept him warm during cold nights when he was patrolling the outskirts of the Oliphant lands, and when his lack of family made the silence of his quarters all the more penetrating at the end of each day, it had kept his loneliness at bay.

Now, however, he did not need to be alone any longer. He had found someone who knew how to reach inside him and stoke a warm fire in the hearth of his heart.

Could he simply be that, then? Could he spend the rest of his days as nothing more than the man beloved by Katherine McGregor, and forsake all other sense of identity?

And most of all, could he manage such a thing acting on his own, without being able to depend upon the support of his guardsmen and the full backing of his own adopted clan? Or would any effort to liberate her be doomed to failure?

Bryan had no way of answering the second question.

The answer to the first, however, was inescapable. Yes. He could live as nothing but Katherine’s husband and be happier for it. He had given years of faithful service to the Oliphants, and could now have a life of his own outside of them without feeling like a man guilty of abandoning his post.

All it would take to achieve such a blessed existence would be to find a way to break into the McGregor Stronghold, sneak into the dungeons, foil whatever locks and iron bars Katherine was trapped behind, and spirit her off into the night without being stopped by any sentries or other McGregors—and all without the aid of any other sworn Oliphant soldiers.

Most importantly, he would have to steal off on his own to do all of this, without breathing a word of it even to his most trusted men.

He realized that in his meanderings he had found his way into the courtyard, and now he looked up at the faces of those men whom he'd trained over the years, the dozens whom he'd helped transform from uncertain young farm boys into sharpened spears in the service of their clan. They all had their different strengths and vulnerabilities, and he knew that he would count himself fortunate to have any one of them at his side for the endeavor to come.

What would they think of him tomorrow, when they discovered that he had slipped away to pursue his own destiny without them? Not only had he left them without the benefit of his leadership, but he'd done so in the name of his love for one of their most hated enemies. In doing so, he might, in fact, be opening them up to a not-unprovoked attack from those same foes.

For would Angus believe that Bryan was acting on his own, if the former Oliphant captain was caught in the act?

Perhaps not.

In which case, Bryan would not merely be following the dictates of his own heart. Rather, he would be risking the welfare of the entire Oliphant Clan in the process. Could he live with that, if such a dreadful thing came to pass?

Aye , he thought grimly. Knowing that of all the men of this clan, I am the one whose skills make him most likely to succeed at such an enterprise. Knowing that if I dinnae make the attempt, the only woman I have ever truly loved will rot in a cell just like the ones that turn my stomach beneath this very castle.

Given how quick and quiet I can be when I wish to be; given my chances of success, I can take that risk.

I must .

So he peered up at the faces of those comrades in arms, knowing that he might never look upon them again. He summoned all his courage, and told himself that there was honor in riding to Katherine's rescue; honor enough to sponge away the disgrace of leaving his sworn post.

Then he proceeded to the stables with a determined stride.

A rat skittered across the stone floor between Katherine's feet.

The first few times this had happened, Katherine had recoiled with a shriek; even jumped up onto the narrow bench of rotted planks affixed to the wall, hoping it could not follow her there.

But every time, the rat had simply gazed up at her with its moist black eyes and twitched its whiskers inquisitively for several moments before continuing on its way.

Eventually, Katherine's revulsion was replaced with a sort of dazed curiosity. The next time the rodent visited her, she did not react; indeed, she stayed as perfectly still as possible, hoping not to disturb the creature so that she might observe him more closely.

It was as close to any connection to another living creature as she supposed she might expect for the foreseeable future.

She could not be certain how much time had passed since her father had ordered her imprisoned, but it seemed to her that at least a day and night had gone by. She had sat alone in near-total darkness that entire time. A rusty hatch at the bottom of the heavy iron door squealed open every now and then, and a tray of wilted greens, tough meat, and stale bread was shoved through.

No visitors, though.

Katherine imagined that her mother was too incapacitated with one of her blasted “headaches,” and that it was likely Romilly had been forbidden to come see her by their father. She had hoped that her sister might defy the order, though, and was disappointed that she had not thus far. None of her former servants had looked in on her, and she could not blame them for being timid in the face of Laird Angus’s wrath.

Would anyone come to tell her of the weather outside; whether the sun was shining on the fields of golden heather she and Romilly used to play in as children, or if the McGregor lands were being drenched by torrents of rain?

Whatever the answers were, one thing was clear to Katherine; she could not hold out any hope for rescue. She assumed that Aitken had immediately sent out a messenger to report her imprisonment to the Oliphants. But what could they be expected to do? Laird Alex was too shrewd a leader to risk war for the sake of a lass from some enemy clan.

No matter how Bryan might beg him to do so.

Katherine wanted to pray that Bryan might come to save her, but she did not dare, for she knew the danger of it. If he attempted to infiltrate the stronghold on his own, he would almost surely perish. And would he even try, if it meant disobeying the laird he’d dedicated his life to serving?

No. This dark and dismal dungeon was her fate for as long as it was her father’s whim, and who knew how long that might be? The madness that smoldered in his hollow eyes like a pair of baneful coals sickened her soul, and she no longer recognized the man who had raised her. He had been stern and aloof back then, certainly, but not this demented ghoul who had ordered her locked away.

Would she be beneath the stronghold for weeks? Months? Years, perhaps, with only vermin to keep her company?

“What is to happen now?” she asked herself hopelessly.

Unbeknownst to Katherine, a relatively short distance from her place of captivity, Bryan Black was asking himself the same question.

He'd journeyed through the day and night, and most of the next day again. The trip had taken far longer than it normally might have, for he was forced to avoid all main roads. He could not take the chance that anyone at all might see which direction he was riding, guess his purpose, and relate it to Laird Alex—or worse, to Angus.

He knew the McGregors might already be prepared for him; that indeed, Katherine's imprisonment might even be intended as a very specific trap for the Oliphants in general, and for himself in particular. There was every possibility that the McGregors were expecting some type of rescue, and that they might have fortified their sentry posts and defenses all the more as a result.

So he knew he could give them no reason to build them up even more. The task ahead of him was difficult enough already. Bryan loathed the stops he had to make along the way to rest himself and his horse, for he was impatient to have the matter over and done with. Every second that ticked away was another moment that the love of his life was trapped in the most horrid conditions imaginable, and he could not bear the thought of that. Even so, he knew that these stops were unavoidable. He would need his steed in the best shape possible in case a hasty escape was required later, just as he would need to be at his best himself in case he was met with any sort of resistance upon his arrival.

Therefore, he had no choice but to allow himself and his mount to recover periodically. And each time he did, he had to force himself to sit still instead of pacing fretfully and imagining every dreadful outcome he might face.

At last, he found himself within viewing distance of the McGregor Stronghold. Most

of the land around the structure was a flat and grassy expanse. The forests that had once surrounded the stronghold had long since been cleared, to prevent an enemy army from hiding in the foliage as they drew closer.

Thus, Bryan had to shimmy up one of the trees closest to the edge of the woods so that he could get a better look at the stronghold's defenses. He did not dare make his move until night fell again; he could operate under cover of darkness. Until then, though, he intended to take in as much as possible in order to plan his approach. Unfortunately, from his vantage point at the top of the tallest tree he could find, Bryan couldn't see any promising way inside.

The walls were not as high as those of Castle Oliphant, but they were still far too tall to climb, especially since the guardsmen stationed atop them appeared quite vigilant. There were bound to be narrow tunnels at the bottom of the wall to keep rainwater from accumulating within the walls and flooding the courtyard, but Bryan could not make them out due to the tall grasses growing in front of them. Even if he could, he found it unlikely that he'd be able to fit through one of them.

However, he climbed down and found another tree that would give him a view of the stronghold from a different angle. And another. And another.

All of that searching for trees and climbing them took up most of the afternoon's remainder, and by the time he had finished, he found himself no closer to discovering a reliable way in.

Even if he could manage that, what then? He had to assume that guards had been placed at multiple points within, between any entrance and the dungeon. Alex had not been wrong in assuming that all of this was a trap laid by Angus, and Bryan hated that he was walking into it willingly.

He hated the idea of walking into it blindly all the more.

This quest was beginning to seem more and more like suicide, yet Bryan realized that this still would not turn him away from it. If he was meant to meet his end here, so be it. At least he would have done so in an attempt to see Katherine again. Maybe, if he could make it far enough before being taken down by Angus's men, his last sight in this world might be her face.

That was reason enough to continue this lunatic mission, and he prepared for his own imminent demise at the points of McGregor blades. Perhaps he even deserved it, he thought, for turning his back on his laird to follow the dictates of his own foolish heart.

“Ye must know it won't work.”

The soft female voice from below startled Bryan so sharply that he nearly lost his grip on the tree and fell the rest of the way. His boots skittered against the trunk, knocking down a brittle shower of loose bark.

When he managed to get his footing again, he slid down to the grass, peering around in the gloom. “Who are ye?”

But his mind was already telling him that the voice was familiar, which was confirmed moments later, as Romilly stepped forth from the shadows of the forest floor. She looked quite different than she had the last time he'd seen her. Her face was clean, her hair was braided, and she wore fine clothes meant for riding, though Bryan saw no horse but his own.

She was deathly pale, though, and her eyes were wide with fear and uncertainty. She wrung her hands and shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

“There's nae need tae be scared of me,” she continued in a trembling voice. “Despite being in the dark woods with a woman known tae be murderous, that is. I'm nae

armed.”

“Yet still plenty dangerous, I’d wager,” Bryan retorted, his eyes narrowing

His mind replayed all of their previous awful exchanges down in the Oliphant dungeons; the way her eyes had blazed through the bars with fury, the promises of agony and revenge she had hurled at him every time.

Did she now mean to make good on those threats? There was nothing stopping her. She had caught him squarely, and could easily raise the alarm. Her voice would carry to the walls of the stronghold, even from this distance.

But if she had intended to spring a trap for him, why would she have come alone?

Who’s to say she has come alone? his mind insisted. She is easily the most black-hearted and devious lass I’ve ever encountered. There could be numerous cadres taking up positions around me.

Except if there were, he knew he would hear them, sense them. His instincts had always proven keen enough to warn him of such things. He knew they would not fail him now, even through the fog of emotion that had swirled around him ever since he’d received news of Katherine’s captivity.

“I knew that if I searched these woods, I would find ye, or some other Oliphant, searching for a way in so that my sister might be rescued,” Romilly said. “I have climbed nearly every tree in this forest at one time or another, so that I might see my own home and its defenses from every angle. ‘Twas as my father insisted.” She chuckled humorlessly. “He has insisted on so many things from me, my entire life. Some reasonable. Recently less so.”

“Ye seemed tae find it reasonable enough tae plot the butchering of Lady Isla,” Bryan

reminded her through clenched teeth.

Romilly lowered her head, mortified. "I deserve that judgment from ye, aye. I blindly allowed myself tae be swept up in my father's fervor, his hatred for the Oliphants. I did terrible things in his name, and was foolish enough tae believe they were needed for the security of my clan. And what has it gotten me? No doubt, ye are here because of Aitken's message. Ye know my sister is imprisoned."

He nodded slowly. "Do ye mean tae see me behind bars as well? That would be a fitting enough punishment, would it not, for what ye endured at the hands of the Oliphants?"

Romilly shook her head sharply. "I have had enough of that. There must be a way forward for our two clans, I see that now. And that cannae come tae pass while my father is allowed tae indulge his own madness and depraved whims. There can be no lasting peace while my sister is locked away senselessly, just tae taunt ye. Come. Follow me."

"Where do ye mean for us tae go?" Bryan was loath to trust Romilly, but if she was giving a performance, it was certainly a convincing one. If nothing else, he was curious to see where it might lead.

If she truly meant him harm, there were far easier ways to achieve that than whatever game she appeared to be playing with him.

"Tae the dungeons, of course. I can show ye which sluice gates in the outer walls of the stronghold might be wide enough tae permit ye tae pass through. I can take ye through the hidden corridors of the dungeons, which will keep ye out of the guards' sight. Without my aid, ye will have no hope of success. And I would not see ye fail with Katherine by yer side, lest she be harmed in the attempt. Besides," she added quietly, "if my sister is tae have any hope of a happy life or future, it will have to be

far away from this ghastly place. With ye.”

Bryan was somewhat taken aback by that last comment.

Romilly noticed, and smiled sadly. “Aye. Even in the brief moments when I saw ye together, I noticed how she looked at ye. With such love in her eyes. More than I ever saw there for anyone else.” She laughed humorlessly. “Even me. Now we mustn't waste another moment, for I cannae abide the thought of her in those dungeons a second longer, and I'm sure ye cannae either.”

Romilly started in the direction of the stronghold as night fell across the lowlands, and Bryan followed, not knowing what else to do. He did not feel as though he had any choice but to accept her offer and pray that it was genuine.

She found the tallest sections of grass and went down on her belly, crawling through them slowly and carefully and motioning for him to do likewise. He did, craning his neck to squint in the direction of the stronghold. His neck and back were tense; he kept expecting to hear some McGregor guardsman raise the alarm upon seeing the rustling of the grass.

But dusk had cast long shadows across the green expanse, and the sentries appeared blind to their approach.

Still, their advance was excruciatingly slow, and it seemed like hours before they reached the foot of the wall. At their present angle, the guards would not see them unless they made a point of leaning far over the edge and looking straight down. Bryan knew they would not do so, for why would they expect to see an intruder so close to them without having observed their approach long before then?

Bryan almost hated to admit it, but so far, it seemed as though Romilly's plan would get them safely inside.

What might happen after that was anyone's guess.

The sluice gate was so small that although Romilly was able to slip through fairly easily, Bryan's brawny shoulders and arms got him stuck a handful of times. Each time his breath froze in his lungs, and he was gripped by the grim certainty that Romilly had meant for it to happen, that she intended to bring a horde of guards to drag him out into the courtyard by his hair.

But then he would find a bit of leeway and manage to edge forward a little more, until at last he was out under the moonlight again. As he rose to his feet, he saw that Romilly had flattened her back against the rough-hewn blocks of the wall, and so he did likewise.

"Follow me," she bade him, sliding along the wall. "There is a hidden passage, long forgotten by most within the stronghold. It was originally constructed tae allow enough currents of air into the dungeon for the prisoners and guards so they wouldnae suffocate. We may be able tae squeeze through there, if it's as wide as I remember."

"If all others have forgotten it, then how do ye know about it?" Bryan tried to keep the suspicion out of his voice, but he still had his doubts about accepting Romilly's aid.

"Most days I spent with my father, learning how tae use a sword and make the most of my wits," she whispered. "Those days when he was too busy tae teach me anything, I roamed the stronghold, memorizing every inch of it. For the day when the Oliphants might attack, and I might have needed tae lead people tae safety."

"Ye truly have spent yer entire life preparing for an invasion from the Oliphants?" Bryan asked, bemused. "What did our clan ever do tae make ye think we were any sort of threat tae ye?"

Romilly turned her head away, embarrassed. “Because my father told me so. No reason better than that, though I ought tae have demanded one. Now remain silent, for there shall be guards nearby, and we cannae risk alerting them tae our presence!”

“I wouldnae worry about that,” another woman’s voice cut in suddenly.

Bryan's panic rooted him to the spot. His skin came over cold as ice, and he was deathly certain that, having been caught, he would never see another sunrise.

I didn't even make it far enough to see Katherine one last time, he lamented inwardly. After all of this danger and uncertainty, I won't even have that to comfort me during my final moments.

When he turned toward the source of the voice, he saw a haggard-looking woman he'd never seen before, with tangled hair and haunted eyes that were sunken in their sockets. The clothes she wore looked as though they had been fine indeed in years past, but lack of cleaning or care had made them dingy and threadbare. She was somehow fierce and pitiable at the same time.

And the resemblance to Romilly and Katherine was unmistakable.

Bryan cleared his throat. "Lady Annabel, I presume. Am I correct in supposing that Romilly told ye she might be bringing me along? That ye have McGregor soldiers ready tae take me tae face yer husband's judgment?"

Annabel lifted her chin imperiously. "Yer suppositions are incorrect, sir, as it happens. Romilly didnae tell me she suspected ye might pay us a visit, or that she meant tae go and find ye so she could lead ye in safely." She looked at her daughter, and her expression softened. "Nay, I guessed it on my own, for 'twas what I was tempted tae do myself. I am only gladdened tae discover that Romilly has thought better of her allegiance tae her father. In truth, my own had been on the wane for

quite some time.”

Romilly’s eyes widened. “Mother, why did ye not confide in me?”

The older woman sighed. “I was afraid tae admit it, even tae myself. So I buried my worries in my headache powders and my long silences, and prayed for my daughters tae find some deliverance from that dreadful man, somehow.” She peered at Romilly. “Perhaps my prayers were answered, at that. Now let us go tae the dungeon and free yer sister.”

“What of the guards?” Romilly asked.

“I dismissed them. I told them that Angus commanded they withdraw tae their barracks, as part of some grander trap he has in store. They were willing enough tae believe it. They would believe any madness spoken in the name of their laird, at this point.”

“And what of Angus himself?” Bryan inquired. “What if he chooses tae go down tae the dungeons while we are there?”

At this, Annabel offered a wan smile. “I dropped one of my headache powders into his ale earlier. It ought tae put him into a deep sleep for the rest of the night. Come, let us tarry no longer, that poor Katherine does not spend a moment longer in that dreadful place!”

Annabel led them down to the dungeons. Sure enough, Bryan saw that there were no guards positioned in the corridors. They were empty, save for the flickering torches mounted on the stone walls, and the rats that skittered here and there at their feet.

None of Bryan’s previous squeamishness regarding dungeons plagued him that night. His stomach might as well have been fashioned from steel, for he was wholly

possessed by his determination to free the woman he adored.

Nevertheless, when they reached the final cell of the dungeons and opened the heavy iron door, the sight of Katherine sitting amid such appalling conditions sickened Bryan. She was on a hard metal bench bolted to the wall, her head in her hands, her shoulders heaving with sobs.

She raised her head, and as their eyes met, they were instantly filled with hope. Her tears left streaks upon her dirt-filmed cheeks, and she rose slowly, approaching the bars of her cell.

“Is this some sort of dream?” she whispered. “For if it is, I pray that I shall never awaken.”

“‘Tis no dream, Daughter,” Annabel assured her, unbolting the door from the outside and swinging it open. “The time has come for ye tae fly free. Back tae the Oliphant lands with this man, if that is what pleases ye, or anywhere else yer heart takes ye. So long as it is far from this dismal and hopeless place,” she added with a shudder.

“But won’t ye come with us, Mother?” Katherine pleaded, taking Bryan’s hand. “Surely ye will be happier there than here.”

Annabel shook her head sadly. “Alas, my place is by Angus’s side. I chose him, and took a solemn vow never tae abandon him. Ye did not.”

Romilly turned to Katherine. “I cannae come with ye either, Sister. My place is here, with our people.”

“Ye cannae remain, Romilly,” Katherine protested. “Our father is a madman!”

“All the more reason why I must do all I can tae mitigate the damage he inflicts

during his final years of madness,” her sister replied solemnly. “I must use all he taught me tae serve our clan now as best as I can. There is no one else tae stand against him, no one else tae insist upon reason when his commands are lunacy. If I stay, I may yet be able tae prevent a war between the clans. I must try.”

Katherine nodded sadly. “Very well. But ye must promise tae find some way tae keep in touch with me, then, so that I may know how close ye are tae success in that regard.”

Romilly gave her a wan smile. “I shall find a way. I promise.”

Then Katherine gave her mother and sister a final embrace, took Bryan’s hand again, and crept with him to the sluice gate where he’d come in. They both crawled through, grunting, panting, even giggling nervously sometimes, for they were giddy with the notion that they might make it out together without being caught at it.

They emerged into the night air, gasping and hugging each other, shedding tears of relief upon each other’s shoulders. Katherine was every bit as familiar with the patterns of the tall heather as her older sister had been, and so she led Bryan to them. The blades of grass waved softly in the cool breeze, as though beckoning them in.

“Stop them!”

Katherine’s nails dug into Bryan’s palm sharply, and they both froze, horrified, as her father’s voice echoed across the moors.

They turned and saw Angus standing upon the ramparts of the stronghold, his white nightgown flapping around him in the wind. That, combined with his pallor and the stark insanity in his eyes, made him appear to be some sort of vengeful phantom shrieking from the abyss.

He pointed at them, continuing to scream. “My daughter! She is escaping with that-that damned Oliphant guardsman. Get them! Stop them! Drag them back here this very instant!”

Before any of the sentries could respond to his cries, Annabel appeared at his side, placing her hands on his arm. “What is the matter, husband? Why do ye wail and carry on so?”

Angus gesticulated wildly at Bryan and Katherine. “Our daughter! She is running off with that Oliphant swine.”

Annabel looked in the direction he pointed, and her eyes swept over Bryan and her daughter. “I see nothing, Angus. Nothing at all. Yer eyes must be playing tricks on ye.”

He spluttered and stammered, his cheeks turning red. Before he could form any words, Romilly stood at his other side, looking deeply worried. “What is the meaning of all this shouting, Father? Why, ye will have every member of our clan thinking ye have taken leave of yer blood senses.”

“Katherine is escaping,” he howled, pointing again with a trembling finger. “She is in the company of that callow young Oliphant thug. He is stealing her away! How can ye be so damned blind?”

“Ye have nae been sleeping well these past nights, Father,” Romilly said in a pacifying tone. “Ye have been at war with the Oliphants in yer mind day and night, and now ye have driven yerself into a frenzy, so that ye can no longer tell the difference between what occurs within yer imagination and what transpires outside of it.”

“Aye, it seems this is so, husband,” Annabel chimed in quickly. “Ye have put so

much pressure on yerself of late, ye have endured so much on behalf of yer clan. Is it any wonder that it has ye jumping at some hare running across the valley, thinking it is some terrible skulking enemy?"

"But it is no hare," Angus roared, foaming at the mouth. "What is the matter with ye? I am no madman, do ye hear?"

Bryan watched this scene unfold, astonished. He glanced over at Katherine, and saw that she was similarly dumbstruck.

One of Angus's oldest and most trusted guardsmen came running. Katherine recognized him. He was called Stump, for his height and girth lent him to such a nickname quite easily. He had always been kind and attentive toward Katherine and Romilly, ever since they were wee lasses.

"What transpires, Laird Angus?" he huffed, out of breath.

Angus gesticulated wildly once more. "My daughter is fleeing! She is being abducted again by the same damned blackguard as last time. Tell me ye see it, Stump." He seized the front of Stump's tunic desperately, his bloodshot eyes rolling in his head. "I am no madman, ye must say it. Ye must say I am no madman!"

Now Stump's eyes were wide as well, and filled with terror. He peered down into the gloom of the valley, and his eyes met Katherine's.

She gave him the smallest shake of her head, her lower lip quivering.

Stump turned, first to Annabel, then to Romilly. They gazed back, their eyes intense, and after several seconds, understanding dawned on him.

He took Angus by the shoulder, gently but firmly. "There is nothing there but the tall

grasses, Laird Angus. And the breeze that moves them, which ye no doubt mistook for the shapes of those ye described. Ye have been under great strain, my laird, and ye have not rested or ta'en care of yerself. Come, let us get ye back tae yer chamber before ye catch yer death out here."

Angus gazed down at his daughter and her companion once more, and his jaw went slack. He mumbled and shook his head, mystified. "I am no madman. I-I..."

"Nay, ye are no madman, my dear husband," Annabel said soothingly, patting his shoulder. "Just a leader pushed tae his extreme, that is all. A night of sleep is all ye need. Mayhap one of my headache powders might help."

One final mad-eyed stare from Angus, and then he was coaxed into the stronghold.

Romilly and her mother likewise gave Katherine a last look, offering a pair of reassuring smiles and nods before following him in.

Bryan and Katherine stared at each other, unsure of what to say after having borne witness to such a strange thing.

After a few moments, they turned toward the wooded ring around the stronghold's grounds and ran toward it as fast as they could. Bryan led Katherine to the place where he had secured his horse, and found that Romilly had tied up another steed in hope of their plan's success.

"yer sister is a shrewd woman," Bryan remarked as they mounted their horses and rode toward the Oliphant lands.

"Aye, she ought tae be," Katherine replied, flicking the reins of her steed. "She was taught by the best."

They rode hard toward the Oliphant territories, stopping only briefly here and there to let their horses recover and to kiss each other passionately. Though they wished to tarry beneath the moonlight and enjoy each other's company more thoroughly, without anyone around to stop them for a change, they did not dare to push their luck, having escaped from the stronghold so narrowly.

So they continued through the night and all the following day, expecting to hear McGregor horses at their heels at any moment, even after they crossed over the border.

Katherine's mind raced. Had her mother and sister truly been able to convince Angus that everything he had seen had merely been in his head? What would happen if he went down to check the dungeons the following day and found Katherine gone?

Would Romilly be punished? Would Lady Annabel?

Would the McGregor clansmen even follow orders that came from Angus anymore, having seen the extent of his madness?

She did not know. She could only tell herself that it was all behind her now, and that she would soon be carried safely through the gates of Castle Oliphant.

Sure enough, as the sun started to set behind the rolling hillsides, the castle's towers came into view. Bryan felt a surge of apprehension, and when he looked over at Katherine, he saw uncertainty on her face as well. He had already told her along the way that his rescue of her had not been approved by Laird Alex.

What sort of reception, then, would await them?

Might Alex turn them both away, Bryan for defying him, and Katherine simply because he could not risk war with Angus for granting asylum to his wayward

daughter?

Neither of them knew.

However, as they neared the gates, a strange sound was carried to them over the evening breeze. It perplexed them for a few moments before they came to realize what it was.

Clapping.

The closer they came to the castle, the easier it was for them to see the sentries atop the ramparts, gathering above the gates to applaud the travelers' return.

Bryan broke into a wide grin as he saw that Kirk was with the guardsmen, who were now hooting and cheering. The gates swung open, and when the horses came to a stop in the courtyard, the sounds of merriment and relief echoed from all sides.

Alex and Isla scurried into the courtyard, looking confused by all the noise at first, then shocked and delighted by the reason for it.

"Bryan!" Isla exclaimed, embracing him warmly as he dismounted. "When we saw that ye were gone, we didnae know if we would ever see ye again."

"Aye, and before we discuss such matters further where others may be in earshot," Alex interjected quickly, his brow furrowed. "Mayhap we ought tae go inside, so that ye may enlighten me on what has transpired here."

They followed the laird to his study, after Isla gave Katherine a welcoming, and reassuring hug, and once they were seated before him, Bryan related everything that occurred from the moment Romilly found him in the woods up to their escape.

Alex stood at the window for a while in silence, stroking his chin pensively. After a few minutes, he said, “Well, it sounds to me as though the captain of my guard chose to take a couple of days to himself riding the outskirts of our lands, and forgot to inform anyone of his plans. Which was careless of him, certainly, but no reason for undue ire or punishment.”

“As that happened,” he went on, pacing the room, “it appears as though Laird Angus McGregor suffered some sort of nightmare that his younger daughter escaped from her cell in his dungeons. A product of his overwrought and rather fragile mind of late, no doubt. His wife and older daughter put him to bed before his mad ravings caught the attention of his people and showed him unfit to lead them. Even so, a strange coincidence, for it seems that Lady Katherine had, in fact, freed herself from captivity and was wandering the woods at the far edges of the McGregor territories.”

Bryan began to see what Alex was playing at, and nodded eagerly. “At which point, of course, I found her and brought her here.”

“Where I pleaded for asylum,” Katherine chimed in, “and it was granted to me, most graciously. Unless ye believe that would be enough for my father to wage war after all?”

“If he is choleric enough to choose such a conflict under these circumstances,” Alex replied, “then as far as I am concerned, we needn’t dance around the prospect of it any longer. Ye would know better than most, though, since ye are his kin. Do ye believe it will come to that?”

Katherine searched her heart, but could provide no honest answer. Her own father was a stranger to her now.

Alex saw her uncertainty and shrugged. “So be it, then. There is nothing for us to do but wait and see. In the meantime, I suggest ye return to the chamber ye inhabited

prior tae yer departure. Isla will be happy tae see tae any other needs ye may have, no doubt. And Captain?" he added, raising an eyebrow at Bryan. "Though I am quite sure ye are relieved tae have Lady Katherine back in our company, might I suggest that ye make yer visits with her public ones? She is still a lady, after all, and one would not wish for rumors tae spread about her propriety. Or yers, for that matter."

"Ye are right, of course, Laird Alex," Bryan agreed immediately. "And thank ye."

Bryan led Katherine to her room, and though both of them wanted nothing more than to fall into each other's arms out of sheer relief, they knew the wisdom of Alex's warning.

When they reached her door, Bryan kissed her hand gently. "Get some rest, my lady. After all ye have been through, I imagine ye need it."

She did, and once he had left her to herself, Katherine collapsed on the bed and slept all through the night and the following morning. It was nearly noon when she roused herself, and the servant girl who brought her a late breakfast told her that Bryan was in the courtyard waiting for her when she was finished. The servant also brought a riding outfit, courtesy of Isla.

Katherine donned the outfit and met Bryan in the courtyard. He had a pair of horses with him. "I thought perhaps ye might appreciate another ride tae the village," he said with a grin. "Tae take yer mind off things while we wait tae hear from yer clan."

"That would be a most welcome distraction, thank ye," she answered with a curtsy. "Thank ye."

He took her to the same village they had visited twice before, and they took tea with Fiona once more. The old woman listened to all that had happened, by turns amused and horrified. As they told her, several of the younger lasses gathered at the window

of the cottage, eavesdropping and hoping that Katherine might teach them more sewing patterns. They wondered among each other whether she would return to her own people, or if she was here to stay this time.

These simple activities allowed Katherine to relax, for she was still extremely anxious about all that had gone before, and all that might still occur as a result of her escape. Would her mother and sister be punished by the insane laird? Would he declare war on the Oliphants the moment he saw her cell empty?

Just as Katherine was helping Fiona clear the table, there was a knock at the door of the cottage. Katherine looked up, and saw a familiar face; a man called Declan, who had often delivered messages for her clan in the past.

He held one for her now.

“Beggin’ yer pardon, my lady,” he said, stepping in timidly. “But ‘tis a great joy tae see ye, if ye dinnae mind me saying so! None of us were happy tae learn yer father had imprisoned ye upon yer return, and when word spread that ye had fled.” He beamed at her through his great bushy red beard. “Well, a great joy indeed, my lady, I should say!”

“Many thanks, Declan,” she replied. “May I see the letter ye bear?”

“Of course!” He handed it over, and she recognized her sister’s seal upon it. She broke the wax and read it to herself.

My Dearest Sister,

I hope you managed to reach Castle Oliphant safely, and that you are doing all you can to put the terrible things you endured here behind you.

Mother and I were able to get Father back to his bedchamber for a few hours, and convinced him that he had imagined the entire thing. However, shortly after that, he rose once more and saw that you were no longer in the dungeons. He roared and raved, as I'm sure you can imagine, and demanded that all those sworn to the McGregor banner ready for war against the Oliphants.

There were none willing to follow such an order. Our people have long watched their laird's descent into madness, and though it pained many of them to show disloyalty to their leader, they were nevertheless unprepared to risk their lives over the rantings of a lunatic.

It is uncommon for a woman to rule over a clan, but it has largely been decided that this is the proper way of things for the McGregors, now that our father has taken leave of his senses and left no sons to rule in his stead. I have addressed our people and let them know that things will be different going forward; that we shall consider the Oliphants our allies from now on, and will have an open exchange of resources with them which will benefit both parties. They seem pleased with this, for as you know, their farms have struggled mightily these recent years.

Now our father largely keeps to his room. He takes his meals there, refusing to see anyone. He has largely given up, I think. Perhaps eventually he shall see that there are other roles for him to fill, other ways that he might continue to serve our clan.

Oddly—and by contrast—our mother has emerged from her self-imposed confinement, and seems all too eager to assist me in forging a new and prosperous direction for the McGregors. I hope to rely on your counsel in the days ahead as well, for we always seemed to fare better on those rare occasions when our goals were as one.

If ye intend to marry Captain Bryan Black, as I imagine you do, then you must extend an invitation for the wedding. Rest assured I shall attend, and health permitting, so

shall our mother.

Until then, I remain your loving sister,

Romilly

Katherine jumped up and down, squealing with glee. Bryan, bemused, took the letter from her hands and read it aloud to Fiona, whose eyes twinkled with joy at the news.

“There’s an end tae it, then,” Bryan crowed, picking Katherine up and spinning her around merrily. “No war with yer clan, no worrying about vengeance from yer father! Just the happy life ye and I deserve, Katherine, at long last!”

“Well, young lad,” Fiona cackled, “that almost sounded like a proposal just now. If ye meant tae make her yer wife, do ye nae wish tae do a proper job of it? She seems like a lass who deserves it.”

There were tears of rapture in Katherine’s eyes, but, nevertheless, she sniffled them back and folded her arms primly, raising an eyebrow. “That sounds true enough tae me!”

Bryan laughed heartily, his eyes shining with tears as well. He took Katherine’s hand tenderly and lowered himself to one knee. “Lady Katherine McGregor, ye are, without doubt, the strongest, bravest, sweetest, and loveliest woman I have ever known in my life. I feel I could spend twelve lifetimes with ye and still never learn all of yer secrets and wonders, but I’d like tae start with one, and see if I might make a fair go of it. Will ye be my bride?”

“Aye, Captain Bryan Black,” she giggled, “I shall gladly marry ye! Ye have saved me from a dismal life, and I cannae wait tae build a merry new one with ye here.”

Bryan stood, and their bodies and lips came together with the majestic urgency of nature itself, of waves meeting the shore, of lightning striking the ground. Their breath carried the warmth of their very souls, and both mingled on their tongues exquisitely. Their fingers laced together tightly, and each could feel the heartbeat of the other, reverberating through their limbs like cathedral bells.

When they rode back to Castle Oliphant to deliver the news, Laird Alex was glad indeed. “We shall have a strong new ally in the McGregors,” he intoned. “They will have the benefit of our resources tae bolster their farms, proper soldiers tae train their raiders and rabble...”

“Och, Alex Oliphant,” Isla exclaimed, shaking her head. “Ye are a clever laird, but a very silly man! Did ye nae hear the most important thing? Bryan and Katherine are tae be married.” She ran over to Katherine, hugging her tightly. “Such delightful news, my dear!”

Alex cleared his throat uncomfortably, his face turning red. “Ah. Aye. That as well, I suppose.” He walked over to the captain of his guard and shook his hand stiffly. “I wish ye both all the best. A union with the McGregor Clan through marriage...”

Isla sighed loudly.

The laird caught himself, blushing deeper still. “...pales in comparison tae a match made out of genuine love, as this seems tae be.”

“Thank ye, Alex,” Bryan replied. “And, for what it’s worth—”

Alex held up a hand to silence him, smiling softly. “I have never questioned yer loyalty tae me, Captain, and I never shall. Ye did what ye felt was right, and I respect that. I am only grateful that yer actions didnae deprive me of a damn fine captain and advisor.”

Bryan did not know how to answer that, for he was touched beyond words.

EPILOGUE

The wedding was set for the following month, and in the weeks leading up to it, there were many preparations to make. Invitations were sent to the heads of all clans allied with the Oliphants, and though the wedding bells were not ringing for a true-born member of that clan, or one of noble birth, they were still greatly encouraged to attend and make merry.

Lady Romilly McGregor wrote to say that although she sincerely wished she could come immediately and assist in planning the event, she needed to spend as much time at the McGregor Stronghold as possible. There was much to oversee in the wake of Laird Angus relinquishing his hold over the clan, and she needed to be there to supervise as much of it as she could.

However, Romilly promised to be there in time for the ceremony itself, and she was every bit as good as her word: The procession of McGregor carriages arrived three days before, for Romilly was able to leave her mother in command of the clan's affairs. Lady Annabel was proving to be a dab hand at resolving disputes and seeing to the day-to-day responsibilities of leadership.

"Ye should see her at it." Romilly laughed as Katherine led her to her guest chambers. "I dinnae know where it comes from. She has been listening tae father conduct his affairs longer and more closely than we ever might have guessed, and she has a tremendous talent for all of it."

"All this time she's spent locked in her room, I'd have thought it might take some doing tae remind our clan who she is and why they ought tae listen tae her,"

Katherine giggled.

“There was a bit of that at the start, aye,” Romilly admitted. “But once they came tae realize that she has their best interests at heart, as our father has not for many years, why, they welcomed her solutions tae their problems with open arms! Now come, let me have a look at yer wedding gown, Sister. From the way ye’ve described it in yer letters, it must be a wondrous thing tae behold.”

And indeed it was: A snow-white cascade like a waterfall frozen in wintertime, with draped and elaborate ribbons that rippled and flowed as she moved. Romilly’s eyes were wide with astonishment.

So were Bryan’s on the day of the ceremony, when he stood in a kilt bearing the tartan of the Oliphant Clan and saw Katherine being led up the aisle toward him.

In lieu of Angus, Romilly guided her to the altar, where her husband-to-be waited.

There were hundreds of guests in breathless attendance; not as many McGregors as Katherine might have liked, only because the members of the clan were still recovering from the poverty and desperation that they’d endured under Angus. Those had their own affairs to tend to. However, a preponderance of them sent along missives with their good wishes, and those who could afford to sent gifts as well. They were largely meager, but entirely heartfelt.

Laird Alex presided over the hand-fasting ceremony, and as he wrapped the cloth around the wrists and forearms of the happy couple, he spoke of loyalty. Not just Bryan’s many years of service to the Oliphant Clan, but also Katherine’s willingness to sacrifice all that she had held dear in the name of peace and prosperity for the Oliphants. He welcomed her warmly into their clan, and said that her sense of duty was equal to that of any sworn or true-born Oliphant.

They were kind words, to be sure. If Bryan or Katherine had heard most of them, there is little doubt that they would have appreciated them greatly.

At that moment, though, the two of them inhabited an enchanted world consisting of nothing but each other.

When the time came for them to kiss, Katherine fell into Bryan's embrace and he cradled her tightly. Their lips came together and everyone at the ceremony rose as one with thunderous applause and cheers.

Now, at last, the long rivalry between these two clans could come to a happy end.

The festivities lasted well into the night. Naturally, the members of the formerly feuding clans were a bit wary around each other at first. There were McGregors who rode with the raiding parties that sacked some border farms and villages, and the grudges from those skirmishes ran deep.

The music and dancing and sense of fellowship all bewitched the guests equally the hours passed, though, and so did the toast offered by Kirk, who had imbibed quite a lot of wine.

"I believe we all owe a great deal of thanks tae the true hero of tonight's celebration; me!" he cackled, raising his goblet grandly.

There were some scattered laughs and groans from those assembled.

"Nay, nay, think on it!" he drawled, taking another long drink, and spilling a fair amount of it down the front of his tunic. "If Lady Katherine had found me at all desirable as a prospective mate, why, perhaps none of this joy might have unfolded at all! But I, very intentionally, mind ye, made myself as unpalatable tae her as possible, knowing in my infinite wisdom that in doing so, I would vouchsafe a happy end for

her and our wonderful captain. So here's tae that!"

Kirk gamely clanked his goblet against that of the man sitting next to him, then guzzled down the rest.

"Guffaw all ye wish, Cousin," Alex said quietly, giving him a wry smile. "But soon enough, it shall be yer turn tae do yer part by marrying some lady of noble birth. Perhaps ye had best study the flower arrangements around us and consider how they might compare with the ones that will be displayed at yer ceremony in the days tae come."

That gave Kirk rather a lot to consider, and he largely kept his mouth shut for the hour that followed. At some point, he passed out face down upon one of the banquet tables, and had flowers weaved into his hair by some lasses at the festivities while he snored.

By the end of the night, it seemed as though everyone had danced with everyone else at one time or another. The musicians had long since retired, but those who had once been sworn enemies now eagerly exchanged stories and drank toasts in each other's honor. There were even a few McGregor lads who found themselves quite taken with Oliphant lasses, and vice versa.

Of all the love matches that night, though, only one was consummated; that of the bride and groom, who managed to sneak up to their marriage chamber while the last of the revelers continued to make merry.

Hand in hand, they crept into the room and shut the door behind them, giggling like a pair of capricious children.

As they kissed and undressed each other, both of them recalled, and silently marveled at, the peculiar circumstances that had brought them there. He had been sent to abduct

her; he had been charged with guarding her while she was with the Oliphants; he had become her confidante, then her unlikely rescuer; and now he was her husband.

Had the world ever witnessed such a strange courtship?

Neither of them knew. They only knew that the world was about to witness the long-overdue consummation of it.

Bryan gently cupped the back of Katherine's neck with his hand and kissed her; on the mouth at first, then down the side of her neck, relishing her soft sighs and moans of delight. He nipped and nuzzled her exquisite collarbone, his fingers busying themselves with the ribbons on her wedding dress. She put her hands over his, guiding them patiently; the fasteners on the dress were somewhat elaborate, and tying them in the first place had taken some time.

At last, the dress relented and crumpled to the floor around her ankles in a heap. The bride and groom looked at each other and laughed softly, and as she stood nude before him in the light of the candles, he saw that she was even more glorious to look at than he could ever have imagined. The way the illumination painted the dimples and contours of her body transformed her into a breathing work of art before his very eyes, and the sight took his breath away.

Her soft and slender hands carefully undid the fasteners on his tunic and peeled it away from his muscled frame, then slid down to release him from his ceremonial kilt.

Now both were naked and vulnerable before each other, their chests heaving with excitement and desire.

Bryan reached around Katherine and lightly caressed her back, allowing his fingertips to slowly dance from the nape of her neck down to the cleft of her buttocks and back again. Goosebumps broke out across her delicate skin, and their lips were inches

apart, their breath tickling each other's faces.

She was shivering with desire for him, and he loved her all the more for it.

Bryan took her hand and led her to the marriage bed that awaited them. Katherine slid onto the soft fur blanket, smiling up at him invitingly. He reclined next to her and held her close with one arm, his burly frame comfortingly enveloping hers. She nestled against him, and with the fingers of his other hand, he traced intricate patterns down her neck and shoulders and breasts.

Katherine arched her back, her toes curling from the giddy sensation. His mouth was at her ear now, nibbling tenderly at her earlobe. Meanwhile, his thumb roughly brushed against one of her nipples, then the other, making each one painfully and perfectly hard in turn.

She had never known such bliss in her life, and these new sensations brought her close to swooning. Her fingers hooked and dug into the bedclothes, so she could anchor herself to his moment, these feelings.

Otherwise, she worried the lightness she felt within her would lift her off the bed and carry her off into the night sky, to shine among the stars.

As Katherine clung to the blanket tightly, her muscles tensed and ached, waiting for the next touch from Bryan. He moved his hand lower and rubbed the delicate delta of her sex, finding her dewy and welcoming. The sensual musk that rose from them beckoned him further.

Bryan lowered himself so that his face was between her legs, and then his mouth met Katherine's most intimate place. She gasped, uncertain of whether her body could possibly contain so much sheer ecstasy. It was as though a flock of bluebirds was singing restlessly within her, bursting to fly free.

As his tongue caressed her, his fingers explored her gently, lovingly, finding places within her that she never knew existed before. She cried out with pleasure, feeling the beautiful birds inside of her suddenly burst into flight all at once. Bliss poured forth from her; she was slick with it, glistening, dripping and desperate.

She did not even fully know what she needed. Only that she needed it now, right now, or else she would perish without it.

Bryan rose again and positioned himself atop her, holding her tightly. He looked deep into her eyes and gave her a reassuring smile. It told her more than words ever could about how safe and loved she was with him, how he would never harm her, how he would cherish her always and forever.

The quivering hardness of him touched her soaked softness, the tip of him pushing against her slowly. He was gentle yet confident, not hesitant. He paused briefly, as if to give her one final chance to object, but she could no sooner do that than she could object to breathing.

Every fiber of her being cried out for him, and she would not be denied.

She unhooked her nails from the blanket and reached up, digging them into his shoulders. He breathed in sharply and gritted his teeth, but did not break eye contact with her.

He knew that she was clinging to him as a way of pleading with him: Never, ever let go of me .

And he never would.

He was as sure of that as he was that the sun would rise upon the morrow.

Katherine took a deep breath, and he knew that she was ready for him. He entered her slowly, with a gentleness that made every inch of her flutter inside and out. She felt something stretch strangely within her, followed by a sharp, wet snap that traveled straight to her brain and almost robbed her of consciousness with its intensity. Everything within her soul seemed to crystallize, like sand turned to glass at the touch of lightning.

Then he was moving back and forth, as soft and even as the comforting sway of a heavy branch rocking in a rainstorm. She matched his rhythm with her hips, hugging him even more tightly. Her nails were dragging across his skin now, drawing thin rivulets of blood.

But she did not notice, and he did not care.

Bryan thrust deeper and deeper inside her. Their bodies were taut against each other, each shaking and building to a thunderous climax. Her hands moved to squeeze the sculpted muscles of his arms, then down to his hands. They took hold of hers and gripped them tightly, the thumbs pressing against her palms, holding her in place, so the passion could surge through both of their forms as one.

Waves of lust crashed and foamed through her, washing away all but her most primal impulses, and her ferocious adoration for him. She felt that same ocean rage and rush through him as well, and their churning seas collided and merged until neither knew where their bodies ended nor began anymore.

Both knew that the force of these torrents would reshape the coastlines of their lives forever. Sweeping away all the loneliness and uncertainty of two people who had come from families that rejected them.

Re-forming those sad inlets into high and noble cliff sides that would stand side by side for an eternity to come, or longer.

Bryan looked into her eyes, love written all over his face, “I love ye, and always will.”

Katherine simply looked at him and nodded. “I’ve loved ye ever since I laid eyes on ye,” she admitted, and kissed him with all the love and ferocity she possessed.

CHAPTER 1

The Scottish Highlands in the late 1700's

Godet Ross sat wearily upon her giant of a horse, her hips swaying with the big draft horse's walk as her clan's tartan blew over her shoulder in the wind. Her long, black, and unruly curls streamed out behind her as well. It had come loose from a hastily-put-up braid this morning. She knew it would have been wiser to put the horse in harness, to pull the cumbersome and heavy traveling coach that was lumbering along behind her at some distance, but she had left in a hurry. If the slow-moving coach was overtaken and they lost their trunks full of their belongings, so be it. She was not going to risk leaving her horse behind, nor her sisters, her aunt, or the other large draft horses her clan was known for.

Mungan Ross had everything now. But not her. Not her sisters. Not the horses.

Godet looked ahead along the winding dirt road that weaved endlessly through the grassy Highlands, its path disappearing behind hills and climbing up craggy barren peaks, only to be seen again in an open view of more grass. Endless, endless grass dotted with sheep. How she had come to hate sheep.

"I dinnae see nothing but mauchit sheep!"

Godet looked down from her big horse and smiled wearily at the tiny, older lady on the small Highland pony beside her. Her Aunt Hextilda spat at the ground as she glared at all the sheep.

“Aye, Aunt Hexy, Mungan thinks he is being canny, clearing out our clansmen and using the land for sheep. He dinnae agree with me that he is naught but a blootered skiver!” She sighed tiredly, remembering her fierce argument with her drunken uncle when he had cleared her clan out of their homes, all to make a larger profit off of sheep. She winced as she pushed the wild, dark curls away from the side of her face, “I’m gaunnie work on it, aunt. There isnae much I can dae until I get the MacDonells’ help.”

“I know, dearie. But ‘tis fair puggled and puckled I am,” her aunt said with a harrumphing noise.

“Aye, aunt, me too,” Godet replied quietly as she looked back at her three sisters on the other big draft horses straggling behind her. “I am sure we are all weary. Why dinnae ye and the girls go ride in the coach? ‘Tis a bit more comfortable fer ye perhaps?”

“Nonsense that is, I can still ride. I dinnae need to be closed up in yon carriage, where I cannae be smelling my braw Highlands and heather and gorse.” Aunt Hextilda looked up at the eldest of her nieces, noting the weariness on her young face. She had the weight of her clan on her shoulders. Ever since her parents had died and that skiver Mungan had come to Castle Fionnaghall, declaring himself Laird, and joining in the Clearances to sweep out crofters and clansmen in lieu of the profit from sheep.

Aunt Hextilda studied Godet with wise old eyes that peered up at her niece from her hooded cloak. Godet was such a bonnie young lass, and her three sisters were as bonnie as she, each so very different. Godet had dark hair that blew wild and free as the winds in the Highlands, her eyes were the silvery, blue-gray color of a stormy Highland sky. The muted red plaid of the Ross clan was proudly worn on her gown, and the tartan was wrapped around her shoulders. Despite the Dress Act, which banned tartan being worn, the rebellious sisters refused to be seen without it. She should have married by now, to have the protection of a man. Then none of this

would have been necessary.

“We will be arriving in MacDonell lands soon, aunt. Then we can rest.” Godet looked down at her aunt. “Ye sure that ye sent the message? I just dinnae understand why I wasnae told about this betrothal between myself and Gordon...”

“Och, and sure I am that yer dear parents died before they could tell ye. But Gordon and his parents will remember the pact, to be sure. Ye’ll see. Dinnae ye fash noo,” Aunt Hextilda added quickly, looking away from her niece.

“I think Aunt Hexy is up to something as usual, Godet,” her sister Flori said as she came riding up on her own big draft horse.

“I agree,” Cenna added as she too caught up with Godet on her draft. “Where has he been? Why hasnae he come to claim ye before this?”

“In the tales, he would have come riding up just as Uncle Mungan was yelling and putting up sich a fright!” Ina, the youngest sister exclaimed in her dramatic voice as she rode up on her draft mare. “With Mungan tossing out the poor, weeping crofters into the cold as ye stood between him and their poor burning crofts. He would have swept ye up onto his magnificent horse and carried ye away before Uncle Mungan could strike ye again...”

Godet rolled her eyes. “Dae ye ken that is the stuff of fairy tales, Ina?”

Ina looked down at her hands where she held the reins of her horse. “Mither told me tales like that. It could happen,” she said adamantly.

Aunt Hextilda smiled indulgently up at Ina from her pony. Neither she nor her pony seemed bothered at being surrounded by the huge draft horses. They were used to it. Though her pony puffed up and pranced a bit in their presence, letting them know

that he was big too.

Godet stared at her sisters. She loved them more than anything. She would do anything in order to keep them safe. If that meant showing up at Castle Conall and demanding Gordon MacDonell marry her according to some old betrothal from when they were children, then she would put aside her pride and do that. Then she would find a way to get her clansmen's homes back and hopefully, Castle Fionnaghall as well.

Her sister Flori reached over and put her hand on Godet's, looking mournfully at her face. "It's a crumbling pile of stone," Flori told her in a sad, serious tone. "Let Mungan have it, Godet. There's naught there for us anymore."

"But the clan..." Godet began, her voice thick with frustration and sadness as she stared back at her sister.

"Clan means family, isnae that right? Family is the people, not the place," Flori said sorrowfully.

Godet turned her hand up and squeezed her sister's hand.

"We have each other and Aunt Hexy," Ina said bravely, her blonde curls blowing around her face.

"Plus, we saved the Clydesdale stallion and mares!" Cenna laughed happily as she patted her horse.

Godet smiled and patted her big stallion as she looked at her sisters.

Flori was ever the pragmatist. She was dark-haired like Godet, but somehow, her face was a bolder, more dramatic version of her sister's. She kept Godet from

overthinking things. But now, she was always sad, always serious. Mungan was responsible for that. He had killed Flori's beloved on the eve before their wedding. Flori had witnessed it herself, and Godet had come upon Flori in hysterics with Mungan's soldiers surrounding her. Mungan was raising his hand over her where she kneeled on the ground over her beloved's body. Flori had never said what had happened and didn't say if Mungan had struck her for disobeying him. But Godet had stopped him from hurting Flori in that moment. He had happily beaten Godet instead since, she was the eldest.

Cenna was always playful. She loved the horses, and it was her idea to ride the breeding horses away from the castle. This line of Clydesdales had been in their family clan going back generations and were highly prized for field work, carriage pulling, and in old times, riding into battle. They were theirs, not Mungan's, just as Cenna had stated. Cenna had striking green eyes and their father's tawny, brown hair alongside his merry disposition. She could train and ride any type of horse. She lived and breathed horses.

Little Ina, being the youngest, still lived on dreams and fairy tales. She looked like a tiny angel with her dark blonde hair and clear blue eyes.

Godet knew that if her parents were still alive, she and her sisters would all most probably be married by now, except, perhaps, for Ina. Within a year, she too would have been married. Mungan, being the greedy skiver that he was, had been working on the best and most advantageous betrothals he could find. Flori's betrothed was not his choice, and the marriage did not bring him any advantages, so he got rid of him. It was another reason that Godet had agreed to her aunt's scheme to leave for the MacDonell's castle immediately after her last skirmish with Uncle Mungan. He had hit her again, badly that time, for trying to intervene between his soldiers and her crofters, whose huts they were burning. Mungan was proving that he was dangerous as well as violent.

She was praying that the MacDonells were as she remembered them: wealthy, civilized, and strong in their family bonds. Their own mother had been a MacDonell. As for Gordon MacDonell, she only had brief memories of him from clan games in the summers; a thin boy who teased her and pulled her hair.

If Gordon would not marry her, she would appeal to the clan Laird for help and protection until she knew what to do.

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Gordon MacDonell set a grueling pace. He had to intercept her. Godet Ross betrothed to himself? His parents had never mentioned it! Though he knew they were very close to the Rosses, and they had always met up with them at the summer games. But a betrothal?

He could not have Godet Ross showing up at Castle Conall claiming to be his betrothed. He was already betrothed! Brigda was at his castle right now, planning their wedding. With Brigda's temper, who knew what would happen? She was a fiery lass and had led him quite the chase, but she had just recently agreed to be his wife.

His brother, Tristan, rode beside him. That grin had not left his face since the moment the message had arrived, and they had ridden out of the castle. He was vastly amused by this turn of events. Gordon knew that Tristan did not like Brigda, not one bit.

Neither did his other men that were traveling with them. All his men knew that Castle Conall was for training soldiers. It was no place for women. In fact, women were not welcome. Brigda had proven to be... difficult.

Gordon was surly, and his temper was rising with each bit of ground they covered. He spotted them after noon and breathed a sigh of relief. He was in time to stop Godet and turn her back. He urged his horse on faster, with his brother right behind him. He galloped full-speed up to the small traveling group, and spun his horse to a stop in front of them.

The girl in the front on the huge Clydesdale stopped her horse and turned it sideways, blocking the others. She pulled out a small dirk and was staring at him fiercely, the knife pointed directly at him. "Dinnae ye move a step closer to me or my sisters, I'm

giving ye fair warning!” she called out to him. Her voice was clear and lilting.

Gordon studied the vision before him, trying to control his shock. He remembered the big Clydesdale horses the Ross clan was known for breeding. This was definitely Godet. How could he have forgotten those long, silky, black curls of hers? Her hair fell to a tiny waist that curved out to the gentle swell of her hips. But it was her eyes that brought back the memories with their strange but eerily beautiful silver-blue color. She had the longest dark lashes he had ever seen, which were sweeping over those bewitching eyes. Those eyes had always mesmerized him, even as a young boy.

She wore the Ross plaid in her skirts that billowed out over her horse's back. The lace that was at her wrists and was also peering out of the tight bodice she was wearing made her look impossibly more feminine, as she sat on the giant horse. She looked at him bravely, not showing even a hint of fear in that upraised chin of hers. Yet, he noted the slight tremble of her slender, delicate hand on the reins of her horse. Gordon frowned. She was impossibly lovely. The young girl he remembered with the strange eyes had grown into a stunningly beautiful woman. And she was a problem he didn't need, nor want. She was possibly even more beautiful than the buxom, red-haired Brigda waiting to marry him back at Castle Conall.

“Put that silly dirk away, lass. ‘Tis I, Gordon MacDonell, and I mean ye no harm,” he greeted a little irritably.

Godet frowned back at the man who was staring at her so brutishly, clearly annoyed. “Ye are Gordon?” Her eyes quickly traveled over his form. This was no skinny young boy. This was a man—a very large, very muscular man. Dark, wavy hair curled down from his head to touch the collar of his billowy white linen shirt. He had on a kilt in the dark blue and green of the MacDonell clan. The dark blue and green made his emerald eyes shine brilliantly as he stared so brazenly at her. His chin was square and firm, his nose was straight, and his lips were full, though they were now thinned in irritation. He clearly was not happy to see her.

Godet's eyes traveled further down in her study of the man before her. She could not miss the big, muscular thighs and tall, black boots gripping the large black stallion he controlled so effortlessly. No man in her clan could pull off the wearing of the kilt like the warriors of old, but this man could. She swallowed and turned her eyes away, knowing she was blushing hotly. Gordon MacDonell had certainly grown up well.

She put her dirk back into her belt and continued her study of Gordon and the men who were beside him. All were on big, black horses—almost as big as the horses she and her sisters rode. Her horses were giants, she knew no other horses could match their size or strength, but these big men rode horses fit for their size. They were big, muscular, powerful and intimidating. She met Gordon's brutish stare. Keeping her chin up, Godet refused to break the contact that his eyes held on hers.

She wasn't aware that her sisters had come forward and were flanking her. All were staring at the men in front of them, except Cenna who was studying the black horses, of course, not the men on them.

Aunt Hextilda pushed her way in between the large draft horses and peered up at Gordon MacDonell. "Well noo, if ye dinnae grow up to be quite the man!" Aunt Hextilda said appreciatively.

"Aunt Hextilda? Is that ye?" Gordon exclaimed as he looked down on the incongruously little woman riding the pony in the midst of the young women on the huge draft horses. "Ye are still alive, old woman?" He laughed.

"Shame on ye, young Gordon, such haiver ye be talkin'. I'll outlive all ye foolish young'uns. Besides, I cannae leave this Earth without seeing me poor nieces safely wed, noo can I?"

Godet let out a soft groan of embarrassment.

"Aunt Hexy, please," implored a girl that looked a bit like Godet, but darker, bolder

in figure, not as delicate as Godet.

“I’d marry any man that rode a horse as fine as those big blacks...” This was spoken by a girl with hair reminiscent of the color of corn and wheat in the autumn fields. She smiled unabashedly as she stared at the horses. Her eyes were a bright, crystal green and had a slant to them that made them look like they were always smiling or laughing.

“Ye see, Godet, look at him. He wears a kilt like a warrior. He will save us all, just like in the stories,” the smallest of girls stated. Gordon heard Godet groan again. He stared at the tiny slip of a girl who had spoken. She was all golden and delicate like a small angel.

Gordon turned to Godet, who was blushing hotly. Bright spots of pink were shown on her creamy cheeks. “I take it these are yer sisters?” he asked, watching her closely. Her lips were lush and pink, and he had trouble looking away from her. She was too beautiful. In fact, each of these girls was a beauty. But Godet... no one could compare to her beauty, he thought. He wondered why she had brought them all. A simple maidservant and her aunt as a chaperone would have sufficed. What did the little blonde one mean by ‘he would save us all’?

“Aye, they are,” she answered him quietly but firmly. “Our traveling coach with our luggage and some servants are a ways back. The coach is slower. We found it more comfortable to ride our horses,” she explained.

“Ye ride a stallion?”

“Aye, I dae,” she answered, raising her chin again.

He looked to the others.

“Ours are mares,” Cenna answered, and added with a smile, “All in foal to Godets’

stallion. We couldnae leave them behind, ye ken?"

Gordon frowned. His irritation at the predicament he was in started to pass on to his own stallion, who clearly did not like the huge stallion Godet was sitting on, and started to prance. Gordon stilled him and opened his mouth to tell her she had to turn around, when the sound of galloping horses caught his attention. His stallion and Godet's snorted and spun toward the sound. A small group of soldiers came over a ridge, heading straight toward them. They wore what looked like the Ross plaid. He relaxed thinking that some of their clansmen were going to stop them and bring them back, that this was all a mistake.

Godet's face, however, turned white with fear, and her hands trembled on the reins. She shortened them and held them tighter. Godet looked back at her sisters and saw Flori's eyes widen in stark fear. "Flori, stay strong for me now, I beg ye!"

"But 'tis Mungan's soldiers again, Godet," Flori muttered, her voice raw with trauma and anxiousness.

"Dae not fear, Flori. We are with ye. Just stay behind me. Aunt Hexy! Cenna! Ina! Get behind me!" She rode forward and stopped her horse again, turning the horse's huge body to block her sisters and aunt from the soldiers' view.

Gordon rode up beside her as the soldiers came closer. He gave a discrete signal to his men to surround the women.

"Dae ye have any weapons on ye?" she asked him urgently in a hushed tone.

Gordon grunted and then growled in his deep voice. "What dae ye take me for?"

"Well noo, where are they? Under that kilt of yours?" she quipped with a quick look at him, and one brow raised before turning back to watch the approaching riders.

She heard his short laugh and then the whistle of steel leaving its scabbard. She saw out of the side of her eye that he had pulled a long sword out of the scabbard on his saddle, and had settled it into place at his belt, where it was in full view. She grimaced, hoping there would be no need for it, but she touched her dirk reassuringly where it rested in her belt.

Godet recognized the first soldier leading the others. It was Mungan's man. She and her sisters had left while Mungan was away hunting. In reality, she knew he was thieving. Mungan's man had been too bloated with whiskey to be aware they had left—until now.

He rode directly up to her, and sneered at her. "Ye dinnae have permission to leave, ye cheeky, gallus girl! Git yerselves back to the castle!"

"I willnae," Godet's voice trembled, even as she spoke quietly but firmly. "And I am Lady Godet to ye . I am fulfilling my parents' betrothal agreement to Gordon of the MacDonell clan. Ye cannae have anything to say about it."

"Yer parents are dead! Ye answer to Mungan now, and he says ye willnae be marrying a MacDonell!" He looked over at Flori and the other sisters and grinned menacingly. "In fact, he says ye'll be marrying him !" he sneered at her, and laughed. "And perhaps I'll be having my choice from the rest of ye."

Godet reeled back at the news that Mungan planned on marrying her. Her face went ashen, and she clutched at her stomach, as a terrible feeling of fear swept over her. She could hear Flori whimper.

Gordon watched quietly. He did not know that the Rosses had died. He did know who Mungan was, however. His lips formed a thin line as he stared with steely eyes at the soldier sneering at Godet, who was visibly shaking now.

"I willnae!" she said in a fervent whisper. "And ye willnae touch any of me sisters

ever again, either!”

The soldier rode his horse forward, pushing his horse roughly into hers, and struck her hard across the face. Godet fell sideways from the force of the blow, and started to come off her horse. Gordon caught her instantly, pulling her effortlessly onto his horse and onto his lap.

“Dae not ever dare to touch this woman or any of her kin ever again!” Gordon spat in a steely, deep voice. He held Godet tightly to his chest.

“The Rosses dae not take orders from a MacDonell soldier,” sneered the man again, this time at Gordon.

“Then take orders from the Laird of Clan MacDonell, ye swine!” Gordon’s voice thundered at him in fury. A wind blew down from the craggy hills, sweeping his plaid out behind him and whipping his hair back in the wind as well. He raised his voice to a mighty roar, as if taking power from the winds of the mountains. “This woman is under my protection as the Laird of Clan MacDonell! Touch her, and face death. Dae ye ken?” he barked in a harsh, commanding voice. His voice was strong, dominating—a voice that was used for issuing commands and being obeyed.

The soldier shrank back at his words, staring aghast at Gordon. “I dinnae know ‘twas ye, Laird! I was just following orders! I have no quarrel with ye, Laird!”

“Orders to strike a woman? Only a weak coward such as yerself or Mungan strikes women!” Gordon growled, his deep voice going down an octave in his disgust at the man before him.

The soldier’s feigned deference to the Laird of Clan MacDonell melted off his face, and he sneered again. “Mungan will hear of this! Ye havenae heard the last of him!” he warned and wheeled his horse around and rode away. The other soldiers that came with him quickly fell in beside him.

Gordon watched them ride away with his jaw tight and his eyes narrowed into green slits, as he held the fragrant bundle of trembling woman against his chest. Her firm round buttocks fit perfectly between his thighs, driving his heartbeat up several notches. He willed his body to ignore what he was feeling.

“Well noo, brother, ‘tis a fine dither ye have to sort out here, isn’t it?” Tristan teased with laughter in his voice.

Gordon looked down to see Godet staring up at him. Her beautiful eyes looked confused and her full luscious lips were open slightly as she stared. He fought off the urge to bend down and kiss her. It would only take a slight tilting of his head for their lips to meet. He started to lower his head, his fingers lifting her chin up, just enough so that he could position her mouth where he wanted her against his own mouth, but her words stopped him cold.

“Laird? Ye are Laird of the Clan MacDonell?”

“Aye,” he answered gruffly. Hadn’t she known? Isn’t this why she had come to him? Hadn’t she wanted to demand he carry on with the betrothal because he was the Laird of the powerful Clan MacDonell?

Gordon stared down at those tempting lips and those hauntingly beautiful eyes. He heard a voice over the rushing of his blood pounding through his body, it was the voice of her youngest sister.

“‘Tis just like the fairy tale, isnae it?” said Ina with a big smile.