



The Duchess's Absolutely Delightful Dream (The Notorious Briarwoods #14)

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Category: Historical

Description: Elspeth Graham, Duchess of Donaldoon, dreams of a beautiful life after the death of her best friend and husband.

Despite the sufferings of his illness, she adored their life together! At her husband's urging, she has promised to live on with fun and joy.

After years spent nursing the duke, Elspeth does not even know how to begin.

Oh, she knows how to be feisty enough, every good Scottish lass does, but it hasn't been easy.

And giving in to joy feels difficult, given the circumstances.

But one day on her brother's estate in Scotland, she meets an Englishman who might just hold the key to her healing and how to begin again.

Lord Octavian Newfield, second son of the Earl of Drexel and Hermia Briarwood, is a military man who has seen the darkest days on battlefields all over the Continent.

He also knows how to laugh at life and mock the darkness before it can claim him! No morose fellow is he.

So, when a fellow officer and laird invites him and his rather large family to get away to the Highlands to revel in the glories of life, he cannot refuse.

But once in those glens, instead of merry antics, he finds the temptation of a beautiful woman and her wounded heart.

Still, Octavian cannot give in to love.

His life is war.

Death lurks on every battlefield.

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Scotland

A best friend is a bonny thing indeed.

Elsbeth and Hamish had been best friends since the moment of their births. Some might even argue they'd been friends before then too, for their mothers had been best friends. They had spent their entire pregnancies together, laughing, planning, and making baby clothes and baby blankets.

Now, some might consider this quite a shocking thing, for they were both ladies of high status.

Hamish's mother was a duchess and so was Elsbeth's.

The lad and lass were the latest additions to two of the greatest families in all of Scotland.

The families had managed to survive terrible wars between England and Scotland.

Somehow, they had lifted themselves up and thrived, and the two mothers were determined that their families would unite and create one of the greatest dynasties that Scotland had ever known.

The children loved their bonny Highlands, the beautiful hills and valleys, where heather grew, the sun kissed the land, and one could still feel the ache and cry of the old Highland ways.

Still, the old Highland ways had slipped away, vanishing like a song into a glen. A whisper. An echo.

But as they grew, Elspeth and Hamish knew in their heart of hearts that they were supposed to carry it all on.

So as the two children aged and raced about the glens and chased up the bens, they were happy.

As they played along the dark streams, which nurtured the salmon that swam up from the sea, laid their eggs, and then found their eternal resting place only for the cycle to start once again, Elspeth and Hamish knew they too were part of an ever-revolving grand plan. A cycle of their own.

And they were thrilled to play their parts.

Why wouldn't they be? Their lives were perfect.

Best friends. Nothing could get the two of them down when they were together!

Nothing could stop their laughter from ringing off the soaring bens or the halls of the Highland palaces that they called home.

Bouncing back and forth from one place to the next—a grand castle to a fairy-tale palace—they thrived.

Oh, what lives they led!

They were joyous, their bodies humming with the magic of the wild land. As childhood left them and they ventured into the years of their youth, they helped people.

They did not care if a person was highborn or lowborn.

For Elspeth and Hamish knew the traditional ways and that Highland lairds took care of their own people, that the clan system was meant to ensure that no one fell away.

But times were changing. Things were hard for the people on the land. The wars had destroyed Scotland. England was merciless in many ways. And people could still feel the echo of the butchers who had come and raided the land and taken so much away.

But it didn't matter.

Not really, because hope was always there.

Hope that things would get better.

And so when Elspeth and Hamish married quite young, as their mothers had always planned, the people on their lands rejoiced.

But all was not so golden and perfect as one might have hoped.

Elspeth and Hamish were close friends, and Elspeth could see that not all was well with the bonny boy who held her hand, laughed wildly, but sometimes looked pale, even for a Scotsman.

One fine day, as they raced up the craggy hills, as they were so wont to do, she could see it on his beautiful face. Instead of ruddy cheeks, bright from exertion, his eyes were sunken, his face was pale, and there was a sheen of sweat on him that was not what she considered normal.

His hands were shaking ever so slightly. She pulled him close to her and kissed him on the cheek. They were not passionate together, though everyone said that one day

that would come. She wondered though, for they were just friends, more like brother and sister than anything else.

“Are you all right?” she asked softly.

He gave a nod of his head, but she knew deep in her core that he was not.

Physicians were going to be part of their future. That thought whispered through her head. Physicians were going to be their guides, not these Highland hills. And the thought sent a wave of horror through her.

And a year later, when Hamish lay upon a chaise longue that they had brought outdoors so he could gaze upon his beloved Highlands, his body sweating and his face gaunt, his eyes were locked upon the purple heather, as if he was searching for a doorway out of hell.

Elsbeth knew that her great friend, her bonny boy, was not long for this world. He had days, maybe weeks. Everything that she had clung to, everything that she had known, was about to be torn from her.

Her best friend, her only friend—for there was no need for many friends when one had a friend like Hamish—was going to disappear. She’d be alone. So very alone.

Oh, she had acquaintances, she had her brothers, and she had her mother and father. But dear God in heaven, her Hamish was her rock, her anchor, her person, someone she could be herself with. Always.

And now he was slipping away from her.

As she rested beside him, tucked against his frail side, he grabbed her hand and somehow managed to turn his fevered gaze to hers.

The physicians had said it was a tumor deep inside him that was stealing him away—inoperable, impossible to get out, for if they tried, it would kill him.

She swallowed. “I love you, Hamish,” she said softly.

“I love you too, Ellie,” he whispered.

And they did love each other. Oh, how they loved each other.

Maybe not like in the great grand stories of old.

No, their love was purer, stronger, truer.

It was a love of spirits and souls, rather than of bodies or romance.

And she did not know what she would do when he went onto the next great place without her.

“You must promise me, Ellie,” he whispered.

“What?” she asked.

“Lass, you must promise me that you will live when I am gone.”

She bit down on her lip and then said, “Don’t be silly, Hamish. Of course I will live.”

“Och, not like that,” he tsked. “I know you. I know that you will be tempted to be too sad, and you must promise me that you won’t be. It would break my heart, you know, if you are too sad.”

Ellie grimaced. “Of course, I’ll be sad, you great ninny. You are my best friend.”

He sighed. “And you are mine. And maybe that was a mistake. Maybe we shouldn’t have—”

“Cease,” she said, tightening her grip on his boney hand. “There were no mistakes. There are no mistakes. This is exactly what you and I were supposed to be.”

“I think it’s good,” he whispered suddenly.

“What?” she asked, trying to understand what could be good about this.

“Now you have a chance for a great love,” he began, as if he had given this considerable thought.

“Someone who will truly, passionately love you. Our friendship, our marriage, was never going to be that, Ellie. We were just going to slip through this world as friends and that would’ve been enough.

But you and I? We were never going to be a love for all time. ”

Tears filled her eyes. “I don’t need that. I just need you.”

“No, you don’t, Ellie,” he countered gently.

“You need more. You need all the world. And I could give you a beautiful castle, and I could give you friendship, but I was never going to give you a grand passion. So you must promise me, Ellie, that you’ll find it.

And when you do, you’ll seize it, and you must never let it go. Can you promise me that?”

She swallowed because she could not believe that such a thing might truly happen.

Never ever could such a love really exist. Surely, their friendship was what love should be.

“Och, Hamish, please stop.”

“I will not,” he denied. “You promise me you’ll live with joy and fully.”

She nodded. Through tears, she promised, “I’ll live with joy, as you say. And to the fullest.”

He sighed, relieved. “Good. Now, I will be watching you, Ellie. And you must promise me this too. You’ll have the grandest, most fiery, most wonderful love that anyone has ever known.” His lips curved into a smile. “And somehow, I will bring him to you. You’ll know when he’s arrived.”

And just at that moment, an osprey dove down through the sky, skimming his talons along the loch. Her throat tightened as she watched the gorgeous bird hunt, then head back to the heavens.

“Hamish,” she managed. “Don’t say such a thing.”

“Why?” he asked, astonished.

“Because it hurts.”

“Life hurts, Ellie,” he said gently. “It’s a great lie that it doesn’t. No adults ever dare tell us the truth. Life hurts so very much, but that doesn’t matter because it’s worth it. Every bit of it.”

And then his hands began to shake a little more, as if the conversation had worn him out. His eyes drifted back to the Highland hills.

She longed to beg him to stay. But she wasn't that cruel. Her beloved Hamish was in so much pain that now the only thing that could alleviate it was medicine the physicians brought in a small vial, warning of how dangerous a strong dose was.

She had to let him go. She would never wish him to stay when every day was agony for him now. In fact, though it hurt...she began to long for his release, for him to be at peace. Though she knew she'd never recover from the loss of her friend.

And when he did finally let out his last, shallow breath, still outdoors, where he always preferred to be, teased by the wind that swept down from the north, and surrounded by the land he loved so well, Ellie was resigned. Peaceful even.

After all, everyone always left.

Of course they did, because that was the journey of all humans. Some left early, some left late, but everyone always had to leave. And in that moment, Ellie knew that Hamish was right.

She was going live with joy and live fully, and she was going to find the great love that Hamish wanted her to have...because she would always do what Hamish wanted. Because a best friend? A best friend always knew what was best.

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Scotland

“Go ask my sister to dance.”

Octavian took a look at the six-foot-four Scotsman, arched a brow, and said, “Are you daft, you mad Highlander?”

The mad Highlander in question arched a fiery brow, grinned, and said, with a surprisingly English accent, “Of course I am. Go ask.”

It had been a shock to find that most of the aristocrats in Scotland had little to no Scottish accent at all.

His mad Highland friend occasionally used a Scottish word, but that was it.

Octavian had found it strange but had come to realize it was part of Scotland having lost the war in the last century.

Most of the leaders had had to leave much of the Highland way of life behind or be utterly crushed under the boot of England.

Octavian shifted on his perfectly polished black Hessians. He did feel rather odd standing in an English military uniform in the Highlands, but it was what he was supposed to be wearing.

It felt even stranger standing next to who some might call his new best friend, aside from his family.

Usually Briarwoods did not need many friends because they had so many cousins, but when a man had been at war for as long as Octavian had, often away from said family, well, one acquired new friends, and Teague MacMorrow, Duke of Rossbrea, was such a friend.

“I don’t think I should do that,” he said softly.

“And why is that?” the duke demanded grandly. “Are you planning on ruining her?”

He ground his teeth. “No, of course not, but it does seem odd that you’re asking me to ask your sister to dance. Generally speaking, I find that most men don’t ask me to ask their sisters to dance.”

Teague’s eyes shone, and he laughed. The sound was rich, full, and bright. It was the sort of laugh everyone loved to hear, for it inherently lifted the spirits of the listener.

They had met on campaign that year.

The duke, of course, was not a soldier, but he had been going through the Continent, meeting up with several friends, conducting operations and missions that Octavian did not know the full scope of.

Octavian did not need to, but the two had hit it off one night while playing cards, and they had a shared sense of humor that Teague insisted most Englishmen did not.

Octavian had taken it as a compliment, and when the duke had insisted that he come and spend at least a week in the Highlands when he could, Octavian had agreed. And not only had he agreed, he had brought just about his entire family, as the good duke had also insisted upon that.

And Octavian knew, from having an uncle who was a duke, and other dukes in his

family, that one didn't really tell dukes no.

His uncle, the duke, was not in attendance at this house party. But his mother and father were dancing happily on the ballroom floor, a sight he dearly loved to see, and his grandmother was surrounded by several other members of the Briarwood family.

The Duke of Rossbrea sobered, and he let out a sigh before he ventured, "The truth is, nobody has the courage to go and ask her to dance. And I thought you might."

"Why? Is she a Gorgon?" he found himself teasing.

Teague's lips pursed as he surveyed the packed ballroom. "My sister a Gorgon? Perhaps a bit. Though that's quite the wrong word. I would say a fiery witch, perhaps."

"A fiery witch," he echoed. "Just the thing for me while I'm trying to take my ease."

The duke cleared his throat. "It would be a favor."

Octavian's brow furrowed, wondering what the devil he was getting into. "A favor? Why does no one wish to dance with your sister?"

"It's not as dramatic as you might think," the duke said, folding his hands behind his broad back. "It's actually rather sad."

"Oh," he said. "Can you explain?"

"Look. I can, but then you'll feel sorry for her, and it's her story, not mine. Suffice it to say, she had quite a tragic experience about a year ago."

A mixture of emotions flooded through Octavian. He wanted to help, but this

sounded fraught with potential difficulty. “You want me to go cheer her up? Is that it?”

Rossbrea snorted. “Och no, man. She’s perfectly capable of being cheerful on her own, but she’s just gotten out of mourning.

She hasn’t been allowed to dance because of mourning, you see.

And no one is lining up to dance with her.

So if you just went over and asked, I’m sure it would break the dam, so to speak. ”

Mourning. No doubt the Scot was referring to his father’s death about a year ago.

He drew in a breath, understanding. “A willing victim is what you are looking for. To show it’s all right to ask her, and that they won’t incur your wrath for doing so?”

“Exactly,” the duke said, beaming. “I’m glad you can follow my line of reasoning.”

“All right,” Octavian said and then peered at the duke, suspicious. “Is this the entire reason you brought me to Scotland?”

“Och, of course,” the duke said before he rolled his eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous. I brought you because you’re the only tolerable Englishman I’ve known in a decade.”

Octavian inclined his head in a dramatic bow, then said, “Point her out to me, will you?”

“She’s standing over there in the corner.”

The ballroom was massive, full to the brim with local lairds and ladies, and those

who had traveled some distance to bask in the attention of one of Scotland's most powerful lairds.

The corner was far away, and he looked, trying to find some wallflower who was blending into, well, the wallpaper. "Where?" he asked, unable to spot her.

"Over there," the duke said, unwilling to point, lest he draw notice to them, but with a jerk of his rather intimidating jaw.

He frowned. "I don't see anyone who... Not her?" he suddenly blurted.

His friend elbowed him slightly in the middle, then laughed. "Yes, her."

The woman in question was shockingly beautiful. Everything about her was beautiful. Her curly, lush hair was beautiful. Her eyes. Her skin. Her lips. Her statuesque form, with a gown skimming it like a caress. All beautiful.

Not just beautiful. She was a goddess amongst mere mortals, worthy of any portrait. Reynolds would have died to put her likeness down on canvas.

"Why wouldn't anyone ask her to dance?" Octavian breathed as he shot a look at the duke. "This feels like an ambush."

"Och, well," the duke began, his voice a low rumble, "perhaps it is, but I've asked you up here. Now it's time to sing for your supper. Go and ask my sister to dance."

Octavian fought a groan.

He was very familiar with the concept of singing for one's supper. His grandmother, the Dowager Duchess of Westleigh, was notorious for making people do such a thing when they came to visit. At Heron House, she usually made visitors recite

Shakespeare or some such.

This felt much odder.

Luckily, the music just beginning was not a waltz.

He decided that there was really nothing for it. He would do what he was asked to do and get it over with.

The duke clapped him on the back. “Good luck, my friend.”

Did he need it? Regardless, years of battle had taught him one thing. Indecision was death.

Without hesitation, Octavian crossed the room quickly. In a few strides, he stood before the lady in question. She cocked her head to the side and looked at him with eyes that were clear and shone with intelligence.

Her lips turned into a slow, merry smile of amusement. “You, sir, are wearing quite an interesting costume for the location.”

“I am aware of it,” he said brightly. “I am here to ask you to dance.”

“Are you?” she asked easily, as her eyes danced.

“I hear you like to dance.”

“I do like to dance,” she replied.

“So do I. Shall we do it then?”

He expected her to tell him to go to the devil, or to look at him with gratitude or, well, he didn't really know what because the situation was so odd. But he was rather surprised that she suddenly grinned at him, held her hand out, grabbed his, and hauled him onto the floor.

"I never thought anyone was going to ask. Thank you," she exclaimed.

With those words hanging between them, the music of a reel began to lilt around the ballroom.

Much to his shock, Octavian felt completely off-kilter. She was not some sort of wallflower, and she did not look as if she needed to be saved. She was absolutely delighted to be asked to dance, and yet it didn't feel as if he was doing her a favor.

Somehow, actually, it felt as if it was he who...

No, he shook the thought away. He would keep his mind on simple things.

He liked to dance a reel as well.

So, as soon as the music hit a certain bar, he took his stance, then she took hers, and off they went, bouncing up and down to the sprightly gait of the music.

Her cheeks were bright, her eyes shone, and she looked happier than anyone he had ever seen, and well, that was doing things to him that quite surprised his entire form.

He had not come to the Highlands looking for anyone to be intrigued by. Certainly not the sister of a duke, but he did his part, bouncing and twirling, turning her under his arm, joining in a small formation when they were expected to do so, and then the music came to a halt.

She smiled at him. Again. She was very good at smiling.

They hadn't spoken a word during the whole dance, as if she felt conversation was extraneous to such joyful movement.

She curtsied. He bowed.

"Wonderful," she said. "Now fetch me a glass of lemonade."

"Fetch indeed," he returned, amused. "I would be happy to do so. Will you accompany me so I might know a little bit more about the dictator of this ballroom?"

She laughed. "Well said, sir. I'm indeed a dictator over lemonade. And in life, when I can be. I know what I want. Sometimes I can't get it."

As they made their way through the crush, eyes followed them as they weaved, and she continued, "I must thank you for assisting me in getting a good dance. I haven't had one for the longest time."

"Oh really?" he said softly, for he didn't want to betray what her brother had said. "Why? Injury?"

She swung him a strange glance. "You really don't know?"

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He looked down at her. “Know what?”

He felt a sudden wave of apprehension, and he resisted the urge to shoot a glance back at her brother as he escorted her to a large table covered with linen and lined with silver cups full of punch and lemonade.

“Oh no,” she said. “If you don’t know, I’m not going to tell you. I’ll savor this moment.”

“I really do feel as if I have been put into some sort of trap.”

“Perhaps you have,” she teased. “But why do you say—”

“Oh, no reason.” He wasn’t about to tell her that her brother had told him to ask her to dance. Such a thing would be deeply upsetting. Surely, no lady wanted to hear that the gentleman who had asked her to dance had been told to do so, even if it was a common occurrence.

She wasn’t acting like a young lady who’d just come out of mourning. She certainly wasn’t acting like a young lady on the marriage mart either. She was acting quite self-possessed.

He picked up a silver cup and handed it to her. “Here you are, sister of my new friend.”

“Ah.” She arched a brow as she took the silver cup. Their fingertips brushed for the barest of moments. She pulled back quickly and asked, “Which brother do you

mean?”

“The eldest one.”

“The bossiest one,” she corrected.

He laughed. He couldn’t help himself. He had no idea what he had expected, but this was not it. “Indeed. He’s quite bossy. As a matter of fact, that’s the only reason I think that I am here in Scotland. He quite insisted you know.”

“He does like to insist,” she replied. “Och, he’s so delightful and charming. Why would anyone resist? And besides that,” she continued, “the Highlands are beautiful.”

Her lips twitched. “But I do think you should change your clothes.”

He let out a low groan. “Alas, it is difficult for me to do so. I am in active service, you see.”

“Not an eldest son then?”

“No, not an eldest son,” he agreed. “Though my older brother, who is an eldest son, did serve in the military for many years.”

“Is he quite all right?” she asked suddenly.

He felt himself soften at her genuine concern. “He is. Yes. Thank you for asking. He was wounded and was married recently. He is quite happy, despite the fact that he was injured, and life is unfolding beautifully for him.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” she said, her voice full of honesty and what seemed like relief, though she didn’t know the man at all. “Life should always unfold beautifully, if

possible.”

He cocked his head to the side, contemplating her.

It was an interesting and rather profound thing to say. He picked up his own glass of lemonade and savored the tartness of it. They were surrounded by people, and yet it felt like they were on an island, completely apart from everyone else.

It was jarring and yet also...perfect.

“Why weren’t you dancing?” he asked at last.

She groaned, fiddling with her cup. “Oh dear. Must we?”

“We don’t have to talk at all if you don’t wish to.”

She glanced down at the contents of her cup. “I think it’s best that I just say it. I’ll rip it off like a bandage that must be dealt with, and then we won’t have to talk about it again.”

“All right,” he said, his own insides tightening with apprehension.

“I am just out of mourning.”

“For your father?” he queried.

She nodded slowly. “Och, yes. For him...and for my husband. He died just before my father.”

“Oh,” he said suddenly, all his preconceived ideas about her falling away. Ideas he likely never should have formed. Hadn’t his family trained him better than to make

assumptions?

She was no fiery young miss hoping for a successful Season.

But the truth was, she didn't look like a widow at all. She looked like a young lady who had barely had her first Season, if she'd had a Season at all.

She couldn't be more than twenty.

"Do forgive me," he said. "People make the most terrible assumptions about people. I never would have guessed you'd been married."

"I don't know if that's a compliment or not," she ventured.

"It's not meant as a compliment or an insult. It's simply an observation." He drew in a slow breath and said honestly, "You look quite young to have lost your husband. I'm terribly sorry. Was he a soldier too? Was he...?"

"He was unwell," she rushed. "And he was the Duke of Donaldoon."

"Another duke," he dared to tease, because he was certain, deep in his core, she had no wish for him to become morose.

She laughed. "Och, well...my family—"

"No need to explain," he cut in. "I understand. My uncle is a duke. Several dukes have married into my family too."

Any sign of wariness or hints of dismay instantly disappeared from her face. "Dukes all around you too then!"

“Indeed. I think dukes like to be with each other,” he said abruptly.

“I think you’re right,” she said, considering this. “I suppose if one can consolidate that much land and power, they wish to keep it amongst themselves.”

“Too true,” he said. “And few can understand what is like to have that much power.”

“Just the great men of our countries, who have killed and had to choose sides, to keep their power.”

“Well said. It sounds as if you have an affinity for politics and history.”

“I do,” she said as if it was quite natural. “I was raised to be a duchess. And I read a great deal.”

He laughed. “So do I. It is one of the beloved pastimes of my family. Is it one of the pastimes of yours?”

“Oh yes,” she assured, her face glowing with excitement at finding a fellow bibliophile. “Long Highland nights require a great love of reading,” she said.

There was a long pause, and he realized he simply had to say, “I am very sorry to hear about the loss of your husband.”

“Thank you. It was very painful,” she replied without artifice. “He was my dearest friend, you see. But it’s now been over a year, and I am attending parties, but no one really wants to ask me to dance. And it is most frustrating.”

“Why don’t they ask?” he queried.

“Because it’s awkward,” she said with a shrug.

“Is it?” he asked, wondering how anyone could resist dancing with her.

“Yes,” she explained. “Because no one wants to have to tell me how sorry they are that my husband has died. But you’ve done it,” she said. “And gamely too.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I don’t think it does any good to be overly silly about death.”

She blinked. “Well, that’s an unusual stance.”

“I’m a soldier,” he said. “I see death a great deal.”

“I’m sure you do. It is my turn to be sorry.”

“Thank you,” he said, his heart beating rather wildly at her kind and sensible response. “And now that we both have gotten our dark pasts out of the way,” he said, “let’s dance again.”

“Oh! Yes!” She plunked her cup down. “Let’s do.”

“How wonderful,” he replied. “Besides, you’re not on the marriage mart, are you?”

She shuddered. “On the mart? No.”

Perhaps the one good thing about being a woman and a widow was the independence one could have, so he asked, “And you don’t need to be worried about a scandal?”

Her eyes sparkled. “Not a whit.”

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For the first time in possibly more than eighty years, the ballroom was full of English people.

Ellie really found the whole display so incredibly fun to watch as the company decided that the large English family who had come up to the Highlands wasn't too terrible. But they were still English and therefore to be viewed with suspicion.

It seemed her brother was trying to start off one of those remarkable shows using gunpowder, fire, and color.

She'd seen them before, of course, but this felt like something entirely different.

Half of the ballroom was watching the influx of English people, the Briarwood family, with a great deal of resignation.

After all, the English were not exactly welcome in the western side of the Highlands.

Still, the Briarwoods, as far as she could see, were a worthwhile investment and not such a shabby lot to have around for a good time.

So far, Octavian, the son of the Earl of Drexel and member of the Briarwood family, was quite up to snuff, in her opinion.

He was shockingly handsome, a stunning dancer, a good conversationalist, and he was capable of bantering about silly things and also touching on quite dark ones without a great deal of difficulty. Yes, he was a surprise of a man.

And she needed surprises.

The last year had been a blasted difficult one.

There was no getting around it. Her husband had died. Though their marriage had been based purely on friendship, he had been her dearest companion all her life. Then to top it all off, her father had died only a few weeks later.

That had been brutal. For it was the end of one dukedom and the beginning of another. And her father had been fit as a fiddle, but his horse had been startled, and he'd been thrown and hit his head upon a rock.

That meant her eldest brother, Teague, had inherited the dukedom.

Truthfully, these concurrent losses had left her in a dark well of despair.

Quite frankly, she'd spent the last year climbing every crag to distract herself, searching every loch for peace.

And while staring up at the heavens, wishing that she could escape this grief, she'd surrendered to the fact that she could not.

She'd simply had to ride it all out, like a horse that was too wild, with no wish to be tamed. But the horse had eventually tired.

Grief had inevitably begun to slip away.

Death was a normal part of life, just as the remarkable Octavian had said. It didn't mean that any of it was easy though. Worst of all, the deaths had made her almost a social pariah. Too much mourning at once, it seemed, was quite bad for one's social calendar.

She hadn't minded. She'd always preferred the land. But she was a lady, and it was her duty to re-enter society and take her place.

Still, ladies, of course, were supposed to go into a sort of mourning that gentlemen never had to, which she thought was absolutely unfair.

Why was she supposed to go about basically pretending that she did not exist?

She did not think that her husband or even her father would approve, but it was the way of society, and so she had done as she had been told.

And now that she had come out on the other side of it, people were watching her warily as if somehow they could catch it—her association with death.

But not Octavian in his bright red uniform and shiny gold epaulets.

He was still with her, asking her to dance, despite her tragic past months.

And she liked him well for it.

She liked much about him!

He was also just about as tall as her brother, which meant he was perfect for her because she had a tendency to loom over other gentlemen.

She did not know if it was some Viking in the long history of their family, but her siblings and she towered over the company, and sometimes that made things quite challenging as a lady.

In her experience, gentlemen did not like ladies to soar over them.

She did not have that problem with Octavian at all.

He was an exceptional specimen of a man and, my God, she did admire him!

She admired the way his hands easily held hers as they danced the jig.

She admired the way his powerful body lilted to the music.

So many men were just blundering oafs on the dance floor.

Others were very, very graceful, but none of them were quite as large or confident or as clearly warrior-like as he was. He was a perfect example of the concept of man who was a great warrior and a great lover of the arts combined into one.

She'd begun to think that the idea of a Renaissance man was only a myth. Yes, she'd begun to think, like so many things, that it was a concept written of in a book but not executed in reality.

But here was reality before her, and she adored him. Very much indeed, and she was deeply grateful that he had charged across the room and asked her to dance. She was no fool. She was rather certain that her brother had made him do it. She couldn't hold it against Teague or Octavian.

Why would she? He did not even know of her existence until recently.

And her brother, her dear beloved brother, was determined to make life better for her, and how could she not be grateful for that?

So, as Octavian turned her about, danced her across the room, and beamed down at her, she wondered how a gentleman of such prowess, such beauty and strength, could make it to so many years of age without a wife of his own.

Now it was her turn to make a grand assumption, of course.

Perhaps he had been married, but when she had confessed about her widowhood, one would've assumed that he would've confessed his own.

Why was such a beautiful, articulate man from an excellent family unattached?

She did not know, but she did know that she was going to enjoy his company while it lasted.

Why would she not? Life was short. It was fleeting, and well, she'd had enough sorrow for all the lifetimes in the world. She'd promised Hamish she'd live with joy. So, live with joy, she would.

When the music came to an end, she gave Octavian a deep curtsy, and he gave her an elaborate bow, both of them enjoying each other immensely. And once again, they headed off the floor.

She sighed with playful melancholy. "Alas, you should go ask another young lady to dance."

"Perhaps I should," he mused, but then he shook his head. Together, they walked along the side of the ballroom floor. "First, let us converse. Will you not show me a little bit of this grand Highland palace?"

She waggled her brows at him. "My goodness," she said. "You aren't afraid of courting scandal?"

"Should I be?" he asked. "Will your brothers come after me?"

She narrowed her eyes. "My brother told you to ask me to dance, didn't he?"

He gave her a look of such astonishment that she knew she was correct. “Tell me I’m wrong,” she challenged, tempted to poke him in his muscled chest.

He choked ever so slightly. “You’re not wrong. I actually was assuming that you would be a little wallflower, desperately sad and longing for help, and that I would do my duty and dance with you.”

They went out through the wide double doors which opened out onto the formal gardens, still filled with people and lit with lanterns strung on silken ropes overhead.

“Oh dear,” she said as her slippers crunched along the raked gravel. “Have I disappointed you?”

“In a way, yes.”

She laughed. “How so?”

“Well, if you had been a dour little wallflower, I would’ve done my very best to cheer you up, felt quite good about it, and then have been on my way, but instead I found you.”

“And what have you found?” she asked, captivated.

“A lady who looks as if she could pick me up, carry me across the field, and throw me, which means you would be excellent at a Briarwood family gathering. We do love our outdoor games. And well, you are unbowed by life’s turmoil, and you are fun, and I... I confess...”

His voice died off as if the words were too hard to speak.

“Have you been missing fun?” she asked.

His mouth tightened into a thin line, and she suddenly rather regretted the question, for it was a deeply personal one.

“Yes,” he said honestly. “As of late.”

“Would it be terribly forward of me to ask...” She stopped herself, then gave him an assuring smile. “You must understand I’m actually quite forward, so if you don’t like a forward person, you should turn about and go away right now.”

He laughed, his darkness lightening. “I do like a forward person. I am surrounded by them.”

She nodded, relieved at his reception. “I’ve noticed your family is like that.”

“And it doesn’t put you off?” he asked bluntly.

“No, I would rather everyone was like that,” she said swiftly. “We would all be much better off.”

“I don’t disagree with you,” he replied.

“But since you have asked, I shall be brief about my lack of fun so that we don’t have to go back into the mire of our mutual sorrows.

” He paused, gathering himself. Then he began slowly, oh so very slowly, “I have been fighting in the war for several years. It’s not very pleasant, and no matter how plucky a person is, years of war eventually gets to one. ”

She longed to reach out to him, to soothe him, and also to kick herself. “I’m so very sorry. I have been ridiculous.”

“How?” he asked, his eyes flaring wide.

“My sorrows are really quite normal,” she explained. “The loss of a husband. Fathers also die. But you? You see the hardest, most awful things quite often, don’t you?”

He stilled, even as the soft Highland summer breeze feathered his dark brow. “That is quite accurate,” he said. “But the truth is that in the history of humanity, though I am loath to admit it, war is quite normal.”

“Oh,” she gasped, taking in his words, surprised by them. “Tell me more then.”

He frowned, clearly on the fence about it, but then he continued. “After so many years, one becomes rather blasé about war, you see. Not that we don’t still feel the deep scars. It’s more that we can’t express deep emotion about it because we are exhausted by it.”

She cocked her head to the side, touched that he would trust her so with his own pain. “I don’t understand.”

His gaze trailed up to the purple sky, scattered with stars.

“Imagine feeling the sort of grief that you felt at the loss of someone you clearly loved, your husband and your father, over and over and over again, and not just once a year, but almost every day, sometimes multiple times in one day.” His body tensed.

“One is no longer capable of making friends easily because the truth is you don’t want to get attached to people, because those people can be taken away from you quite quickly.

And so we long-term soldiers become distant, and we make terrible jokes, and we no longer weep because all the tears are gone. We have wept them all out.”

“Are you sure you are not a Scotsman?” she teased gently.

He yanked his attention down from the heavens, back to her face. “I beg your pardon.”

She brushed an imaginary bit of nature from his shoulder, wishing she could embrace him. “You speak like a poet.”

“If my wounds make me speak like a poet, then yes, I suppose I am poet,” he groaned. Then he swept his hand out to the dramatic horizon about them. “And I wouldn’t mind being a Scotsman. You have a beautiful country up here.”

She tilted her head to the side, not needing to look. No, she preferred to keep her gaze upon his face and what she saw there. “Yes, we do. It can heal the wounded heart.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know about that,” he whispered.

“I don’t know if all wounds heal or if they should.

You see, I think sometimes we just have to carry on with our wounds.

We do the best that we can. We soldier on, so to speak.

There’s no getting the rot out once it’s in, and you just have to accept that. ”

She pursed her lips. “That is a rather grim view of the world.”

“Right now, the world is actually quite grim.”

“I’m quite protected up here in the Highlands,” she confessed.

“Good, don’t leave them,” he said with shocking intensity.

“You advise me not to travel?” she queried, her own heart aching for him and all he had seen.

“I advise you to enjoy the life that you have because right now life out there is quite tricky.” His eyes closed for a moment. “My cousin, Calchas... Bloody hell, the poor man.”

Whatever spell had fallen between them had unlocked his suffering, and she knew in her heart that there would be no prevarication between them. No artifice. Just truth. And she wondered...

Was this man...?

She shoved the thought away. She needed to listen to him, not think of past conversations.

“What do you mean?” she urged.

“He’s half at war with our own American cousins, you see.

He’s a captain, and we’re at war with the United States, and every day for him is a grim possibility of having to face people that he sees as friends and allies.

He hates it. His superiors tell him what he must do, and he doesn’t want to.

It’s an inner battle that he has difficulty squaring away.

Whereas I do actually hate Napoleon. But every day,” he ground out, “I’ve come to hate the French men that I must fight less and less, you see, because they’ve got no

choice in it.

They think they're fighting for honor and glory in France, but they're fighting for a madman who would happily kill them all just to keep his crown. ”

She stared at him. “Isn't that true of most leaders with a crown? Wouldn't they happily kill everyone to keep it?”

He sucked in a rough breath. “Now that's one way of looking at the world.”

“That's one way of reading the history books,” she said gently. “And not putting any sentimentality to it. But I'm very sorry that you have waded through so much and must continue to do so.”

He said nothing, but a muscle tightened in his jaw.

“So,” she continued gently, “we must make your trip here as happy as possible because I assume you will be going back to war soon.”

He nodded. “Yes, unless Napoleon suddenly dies in his sleep, and France wakes up and stops following that madman to their doom.”

“Then every day here should be a peaceful one and full of fun. Will you let me help you have that? Because that would give me joy, you know. Instead of thinking about myself, we could have fun together.”

“Fun together?” he whispered. “That sounds a bit dangerous.”

“All the better,” she replied. “Life isn't safe. So why pretend otherwise?”

And she knew in that moment that she would give him as much joy as she possibly

could. For who knew what lay ahead? For him. For his country. For the world.

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“If you can make her happy, we’d all be positively thrilled,” a fellow named Archie declared. He was another one of Elspeth’s brothers.

Octavian stared at the set of incredibly large Scotsmen, who were up to their waists in the dark loch water, and considered turning tail and running.

The duke was there, along with Archie and two other massive brothers named Brodie and Leith. They were fair copies of each other. All over six feet. All russet-haired in fiery hues. All looking as if they had descended from the god Thor.

This all felt a bit familiar. It was absolutely something that Briarwood men would’ve done, and yet Octavian felt incredibly vulnerable.

He trusted his own family, and he even trusted the Duke of Rossbrea because he liked him.

They had hit it off, and Octavian had incredibly good instincts about people.

But these fellows were very large, and he was out in the country, far, far, far away from everyone.

Now, his own cousins were here.

If things got particularly sticky, they would come to his aid and rescue him, but he was fairly certain he understood what the big Scots were suggesting. After all, his own uncles had suggested it to his aunt’s husband. It had been done before. He could make a lady happy.

But he wanted to be clear so that there would be no confusion later down the road.

And this all felt incredibly awkward as he stood without his own clothes on in the freezing water.

Seals were swimming by, lounging on lichen-covered rocks, eyeing the lot of them as if they were all positively mad.

“I have to ask,” he said. “I want to be clear what you’re suggesting.”

The duke angled his head to the side. “Yes?”

And before the duke could reply, his own cousins, Laertes, Deimos, and Perseus, raced down the side of the hill, let out cries, and charged into the water.

Horried, shocked breaths filled the air.

“It’s cold,” Perseus yelled. “It’s cold.”

“Of course it’s cold,” Rossbrea declared. “It’s Scotland.”

“We are accustomed to sea-bathing on the Isle of Wight. The water is not exactly warm,” replied Deimos, his dark hair the same shade as the skin of the seals swimming about.

“That’s the south,” Brodie said with his light burr.

“Tropical,” put in Leith.

“Positively hot,” Archie affirmed.

Laertes eyed them all. “This might as well be the land of ice.”

“Do you see any ice?” Rossbrea drawled as he bobbed up to his neck in the dark water. “This is a Scottish summer. This is very warm.”

“This is enough to make certain that you never have children,” said Deimos.

“Don’t worry, none of us are hunting for marriage partners and thinking of having children,” said the Duke of Rossbrea.

“We just need everyone to have a wonderful time. That’s what this summer is for.

We’re all going have an absolutely magnificent time because the world is going to the dogs, and we all just need to smile a bit. ”

The comment, Octavian felt, was a bit overdone. It was not inaccurate, of course, because the world was going to the dogs as far as he could see. Everything was a mess. Still, it felt forced and as if the duke was determined to make everyone feel happy, come hell or high water.

He supposed he was mostly in agreement with that, but it did make him a bit nervous. What if the duke and his brothers all turned on him? Suddenly, he had a great sympathy for his American uncle who had, well, had an affair with his English wife, though with the permission of the Briarwood family.

Was this that? Octavian was unsure.

“I think I should decline the offer,” he said, “to make your sister happy.”

“What kind of happy are you talking about?” the duke asked with narrowed eyes.

Octavian stilled. "I don't know. What kind are you talking about?"

"Details should never be discussed when talking about ladies," Leith growled. "And we mean you should attempt to make her smile. What else could we mean, you foul-minded Englishman?"

Ah. They did not mean what he'd thought. And he found himself rather disappointed.

"Don't fall in love with her," Brodie said merrily. "We don't want an Englishman in the family."

"That's not going to happen," Octavian assured quickly.

"Why? Do you think something is wrong with her?" Leith demanded.

"I haven't known her very long," he dared to tease. "Is there something wrong with her?"

Leith snorted. "Not a jot."

Archie grinned. "But, of course, she's our sister, so we think she's extremely irritating to us."

Octavian laughed. "I don't have sisters, but I have many cousins."

"Many," Laertes bellowed.

"You see, I think I should be clear," Octavian stated as he swam deeper into the freezing loch.

"I have no intention of marrying. I have no intention of falling in love. I have a very

specific duty, and anyone who doesn't understand that should be very careful.

I just want to be utterly clear on that point so that there's no confusion, you see. ”

Rossbrea nodded. “Understood. And we aren't looking to get her married. Or scandalized. We just want to remind her that men can be bonny, and she shouldn't put herself on the shelf. The ladies love you,” the duke added.

“Yes, they do,” Octavian agreed, without any attempt at humility. “But this is different, isn't it?”

“Are you not up to the task? Do you have to seduce ladies to get them to like you? Because if you seduce her, a new war between us and your lot will start.”

His jaw dropped open at the insult. “Of course I'm up to the task,” he said.

“But I want to be absolutely certain you understand. I can make her laugh and smile. This won't be any hardship.

But that will be it. I could die any day, and I'm not about to leave the battlefield because I fall in love or get married.

That would leave the woman I was in love with in the most terrible state.

I could not do that to anyone, and I especially could not do that to a woman like your sister. ”

Rossbrea's merry look dimmed, replaced by sympathy.

“Like my sister?” Leith growled. “What are you trying to say?”

“She’s already been widowed once,” Octavian bit it out. “And you are very clear that she was very sad, which means she’s quite a reasonable, healthy person. But to do that to someone twice...” he said softly.

“You’ve thought about marrying our sister?” Brodie challenged.

“No!” he all but shouted. “Right, I just thought we should all understand each other.”

“Of course we do,” said Archie.

“We all understand each other,” added Leith.

“No Englishmen marrying into our family,” Brodie proclaimed before he shuddered in the water. “How horrible would that be?”

“You are just here for a few brief happy days in the Highlands,” Rossbrea said. “And you’ll be welcome back at any time.”

“And that’s not usually something that we’d say about the English,” Leith admitted.

“That’s rude,” Laertes said.

“But true,” Brodie pointed out.

Laertes cocked his head to the side. “Then you clearly don’t know enough of us Briarwoods.”

“You are wonderful guests,” Rossbrea said before his lips twitched and he swam along the loch’s edge. “I hear that a production is being put on.”

“Oh God, really?” Octavian asked, finally adjusting to the cold. “Just as long as

Grandmama doesn't ask me to play any of the fairies."

A laughed boomed from the duke's lips. "I bet you would look marvelous in wings."

"I do," Octavian agreed. "That's what you need to understand. I do look marvelous in wings, and if Grandmama has her way, we'll all be on stage, including you, Your Grace."

The duke dunked under the water, then came up, his fiery locks glistening as he grinned. "I don't suppose it would be the worst thing in the whole world, as long as we don't do the Scottish play. It's a terrible propaganda piece," he said.

"Oh no, no, no. We won't be doing that. At times like these, Grandmama prefers comedy," Laertes informed. "So look out for that."

"Life should be full of comedy," Octavian said.

"Because it's so terrible," the duke replied. "Right. A good time for everyone. Especially my sister. But not too much of a good time."

Octavian sighed. "I shall consider it," he said. "It's what friends are for, after all."

"That will do," the duke said. "I'm glad you understand."

And he did. He had family he loved and would do anything to help them. Really, he was quite honored Rossbrea trusted him to help his sister out of a tricky period.

Some might have been offended. He knew better than that.

Octavian dived under the water. The water was cold. Very, very cold. It cleared his head, and he loved it.

As he reemerged, he watched his cousins swim up and down the length of the loch.

Memories of many joyous days they had of swimming in the Thames along Heron House came to him. It was a tradition for his family to dip together into the waters of that famous river. But here, something else entirely was happening.

It had to be the cold water.

Yes, the cold water had stolen everyone's wits. It was the only way such a conversation could actually take place between two sets of men from two different families.

He wondered if she would like this conversation. He had a funny feeling that she would not. She seemed to be quite independent and quite strong and would not like men arguing over how she should be entertained or made happy.

He smiled despite himself. She was interesting, she was wonderful, she was beautiful, and that was the exact reason why he should probably climb out of the loch, put his clothes on, find the nearest horse, ride to the closest town, and take a coach out of the Highlands.

But as he looked around at the beauty about him, the seals lounging about or swimming through the dark water like magical creatures, then up to the hills, which soared out of the water and seemed to strike up to the sky like God's own land, Octavian realized he didn't want to go.

He wanted to stay. He wanted, as she said, to let this land heal him. But what if he made the wound worse? What if he made her wounds worse?

He was being an idiot.

He was allowing himself to indulge in a sort of melancholy nonsense that the Briarwoods did not believe in. His Grandmama would be appalled. Likely, he just needed to seek her out, have a good conversation, and forget all this nonsense.

He hadn't been joking when he'd discussed war with the young, widowed duchess, Elspeth.

The truth was that life could be very bad, and one could either succumb or one could find the best out of all of it.

And she was the best. Even her family was the best, just after the Briarwoods, of course.

They'd found him and given him this chance of a beautiful stay in the Scottish Highlands to enjoy life before he had to return to war.

And the war was accelerating, in his opinion.

The armies were circling. He felt it in his bones that one truly great battle where thousands and thousands of men would meet, and thousands and thousands of men would die in one day, was coming. He didn't know when or where, but it was definitely coming.

Yes, that blood-streaked battlefield was on the horizon, calling his name.

And he might, at last, be one of the men who did not get up, who did not rise again, who did not escape the fate of a grave in a far-off land. So, he was going to enjoy himself here, he was going to make Elspeth happy, and he was going to make himself happy too.

And a little bit of happiness would be enough.

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“Right!” exclaimed Josephine Briarwood from her seat at the inlaid table in the long, daffodil-yellow, silk-walled salon. “I say we go down to the loch and get the lads out.”

Ellie eyed the young woman, rather captivated by the fiery nature of all the Briarwood ladies.

The three of them, Josephine, Emily, and Anne, were all characters. For most of her life, she had been surrounded by men, and the sudden invasion of young ladies into the castle really brightened her spirits.

It was odd, though, of course, because she was accustomed to towering men who made jokes of a dubious nature and loved giving her difficulty.

These ladies loved good humor and wordplay, but they wore beautiful gowns, had their hair styled to perfection, and laughed lightly and fully all through the day.

“Why do they get to have the loch?” Emily pressed, her eyes shining with mischief. “I’d love a bit of sea bathing.”

“Surely you don’t wish to go down there with all those ridiculous men,” pointed out Ellie.

“Why ever not?” Anne asked, pursing her lips as she adjusted the blue ribbon in her dark hair. “It’s terribly fun to torture them, you know.”

“And your brothers? I think they will be great fun to torture,” trilled Josephine.

Emily waggled her brows. “Oh, indeed. They’re so tall that it should be fun to make maypoles of the lot of them and dance about.”

Ellie laughed, unable to contain her amusement. “Och, I fear for them with you in their company. You shall make mincemeat of them.”

Josephine arched a red brow and smiled. “It is what we Briarwood ladies do. We know how to make gentlemen dance to our melodies, and they generally like it. And your brothers seem good sports.”

“They are,” Ellie affirmed.

“And handsome too,” said Anne with an appreciative smile.

And suddenly Ellie wondered if she was speaking to three future sisters-in-law. After all, she did have several brothers. And if the three of them wished to attach themselves to her family, she would not cry foul. No, she might actually applaud it.

“What if I told you I had a far better destination in mind than cavorting with those large lads down by the loch?” she teased.

“That was a great deal of alliteration,” Josephine said. “You clearly belong in the Briarwood family. You must have a great love for words.”

“Oh, I do. I do,” she assured, rather pleased that she’d noticed. “But what I mean to say is that if you’re game for it, I can take you up into the glens, where there is a secret hideaway. We shall be able to do whatever we please there.”

And as she spoke those tempting words, a rather elegant older woman swept into the drawing room.

The Dowager Duchess of Westleigh was a figure to be admired wherever she went. She walked with fortitude, grace, and, well, stamina. She was not a young woman, but she did not seem to let that faze her.

“Ah, my darling young ladies,” the dowager enthused. “What mischief are you up to today? Do tell me that it is exquisite.”

“Well, Grandmama,” Josephine began, “Ellie does not think it a good idea that we go down and stir the pot with the men.”

“They’re my brothers,” Ellie pointed out. “I get enough of them.”

The dowager duchess chortled. “Fair play to you, my dear. And what are you thinking of doing instead?”

“I should like to take them up into the hills. There is a secret little glen with a stream there, and we should be able to cavort and do as we please.”

“Ooh,” Emily said, “I do like to cavort.”

Josephine laughed. “Indeed. Do you think we can take a basket of treats with us?”

Ellie nodded. “Of course.”

And with that, she pulled the bell, and in a few moments’ time, they had everything gathered together.

The dowager duchess looked at the wicker basket full of savories and pastries, turned to the young ladies, and applauded.

“Off you go to make merry.” She let out a happy, though ever so slightly plaintive,

sigh.

“Ah, if I were but ten years younger, I would climb the hills with you and frolic in the water.”

“Aye, why don’t you come?” Ellie encouraged. “We can help you out. There are several marvelous walking sticks in the hall at the entry.”

“Oh no, no,” the dowager protested good-humoredly.

“I have a plan of my own, my dear. My family will tell you that I’m always at work on something.

Besides, a production of Shakespeare is afoot, and I cannot be taken away from it!

My daughters and I? We have quite the extravaganza planned for the end of our visit.”

Ellie eyed the dowager duchess and found that she admired her greatly.

So many women of a certain age seemed to give up on life.

They gave all of their energies over to just the children, or grandchildren, or to their estates.

They had no personal interests of their own.

Now, devotion to family was admirable! Love was so important.

But these ladies often seemed worn down and sad, as if they had lost a part of themselves along the way and did not know how to live without that missing bit.

But the Dowager Duchess of Westleigh? It was very clear to Ellie that she cared about her children, she cared about her grandchildren, and she bloody well cared about her own tastes.

“Is there a part for me in it?” Ellie asked.

The dowager duchess blinked. “You wish to be in a play?”

“Oh,” Josephine said ruefully.

“Now you’ve done it,” added Emily.

“How?” Ellie said.

“You have cemented yourself as a prospect,” Anne said, fluttering her lashes.

“A prospect?” Ellie echoed.

“Oh, yes, my dear.” The dowager’s brows rose with what could only be described as anticipation. “By the way, you dance beautifully. Octavian does love a good reel and you kept him on his proverbial toes.”

“Thank you,” she said, feeling as if she had been completely lost in a storm of Briarwood words.

But she took the compliment, smiled at the lot of them, and said to the young ladies, “Shall we be off? Now, it is a good walk. Are you all capable of a good walk?”

“Don’t be insulting,” Josephine tsked. “Not a single one of us likes to sit on a settee, eat bonbons, and do nothing. Unless it’s the evening.”

“No,” Emily said, laughing. “Or we like to sit upon the settee, eat bonbons, read books, and then go for a long walk.”

“Otherwise, the bonbons do make us feel rather tired,” added Anne.

“Exactly,” said Josephine.

“But what is a life without bonbons, I must ask?” mused Emily.

Ellie laughed, liking them more and more. “I think a life without bonbons is extremely sad. But a good walk up in the Highlands, well, that does something to the soul.”

“I long to have my soul transformed,” Josephine gushed.

“And I,” Emily said.

“Me too,” Anne agreed.

The dowager duchess smiled. “Off you go to have your transformation then. Like caterpillars to butterflies, I expect to see you come back resplendent.”

And with that, they headed off, basket in hand, eager to go on their own adventure. Ellie did think it was rather annoying that the gents could go off and swim nude in the loch, but they would have just as good a time.

“Do you all swim?” she asked as they climbed up into the glens, going over the slightly rough terrain. But there was a path; a path made by some very determined sheep, which loved to romp along the way to the secret glen.

“Oh, yes,” Josephine said. “We all swim.”

“But you have to understand,” Anne added, “the place where our cousins and our uncles swim...”

Emily then cut in, “Is the Thames. And you know it’s really difficult for ladies to go swimming in the Thames.”

“Why?” Ellie asked as they wandered ever higher through the heather and into the hills that folded in on each other, hiding them away from the eyes of the valley floor.

“Well,” Josephine explained, holding her skirts up, climbing as gamely as the mountain sheep that roamed the Highlands.

“The Thames is one of the busiest rivers in the world. And sometimes people will go down it in a barge or a boat or they’ll punt, you know?”

So if you go swimming, there is the chance you can be spotted. ”

Ellie eyed them. “And?”

Emily groaned. “Our brothers and our cousins and our uncles, they all go swimming nude, you see.”

“Oh,” Ellie said. “Like here.”

Anne nodded. “And ladies can’t be doing that now, can we?”

“I think it’s a travesty.” Emily snorted. “Why can’t we feel the sun upon our skin?”

“And the water upon our backs,” added Anne.

“I don’t know,” Ellie mused, the basket heavy in her hand. “But I suppose we could

do it up here.”

“Truly?” Anne asked, letting out a shout of delight.

“It’s the Highlands. And my brother’s land. No one’s going to see us.”

“What an idea,” Josephine suddenly said, clapping her hands together.

They each took turns carrying the basket farther and farther, until they at last came to the place that Ellie had spoken of.

She was rather amazed at the affinity she felt for these three witty young ladies who were bold and eager to try new things.

She had rather thought that English people were going to be quite stuffy. But there was nothing stuffy about Anne or Emily or Josephine.

She had not left Scotland, and she had spent most of her life running wild over the land with her Hamish.

And as she came to the stream, flowing down from the even higher mountains, she realized that she had missed a best friend very much over this last year. Now, she appreciated having people to go on adventures with, to explore with, to enjoy the beauty of her homeland with.

Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them away.

And she suddenly felt very proud that she could be a guide to them.

“Look!” Anne exclaimed as she set down the basket and then ran forward. She pulled off her shoes and stockings, hauled up her skirts, and then dashed into the stream.

“It’s freezing!” Anne shrieked.

“Is it?” Emily asked, clearly eager to join. And she too then had her shoes and stockings off in a trice and was galloping into the water.

Josephine paused for a single moment, then shrugged her shoulders, pulled her own shoes and stockings off, and waded in.

Water sloshed around them, spraying in silver plumes.

Ellie watched the three of them with great amusement. They were like extremely enthusiastic fae creatures, eager to be joyful and dance through the water.

“Come on then, Ellie,” Anne announced. “Join us!”

“Oh, I shall come,” she assured, feeling a warmth in her chest that had been absent for a long time. She felt like she actually had friends.

And she slipped her hand to her pocket, where there was a miniature of Hamish. She pulled it out quickly and looked at his face. He would be happy that this was happening. He would be so pleased that she was making new friends, even if they were English girls.

She tucked the miniature safely in the basket so it wouldn’t be ruined by the water.

“What do you think?” Ellie asked. “You all wished to be free like those big lads down there.”

“Freedom is an excellent thing,” Josephine proclaimed.

Ellie propped her hands on her hips. “Ooh, aye. I don’t see why we shouldn’t be

free!”

And so then, choosing to be quite free, she pulled off the top layer of her gown, leaving herself in nothing but her chemise and stays. Feeling bolder than she had in over a year, Ellie dashed into the water and cried out with joy.

The three ladies stared at her, amazed at her boldness, and then they quickly went to work on each other’s garments. And within a few moments, the three of them were standing in their chemises and joining Ellie.

They romped in the cold water, and then they began splashing each other most excitedly.

With their chemises plastered to their bodies, their hair wet, and their eyes fringed with water, they all took turns sitting down into the freezing, dark, winding stream, twirling their fingers across the water and feeling more relief and happiness than any of them had felt in some time.

“Why would anyone want to live anywhere other than Scotland?” Josephine suddenly declared, twirling her hands through the stream. The four of them began to ease up with their antics and simply enjoy being in the cool water on the hot summer Scottish day.

“Well said,” Ellie said. “Personally, I can’t think of a single reason.”

“It’s beautiful,” Emily said.

“I agree,” put in Anne. “I haven’t seen anywhere as beautiful as this since my home.”

“Your home?” Ellie asked. “England?”

“Well, England is very beautiful,” Anne said before her voice died off.

And Josephine cocked her head to the side, then continued, “It’s been home to us, but none of us were born there.”

“What do you mean?” Ellie asked.

“We’re not really from England,” Emily said. “We were all adopted by the Briarwood family.”

She blinked. “The three of you?” Ellie asked, astonished.

There was a moment’s hesitation, as if they were afraid she might be rude.

“How wonderful,” she rushed, eager to make them feel at ease. “You all act as if you are sisters.”

“We are sisters,” Josephine said. “Far better than blood. We are a family by choice. And you, Ellie? Would you like to be our sister? We think you’d be an excellent addition.”

“I’m not planning on marrying anyone at present,” she returned swiftly. “Though I’m sure I—”

“That’s not what we mean,” Anne said. “We can see you need female friends, and we think that you should be one of our sisters. Briarwoods are the best at bringing people into the fold.”

She stared at the three of them, stunned. They’d known each other for such a short while. It felt like a far too intimate question.

And yet she could tell that they meant it. They meant every word.

“Why would you ask me such a thing?” she said.

Josphine stood in the stream, looking as magnificent as a Valkyrie. “Because Briarwoods don’t believe that we need to wait. Briarwoods believe that once you feel something, you seize it.”

To seize something, Ellie thought. What a way to live. The best way to live!

Yes, she thought. It was the only way to live. And for some reason, much to her amusement, the Honorable Octavian came to mind.

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Feeling invigorated from the sea loch dip, which had left his limbs feeling rather numb but completely alive, Octavian charged down the halls of the fairy-tale castle that sat on the edge of the loch, so near to the ocean.

It wasn't like the sort of castle that he had envisioned for Scotland. Somehow, in his mind, he'd envisioned a fortress.

But not this one. No, it was all beautiful turrets and light and air. The walls were all the most remarkable soft pastel colors, as if they hoped, in this place, to bring in as much light as possible, cheer it up a bit, and create an even brighter hue.

Perhaps some might have found it a bit much.

He did not; he loved it.

No doubt, the winter months, with the wind howling in off the water and the sun disappearing for most of the day, made the architectural choices good for the soul.

It was like the castle was determined to be blissful and full of good hope. The walls were decked in the most beautiful brocade, and murals had been painted on many a surface.

Bright paints swirled, depicting stories of what he could only imagine were fairy-tale depictions of Scottish myths.

Octavian headed down one of the many halls, trying to find his way back to his chamber. He found himself thinking about the mission that he had been given.

Happy. Make Elspeth happy.

It was an interesting mission, because the concept of happiness was really quite vague. What made one person happy would not make another person happy at all, and he did not know her particularly well, so how could he find the ways by which to bring her joy?

Well, that would require some thought. And the only way to find out what she enjoyed, of course, was to spend time with her and ask her questions.

Yes, it was all very logical. He would have to spend a great deal of time in her company and find ways to make her pink-cheeked with bliss, and then he would be able to return to war feeling as if he had done a good thing indeed.

Yes, he was quite grateful to the duke for having given him an opportunity to spread joy about the world, because it was really quite easy to become very indulgent in one's own life.

And the best way to stay buoyant—the only way, in his opinion—was to help others. So as he walked down the Axminster-carpeted hallway, he thought of all the different things that a lady of Elspeth's station might enjoy.

She had declared that she liked books. She was rather tall. What were the things that a tall lady who liked books might admire? It seemed an imbecilic question.

And he knew why. Because if he was honest with himself, he knew one way he could make her happy. Very happy indeed. He'd take her in his arms, lay her back against her bed, kiss every inch of her and...

But before the delicious thought could take root, he turned the corner and crashed into a young woman. His young woman.

A goddess. An amazon of a woman.

Her.

Elsbeth's entire body plastered to his, and it gave him quite a start. She was tall, and her head came up to his chin. But even with her height, her curves melded into his hard muscles.

He grabbed onto her, holding her tightly, lest she stagger back and fall.

"Do forgive me," he blurted.

"How very English of you, man. It's just an accident. There's no need to apologize. Unless, of course, you're in the habit of running about corners and crashing into people on purpose."

He laughed, the sound reverberating through his chest, bouncing over her, and tumbling about them.

She gave a little shiver, as if she liked the feeling very much.

He laughed again, a low, tortured sound. For a perverse part of him loved that he could make her shiver with desire, for that was what it was, and he wished to do it again. And again.

"Stop that," she said. "Your laugh is..."

"What?" he asked.

"Let's just say it makes me feel things that are quite inappropriate for a young lady to feel in the middle of a hall."

His jaw dropped at her frankness. A frankness which only fanned his desire. “What are you trying to say?” he said.

She leaned back ever so slightly as she tilted her chin up. “If I have to explain it to you, you’re too far gone. Now, come with me,” she said.

“Why?” he asked.

“Because I’ve asked you to.”

That was hard to argue with.

Elsbeth took a few steps down the hall, opened a door, and flung it open.

That was when he realized that she was in a rather damp chemise. He could see almost every shadow of her body, and he glanced back over his shoulder.

He should not go into her room, and yet he longed to, and what kind of man could turn down such an opportunity as this?

Surely, a man would have to be a fool not to follow her in.

And so, much to the consternation of his own usually excellent thinking process, he found his boots crossing the threshold.

And then he was inside her chamber.

“Close the door,” she directed.

“I think that’s a terrible idea,” he replied.

She shrugged. “Well, if we leave the door open, we’re more likely to be found.”

“And yet,” he said, “if I shut the door, your brothers are more likely to kill me.”

She laughed. “Och, they’re not going to do that.”

“They might,” he said. “I know that some of my cousins and my uncles might kill a fellow for going alone into one of my female cousins’ chambers.”

“They sound most violent,” she tsked, tucking a delightfully wild lock of hair behind her ear. “They wouldn’t really do that, would they?”

“Perhaps not,” he replied, turning and eyeing the open door. “But first, I might ask why do you wish to be alone with me in this room?”

She smiled at him as if he was a very silly boy indeed.

She crossed to the door, shut it, turned to him, and said, “Because gentlemen get to have all the fun, and ladies get to have so little of it, and I was thinking about this today as I splashed in a stream with your cousins.”

He didn’t think about his cousins, but he suddenly did think about her splashing in a stream. He himself had spent a great deal of time in cold water today, and yet he suddenly felt very warm.

“I see,” he drawled.

“Do you ken it?” she queried, her chemise stroking her body like a second skin as she crossed towards him. “You see, I think that since you are here and we clearly like each other—”

“No, no,” he groaned, loving the torture and also fearing it. For there could be consequences for playing with flames, no matter how alluring. “I am concerned about where you are heading with this conversation.”

“Are you?” she asked, crossing to him.

“I am.”

The vast majority of her thick hair was tangled about her face, clearly having been quite wet recently, and somehow he found her disheveled nature to be even more tempting than her beautiful, groomed one was the night before.

“Look,” he began, squaring his shoulders, wondering how to explain himself and his mixed feelings. “My family is in the habit of getting into these sorts of circumstances all the time, but I get the distinct impression that you are not accustomed to these circumstances.”

“I’d like to become so,” she said, playing with the ribbon at her bosom. “I like your cousins. I like your grandmother. I like how they live.”

He groaned. “Oh, dear God, you’re being converted, aren’t you?”

“Into being a Briarwood?” she teased.

He nodded.

“Don’t worry, it’s not really conversion. My family is quite remarkable all on its own.”

Another groan escaped his lips. “Yes, but I don’t think that they’re given to scandal.”

“No, I agree with you on that point. Though we are all great-hearted. I don’t want to cause a scandal,” she said.

“Good,” he said. “I’m not interested in starting one myself.”

“But I would like to...”

“What?” he asked, his heart beginning to beat far more wildly than it should.

She bit her lower lip, then ventured, “Live a little.”

“I don’t know if we should,” he whispered, as heat and hunger laced through him.

“Why not?” she asked.

Suddenly, he found himself wondering why not indeed.

Her family had asked him to make her happy, and they’d simply been clear that he was not to ruin her and he was not to marry her. He could do those two things and still... He could make her happy, couldn’t he?

Yes, of course he could.

All could be done in good taste, good humor, and much to his chagrin, he knew he was talking himself into circles, convincing himself the path they were on was a good one. Even if, in reality, it was completely terrible and dangerous for both of them.

But whatever was left of his brain was quickly heading out the window. As a matter of fact, he knew that his brain had completely left and wandered out onto the Highlands the moment he’d stepped into her room.

He took a step back, his last attempt at denying what he so wanted, but then she grabbed his hand, holding him fast.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

As he savored the feel of her touch, and her hold, he felt as if the tables had been flipped. Usually, it was he who was leading the seduction, but he felt in this particular case, quite remarkably, that it was she who was leading, and he found himself quite intrigued.

He could not take his eyes away from her lips.

“You want to kiss me, don’t you?” she asked, her voice a soft purr.

“Yes,” he said, exasperated.

“Then do,” she instructed.

Her mouth was mesmerizing him, and yet he tried to protest, “It’s not that easy.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“I’m a guest of your brother. He’s my friend.”

She rolled her eyes. “Is my life to be completely boring and without affect because the friends of my brothers are terrified of them?”

“I’m not afraid of your brothers.”

“Yes, you are,” she said, tsking. “That’s why you won’t kiss me at my request.”

“You didn’t request it,” he rumbled. “You said I wanted to kiss you.”

“Do you not?” she asked softly.

“I do,” he whispered, the words slipping past his lips, almost against his own will.

“So if I request that you kiss me, you will?”

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He let out a hiss of a breath, losing all his resolve, yet still clinging to the last vestiges of it. “This very morning, they warned me—”

“Warned you, did they?” she gasped, indignant. “About what?”

“It was a bit of a two-handed thing.”

“Explain that to me,” she said, narrowing her fiery eyes. “I feel as if I’m going to have a headache any moment, trying to sort it out.”

Octavian cleared his throat. “I’m rather charming,” he began.

“Are you?” she asked, her lips twitching with amusement at his attempt at sounding humble. “Are you certain about that?”

“Yes,” he confessed, amused by her amusement. “And they know it, and they thought I could charm you and make you smile and perhaps lift your heart a bit.”

“Oh, I see,” she said softly.

“But there was this definite indication that I was to maintain my proper distance.”

“Och, bother that,” she replied. But then her irritation evaporated, replaced by a dangerous playfulness. “And what exact distance would that be?” She took a step towards him. “This distance?”

He could clearly see what she was about, and he immediately understood that he was

dealing with a formidable and intelligent woman who was going to turn his life into absolute bliss one moment and hell the next. And yet he did not have it in him to turn her away, or to turn and run himself.

No, he couldn't. He had to stay. Some infernal part in him willed his boots to lock to the floor.

"I don't think that's exactly the distance," he managed.

"What about this?" she asked, taking a step back.

"Not that either," he growled, his body hot now, his blood aflame with anticipation.

"Oh?" she said, her brows rising. "And this?" she queried, her pink lips parting.

She closed the distance between them, letting her chemise brush his breeches.

"Better."

She took another step closer, their bodies now kissing as their lips longed to.

"You're not wearing enough clothing," he pointed out, aching to slip what she had on from her perfect body.

"Well, how much clothing exactly should I be wearing?" she teased.

"According to your brothers, no doubt about fifty layers."

"Bother my brothers. It's summer, Octavian, not winter."

"Do you wear fifty layers of clothing in the winter?"

“It’s Scotland,” she said. “But it’s not winter now.

In fact, I find myself far too warm. I’m tempted to divest myself entirely of my garments, just to watch you quiver with shock and horror and not know what to do next, even though it’s clear to me you absolutely do know what to do with a lady without her clothes on. ”

She shook her head, then began to slide back. “But I can see that you are also a man of honor, who does not want to upset my brothers, which leaves me rather disappointed.”

“And unhappy?” he blurted.

She tilted her head to the side. “What?”

“Would it leave you unhappy if I were to suddenly depart and not kiss you?”

She sucked in a soft breath, apparently marveling at his logic.

“Oh yes,” she said. “Very unhappy. Very unhappy indeed.”

“Then I would be going against what I said I’d do, and I can’t have that,” he said, his voice a low rumble even to his own ears.

Oh, he was on dangerous ground. Dangerous, delicious ground. Luckily, as a soldier, he was familiar with it, and he had no intention of retreating now.

The power of a duchess was no small thing. And the power of being a young woman who was no longer on the marriage mart flowed through Ellie’s veins. As did her desire for Octavian. A few years ago, she never could have dared do such a thing as invite a man into her rooms.

Nor would she have wished to.

But she was free now. She had not become free by choice, but by fate.

And in her freedom, she had the sort of independence that only some women knew.

Now, she could embrace hedonism. Pleasure.

Sensuality. All because she wasn't a blushing, innocent young lady trying to win over some man so he would make her his bride.

Since she'd been married, innocence was no longer something she had to aspire to.

She aspired to far different things now. Octavian could help her with those desires.

So, the playful banter between them sparked her need and urged her to dare. Dare to finally fulfill what her body had been made for.

Bliss.

His eyes shone with hunger, yet she could see the conversation in his head, deciding if he should dare.

And he did.

Octavian's sensual lips parted as he gazed down at her. There was a moment of transformation when he chose. Chose her.

His hands slid to her chemise covered waist. Gently, he tugged her to him, arcing her body against his hard frame.

She gasped, startled at the feel of his muscled body. This was exactly what she wanted, but it was a surprise. A new experience.

Tentatively, she placed her hands on his broad shoulders as her damp hair danced over her back.

He pulled her up until she was on her tiptoes, and then he swooped down, stealing her mouth with his. From that first brush of his warm lips, her thoughts shimmied away, replaced by feeling.

Her heart skipped, rushing along in a wild beat. Her skin tingled.

He explored her back with his firm, strong hands, sliding upward with one and down to her bottom with the other.

Kiss after kiss warmed her, seduced her, teased her into opening to him. As her lips parted, his tongue slipped into her mouth, caressing her.

The shock of it was thrilling.

It seemed mad that such a thing was pleasurable, but it was! Oh, how it was. Soon, her tongue was tangling with his, and the nature of their kiss grew more intense. Her hips, of their own accord, pressed towards his.

He groaned against her mouth. The sound sent a wave of primal need through her.

He'd made that sound for her.

Pride and satisfaction rolled through her, and she slid her hands to the nape of his neck, driving her hands into his hair. His hold tightened, arcing her back as he kissed her over and over.

The slow build of it quickly transformed into an inferno of hunger.

And as his hand cupped her bottom, pressing her into the hard length of his shaft in his breeches, a moan escaped her lips.

Abruptly, he pulled back and sucked in air.

His eyes were dark. “You are...”

“Yes?” she breathed.

“There aren’t words. I...” He swallowed, then gently extricated himself from her embrace.

“Why are you ending this?” she whispered.

A breath shook from him, and he plowed his hand through his hair.

“Ending?” he echoed. “For now.”

A good man, he strode to the door, clearly clinging to his control. “I think we have only just begun.”

As he headed into the hall, she hoped so. Very much.

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Ellie was going to do murder to whoever was thrashing through the heather.

The sun had come up not long ago, and she was in her usual perch in a little cove by the loch, watching the birds soar in and the seals play on the rocks. The place was perfect to avoid others, as it was fairly hidden. Or so she'd thought.

There was something about it which always gave her a sense of peace and set her up for a day that was worth having. So often, days could be fraught with grief and pain and loss, and a general feeling that the world was ill at ease and aching.

But here, as the sun came up, danced over the land, and kissed the smooth surface of the water, she could be at peace.

The birds' songs and the splash of the loch as the animals played?

It reminded her that this life was not one great slog, but an ever-continuing melody of perfection that did not need the dramas of humans to carry on.

As a matter of fact, she had a very strong suspicion that the seals and the birds overhead would do quite well without her.

Still, whoever was making such a racket was ruining her perfect morning.

It was an expected move by an ignorant human to go blundering into nature and disturb everything. So she shoved herself up from the heather, looked about for the culprit, and was ready to hiss at them.

But the sight that caught her eyes stole away her castigation and left her feeling quite bemused.

Octavian was making his way, boots loud through the grass, over the ground as if he was marching across the Continent. She grinned.

She could not castigate the ignorant Englishman who was likely far more used to making military campaigns than sitting down and integrating with nature.

And so she let out a low whistle and then another.

He stopped, looking about. Clearly, her whistle was not birdsong.

The sound was an indication that another human was in the area, and given his senses from years of battle, he caught it immediately.

His gaze scanned the horizon.

Oh, hell's bells, his gaze was heaven, as was his dark hair, which was teased by the golden light. He looked like a young god, kissed with fire, suddenly standing here in the Highland dawn.

From awkward invader to a sudden king, it was quite a transformation as he stood in his linen shirt, open at the throat. His hair was shaggy over his forehead without a touch of pomade, and his tight breeches hugged his strong legs.

There wasn't a hint of polish to his boots. No, he looked rugged. And though he had blundered, he now somehow looked like he could belong.

She waved, and he spotted her.

His eyes flared, and then his lips turned in a smile, as if he was both confused and pleased to spot her. She waved him over.

He looked back over his shoulder towards the castle with its turrets winding up towards the sky, as if he was contemplating whether or not he should seek her out, since they would be alone.

It was a moment in which she felt the weight of his decision. Much like when he had decided to cross the threshold of her room. When he had done that? She'd known she was going to be kissed.

Now? If he came towards her, surely her life would truly change?

She could not draw breath as she waited. Would he go or would he come to her?

His chest expanded as he took his own deep breath. And as his shoulders expanded, it was a marvel of male perfection at work, the way every part of him moved.

Hells' bells, that movement convinced her that the genius of the human form was nothing to sneer at. Oh no, it was to be lauded.

And then... At last, he turned his gaze back to her, and there was a look in those eyes that sent a shiver through her body, for she knew that he was making some sort of commitment to cross to her, to not go back.

No, he was going to come forward. And then Octavian strode across the heather, picking his way through the purple flowers until he at last stood beside her.

She rested on her elbows, turning onto her back, glanced up at him as her hair danced against her shoulders in the morning breeze. "You are up early."

“Men in the military often don’t sleep well,” he said. “I’m usually up at dawn. It’s the way of things,” he said easily.

“I never thought I would say that I had anything in common with a military man,” she marveled.

“But it seems that I do. I cannot sleep past when the first golden rays touch my window.” She frowned.

“Actually, when the first blue hints of dawn tease at the sill, I find myself awake, alert, and completely ready to meet the day. And the songs of the birds call me to come outside.”

“You remind me a little bit of my Aunt Perdita in this.”

“Oh?” she said. “Does she like birdsong?”

“Perdita likes all animals. She would be well-suited to living in a place like Scotland. If she had lived in another time, people would’ve accused her of witchcraft.”

She shuddered. “Don’t say such a thing. Even here now, many people do believe in witches, you see? The story of magic runs through all the streams and valleys and sky.”

He narrowed his gaze. “You don’t believe in magic, do you?”

“No, not really,” she said. “But it traverses my blood, the belief that there could be something more than that which we see. It’s the way of the Scots.

And it’s hard to shake that. Generations of people who have believed that there’s simply more to this life than cold, hard Newtonian facts are my ancestors. ”

He laughed softly, then lowered himself down beside her. “Are you a student of cold, hard Newtonian facts?”

She nodded. “Och, aye. I’m a student of all the silly Englishmen who tried to make sense of the world. Not just Englishmen,” she softened. “The French are quite bad too. But you know...” She wagged her brows. “One can read something without agreeing with it entirely.”

“Are you sure you are not a Briarwood somehow?” he asked.

“It’s possible,” she mused. “We should search our family histories. Perhaps somewhere far, far back, before the Romans, a Briarwood met one of us and they intertwined.”

He laughed softly. “Or perhaps there are simply certain people in this world who are ready to question everything.”

She gazed out at the sea loch. “Can you imagine going through your entire life without asking questions? How very terrible that would be,” she lamented.

“I don’t know. It might be rather peaceful.”

“Peaceful?” she echoed, horrified. “But think of how much you would deny yourself to never ask the whys and consider the possibilities?”

He peered at her, awed.

And she felt his admiration like a caress. She buried herself down a little bit more into the heather, which was scratchy but delightful. Feeling enveloped by her home, by the land, which had been like a cradle to her since she was a child.

“Look,” she said, pointing her finger. “There. There.” Running across the shadows on the other side of the loch was a young doe, who moved with grace after taking her morning bit of grass.

“Beautiful,” he murmured.

And for a long moment, she was certain he didn’t just mean the doe.

She cleared her throat. “I come out here to witness the wonder of nature,” she said.

“I suppose it’s the best thing to do when everything around one is completely at odds.”

“Och, aye,” she agreed. “It gives me hope when my fellow humans are acting mad. A return to nature reminds me that everything will be all right in the end.”

“Will it?” he asked softly, pain turning his voice into a bare whisper. “Be all right in the end?”

“It’s a difficult question,” she said honestly, “because I didn’t say it wouldn’t be without suffering or pain or grief.”

“You know that better than most,” he said.

“I do,” she affirmed without self-pity. “It would be very silly of me to deny it.” She paused, then said, “And so do you.”

“I’ve never had anyone I love, someone close to me, die,” he said.

“It doesn’t really matter,” she cut in. “We both know death, and that’s enough. It might be different, but we understand that something working out doesn’t mean a

perfectly happy ending. It means that it's going exactly as it should."

He stared at her, then let his gaze travel out to the loch. "And you think all of this is going exactly as it should?"

As he asked that question, she tilted her chin, looked up towards the sky, and spotted an osprey flying overhead.

It then dashed down to the loch, swift and deadly and beautiful.

Its talons caressed the water, seizing a small fish. Then the bird flew up into the sky triumphantly. Elspeth's breath caught in her throat.

She watched the osprey soar back into the sky, wheeling overhead, crying out joy at having caught its meal. It was a moment showing the nature of the cycle of life. For the osprey would feed today and live.

"Oh, yes, things are working out exactly as they should," she whispered as astonishment washed over her.

She felt as if Hamish was reaching out to her, exactly as he said he would. Perhaps it was madness, perhaps it was ridiculous, and perhaps it was just coincidence. But she remembered that day when Hamish had promised that he would send her a great love.

And an osprey had soared across the sky that day.

And now, she looked up at Octavian, studying his face. "It feels right, doesn't it?"

She trailed her hand over to his and dared to take it. He studied their fingers intertwined.

“What are you doing?” he asked softly.

“I think that it is best that we stop pretending.”

He cleared his throat. “What do you mean?”

“The moment we danced together, you knew and I knew that we weren’t going to be mere acquaintances. We went well together, like two notes in a chord. Do you not agree?”

He smiled at her softly. “I agree, but what about—”

“No, no,” she cut in quickly. “I will not hear protests, nor will I hear visions of dire futures and difficulty. Do any of those things exist right here in the heather overlooking the loch?”

He stared at her, stunned. “No, they don’t.”

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“Good.” She nodded, twining their fingers. “Now, turn your eyes to the loch, and watch nature at play, and stop being so serious.”

He let out a laugh. “Whatever you say, Duchess,” he said.

“Very good.” Her lips twitched. “I’m glad you know that you should obey my commands.”

“I like your commands,” he rumbled softly. “I have been giving commands for a decade.”

“Well then,” she said softly, stroking his hair back from his cheek. Daring, dear God, daring to do as she wished, as she felt was right, she cradled his strong, handsome face. A face which bore the marks of man who had seen much suffering.

He was a man who needed to be saved, who needed to understand that he would be all right if he would but allow himself to be.

And she would be all right too because she was choosing him. And whatever they could have. She was so grateful to have realized that she did not have to choose grief, and widowhood, and chastising herself, and martyrdom.

No, she could choose differently here in the heather, under the ever-brightening Scottish sky. Here, she could simply enjoy life, and him, and all that life had to offer... Where everything was exactly as it should be.

Every part of Octavian ached to discover Elspeth’s body and the pleasure he could

bring her.

In all his life, he'd never known the sort of captivation that he felt for her here in the Highlands.

And in the little hidden-away cove on the loch, where they could watch water ripple, he rolled her onto her back and studied her perfect features.

How he loved the way her fiery hair teased over the green grass and purple heather.

Her pale skin glowed in the dawn light, and her pink lips beckoned.

How had he been so lucky? It never could have occurred to him that a woman like this would be waiting for him when he'd chosen to escape to the Highlands for a respite.

She made him wish to never leave, and so he would savor every moment of this. He could drink deeply of it, of her, knowing that it would end. The shortness of it would surely make this all the sweeter.

Gently, he stroked the side of her face, then teased his fingertips over her mouth.

Her lips parted before he traced down the delicate line of her throat to where her gown hugged her bosom. How he longed to see her perfect breasts.

He hesitated for a single moment, but then he bent and kissed her. And as he seduced her mouth, he gently stroked his fingertips over the swells of her bosom.

Her beautiful hands came to rest on his shoulders, pulling him closer, urging him on.

He accepted her urging and gave in. Gave into this moment that they both so clearly

longed for.

And he knew they both needed this for different reasons, but they did need it. Needed each other.

His hands began to shake slightly as he worked at her bosom, freeing her breasts.

Her soft skin swept him into heaven as he gently massaged her. Then he could bear it no more, and he lowered his mouth to her nipple. Taking the pink nub into his mouth, he teased it, kissed it, dragged his tongue over it before he did the same to the other.

With each touch, each caress, each kiss, logic slipped further and further away and passion reigned.

As he worshiped at her breast, he took hold of her skirt and slid his hand to her bare thigh.

She trembled, eager for his touch.

Slowly, he let his fingers wander ever upward, to the juncture of her thighs.

There he met her curls, and then he delved into her slick petals.

A groan of sheer bliss slipped past his lips. She was slick for him. Hot and eager, her body longed for him. Just as his longed for her, evident by his hard cock pressed against his breeches.

It ached. It ached for her. But not yet. He wasn't a brute. He wanted to ease her into this. He wanted her to feel pleasure and safety with him so she could be free to give herself over to her ecstasy.

Then gently, he stroked his fingers over her nub. He gazed down on her face, studying her for the signs that he had found that perfect spot. The spot that would pitch her into bliss.

When her lips parted and her cheeks pinkened and her body began to undulate, he knew he'd found it.

Slowly, he circled his fingers. Biting his own lower lip to keep himself focused on her pleasure alone, he stroked and stroked, loving the feel of her beneath his touch.

And when her hips rocked upward, he teased her opening with a finger.

She gasped.

She was tight and so, carefully, he added another finger, rocking them in and out, stretching her gently...finding that other spot that could transform a mere exchange between a man and woman into something that mere words could not describe.

And as he used his fingers within her and over her nub, she clutched his shoulders.

Her mouth parted, her eyes widened, and her breath caught.

Ripple after ripple traveled through her, and he knew in the way her core tightened around his fingers that her body was giving over to release.

He eased himself down beside her. The scents of the Highland summer surrounding them mixed with their desire. And he held her. Held a window into a world that he'd never dared to contemplate.

A world where there was nothing but beauty. Nothing but this.

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It was very clear to Ellie that Octavian had no idea what had hit him, and she was enjoying it immensely.

She realized that men like him were quite used to being in charge wherever they went. Oh, yes, it was true that he was a second son, but he was a military commander and a member of the English aristocracy.

When one was the son of an English earl from an extremely powerful and wealthy family, one was accustomed to being at the lead.

And she loved that he seemed to love her taking the lead too.

All of this was because of a single promise.

She'd had no idea that it would be the greatest, wisest, most astonishing promise of her life, and she was really quite amazed to realize what was happening to her.

Him.

He was happening to her.

Octavian was gorgeous, stunning, strong, and capable. He had wandered into her life, and she was not going to let him wander out again.

Hamish had made it very clear to her that she was going to find a great passion, and once she did, she could not let it go.

It might seem mad to some people that she had known Octavian but a little bit of time, had been in his company for almost no time at all, and had come to believe that he was her great passion.

But things like this did not just happen.

Anyone who believed that they did was an utter fool.

How could anyone believe that a man like Octavian would come into her Highland castle without a purpose?

He was the very epitome of what a passionate man should be.

He was perfect for her, and to think differently?

That would simply be her spitting upon the Fates, who had clearly sent her a man at Hamish's bequest.

Now, yes, she did understand that sometimes it felt quite awkward to think that all of this was the orchestration of her now-deceased husband.

But it really didn't matter because Hamish had not been her husband per se. Legally, yes, of course he had been, but he had been her best friend. The one who knew her best. From fears to joys, to hopes and dreams, Hamish had known her.

And he had known what she truly needed.

So she would take Hamish's own urging to heart.

She had found a man she could have a passionate affair with for the rest of her life. And if the Honorable Octavian Newfield did not meet that description, she did not

know who would.

She rather enjoyed the way that he was going about their acquaintance with such shock. Now, she would not tell him that he was her grand amour. That might take a bit of time for him to realize, but she knew it in her bones.

Perhaps it was completely illogical. But logic didn't need to have anything to do with this.

And especially not if one grew up in the Highlands, where magic was everywhere, in every tree, every stone, every river.

And there was always a story to explain said magic, so one didn't need to believe in logic at all.

No.

One could simply believe in the feelings that came up from the core and into the heart.

And then, of course, that kiss! Their bodies intertwined in the heather!

Well, that kiss had solidified everything. As had their morning by the loch.

Perhaps she was innocent. She did not know much about kissing or intimacy.

She and Hamish had never bothered. Why would they?

They had believed that they had a great deal of time to provide an heir for Hamish's dukedom. So they had not pushed on that score. Especially since neither of them wished to kiss, let alone...

She shook the thought away.

She knew that Hamish's family wished that she had had a child, but she and her friend had simply never felt that way about each other.

Octavian? He was something else altogether. When she was with him, she felt completely alive.

She understood desire with him, the feral nature of a creature who had to have what it instinctually required. And somehow she knew instinctually that she required him.

As she wandered down into the drawing room, the sun was setting and the lamps were being lit, and she was alone.

She quite enjoyed it because it gave her an opportunity to muse on how she might best corner the fellow of her interest and get him to do exactly as she pleased, because he was an honorable man.

Honor was all well and good, but honor had to be gotten around in this circumstance.

She didn't have very long to prove to him what they were meant to be. After all, he was going to have to leave soon. His stay here in the Highlands was temporary.

He didn't live in Scotland. And from what she understood, he was only in England when the Army allowed it.

She had to act quickly, and she had to act cleverly.

"My dear, you do look as if you are plotting the overthrow of a government. I absolutely love to see such a pensive look upon your face. You also look quite pleased about it."

She startled and turned at the barrage of words from the Dowager Duchess of Westleigh, who was sitting in the dim light overlooking the open windows.

“My goodness,” she said, stunned that she had not noticed the older lady in the room when she had wandered in. “Is anything amiss?”

“No, I am simply drinking in the beauty of your country,” the dowager duchess said. “I had no idea it looked like this or I would have come years ago.”

“Did no one ever invite you to Scotland?”

“If you can believe it, no. I think it has to do with all the turmoil over the last century.” The dowager wound her bejeweled hands in her lap. “And the fact is that I like London, my dear. I like the idea of living in Scotland, but I never could.”

“Why?” Ellie asked, as she crossed to the dowager duchess.

The dowager smiled wisely. “Because I crave the theater, I crave interaction with society, and here, I think, one has to love the silence of the universe.”

“My goodness, Dowager Duchess,” Ellie said. “The silence of the universe? How profound.”

“Life is too short for anything but profundity,” the dowager duchess returned. “And you must call me Sylvia because I think that you and I are going to be very good friends.”

She blinked, pleased but surprised. “And what would make you say such a thing?”

The dowager winked. “We duchesses, for one, must stick together. And two, my dear, you have an instinct for and an interest in my grandson that I cannot ignore.”

She blushed. She could not help herself.

“Am I so obvious?” she asked, not sure if she should kick herself or be pleased that she did not hide how she truly felt.

“There’s no ignoring it,” the duchess declared. “You want him, and I approve.”

“I’m glad that you do,” she said. “I hope that my family will as well.”

The dowager’s brows rose with surprise. “Do you think they won’t?”

“Och. It is difficult that he’s English. The other side of it is I don’t think Octavian understands yet what I...”

The dowager duchess grinned at her. “No, he doesn’t because he’s a man. It hasn’t even occurred to him yet the way that you’ve changed his life. And I do see it, my dear. You have indeed changed his life. He’s never been interested in anyone like he is in you.”

She found herself growing inordinately pleased at that. “I’m glad to hear it,” she replied honestly. “You see, because I’m on a mission to have a grand, passionate love.”

She waited for the dowager duchess to say something disdainful and bring her back to reality.

Instead, the dowager duchess lifted her hands and began to applaud, her jeweled fingers winking in the dimming light.

“Marvelous, my dear. I applaud your endeavor, and I’m glad to hear that a young lady of such determination will likely join my family.

We'll have to see what we can do to get Octavian to come around from his silly ideas about never getting married. ”

“What?” she gasped.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” The dowager winced. “I shouldn’t have put it quite like that, but I suppose forewarned is forearmed.”

“I don’t understand,” she said softly.

The dowager sighed. “Octavian has made it very clear that he has no interest in finding a lady to marry him until all the wars are over. And as far as I can tell, the wars are going to go on forever. Gentlemen do seem determined to fight,” the dowager duchess said with a grim sort of acceptance.

“Why?” she blurted, not understanding how people could wish for carnage when the world was so very beautiful.

“In truth, I don’t really know,” the dowager said honestly.

“Perhaps these men weren’t loved. As far as I can see, most men are bullied as children.

Pushed into corners. Told to swallow their feelings, and the only thing applauded is anger.

Not all men yearn for war, of course, but a few of them, the ones who lead the fray?

They are the ones who keep me awake at night.

For those few, with their festering hearts, make graveyards of nations.

And they steal love like an ever-hungry thief.

I wish I could say I understood the nature of man.

The closest I have ever come to truly understanding it is through the plays of William Shakespeare, of course.

He seems to understand mankind better than most.”

“I’ve read all of them.”

“Good.” The dowager smiled, as if glad to turn to other matters than the way a few men lead other men into bloody battle.

“That is a wonderful line of recommendation into the Briarwood family. But I have a funny feeling that if Octavian does marry you, he shall be coming here, to Scotland. And I shall be very sad to lose a great deal of his company.”

She frowned. “Why would you say that?”

The dowager duchess cocked her head to the side. “Because he could be healed here.”

Ellie sucked in a breath. “We are of one mind.”

The dowager duchess’s eyebrows rose. “Oh, are we?”

She nodded. “I can sense it in him, and he’s confessed to me the pain that he’s had over these last years.”

“It is a very good sign that he has shared those feelings with you,” the dowager duchess said, her face creasing with worry over her grandson.

“It has blunted him. It’s been very hard to watch so many of my grandsons go to war.

My children did not have to do that. Who would have thought that I would be spared my children not being scarred in such ways, only to see my grandchildren face such demands.

I think part of me had hoped the world might find a long peace.

What a foolish notion,” she said sadly. “But I had hoped. I will always cling to hope. But I cannot ignore the fact that a sea of troubles besets the world, and I do not know when we shall know calm seas again.”

“That sounds a great deal like Shakespeare,” Ellie observed.

“Much I say sounds a great deal like Shakespeare. I’m always borrowing from him, my dear,” the dowager said. “He is the great teacher of my life. I might even argue I became a duchess because of him. And if you’re going to borrow from someone, he’s the one to borrow from.”

“What about some of the Scottish writers?” she asked.

“I am not familiar with them.”

“I’d be happy to acquaint you.” She went to the shelves, pulled out a book, and handed it to the dowager duchess.

“Thank you. That is very kind,” the dowager said, taking the slim volume.

“I shall read apace. But first we must discuss the play I am putting on to thank your brother, the duke, for our visit. I think I know exactly what I must choose. I will choose a play about finding who you truly are. Perhaps we can inspire Octavian to do

the same.”

“Is it not manipulative?” she asked, astonished.

The dowager duchess’s brows rose and she began to laugh.

A deep, rich, rolling sound. “Oh, my dear. Men must be maneuvered. If they were left to their own devices, they would have no idea what was going on about them most of the time. They have very little intelligence when it comes to matters of the heart or love. And right now, Octavian believes the only thing that truly matters is war. So I think that we should turn his mind to love.”

“Does it not feel ill-advised?” she suddenly blurted.

“How so?” the dowager duchess asked.

“I have known him so little, and my own husband died but a year ago, and, well, some might say...”

“Some might say that we should all wear hair shirts, whip ourselves, never be happy, and live in punishment for the rest of our days so that we might have the possible promise of bliss in a life thereafter. Do you find that to be wise?”

Her jaw dropped. She’d never met anyone who spoke thus.

“No,” she replied honestly.

“Good. Don’t follow that sort of wisdom. I’m not interested in wise people like that,” the dowager duchess said, shaking her head. “And I hope you aren’t either. I hope that you are ready to fling yourself into the fray of love. You seem to be, my dear.”

“Och, I am.”

The dowager eyed her carefully, gently even. “You are not burdened with some sort of guilt for your husband?”

“Och, no,” she said quickly. “My husband made me promise that I would never do that. Well, not in those words, but it’s what he meant.”

The dowager nodded, her lips curving into an approving smile. “He was a good man then.”

“The very best, and I was lucky that he was my friend.”

“It seems that you were. I wish I had known him.”

Tears stung her eyes. Sometimes she wished Hamish could still give her advice. “I wish you had too. But he is gone, and I am here, and I know what he would want.”

“And what is that?” the dowager duchess asked.

“He would want me to find love,” she declared, lifting her chin, unafraid before this magnificent older woman, who seemed as wise as the land about them.

Ellie drew in a long breath and proclaimed, “Octavian thinks that this is just a little affair, something to make me happy, but he doesn’t understand. I want so much more than that.”

The dowager stood slowly, crossed to Ellie, and took her hand before urging, “Then don’t stop, my dear, until you get it, because he needs someone like you. He truly does.”

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“I want you to let me have him, and I don’t want you or anyone to get in the way.”

A bleat of distress escaped Teague’s lips. “I can’t believe we’re discussing this,” he ground out.

“Well, we must,” Ellie said to her oldest brother, who had shepherded her through much in the last years.

He had taken her back to their family castle because she no longer wished to live in Hamish’s home.

As wonderful as it was, it was quiet and lonely, especially after the new duke had taken over.

She had little place there. Here at her family’s castle, she was happy.

And she loved being with her brothers, but not when they were overbearing.

“I’m not a wee lass,” she stated.

“Och, Ellie, I know you are not a little girl,” Teague said as he glanced out the windows of his office.

“Good. I’m glad we have an understanding.” She crossed to his desk. “He is the perfect man for me.”

Teague turned back to her and winced. “As your brother, I’m supposed to protect you

from such men. He's a rake."

"He's your friend," she said.

"That makes it worse," he exclaimed.

"Does it?" She queried. "Truly? Would you rather that I chose your enemy?"

Another groan escaped Teague's lips. "Of course not."

"Is he a bad man?" she asked simply, sympathetic to her brother's position, but determined to point out that Octavian was a good choice for her.

"No," he allowed. "He's one of the best."

She beamed. "Then there's really nothing to complain about."

He placed a hand over his eyes for a moment as if she was going to be the death of him. "Brothers are not supposed to condone their sisters having affairs," he said.

"Why ever not?" she replied, her lips twitching. "Do I ever get in the way of any of your arrangements?"

He grimaced. "I did not know that you knew that I had arrangements."

She snorted. "Don't be ridiculous. I know that you've been off with maidens in haystacks for years."

He looked defensive. "Not haystacks," he said. "I wouldn't stoop to that. Plus, I don't take advantage of any of the local lasses," he pointed out.

She laughed. "I know you're a good man. And so is he, so he's the perfect person for me to enjoy myself with."

Another bleat of horror escaped his lips.

He seemed to be able to do nothing but bleat and let out notes of dismay.

"What?" She asked. "Do you think that I am going to be a porcelain doll upon a shelf? Should I be like the crockery or those beautiful little figurines that mother and father liked to collect, cold and kept at a distance?"

"No, of course not, Ellie. You're a full-grown woman, and I have no wish to get in the way of that."

"Good. I'm a widow," she pointed out. "Aren't widows allowed to have fun?"

"Yes," he admitted. "But just so you know, the brothers have already warned him off. Just a bit."

She rolled her eyes. "What does that mean, 'just a bit'?"

"No marriage," he said. "Not to an Englishman. That's what they said. Though I could care less, and they don't really mean it. They like him. I like him. And I think that Octavian will understand that we meant there's to be no taking advantage of you."

"First of all," she began as patiently as she could, "he would not be taking advantage of me. I'm the one who is pursuing him."

"I didn't need to know that," Teague said, rolling his eyes.

“Fine. You don’t need to know anything except for the fact that you are not going to get in the way.

” She cleared her throat. “This is an extremely large castle and an extremely large estate. I’m an adult.

I can have a bit of fun in this life. You wouldn’t wish me to remain a perpetually lonely person, would you? ”

“No, Ellie,” he said softly. “Of course I wouldn’t. Truthfully though, I didn’t bring him here for you to have a merry bit of business with him. But if it’s what you want, I won’t stand in the way. As long as you promise not to break him.”

“Me?” she queried. “Break him? Don’t be ridiculous.”

He laughed softly. “I don’t know. That one needs help.”

“Then we should help him,” she said gently. “Perhaps I can help him.”

Her brother’s eyes grew dark with a mixture of sorrow and warning. “Don’t try to fix broken men, Ellie. It never ends well.”

“Right,” she returned. “That’s probably a good bit of advice.”

“It’s very good advice,” he said. “But if you do choose to have a bit of fun with him, I’ll look the other way, and I’ll tell our brothers to do the same.”

She smiled, relieved. “Good. I’m glad we have an understanding.”

He let out a long-suffering sigh. “I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this.”

“What would you do to stop me, in any case?”

He ground his teeth. “You have a point there. And I think you are right. Better him than anyone else.”

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“O ff we go then.” She pointed to a bag at her feet. “You can carry that.”

Bloody hell, Elspeth was a gorgeous sight, outside in the Highland sunshine, her hair flicking about her face as a strong breeze blew in off the loch.

Damnation, Octavian wanted her. Every bit of her. He wanted the mischievous curve of her lips. He wanted the voluptuous swells of her breasts, currently pressed against her simple linen shirt.

She’d eschewed her usual elegant attire and was dressed in the garments of a Highland lass. And it was driving him positively wild.

“Where?” Octavian managed, wondering when he’d have the opportunity to seize her lips again with his own, to get lost in the heat of her, and the way her body undulated against his in perfect welcome.

“There,” she said, pointing into the distance.

Octavian dragged his gaze from her lush form and stared at the point of her finger. He then followed the line up to what he could only describe as an extremely high point in a series of peaks.

He cleared his throat and wondered if he could convince her to pretend she needed a lie down. Surely, they could vanish to her chambers... But then again, he had loved twining with her in the heather.

“I’m here to rest,” he pointed out, anticipating that the climb would be lengthy.

She gave him the oddest look. “This is resting,” she said.

“Where did you get that garb?” he asked.

“They’re mine,” she said, stroking her hands over the purple wool skirts. “Much as I love French fashions, I always have sensible things for a climb.”

Most of his cousins would’ve thought sensible clothes for a climb meant breeches, but not her. No, she stood captivatingly in a swaying wool skirt, and her simple linen shirt somehow managed to seductively skim her breasts and waist. And she had a shawl tucked over her shoulders.

“It’ll get quite windy,” she said. “So, be prepared for it to become cold.”

“I know ways to keep warm,” he assured. And he could not wait to employ them.

Her cheeks bloomed with color, but her gaze spoke volumes. It was clear that she quite looked forward to his methods.

“Are those boots good for walking?” she asked.

“Very,” he said.

And they were. He had spent a great deal of time walking over continental Europe. Yes, he rode a great deal, but he also wanted solidarity with his men so that they didn’t hate him every time he rode by.

So, he often walked and talked with them. Made sure they were getting enough food, they had their clothes mended, and didn’t have any injuries left unaddressed and festering.

Yes, he was an excellent walker with well-worn boots.

For he knew the danger of blisters. Those were the way to infection and misery.

“Why are you going to drag me up that peak?” he teased. “Surely, we could get our exercise in a—”

“I’m not going to tell you,” she cut in, her eyes dancing.

He pursed his lips, loving the banter with her. He felt like he could speak with her for hours and hours and never feel strained. “Is there some sort of magic fountain at the top?”

She winked at him. “Och, did your cousins tell you about the stream?”

His lips twitched. As a matter of fact, Josephine, Anne, and Emily had gone on and on about the secret stream. He rather hoped to see it eventually, but he did not think that’s where she was taking him.

And he wondered why, at this particular moment, she wanted to haul him up to the top of the world.

“I’m happy to follow you,” he said, “wherever you might lead.”

And he would, for many reasons, least of all the way her skirts clung to the plump figure of her bum.

She folded her hands behind her back and grinned. “Good, because that’s what you are doing.”

“And where is it you think you’re going?” a deep voice with a light Scottish accent

asked.

He winced. Now, they were done for.

The pack of Scotsmen crossed up from the garden to the edge of the wild land that headed into the Highlands.

They were indeed a formidable lot with their burnished hair, strong features, and muscles that harkened back to warriors of old, though their dress was quite fashionable, despite being meant for country life.

“I wish to take him for a long walk.”

Brodie laughed. “It’ll do him good. All that tension. Long walks are just the thing.”

Octavian swallowed. It was a damn delicate balance he was attempting here. Did her brothers actually approve of him being alone with her?

“Should we take a chaperone?” Octavian inquired, though he was loath to.

“Och, aye,” called out Archie. “We’ll all go. It’ll be a splendid day.”

“You’re not invited,” Elspeth retorted.

Brodie let out a tragic sigh. “I’m wounded to the quick, sister.”

“You’ll recover,” she drawled.

“But how can we trust that he won’t prove an utter English rogue?” Archie demanded, though it was clear he was in jest.

But the truth was...he was an utter English rogue. Wasn't he? Well, not entirely. He was only a bit of a rogue. The right amount.

She was a widow. A woman of means. Didn't she have the right to live freely?

Who was he to decide for her? Who was any man?

The Duke of Rossbrea approached. "Are we having a clan gathering?" he boomed.

"She wants to take him up the peaks," Archie said.

Rossbrea swung his gaze to his sister and arched a brow. "Good," he said. "Octavian should see it."

See what? he wanted to demand. But he knew that would do no good.

"Would you like to join us?" Octavian invited, hoping to keep his friend's good opinion.

The duke arched a brow. "My sister is very capable of taking you on her own, and I trust that you're the man I think you are. And she can do anything that she pleases, except marry an Englishman," he said.

"Oh, for God's sake, Teague." She rolled her eyes. "What have you against me marrying an Englishman?"

Her brother winked at her as if they had some sort of understanding about the whole affair. As a matter of fact, all the brothers looked as if they had some sort of understanding with her.

He glanced from Rossbrea to Ellie, then back again.

“Never fear,” Octavian piped, suddenly feeling off foot. He did not like the word “marry” being bandied about. “There’s no danger of marrying an Englishman.”

She laughed, taking delight in his sudden discomfort. “Are you afraid, Octavian?” she asked.

“Perhaps,” he said. “Just a little. There have been forced marriages in my family, and I really would prefer to avoid those.”

“Would you?” she asked playfully. She folded her arms under her breasts and leveled her brothers with a challenging stare. “Would you lot ever force me to marry Octavian?”

“Never,” Rossbrea said swiftly and with ease.

“Not a chance,” Brodie insisted with a shudder.

Archie grimaced. “Force you to marry an Englishman? My God, we’d send you abroad first.”

“Exactly,” she said, turning back to Octavian. “So you needn’t worry about a wee kirk in the heather and being forced down the altar to marry me.”

“That said—” Brodie began.

“No,” she cut off. “There will be no extraneous things added onto this. I am not a little girl. I am a widow. I have been married. I have a fortune of my own. Love you all as I do, you’ll all be quiet about what I choose to get up to.”

Her brothers had the good graces to look chastened for a moment. And quite frankly, Octavian enjoyed what she was saying, because the truth was he’d begun to feel as if

he was being bandied about like a ball badgered by a pack of dogs.

At one moment, they wanted him to please her. The next moment, they wanted him to be afraid they might trounce him.

And as she began to stride away, he faced the tall Scotsmen. “You have to understand she’s in far more control of all of this than I am.”

“Some officer you must be,” Brodie said.

The Duke of Rossbrea shook his head. “No, he’s quite a man on the battlefield, but he’s dealing with Ellie.”

Archie began to laugh. “Well, that’s true.”

“You’re her brothers. You love her. My cousins and my uncles would do the same for any female of our family. Threats of murder are quite commonplace amongst the Briarwoods. But I can either do what you lot want or what she wants.”

Archie rolled his eyes. “The answer is obvious, you great idiot.”

“Is it?” he replied.

Brodie tsked. “You always do what the lady wants.”

“Always,” the duke affirmed.

“Always?” Octavian questioned.

The Scotsmen looked at each other, nodded, then looked back to him and said in unison, “Always.”

“But we don’t have to know about it,” Archie whispered with a touch of horror.

“Officially, that is,” added Brodie, as if the idea of contemplating his sister in an affair was horrifying.

Octavian ground his teeth.

“But none of us are foolish enough to think we can control our Ellie,” Archie said ruefully.

“And we could never really blame a fellow for being ruled by her. She’s Ellie,” Brodie said, as if this somehow explained that his sister was a law unto herself, for all that they might try to say.

The duke smiled and took a step forward. “And we can all see she’s much happier with you.”

“Is she?” he asked, ridiculously pleased by this, and feeling far less terrible at the way he was having trouble resisting giving in to the tempting lass. He eyed Ellie’s form as she strode off across the heather, going towards the incline that led up to the peaks.

“Oh, yes,” Archie said. “Just mind yourself. No heartbreak. Do you understand?”

He nodded. “I have no intention of breaking any hearts,” he said.

Though given how things were going...he feared he might break his own.

“Good,” Brodie replied. “Now, don’t keep her waiting. She’s not a lass to be gainsaid.”

That was the truth.

“Right,” he said, feeling both bolstered and flummoxed. He picked up the bag she’d instructed him to bring and slung it over his shoulder. She was a lass ever prepared, for he could tell there was a jug of some refreshing liquid inside.

His Highland adventure was beginning to feel like a Highland farce. And thanks to his grandmother, the family’s love of the theater, and his own reading habits, he was very familiar with farce.

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But better to be in a farce than a tragedy!

And with that thought, he strode off. And as soon as he had set off, he couldn't tear his eyes off his fiery Scot.

She'd paused, turned to look back, and stood with her hands on her hips.

Her hair was whipping about her face like cinnamon flames, and she looked as if she had stepped out of some old tale of sword-wielding maidens.

And he loved it. Dear God, he did. For better or worse, to his detriment or blessing, his spirits soared as he followed her, like a ship to a lighthouse.

There was something about her fiery nature that lifted him up. He was so used to ladies who waited to be picked, who waited to have things done for them. Not ladies of his own family, of course.

But in this? She was organizing everything and telling him what he should be doing. He'd given so many orders that it shocked him to find that he quite liked someone taking charge of him a little bit. It made him feel as if he could, for once in more than a decade, relax ever so slightly.

Once he was ascending the incline and nearing her, Elspeth smiled a smile so large she could have lit the whole Scottish night with it. His heart slammed in his chest.

She was light. Pure. Perfect. Beautiful. And with a way of moving that made him leap to attention, Ellie started charging across the heather and winding up towards the

peaks.

A blissful sigh escaped his lips as he climbed after her. She was right. This was rest. Real rest for his soul.

This was exactly what he needed. He did not need to lay about a house, staring up at the ceiling. He did not need to sit in a chair in the corner of some room, moldering.

No, he needed this.

Clouds danced across the Scottish sky, but the sun was shining mightily through those clouds, dappling the land in golden hues. It was breathtaking, and with each step they went higher and higher into the wild land that looked so primal he felt his soul ache with it.

Up and up they went, farther and farther, until they stood in a hidden nook of land, nestled amongst the peaks. It was a jewel of a little glen, tucked back away from the great loch.

He stopped and pulled out a ceramic bottle from the bag he'd lugged, pulled the stopper out, and then he offered it to her.

She lifted the mouth of the bottle to her lips and drank. Her eyes closed with bliss and that look, and her lips about the bottle, caused his body to crackle with need for her.

She passed him the bottle then, their fingers skimming as their eyes locked for a second.

He then took a drink and ecstasy, after the climb, danced though him as the tart, zesty taste of lemonade slid over his tongue.

He drank and drank.

“Like it, do you?” she teased.

At last, he lowered the bottle and recorked it. “Your cook really does make the best lemonade. You must promise not to tell Grandmama, for she adores her cook, though she already likely knows.”

She smiled at him. “I like your grandmother.”

“Most people do,” he said. “Those who don’t? They’re sad about their own lives and have no idea how to go about living. In my opinion, that’s why they don’t like her.”

She frowned. “Isn’t it terrible?” she asked. “So many people trapped in their own lives, who can’t end their own suffering, and they miss all of this.”

She swept her hand out towards the beautiful landscape, and she was right.

“Is this what you’ve come to show me?” he queried as he gazed out over the landscape.

“No.” She smiled. “Follow me.”

Slowly, they made their way through the small glen until they came to a series of stone cottages with their roofs overgrown with weeds.

“What are those?” he asked, drinking in the sight of the old buildings.

“Many, many years ago, our people lived on these lands and dwelt up here away from the world. They were protected from the rest of the world, able to live in harmony. They tended their cattle, raised sheep, wove their wool, and lived bonny lives.”

“What happened to them?” he breathed.

“Change.”

He blinked as he tried to envision the people who had lived in the cottages.

For a moment, he could have sworn he heard the laughter of children in the glen and the sound of a woman’s song on the wind, but it was just a trick of his very imaginative mind.

An imagination that most Briarwoods possessed.

“I thought you might like to see them. Our history,” she said. “Whenever I’m feeling a little bit amiss, I come here to remember that things always change, and yet they somehow also stay the same.”

“Are you feeling a bit amiss now?” he queried.

“Not at all,” she returned, placing her hand on one of the stones in the wall of the first cottage. “I feel more at peace right now than I have in a very long time, but I know that you... Your own life, is...”

“Yes?” he prompted, feeling rather strange about it.

“You can’t feel very much at ease with war constantly going on.”

He frowned and then stepped forward and traced his hands over the carved stone. In the corner, there was a circular mark carved into the stone. Clearly done by someone.

“What is this?” he asked.

“It’s a charm,” she said softly. “For protection.”

And he thought how remarkable it was that many, many years ago, some enterprising soul had marked this stone to protect their house and family and left it here for Ellie to look upon, for him to touch.

As he traced the mark, he suddenly felt a part of something. A part of Scotland. A part of a story.

“Actually,” he said softly, “I’ve come to terms with war. In many ways, I think that is the most dangerous part of it.”

She closed the distance between them and placed a hand over his. “You mean you’ve accepted that it’s your reality?”

He nodded. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to get out of it,” he said softly.

“Do you want to?” she whispered.

He lifted his gaze from their hands together to her eyes. “I don’t know.”

And somehow, he knew that she could see inside him then and that sent a shock of terror through him.

She could see his fear. Not of the war itself, but that he might not know how to live without it. That he had lived as a warrior for so long, as a man of battle and blade and gunpowder, that he did not know if he could ever be a man of peace.

Did he even trust himself to try? He had made war on so many men, charged across so many fields, and taken the lives of so many enemies that he did not know if he could imagine dancing peacefully through a ballroom for the rest of his life or tilling soil or...

“You know the great warriors of old used to run about these glens,” she said.

“Sometimes, I feel like I can feel their echoes, and it’s haunting.

They’re gone forever now. The last great war for Scotland killed them.

Once they filled these cottages, but war took away an entire way of living.

I think that we must understand that nothing is permanent.

Even if it has been here for one hundred years. Even stones,” she whispered.

She bit her lower lip, staring at the cottage.

“Eventually, the wind will wear these walls down, and the weeds will rot the roof. Then every trace of humanity will be gone from here. One day, the glen will reclaim this land, and the foibles of humans will be forgotten. This mountain and these glens where the warriors of my clan and the clans of others used to charge and roam? They too will fade into history.”

Her words caused the most impossible ache in his heart.

“This season of war in your life? It will also fade away. For nothing ever stays the same,” she said.

His throat tightened. “Do you think so?”

She nodded.

Panic welled up in him. He had his family. It was true. But the life of a warrior? That had been his primary purpose for so long now. “But what if it...”

And then she lifted her fingers to his lips and touched them gently. There was no need for what ifs. So, she took his hand and did not say another word.

They wandered through the hills above the castle, taking their time, and he followed her eagerly, discovering the world she knew.

How Ellie loved that he had allowed her to lead, to show him the land she loved so well. So many men insisted on striking out, despite their own ignorance, determined to be masters in all things.

But not Octavian.

Still, there was one thing in which she desperately wished him to take the lead, for she had no idea how to truly begin.

As they came upon a single tree growing in a small green clearing, it was as if he knew, as if he was one with her.

Because he took her hand, twined their fingers, then pulled her back towards him.

“I want you,” he groaned against her neck, as his hard sex pressed through her skirts and into the curve of her bottom.

“As I do you,” she breathed, hardly daring to believe this was happening. That her dream of passion was about to be achieved.

With a possessive groan, he whipped her around to face him.

It seemed something about the Highlands had ripped away all his proper English veneer, and he slid his hands into her hair and kissed her.

Her body yielded to his and she melted into him.

He devoured her then. And she wished to be devoured. How she did!

That mouth of his took hers with a tender wildness that did something to her heart, and she knew she'd never be the same after this.

Closing her eyes, she gave herself over to sensation as he lowered them to the cool ground, surrounded by wildflowers and blooming heather.

The wild herbs of the Highlands filled the air with the most delicious aromas as she eased back.

And as he laid down beside her, he paused. "Tell me yes."

"Och...I'll tell you aye, Octavian."

"Even better," he whispered before he took her mouth again.

Then passionately, devotedly, he brought her body to the precipice of pleasure with slow, skilled strokes.

And as he slid her skirts up her legs and slid between them, she sucked in a sharp breath of surprise as he kissed her there as he had kissed her lips just moments before.

She grabbed fistfuls of grass and stared up at the branches of the tree and its bright green leaves.

As he kissed and teased her with his tongue, it felt as if she was being transported to another world as the light pierced through the arms of the ancient oak that had survived so much over the centuries.

There, she felt connected. Connected to Octavian, to herself, to the romantic passion of this place. It was like coming home to herself, to him, to a myth that had laced through men and women for all time.

She never wanted it to end.

Just as she thought she could bear no more, she cascaded into a river of pure pleasure. It tumbled over her, its piercing, delicious rapids a delight she'd never imagined.

Then he was unbuttoning his breeches, and she pulled at his hips, eager for him to join her in languid bliss.

He took his sex into his hand and rubbed it along her slick core.

His face was a map of need as he thrust deep, and she let out a yelp of pain.

He stilled, shock transforming his face. "Ellie?" he gasped.

"Don't stop," she gritted, trying to take him.

"Have you ever done this?" he rasped.

She shook her head.

He sucked in a sharp breath, then managed, "I should stop."

"Why? It's you I want."

His gaze searched hers and the hesitation vanished, replaced by something else. Something that reminded her of pride—pride that he was her first.

And when he began to rock against her, it was as if he was determined that she would never forget this. Forget him. Or the pleasure he could bring her.

And before she knew it, she was crashing into ecstasy, and as she peaked, pure pleasure washed over his face as he thrust home.

They both clung to each other, dragging in ragged breaths.

And as he pulled her into his arms, it took him several moments before he asked, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“That I hadn’t—”

“Yes,” he broke in softly.

“I don’t know.” And she didn’t. It wasn’t exactly as if ladies were encouraged to discuss their virginity or lack thereof.

“I’m honored,” he said softly, holding her as if she was a treasure.

His treasure.

She smiled, at ease with him.

And there, under the arms of the tree, in Octavian’s embrace, she knew... She’d found exactly what she had been looking for.

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“A re we going to have to pull a dramatic escape?” Laertes drawled, getting ready to shoot a ball across the billiards table.

In the vast castle, one might even dare say palace, of the Duke of Rossbrea, there was every amenity that anyone could ever possibly wish to have.

It might be argued that it was far better than any English great house or castle for beauty or for entertainment. There were music rooms, salons, billiards rooms, dancing rooms, and a library that stretched over half the castle.

Yes, it was a place of bliss, but the tension in the billiards room at present was palpable.

Octavian stared at the green felt, lifted his gaze to his cousin’s, grated his teeth, and said, “Quite honestly, I don’t know.”

Deimos gave him a leery look. “That’s not the sort of thing that we wish to hear, old boy.

It’s not exactly a quick jaunt down the main road, now is it?

We’re up in the bloody northernmost corner of this island, and they could harry us down all the way to the border.

They’ve quite a history of it. We’re not in the best position to get you out of here if the lot of them decide you’ve played too nice with the sister. That said—”

“We will do whatever is needed to get you out of any difficult situation; namely, the brothers,” Perseus announced as he leaned against the billiards table.

“The Scots,” added Laertes. “I like the Scots. But they’re a whole different game than irritated Englishmen.”

“We all like the Scots,” Deimos said.

“Exactly. They’re just like us, actually, with slightly more colorful accents. And they’re ever so slightly taller,” Laertes admitted with a grin.

“They also have bigger tempers,” mused Perseus, as if he was looking forward to seeing those tempers.

“That never stopped us before,” Octavian drawled, glad that his cousins were taking his escapades with good, if wary, humor.

“Too true, but you don’t seem to know which way the wind is blowing, and honestly, that’s what’s making us nervous,” Laertes confessed.

“What do you mean, ‘which way the wind is blowing’?” Octavian demanded as he took up a billiards queue and considered what he might do with it if Laertes continued this particular line.

The fellow may have done an excellent job at Eton, and was currently at Oxford, but that didn’t mean he had the right to use such nefarious logic upon Octavian.

“It’s clear to everyone in this castle that you and the young widowed duchess get on quite well.”

“Yes, of course we do,” he defended. “That is what was wanted. She is coming out of

a long period of mourning, and she needed a suitor to show her there is more to life than simply living up here in the Highlands and being in a castle. And—”

“Yes, yes,” Laertes cut in. “We understand. The Duke of Rossbrea and his brothers wanted you to make her happy, but we are now beginning to be concerned about what’s going to happen when you leave.

Do you think she will still be happy when you leave?

Are you planning on taking up some vast correspondence between the two of you? ”

“Yes,” Deimos added practically. “The sort of acquaintance that in twenty to thirty years’ time will make an excellent novel.”

Perseus gave a shudder. “We’re going to have to burn all of our family papers.”

“Never in a month of Sundays,” Laertes declared. “Grandmama would be horrified at the idea of burning anything that we have committed to paper. We want generations in the future to know how wild we are, so they feel free to do the same.”

Deimos grinned. “That’s just incentive to act a wee bit madder, isn’t it? Right. So tell us what we need to do. What’s the battle plan? Are you taking her with you? Are you going to stay here? Are you going to marry her?”

“No marriage,” he gritted.

“You act as if that word is a poison, like it could make you sick,” Deimos mused, stroking his jawline.

“It could,” Octavian retorted sharply, hoping to shut down this nonsense. “It could absolutely make me sick. Do you understand the sort of guilt that I would have, going

to sleep every night, knowing that I could be killed on the battlefield? My wife would be left behind.”

“Yes, boo-hoo,” Laertes said, examining his nails with affected attention.

“Oh, the horror. The widowed duchess would be left behind in poverty here in the Highlands. In her castle. With a host of family and friends that has only expanded with the Briarwoods. And her stacks and stacks of gold coins. My heart weeps for agony.”

“Stop that,” Octavian growled. “You make a fair point though. It’s not as if she would be entirely on her own if I was to shuffle off this mortal coil,” he found himself saying, much to his horror. He quickly shoved aside the conciliatory thought. “But that doesn’t really make it better, does it?”

“It should,” Deimos said. “Besides, what Briarwood has an unhappy marriage? None of us. All evidence points to marriage as medicine. Not poison.”

“Are you getting married then?” Octavian challenged.

Deimos coughed. “Yes. Of course. In a decade. One needn’t take medicine too soon.”

Octavian considered the gist of the conversation. Maybe they were right. Maybe he should think differently. Maybe he should just throw all his principles and ideals away and ask her to marry him.

But he knew that he couldn’t.

It didn’t matter if it was rational. It didn’t matter if it made sense or not.

The knot in his gut would not unwind. The number of letters that he had sent telling

people that their loved ones would not come back had done something to him.

It was one of the most precious and hard parts of being an officer.

The amount of pain that he might feel, wondering every day if he would ever see the woman he loved again... He couldn't bear that.

And that's when he knew, dear God, this fear was selfish. It had very little to do with her.

Laertes gave him a knowing look, arching his brow. "Yes, it's all about you, isn't it? You naughty bugger."

Octavian ground his teeth. "Is it so obvious?"

He hated the way that Briarwoods could see through each other with such ease. It made keeping feelings private all but impossible.

"Yes. The insides of your brain move about like cogs and wheels that we can all see," Laertes stated. "I'm glad you finally are coming to understand the reality of your situation."

He wished his cousin Calchas was here. But Calchas was at war, captaining his ship. Calchas would understand.

Octavian blew out a long breath. "I can't do it," he said. "Maybe when the war is done, I can come back and face it. I could ask her then," he said.

"Oh, if no one's had her first," Perseus pointed out coolly.

"Why in God's name would you say that?" Octavian demanded.

“Why in God’s name would he not?” Deimos pointed out, leaning on his billiards cue. “She’s beautiful. She has money. She’s got land. She’s connected to a powerful family. Though her family is really quite something. Can you imagine celebrating Christmas with them?”

“Oh, I can,” Laertes said brightly. “I think it’d be great fun. Imagine the sort of antics the lot of us could get up to.”

Octavian blew out a long breath.

Oh, how he dearly loved his cousins. He had spent his entire life with them quite close, and now they were even closer here in Scotland as they were putting on his grandmother’s production.

“Grandmama will be calling us at any moment,” he said swiftly, deciding against the billiards queue as a club against his cousins.

“Then we best go,” said Laertes. “We mustn’t keep the ladies waiting.”

There were not really many ladies for Laertes, Deimos, and Perseus to admire, but it was great fun watching Anne, Josephine, and Emily trot about the Highlanders and make them do exactly as they pleased.

They were great big, burly men who clearly knew how to give as good as they got, but they seemed utterly captivated by the young Briarwood ladies. And the ladies were quite intrigued by them.

There was something about this place. There was no questioning it.

There was almost a whisper in the air, which made one wish to give in and simply do the impossible.

This place made him feel as if anything was possible, and that felt damn dangerous, because he knew that that wasn't true.

There were limitations, there were rules, and there was cause and effect.

Consequences occurred after the actions of one's choosing.

They headed down the hallway, going out towards the back of the castle.

Grandmama had decided that an outdoor production was the only thing possible, given the beauty of the Scottish Highland summers, though sometimes the bugs were really quite determined.

Still, it was worth it.

As they headed out onto the graveled area of the garden, his grandmama was already at work. She was putting the Scots through their paces. They were not cast as the lovers. No, they were cast as the comedic relief.

Their height and good looks only made this more hilarious.

He knew that his grandmother was up to something with regards to himself because he had been cast as the fool and not the male love interest.

Usually, when she was maneuvering people, that's what she would have done. But she had switched tactics, and he wondered what exactly she was trying to teach him.

He knew all the parts by heart. So this felt very much on purpose.

Pretty much every single Briarwood knew all of the parts by heart in every play.

Despite his casting as the fool, this time felt different. There was something about putting on the play here, at the castle, by the water, and he enjoyed watching the beautiful, gorgeous Ellie make merry with his cousins.

Their antics made him laugh, and he wanted to laugh. He needed to laugh. Oh, he had made banter for years, and he'd occasionally let out booming laughter with his cousins.

The whole ordeal with the Duke of Baxter and his darling cousin, Cymbeline, had recently lifted his spirits and made him hope that there might be a bit more to this world than all he had committed himself to.

But as he came out onto the lawn and spotted the young ladies dancing about, reciting their lines together, he felt his heart—his dratted heart—do something that it had never ever done until he had come here.

He felt it expand. He felt it ease. He felt it release, as if just being here with Ellie was the only balm he'd ever need.

As if his heart was ready to heal. But he was not ready to heal. He could not be ready to heal. There was too much to be done. There were battles still to fight. There were young men to get into shape to march across a field and face the enemy.

He could not be soft for that.

He could not give in to love for that. For all his protestation that he could not leave his wife behind, as he stood out here by the castle, with his family and his newfound friends, making merry and living, he knew it was all about him, and how he had to keep himself hard.

So very hard, lest he break.

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Was it possible that she had been mistaken?

Surrounded by her brothers, his female cousins, and the golfing green that Teague adored, she thought perhaps it was.

She didn't like to think so because then she would have to admit that there had been a great deal of coincidence in the meeting of Octavian, especially the bit with the osprey. After all, it had felt like such a sign, but now she was beginning to wonder.

And she had no one to blame but herself.

She had gone on this merry endeavor, enjoying him in all the ways that a lady could possibly enjoy a man without needing the commitment of a future relationship.

And yet somehow, she had utterly and fully trusted deep in her bones that a future relationship was what was coming.

After all, hadn't she promised Hamish that she would find a great passion?

And hadn't Octavian shown up literally on her castle doorstep, danced into her life, swept her out into the gardens, and made her spirit sing?

How could he not be the most passionate man for her? No one had ever made her feel like this, and she was fairly certain no one ever would again.

Yet, he was obstinate, determined, stuck in his ways. Now again, she had no one else to blame but herself for picking such a stubborn fellow, but being Scottish,

stubbornness should have been as familiar to her as, well, Highland coos meandering through the heather.

Still, things were growing more challenging. The visit was coming to an end. He was going to depart soon, and she was beginning to feel certain that whether or not he felt entirely comfortable with it, he was about to head back to the fight.

And she understood that was what he needed to do and yet...it didn't feel right. Perhaps she would be able to simply turn it into a beautiful memory of an experience that lifted her soul.

But as she grabbed the golf club, lifted it, and began striding across the green that her brother had had made on his vast estate, she had a different idea entirely.

She knew she did not have long to sway the Englishman who was stealing her heart, but she was going to convince him that he and she should be bound for life.

He didn't even have to marry her. Well, perhaps he did.

She wanted to marry, but she wanted him to see what he'd be missing first.

And so she strode up to him and shoved a club into his big hand.

"What the blazes is this?" he demanded, his dark eyes wide.

"Have you not heard of golf, man?"

His lips twitched. "I have heard of it as some sort of mad sport that you Scottish people play and some English people have become transfixed by."

"Well, then you are about to see why it makes everyone so transfixed," she said.

“And I’m beginning to wonder if you Scots spend all of your time out of doors.”

“In the summer?” she said. “Of course we do. We must soak up every bit of sunshine.”

“There’s been a great deal of rain,” he stated, unable to resist needling her, it seemed.

And there had been rain. It was Scotland. “And you didn’t grow mold,” she said.

Whilst they had spent time in the mist, so to speak, they had also spent a good deal of time in each other’s arms, which she had enjoyed immensely, as had he.

Her bedchambers had become a sanctuary. A place to hide away from the world. Though she was suspicious that it was impossible to truly hide in the castle, despite its size. Her family and his family were canny people.

But the beauty of society was everyone’s ability to claim ignorance as long as they didn’t actually see anything.

“Summer rain is different than winter rain,” she pointed out.

And then her brother Brodie let out a strong note of agreement as he tested his own golf club. “Exactly so,” he said. “A bit of summer rain is just the thing for one’s complexion.”

“Complexion?” Octavian echoed. “Do I need to worry about my complexion?”

“Your complexion has only grown more beautiful, hasn’t it, lads?” Leith crooned as he clapped Octavian on the back.

Octavian wagged his brows, his sense of humor excellent, no doubt due to his

family. “You know exactly what to say to make a fellow feel fine about himself.”

“If you don’t have ruddy cheeks, you should definitely be concerned,” put in Archie with more seriousness.

“Yes,” she agreed. “Ruddy cheeks are a sign of good health.”

Octavian arched a brow, eyed the slender stick with the head attached to it, and demanded, “What the bloody hell am I going to do with this?”

“Think of it as cricket, but for people with brains,” she said.

He snorted. “Now that is...”

“A very Scottish thing to say,” put in Brodie, as he took out a small ball from his pack and readied it for play.

Octavian frowned, stepped up, and looked at the small ball, then at Brodie’s club.

“Idiocy.”

“Skill,” countered Leith. “Something you English generally lack.”

Octavian had the good sense not to be drawn in.

“Let’s see what all the fuss is about then,” her Englishman drawled.

She grinned, pulled a ball from her own pack, and positioned it. “This will be struck by the club, and it will be sent soaring out, and you will attempt to make it land in a little hole far away.”

He stared at her as if she had lost her wits. Perhaps in the explanation of it, golf did seem like a game for those who had lost their wits, but the truth was it was immensely fun, and it meant that you got a good long walk in.

She was always looking for a reason to go on a good long walk.

Most Scots were always looking for a way to get good long walks in.

And she felt that Octavian needed a good long walk almost every hour to keep his mind off of war. Not a march, mind you, but a walk.

He'd been walking far too much for the purpose of war. He needed to walk for pleasure, for fun. And just as she was about to say something, Josephine, Anne, and Emily romped up the hill towards the green, Teague following, looking a bit harried but bemused.

"This looks like a good deal of fun," drawled Octavian, clearly eager to see his cousins put the Scots through their paces.

Archie, Brodie, and Leith all looked incredibly pleased at the arrival of the ladies.

"May we join in?" Josephine asked quite boldly.

Teague announced loudly, "Of course you may. We shall be happy to teach you the way to use a..." He cleared his throat. "Club."

Josephine arched a brow at him. "Oh, I'm sure I shall take to it at once."

Ellie smirked.

She adored these ladies and how nothing intimidated them. Many young ladies did

not know how to handle her brothers, but the Briarwood girls certainly did, and they'd all been having more fun together than she could recall having fun with other people in a very long time.

Octavian still looked suspicious as he eyed the club, eyed the ball, and then looked out into the distance. "You want me to hit that where?" he demanded.

"Come now. Come now," she soothed. "Don't be so skeptical. Eschew some of your Englishness, why won't you?"

"I think English people are actually optimists," Josephine said bluntly.

"You do?" Ellie asked, amazed.

"Oh yes," put in Emily.

"You see," said Josephine, "the weather is terrible in the south as well, and yet the English still somehow manage to write the most beautiful poetry and they go out on the greatest adventures. The truth is the English should have never come back from most of their dangerous endeavors, and yet they managed to conquer half the world."

"I mean, it's a terrible thing in its way," said Emily, lips pursed as she considered all angles of English optimism. "But also rather impressive in its way."

Josephine nodded. "Yes. They have a certain sense of optimism that it'll always work out for them, and I think that, while they might be quite self-deprecating, it is that rather inherent belief that has led them to conquer most of the world and believe they are the best at all things."

Ellie laughed. "I think you might have a point. They do seem always determined to feel that they are going to win."

“Indeed they do. Do you think it shall last?” Emily asked.

Octavian snorted. “Of course it will last. The English have been winning things since...”

“Yes. Yes. For time out of mind,” the Duke of Rossbrea said, sweeping up his club from the bags that had been brought up earlier in the day.

Octavian eyed said club warily, then cleared his throat. “We’re not about to have our own fisticuffs here in the Highlands, are we?”

“Only if you think it sounds like fun,” Teague said merrily.

She gave her brother a warning stare. The rift between the Scots and the English was now more playful than warlike on most occasions. But in the wrong circumstances or difficult conditions, there was a deep pain that ran through the Scots and the banter could turn bloody.

Still, in any grand aspect, at least, the Scots simply didn’t have the means to fight back against the whole of England now.

It was dismaying. And so a war of words was the best that they could hope for. Sometimes she wondered what it would’ve been like if the Scots had won against the English.

Perhaps her grandfather and her father would’ve had very different lives. Perhaps half the people that had filled the land of Scotland would still be here. They would not have been made to leave for countries thousands of miles away because of poverty and starvation.

But one could not go back. One could only go forward.

“Now I’m going to teach you how to golf,” she said to Octavian.

“Teach away,” he said.

She winked at him, eager to show him that life with her was the very best thing for him. “Now put your feet apart.”

He did as he was told.

“Take hold of the club.”

Now she looked over and noticed Teague was already teaching Josephine how to handle a golf club.

She stifled a laugh.

Her brother was standing behind Josephine, assisting her in the right stance, and Josephine looked as if she was going to burst out laughing at any moment.

She also looked quite pleased to be enveloped in Teague’s massive embrace, which was necessary, of course, to teach the proper way to grip a golf club.

Ellie could barely contain her amusement!

And so to be absolutely silly and to show the absurdity of the way her brother was clearly trying to connect with Miss Josephine, she stepped up behind Octavian, wrapped her arms about his middle, and showed him exactly where to put his hands.

“What are you doing?” he whispered.

She tsked, as if she was doing the most obvious thing in the world. “I’m simply

teaching you how to golf.”

“Your brothers are looking at me as if they’re going to turn my insides into my outsides.”

She laughed. “Why is it so different when a gentleman teaches a lady how to play golf than when a lady teaches a gentleman?”

“I don’t know,” Octavian said, though he did not move away from her embrace. He laughed softly, that delicious hum of his which caused his body to vibrate against hers.

Hell’s bells, how she loved that feeling! Loved the feeling of his long, hard body, dressed in immaculately made attire, against her.

“By rights, it should not,” he continued, adjusting his stance, gripping the golf club harder, and leaning ever so slightly into her embrace, clearly determined to tease her back for draping herself on him.

“But it just is. There’s something about the way the male mind is made.

Quite irrational, quite without sense, but there it is.

I think we need ladies to keep us in line,” Octavian observed.

“Then I’ll happily keep you in line,” she piped and traced her fingers over his. “Now put your hand here.” She adjusted ever so slightly. “Now you are going to rock back.”

A rough take of breath slipped past his lips. “No,” he growled softly. “You’re killing me.”

“Surely, it’s worth it,” she whispered near his ear.

“You?” he whispered back, as the others worked with their clubs and readied for the play to begin. “You’ll always be worth it.”

She tingled at those delicious words. Did he mean them? How she wished he did.

“I should step back now,” she ventured. “But I don’t want to let you go.”

The silence that slipped between them then was as powerful as a caress.

Neither of them ever wished to let the other go. She knew it. She felt it in her heart and in her soul.

“Why must you say such a thing?” he rumbled.

She licked her lips and slipped back. Her body felt bereft as she separated her torso from his. “I like being with you. Is that so very terrible?”

He stared down at her, his eyes dark with emotion. “Not terrible at all. I like being with you more than I’ve ever liked being with anyone else.”

“Then what is the difficulty?” she queried softly.

He parted his lips, ready to make quick argument.

But she knew he was not going to give her a real reply, but rather whatever nonsense he had made up in his mind.

Grateful for once that her brothers were completely absorbed by Josephine, Emily, and Anne, she shook her head.

“Ellie,” he began, his voice deep with a note of regret.

“No, no!” she whispered, raising her hand before he could say anything. “I will not hear anything unreasonable. You must tell me the truth.”

He bit his lower lip, his brow creasing. “The truth?”

She nodded and, much to her dismay, her heart began to pound so rapidly, she could hear little else.

“The truth is,” he said softly, “I simply cannot yield to love.”

“You make it sound like a battle,” she returned, even as her mouth dried and her stomach twisted with disappointment.

“It is.”

“No, it’s not,” she countered, unwilling to let him get away with this so easily. “It is a game, and until you’re willing to play it with joy and fun—”

“Joy and fun?” he gritted out. “Despite what my family thinks, this life is not joy and fun. Most have never seen what I have seen. And I pray to God they don’t. That you don’t.”

The words hit her like blows, but she refused to be cowed.

To give up on him. On herself. On them. “You might be right, Octavian. But if you don’t find a way to trick yourself into thinking this life is joy and fun, I fear that you’re doing the Briarwood name a great disservice.

But you are doing yourself the greatest disservice of all. ”

He winced, and for a single moment, it seemed as if he was about to say something else. Something powerful. Something meaningful. Something which would change both of their lives forever.

But then his sensual lips pressed into a hard line, and his passionate eyes turned into twin dark stones.

He turned to the ball, hauled back the club, and let fly. A gasp rasped from throat. He hit the ball with such force that the sound echoed off the glen, and the ball raced across the sky.

And for a moment, she could have sworn it was his heart fleeing from hers.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

Deimos stood in the corner of the long, beautiful drawing room that overlooked the loch, playing the violin with utter perfection. Octavian's cousin went everywhere with the instrument that had been made for him in Italy.

And it was really quite a boon. Octavian found music could break the worst sorts of tension and pain.

It was something that he was familiar with on the battlefield.

Music was often played to help the soldiers stay in line.

Drummers carried the beats. Flutes were played to give some sort of encouragement and assurance.

And when the fires were lit the night before battle or when the camps were set up as they marched across the Peninsula, ever ready for facing death, the men set about in circles, singing songs and playing tunes.

Deimos could play the sweetest, most beautiful music. He could make any room sound as if heaven had come down and was vibrating out of the strings of the violin.

As he played, Scots and English alike sat rapt, held in the young man's thrall.

Octavian's grandmother sat bemused, staring at her grandson. Her pride shone on her beautiful, aging face. She was the great, wise woman of their family. And she loved the beauty of this world, despite having been raised in the ugliest of circumstances.

She was someone who had encouraged a tradition of artists in the family, who used their creativity to bring joy to all those around them.

Sometimes Octavian wished he had been born with the talents of a dancer or an actor or a musician, or even a writer, but he had been born with the talent for being a soldier.

And so now, as he sat listening to the last strains of Deimos's music filter through the night, his heart ached with a melancholy pain that felt all-encompassing because he was going to have to go back into the fray.

The days had raced past, and the weeks that he had been given to be spared the hue and cry of pipe and drum were done.

And he could not thank Rossbrea more for this brief period away from the rest of the world.

Yet he now feared he was in more pain than when he had come, because now he felt like he was giving something up, walking away from something that had pressed in on his heart, daring him to be different... But he could not be different.

He could not allow himself that.

He had to be exactly who he was until the war was won, until the battles were done, until Napoleon had been entirely stopped and the world had been put back to rights.

He could not stop until his family was safe.

Until all those who had been displaced by that madman at least had hope of a life of peace.

He let out a soft sigh as the final note of the song drifted through the air.

And then Rossbrea and his brothers, all of Octavian's cousins, and all of his family that had traveled up from the south of England lifted their hands and began to applaud.

"That's damned beautiful," Archie declared.

"I love a tune. Indeed, I do. I didn't think an Englishman had so much soul in him," proclaimed Leith.

"I now feel as if I have been kissed by an angel and also long to sob out my tears," put in Brodie.

Deimos nodded. "Yes, it is a rather piercing melody, but I can't leave you with that now, can I?"

"You can. It would be a right fine thing to do. We could sit before the fire now and recite poetry," the Duke of Rossbrea said. "That would be a very Scottish thing to do."

Deimos smiled. "If I may, I was walking down by the village, and I heard some music that inspired me. So I think there's another Scottish thing that we could do."

"Oh?" Rossbrea asked, tilting his head to the side, clearly intrigued.

"If you don't mind," Deimos said, gesturing with his violin.

"Not a bit of it," the duke replied, gesturing for him to continue.

Deimos lifted the violin, placed it back on his shoulder, tucked his chin in, and then

began to play. The fiery notes of a reel began to fill the long drawing room, and the Scots let out a chorus of laughter and cheers.

“Well done, man!” Rossbrea called.

“That’s the stuff,” Archie declared, clapping his hands together.

“Now let’s dance, ladies,” Brodie called.

The wild beat of the music filled their limbs, summoning some ancient instinct to move together. Soon all the men were up and ready to dance.

Emily, Josephine, and Anne let out squeals of pleasure as they were hauled to their feet and all but tossed into the air as the jaunty dance began.

This was no proper English ballroom reel.

No, suddenly the music was filled with clapping and stomping and jumping about, done with such excitement, such full joy of life, that Octavian sat frozen in his chair for a moment.

He swung his gaze over to Ellie.

She’d already been called to dance by one of his cousins.

He wished to curse at that. Laertes was attempting to bounce her about the room as enthusiastically as the Scots.

And he was doing quite a good job. Ellie was grinning at him, and the two of them were dancing up and down the room as if a reel could cure anything.

The whole room acted as if there wasn't a care in the world. And for them, perhaps there wasn't.

And then, much to his dismay, he spotted his grandmother sitting down beside him. He tensed, feeling half paralyzed by it all.

"It can, you know," she ventured.

"What?" he gritted, holding on to his chair for dear life. He did not know why. He'd always been able to make merry before. What had changed? Why was he holding on so tight now?

"Dancing could cure anything."

His eyes flared. Blasted Briarwoods! This was the second time his thoughts had been made plain.

"Good God, Grandmama, have you started reading minds?"

"Yes," she said with a smile. She leaned into her chair casually, enjoying the scene. "It's all too easy at my age, my dear. I've almost seen it all, you see."

"Why don't you go and dance, Grandmama?"

"Are you going to ask me?" she asked.

He gritted his teeth.

"Oh dear," she said with a tsk. "Alas not. You are in the grips of something, Octavian. And I worry for you. I was hoping that when we came up to Scotland, that this place would shake you free of whatever has a hold on you. You've always been

such a joyful, merry boy, but now there's something not quite right. ”

“Oh?” he challenged, tempted to wax on about the difficulties of war.

She eyed him without judgement. “And I know what it is.”

“What?” he demanded.

“You won't let yourself have what you want out of some strange fear. And it's interesting to me because you know our family. You know all the fights that we've had, all the struggles, and you know fear is always the enemy.”

“I'm not afraid of anything,” he protested.

She tilted her head to the side. “You're not?” she queried. “Elucidate.”

“I'm not afraid,” he repeated.

“Oh? I do love the novelty of being wrong.” She smiled gently. “Can you help me to understand?”

“I have a duty,” he stated firmly.

“A duty?” she queried, that ever gentle yet knowing gaze far more frightening in some ways than any corporal on a battlefield.

“Yes,” he insisted plainly. “To be the best soldier I can be, and I cannot allow myself to...”

He licked his lips and looked away.

“What?” she queried.

“Love,” he blurted, grateful that the reel covered their conversation.

Her brow furrowed. “Do you not love your family?”

“I do. That’s not it. But, Grandmama,” he bit out, “if I were to marry her, if I were to have children, I—”

“Yes?” she prompted, truly curious as she leaned forward ever so slightly, encouraging him to free himself of those thoughts.

“You see it sometimes,” he said softly.

“What do you see, my love?”

He frowned, hardly believing he was daring to explain it. Soldiers did not talk about such things with those who did not understand the fight.

He drew in a slow breath. “The officers that have wives and children. They’re afraid to take risks.

They hold back. They don’t push as hard.

Sometimes they get their men killed because they’re indecisive, because they wish to be safe.

Sometimes they retreat too soon. Battles are lost because of those things, Grandmama.

A madman can destroy countries because of such weakness.

And England cannot lose. I cannot lose. Not after all—”

His voice broke and he looked away, unable to bear her kindness.

“I see,” she whispered.

And from the emotion deepening her voice, he rather believed she did.

“You will not have what you want because England requires more of you?” she surmised.

“Yes,” he gritted. “My men require it.”

She nodded, understanding. “Oh, my love. I cannot argue with such a cause, nor would I be such a fool as to try.”

She emphasized the word fool, and he felt a moment’s trepidation. She had cast him as the fool in the play they were performing.

“Do you think me a fool?” he demanded. “Is that why you’ve put me in that part?”

Her eyes flared. “Oh, Octavian. You know the plays better than most. The fool is always the wisest person in the play.”

He couldn’t breathe suddenly. Nor could he look away from the grandmother who had loved him since long before he had taken his first step... And who would love him until the very end, whenever and whatever that might be.

“Be wise, my love,” she said firmly. “As I have always known you to be.”

He pressed his lips together, feeling emotions shake through him. Emotions he

never allowed himself to unleash. Swiftly, he swallowed, then stood. “All right then,” he forced himself to proclaim with bravado. “Grandmama, let us dance.”

He offered his hand to her.

She smiled, her eyes still sad, but joy was there too. “I could never tell you no, my darling boy.”

“Good,” he said, “because we must cherish these moments together, Grandmama.”

“Of course, we must,” she said. “Who knows what is to come? Listen to your cousin, listen to the joy that he is causing.”

He looked over at Deimos. He was playing like a man possessed by another world entire. And the room was full of revels because of it.

The great Scotsmen were causing the floor to shake, and so were his cousins, who were embracing the spirit of the Highlands.

“Right then, Grandmama.” He grabbed her by the waist and whirled her around.

Deimos transformed the world with music.

He would transform it with justice.

Each had to play the instrument they had been given.

She let out a laugh, and soon they were all dancing in formation, the Scots leading the way.

Octavian marveled at how easy it was for the great big Scotsmen to suddenly start

herding the Englishmen about, teaching them the patterns of a new dance.

They danced in, and then they danced out.

They danced to the side. Then they danced back to the other side.

And then they turned to their partners and whirled about until the room turned blurry.

They passed partner to partner until suddenly he was arm in arm with Ellie.

His breath caught in his throat.

She gazed up at him, her cheeks bright and rosy, her lips parted in a smile that would light his heart for a thousand years.

And he knew when he was on the next battlefield that this moment was the one he would carry. This look upon her face would be the last moment he would recall if ever he faced death. He held her close, drank in her scent, gazed down at her beautiful rich hair, and wished...

Oh, how he wished!

But wishes meant nothing, not really, not at the end of the day. So all he did was dance. He danced with everything he had, with every fiber of his being.

And when at last the music came to a pause and the din of the crowd faded, he turned and looked to his grandmother. She was gazing upon him with a sort of resignation in her eyes.

That was the look he had seen in someone who knew that they were losing a war.

He then gazed down at Ellie. She did not look at him with resignation. She looked at him with great hope, and he hated himself. He had come here and promised her brothers that he would make her happy, but he knew he was now going to do the exact opposite.

He had been the most terrible of men to think that he could simply charm her, that the two of them could be light and not without real connection.

What had he done? What lies had he told himself? His grandmother was mistaken.

Clearly, he had never been wise. He was a real fool, not a pretend one.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

Lady Hermia Newfield, once Lady Hermia Briarwood, now the Countess of Drexel, cuddled into her husband's arms in the magnificent room in the even more magnificent castle.

Despite the beauty of the days, the Scottish summer nights were cold. There was no question about it. The air slipped in through the windows, stealing in off the loch, sweeping through the room and up and over her form.

Thick blankets swathed herself and her darling husband, and a hot brick wrapped in flannel had been tucked at their feet. The bitter cold of the north was inescapable when the sun set and the stars shone.

She did not mind it.

As a matter of fact, she liked it quite well, for it gave her a deeper excuse to nestle into the loving embrace of her husband's arms.

Years and years and years ago, she never could have imagined that a man like him would be her husband.

She had spent her Seasons on the shelf as a young lady.

There had been no interest in her as a marriage prospect.

She had not particularly minded. In fact, in many ways, she'd preferred it.

She found the antics of her own family impossible sometimes, love them as she did.

But she had ended up causing the most scandal!

And it had been worth it.

Dear God in heaven, it had been worth it, because it had united her with her husband. Their passion for each other had changed everything. And now that passion kept them warm on cold nights, whether they be in Scotland or England or the Isle of Wight.

Yet her heart this night? Her heart was full of trepidation, for she was a mother. Her oldest son, Maximus, had married. He had found the most remarkable of women to claim for his wife.

She had long hoped he would find the right lady, but it had never occurred to her that she would come in the surprising form of a pickpocket! Even stranger, she'd been a young lady who had needed to be convinced that she was worthy of being a member of the family.

The young lady had been more than worthy.

She was of excellent character, a phenomenal choice, a lady to be reckoned with.

But that had only taken one weight off of Hermia's shoulders.

Though she and her husband had feared for their eldest son, Maximus had come back to himself. But she still worried about Octavian.

Sometimes she wished beyond all things that she and her husband had not allowed their sons to go to war.

"It was a mistake," she said softly.

“There are no mistakes,” her husband said, his voice rumbling softly against her ear as he held her tight, pulling the covers up about them.

She loved that he took such good care of her. Even after all these years. She appreciated that he tried to comfort her, to ease her feelings at the decisions they had made.

They gazed into the crackling fire just across the room, savoring each other’s company. For in times of doubt and fear, the only thing one could truly do was to savor the pleasure of the moment, lest the fear of the future come and seize all joy from one.

“We should not have let them go fight,” she insisted, balling her hand into a fist on her husband’s muscled, capable chest. “Maximus did not need to go. He is destined to become the earl. Octavian? His spirit was so gentle as a boy! He was always the best in all the plays, and he cried when he found animals hurt, or when Cook tried to set out traps for mice.”

She could feel her husband smiling sadly as he stroked her back, listening.

She knew she was rambling and was grateful that he listened to her trying to sort out her own thoughts and feelings. “We are not soldiers, my darling. We’re a family of artists and theater-makers. We come from a courtesan, for God’s sake!”

It was true. The first great lady of the Briarwood family had been a courtesan who had captured the interest of the king, borne him a son, and won a dukedom for that son.

They had not won their dukedom on a battlefield.

No. They had won that dukedom in a seduction in a bed that had caused pleasure all

around.

“He is a soldier,” her husband said gently. “Despite his gentle spirit, or perhaps because of it. He could never bear injustice. You know it. You’re merely grasping at straws now, trying to find some sort of sense in all of this. And I understand. You wish to keep him safe.”

“I worry,” she breathed, trying to keep tears from stinging her eyes.

“Of course you do,” her husband replied without condescension. “You’re his mother.”

“Don’t you worry?” she countered.

“I worry less, but I do worry,” he said honestly. “Sometimes it keeps me up at night.”

“It does?” she asked, astonished.

She’d never noticed him up pacing the floor. But she didn’t wish to question it, because her husband loved their son so very dearly. “Don’t you think you could write to a friend?” she rushed, ignoring how mad she sounded. “Maybe you could...”

And then her voice died off and she closed her eyes, making herself stop before she said something she couldn’t take back.

She could not ask her beloved husband to save their beloved son in such a way. If he ever found out, Octavian would never forgive them.

Octavian was a brave, honorable man who had risked his life over and over again for his own men. He would never forgive his parents if they intervened and got him out of the war.

“I wish to God that dreaded man Napoleon would stop,” she bit out.

“He’s been at it for far too long. First there had to be that terrible revolution, where so many people were killed.

And then this? Will the blood never stop?

Will the battle never cease?” she demanded.

“Will monsters like that always rule the day?”

Her husband tightened his arms about her and sucked in a rough breath.

“I don’t know, my love,” he whispered. “History tells us that monsters will always rise, that peace will be followed by war. And then there will be peace, and then war will rise again. That it is inescapable,” he said, his voice taut with bitter resignation.

“I wish it wasn’t true. I wish it could be some sort of fantastical story in which all humans knew peace. But you know that’s not how it is.”

She nodded, blinking back tears, wishing she could curse the lot of men, who insisted on making war and ruining the lives of so many. “But how do I save my son? How do I face this?”

“You face it,” he said, “as you face everything, Hermia. Head on, without hiding, my glorious wife.”

She bit her lip, then nodded, her heart swelling with love for the man who was always there for her and bolstered her whenever fear stalked her way.

A better thought slipped into her mind. “He’s in love with that girl.”

“Yes,” her husband said. “He is.”

“He won’t admit it.”

“No. He won’t,” he agreed.

She tsked. “And he’s not going to ask her to be his.”

“No. He’s not going to,” her husband said on a sigh.

They both stared at the fire for a long moment.

“Why?” she demanded. “You’re a man. Explain it to me!”

He laughed softly, but there was little humor in it. And when she glanced up at his face, she could see the pain and sorrow of a father who could not rescue his son.

“Men are foolish creatures,” he ventured, clearly searching for the words to make sense of their son’s behavior. “You already know that.”

“Yes,” she said, but she refused to give up. “But there has to be a way.”

He winced. “No, unfortunately, I do not think there is. There’s nothing that we can do. It seems like all attempts at intervention have been made. And he is determined to walk his path, as most people are, my darling. He’s got it into his head that he has to finish out this war. And so he must.”

She held her breath, words hovering at her lips. Words she’d never dared to say aloud. Not even after all these years.

“What if he dies?” she said softly. And then she clamped her mouth shut, horrified

she'd spoken the words aloud. But then she felt a measure of relief at finally speaking them.

Her husband didn't reply. And her heart sank. She had shared too much of her fear. And she needed to be strong for him too.

"I know," she said quickly, sitting up slightly so she could gaze down at the man she loved.

"I know what a silly question that is. We all die. We all perish. We all slip from this earth. And I have had to live with the possibility that I would receive a note telling me that he had died on some battlefield or in some fray. I have faced it for so long. It has been too many years, but I will not shirk it now," she whispered softly.

"I promise you. I will hold firm and I will hold strong."

Her husband pulled her back into his arms and rolled her onto her back. He tilted her face towards his and pressed his forehead to hers. "Of course you will, my love. It's why I admire you so greatly. You are a rock. You always have been."

"Sometimes it gets most frustrating being a rock," she admitted.

"Yes." He kissed her forehead and then her cheeks. "And in those times when it's frustrating, you must lean upon me."

Then he kissed her lips softly, taking her mouth gently. She lifted her hand to his face, needing to feel at one with him, to feel loved and secure in something, even if she couldn't feel secure in the safety of her son.

He paused the kiss, as if he felt there was something else. Something more that needed to be said.

“I feel sorry for her,” she said suddenly.

“You feel sorry for the young duchess?” he clarified, stroking a lock of hair back from her face.

She nodded. “She is a widowed duchess with power and land and all the things which everyone is supposed to want. But I’ve seen the way she looks at Octavian, and I’ve seen the way that he looks at her. I can’t imagine what she will think when he leaves.”

“No one can imagine what she will think. But one thing I can tell you.”

“Yes?” she said softly.

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“That one?” her husband said. “She’s not going to beg him to stay. She knows her self-worth. She knows that there’s nothing to be done. Not if he wills it so. She is no fool. And her heart is braver than most.”

“I would like to shake him,” Hermia stated, wishing she could stride down the hall, wake her son up, and give him a good talking to as if he was small again.

But she couldn’t. Not ever again. He was a grown man. And he had to live his life. She and her husband and her family had raised Octavian, and that had to be enough. She prayed it was enough.

“I think that every man needs to be shaken,” he pointed out.

“Then you go do it,” she teased.

“I would, if I thought it would make a difference.”

“You should still have a word with him,” she said gently, daring to at last say what she wanted, deep in her heart.

“If it is what you want, of course I will. But he’s a stubborn man.

He always has been. It’s why he’s in the Army and not in some other occupation that would’ve pleased us more.

None of your family was ever going to choose to be a vicar, but he could have done almost anything else.

But he is on his own path, that one. It's why he demanded a position that wasn't safe.
”

Safe. None of her family had ever chosen safety.

They'd always chosen the hue and cry and living with passion. And she supposed that was how it still should be. But now they had to fight with all they had. They had to try to help Octavian before it was too late.

Octavian sat at the breakfast table, eating a particularly fine rasher, when his father came in.

Rashers were one of his favorite parts of the day.

And the rashers here were particularly good.

The cook was excellent, and the meat had been cooked perfectly.

And there was a richness of taste that simply did not exist down south.

Perhaps Scottish pigs lived exceedingly happy lives.

“It's delicious,” Octavian said. “You should try some.”

His father nodded and sat down beside him. He poured out a cup of tea, stared at it, then stared at it some more.

Octavian studied his father for a moment, wondered if something was amiss, and then chose not to ask about it. Which in and of itself was most unusual.

Now, in his family, men often did ask if things were amiss. But too much was

happening in his own life right now to venture opening such a conversation... Until he realized what an utter scoundrel he was being.

What if his father needed help?

Slowly, he lowered his fork to the blue-painted porcelain plate and asked, "Are you all right, Father? Is something wrong with Mother?"

"I am perfectly well, and your mother is perfectly well too," his father began. "But I felt the need to speak to you."

Octavian grew wary. This was odd. His father did not usually corner him in the breakfast room. They had wonderful conversations. He'd never tried to hide anything from his father. There was no need. But this felt quite pointed.

"Oh dear, I feel as if I'm being ushered into the dock," he said, "to be questioned on some difficult matter."

"Well, that's not completely wrong," his father admitted, smiling ruefully. He cleared his throat. "What are you going to do about that girl?"

Octavian choked on air and grabbed his half-drunk cup of black tea and drank it to the dregs before managing, "I beg your pardon?"

"The duchess. I'm talking about Elspeth."

"Father, whatever are you saying?"

"She's a delight, my boy."

"Yes, she is."

“You should marry her,” his father said suddenly.

Octavian’s mouth dried, despite the gulping of tea. “You know that I don’t wish to marry.”

His father’s brow furrowed. “Yes, I know that you don’t wish it. But that doesn’t mean that you won’t do it. She would be the most delightful of wives.”

“Papa,” he said carefully, choosing a childhood endearment for the man who had raised him so well, who had taken him out on the moors, who had taught him to ride a pony, had put his first little sword in his hand and played pirates with him.

And then, of course, there had been the years when Octavian had been growing into a man. There had been the gentle, kind reminders about how to treat everyone, how to stand up for oneself, and how to survive the years at Eton.

His father had been there every time he had gone to war, and he’d been there every time he had come back. And he’d written him at least once a week for years. But now... Now his father was asking to speak in a way he did not wish to.

“Papa, thank you for your kindness and your good thoughts. But no, there will be no delight here. She’s a delightful duchess. There’s no question. But any idea of us marrying is but a dream.”

“Why?” his father demanded. “The two of you would be marvelous together. Everyone sees how lovely you are, how much fun the two of you have.”

Octavian grabbed hold of his napkin, dabbed his mouth, and said, “Everyone is right. We are wonderful together. She is a delight. But Papa, it’s not possible.”

“I just don’t see why, my boy.”

“You don’t need to see why,” he said, hating that he had to disappoint his father. “And don’t worry. Maximus is your heir. And he will have—”

“Don’t!” his father cut in, turning towards him, his eyes wide with pain.

The ferocity of it stunned Octavian.

“Don’t,” his father said again. “I’ve never thought of you boys as just something to carry on my line.

You are my flesh and my blood, and I love you more than I could ever say.

So if you choose not to marry her, my displeasure is not because I don’t think you’ll have children.

It’s because I worry that you are denying yourself.

Denying yourself happiness and denying yourself love like your mother and I know. ”

“But, Papa,” he protested, “some of us wake and see what the world is really like. And I’ve done that.

The Briarwoods? They stay at Heron House.

They go to London. They’re invited to house parties and they make merry.

And they do not see. Or if they do, they choose other things than all-out war.

But Maximus and Calchas? They understand.

They understand the truth of the world, the brutality of it.

And while I am touched by all that you wish for me, I cannot wed.

I cannot let myself grow soft. Nor can I bring that brutal world to the woman I... ”

His voice died. He pushed himself back from the table and strode to the door. “I’m sorry, Papa,” he said. “I’m coated with something that I wouldn’t wish to share with anyone. And I cannot clean it off. Not yet.”

He strode through the door and didn’t look back.

As he strode down the hall, Octavian wondered how something meant to be so restful, this too-brief respite away from the fields of blood, had become such a nightmare.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

It was not going well.

The play was tomorrow, and the Briarwoods were leaving the morning after. Most of the trunks were already packed and were ready to be put into the coaches.

The servants had secured everything. Just the last few things would be added in the early morning so that they could easily depart the Highlands.

Perhaps none of them would ever come back. The thought sent a lance through Ellie's heart, piercing it, leaving the most terrible of pains. Perhaps she would have to convince her brother to take a house in London this Season so they could visit Josephine, Emily, and Anne.

She would have to become a prodigious letter writer, because she did not think she could survive without her friends now that she had them. She had had only Hamish for so very long. And now, having three such lovely, young women in her life, she could not bear the idea of losing them.

But that was not the worst of all.

Yes, the play was ready to be presented as a final celebration to the locals, both nobles and villagers, tomorrow evening. But somehow, she was going to have to get her courage together to tell Octavian the truth, to tell him all her feelings.

But she was beginning to wonder if it would matter at all. He seemed so committed to some idea in his head, as if it was the word of some divinity on high carved deep inside him.

There might be no reasoning with him. He was so noble and so good, and she... Well, she'd known exactly what she was choosing when she had decided to take him into her life and her bed.

A part of her had also believed in the magic that her Hamish had promised. She eyed the sky, looking for the osprey, for some sign, for any hint or indication that things were going to work out.

Hamish had promised her he would send her a grand passion, the man that was meant for her, a man of her dreams. But it wasn't working out that way. The oh-so-delightful dream that she thought she was having was fading from her fast, and it hurt.

It hurt that she did not know how to show Octavian that he did not need to be worried about her. He did not even need to be worried about himself and the love that might be lost.

No. All that he had to do was love her now, choose her now. Or so she thought. Perhaps she was wrong. Perhaps the living in the now was what was causing all the trouble.

And that's when it hit her.

Och, it rattled through her and it hurt. It hurt so much she sucked in a shuddering breath. Nothing had hurt this much since she had watched Hamish fade away on a small bed, made to look huge by his ever-shrinking form.

She had to let Octavian go. Not only did she have to let him go, she had to tell him to go. She had to free him. She could not ask him to stay. Or even ask him to marry her.

Perhaps she could not even tell him that she loved him. Should she? Was her love a

burden? Would he carry it into battle like a millstone rather than a boon?

She closed her eyes and put her hands over her face as she laid in the heather by the loch she loved so well, whilst the seals played, oblivious to her human trials.

“You love him. And I admire you greatly.”

The firm female voice, touched with a hint of regret, slipped through the Highland air.

Ellie rolled over quickly, wondering who the devil it was. A part of her knew before she even had a chance to look. It was Lady Drexel, his mother.

Ellie was quite accustomed to running into the vast number of Briarwoods who had come to visit all over her brother's castle and estate.

Many of the dowager duchess's children had come, though not all.

Hermia and her husband, the earl, had come with Octavian.

Because of course, when Octavian was away, his parents had missed him.

Whenever he came back from war, they spent as much time as possible with their son. She thought her brother brilliant, that he had made certain to invite them.

That Teague understood that with such short time available and such risk at hand, that he had to invite the earl and countess to be near their son.

She swallowed.

There was no point in denying her love, though it hadn't been a question on the

countess's lips.

And so she said, "I do love him."

Lady Drexel nodded.

And then, much to Ellie's surprise, the lady plunked herself down on the heather beside her.

The countess adjusted her skirts, placed her hands back, tilted her body ever so slightly, and then lifted her face to the sun that would linger in the sky in the summer night.

"I'm sorry," the countess said.

"Why?" Ellie blurted. "That I love him? Is the idea of a Scottish wife so very terrible?"

The countess tsked. "Oh, I should adore it," she said. "And you, my dear? I could not ask for anyone better as a daughter-in-law. Fortune has sent me the most magnificent women to fall in love with my sons. I just wish my sons were as wise as the ladies they fell for."

A laugh tumbled out of her throat. "I do not think it is possible for men to be as wise as ladies," Ellie mused, tracing her fingers over the grass and the purple Highland flowers about her.

The countess eyed her then and laughed. "I do not think you are wrong. With the number of brothers I have, I can't disagree with you."

"With the number of brothers I have," Ellie replied, "that is how I came to the

conclusion.”

The countess laughed again. “I always adored my brothers. They were very clever. Difficult, of course. Always making fun. But the way our mother raised us, we were all open to love and ready for it, for the most part. Yes, of course, there were difficulties, and sometimes we had problems that prevented it. But we believed in true love, you see. We believe that for every one of us, there is the one. It was a Briarwood blessing, you see.”

Ellie sat and let out a soft breath, astonished by the admission. “And now what do you think?”

“Oh, I still believe in the blessing. But this next generation?” The countess frowned.

“They seem less convinced by the possibility of it, and it makes me sad. Perhaps it is the times that we live in. You see, my brothers and sisters and I, we grew up in a time of relative peace. Yes, there was that difficult bit with the American Revolution. But we didn’t really feel that, not as much, and things seemed hopeful, possible. ”

The countess wound her hands together as she explained, “The most wonderful books were being written in philosophy, the most hopeful ideas about what could happen for man were spoken, and the American Revolution in and of itself was an inspiring thing. It was asking the most important questions about the rights of humans, about what we should have and what we should fight for.”

The countess’s voice died off, and she looked away for a long moment.

Then her smile dimmed, replaced by a grim sorrow.

“And at first, France seemed like it would go the same way as the Americans, but it did not. And even darling America let us down, didn’t it?

The ladies don't have their rights. Slaves still exist. And then, France, dear God. ”

The countess closed her eyes against the horror of it. “France took up the battle cry of independence and justice for all and then let out a wave of murder, cruelty, and brutality so intense that we are still feeling it shake through our lives. I fear we shall feel it shake through centuries.”

“I don't think you're wrong,” Ellie said softly. “From what I read, such things seem to happen just when we think we are about to achieve bliss.” She paused, then whispered, “I thought that perhaps with Octavian, I was about to achieve it too.”

The countess opened her eyes. “I sometimes wonder now what all that revolution was for if we just end up where we were. With kings, and tyrants, and brutality instead of the rights of man and woman.”

Ellie felt compelled to reach out and take the countess's hand.

“The truth is change doesn't always mean it's going to be pleasant.

History shows us that without question. Your son came into my life.

I adore him. He gave me a new view of things.

He's taught me so much, and I think I have taught him too.

And I will never regret it, not a bit. But it's not going to end the way I wanted it to, the way I thought it would. And it makes me think...”

“Yes?” Lady Drexel prompted.

She eyed the countess, wondering if she dared confess what Hamish had told her

about a sign.

She bit her lower lip, then rushed, “That blessing you speak of. I believed in that sort of thing too. Magic. A touch of it anyway. And maybe it’s the curse of this generation to lose their belief.

I don’t think I believe in magic anymore,” she rasped.

“I don’t think I believe in those kinds of blessings. I wanted to, but I can’t.”

Ellie’s eyes filled with tears and she searched the sky again.

“What are you looking for?” the countess asked softly.

“Another sign,” she said.

“Oh,” the countess replied, “and you have not gotten it?”

She gave a tight shake of her head, “No, and I am going to stop looking because I cannot live my life like that. I cannot live my life pushing and pushing. I feel like I will break from it.”

And then she shoved herself to her feet. “Forgive me. I must go and rehearse.”

The countess nodded. “I understand. My mother will be waiting for you, and we mustn’t disappoint her.”

“No,” she agreed.

“But this will,” Lady Drexel replied sadly, gesturing to Ellie.

“What?”

“Octavian leaving you. It will disappoint my mother. She is getting older now, a little bit more faded, and I worry the magic is slipping from her too. I don’t want to lose her, you see, or the magic she taught us to believe in.”

Something filled Ellie’s heart as she looked at Lady Drexel, who was a mother of full-grown sons, and she realized that the countess was afraid too.

And so Ellie reached down, took the countess’s hands, pulled her to her feet, and took her in a warm embrace.

Lady Drexel was afraid of the loss of her mother, and the loss of her son too.

Suddenly, she realized that they were very much alike. The years between them did not matter.

“I’ll always be here for you,” Ellie vowed impulsively. “If you want me to be. Even if I’m not your daughter in truth or in marriage.”

Lady Drexel sucked in a breath, her eyes warming, even as they shone with unshed tears. “Oh, my dear girl. I should like that very much indeed.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

“It must hurt, even now. The loss of him.”

Ellie stilled on her wide, soft bed and wordlessly entwined her fingers with Octavian's. She needed a moment to think of a reply to this observation which was gentle and made with the utmost tenderness.

She loved these moments alone with him, away from the eyes of others.

Yes, somehow over the last two weeks, these moments of quiet in the middle of the night, when the entire castle had gone to sleep, had become treasured. They spoke of everything. Poetry, plays, history, philosophy.

They spoke of ideas and the noble need to bring peace to a war-torn Europe.

Still, he never spoke of his time on the battlefield.

Nor had she spoken of her marriage.

So she had not expected this comment.

For some reason, she had not expected him to bring up her life with Hamish. Octavian seemed so determined to just live in this tiny little window of life here in Scotland, where he did not really think about the past, nor did he think about the future.

It was like a perfect window into a world that he could have to himself, and she wanted him to have it.

If he was going to go off to war and fight battles and perhaps never come back, she wanted him to have peace to cling to, joy to remember, and her own deep and ever-growing affection to hold close to his heart, even if he could not return it.

Even if she feared that, secretly, he did not want her love.

She knew that he thought that he could not have it. She knew that he thought his heart was hard and had to remain so.

Men were such silly creatures.

They thought they held vast, noble secrets inside them that ladies could never comprehend. She could not agree.

Perhaps it was because she had been raised so much with boys that she understood them so well. She'd thought of this considerably since her conversation with Lady Drexel that day.

Men were actually quite simple creatures. Octavian felt he had to keep her out so that he could be strong, and so she had to teach him that one could be vulnerable and strong too.

"Oh, I miss him every day," she said honestly.

"You see, we toddled about together when we were small. I can still remember his mother singing to me, putting me to sleep in the afternoon some days. And on others, my mother would sing to him. We discovered the world together, Hamish and I. And I think we thought that we would go through our entire lives together. We would be old together, and we would watch our children together."

"But you two never..." he said softly.

She sighed, missing Hamish, but finding it rather challenging to explain how she had loved her husband but had not been in love with him.

“We married each other because it’s what our families wanted, and we understood the unification of power to protect the people of the Highlands.

You don’t know what it was like before,” she said, her throat tightening as she recalled her grandfather’s grim face as he had whispered the tales of the great Highland Clearances after the last terrible rebellion.

“You see,” she began, “so many people were driven off the land by landlords who cared more about English power, money, and the privilege that the south could give them than actually looking after their own people. It was a miserable, miserable time. I’m grateful that I did not have to see it, but the stories have been passed down through my family and through Hamish’s.

It is like a bitter vine that can’t be pulled out.

Its roots just keep growing and growing, no matter how we try to stop them.

So our families wanted to make certain that the people on our land could end that pain and stay somehow. ”

He studied her with patience, truly listening.

She felt her skin prickle with horror as she remembered the stories of famine and homelessness that had besieged so many Scots.

“People still left. The glen I showed you is an example of that, but we’ve done better than most. We’ve given work to so many of the people on our land and on Hamish’s. Sometimes I miss his castle.”

She smiled tentatively. “I miss it there. It is pressed right up to the sea, perching on a cliff, like an old giant, defiant against all odds. It’s wild and dashing, and one feels as if they’re in the middle of some great novel or a Shakespeare play.”

“And him?” Octavian prompted gently.

Tears filled her eyes. “I miss him, yes, often.”

“You can talk to me about him if you want.”

She smiled through those tears, grateful that Octavian was more than just a handsome face and strong body. He was a strong man in spirit too. “Thank you. That’s kind.”

“I think that people often don’t like to talk about such things,” he said gently, “and I would hate to think that you couldn’t share with me.”

She arched her brow, tempted to point out that he didn’t exactly feel as if he could open up and share with her, but that wasn’t entirely true. She had a suspicion that he’d actually shared more with her than with most people. She wished that he would share more.

Once again, perhaps she had to teach him how.

“He was my very best friend,” she rushed.

“We could finish each other’s thoughts, and we would run through the glens together, causing trouble wherever we went!

We had quite the cheeky reputation as a pair.

He dipped my hair in ink, if you must know, and I did as many terrible tricks to him

as I could think of.

We were like brother and sister. He was the best, most wonderful, most kind boy.

And when he got sick, it was like having a whole part of myself removed. ”

Her chest felt heavy, for she hadn't spoken as much about Hamish as perhaps she should have.

It was hard. But that was all right. She could survive hard words and hard tasks.

She'd already survived much. “For a long time, I didn't think I'd ever recover, you see.

Because without him in my life, it was like learning to walk again, to breathe again, to eat and think again. We had thought as one for so long.”

“And yet you are not afraid of risking that kind of connection again,” he said softly, as he carefully wiped away her tears. “But different... Not just friends...”

She grinned at him. “You mean falling in love?”

He nodded softly.

“I'm not afraid of it at all.”

“How is that possible?” he demanded, astonished. “How can you not feel fear deep in your gut?”

She shrugged. “I must fall in love again.”

“Why?” he gasped.

She blinked and tilted her head to the side. “Because I promised Hamish.”

“You did what?” he all but yelped.

“I promised Hamish that I would fall in love and live life fully and with joy, and I’m going to do that, you see. With you, I’ve been having an absolutely wonderful time, so I’m fulfilling my part of the bargain that I made with him when he was dying.”

Octavian blinked. “I’m part of a bargain?”

“A splendid bargain,” she pointed out. “A bargain full of bliss and goodwill...and perhaps a little bit of l—”

“Don’t,” he cut in.

She swallowed back the word “love.” Blowing out a breath, she closed her eyes.

“Forgive me,” he rushed.

She tsked. “Oh, don’t worry. I’m not going to fling myself dramatically at you and profess love like some character from one of the dramas that are becoming so sentimental and popular.”

“You’ve seen those?” he asked with surprise.

She rolled her eyes, trying to find firmer ground. She had so very nearly said she’d loved him. And it had terrified him. “I do go to Edinburgh and see plays.”

He smiled. “You must come to England. My grandmama would be thrilled to show

you around London and take you to all the plays.”

“Perhaps I will,” she declared, stretching out along his side. “I think my brother would like it, and I certainly like your cousins.”

She didn’t add, And I want to see you too . She didn’t want to risk driving him away before they had to part.

“Go on then,” he urged. “Tell me more about him.”

As he pulled her closer, he asked, “It doesn’t feel strange telling me about him?”

“No. He would’ve approved,” she pointed out, easing back into his embrace. “I think he even would’ve liked you, Englishman that you are.”

He laughed softly. “I’m glad.”

“When he was dying, I knew that he didn’t want to go, but he was ready,” she marveled. It truly had been amazing the way Hamish had met his death. “He was the best, most gentle, most wonderful man I’d ever known. And I almost think...”

“Yes?” he prompted carefully.

She worried the inside of her cheek, then threw all caution to the wind and said, “I almost think that he had done here what he’d come to do, and he was so good and so lovely that the heavens wanted him back. That there was nothing left for him to learn here.”

“Oh, dear,” Octavian groaned. “That must mean that I have a great deal to learn,” he teased softly.

She punched him lightly on the shoulder. “Don’t make fun.”

“I’m not,” he said swiftly before saying with all seriousness, “I think you’re right.

There are special people like that. They die far too young and one can only wonder why, because they’re so unique, so special, and yet they are taken.

I’ve been lucky. I haven’t had anything like that happen to my family, but I’ve known men and boys in the Army who’ve been stolen too soon.

So I can only imagine what you feel.” He paused, then managed, “But I am well aware that I have many lessons to learn.”

“Why do you make it so hard to learn them then?” she teased, hardly believing she could dare to be so naughty with him, but feeling she had to say it.

“My God,” he said, tickling her ribs, “you’re relentless.”

“Och, I must be,” she said, trying to stifle her laughs. “And I must be ridiculous to you because I’ve fallen for an Englishman.”

“Don’t say that,” he rumbled, slowing his touch until he cupped her hips and held her close.

“Why not?” she said, eyeing his mouth, thinking of all that he could do with it. A magic of its own.

“Because that wasn’t what this was for,” he returned, stroking his hand along her body. “This wasn’t—”

“You came to this place to enjoy yourself. Are you not enjoying yourself?” she

queried without recrimination.

He groaned as he swept his hand over her breast. “Yes, but—”

“Are you afraid of feeling guilty?” she suddenly asked, pushing herself up into a seated position on the bed.

A note of protest escaped his lips before they pressed into a tight line.

“You are,” she breathed, not caring that the blankets left her sitting nude before him. “You’re afraid of feeling guilty about this, as if you misused me somehow?”

She drew herself up and declared, “Well, I release you from that now, Octavian. You are not allowed to feel guilty. You are not allowed to feel shame about this. You are not allowed to feel regret. So when you leave this place, which you will do in order to go and stop Napoleon, you will not look back and feel any touch of sorrow. Do you understand me?”

He stared at her as if she had turned into a lioness on the bed. He gazed at her with awe.

“Promise me,” she insisted. “You will not feel anything but luck when you think back to me and this castle by the loch and what we have shared here.”

He was silent for a moment.

She leaned forward and placed her hand over his heart. “Promise.”

He licked his lips. “I don’t know if I can promise that.”

“Then you shouldn’t leave,” she said simply.

He shook his head. "That seems like such a childish view."

"Why?" she demanded. "Are you doing something now that you think you'll regret?"

"Perhaps." His voice was barely audible and, for a moment, he looked haunted.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, unwilling to let him choose guilt. "You're taking my heart, and you refuse to give me yours in return, is that it?"

He was silent.

"I don't need it in return." She thought of part of her vow to Hamish and shoved aside the part about finding a passionate love. "That's not what Hamish asked me to do. Not really. He asked me to embrace life and not retreat from it after his death."

Though it was not easy, she couldn't turn away from the other part of the vow she'd made Hamish.

"And if you are not the grand passion of my life, so be it. I will have learned something from you, or maybe, maybe," she continued with a hoarse voice, "I'm supposed to learn how to let you go now that I've had you. "

"Life seems to be asking you to let go of many things," he said, "and it doesn't seem fair."

She arched her brow. "You, the Honorable Octavian Newfield, man of the Army, speak of fair? How astonishing."

He let out a low growl. "Don't make fun of me."

"Why not?" she asked. "Life should be full of laughing."

“Yes,” he returned, “it should.”

But there was sorrow to him then, and she feared that he was slipping away from laughter, and she wished... Oh, hell’s bells, she wished she could drag him back to it.

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The play was done. The applause had been had. The bows were taken.

The night had been full of laughter, and the sun had at last set on the sea loch, leaving the land kissed in lavender and cobalt hues as the light vanished.

It was time.

Time to say what needed to be said.

Hamish would be so proud of her.

She was living just as he had asked, and yet it did not mean that everything she desired was working out. Somehow, she had thought that if she had just done as Hamish said, everything would fall into place, but it hadn't.

It didn't matter.

She still had to continue to be brave, to do as Hamish would want. To live the life that she was destined to live. And that wasn't a tiny little life, sitting in a room in the Highlands, protecting herself.

And so, still in her costume from the play, whilst the Briarwoods and her own family and people who had been invited from all parts drank champagne, laughed, made conversation, played cards, and danced inside the castle, she found him standing out in the garden overlooking the loch.

Her heart, oh, her treacherous heart, it swelled at the sight of him.

How she loved him!

No, her heart wasn't a traitor. Her heart was so wise because he was a great man. One of the greatest men she had ever known, and she ached with wanting, wanting something she feared she could never have.

She swallowed that thought, because wishing really didn't do anything. Action did. She strode across the gravel, stood beside him, and wound her hand with his.

"Octavian," she whispered, "I have to say something."

And just as before, he said, his voice nearly broken, "Don't."

Much to her horror, her eyes stung and her throat tightened, but she did not give way. "Why not? When it is clear to me that you—"

"Because I won't be able to bear it," he growled.

"You won't be able to bear me saying something? You, who have faced such great conflict?"

"Yes," he bit out, "because this feels worse than any war I have fought."

Her love could feel worse than all of that?

"I can't believe that," she protested as tears slipped down her cheeks. "I love you," she said firmly.

No whispering, no hesitating, she declared, "I must say it, you see, because it is true. And when you go, which I know you will, I want you to understand that. I want you to know that I love you, even if you cannot love me..."

His gaze shot down to hers. “Do not love you?” he returned.

He drew in a harsh breath. “My God, woman, it’s not that I don’t love you.

I do. And that is what is making this sheer hell.

I love you. I love you more than the stars and the moon and the damn loch out there full of the creatures that play.

I love you more than I could ever put into words.

I love with you an intensity that terrifies me so entirely, I cannot let it break loose. ”

“Then,” she rushed, “what is there...?”

“I have to go,” he gritted. “I have to leave you, and I have to fight without fear, because if I let the fear of losing you control me, do you know what could happen?”

She began to tremble at his fierce passion. “No, I don’t,” she whispered.

“I could get people killed,” he stated harshly. “So I must get myself in order.”

“But, Octavian,” she said, “there is no order when it comes to something like this. There is only how you truly feel.”

“That isn’t so,” he lamented, his voice deep, almost guttural. “Life is full of emotions and desires, and if we act upon all of them, it’ll be utter chaos.”

He shook his head, his dark locks teasing his brow. “I know my family believes that love conquers all, that it saves all, but...oh, Ellie,” he whispered. “Love doesn’t exist on a battlefield.”

She sucked in a breath as he turned to her, took her face in his hands, and lowered his mouth to hers, kissing her fervently.

When he pulled away, he ground out, “I cannot regret what has happened here. I will do as you command. I will not feel sorrow when I think of these two weeks, but sometimes, by God, I wish...”

“What?” she cried.

His face grew gaunt. “People say that it is better to have loved than to have not loved. But I don’t know if that’s true.

The sort of pain I feel in my heart now, having to leave you, it is so...

Ellie,” he whispered, “I will have to shut you out. I will have to shut it all away. I never should have let it in.”

“Yes, you should have,” she countered.

He held onto her tightly then, pulling her against his chest.

“Ask me to wait for you,” she demanded. “Ask me.”

“I cannot,” he said, “because I don’t know if I will come back.

I could never do that to you. I could never do that to myself.

Because if I ask you to wait for me to come back, I know that I will do whatever it takes to come back, and I can’t do that, Ellie.

I must do whatever it takes to win the war.

I must not try to save myself. Do you understand? ”

She nodded against his chest, though the agony of it nearly crushed her. “I understand. I understand.”

And then he slipped away from her, walking out into the darkening night.

She stood there by the sea loch, the wind now whispering in, cutting through the glen, cold and merciless.

Clouds chased in overhead, ominous, a promise of the end of summer and the beginning of winter, and her heart broke again.

She knew that a heart could break again and again, but she had not anticipated how very terrible it would be this time.

She had chosen him. This. But that wasn't the part that was undoing her.

No, the worst of it was how he was hurting himself, how he was punishing himself. How he did not see that love was not the enemy. That love would not make him a coward.

For that was his fear. Not that he wouldn't love her. But that he would love her so much that he would betray himself and all he had ever fought for.

Tears poured down her face, and she dug her nails into her palms.

She'd found grand passion. But she never could have imagined it would be like this. This could not have been what Hamish meant.

There was nothing she could do to make Octavian see.

That was the cruel nature of people. Nobody else could force someone to see. No. They had to open up their eyes themselves. He had to see that their love was beautiful, not dangerous.

She searched the sky again, looking for any sign, any sign that Hamish might send her. But the sky was empty. The night had fallen, the osprey were gone, and her chest was empty because Octavian was taking her heart with him.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

What had he done?

He was in love. There was no denying it. It was the most brutal feeling he'd ever felt in his entire life. The loss of life he'd seen on battlefields, the loss of friends? That was a hell of its own.

Love?

Love was a hell he never could have hoped to understand.

Whoever had sung songs about love and the joys of it should be dug up, shaken, and pulled apart.

That was his opinion.

All the poems about love, except for the ones citing how terrible it was, should be destroyed. No one should be encouraged to be in love or feel love because he was being ripped apart by love.

How could love threaten to swallow up his sense of duty so entirely?

There was no question that it was making the attempt.

Octavian charged through the dark night across the heather. He did not know what possessed him, but he climbed up the peak, into the night.

Clouds covered the moon, making his path almost indiscernible.

A flash of light crossed the sky, and he realized that a storm had found him.

Thunder rumbled over the glen. Rain began to fall through the dark night. It slashed down over him, coating his clothes to his skin, smashing his hair to his head. He walked relentlessly through the cold, piercing rain as it dashed down on the land.

The cold water was merciless, like the brutality of the love that he felt.

His instinct, every part of him, told him that he should go back down into the glen, seize her, pull her to him, claim her as his own, and never let her go. She was his, his woman, like the old days when a man saw a woman and claimed her.

Yes, that's who she was. His.

But he was not ruled by such forces as those men of old.

Duty, his service, his vows to that? That was controlling him now, wasn't it? He had to stay strong. He had to hold tight. And yet, the harder he held tight, the stronger he committed himself to those vows to be hard as stone, the more he felt as if he was rattling apart.

How could he leave her? He was the worst of men. A complete and total bastard. Her husband, her best friend, had died, leaving her to face the world alone, and now he was going to leave her, but it was because of a noble endeavor.

Surely, that made it acceptable somehow. Surely, that was right. It was at least a justification.

A hollow, cruel justification.

He swallowed back bitter gall and strode higher and ever higher up into the craggy

peaks, his feet catching on the wet grass and twisting heather.

He did not stop.

He did not allow himself to look back over his shoulder. He did not know what drove him, but on he went, farther and farther until he found the path that led to the glen she had taken him to.

Lightning flashed again overhead, and he spotted the cottages. They looked like ghosts in the darkness, like echoes of the past. Like bones, waiting for the soul to return.

Once this place had been full of hope. Once this place had been full of the lives of people who were born and lived and died in the ever-continuing circle that was the story of humanity.

They were gone now.

The cottages looked even worse in the storm.

Wind whipped at the collapsing roofs. Rain pounded down on the structures.

His heart sank.

He wanted to curse, and so he did. He threw back his head and cried out to the heavens as lightning flashed across the night.

He raged. Raged against the misfortune of finding love right before he had to go back to war. Why? Why did it have to be like this of all things?

And as his rage clawed at his throat, and he railed against the unfairness of it all, the

storm began to dissipate.

And when his throat was hoarse and he lowered himself to his knees, the rain, the storm, as it seemed to do in these Highlands, passed as quickly as it came.

And he was left alone, drenched, cold, shaking.

“Are you trying to get yourself killed, man?”

He tensed.

He knew who it was. He closed his eyes. But he did not wish to see him.

“Please,” Octavian said, “not now. I cannot face you right now.”

“And I’m not giving you a choice,” the Duke of Rossbrea countered.

A strong hand came down on Octavian’s shoulder, but there was no harshness to that touch. “You have to face it, and me, and I won’t leave you alone like this because I think I’m to blame.”

“Why did you bring me here?” Octavian bit out. “Tell me, was it to be some sort of pawn in your sister’s life? When you met me, did you say, ‘Och, there’s the English fool that I can bring up to my estate’? Did you know it would end like this?”

“I had no idea it would end like this,” Rossbrea said wearily.

“And if I had, I never would’ve invited you.

No.” He stopped himself. “That’s not true.

I think I would've invited you still, because even though you're on your knees here, I still have hope.

It is the curse of the Highlanders to have hope," he sighed.

Rossbrea circled around him and knelt before Octavian, like brothers in arms of old, ready to take the vows of knightly service. The duke's eyes flashed with resolve and suffering.

"We've had everything ripped away from us up here in so many ways. Even myself."

Octavian blinked. What the bloody hell did Teague mean? He was a duke.

Rossbrea gestured to his wet clothes. "Look at me. I don't dress like a great clan laird.

I don't even speak like a great clan laird.

That's been ripped away from me. Our music, our language, our way of life.

I speak and dress like an Englishman because I must, or I risk losing the power I have to help my people.

But when I met you, I knew you were a man to be reckoned with, a good man, and I thought, he needs peace.

He needs a bit of healing. I could see that you were on the brink, laughing, making jokes, and yet the tension in you was so intense. "

Octavian sucked in a surprised breath as the force of his friend's words fell on him. How had he not realized how much pain the Scot was in? "You didn't bring me here

for your sister?”

“No,” the duke said honestly, “I didn’t.

I brought you here for you. My sister was a lucky part of it.

” His voice dimmed. “Or so I thought. When we stood in the ballroom that first night, that’s when it struck me that the two of you would both enjoy each other and have a bit of a laugh.

It never occurred to me that she would fall in love with you.

You’re completely the opposite of what Hamish was.

Hamish was quiet and soft and gentle. He loved to roam the hills, but he made no war on anything.

You are loud and brash and a warrior. It never occurred to me that she, that you—dear God, man—that you would steal her heart, that she might one day wish to leave these Highlands to be with someone like you, that she would fall in love with a man who could be taken from her.

Do you think I’d want such a thing twice for my sister? ”

“No,” Octavian said, as he truly came to understand. “I suppose I don’t, but what am I to do? That is exactly the position that I am in. I have fallen in love with her.”

“And she loves you,” the duke said. “So what are you going to do, pretend that you don’t?”

“I have to,” he said.

“Then you are a liar and a coward, and those are two things that I never thought I would say about you.”

He snapped his gaze up to his friend. “You can say that? To me?”

The duke’s brow furrowed and pain tightened his mouth. “I did not think I could, but I must. If you are going to run away from here, if you are going to leave her and not understand the power of what you have, then that is what I must say.”

“But what about my men? What about the—”

“What about them?” the duke challenged. “Do you think they will do better having an officer who cannot even admit the truth to himself? No, this is what I have to say to you. You think that if you give yourself over to her, that you are putting everyone at risk, but this is what I think: If you do not give yourself to her, then you are only fighting for a flag, for a country, for an idea. But if you fight for love? For her? You will be fighting for so much more. You will be fighting for a legacy. You will be fighting for the bonny children you could have with her. And you will be fighting for a world that will be better.”

The duke grabbed his hand, clasping it as if making a blood oath.

“You must look ahead, Octavian. I would not usually say that to anyone. I usually think we have to live in the present, but you? You do not even allow yourself to think of the future, and that has to stop. You need to dare to believe. You need to dare to believe you’re going to be an old man, nurturing a country with new ideals, raising children who will change the world, and living with a wife who loves you very much.”

Octavian swallowed. Was it true? Could it be true? Was the duke right?

And just as his own heart and mind began to realize that, yes, it could, a cry pierced through the air. He spotted it soaring overhead.

An osprey. It dashed down and landed on the cottage roof. Gazing at him, tilting its head side to side.

And then another soared down, joining it. The two birds sat side by side, majestic and fierce.

“They mate for life, you know,” the duke said. “Once they find love, even if they must part for a time to migrate, they always return to each other.”

For life.

Octavian looked at the glorious creatures and felt a moment’s peace, a moment of belonging, a moment in which he knew that this was happening just as it should, and that he was going to go back down into the glen after the storm, freer than he had ever been.

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It was not easy to smile or to dance.

It was not easy to make conversation, and yet Ellie forced herself.

Hell's bells, every part of her wished to retreat to her room, to hide away, to sink into her blankets and never look upon the light of day again.

Surely, it would be far easier to retreat to the cave-like chamber and never ever face anyone again. But she was stronger than that. She always had been, and she always would be.

She wasn't about to give in or give up. Even if she felt like she was dying inside.

So, as she stood in the center of the long drawing room, as the storm rolled by, she made conversation with the Briarwoods and their other guests.

She forced herself to make pleasantries.

She knew that no matter how terrible life could be, she would not be crushed by it.

Somehow, she would go on. She would be strong.

She would drink up every bit of goodness that there was in this life, even if, at this moment, it felt like it had all been stolen from her.

The dowager duchess made her way across the room and paused before her. "You were wonderful tonight."

“Thank you,” Ellie said, choosing to try to see the good in all of this. “I have discovered a newfound love for performing, which I never would’ve known if it was not for you. I think we shall have to make it a yearly summer occurrence.”

“How wonderful,” the duchess replied, though she did not look as joyous at the news as she might have done under different circumstances.

The dowager smiled sadly. “I read the book of poetry you gave me. Those stories? Those stories fill my heart with the strength of the old gods and the old ways. Ah, to have been a Highlander then.”

Ellie considered this, then shook her head. “No. Oh, to be a Highlander now. To usher this land into a new existence. That is far better. We might be on our knees,” Ellie declared, one duchess to the other, “but we will not be destroyed. One day, the whole world will wish to be a Scot.”

The dowager duchess laughed, a tone which suggested she had seen the hardest and best of times, and that she too had not been bowed.

The older woman took Ellie’s hand and squeezed it.

“Well said, my dear. This duchess already wishes that she was a Scot, for they have the greatest hearts, it seems to me.”

The room suddenly grew silent.

A strange sensation stole down Ellie’s back.

And somehow she knew.

She knew it was him.

Slowly, she turned. Her breath froze in her throat. Octavian stood in the doorway. His clothes were soaked, pressed to his hard body.

Then without hesitation, with a crackling power, he strode across the room and, in front of everyone, he pulled her into his arms, enveloping her in a passionate embrace.

He took her mouth with his. Their lips caressed and met and branded.

They claimed each other with that kiss.

When at last, he lifted his lips from hers, he locked gazes with Ellie.

“You gave me your love,” he growled fervently.

“And I’m going to keep it. And I’m never going to let it go.

And I give you mine to keep. Our love will grant me strength when I feel weak, because I know in my heart you will always be there whispering to me, encouraging me to go on.

To fight on. To never ever let the brutality of this life win.

Will you marry me?” he whispered. “A soldier?”

She held him close, hardly daring to believe what was happening, but it was. And she would not falter.

“I have always wanted you exactly as you are. I have never wanted anything different, and I never will,” she declared, holding onto him with all her love.

“Then be mine,” he said. “Be mine today. Be mine tomorrow and the next day and forever. Let us dream of when it’s all done and when we are together again.”

She lifted her hand to his cheek. “It is a beautiful dream.”

“It is our future, Ellie, and I will never let you go again.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:03 am

Five years later

Scotland

Summer

Octavian had not been wrong.

The Battle of Waterloo had been one of the greatest battles the world had ever known. It would likely be remembered as one of the greatest as well.

No doubt, men and women would recount it for centuries.

It had changed the world, and thousands of men had died or been wounded and had not gone home.

Their bodies had littered those far-off fields. Those lost souls would become a part of that land. They would never go back to the countries of their births. But Octavian was not one of them.

No, Octavian had come home.

And there were days when the war still came to him at night or in the quiet afternoons as he walked through the Highlands.

He could still see the faces of all those men. He could smell the gunpowder on the wind. He could hear the cannons roar and the horses scream as they fell to fire.

But here, in the peace of the Highlands, with his wife's hand in his, he was healing. How he loved the feel of her hand in his, leading him through life's difficulties.

He'd thought when they met that he was the one who was supposed to teach her how to be happy, how to let the past go, how to live life fully.

How foolish he had been! For it was she who had taught him all those things instead. Or perhaps, in truth, they had taught each other.

They were still teaching other. They always would. Which made their love even more wonderful.

Here, he knew how beautiful the world actually was, how pain and death could make something beautiful. And as they crossed up into the little glen where the cottages still remained, he gazed at those little homes.

Now, in high summer, the roofs were covered in wildflowers. The yellow and pink flowers bobbed on the thatch that was retiring to the earth.

It was a beautiful sight.

True, they were a sign of that which had been taken, but the flowers were a promise of what was to come.

Octavian's small son and his smaller, feisty daughter ran and laughed through the glen, climbing over rocks, chasing rabbits.

And overhead, two ospreys wheeled, dancing in the sky, crying out their song, united. They had returned to each other, as they always did. They were one.

As was he with the woman of his heart.

The End