



The Knight's Temptress (Lairds of the Loch #2)

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Category: Historical

Description: DARING ESCAPE

Sir Ian Colquhoun has never feared danger. So when Lady Lachina MacFarlan is captured by a ruthless enemy, mounting a daring rescue seems only natural for the courageous knight. But once he has Lina safe in his arms, he sees that the prim young girl from his youth has grown into an alluring woman of extraordinary gifts. When circumstances force him to take her as his wife, the stakes-for her life and their growing love-rise even higher.

DANGEROUS DESIRE

Grateful for Ian's bravery, though wary of his recklessness, Lina agrees to his unexpected proposal. As the two begin to know each other as husband and wife, Lina realizes that she desires more than a passionate protector. But when evil threatens both her family and the knight she has come to love, the lady must take the greatest chance of all . . .

Total Pages (Source): 22

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:13 am

Stirling, Scotland, late May 1425

Riding into the cobblestone court of Cambuskenneth Abbey and reining in between the long abbey kirk and its tall stone tower, the weary knight flung himself from his lathered horse, brushed off his dusty leather jack and breeks, and smoothed his dark brown hair away from his face. It was dusk. He was hungry.

A lay brother in a black cassock hurried to meet him. The knight handed him the horse's reins, saying, "His grace is here, aye? With Sir William Fletcher?"

"They are both here, sir. But his grace is receiving nae one."

"He will receive me. Prithee, tell Sir William it is urgent that I speak with his grace as soon as possible. I will wait."

"Your name, sir?"

"Ian Colquhoun... Sir Ian Colquhoun," he added, remembering.

The lay brother summoned a second layman to look after Ian's horse and then entered the abbey through the tower door.

Sir William Fletcher, a man some six or seven years older than the twenty-four-year-old Sir Ian, came out to get him shortly afterward. Sir William said, "His grace will see you at once, sir. Come with me."

"My news is not for sharing," Ian said. "Is anyone else with his grace?"

“Nay, he meets his nobles across the river at the castle but sleeps here. Since his English captivity, he prefers to avoid fortresses, so he has been here for several days. Hanging four of his close kinsmen much affected him, however greatly they deserved it. So he will be alone,” Fletcher added, “although I will stay with you.”

“Aye, sure,” Ian said, knowing that Jamie Stewart, King of Scots, rarely went anywhere without his childhood friend, Will Fletcher. Jamie and Will had become friends shortly before Jamie’s capture by the English and his subsequent nineteen-year captivity. Will had been one of the first to welcome Jamie home a year ago and had received his knighthood shortly thereafter.

Ian had won his own silver spurs more recently.

“This way,” Will said, opening the abbey tower door onto a stairway landing. Leading the way up a few stairs to the first landing, he opened another door and preceded Ian into a small, austere room, saying, “Sir Ian is here, your grace.”

The King beckoned Ian forward. Although Ian had seen him less than a fortnight before, his grace looked older than his thirty-one years and very tired.

Jamie said, “Be sure that latch catches, Sir Ian. It often fails. One good thing that my duplicitous uncle did before he died was to begin restoring the abbey kirk here and some of this tower. More requires to be done. But tell me your news. By the look of you, and your urgency, I ken fine it cannot be good.”

“James Mòr and the rebels have seized Dumbarton,” Ian said flatly.

“The castle?”

“Aye, your grace, but also the royal burgh and harbor.”

“My uncle John Stewart of Burleigh is the Governor there.”

Ian’s throat tightened. “The rebels murdered Lord Burleigh, your grace. They also murdered his captain of the guard, my cousin, Gregor Colquhoun.”

“Fiend seize them!” his grace exclaimed. “We must have that castle back.”

“Dumbarton Castle is impregnable,” Will Fletcher said.

“Nevertheless...” Jamie looked at Ian, his eyes narrowing speculatively. “Your Colquhoun seat of Dunglass is gey close to Dumbarton, as I recall.”

“Less than three miles up the river Clyde,” Ian agreed. “The castle sits midway between Dumbarton and Glasgow.”

“Then you are ably placed to recover the castle for me, are you not?”

“We are likewise well-placed to suffer mischief perpetrated by the rebels at Dumbarton,” Ian replied with a wry smile.

He saw Will Fletcher’s bushy eyebrows shoot upward, but Jamie said, “I recall that you also enjoy a reputation for mischief, Sir Ian. So I would like you to put that devious mind of yours to work and devise a way to recover my castle. You are, after all, a knight of my realm, sir. Now, what do you say?”

Without hesitation, Ian said, “If I can do it, your grace, I will.”

“I shall prepare a royal warrant for you straightaway,” Jamie said. “I’ll also give you names of powerful nobles who will help if you need them. They will want to besiege the place, but I’d liefer you find means to avoid that and keep the town and harbor safe. Feed him now, Will. He must be hungry.”

As Ian followed Will Fletcher to the abbey refectory, he felt rather numb.

Was he daft to have agreed? His family would surely say he was, aye.

Glen Fruin, near Loch Lomond, end of July

“We’ve stared down at that tower now for a good half-hour,” the big, dark-haired Highlander said with a grim frown. “Ye’re sure they’re here?”

“Aye, master,” his much smaller companion replied, eyeing him warily.

“And ye’re sure ye saw Lady Aubrey MacFarlan and her daughters?”

“I canna be as sure o’ that,” the lad said. “I followed the Laird o’ Galbraith and five females what crossed the loch wi’ him from Inch Galbraith tae the wee clachan ashore. Then they all rode here wi’ him. Likely, one or two o’ them women be maidservants. But I dinna ken nowt o’ them. I only just ken the laird.”

The two stood on a wooded hilltop looking down at a large, square, gray-stone tower just above the wide, swift-flowing burn known as Fruin Water.

“If they’re here, ye’ve done well, lad. If they are not—”

The Highlander broke off when a door in the tower opened. As he watched, a young woman wearing a plain gray kirtle and white veil stepped outside. Another, younger lass with flaxen hair in two long plaits and wearing a pink kirtle followed, then another even younger one in yellow. The third lass boasted a thick, unruly mass of long, light-red curls, kept back from her face by a white ribbon that ran under the mass and up behind each ear to tie in a bow atop her head.

A slender woman came next. Recognizing Lady Aubrey, the Highlander relaxed. One

more lass followed, also garbed in gray with a plain white veil. She had a basket over one arm and shifted it slightly as she shut the door behind her.

“Where are they going?” he wondered aloud.

“I... I dinna ken, master. Belike they’ll walk up the glen.”

“We’ll follow them and see,” the big man said, already moving through the woods to avoid losing sight of the women.

He soon saw that the winding path they took up the glen followed the course of Fruin Water as it tumbled down to join Loch Lomond, a mile and a half behind him. Confident that the swift burn would prevent the women from leaving the path, he realized his error a short time later when the red-headed chit suddenly kilted up her skirts and splashed across the burn to the other side.

When his man turned quickly to head downhill, the Highlander stopped him. “Go softly, and do not show yourself. They must not see either of us.”

“They will if we cross yon burn, though. D’ye mean we should turn back?”

“Nay, nay. I want to see where they go. But we’ll wait until they get into the woods above that meadow they’re crossing. Then we’ll follow them.”

Sakes, he thought when he and his companion reached the woods and could hear the women’s voices ahead, it was almost too easy. If they had been his mother or sisters, they would take armed men along whenever they left home.

The women stopped at last in a small clearing, still talking quietly. The gray-clad maidservant with the basket put it down and opened it. The other one took a cloth from it and shook it out to spread on the ground.

A bird tweeted nearby. Another answered it, and a squirrel chattered.

It was a beautiful and peaceful place, where aught could happen and nae one would be any the wiser.

“Ye’ve done well, lad,” Dougal MacPharlain murmured.

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Glen Fruin, near Loch Lomond, August 1

Lizzie, no! Come back!”

Dismayed to see her young companion spur the bay gelding she rode to a gallop and disappear around a turn shortly before the steep, downhill Glen Fruin path met the one along Loch Lomond’s southwestern shore, eighteen-year-old Lachina MacFarlan gritted her teeth, warned herself to keep calm, and urged her dun-colored horse to a faster pace.

A voice above and behind her on the glen path shouted, “Lady Lina, wait!”

Glancing back at the gillie who followed her, Lina did not reply or slow her mount. Nor did she spare more than a fleeting thought for the reaction her good-brother, Sir Magnus Galbraith-MacFarlan, would have when he heard—as he would—that his little sister had broken her word... again.

Although Sir Magnus was the largest man Lina knew—or had ever seen, for that matter—she did not fear his wrath. For one thing, he and his wife—her elder sister, Andrena—were visiting Magnus’s eldest sister and her husband in Ayrshire. For another, she knew that Magnus would easily deduce that the blame for this mischief lay entirely with the irrepressible Lizzie.

Reaching the shore path, Lina scarcely noted the sparkling blue loch spread before her. Deftly turning the dun gelding southward, she felt relief mixed with exasperation when she saw Lizzie again.

The slim, fourteen-year-old scapegrace rode as if she were part of the horse.

Lina was a competent horsewoman, but Lizzie was spectacular, especially riding astride in her mossy-green cloak with the mass of her long, curly red hair billowing behind her in a cloud of light red and sunny highlights—confined only by a narrow white ribbon at her nape.

Lina's honey-gold hair lay smoothly coiled against the back of her head under a white veil held in place with an inch-wide band that she had embroidered with pink roses. Her hooded cloak was of soft gray wool that her sister Muriella had spun from their own lambs' wool. Lina had woven the spun yarn into fabric herself.

It was a fine summer morning. Clouds drifted above and the air was cool, thanks to a breeze blowing off of Ben Lomond. The mountain loomed northeast of them, still wearing its snowcap. The breeze rippled the water of the loch.

Earlier, in the glen, had Lizzie not been ahead of her and eager to reach the loch, Lina might have paused to remove her cloak. Now, in the chilly breeze, she was glad she had not.

Lizzie had agreed that they would ride from Bannachra Tower, an ancient Galbraith holding half a mile behind them, only as far as the loch. That she had turned south told Lina that she had intended to do so all along.

The ever-present, self-critical voice in Lina's head suggested that she ought to have known Lizzie was up to mischief. She had seen enough in past days to know the lengths to which the younger girl would go to get her way. She knew, too, that Lizzie must have heard her shout, but Lizzie neither paused nor looked back.

Hoping no one else would hear her, Lina shouted, "Lizzie, stop now !"

Lizzie pounded on, making Lina wish Mag were with them. He would...

But it was useless to speculate about what anyone who was miles away might do. Moreover, had Mag or the Laird of Galbraith been with them, Lizzie would never have dared to break her agreement.

Lina pressed her lips together. No use to repine about that, either. Repining would not stop Lizzie. Had she been Lina's younger sister, Muriella, Lina would have reined in and waited for her to come to her senses.

But the only traits Lizzie and Murie shared were occasional lapses of judgment and an oft-spoken desire, common to many people of their age, to enjoy more freedom than they had and to make their own decisions.

Murie could also take the bit between her teeth, but she would not dash into unknown territory as Lizzie was doing—territory unknown to Lina, at all events. Lizzie was a mystery to her in other ways, too. Although Mag and Andrena had been married for nearly six months, Lachina had known Lizzie for only six days.

“Lady Lina, dinna ride any farther! Ye mun turn back!”

Realizing that while she had been lost in thought, the gillie had caught up with her, she looked over her shoulder and said, “I think Lady Elizabeth wants to see if Duchess Isabella has returned to Inchmurrin, Peter. Galbraith told us that the King had given her permission to come home.”

“We’d ha’ heard summat more if the duchess was there, m’lady.”

“Aye, perhaps. But we cannot turn back and just abandon her ladyship.”

“But the pair o’ ye mustna ride south!” Peter exclaimed. “There be danger there. The

rebels! The laird gave strict orders, too. Ye ken fine that he did.”

She did know about the Laird of Galbraith’s orders. She had heard him issue them, and so had Lizzie. But he had issued many orders before his departure the previous day in response to a summons from the Colquhouns of Dunglass.

That stronghold, Lina knew, lay ten miles south of Loch Lomond on the river Clyde, not far from Dumbarton, the royal castle that the rebels had seized.

She knew the Colquhouns, because their lands along the Loch of the Long Boats abutted the southern boundary of Tùr Meiloach, her father’s estate.

Suppressing a sigh, she said, “We must catch up with her, Peter.” Leaning forward, she urged her horse to a faster pace. Thickets of shrubbery and scattered copses of trees dotted the loch shore and the hillside above it. The track they followed disappeared into dense woodland ahead.

Surely, Lizzie would not...

“That hibbertie-skipperie lass be a-heading right into them woods, m’lady!”

“I see her, Peter,” Lina shouted back. “Just ride! And mind your tongue when you speak of the lady Elizabeth!”

“ ’Tis what Sir Mag calls her,” Peter said. “I ken fine that I should not. But—”

Evidently realizing he had said more than was wise, he fell silent.

Lina saw then that Lizzie was slowing her horse. Perhaps she had come to her senses. Even as the thought presented itself, Lina felt a strong sense of unease.

The woods ahead seemed ominously to darken.

“Was that not a grand gallop, Lina?” Lizzie called out as Lina and Peter drew near and slowed their mounts.

“What you want, my sweet, is a taste of your brother Mag’s temper,” Lina said, reining in but keeping her eyes on the woods. Her unease was increasing. “Whatever were you thinking to ride off ahead of us like that?”

Lizzie shot a glance at Peter. Then she looked back at Lina with one eyebrow raised before saying, “Even Mag would not scold me in front of a gillie.”

“You chose the setting,” Lina said. “You might have considered the fact that, since I’m four years older than you, your lord father will likely blame me for this.”

“He will not. Nor will Mag. If they were here, they would scold, to be sure. But they are not here. And, by the time they come home, anyone else who may learn of it will have forgotten. So, you need not fratch with me, Lina. I want only to see if the Duchess of Albany is in residence yet.”

“We can see Inchmurrin’s towers from here, Liz. No banner flies there, let alone a ducal one. Forbye, we are defying your father’s orders. Do you think he will not hear about that?”

Lizzie shrugged. “Peter is your gillie. He won’t carry tales about me to my father. Will you, Peter?” she added, flashing her lovely smile at him.

“It won’t matter who tells him,” Lina said.

“No one will. And we are nearing Balloch now. Since the duchess inherited all of her late father’s properties and Balloch Castle is one of them...”

“The King is unlikely to let her keep all of Lennox’s properties,” Lina said, trying to ignore her growing sense of urgency and at least sound patient. “Recall that Balloch was a royal estate before the first Duke of Albany gave it to Lennox when Isabella married Albany’s son, Murdoch. We must turn back, Lizzie,” she added.

“But I’ve never seen a duchess,” Lizzie protested. “Nor have I—”

“Listen, m’lady!” Peter interjected.

Lina heard then what he had heard and wished that she had her sister Andrena’s keen ability to sense when others were near her.

“Horsemen,” she said, looking at Peter.

He nodded. “Armed ones,” he added. “Ye can hear weapons clanking.”

“Mayhap they are royal men-at-arms, escorting the duchess,” Lizzie said.

“Or rebel forces in such number that they fear no one,” Lina replied. She felt in her bones that soldiers were more likely than the duchess.

“It could as easily be my father, returning from Dunglass,” Lizzie said.

“I hope it is,” Lina declared. “You’ll be well served if he finds us here, aye?”

Lizzie grimaced.

Peter said, “We mun turn back. If we set our horses tae a gallop—”

“They will give chase,” Lina said flatly. “We cannot outrun them, Peter. Our horses are not fresh. Theirs may be.”

“We are noblewomen,” Lizzie said, tossing her head. “They won’t harm us.”

Lina nearly contradicted her. But she decided that she would be wiser to let Lizzie believe what she wanted to believe.

Meeting Peter’s worried gaze, Lina said, “Ride into that copse yonder above us, Peter. They won’t hear just one horseman on that grassy slope. But they would hear three. Nay, do not waste time arguing,” she added when he opened his mouth. “They’ve not yet seen us, and that copse is dense enough to conceal you and your horse. Also, whoever they are, they are unlikely to interfere with us.”

“But, m’lady—”

“Go,” Lina said. “If they are enemies, you may be our only hope of rescue.”

Without another word, Peter wrenched his horse’s head toward the hillside and spurred hard. He disappeared into the trees just as Lina caught sight of the first mounted riders through the woodland foliage ahead.

“Don’t you dare look toward that copse again, Lizzie Galbraith,” she said fiercely, trying to think. “They fly a Stewart banner. But it is not a royal one.”

“Oh, Lina, what have I done?” Biting her lip, Lizzie watched the path ahead.

Minutes later, rebel men-at-arms surrounded them.

Dunglass Castle, that afternoon

“We must plan the attack on Dumbarton for well after midnight when they’ll least expect it,” eighteen-year-old Adam Colquhoun said eagerly to his older brother when they had finished their midday meal. “We can secure the royal burgh, Ian. But I don’t

know how we'll get an army up that rock to win back the castle. It's two hundred feet high with only that one devilish steep road on the north side."

Sir Ian shook his head but smiled at Adam, whose dark hair, light-blue eyes, and lanky body mirrored his own. Their younger brother, Eric, fostering with cousins in Leith, had fair hair like their sisters. "We'll think of a way," Ian said. "In fact, I've carried out some of my best gambits in broad daylight," he added, shifting his gaze from Adam to the two older men seated with them at the high table.

The rest of Dunglass Castle's cavernous great hall was empty.

"Broad daylight!" Adam exclaimed. "But—"

"Hush now, lad," the Laird of Colquhoun interjected. "Ye've put your finger on the most vexing obstacle to retaking Dumbarton from that nest of villains. But Ian is the man his grace ordered to reclaim the royal burgh and castle and return them to the Crown. Let him have his say."

Smiling at his father, Ian said, "I do expect to draw considerably on your wisdom, sir. And Sir Arthur's," he added, looking at the Laird of Galbraith.

Galbraith acknowledged his words with a dignified nod.

"Sithee, the enemy will be much stronger than we are," Ian went on. "So we must avoid head-on battle. Also, we don't know who amongst the Loch Lomond lairds will be with us and who will not, whatever any of them may tell us."

Galbraith said, "I own, lad, I'm of a mixed mind about this venture. Ye ken fine that my son Patrick has long served James Mòr Stewart and stands now with him against the King. And Rory, my heir, serves the Duchess of Albany. She has even more reason than James Mòr to loathe the King. After all, he beheaded not only her

husband and two of her three sons but also her eighty-year-old father.”

“True, sir,” Ian said. “But Lennox and James Mòr did betray Jamie. And you also have one son who is loyal to him. I’m hoping that, even if you cannot actively support us, you will do nowt to prevent our success.”

“My view is still that the King of Scots is chief of chiefs,” Galbraith said. “So I can make ye that promise. Forbye, I’m thinking your sire may have qualms about this undertaking, Ian. He aye puts peace above all else, does he not?”

Shifting his gaze to Colquhoun, he added with a slight smile, “What say ye, Humphrey? Art willing to wage war to help reclaim Dumbarton for Jamie Stewart?”

Colquhoun shrugged. “I’m much less willing to let James Mòr Stewart seize control of the river that flows by this castle, not to mention the entire Firth of Clyde,” he said. “He would then control the route from here to Glasgow. And to the sea.”

“He has apparently made no such attempt yet,” Galbraith pointed out.

“Only because he lacks men skilled enough to manage Dumbarton’s boats in battle against others,” Colquhoun said. “Forbye, such boatmen as they do have are nearly all lads who served under our own Gregor Colquhoun. They swore fealty to James Mòr only to save their hides after he murdered Gregor and seized the castle.”

“Also true,” Ian said grimly. “The first thing I’ll do after reclaiming Dumbarton is hang any man who served my cousin Gregor whilst he was captain of the guard there but who refuses to aid me now.”

“And I’ll help you do it,” declared a deep voice from the rear of the hall.

Recognizing the voice as that of Galbraith’s youngest and largest son, Ian leaped to

his feet, exclaiming, “Maggy! You’re back!”

“As you see,” the big man said as he strode across the hall toward them.

They had been riding hither and yon, and Lady Lachina’s stomach was growling. Neither she nor Lizzie had eaten since breaking their fast that morning.

Their captors, numbering nearly a score and riding two-by-two before and behind them, apparently had their own food and water with them. Lina had seen several of them pull out bread, salted meat, or a flask as they rode.

Casting an oblique look at Lizzie, Lina saw that she was exerting herself to look calm. She had been silent for nearly half an hour after prattling nonstop before then without caring who might hear her. She had complained about the dastardly nature of their capture, the likelihood of her father’s violent reaction, and what—in vivid detail—Galbraith would do to punish the men when he caught them.

Lizzie’s expression froze then, her gaze fixed somewhere ahead of her.

Shifting her own gaze accordingly, Lina saw that the troop’s leader was looking over his shoulder at them.

Just then he winked.

His audacity stopped Lina’s breath in her throat. She looked at Lizzie.

The younger girl, blushing deeply, looked down at her horse’s mane.

Having seen how flirtatious Lizzie could be, Lina said evenly, “Don’t encourage such conduct from any of these men, Liz. They are not our friends.”

“I know,” Lizzie muttered, still staring at her horse’s mane. She looked at Lina. “He is very handsome, though, is he not?”

Honesty forbade denial. The leader was a good-looking man perhaps eight or a dozen years older than they were. He wore no hat or helmet and had tied back his dark hair with a string, so one could easily see his strong jaw line, firm chin, and well-formed lips. Lina noted, too, that his nose was admirably straight, his thick-lashed eyes set deep and well apart. Nevertheless, he gave her chills.

“Lizzie,” she said sternly, “one does not flirt with a man who has taken one prisoner. These men must be some of the rebels who seized Dumbarton.”

Lizzie shrugged. “What if they are?” she asked. “Is not my brother Patrick also one of those rebels? He has served James Mòr for years, after all. That is why I told these men who I am when they accosted us.”

“You would have identified me, too, had I not interrupted you,” Lina reminded her. Glancing around to be sure no one was near enough to hear her over the noise of horses and riders, she added quietly, “You must not tell them who I am, Liz. Recall that my father’s sworn enemy Pharlain is in league with James Mòr. They both took part in the ill-fated coup a few months ago, when enemies tried to seize his grace’s throne. Perhaps you don’t realize that Pharlain is also the man who murdered my three brothers just before Andrena was born, when he usurped Father’s chiefdom and seized Arrochar, his primary estate.”

“Well, Pharlain is not here, and our Patrick will soon sort this out,” Lizzie said confidently. “When Patrick hears what these men have done, he will make them take us home. Meantime, Lina, it cannot hurt to be nice to their leader. He will be kinder to us if we are kind to him, I think.”

Dryly, Lina said, “Had he been at all nice in his ways, he would have left us alone.

He would not have dragged us around the countryside with him as he has.”

“Why do you think he is doing that?”

“To complete whatever mission his superiors assigned him today, I expect. Parading themselves as they have, daring anyone to challenge them, these men must be making a show of force to frighten local residents.”

“Perhaps, aye,” Lizzie said, looking ahead again and then back at Lina with a twinkle.

“That villain is still watching us. He does have a charming smile.”

“Aye, sure he does,” Lina said, thinking swiftly. “Such men think they have only to smile at a woman to make her swoon at their feet, Liz. Doubtless they also imagine they can bend any lass to their ill-doings just as easily.”

“Do they?” Lizzie said, lifting her pointed little chin.

“So my lady mother has said. Come to that,” Lina added, remembering, “Andrena told me that your brother Mag once threw a man into the Loch of the Long Boats for too impudently flirting with her.”

Lizzie’s eyes sparkled. “Faith, I’d like to have seen that.”

Silence fell again, and a short time later, they emerged from the woods. In the distance, Dumbarton Castle sat high atop what Lina knew, from visits by galley to Dunglass and Glasgow, was a solitary but massive rock fully a mile around. From the firth, the sight had taken her breath away. Now it depressed her.

She had no faith in Patrick Galbraith’s ability to help them, because lacking power in his own right, he was not one of the rebel leaders. Nor was rescue likely to come from their erstwhile hostess, Lizzie’s paternal aunt, the lady Margaret Galbraith of

Bannachra. Lady Margaret was unmarried, irritable, and rather elderly.

Lady Margaret did have men-at-arms to guard her, but they were too few to send any after two young women whose own disobedience had put them in danger.

Although Lina had glanced back several times, she had seen no sign of Peter and feared that he might have ridden back to Inch Galbraith or even as far as Tùr Meiloach to get help. No one would know where she and Lizzie were.

Her sisters' images suddenly loomed large in her mind.

Andrena was on the Ayrshire coast, Muriella at Bannachra with their mother and the lady Margaret. Just thinking of her sisters stirred fresh trepidation in Lina. One, if not both, might try to find her and would thus put herself in peril. Each of the three of them could sense when another was sick or in deep trouble.

And if this wasn't deep trouble...

Dunglass

As Mag Galbraith stepped onto the dais, Ian said, "I'm glad to see you, Maggy. I was sure you'd be gone for at least a fortnight. Yet nobbut five days have passed since you left. You did not bring Lady Dree back, too, did you?"

"Andrena will be content for a time with my sister Wilhelmina," Mag said, shaking Ian's hand. "You said you were inviting local lairds and knights to meet us. I expected to see many here by now."

"Sakes, I sent messages out only a few days ago! But Rob MacAulay will join us. And one or two Buchanans will come if only to learn what we're up to. Jamie said we can count on some Border lords to help, too."

Nodding, Mag turned to shake hands with Colquhoun and Adam, leaving his father for last.

Galbraith stood when Mag moved to greet him. “ ’Tis good to see ye, lad,” he said, clapping him on the back. “We’ve a dilemma here, as ye doubtless ken fine.”

“I know that Jamie wants Ian to take back Dumbarton, sir,” Mag said. “I know, too, that our Patrick is with James Mòr. But Patrick chose his road. Forbye, if he knew that James Mòr intended to betray the King, I ken fine that he said nowt of it to you. Rory sets us another problem,” he added.

“Rory is my heir and knows his duty,” Galbraith said. “But ye’re right. He does divide his loyalties between Clan Galbraith and what remains of the House of Albany.”

“Which is to say the Duchess of Albany,” Mag said. Turning back to Ian, he said, “What do you hope to accomplish with this meeting of yours? From what I saw of Dumbarton, journeying to the Ayrshire coast and back, James Mòr controls the royal burgh, its harbor, and the castle. His position looks impregnable.”

“We’ll find a way,” Ian said. “We must just figure out what it is. Forbye, before we can act, we must know more. But I do have some ideas for us to consider.”

The other four men willingly agreed. And, although they dismissed several of his ideas as being foolhardy—albeit typical of Ian, a notorious risk-taker—they deemed three or four worthy of further consideration. They were discussing how to present those possibilities to the other men who would join them, when a Colquhoun man-at-arms entered with a young chap at his heels and said to Colquhoun, “Forgive us, laird. This lad begs urgent speech wi’ ye.”

Ian did not recognize the newcomer. But Mag leaped up, brow furrowed with

concern, and exclaimed, “Peter Wylie! What brings you here, lad?”

The dismay on Peter’s face made it plain that he had not expected to see Mag. But he recovered swiftly, saying, “ ’Tis glad I am tae see ye, Sir Mag. This were the nearest place I knew tae come. But...”

When he hesitated, Ian said impatiently, “What is it? Who is this chap, Mag?”

“I be Peter Wylie, Sir Ian, from Tùr Meiloach. But I were at Bannachra this morning. If ye’ll permit me, I should speak privately wi’ Sir Magnus.”

Before Ian could object, Mag said, “Tell us all, lad. We’re with friends here.”

“It be their ladyships, sir,” Peter said, darting an anxious glance at Galbraith.

“Which ladyships?” Ian demanded, drawing Peter’s gaze back to himself.

Swallowing visibly, Peter glanced at Galbraith and Mag again before he met Ian’s gaze and said, “The ladies Elizabeth Galbraith and Lachina MacFarlan, sir. Rebels captured them near the woods at the southwest end o’ Loch Lomond.”

“The devil they did!” Ian exclaimed. An image of the lady Lachina leaped to his mind’s eye: a slender lassock with long golden plaits, whom he had first met a decade ago when he was fourteen and she a too-dignified eight.

“Where were you , Peter?” Mag asked ominously.

Looking wretched but speaking firmly, Peter said, “See you, sir, we were tae ride only as far as the loch. But the lady Elizabeth rode off tae see if the duchess were at Inchmurrin yet. Lady Lina shouted for her tae—”

Noting Mag's frown, Ian hastily interjected, "We know the lady Elizabeth, Peter. But you fail to answer Sir Magnus's question. If you were with them..."

More wretchedly than ever, Peter chose to address a point between Ian and Mag, saying, "See you, we heard men and horses ahead o' us in the woods, and Lady Lina ordered me tae take cover, lest they be enemies."

"Why did not all of ye take cover?" Galbraith demanded.

"She said we must not, that they'd hear three horses but might miss one. By my troth, laird, them villains never looked my way. They had eyes only for their ladyships. They surrounded them and turned back the way they'd come. So I followed them."

"What else did you see?" Mag asked. "Did they harm either of them?"

"They rode hither and yon, just showing themselves and their arms now and now. I saw nowt else save they ended at Dumbarton. When we reached the flatlands betwixt the castle rock and the woods, I stopped in the woods beside the river Leven. But I saw them ride up that steep track and in through the castle gates."

"This changes things," Ian said grimly.

"It does, aye," Mag agreed with a thoughtful look.

"We need more information straightaway," Ian said. "You and I—"

"Nay, lad, I'm for Ayrshire again, straightaway," Mag said.

"For Ayrshire!" Ian and Galbraith exclaimed as one voice.

Ian added curtly, "Mag, Lizzie's your sister. You and I can sneak over..."

But Mag was shaking his head, and Ian detected a twinkle in his eyes before Mag said, “You’re daft if you think I can sneak anywhere, lad. I’m too big. Forbye, one factor exists of which you have no ken or don’t credit if you do. My Andrena shares so strong a bond with her sisters that each one knows when another meets danger. If Dree is not already on her way back, she soon will be.”

“Certes,” Ian said, “your good-brother would stop her.”

“She’d come despite him,” Mag said. “Forbye, before I left, she informed me that I’m soon to become a father. She hadn’t told me before, because she knew I wanted her to meet Wilhelmina. The only thing that might keep Andrena from leaving is if she knows that I’ll come for her. So I must.” He shifted his gaze to his father. “As you know, sir, if the lady Aubrey has not locked young Muriella up or tied her down, she, too, will be seeking a way to reach Lina.”

“I’ll see to it,” Galbraith said. “I took them all to Bannachra when I got Ian’s message. You fetch Andrena. We’ll see to things here.”

Mag said in a near growl, “If Patrick lets anyone harm Lizzie—”

“He won’t,” Galbraith said.

Ian could tell that Galbraith was not as sure as he sounded. A glance at Mag told him that he had even less faith in Patrick than his father did.

Ian thought again of the lady Lachina. He had seen little of her for years and had often teased her in the past, when she, Andrena, and their lady mother had stayed with the Colquhouns on their way to visit kinsmen. Lina had often expressed disapproval of him, with good cause. But he had liked her nonetheless.

Firmly, he said, “I’ll find out what’s going on at Dumbarton, Mag.”

“I know you will.”

Without watching the big man stride away, Ian turned back to the others.

He knew what he had to do.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:13 am

Dumbarton Castle, that night

Do you think we'll be able to sleep on these pallets?" Lizzie asked.

"Eventually, aye," Lina said.

"Well, I'll sleep better if I'm warmer. I do wish that someone would build us a fire or bring us blankets and food. Sakes, I wish your Tibby were here to brush my hair. It's all in tangles, but I expect Patrick will lend me a comb."

Tibby was the maidservant Lina shared with her sister Muriella and also was Peter Wylie's sister. "I'm surprised that no one has been next or nigh us since they put us here," Lina said. "But I'm glad, for Peter's sake, that Tibby is not here and glad, too, that our captors left us that pitcher of water... and that pail."

She was also thankful that Lizzie still hoped her brother Patrick would protect them. Despite the younger girl's bluntly expressed if ineffective outrage after their capture, she had behaved fearlessly since then. She still complained but seemed to view their predicament now as an adventure.

Lina's initial fear, when the men's leader had declared that they were going to be the rebels' guests at Dumbarton, had faded to uneasy trepidation. She was confident that Peter had escaped but still feared that he might have decided to ride all the way home to Tùr Meiloach before seeking help.

A rap at the door interrupted her train of thought. She tensed, and the fine hairs on her forearms tingled, a sensation that seemed to spread through her body.

A key rattled in the lock, and two men entered. The first was a short, stocky man wearing what she assumed was the attire of a castle servant. The other was ill-kempt, his dark shaggy hair hanging in his face and his clothing in tatters.

While the first man stood silently in the open doorway, the shaggy one carried in a hodful of peat topped with straw, which he took to the hearth. As Lina watched, everything else in the room seemed to vanish. She saw only the peat man.

He knelt, set down his load, extracted a tinderbox from a pocket amid his tatters, and muttered, “We thought ye’d be glad of a fire, the pair o’ ye.”

“Thank you,” Lina murmured. She barely heard her own voice.

“ ’Tis nowt,” the man replied. Deftly arranging peat and straw, he dealt as deftly with lighting it. Then he stood and turned, evidently sure it would burn.

The air around him seemed to take on life of its own, to crackle as he moved.

“Some’un comes,” the man at the door muttered in the vast distance.

The shaggy one looked right at her then, his light-blue gaze holding her astonished one. “Dinna squeak, lass,” he said. “Just tell me, ha’ they harmed ye?”

“N-nay,” she said, fighting to suppress her shock. “But—”

A quick shake of his head silenced her, and he moved toward the door. His demeanor remained casual, but his strides were longer, resulting in deceptive haste.

As he neared the open doorway, a tall tawny-headed figure appeared behind the stocky manservant who stood there, and Lizzie shrieked, “Patrick!”

Terrified that she might also have recognized the shaggy peat man and might betray him to her brother, Lina was thankful to see the manservant leave and the shaggy one slip past Patrick Galbraith to follow.

Then, just beyond Patrick, Sir Ian Colquhoun ducked his head, looked right at Lina, and blew her a kiss before vanishing down the stairs.

Passing his companion on that dark first flight of the spiral stairway, as well as a second man coming up, Ian led the way swiftly but silently downward, his heightened senses alert for any movement or voices on the stairs below or above. Only someone who knew him well might have detected his amusement.

The lass was still fun to startle, even under less than ideal circumstances and when the only signs of her shock were her widened eyes and slightly parted lips. She had lost scarcely a jot of her serenity. Hence, the blown kiss. But that, he knew, had been reckless. She would tell him so, too, he'd wager—at the first opportunity.

Hearing only Gorry MacCowan's heavier tread behind him, Ian nevertheless kept a hand on the dagger thrust into the belt beneath his rags and hurried on.

Both men kept silent until they neared the landing they sought. Then, stepping back to let Gorry pass him, Ian whispered, "Doucely now."

"Aye, master."

"Nay, nay, I be nobbut a scrofulous peat carrier," Ian muttered. "That man above kens me well and may follow us. He must not see my face."

Gorry nodded. Nearing the door into the yard, he nodded again at the guard there, saying, "I'll see this chap outside yon gates the noo."

The guard pulled open the iron yett and heavy door without a glance at Ian, whose confidence was such that his thoughts had returned to the chamber above and the two young ladies there. He had not seen Lizzie Galbraith for years, and she had not seen his face. The lady Lachina certainly had, but she would not betray him.

Recalling her astonishment and her quick control of it, he felt amusement stir again. He had never known her well. But he had met her numerous times since her childhood, and her steady composure had always impressed him. It also, nearly always, tempted him to disturb it to see how she would react.

As he followed Gorry through the open doorway into the torchlit yard, he heard a clatter of boot-shod feet on the stairway above them.

“Haste now,” he muttered, barely breathing the words into the air.

Gorry lengthened his stride.

But Ian knew that haste would not be enough.

The gate was too far, the footsteps too close.

“Patrick, you must get us out of this horrid place!” Lizzie cried while Lina was struggling to recover from her shock at seeing Ian Colquhoun in their chamber. “Those dreadful men captured us and paid no heed when I told them who I am.”

Watching Lizzie fling herself into her brother’s arms, Lina strained her ears to hear the retreating footsteps of the other two men but could not hear anything over Lizzie’s outrage. She prayed that the two would get safely away.

At the same time, she wondered at her odd reaction to Sir Ian and as swiftly wrenched her thoughts away from him. It was no time to let her mind wander.

Patrick Galbraith looked enough like his brother Mag to make her sure of his identity even if Lizzie hadn't shrieked it. When he set Lizzie back on her heels and turned in the doorway, Lina saw that a second man-at-arms had reached the landing.

"Did you see who those two men were?" Patrick asked him.

"One were Gorry MacCowan," the man replied. "I didna see t'other one's gizz at all, sir, wi' his hair all a-flappin' round his face as it were. Likely, it were Jocko, the peat man, or one o' his sort."

"Go and make sure," Patrick said, sending a chill up Lina's spine.

"Good sakes," Lizzie said, rolling her eyes. "Those men came only to light a fire for us, Patrick. You should be thanking them, for 'tis cold in here and no one else thought to provide us with food or even blankets, only that noisome pail in the corner. I wish I had thought to ask them to take it away with them. But now that you are here, you will see to everything. I want to go home!"

Lina, who had much appreciated the presence of the pail on their arrival, saw that Patrick looked taken aback by his sister's naive demand.

"I know it is not what you're used to, Liz," he said. "Sakes, I could scarcely believe my ears when I heard you were here. I came up only to see if it was true."

"But you must help us," she insisted. "You serve James Mòr, and he cannot know we are here. You must tell him that Father—"

"Father has no authority here, Lizzie. Sakes, even I have gey little."

"But you have been with James Mòr for years! I'm your sister!"

“You had no business getting captured,” Patrick snapped. “Nay, do not try to explain. I’ll warrant you were where you had no business to be. Is that not so?”

When Lizzie glowered at him, he went on, “You have come by your just deserts, my lass. And if you imagine that I can do aught to aid you, you are wrong. I am just one of many who serve James Mòr. What’s more, I have no authority over the man who brought you here.”

“Why not?” Lizzie demanded. “Who is he that he outranks you? Sithee, I think that man likes me. So if you ask him civilly to let me... that is, us go—”

“What makes you think he’d heed aught that I say?”

“He flirted with me, that’s what.”

Lina, watching, expected Patrick to bristle at hearing of the leader’s insolence to his sister. When his frown revealed that he was angry with Lizzie, Lina felt a deep frisson of fear.

Patrick looked at her, and she fought to conceal her distaste for him.

“Who is your friend, Liz?” he asked softly.

A louder male voice, behind him, snapped, “What the devil are ye doing up here, Galbraith? Ye’ve nae business here.”

Patrick jumped as if someone had pinched him. Turning toward the voice, he said grimly, “I came to see my sister. Perhaps you will explain to me , Dougal MacPharlain, just why you abducted and brought her here.”

Hearing the name of her father’s sworn enemy, Lina stiffened. But she wondered,

too, if Patrick might take his sister's side after all.

She had never met Dougal MacPharlain. But knowing that he was the son and heir of her father's usurping cousin, Parlan MacFarlan—who now called himself simply Pharlain after the ancient founder of their clan—was enough.

Pharlain had seized not only Andrew Dubh's chiefdom twenty years ago but all of his estates except Tùr Meiloach, the sanctuary to which he, his lady wife, and their infant daughter had escaped and where the family still lived.

To her shock, the man who stepped past Patrick into the room was the leader of the rebel troop that had captured them. He wore no plaid, just the clothes he had worn earlier: leather breeks, boots, and a brigandine over a plain shirt and jack.

As he passed Patrick, Dougal MacPharlain said, "Ye've nae right to question my actions, Galbraith."

The tension that Lina had sensed immediately between the two increased tenfold. Patrick's fists clenched. His jaw tightened.

Before he could reply, Dougal went on. "I do have the right to question ye , Galbraith," he said. "Had ye wanted to see my prisoners, ye should have got my permission. Yon door was locked when I left. How did ye get in?"

"One of the servants opened it to let a peat man in," Patrick said. Gesturing, he added, "He built that fire yonder."

Dougal did not look away from Patrick, and his anger revealed itself in the set of his jaw and narrowed eyes. "Ye found two men here and didna raise a cry?"

Grimacing, Patrick said in measured tones, "They were leaving when I got here. The

reason they had come was plain to see.”

“Who, exactly, were they?”

“The older one was a chap called Gorry. I did not know the other.”

“Then go after them and find out who the devil he is,” Dougal snapped, gesturing sharply toward the doorway.

Without looking at his sister or Lina, Patrick left.

When the sound of his footsteps had faded down the stairway, Dougal shut the door and turned back toward Lina.

She tensed again. Her inner voice screamed at her to warn Dougal off, to ask him to leave them in peace or try to divert him. Had she possessed Andrena’s skill at reading others, she might have acted on that instinct. But knowing that she distrusted the man because his father had wronged her family and that she might be leaping to conclusions about Dougal’s intentions now, she hesitated to speak.

He looked intently at Lizzie.

Lina saw then that his charm, though undeniable, was that of a wildcat holding a bunny motionless with the power of its gaze... just long enough to pounce.

“Ye’re gey beautiful, Lady Elizabeth,” he said smoothly. “I saw that straightaway. Ye must have many suitors.”

Lizzie, apparently tongue-tied for once, blushed, then smiled uncertainly.

Dougal took a step toward her, one hand moving as if to touch her.

Without thought, Lina stepped between them.

Ian noted thankfully that the guard at the tower door had shut it behind them.

Then Gorry touched his sleeve and muttered, "This way, master."

Ian followed, keeping his head down. He knew, though, that they headed toward the stables, not the gate.

Since most visitors to Dumbarton stabled their mounts below in the royal burgh or at an inn there, the stables inside the wall were only stalls facing the east wall with a long thatched roof over them. Torches cast golden light over the yard.

"What are you thinking, Gorry?" Ian asked, keeping his voice low.

"The straw, master, and quick! It will be nae great thing for anyone following us tae see me wi' the ponies. Despite the size o' this place, the leaders brought few servants tae look after them. James Mòr has his body servant, as does Master Dougal MacPharlain and some o' the others. The rest brought nae servants, and none o' them thought tae bring much food along."

Ian's attention had fixed on one name. "Dougal MacPharlain? That devil's spawn is here?"

"Aye, but dinna dally!" Gorry urged, gesturing toward the straw.

Glad that he was wearing rags, Ian eased past the occupant of a stall midway along and plowed a tunnel in fresh straw at the wall end of it for himself. Squirming briefly to settle in, he moved just enough straw aside to get a view of the yard.

A man-at-arms stood on the steps by the door they had used in the southeast tower.

Scanning the torchlit yard, the man descended and strode toward the gates.

Gorry was brushing one of the ponies as if he had been doing it for some time. The pony in the stall Ian had chosen noisily nibbled straw, making Ian hope that the beast would not mistake his tangled, dirty hair for something tastier.

After watching the man-at-arms approach the gate, talk to someone there, and turn back, Ian looked over the others in the yard. When he saw no women, his thoughts flitted back upstairs until he realized that the man he'd been watching was striding back toward the southeast tower doorway.

Someone stood on the steps there now, his features barely visible in the torchlight. He was as tall as Ian, perhaps, but not as tall as Mag. Something about the way he stood... Realizing that the man's posture was similar to the way Mag often stood, with one hand on his dirk and the other hooked by its thumb to his belt, Ian recalled Lizzie's shriek.

"That's Patrick Galbraith," he muttered, hoping Patrick's appearance was due to something other than that he had belatedly recognized the peat man as Ian.

Gorry finished the first pony and moved to a second, two stalls away.

The man-at-arms went up the steps, shook his head in response to something Patrick said to him, then turned and scanned the yard again. His gaze moved past Gorry, halted, and went back again. When the man and Patrick descended the steps together, Ian stopped watching lest either man sense his gaze on him.

Relaxing to keep his mind blank as he did when hunting, he heard Patrick say loudly, just steps away, "You there, we want a word wi' ye."

"Aye, sure," Gorry replied laconically. Then, as if realizing that Patrick was not just a

second man-at-arms, Gorry said politely, “How may I serve ye, sir?”

“You were in yon tower room with a peat man,” Patrick said. “Where is he?”

“Why, Jocko’s gone home, sir,” Gorry said. “He delivered his peat, so he had nowt more tae keep him.”

Hoping that Gorry held both men’s attention, and unable to bear not looking, Ian peeked through the straw at the three men, easily visible now.

“The gatekeeper said he saw no peat man leaving the castle,” Patrick said, looking around. When his gaze swept right over Ian’s hiding place, it was all Ian could do not to flinch.

Gorry was protesting. “The gateman mun be mistaken, sir. I saw Jocko walk tae the gate, and he had nae call tae go anywhere else. Mayhap yon gateman doesna ken Jocko. Shall I ask him m’self?”

“We’ll all go,” Patrick said grimly.

Deeply relieved, Ian watched them stride away. He wondered if perhaps he should move.

Then Patrick looked back.

“Stand aside, wench,” Dougal said curtly to Lina.

She stood her ground, meeting his angry glare with effort at first. Then, abruptly, she realized that his glare matched the fiendish way her cat, Ansuz—named for a runic god that controlled men’s fate—looked at her when it took exception to having stubborn tangles or burrs combed from its long fur.

“I told ye to move,” Dougal said impatiently.

“Do you make war on women, sir?” Lina asked.

“Don’t be daft. I have nae interest in a doltish woman hired to look after this lass and inept enough to let her be captured.”

“The capture was your doing, not mine,” she said, studying him.

His hair was the reddish brown of ground cinnamon, his eyes the grayish brown of grated nutmeg. Since he had not replied, she added, “What will James Mòr think of your having imprisoned two innocent young noblewomen?”

“Sakes, he’s like to reward me for capturing a pawn to keep Galbraith in check. It may even persuade the laird to join us. Her brothers already have.”

“Not all of them,” Lina said.

He leaned forward. “D’ye dare to contradict me?”

“I merely point out a fact,” she said.

“By God, I’ll not permit insolence from such a naebody!” he snapped, raising a threatening hand.

Lizzie exclaimed, “Don’t you touch her, Dougal MacPharlain! I thought you would be nice. But you are not fit to touch Lina!”

“Lizzie, don’t shriek,” Lina said calmly, still watching Dougal. He had lowered his hand when Lizzie cried out. But his fingers twitched, and Lina held no illusions. He was capable of striking either one of them.

“He should not talk to you so,” Lizzie protested. “Tell him, Lina.”

Dougal’s gaze swept back to Lina. “Aye, tell me, Lina . Ye’ll find yourself well thrashed afterward for insolence to your betters. But say what you li—”

“You are not her better,” Lizzie interjected scornfully. “ Lady Lachina’s father is the true chief of Clan Farlan, as you should know if anyone does.”

Dougal abruptly shifted his gaze back to Lina. For the first time since his arrival, she felt true fear. Lizzie had just made their situation twice as dangerous.

Ian moved his right hand enough to be sure he could reach his dirk and then called himself a fool for doing so merely because Patrick had looked back. He relaxed, knowing he could not kill Mag’s brother, whatever risk lay in letting him live. Still aware of Patrick’s gaze, he pictured the woods beyond the castle and exhaled deeply, imagining peace and quiet beneath the trees there as he kept perfectly still and imagined a fawn drinking water from a rill.

Distantly, he heard Gorry’s voice like a murmur of wind in the treetops.

Then silence, as if all the world save that woodland had vanished. The fawn kept drinking. In time, he could hear its wee tongue lap-lapping the...

“Master, wake up!” Gorry’s urgent whisper brought Ian abruptly out of his reverie to full alertness.

“Have they gone?”

“Aye, back inside. But ye must be away.”

“How did you persuade them to stop looking for me?”

“Coo, I kent fine that Jed Laing be on the gate t’night,” Gorrry muttered. “So I walked bang up to ’im and said, ‘Did ye no see Jocko leave a wee while ago? He looks at me, and I looks straight back at him, and he claps a hand tae his pate and says, ‘Jocko!’ Then he looks at Patrick Galbraith’s man and says, ‘Be that who ye were a-looking for? Jocko does all manner o’ things, so I dinna think o’ him as a peat man. He left a half-hour ago.’ ”

“Clever,” Ian said approvingly. “But you’re right, I must be away. Will not everyone be searching for the peat man, though? Should I alter the way I look?”

“Nay, just come wi’ me, sir. If we dinna make a song about it, Jed will let us out now afore the moon rises.”

“Aye, then,” Ian said. “But you must come back, Gorrry. I need you inside.”

“I ken that fine, sir. I’ll tell them me sister’s ailing in the burgh. Nae one will think nowt o’ me goin’ along tae cheer her. We canna go doon the track t’gether, though. We might meet some o’ them comin’ back up.”

“How will I get down, then?” Ian said. “I cannot fly.”

“That be why I spoke o’ the moon, sir. I’ve a rope tae let ye doon far enough tae get on away without it. I hid it when ye sent word ye’d be coming here.”

“Good man,” Ian said. He hated heights. The thought of descending two hundred feet on a rope...

However, he never turned down a challenge.

“This way, sir,” Gorrry said, handing him a cloak to put over his rags and leading him along the east wall, where shadows were thickest, to the gatekeeper. “Jed, we’ll be a-

going tae me sister's the noo. I'll be back afore dawn."

"I'll be here," the burly Jed said, giving Ian an appraising look as he pulled the nearer gate open just enough to let them slip through the opening.

It closed silently behind them.

"Keep close tae this wall, sir. And step doucely," Gorry added, leading the way. "They ha' two men above. But they dinna expect trouble from doon here."

Ian could see why. The only torches in sight flanked the gates. The rest of the castle wall and the area beyond it were pitch dark. After they turned the northeast corner, he could at last see where he was going but only because the firth lay below the next corner many yards ahead. Its water reflected the starlight gleaming between clouds that drifted overhead.

The two men moved quietly away from the wall toward the drop-off.

Ian soon felt prickling at his nape and an unsettling sense of open space right in front of him. He stopped gratefully when Gorry put an arm out.

"Can ye see your way, sir?"

"Aye, well enough. But are you sure you can lower me? I'm no lightweight."

"I've done it afore to help one or two lads escape after we knew trouble had come. I'd pledged tae serve James Mòr, and me cousin did, too, but his lass be expecting their first, and, after these louts murdered Captain Gregor, we knew that nae one were safe. So I got him away that night whilst the rebels slept off their long, treacherous day. Nae doot they mean tae kill the rest o' us when what's left o' James Mòr's troops arrive, as he says they will. If they do, I hope they bring supplies. We've none so

much food for so many.”

“You’ve done well, Gorry, for your cousin and for me,” Ian said. “Keep yourself safe, but if you hear aught concerning their ladyships that I should know, get word to me at Dunglass as fast as you can.”

“Aye, sir, I’ll do that.”

“Good.” Looking down into the black abyss, Ian swallowed. It was a shadowland, its only light eerily reflected from the river Clyde, for they were beyond the wider firth now. He drew a breath and said, “Let’s do this thing.”

Gorry found his rope in a crevice, uncoiled it, and moved with catlike silence across the pebbly surface of the great rock with Ian close behind him.

Tying one end of the rope around a two-foot-thick upthrust of solid granite and then looping it around another upthrust five or six feet from the edge, Gorry handed the free end to Ian, braced himself behind the second upthrust, and murmured, “I’ve over a hundred fifty feet of rope here, sir. When I’m comin’ up short, I’ll give it two twangs. Ye’ll ken then that ye’ve got nobbut a few feet more. I’d like tae be away afore moonrise, so dinna tarry.”

Agreeing, trying not to think but merely to do what was necessary, Ian helped fashion a harness that cradled his hips and thighs and tied it off with a knot at his waist, in the front. Then, sending a fervent prayer aloft, he gripped the rope, and waited until firm resistance told him Gorry was ready.

Then, setting himself, Ian took a cautious step backward over the edge and felt with one rawhide-shod foot to find purchase for it against the granite.

When he had, he breathed easier, set himself again, and tried the other foot.

The rope slipped and stopped. His left foot found a foothold.

Refusing to think about where he might end up or that at least one other man, mayhap two, had already used the rope, now rubbing dangerously against granite posts that were likely knife-sharp in places...

Ordering himself to stop thinking, he focused on feeling his way and, for a time, made faster progress than expected. A glance to his left revealed the river and the ground below him. He was nearly a third of the way.

His right foot slipped. In trying to catch his balance, he jerked the rope, which slipped farther, unbalancing him so that he swung outward before slamming against the wall. There he found a slight, vertical indentation. Clinging to it with his fingertips, he found a firmer foothold.

Drawing a breath, and hoping to keep other thoughts at bay, he thought about the two young women in the tower chamber and wondered how long Lady Lachina's composure would last. Smiling a little, he decided she would cope.

Lizzie, on the other hand, should think herself fortunate that she was not his sister. Not that any of his three sisters would be so daft as to defy their father's orders and gallop into danger. Doubtless, Mag or Galbraith would attend to Lizzie if Ian could just decide how the devil to rescue her and Lina.

He could do no one any good by staying where he was.

Finding purchase with his right foot, he turned to face the wall of rock again and sought a place to put his left foot. Finding one, he shifted his weight and began to feel about with the right one.

The narrow shelf of rock under his left foot, evidently thinner than other such

footholds, suddenly and treacherously broke away.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:13 am

Recalling her earlier comparison of Dougal MacPharlain to her cat, Ansuz, Lina watched Dougal closely. But she was unable to summon the calm that thinking of Ansuz had provided her before.

Now Dougal was the one holding her gaze. His expression was disturbingly speculative, too, making her wish she had the power to disappear.

Lizzie, for once, kept her mouth shut.

Lina tried to feel grateful for that silence but could not seem to summon up gratitude, either.

At last, when Dougal had not spoken for what seemed an age, she collected herself enough to say, "Have you lost the power of speech, sir?"

He blinked. Then he said in a cool, strangely distant tone, "My father once suggested that I should marry one of the MacFarlan sisters. If ye be Andrew Dubh's daughter, ye must be one of them, aye?"

"I am," she said. "But I doubt that my father would approve such a marriage."

"Andrew Dubh did disapprove when my father suggested a union betwixt your sister Andrena and me," Dougal said, his attitude still distant as if a veil had dropped. "But ye're in nae position to request your father's approval. Nor would he be likely now to refuse it."

Chilled, Lina drew a breath before saying, "I knew of no such suggested union, sir."

Choosing her words with care to avoid provoking him further, she added, “I fear I would fail to be the sort of wife you desire.”

Despite her caution, his jaw set, and his lips thinned. One dark eyebrow twitched. “How would you know the sort of wife I’d want?” he demanded.

Racking her brain, she tried to imagine what sort of wife he would want and wished again that she possessed her older sister’s insight into others.

Impulse stirred. Lina swallowed it. Even so, the words spilled from her lips: “I think you would want a gey beautiful wife who thinks just as you do, sir. To satisfy your needs, she would also have to be obedient to your will in every way.”

“Any wife should be obedient to her husband’s will,” he retorted, eyeing her more closely. “If she is not, he should teach her that she must obey.”

“Aye, sure. But, you see,” she added gently, “I could never be happy with a man who thought only of his wishes and never of mine. I doubt that you would deal kindly with an unhappy wife, sir. You would just order her to be happy.”

“Ye’re gey insolent.”

“I expect I am, or that I sound so to you,” she agreed, remembering with a shiver what he had said he would do to punish insolence. “But you see, I have always been allowed to speak my mind. I would find it hard to stop.”

“Ye’d do better to think of how much more unpleasant your captivity could be, lass. Ye’ll do as I say, or I’ll see to it that neither of ye marries any man.”

Lizzie spoke at last, her eyes wide, “Faith, do you mean to murder us?”

“Ye might wish I had,” he said curtly. Returning his gaze to Lina, he said, “I could just spread word that I’ve enjoyed favors as intimate and varied as I’d wished, from both of ye. Sakes, I could demand those favors or offer them to my men.”

The chill that struck Lina then nearly robbed her of speech. But she managed to say, “I hope you will not.”

“Ye may hope, aye,” he said grimly.

Then, to her relief, he turned and left, snapping the door shut behind him. Not until she heard his key turn in the lock did she breathe easily again.

“What did he mean about telling others that he had enjoyed our favors?” Lizzie asked. “We have given him no favors. Faith, I’ve never even attended a tourney where I might have offered a man my favor.”

Recognizing the innocence of those words, Lina said, “He speaks of sexual favors, Liz. The sort a husband enjoys from his wife in their bedchamber.”

Lizzie frowned. “Since I have no mother, I do not know what those are. But surely it would be wrong of Dougal MacPharlain to pretend he had treated either of us as if she were his wife.”

“Yes, it would be wrong, just as it was wrong of you to flirt with him earlier. Sithee, the truth is that whilst we are here, we are wholly in his power, Liz. Unless James Mòr stops him, Dougal can harm us. He can thrash us or do much worse. And, as we’ve seen, your brother cannot help us.”

“I hate Patrick,” Lizzie said fiercely.

“I know you must be disappointed that he—”

“It is not disappointment, Lina. ’Tis fury. In truth, Patrick has always been my least favorite brother. He is quickest to take offense or lose his temper if one disagrees with him. Rory is bossy, too, but he will one day be our clan chief. Mag is the kindest. But I’d liefer not see him now, either,” she added with a sigh. “He will likely be more unpleasant than Father will when they learn what happened to us.”

“Well, I won’t pretend to sympathize if you come by your deserts, Lizzie. But the truth is that, much as I hope Magnus and your father can rescue us from this awful place, I do not look forward to facing either one of them.”

As she said the words, her thoughts shifted abruptly to Ian Colquhoun, and she hoped he was safe. If he’d got into trouble through trying to aid them, she would not want to face him either. Heaven knew what he would say.

Having lost his right foothold as well as the left and now swinging free, Ian grabbed wildly for the rope with both hands at eye level. Had he not caught it so, he knew he’d likely have found himself upside down in the simple rope harness that he and Gorry had fashioned for his hips and thighs.

He might even have fallen headfirst to his death.

As it was, his position was damned precarious. Dangling as he was, the rope had to bear his full weight. Also, although he had crashed against the rock’s face, he had not yet found a handhold or purchase for either foot.

Trying to steady his nerves, he realized that the rope he held was vibrating. Letting go with his right hand, he felt along the rock face for a crack, crevice, or solid outcrop that would hold him if the rope broke.

Gripping the rope with his left hand and steadying himself against the rock with his right, he had just found a place to put his right foot when he felt a stronger twitch.

Then came a second, more violent one.

He nearly shouted up to ask Gorry what the devil he was doing before he remembered the man's warning that he would signal when he could let down no more rope without detaching his end from one of its anchors. Ian acknowledged receiving that message with two tugs of his own and remembered that two more would tell Gorry he could retrieve the rope.

Ian suspected that if he took too long, Gorry might fling the rope after him to avoid being caught. He wouldn't blame him if he did.

Accordingly, and finding a cleft into which he could jam his free hand, he tried to discern a way down from where he was.

Rough calculation told him that he was past the midway point. The rest, Gorry had assured him, would be no challenge for a man of his skills.

"Looks a devilish long way down to me," Ian muttered.

However, the cleft he had found appeared to be part of a vertical crack between two massive slabs of granite. Below his feet, the crack widened to a crevice and continued downward, angling northward. It was deep enough for his fingers, even for his feet if he could get to the portion that slanted. He would have liked to know that it continued to the ground. But one worked with what one had, and Gorry was waiting.

With a slight shift of position, he found that he could stand with his back to the shallow angle formed by the protruding slab. Feeling more secure, he decided to try using both hands to loosen the rope harness.

He focused on the knots, not on the distance to the ground, and by the time the harness was undone, he could see more cracks and fissures below him.

The moon was peeping over the eastern horizon.

Although clouds occluded all but a dim glow at its edge, stars gleamed above, so the clouds were thinning. Moonlight would make the rest of his descent safer.

Keeping a firm grip on the edge of the crack he'd found, he gave two hard tugs on the rope and let go.

It dangled.

Looking up, he saw torchlight and moving shadows atop the rock.

Fearing that Gorry had fallen captive, Ian wondered if anyone up there could see him where he stood now. Tensely listening for shouts, he heard nothing.

The next time he looked, the torches were gone. Moments later, the rope slithered away upward like a long snake and vanished in the darkness.

Praying that Gorry was safe, Ian waited, scanning the panorama before him.

Eastward along the river Clyde, he saw pinpricks of light on the north bank that he knew were those of Dunglass. The sight gave him fervently to hope that his parents had retired for the night.

He would have to tell Colquhoun what he had done and knew he would not enjoy that discussion. His father would disapprove of his taking such a risk.

However, if Patrick Galbraith could not protect Lizzie and Lina, Galbraith and Colquhoun would want to know that, and fast. Soon after Mag had set out for Ayrshire, Galbraith had left Dunglass for Bannachra Tower, but Colquhoun would send a running gillie to him with a message.

Ian could at least assure both men that Gorry would get word to him if any more danger threatened the lady Lachina and Lizzie.

“Lina, are you still awake?”

Lina had been lying on a hard pallet, thinking about Sir Ian’s recklessness and the folly of his having dared to blow her a kiss. She wondered, too, how much of her predicament her sisters had sensed and what her mother and Lady Margaret must have thought when she and Lizzie failed to return from their ride.

It was therefore with relief that she murmured, “I’m awake, Liz.”

“I can’t sleep, either. This pallet is too thin and the floor is too hard.”

“Then think about something else,” Lina said, adjusting her cloak to block the icy draft that kept slipping under it.

Lizzie made a rude sound. “All I can think about is what a fool I was to ride off as I did. Or else I think about Dougal MacPharlain and how strange he seems. I do still think he is the handsomest man I’ve ever seen, though.”

“Put that thought out of your head,” Lina advised her. Hoping to change the subject, she added, “I could tell you one of Muriella’s tales, if you like.”

“Perhaps later,” Lizzie said. “She knows many stories, does she not?”

“She has a good memory,” Lina said. “I know some of them, too, though. I can tell you about the hero Tam Lin if you like.”

“First, I want to ask you something. Do you not agree now that if we are kind and speak politely to Dougal, he will like us better and may agree to help us?”

“No, Lizzie, I don’t.”

“But you saw what happened when you spoke to him quietly. He listened to every word. And he had been ready to strike you, Lina. Even I could see that. But then, after you explained why you would not suit him as a wife, he left.”

“Aye, he did, but we have still had naught to eat, Liz. If he liked us or had truly taken responsibility for us, would he not at least have ordered some supper?”

“Men don’t think of such things,” Lizzie said. “Most of them think food just appears on the table when it is time to eat. I think Dougal is like that.”

“Perhaps you are right,” Lina said, yawning.

“I am. I also think he will order food for us if you just tell him we require some. You did influence him before, after all.”

“If he heeded aught I said, it was because you told him who I am. Or mayhap because his father had suggested that Dougal should marry a MacFarlan.”

“I didn’t mean to do that. He made me mad. But I do think you might—”

“Lizzie, forgive me, but you would do better to think of Dougal as an ill-bred horse. The sort who might respond briefly to kindness but who is just itching for a chance to bite or kick you.”

“We don’t keep ill-bred horses.”

“Exactly,” Lina murmured.

“Very well, then. Tell me about Tam Lin.”

Although she would rather have slept, Lina complied. To her relief, Lizzie's soft, even breathing soon told her that she slept. Letting her voice trail to silence, Lina also slept until sunlight crept in through their window Thursday morning and woke her. Getting up quietly, she relieved herself in the pail and went to look out the window.

Clouds still drifted above, but the river looked blue instead of gray as it had the day before. Ahead in the distance, she could see just the top of a tower that she suspected was Dunglass Castle. When her mother had taken her and her sisters to visit kinsmen, they had sometimes stayed overnight there and ridden Colquhoun ponies to Glasgow or Stirlingshire.

With a sigh, she shifted her view to the flatter, thickly forested land between Dumbarton's great rock and Dunglass. She wondered if Ian was home and asleep.

A rattle at the door made her turn sharply to see that Lizzie had wakened and was eyeing the door with trepidation.

To Lina's surprise, the same man entered who had come with Sir Ian the previous evening. Today he carried a pail. Beckoning behind him, he held the door open to let a rather grubby-looking boy enter, carrying a tray.

"It be nae more than bread and dried meat wi' a jug o' ale, m'lady," the man said. "MacPharlain tellt me tae bring up summat tae break your fast. Having small choice, I told the kitchen lad just tae put summat together."

"Thank you," Lizzie said fervently. "We don't care what it is as long as it is edible. I'm ravenous!"

The man smiled, and the boy put the tray on the room's only table, saying, "Ye can put the dried beef on yon bread, mistress. I do that m'self."

Lizzie rose and began to examine the tray's contents with the lad's aid.

Taking advantage of the diversion, Lina said to the man, "I do not know your name, but we are truly grateful to you. We have not eaten since yestermorn."

Clicking his tongue in disapproval, the man said, "Ye can call me Gorry, m'lady. But if ye mention me tae MacPharlain, I'd liefer ye call me MacCowan. Sithee, he..." Pausing, he shook his head and added diffidently, "MacCowan's enough for him, an it please ye."

"I'll remember, Gorry. May I ask"—she glanced at Lizzie, still enrapt with the food—"did the... um... the peat man get home safely last night?"

"Aye, sure," he said. "Did he fail tae get there, we'd ha' heard a hue and cry by now. Sithee, the laird be at Dun—" Breaking off, he shook his head at himself. "I'm a rattlepate and nae mistake. I had best be off, too, or someone will come tae fetch us, but we'll bring your midday meal, too. MacPharlain said I was tae look after ye. I'm tae see that nae one else troubles ye like that Patrick Galbraith did." To the boy, he added, "Take this pail now, lad, and exchange it for the used one. Be there aught else ye need, m'lady?"

"Can you find us some tasks to occupy our time? I can sew," Lina said. "We would also be grateful for blankets."

"I'll see tae that," he said, nodding as he shooed the lad out the door.

"Why did you ask him about the peat man?" Lizzie asked when they had gone. "You might have asked him to bring more peat for a fire tonight."

"I'd rather have asked why Dougal sent him," Lina said, having no wish to answer questions from Lizzie about the peat man.

Lizzie sighed and said, “I’m telling you, Lina, Dougal likes you. And we would be daft not to take advantage of that.”

Having reached Dunglass only an hour or so before sunrise, Ian had fallen onto his bed in the clothes he wore to Dumbarton and then into deep sleep. So he strongly resented the sudden, violent shaking a few hours later.

“Stop it,” he grumbled.

When the shaking continued, he sat bolt upright, ready to pulverize whoever had dared to disturb him.

That worthy, however, having enjoyed long experience with his charge, had been ready to leap back at the first twitch of his eyelashes.

“What the devil ails you, Hak?” Ian growled.

Christened Hercules but never having lived up to the name, Hak was slight of build but quick of wit. Barely three years older than Ian, he had acted as his body servant from the age of thirteen and for some years now as his equerry.

“It be nigh midday, sir,” Hak said. “The laird said that did ye no come down tae eat wi’ him and her ladyship, he’d roust ye hisself.”

Suppressing an impulse to curse the laird and order the laird’s messenger to perdition, Ian satisfied himself with another growl.

“I brung ale, sir.”

“I don’t want ale.”

“By the look o’ ye, ye must ha’ been in your cups,” Hak said. “Wherever else would ye come by such a pile o’ rags as them ye wore tae bed?”

“I got them in exchange for my old breeks and one of your sarks,” Ian said, eyeing his man to see how he’d react to that news.

He wasn’t disappointed.

“My sark!”

“Aye, so you are well paid for waking me betimes.”

“Aye, then, I’ll go and tell the laird ye dinna want your dinner. Likely, he’ll just say good on ye and ha’ done wi’ it. But if ye’ve been up tae mischief again, as I’d warrant ye have, a-wearing o’ them rags—”

“Enough about the rags,” Ian said, sitting up and sniffing. “Is that me?”

“Aye, sure it is. Heaven kens it isna me, and there be only the two of us in here. Ye smell like a midden.”

“Shout for a bath then. It’s these damned rags that reek. When you’ve shouted for the bath, help me get out of them. I’ll see that you get a new shirt.”

An hour later, washed, brushed, and properly attired in a linen tunic and his favorite blue-and-gray plaid, Ian descended to the castle great hall. There he found his parents and his brother Adam at the dais table, with a stolid Rob MacAulay.

Colquhoun’s two favorite greyhounds lay under the table near his feet, as relaxed as if they had no interest in scraps.

“ ’Tis good to see you, Rob,” Ian said, stepping onto the dais and extending his right hand as MacAulay got to his feet.

Ian was taller by an inch, and lanky. Rob MacAulay was broader of torso and muscular from top to toe. He boasted a thick mop of yellowish brown hair, leaf-green eyes, and the sober but confident demeanor of a man who knew his worth.

Ian knew him to be a strong, highly-skilled swordsman, a devil with a knife or dirk, a fine wrestler, and an enviable archer. If Rob agreed to join them against James Mòr, he would be a valuable ally.

Shaking hands, Rob said, “ ’Tis good to see you, too, Ian. I’ll admit, though, I had expected you to be up earlier than this.”

“He’s a damned lie-abed,” Adam Colquhoun said with a teasing look.

“Just out late,” Ian said, avoiding his father’s gaze.

“I see.” Rob cocked his head. “Is she a beauty?”

“Enough of that, you three,” Colquhoun said. “Ladies present.”

“Only one lady, my dear,” Lady Colquhoun said in her amiable way. “And none of these three will say aught to offend me.”

“Not unless we want to see our heads in our laps, my lady,” Rob said. “When I was a stripling, you put me to shame more times than I care to recall. And you did it with nowt save a few well-chosen words.”

“Did I?” she asked. “I do recall that you and Ian got up to mischief more than one would care to see. But I am sure I was the most tolerant of mothers.”

“Sit down and eat, Ian,” Colquhoun said dryly. “I’ve nae doubt ye’ll have much to report afterward, will ye not?”

“Not as much as I had hoped, sir. I did learn a few things, though.”

“I’d hope so,” Colquhoun said brusquely. “Sit, sit, now, both of ye. They’re waiting to serve ye, Ian, and ye’re blocking their way.”

Conversation was wide-ranging until Rob asked Colquhoun if the rebels at Dumbarton posed a threat to Dunglass.

“Nay, nay; they ken fine that I’m a man of peace,” the laird said.

“I’ll wager they’d rather have you with them, sir.”

Colquhoun’s eyes twinkled. “Aye, they would. But I’ll have nowt to do with unseating a rightful king, lad. And knowing your sire as well as I do, I’ll wager he feels as I do.”

“He does, sir. He also has some concern that, situated as we are at Ardincaple, guarding the entrance to the Gare Loch, we may pose a threat to James Mòr that he will seek to eliminate. That is why I asked about Dunglass. It sits in a similarly strategic place and could block his access to Glasgow.”

“I expect it could,” Colquhoun said. “But it will not do so unless his grace orders it. If he does, I’d have to obey the royal command, would I not?”

They chatted desultorily then until Lady Colquhoun departed with a graceful suggestion to Rob that if he tired of male company, he might visit her. “I would fain hear all the news of your mother and the rest of your family,” she added.

He agreed with a smile, and the men stood until she had departed.

Then, signing to a gillie to set the privacy screens, and dropping tidbits to his dogs, Colquhoun said to Ian, “Now, let’s hear it, lad... all of it, if ye please. Hak looked as if I had suggested hanging him when I said I’d wake ye myself if ye didna get down to eat. I half expected to find ye wearing bandages, or worse.”

“It was not as bad as that, sir,” Ian said. “I just visited Dumbarton Castle to see how their lady captives were getting on.”

The rest of Lina’s morning passed slowly, making her wonder what her captors expected them to do all day. She could occupy herself indefinitely with her thoughts. But she preferred to walk or sew while she thought, and at present her thoughts had an absurd tendency to drift to Ian Colquhoun if she let them.

Lizzie loved to talk, but she talked mostly about herself or Dougal. If Lina tried to shift the topic, it too often returned to Dougal, and since her own thoughts seemed equally frivolous and contrary, she found it hard to stifle Lizzie.

However, when it happened for the third time before MacCowan brought their midday meal, Lina said, “Prithee, Liz, can we not talk about someone else?”

“But why do you not like him? He sent us breakfast, after all, and ordered our midday meal. And he told that MacCowan man not to let anyone trouble us, even Patrick, which I can tell you, did not disturb me in the least, although you may have feared that it would. Do you dislike Dougal as much as that, Lina?”

“It is not a matter of how much I dislike him,” Lina said. “I have no reason to like him. Forbye, your brother Mag also dislikes Dougal. That should tell you all you need to know about the man, Liz. You respect Mag’s opinion, do you not?”

“I just want to get out of here,” Lizzie said flatly.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:13 am

Colquhoun glared at Ian but kept his voice from traveling past the privacy screens that sheltered the dais from the lower hall when he said, “What the devil d’ye mean ye just visited Dumbarton ? Have ye gone mad?”

Pretending not to notice Rob’s wince, and grateful for Adam’s silence, Ian said, “I don’t think so, sir. We must get the ladies Lachina and Lizzie away from Dumbarton as fast as we can. No other female is there, and many rough men are.”

“Are you talking about Lachina MacFarlan and Lizzie Galbraith?” Rob MacAulay demanded when Ian paused for breath.

“I am.” He explained what had happened. Then, grimly, he added, “To say that captivity at Dumbarton is dangerous for them is to understate that situation by a long measure. I know you must agree with me, sir,” he said to Colquhoun.

“Aye, sure, I do. Where I do not agree is with your thinking that going there alone was wise. Ye’ve admitted that the castle is impregnable. So the only way to win the release of those poor lassies is to approach James Mòr in a tactful way. Has it occurred to you that he may not even know they are there?”

“It might not have occurred to me before I learned that Dougal MacPharlain led the rebels who captured them, sir,” Ian said quietly. Aware of their audience, he kept his temper under rigid control. But he could not resist adding, “We both ken fine that Dougal is a man whom anyone of sense would distrust.”

“Pharlain’s whelp, eh?” Colquhoun frowned. “We also ken that he and his da supported Duke Murdoch, his sons, and the other rebels in their attempt to seize the

throne five months ago. I was unaware of Dougal's presence at Dumbarton, but has not everyone there sworn fealty to James Mòr?"

"Aye, sure, including Patrick Galbraith, in whom Sir Arthur expressed such confidence yesterday before he left. Patrick entered their room whilst I was there."

"You were in their chamber?"

"Yes, sir."

Colquhoun's brow furrowed, his jaw tightened, and his lips thinned, all familiar signs that warned Ian to tread lightly if he wanted to avoid igniting a paternal explosion. Knowing his father well, he waited.

In the silence that followed and with surprising grace, considering its size, one of the greyhounds emerged from under the table and gently nudged Colquhoun's arm with its smooth, elegant head.

Absently patting the dog, Colquhoun drew a breath and said, "D'ye doubt that Patrick will protect Lizzie?"

"He lacks the power to protect her," Ian said. "I ken little of his courage. But it would take a vast amount to go against not only James Mòr but also those nobles who serve him, as Dougal seems to do."

"Dougal supports James Mòr because his father does. Both of Galbraith's older sons chose for themselves to support Lennox and Murdoch, perhaps because their father makes a practice of keeping his political opinions to himself."

"Aye, but you should know that some who have sworn allegiance to James Mòr are members of our clan," Ian said. "Gorry MacCowan and Jed Laing, to name two." He

watched Colquhoun's expression change to shock and disappointment.

"I'd never have expected to lose either of them," Colquhoun said.

"Nor have we, sir," Ian said. "They remain loyal to us."

"But they swore an oath of fealty—"

"It was the only way they could stay at Dumbarton and hope to survive long enough to wreak vengeance for Gregor Colquhoun's murder, sir," Ian explained.

Rob said solemnly, "We heard about Gregor. Also that the villains killed Jamie's uncle, Lord Burleigh. Fiendish acts, both."

Colquhoun was shaking his head. "I ken fine that we live in treacherous times," he said. "But we'd all do better if we could speak honestly with each other."

Exchanging a look with Rob, Ian said, "If everyone were honest, that attempted coup would never have happened. In my experience—and, before you remind me, sir, I'll admit that I've much to learn before mine equals yours. But if one side is always honest about its intentions and actions, and the other side is not, I should think a child could predict the outcome of any conflict between them."

"I dislike liars even when they lie in support of the King," Colquhoun said. "I understand what you say, lad. And I'll acknowledge that your reasoning has merit. But Dunglass is safe now only because James Mòr believes we are neutral. If you violate that neutrality by taking sides, you risk more, I think, than you know."

"I fail to see how rescuing two lassies abducted by a conniving scoundrel has aught to do with politics, my lord. Lizzie is scarcely more than a bairn."

“Ian, cease these ‘sirs’ and ‘my lords,’ ” Colquhoun said testily. “They tell me more of what ye’ve been up to than your words do. His grace ordered ye to reclaim that castle. Surely, ye canna be so na’ve as to think James Mòr doesna ken that.”

“Jamie spoke privately to me,” Ian said, mentally stomping on the impulse to add “sir.” He recognized it—now that his father had pointed it out—as a reflexive habit from childhood that, as he recalled, had not impressed Colquhoun then, either.

“How privately?” Colquhoun asked.

“We were alone except for Will Fletcher, who would never breathe a word of it without Jamie’s leave,” Ian said. “I have told only you, Mag Galbraith, Adam, and Sir Arthur. Now you have told Rob, and I’ll soon tell the men I’ve summoned here. However, we can act as if the abduction of Lina and Lizzie—maidens both, I’d remind you—is a separate matter from James Mòr’s occupation of Dumbarton. Galbraith expects Patrick to protect them. But I tell you he would not even if he could. He is entirely loyal to James Mòr, so we must depend on our own people.”

“We must approach James Mòr first,” Colquhoun insisted. “You know that Arthur agrees with me, Ian, and Lizzie is his daughter. If my approach fails,” he added, “we’ll consider other options. But we must not forget that until recently James Mòr was the reasonable member of the House of Albany.”

Tempted as he was to point out that James Mòr had behaved anything but reasonably when he charged the King on the field and tried to murder him, Ian did not. The only thing that had saved Jamie was Jamie’s own superior skill, but Colquhoun had spoken. The wisest thing for his heir to do was hold his tongue.

“D’ye not agree, Ian?” the laird asked bluntly.

“I cannot agree that James Mòr is reasonable,” Ian said. “But I do know that you can

be most persuasive. My concern is the time that tactful haggling takes.”

“With respect, my lord,” Rob said quietly. “I must agree with Ian about that. Two young maidens held prisoner in a castle full of men...”

Colquhoun was shaking his head. “James Mòr knows better than to let anyone harm them. Also, I’ve known Lady Lachina since she was a child. Sithee, since Andrew Dubh never leaves Tùr Meiloach, lest Pharlain seize that land, too, the only way Lady Aubrey and her daughters can leave without drawing Pharlain’s notice is to cross my land. They have often stayed with us.”

“I did know that, aye,” Rob said. “I have met Lady Aubrey and the ladies Andrena and Lachina. But I do not know them well.”

“Aye, well, I can tell ye that Lina is an eminently sensible lass. Sakes, she can handle Dougal and perhaps even James Mòr himself if she has to. So now, Ian lad, if ye mean to tell us more about your visit to Dumbarton...”

“I’d rather not, sir,” Ian said. Smiling ruefully when Colquhoun continued to look steadily at him, he added, “I suspect that that is not an option.”

“It is not,” his father agreed.

“Aye, then.” He described the message he had sent to arrange a meeting with Gorry, their discussion of how Ian might gain access to the tower room where the girls were, and the agreement to do it at once.

“You pretended to be a peat man?” Adam repeated with a chortle. “To think of you carrying a hodful of peat up those tower steps...” He laughed again.

Colquhoun did not. He said, “Ye saw them both, though.”

“I did,” Ian said, nodding.

“Did they see ye?”

“Lina recognized me. Lizzie never saw my face.”

“That’s good,” Adam said. “That lassie has a tongue hinged in the middle.”

Waving Adam to silence, Colquhoun said, “Did no one suspect ye?”

“No, sir,” Ian said. “Patrick arrived whilst Gorry and I were there. But we slipped out, tugging our forelocks in servile respect. So he didn’t see my face.”

Remembering the kiss he had blown then and Lina’s look of astonishment, Ian suppressed a smile. It would not do for Colquhoun to notice and ask about that.

“If your visit was so brief,” Adam said, “why were you so late getting home?”

Suppressing the familiar urge to clout his brother but knowing better than to describe his descent of the rock, Ian said, “It was pitch dark whenever clouds hid the moon. I did not want to draw attention, so I took my time.” All of that was true, he assured himself, returning his attention to his father.

Colquhoun returned his gaze for an unsettling moment before he said, “I’ll send a message straightaway to James Mòr. We’ll see how he responds.”

“I’ll depend on you then,” Ian said. “I did arrange with Gorry to let us know at once if aught about the situation changes.”

Nodding, Colquhoun said. “I’ll send word to Arthur, too.”

“Ask him, too, if he was able to intercept the lady Muriella,” Ian said. “We don’t want her near Dumbarton.”

“I’ll ask, but we can trust Lady Aubrey to stop her,” Colquhoun said. “She usually knows when Murie is up to mischief.”

Lina was beginning to wonder if they would get a midday meal, after all.

Lizzie had complained with increasing frequency about its failure to appear, and Lina was about to demand silence on the issue when Gorry MacCowan entered with a tray of food. His young minion followed, carrying a bulky, drab bundle that looked as if it might contain old, badly folded drab-wool blankets or cloaks.

“Along o’ them old blankets,” MacCowan said, answering the unspoken question, “I’ve brung ye some wee scissors, m’lady, tae cut your thread. I be hoping, if anyone asks ye aboot them, ye’ll say ye’ve had them by ye all along.”

“I will, aye,” Lina said. “But what are we to sew?”

His light-brown eyes twinkled. “Seems ye told MacPharlain that ye craved occupation. So he bethought hisself of a shirt or two ye could mend for him. Then he decided ye could do as much for Lord James Mòr and mayhap some others.”

Lina bit her lip. “I see,” she said. “I will do what I can and be grateful for any task to pass the time. I expect we will be here yet a while.”

Grimacing, but without comment, MacCowan set the tray on the table. Then, to the boy, who was chatting with Lizzie, he said, “Come along now, lad.”

“Soup with just barley and leeks in it,” Lizzie said with a sigh when they had gone. “Servants’ fare here, I expect.”

“They may have trouble getting supplies,” Lina said. “Provisions for a place this big would need frequent replenishing, and local folks may resist coming here.”

“I’m so hungry I don’t care what I eat as long as they feed us. And if we’re to sew, I’m glad we have scissors. But won’t we need needles and thread, too?”

“I always carry two needles and enough thread to sew on buttons or mend a tear,” Lina said. “If Dougal wants us to mend fine linen, we will need finer thread, and in sufficient quantity. If those blankets need mending, I can show you how to pull threads from their hems or mayhap more easily from one of the shirts.”

“Surely, we’ll not need to mend the blankets if we lay them atop our cloaks,” Lizzie protested. “I’m gey glad we had them on when they captured us. Without them, we’d have frozen stiff before that raggedy man built us a fire last night.”

“Don’t exaggerate,” Lina said with a light laugh. “We might have been cold. But we would not have frozen.” When Lizzie smiled back and returned to her food, Lina was satisfied that she had diverted her from more talk of the raggedy man.

Certain that she dared not trust Lizzie with Sir Ian’s identity, she also hesitated to share the wild thought she had had at first sight of the blankets—that MacCowan had brought them old cloaks to mend.

Her mind toyed with that thought before providing her with a fresh image of Sir Ian as the shaggy peat carrier. The image alone stirred the odd tingling sensation she had felt when he had entered their room. Although she tried to ignore it, the sensation persisted, making it harder to stop thinking about him.

She had heard that he loved taking risks, because her sister Muriella collected tales to tell at ceilidhs and other events. More than one had included a daring adventure of Sir Ian Colquhoun’s. And Magnus had told them others.

At such times, Lina had found it impossible to imagine Sir Ian Colquhoun playing such roles as a peasant, an innkeeper, or a common soldier, because she had seen him only in fine clothing or warrior's attire. Seeing him in rags as a peat man, knowing the enormous risks he must have taken to reach their chamber, made those earlier tales more likely to be true. But to be so reckless...

The man was daft. Glancing at the old blankets, she wondered if it was not just as daft to think that cloaks such as she had envisioned could be at all useful to two maidens with cloaks of their own... unless they had to disguise themselves.

Looking at Lizzie, Lina decided that even if her imagination was taking advantage of an aversion to tedium, she could not discuss her thoughts with a prattler like Lizzie, who rarely thought before she spoke. Dougal would return, and Lizzie still wanted to believe he would befriend them.

As if Lina had conjured Dougal up by thinking about him, a perfunctory rap on the door was their only warning before he walked in.

He, too, carried a bundle, surprising her. She had not thought he was the sort of man who carried things when he had minions to do so. But there he was.

Shutting the door, he said brusquely, "I hope ye meant what ye said, lass. I told James Mòr ye'd requested tasks to do and that I was bringing ye shirts to mend. These others belong to nobles attending his lordship. His manservant sent two needles and a clew of linen thread for ye. He said ye'd need them."

Rising from the stool where she had sat to drink her soup, Lina said, "Thank you, sir. We are grateful for any useful task to ease our tedium."

He nodded but remained silent until she wondered if something she'd said had discomfited him.

“Is aught amiss, sir?” Lizzie asked.

Shifting his gaze to her, his expression seemed briefly to soften before his jaw tightened and he looked back at Lina. Raising his chin, so that it seemed to jut at her, he said, “I did once tell ye about a plan that could end your tedium here.”

Realizing that he meant his absurd insinuation that he might marry her, Lina stiffened. She had hoped he’d forgotten that exchange and that she had successfully damped down any other interest he might have taken in her.

Employing the tactic she had used before, she said, “You said that that plan was your father’s notion, sir, not your own.”

“And ye indicated that your reluctance was due to your father’s disapproval and your fear that ye might make me a bad wife.”

“I doubt that I put it so bluntly,” she said with a wary smile.

“It matters not how ye said it,” he retorted. “Such a marriage would reunite our clan. Ye must want that.”

Since she did not believe that Pharlain had any inclination to reunite Clan Farlan under the leadership of its rightful chief, Lina thought it best not to reply to that and said instead, as tactfully as she could, “Whatever I might like, sir, you said certain things when we discussed it before that make it difficult if not impossible for me to consider marriage with you.”

“Ye’d do well to consider the consequences I suggested—”

“Threatened,” Lizzie interjected solemnly.

Shooting her a murderous look, he held her gaze until fiery blushes darkened her cheeks. Then, turning to Lina, he said curtly, “Those threats were not idle ones. If ye’re wise, ye’ll consider what both of ye may suffer if ye remain willful.”

To steady herself, Lina breathed slowly and willed her rapidly pounding heart to slow. Until it had, she gazed at Dougal, wishing she could will calmness into him as easily.

He frowned, but he seemed merely irritable, not angry.

Speaking quietly, she said, “I do not consider myself willful, sir. Nor would I reject friendship if you were to offer it before discussing this further. I do thank you for the mending, in any event. Having a task to do—”

“Breaks the tedium, aye,” he interjected curtly. “But ye do be willful. And if it persists, Lady Lachina, ye’ll endure much more tedium unless your family or the lady Elizabeth’s can persuade James Mòr to return ye to their care.”

“Do our families even know where we are?” Lizzie asked then.

“If they do not, they will,” he replied.

Turning on his heel, he strode toward the door.

Lizzie said to his back, “Perhaps you might send them word of our situation, sir. We would be most grateful if you would.”

Without bothering to look back or reply, he left the room and shut the door with a snap. The grating of his key in the lock followed.

“How rude,” Lizzie said, looking bleakly at Lina. “I fear you were right about him all

along. He isn't going to help us get out of here."

"Perhaps not," Lina said. "However, I doubt that we will stay as long as Master Dougal MacPharlain thinks we will."

"You've thought of a plan!" Lizzie exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "Oh, Lina, tell me what we must do."

The image of Sir Ian attired in knightly garb, with flashing sword and glinting brigandine, filled Lina's mind. She shook her head to banish it.

As reckless and daring as he might be, Ian could not carry the two of them out of the tower room, down the stairs, across the castle yard, and down the steep hill to freedom in a peat hod. Neither could they fly.

The truth was that Ian was as daft in his own way as Dougal was in his. She had no more business expecting Ian to help them than Lizzie had to expect help from Dougal. Nor, Lina told herself firmly, had she any business to be scolding Lizzie for thinking of Dougal while letting her own thoughts dwell on Sir Ian.

Aware that Lizzie's face had fallen again, Lina said, "Don't fall into another gloom, Liz. We'll think of something."

"Why do you keep looking at those awful blankets?"

"Do I? I suppose I have glanced at them now and now. I keep feeling as if I've dreamt all this. Do you not sometimes have such a feeling?"

"I don't think so. But I rarely remember my dreams."

"Well, it is as if those blankets have been trying to speak to me, as if they ought to be

cloaks like the servants here wear. I expect you think I'm daft."

Friday afternoon, the clouds that gathered were darker and, unlike the gray ones that had hinted at rain all week, suddenly released a downpour.

Ian, Adam, and Rob MacAulay were crossing the yard from the stables when it descended. They ran into the castle's keep and up the short flight of steps to the great hall, where a welcome fire roared in the huge fireplace.

Others had gathered there, including Colquhoun, who sat at the high table with a mug of ale and some documents before him.

The three younger men went to join him, and Ian shouted for ale on the way.

Thunder boomed outside as they took their seats. The two greyhounds raced across the hall, onto the dais, and dove under the table.

Ian laughed, but Colquhoun said, "Don't laugh at them. They're just showing the good sense to avoid unnecessary danger."

Eyeing him speculatively, Ian decided his father had meant only what he had said, with no hidden meaning for a reckless son.

"I ken fine that you sent a messenger to Dumbarton yesterday, sir," he said. "Dare we hope that James Mòr has sent a reply?"

"I know only that our gillie went, returned unmolested, and did deliver my message," Colquhoun said. "The lad told me James Mòr promised to send a reply by evening today or tomorrow. So, you see, he has not refused to meet with me."

"I doubt we'll hear from him in this weather," Ian said.

“Likely you’re right. But tact and conciliation take patience.”

After a quick glance at Ian, Adam said to Colquhoun, “Did you inquire about the well-being of the lady captives, sir?”

“I did not. I merely requested a meeting with him. In such ticklish matters, Adam lad, the less said, the better. One is less likely to cause friction.”

Ian held his tongue, with effort.

Then he remembered Lina’s startled look that first day and the speed with which she had composed herself. So quickly had her expression altered that he doubted Lizzie had noticed, let alone Patrick Galbraith. It would have been another matter had it been Mag rather than Patrick. Little escaped Mag’s eye.

Just thinking about Lina’s being able to recover so quickly in such a place at such a time calmed him. If she could do that, he could keep his contentious thoughts to himself and avoid unnecessary conflict with his father.

He had great respect for Colquhoun. Like most sons, he wanted to please his father. The last thing he wanted was to disappoint him.

One day, if the Fates willed it so, he would step into his father’s place as Laird of Colquhoun and chief of their clan. The position had long been a lofty one, carrying great power even now when factions divided the Scottish nobility.

Clans warred with clans and Highlander fought Lowlander. Both fought Borderers and the English. In the case of Clan Farlan and others, clans divided and fought amongst themselves. Meantime, Colquhoun kept the peace in Clan Colquhoun and with its neighbors. His skill in doing so demanded respect.

Even so, Ian thought as he nodded for a gillie to pour him more ale and watched Colquhoun sign the documents before him, at times only by daring could a man achieve a difficult goal. If one refused to take risks...

Colquhoun glanced up and met his gaze with a lifted eyebrow as if to ask if aught were amiss. When Ian replied a slight shake of his head, Colquhoun's lips twitched, making Ian wonder if his father had somehow read his thoughts.

Shaking his head again, this time to clear it, he told himself that thinking of Lina MacFarlan must have led him to imagine that his father had magical powers. Many people believed the blethers that Andrew Dubh and others had spewed over the years about Tùr Meiloach being a magical place that protected its rightful residents, even suggesting and some of its residents possessed such powers.

Ian had visited Tùr Meiloach, and he disbelieved most of it. As for knowing what others thought, only the gods and perhaps the Fates could do that. Then he recalled certain events involving Mag's wife, Andrena...

Rob cleared his throat loudly.

Giving him a look, Ian said, "Did you think I was ignoring you? My thoughts just went a-roving."

"You said you wanted to discuss how to wrest Dumbarton from James Mòr."

"In troth, I don't have a plan yet," Ian said frankly. "Something will present itself, though. It always does. Recall how it was when Jamie told his cousin Alex Stewart to retake Stirling after the coup failed. Stirling is impregnable, too, after all. But Alex rode in with his lads, claiming that they were allies of the coup. They took Stirling without spilling a drop of blood."

“Unless one counts the leaders who lost their heads shortly thereafter.”

“I don’t,” Ian said. “So tell me what you think we might do unless you mean to suggest tact or conciliation. If that’s what you think, talk to my father.”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:13 am

I do think this is daft,” Lizzie said that afternoon. She sat on her stool by the window, despite the drizzle outside, carefully pulling individual threads from the length, or warp, of one of the shirts as Lina had shown her. “You may hope we can sneak out of here by disguising ourselves with those so-called cloaks you are fashioning. But that door is locked, Lina. And, no matter how much MacCowan or anyone else here might sympathize with our predicament, they dare not help us.”

“Mayhap I am daft,” Lina said equably as she threaded her needle with a fresh length of thread. “In troth, I just need to do something, to...” She hesitated, unable to put her strange feeling into words that would make any sense.

To her surprise, Lizzie laughed. “I used to think, before I met you, that the MacFarlan sisters were all daft,” she said. “Don’t people say that Andrena knows what one is thinking and that Murie remembers all that she hears or sees?”

“I cannot know what people say about us unless they say it to me,” Lina said. “But they don’t say such things to me. What else do they say?”

Lizzie cocked her head thoughtfully. Then she said, “They say that you know potions and cures, like an herb woman. Also, that you can cast and read runes. Such things sound wise and interesting, though. Many folks do seem to be in awe of you, but that may be because you are kind and try to help them with what you know.”

“What else do you think about us?”

“I scarcely exchanged three sentences with Andrena before she and Mag left for Ayrshire. But she seemed nice. And I like you and Muriella. I realize now that people

meant only that Murie remembers the stories she hears. She just has a good memory. But Andrena, knowing people's thoughts..."

"Did you ask Magnus if Dree can tell what other people are thinking?"

Grimacing reminiscently, Lizzie said, "I did, aye. He told me that if I were wise, I'd have no thoughts that did not bear revealing."

Lina chuckled. "That sounds like him. But I don't think Dree knows anyone's thoughts save her own. She is gey observant, though. Sithee, she can tell much from the way a person acts, speaks, or moves. My mother says that Dree just has keener instincts about such things than most people."

"They say that Lady Aubrey is a Seer," Lizzie said.

"Aye, well, people do believe the strangest things, don't they?"

Saturday and Sunday, the rain continued intermittently, which was normal for a Scottish summer. Clouds gathered near the western or northwestern horizon each morning and moved eastward. Scattered clouds came later from all directions to collide in a mass when they met, and afternoon thunderstorms resulted. Some were severe, even vicious, with bolts of lightning threatening the land. Both days saw brief, heavy downpours of rain mixed with hail.

Despite the weather, messages flew from Dumbarton to Dunglass and back. Running gillies delivered them when lightning threatened, and mounted riders when it did not. The people at Dunglass learned no more about the captives.

On Monday, Ian endured a late-morning shower while he supervised mopping up after the previous day's storm. Soaked through, he retired to his chamber shortly after noon to dry off and change his clothes for the midday meal.

To his surprise, Hak was not waiting for him. Having no wish to annoy Colquhoun by being late to the meal, Ian peeled off his sodden clothes and dried himself with a towel from the washstand rack.

Donning a fresh tunic, he left his wet clothes on the floor for Hak and had just taken his favorite plaid from its hook when the door opened and Hak walked in.

“Where the devil have you been?” Ian demanded.

Shutting the door, Hak said, “I ha’ a message for ye, sir, from Dumbarton.”

Draping the plaid over a shoulder and taking his belt from the hook, Ian handed Hak the belt to hold. “How did you receive such a message?” he asked, using both hands to arrange the length of blue-and-gray wool.

“A rider brung word from James Mòr for the laird,” Hak said, handing Ian the belt when he reached for it. “When the rider went inside, a lad he’d brung wi’ him tae watch the horses asked for me. He said Gorry MacCowan said tae tell ye that the deevil’s spawn... I dinna ken who that be, sir. Nor did the lad.”

“I do,” Ian said grimly, recognizing his own words to Gorry at Dumbarton. “It is Dougal MacPharlain.”

“Aye, well, the lad said that the deevil’s spawn asked the lord tae let him keep the elder o’ the two pawns he’d captured. I dinna think he meant the Almighty when he said ‘lord,’ Master Ian.”

“No,” Ian said. “He meant James Mòr. The man fancies himself still a great lord despite the fall of his whole House of Albany. Go on.”

“Lemme think,” Hak said, frowning. “Aye, then the deevil’s spawn said the younger

pawn be the important one o' the two, because the lord could use her tae keep her sire in check. I dinna ken what that means, neither. But the lad said he tellt me just what he'd clapped in tae his memory, as Gorry bade him tae do."

"I understand it," Ian said. It meant that Dougal thought holding Lizzie hostage would keep Galbraith in check and thus made her more valuable to James Mòr than Lina would be. However, it might mean that Dougal wanted James Mòr to believe that because Dougal wanted Lina. Ian did not share these thoughts with Hak. Nor would he until he had pondered them more. "Is that all?"

"Nay, master. Forbye, Gorry said that this be the most important part. But he said tae tell ye the other first, lest ye fail tae heed aught save this bit."

Tension gripped Ian. "Well?"

Hak gave him a wary, speculative look. His news wasn't good.

"Hak?"

Swallowing visibly, Hak said. "See you, sir, the lad said that the lord—James Mòr, that would be—declared he would keep both o' them." He paused.

"Go on, damn you."

"He said he could do nae bargaining if the young one faced ruin, by having nae female tae speak for her innocence after being captive in a castleful of men."

"What else did your messenger say?" Ian asked grimly.

"That afterward, the deevil's spawn were in a rare tirrivee. That Gorry fears the man will just take the pawn he wants."

Hak stopped, less wary now, his curiosity nearly palpable.

“Hak, I’ll explain it all to you, because I’m going to need your—” Ian broke off at a sharp rap on the door followed by his father’s entrance.

“Leave us, Hak,” Colquhoun said so curtly that Ian wondered how much he had overheard or if something else had stirred the paternal wrath.

Since he had been treading lightly to avoid aught that might imperil his own plans—when he had some—the chance that he had angered Colquhoun was small. Moreover, the door to his room was thick, solid, and well-hung. So his father had overheard only a word or two as he entered the room.

So far, Ian had shared none of the wild ideas he had considered and rejected for rescuing the girls. Not with Rob MacAulay or any other man who had arrived at Dunglass since Ian’s visit to Dumbarton, including Sir Alex Buchanan, who was a close cousin of Rob’s, a friend of Ian’s, and a fellow knight of the realm.

Hak was on his way out with the bundle of wet clothing, so Ian said, “Come back when the laird has gone, Hak. I have more to say to you.”

When the door had shut again, Ian faced his father.

Without preamble, Colquhoun said urgently, “James Mòr demands that I go to him at once, lad. This very afternoon or not at all.”

Lina could hear Lizzie’s soft breathing as the younger girl concentrated on her stitches. The rain had stopped temporarily, allowing them to open the shutters and proceed with altering the old blankets into rough cloaks.

Glancing out the window, Lina saw that dark clouds still hung low over the

landscape. The stillness seemed ominous. It was going to rain again and would doubtless rain hard. Nevertheless, she could hear a bird whistling somewhere.

Against that eerie, prestorm stillness, she also heard a murmur of male voices in the stableyard below. From her stool near the window, she could see the eastern wall. The long, narrow thatched roof that jutted from it barely covered the restless backsides of the few ponies in open stalls facing the wall.

Distant, hasty footsteps sounded on the stairs.

“Lizzie, put that cloak aside and take up a shirt,” Lina said. Pushing her own drab wool aside, she snatched up one of Dougal MacPharlain’s shirts in its place.

“I don’t hear anything,” Lizzie said.

“Quick!” Lina said. The footsteps had neared their landing. “Do it!”

As a key scraped in the lock, Lizzie dropped the end of her blanket so that the cloth draped over her knees. Snatching up a linen shirt from the round table beside her, she thrust her needle through its fabric near one of the rents in it just as the door opened and Dougal strode in, leaving the door open.

Having had the foresight to use one of her own needles as a second one and to thread them both, Lina calmly finished a stitch and looked up at him. Fearing that he might notice something amiss, especially if Lizzie tried to pull her thread through and revealed that it would bring the blanket on her knees with it, Lina said quietly, “What is it, sir?”

He regarded her silently, looked outside, then back at her. “It is going to storm,” he said. “Is the cloak ye wore here on Wednesday a thick, warm one?”

“The weather is warm enough without it,” she said, wondering guiltily what demon had turned his thoughts to cloaks.

“Is it warm enough to wear outside if it grows colder?”

Sensing Lizzie’s immediate, joyful reaction to his words and feeling an icy chill that had naught to do with cloaks, Lina said hastily, to silence Lizzie, “On most days, aye. But if you mean would it keep me dry on a day like today—”

“I do, aye,” he said.

“I knew I did not misjudge you!” Lizzie cried. “You mean to take us home!”

“Not ye, lass,” he replied harshly. “Ye’re too important to James Mòr.”

Lina did not need to see the stricken look on Lizzie’s face to say flatly, “Then I cannot go either, sir. You must know how wrong that would be.”

“Ye’ll do as I bid ye,” he retorted.

Hearing footsteps again on the stairs, Lina said, “No, sir. I won’t leave her.”

Ignoring the relief he felt at hearing that James Mòr and not he had irked Colquhoun, Ian said, “He does not again demand that you go alone, does he?”

“Nay, nay, we settled it in the second round of messages that I’ll take my usual tail. But he does say we must go afoot and my men must stay in the yard whilst I go inside. I can take one man in with me, though. That will be ye, lad. But neither of us may enter James Mòr’s presence armed.”

“I see,” Ian said, mentally rejecting the idea that he be the one to accompany

Colquhoun. To be sure, it was his right. And the last thing he wanted to discuss with his father was any still-amorphous plan of his own. Even so, everything in him screamed that being closed up in an audience chamber with James Mòr and Colquhoun would be fatal to any plan of his that might present itself.

To his delight, as that thought formed, so did the possible outline for a plan. Needing time to think, he said, “We’d be wise to consider just what options we have, sir, before we set out. I ken fine that you must have done so already. Mayhap, though, if you will permit me to think aloud...”

At Colquhoun’s nod, Ian said, “First, despite what James Mòr commanded, I believe we must take horses. The weather has been so treacherous of late that if we walk all the way, we’ll be drenched and muddy to the waist when we arrive. That would put us at an immediate disadvantage in any discussion.”

“Aye, but we’d wear oiled cloaks, lad, as we always do.”

“Even so, sir, we’ll be in better shape if we ride at least through the forest to the edge of the river plain.”

“What if James Mòr has set watchers there?”

“Even if he has, I suspect that you still have not mentioned the ladies Lina or Lizzie in your messages to him.”

“Ye ken fine that I have not. I want to be facing the man when I do that.”

“Aye, sure,” Ian said. “So, if James Mòr learns that you rode as far as the plain and objects, tell him you stopped there in deference to his wishes. Add that, due to his known chivalry—a gey tactful phrase, I think, however untruthful—you believed that he would agree to release the women, and they would need horses.”

“Now, that is a good notion,” Colquhoun agreed, ignoring the digressive comment. “I warrant I’d have thought of that myself, had I taken the trouble.”

“Then, I’ll dare to offer a second suggestion.” Watching his father’s face carefully, Ian said, “I think you should take Rob MacAulay in my stead. Before you command me, sir,” he added hastily, recognizing signs of Colquhoun’s doing just that, “I would suggest that the less anyone else knows of my whereabouts now, the better. ’Tis possible that James Mòr knows I’ve returned to Dunglass. But, unless he has spies here, he won’t know more than that. I’d like to keep it that way, especially with others arriving every day to take part in our meeting.”

“Won’t he think it odd if he does know ye’re here and ye don’t go with me?”

“I am your heir, sir,” Ian said solemnly. “James Mòr will think only that you protect the Colquhoun succession against possible mishap. I’ll wager he’d do the same in a similar situation. However, since I know that fact will not weigh heavily enough to persuade you, I will add that I’ll feel better if Rob goes with you.”

“Good sakes, lad, why?”

“Because I distrust James Mòr,” Ian said frankly. “I believe that, whether he lets you have their ladyships or not, you will be in danger. And Rob is an excellent man to have at one’s side if aught goes amiss.”

“Better than you ?”

“I am gey skilled with weapons and on horseback,” Ian said. “And I can outfight most enemies. But, although I’m grateful for your confidence, sir, Rob has a knack for hand-to-hand combat without weapons that I cannot match. Your own tactfulness will doubtless see you both safely away. But if tact should fail...”

Having already said enough to land himself in the suds later if he acted on the plan rapidly hatching in his fertile mind, he let his father's imagination fill in the rest.

Colquhoun was quiet long enough to give Ian another qualm. Then he said, "Again you speak sensibly, lad. I'm leaving Adam here, too. I mean to take only men with proven ability to wait patiently, without complaint." With a slight smile, he added, "Your brother will thank me, I know. He loathes standing in the rain. And everyone I leave in the castle yard will be soaked through."

"True, sir," Ian said, returning his smile. "How soon must you leave?"

"I've already sent orders to the men. I'll order the horses now, and we'll leave as soon as we've eaten."

"Order at least two extra horses for their ladyships," Ian said. "In troth, you might take four or five extra in a string. If thunder and lightning erupt whilst you're inside, some of those ponies could startle and injure themselves."

"Unlikely, since we'll take lads to stay with them," Colquhoun said. "But I agree that we should be prepared for aught that comes. I'll see you at the table."

Hak returned fast enough to tell Ian that he had quickly disposed of the wet clothing and then waited nearby for Colquhoun to leave.

After briefly explaining what was going on, Ian said, "Find Rob MacAulay and Alex Buchanan, and tell them to meet me here before we eat. They'll have to hurry, so assure them I won't keep them long. Tell them it's urgent."

Dougal had taken a step toward Lina, his evident intent to shake her or worse, before he, too, heard the footsteps. Looking over his shoulder, he saw, as Lina did, that Gorry MacCowan stood at the open doorway with his minion and their midday meal.

MacCowan paused at the threshold, the lad just behind him with the tray.

“Beg pardon, sir,” MacCowan said. “Was ye meaning tae take your meal wi’ the ladies? Nae one told me. But I can see tae—”

“Never mind,” Dougal said. To Lina, he added, “We’ll discuss this anon.”

“If you wish, sir. But I will not change my mind.”

“We’ll see about that,” he snapped. Pushing past MacCowan and the lad, nearly upsetting the tray that the boy carried, Dougal left.

“Lina,” Lizzie said urgently, “promise me—”

“Hush, Liz. Not now.”

“Shut that door, lad,” MacCowan said. “I’ll take that tray whilst ye stand wi’ your ear tae the door. Tell me if ye hear aught o’ footsteps or voices a-coming up.”

When the boy had obeyed, MacCowan set the tray on the table. As he did, he said quietly to Lina, “I’d be fain tae ken what that were aboot, if ye’d be inclined tae confide in me, m’lady.”

Lina nodded. “You have looked after us well, Gorrie MacCowan. You also aided the person who came here that first night.”

Glancing at the boy, who had pressed his left ear to the door, he murmured, “Aye, m’lady, and that person wants ken of aught that might endanger ye.”

“Then he should know that Dougal MacPharlain wants to take me away but means to leave the lady Elizabeth here. I refused to go. So now he is angry.”

MacCowan winced. “Ha’ courage, m’lady,” he murmured. “I did hear that he had hopes o’ such. But the lord James Mòr did tell him nay. James Mòr would keep ye both here.” Whispering, he added, “I did send word o’ that tae—”

“Thank you, MacCowan,” Lina interjected, thinking it was unwise even to whisper names or places with the lad still there. “Do you think you can arrange for someone to bring us more peat? The air in this room grows colder each night.”

Straightening, MacCowan took two bowls off the tray and set them on the table. Between them, he set a pot of watery stew. “I’ll do all I can, mistress. But—”

“Don’t say it,” Lina said. “We ken fine that you may be unable to help us.”

Lizzie said urgently, “Lina, if that horrid man takes you away—”

“I won’t let him, Lizzie. If necessary, I shall send for James Mòr and demand that he protect us from Dougal whilst we remain in his care.”

Lizzie’s eyes widened. “You would do that?”

“I would,” Lina said firmly, hoping that Lizzie believed her. Her own belief was that no one could persuade James Mòr to do aught that he did not want to do.

Rob MacAulay and Alex Buchanan arrived together minutes later. Sir Alex was as lanky as Ian, with hair the color of dried straw. His eyes were brown, deep-set, and heavily lashed. His lips were thin, his jaw square, and his features chiseled.

“What’s amiss?” Rob asked Ian.

“My father meets this afternoon with James Mòr, who will allow him just one companion. He has agreed to take you, Rob. He will say that neither of you may carry

weapons. But wear your breeks and boots, and take that lovely wee dirk of yours in with you. Even if they search you, I'll wager that no one will think of looking inside your boot for such a weapon."

"Am I to know what this is about?" Sir Alex asked.

"I've told him nowt," Rob said.

"Aye, sure," Ian said. "I trust you as much as I trust Rob, Alex. But he and Mag Galbraith arrived first, and I've said nowt to any others who've arrived since. Sithee, I wanted to avoid arousing suspicion that some of us might keep secrets from others. But this is gey important and I'll need you both."

"Then you have a plan," Rob said. "I thought it was time."

"Just a wee one," Ian admitted with a half-smile.

Alex chuckled. "What that means, you madman, is that you have a vague but crazy notion in your brain box and mean to share only part of it with us. Correct?"

"It may be daft," Ian agreed. "But James Mòr is holding two noblewomen as hostages in Dumbarton Castle. My father is trying tactfully to arrange their release. He did succeed in gaining this meeting today. And since he can take one man in with him, I persuaded him that Rob should be the man."

"Meantime, you'll do something of which Colquhoun will disapprove," Alex said. When Ian shrugged, he exclaimed, "Sakes, you mean to get them out yourself!"

"If, as I expect, James Mòr refuses to release them, I do, aye."

"Who are they?" Alex asked.

“Lina MacFarlan and Lizzie Galbraith.”

“Devil take the man!” Alex glanced at Rob, then back at Ian. “That castle is unassailable,” he said. “But you... Heaven save us! I expect some ass told you that such a rescue is impossible.” Shutting his eyes, he drew breath and then glared at Ian. “At least, we’re all too big now for Colquhoun to take leather to us.”

“If I tell you that I’ve been inside, seen Lina and Lizzie for myself, and got out with a whole skin, will you have more faith?” Ian asked him.

“I have faith only because you rarely do fail, my lad. But one day, you will.”

Rob said firmly, “I want to know how you mean to proceed.”

“I’ll get inside the gates with my father’s tail,” Ian said, thinking as he talked. “With all this rain, I’ll be able to ride near the end of it, staring down at my pony’s mane with the hood of my oiled cloak well over my head. I should draw little if any notice so. After we reach the forest edge, the rest will be easy afoot.”

“It might be better if Alex rode with your father,” Rob said. “As a knight, he can legally take eight men of his own. Altogether, they’d have a score.”

“You can take six as a gentleman,” Ian reminded him. “I’ll make one more unless the guard at the gate exerts himself to count us and stops me. In any event, I’ll be near the end, so if I must, I’ll just tell whoever is nearest me to stay outside.”

“Get back to my part in this,” Alex said.

“You and your men, and some of mine, will follow us through the woods. Keep far enough back so that my father does not see or hear you. And watch for watchers in the forest. If you see any, render them unable to report to James Mòr. Then conceal

yourselves where you can watch for any trouble when we leave.”

“If all goes well,” Alex said dryly, “do we just sit and wait for Colquhoun to find us and demand to know what the devil we mean by following him?”

With a mocking smile, Ian said, “Afraid of him, Alex?”

When Alex shook his head, his tightened lips making it clear that he was in no mood for teasing, Ian said, “From the forest, you will easily see us coming. If the gates shut behind us and you see no sign of a threat, turn back to Dunglass. But leave someone with a horn to alert you if he sees armed men coming after us later.”

Rob said, “Won’t you want one of us with you to help get them out?”

“Nay, I’ll have all the help I’ll need in getting to them. Getting them out will be easier by myself. I’ll need oiled cloaks for them, though, to disguise them and keep them from drowning when they step outside.”

An hour later, in the Dunglass stable, Ian, Alex, and Alex’s equerry saddled the last few ponies that Colquhoun, Rob, Ian, and the others in their tail would ride.

“Ye shouldna be doing this, Sir Alex,” his equerry, a wiry man at least ten years his senior, said testily. “It be beneath your dignity tae tend ponies for others.”

“Whisst now,” Alex said. “Saddle one for me and another for yourself. Tell our other lads to saddle their mounts and wear their oiled cloaks. We’ll be riding out as soon as these others are away. Ready, Ian?”

“Aye, sure,” Ian said. He was wearing one of the oiled leather cloaks that the Colquhoun men wore in inclement weather over an old gray cloak of his own that had seen better days. Under both he wore the noisome peat man’s rags he had worn to

Dumbarton before. “Do you not think this costume will serve?” he asked Alex.

“It will until Colquhoun catches you in it,” Alex said, wrinkling his nose. “But those black clouds and the irksome drizzle suggest that rain should conceal most of your sins.”

“As long as they are my sins and not Dougal MacPharlain’s or James Mòr’s,” Ian said grimly as he mounted one of the horses. It was not one of his own, so he was thankful that his father kept only well-mannered beasts in his stable.

The clouds promised not only rain ahead but also thunder and lightning.

Bidding Alex farewell, Ian sent a prayer aloft and hoped that the increasingly dismal weather meant the Fates were in a mood to let his plan succeed.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:13 am

Having put away their stitching to eat their midday meal, Lina and Lizzie had no sooner sat down at the little table than Lizzie said, “We must talk, Lina. I know you said you won’t let Dougal take you away. But how can we stop him?”

“I don’t know, Liz,” Lina said mildly, drawing on the patience so often required with her sisters. “I do know that we must be ready for any opportunity that may come our way. For now, though, I think we must close the shutters. The wind has shifted again and is blowing the rain in. Forbye, those black clouds are so low and moving so fast that I fear we shall soon be in the midst of them.”

“I’ll close the shutters if you will put more peat on the fire.”

Lina agreed. She also lit candles from the fire, so they could see what they ate. Then, feeling a strong draft despite the closed shutters, she suggested moving the table nearer the hearth. Settled at last with the stew still warm enough to be edible, they ate quietly until Lina looked up to see tears trickling down Lizzie’s cheeks.

“Oh, Liz,” she said softly. Setting down her spoon, she reached across to touch Lizzie’s hand. “Prithee, dear one, try not to fret about things that have not occurred. We are still together. So try to think as you did when we arrived, as if this were an adventure. Think about how Mag would act—or Patrick, if he were the prisoner and you were aiding his captors.”

“I’d cut off the villains’ heads and boil them,” Lizzie snapped. “Even though Patrick is my least favorite brother, I’d do what I had to, to set him free!”

“I believe you,” Lina replied, thankful to see the tears stop flowing. “I don’t

understand men like Patrick. I'd do anything I could to aid either of my sisters in such a fix. Faith, I worry more now about them and what they might do than what even Dougal might do next."

"But Andrena and Murie don't even know where we are," Lizzie said. "Mag can't know, either. If he did, he'd be taking this castle apart to find us."

"People do know where we are, Liz." Wrestling with the instinct that had warned her all along not to tell Lizzie anything that she might repeat to Dougal or to MacCowan's lad, Lina decided that keeping quiet any longer was unfair. No matter what might come of revealing the truth, Lizzie needed to know that they had hope. "Can you keep a secret, Liz?" she asked.

Lizzie cocked her head. "From whom?"

"That was the rub until now, aye," Lina admitted. "Sithee, I feared you might reveal this secret to Dougal if you thought that telling him might help us."

"I would not tell that villain anything," Lizzie said fiercely. "If he were on fire, I would not spit on him, let alone give him water enough to save himself."

Amused despite herself by the vision Lizzie's angry words produced, Lina said, "Then I'll tell you. Do you remember the peat man who came the first night?"

"Aye, sure," Lizzie said, frowning. "How could anyone forget him?"

"He is the proof that people know where we are."

Glancing at the door, Lizzie leaned closer. "How can you know that?"

"Because I know him," Lina said. She explained, omitting her usual opinion of Sir

Ian's recklessness and letting his actions speak for themselves.

When she finished, Lizzie stared at her, eyes wide and mouth agape.

Lina waited for the bitter reproaches she expected to hear.

Lizzie said in a low but vibrant tone, "How brave of him! Oh, Lina, don't you think he must be the bravest man who ever lived to do such a thing?"

Easily controlling any desire to agree with that statement, Lina said dryly, "I fear I am too practical to see such behavior as aught but dangerous, Liz. I am sure that Sir Ian will be pleased that you think he is brave, though."

"But he must be! Had he not done that, how could anyone else ever have learned where we are?"

"You forget our gillie, Peter Wylie. Peter must have had the good sense to ride to Dunglass and tell the Colquhouns what happened to us."

"Perhaps," Lizzie said. "But it was Sir Ian who came to see us for himself."

"Aye, he did do that," Lina agreed, aware that the strange sensations that often accompanied her thoughts of Ian warmed her as she spoke of him. "I suspect he could not resist the challenge," she added firmly. "But remember, Lizzie, you must not mention even the name Colquhoun whilst we are here. If Dougal or James Mòr should learn that the Colquhouns might aid us, they'll surely stop them."

"I won't say a word," Lizzie promised. She fell silent again, and her face grew so solemn that Lina nearly asked what she was thinking.

She finished her meal in silence instead and had her reward when Lizzie said

reluctantly, “In troth, Lina, had you told me that before, I might have told Dougal.” She paused as if she expected comment, but Lina just cocked her head a little.

Grimacing, Lizzie added, “You were right about him. But I was so sure I was right that, had I known, I...” Pausing, she added in a rush, “I might have tried to scare him by telling him the Colquhouns would save us. Do you think they can?”

“I know Sir Ian well enough to know that he will try. But I also know the laird and your brother Mag, Liz. They are more practical than Ian is, and the plain truth is that this castle is the most invincible in Scotland. That Sir Ian was able to slip in and out is one thing. An army trying to do so would certainly fail.”

“I know,” Lizzie said with a sigh. “But it is nicer to hope that an army may come than to fear that only Dougal MacPharlain will.”

Lina wished she could agree that thinking about either of those options would be helpful. The trouble was that, despite her practical nature, her hopes had fixed themselves on Sir Ian. She prayed that, for once, he would put his daring to a truly useful purpose. Even so, every time the tantalizing mental image of his rescuing them arose, she rebuked herself for her hypocrisy.

It might be different, she decided, had she dwelt on Ian’s looks alone, for he had grown to be a tantalizingly handsome man, certainly far handsomer than Dougal MacPharlain would ever be. How Lizzie could think... But Lizzie had seen Ian only as the raggedy peat man and did not know him, she reminded herself. In any event, to be making such comparisons was as hypocritical as the rest.

The rain penetrated the forest canopy, giving Ian good reason to ride bent over his mount and let the hood of his oiled leather cloak conceal his face. Colquhoun’s men and Rob’s carried weapons but would leave them with the horses.

The MacAulay man riding beside Ian had recognized him but would say naught of his presence. Six of Ian's own men rode with Alex Buchanan.

The first mutterings of thunder had been distant enough for the horses to take them in stride. Now, louder growls of thunder made their withers tremble, and some ponies tossed their heads. But they all were well-trained.

Ian knew his suggestion that they take extra horses might well have stirred his father to suspect he was up to something. If so, when he had to face Colquhoun afterward, just having had that suspicion would likely increase his anger.

Ian had kept most of his thoughts to himself, telling Rob and Alex only what each needed to know. He wanted to spare them from as much of Colquhoun's wrath as he could. But while the Dunglass men were mounting, Rob had asked him why Dougal was so determined to have the lady Lachina MacFarlan.

Ian had shared his own belief that Dougal hoped to use Lina in some way to force Andrew Dubh to surrender Tùr Meiloach to Pharlain, the man who had seized the rest of the lands of Arrochar. Originally, those estates had included Tùr Meiloach, but for two decades, Andrew had managed to keep that one for himself and his family. He should not have to relinquish it now through more villainy.

Ian was still sorting his thoughts, trying to imagine how he could get inside Dumbarton Castle from the courtyard, when the forest darkness lightened. Looking through the dense trees ahead, he could just make out, through the heavy downpour beyond the forest, the looming gray shape of Dumbarton Rock and the forbidding stronghold on top of it.

The short hairs on his nape tingled as forks of lightning split the roiling dark clouds and haloed the castle. Deafening cracks of thunder accompanied them, putting to shame all the mumbling, muttering, and growling that had preceded them.

Horses skittered, reared, and otherwise expressed their unease, and Ian briefly had his hands full, calming his own. When Colquhoun signaled for them to dismount, Ian did so, taking care to keep his head down as he did and while he stroked and tethered his horse.

The cracks of thunder startled Lina and Lizzie while they were trying to position an extra blanket to block icy drafts slithering in between the slats of their shutters. Standing on a tottering stool, Liz held one end of the blanket in place atop both half-open shutters while Lina tried to close them on it. When the thunder clapped, Lizzie abruptly let go of the blanket, and only Lina's swift hand to the younger girl's hip kept her from falling.

The last rolling reverberations had scarcely faded when the door opened, startling them again as Gorrie MacCowan hurried in with his ubiquitous minion.

"Here, here, m'lady," MacCowan said to Lizzie as he slammed the door shut behind them and strode toward her. "Get ye doon from that stool afore ye break your wee neck. Begging your pardon for the liberty," he added with a wary glance at Lina. "But that lass doesna belong on sich a rickety stool. Nor do ye. Lad, stir up yon puny fire. Then run doonstairs and fetch more candles for their ladyships."

As the boy hurried to obey, MacCowan helped Lizzie down, took the blanket corner that Lina now held, reached up, folded a few inches of it over the top of one shutter, and pressed that one closed. Then he repeated the process on the other side.

Lina thanked him with a smile, adding, "You came just in time, Gorrie MacCowan. Neither of us can reach so high. In another few minutes, both of us would have been soaked."

"We came tae clear away the leavings o' your meal, m'lady," he said, glancing toward the door where his lad was just leaving.

“You have news, Gorrry,” Lina said, when the door had shut behind the boy.

“Only tae tell ye that James Mòr and some o’ his lairds be a-meeting wi’ the Laird o’ Colquhoun later today. Seems Colquhoun requested the meeting tae—”

“Oh, Lina,” Lizzie exclaimed, “he is going to make James Mòr release us!”

“As tae that, I canna say, m’lady,” Gorrry told her sternly. “But I ha’ me doots ye should be settin’ up sich a screech about it.”

“He is right, Liz,” Lina said. “What if Dougal had heard you or should see you looking as if you eagerly expect release?”

“ ’Tis true,” Gorrry said, nodding. To Lina, he added, “I tell ye, though, me lady, I never seen that stairway below as busy as it be the noo. See you, it all be a show for yon meeting wi’ Colquhoun. I ha’ me doots that any man could get up or doon now without someone demanding tae ken his business.” Pointedly, he added, “Even were a man used tae visiting ye on any whim what struck ’im.”

Lina knew without question that MacCowan meant Dougal MacPharlain.

She also knew, though, that so many watchers must affect any plan that Ian might have to save them, assuming that Colquhoun had not forbidden him to act.

The principled laird might look dimly on any scheme that Sir Ian suggested to him. Closing her eyes, she tried to imagine Ian flying to her rescue. All she could summon up was his handsome face and the mischievous way his eyes danced.

It would be helpful, Ian thought, if he could devise a complete plan—or better yet, put one into successful action—before his father caught sight of him.

He and the other men were following Colquhoun on foot across the river plain, slogging through mud as the rain pelted down on them.

The high rock and steep road up to the castle gates sheltered them from the worst of the wind. It had come from the northeast earlier but now came from almost due west. When they reached the foot of the road, the wind caught them broadside, and everyone had to fight to retain his cloak and hood. The track was slippery, too, but at last, the gates opened to admit them. The first face Ian saw as the men ahead of him passed through the gateway into the castle yard was Jed Laing's.

"Gorry be by the door, master," Jed murmured as Ian passed him.

Other men besides their own milled in the castle yard, so James Mòr or his captain of the guard had set Stewart men and perhaps others, as well, to watch the visitors. More horses were in the yard than he had seen on his previous visit, too.

He had no complaint, though. Thanks to the rain, the more men there were, the easier it would be for him to walk amongst them, especially dressed as he was.

While he scraped mud from his boots on the gravel and stones of the yard, an immediate obstacle presented itself. Three men stood by the door that led into the tower that housed Lina and Lizzie's room. The service stairway inside it was the only way Ian knew to reach them quickly and get them out.

As he watched, two more men went up the steps and three others emerged.

Recalling that Jed had said that Gorry was by that door, Ian hoped he had a plan to get them inside, one they could discuss without drawing notice.

He certainly could not follow Colquhoun and Rob in at the main entrance.

At that moment, a firm hand gripped his left arm.

Concerns about Dougal MacPharlain had eased, thanks to Gorry's assurance that the busy stairway would prevent Dougal's mischief. So Lina had finished her cloak and had begun repairing a tear in one of the shirts.

Lizzie, having put her faith in Sir Ian, hummed a tune as she sewed. When she stopped humming, she said, "I used to think that living at Tùr Meiloach as you do, with Pharlain fain to seize your land, it must be dangerous for you to travel. But you have traveled much more than I have, and farther."

"I expect we have, aye," Lina said. "My mam has many kinsmen in many places, and she thought it was her duty to visit them and take us to meet them."

"I wish my sisters would take me places," Lizzie said wistfully.

"Perhaps they will when you are older."

"I'm fourteen. How old were you when Lady Aubrey first took you?"

"Eight," Lina admitted, remembering the first time she had met Ian. "It was about this time of year, too, because Dree had just turned ten. Sir Ian—he was Master Ian then—teased us mercilessly until Dree threatened to tell his father."

Lizzie raised her eyebrows. "Did she tell?"

"Nay, but she wished she had when we reached Glasgow and she found a live frog amidst the clothes in her sumpter basket. But, Lizzie," Lina added, "now that Mag and Dree have married, they will likely take you places with them."

"They did not invite me this time. And they went to visit my sister."

“Aye, but that was by way of being a bridal visit. Forbye—and you must keep this to yourself, too, Liz—I think Andrena is expecting a child.”

Lizzie gaped. “Mag never said a word!”

“I don’t think he knew,” Lina said.

“How could he not? It is his child, too.”

“Dree may not have told him. She did not tell me or Murie, either.”

“Faith, can you read Dree’s thoughts, the way she reads others?”

Lina was about to deny that suggestion when her quick hearing again caught the approach of hasty footsteps on the stairs. Something about them differed from the sound of Gorry MacCowan coming upstairs with his lad. Her skin tingled.

The hand on Ian’s arm had gripped tightly enough to make him wonder if the next thing he heard would be the declaration of his arrest for trespassing on property belonging to the House of Albany.

Instead, when he turned his head, carefully looking down as he did, he heard Gorry’s low-pitched voice: “Come along wi’ me, master. I’ve much tae tell ye.”

“Tell me this first, and quickly,” Ian muttered back. “D’ye ken if James Mòr will agree to treat with Colquhoun for their ladyships’ release?”

“He will not, for he said so,” Gorry said. “I were tending the fire in yon great hall when James Mòr told his lickspittles that Colquhoun were a-coming today. He said unless he drowned on the way, mayhap he meant tae declare hisself at last for Albany against the King. One o’ them so-called nobles what laps at his heels said ’twere

more likely he were a-coming on account o' the lady hostages. James Mòr laughed then and said if it were so, 'twould be a fool's errand."

"You're certain he won't give them up?"

"Aye, sure; he says they be too valuable, the pair o' them. But the lady Lachina tellt me that Dougal MacPharlain be for taking her away right soon."

"Then I must reach them straightaway, Gorry. Can you get me inside?"

"Easy as breathing wi' such a mob in this yard and servants coming and going tae attend them in the hall," Gorry said. "What's in yon bundle?"

"Oilskins to cover them and breeks," Ian replied in an undertone as they wended their way toward the service-stair door.

"Oilskins be a good notion," Gorry said. "I didna ken what tae do about their skirts, and ye couldna verra well spirit them away in them. Am I tae leave wi' ye?"

"I should take you, because it will be gey dangerous for you here when the lasses are gone," Ian admitted. "But if we can arrange for you to stay safe, you'll be more valuable to me when I think of a way to force the rebels out of here."

"Aye, sure, when ye take back the castle. But willna James Mòr ken fine that Colquhoun had summat tae do wi' the ladies' disappearance?"

"If you or one of your friends can help, I mean to cast suspicion on Dougal long enough for me to get their ladyships safely to Dunglass."

Gorry glanced at him, eyes agleam. "We can help wi' that, for Dougal's awa' doon tae the harbor. What must we do?"

“I’ve scrawled a message on a scrap of vellum that I mean to drop in their ladyships’ chamber,” Ian explained. “I brought matching vellum with me, too. If you can hide it amidst Dougal’s effects and then have someone spread word of his too-frequent visits to their ladyships, even that he discomfited them...”

“Aye, sure, we’ll do that,” Gorry said. Striding up the steps to the service-stair door, now open to admit others, he muttered, “Keep your head doon,” and preceded Ian to follow them in.

Inside, Ian saw with astonishment that the stairway was alive with cloaked and uncloaked servants going up to rooms on other floors or down to a kitchen, bakehouse, or storerooms below the entry level. They carried jugs, trays, and other objects, doubtless meant for the great hall on the next level or chambers above it where James Mòr and his noble followers would have their private chambers.

The narrowness of the service stairway made passing others awkward. But the gillies and men-at-arms using it paid no heed to them. Each man clearly had his mind on his own task. And with duties taking them into and out of the weather, the majority of them wore cloaks of one sort or another over livery or mail.

Gorry kept to the narrow part of the wedge-shaped steps, near the stone center post, allowing those coming down to hug the wall as protocol demanded. He moved up with practiced ease as men coming down with empty jugs, trays, baskets, linen, or other paraphernalia pressed past him.

Following him, Ian held his oilskins bundle close, so no one would knock it from his grip. When they were past the great hall, Gorry moved faster.

No one questioned their presence.

At the next-to-last landing, the flight above loomed dark and vacant.

“No guard?” Ian murmured.

“None needed,” Gorry replied. “I ha’ the key. Dougal keeps another in the wee purse on his belt. Since he’s the one as ordered me tae keep others away and see tae their ladyships m’self, I’ll be the first one he suspects o’ this.”

“There must be more than two keys to that chamber,” Ian said.

“Aye, sure, the castle steward had one. So did the captain o’ the guard.”

“If one or both of those keys should vanish for a wee while...”

Gorry chuckled, “Aye, and so I thought m’self,” he said. “That be how them keys did go a-missing. I dinna think their keepers ha’ missed ’em yet.”

“You’re aye a canny man, Gorry,” Ian said, grinning.

Taking advantage of the unusual activity within the castle wall to slip down to the harbor, and believing that his immediate goal was within reach, Dougal had ordered his crew to prepare to depart soon for Arrochar despite the heavy rain.

Wrapped in an oiled leather cape over his plaid and a simple saffron sark, his rawhide boots soaked through, he was heading back to the castle, certain that Colquhoun must have arrived by now.

The lightning and crashing thunder had nearly undone his plan, because some of his men were superstitious, others terrified of lightning, especially on the water. But, unlike the fashious wench, they would obey him. He had never heard of lightning striking a vessel on the Loch of the Long Boats. It struck the nearby peaks instead. And the lightning had moved on. Only distant, growling thunder remained.

“This damnable rain,” he muttered through his teeth. The wind had dropped, but his stiff cape had provided only slight protection while it blew, so he was wet.

Their journey later would be unpleasant, but he had an unexceptional reason now for leaving. Having found it impossible to secure the Firth of Clyde, James Mòr feared a siege and had asked him to learn who amongst the west Highland clan chiefs would be most disposed to aid him if he needed an escape route.

So, Dougal would take the lady Lina as soon as he could and leave.

Lina had finished darning the shirt, so when the latest set of footsteps reached the landing, she snipped her thread free and set the garment aside.

“Someone’s coming, Liz. Two men.” She realized that the difference she had discerned in the footsteps was that they were of equal tread.

The lad’s steps had always been lighter and quicker than MacCowan’s.

Her heart was beating faster, harder. Her skin felt as if lightning were still in the air. She fought to keep her composure, to look natural when they came in.

Lizzie was staring at her, squinting in the flickering light of the candles.

With little more noise than a few clicks, the door swung inward and Gorry MacCowan filled the doorway. By then, Lina knew who stood behind him. Her body had recognized Sir Ian’s approach with more confidence than she had.

“M’lady,” MacCowan said, “Ye should—”

“Watch the door, Gorry,” Ian said, stepping past him into the room. “I’ll explain, but we need to hurry if we’re to succeed.”

His peat-man rags, gray cloak, and stiff oilskin contrasted oddly with words spoken in the crisp tones of a noble knight accustomed to command.

Lina glanced at Lizzie, who was staring at Sir Ian with her mouth open.

Gorry shut the door and stood with an ear against it as his lad had earlier.

Collecting her wits, Lina said, “What must we do, sir?”

“I’ve breeks for each of you,” Ian said, revealing his bundle. “Put them on and stuff your skirts into the waists. Can you do that by yourselves?”

“Aye, sure,” she said, taking the leathery pair of breeks he handed her. “Quick, Liz. Put down that shirt, and do as he bids.”

“But—”

“I’m a friend of your brother Mag’s, lass,” Ian said to her. “I’ve come to get you out of here. So, be quick. We’ve nae time for debate or modesty.”

Lina donned her breeks easily, although they reeked and were too big. Wondering who might have worn them before and what vermin they might contain, she looked at Ian, saw his eyes light with humor, felt her body respond, and hastily attended to her skirts.

Lizzie eyed with distaste the pair Ian had handed her. But after a glance at Lina and one at him, she pulled them on. When she had stuffed what she could of her skirts into them, she looked like a plump lassock in lad’s clothing.

“Turn around,” Ian said to her. When she did, he loosened her long red plaits and tied her hair at her nape with a string. “Now put this oiled cloak over you, lass.”

“Nay, sir, not yet,” Lina said. She had no need to tie back her hair, coiled rather untidily at her nape. But she removed her veil as she said, “Oiled skins will keep off rain, but they are stiff and unwieldy. Going downstairs, we would find it impossible to keep our stuffed-in skirts and our hair hidden from those coming up.”

“Her ladyship be right, master,” Gorry said. “We’ll ha’ tae go doon the way we came up. Gillies and the like will still be a-using them stairs.”

“Sakes, man, they cannot wear their own cloaks,” Ian said.

“We have others,” Lina said. Picking up her blanket-cloak and handing it to him, she said, “We fashioned hoods, and we slit fitchets in the sides to slip our hands through, so we can hold them round us as we go. They look rather monkish. But when we are outside, with your oilskins over them—”

“They should serve, aye,” he interjected, his light blue eyes brimming with amusement as he draped the cloak around her. “I thought sure you’d balk at this reckless escapade, my lady. I did not expect you to prepare for it.”

“Any captive should try to plan for an escape,” she said. “But this is no time to quibble, sir. We must go if we are going. Art ready, Liz?”

To Lina’s relief, Lizzie nodded without a word as she adjusted her bulky middle to more appropriately resemble a stomach than a roll that bulged all around her. Then she let Ian help her don her blanket-cloak. Its hood, like Lina’s, fit in loose folds that concealed much of her face and all of her curly tresses.

“The message, master,” Gorry said as they turned toward the door.

“Aye, sure,” Ian said. Pulling a scrap of vellum from his rags, he dropped it to the floor. You had best take the other portion now, Gorry, lest I forget later.”

Watching him hand a small roll of vellum to Gorry, Lina wondered what message he had left. Whatever it was, she just hoped they would get away. Moving to the door, she assured herself that if someone did catch them and bring them back, she and Lizzie would still be as valuable to James Mòr as when they had arrived.

Ian startled her with a light hand on her arm, a touch that stirred the tingling again. So strongly did the sensation affect her that he sounded far away when he said, “Let Lizzie go first, lass. We’ll keep you two between us. And keep your heads down. Both of you must look as meek as you can.”

“Wait, master,” Gorry said, crossing the room to pick up the noisome pail and then a tray from the table. “Let the lassie carry this pail. They’ll mistake her for me lad, and nae one will trouble her. And, m’lady, if ye’ll carry this tray, ye’ll look as if ye’re doing your chores, too. Look slippy now, master,” he added. “Four of us a-going down may set some’un tae thinking summat we dinna want him tae think.”

“No one will heed us,” Ian said, gesturing for him to lead the way. Then he put a hand to the small of Lina’s back, sending new tremors through her.

“Move along, lass,” he said when she stiffened.

Making her way down the twisting stairway, she was glad that those coming up kept to her left, giving her the wider footing. She did not need to shift the tray to watch her feet, but even so, she had all she could do to keep everything in place when she had to pass someone. At the door to the yard, so determined was she to keep her head down that when the deluge struck her, she nearly cried out.

Ian’s hand was at her back again. Gorry kept Lizzie with him as they wended their way through the sodden crowd milling in the courtyard, but men they passed seemed too concerned with their own misery to pay them heed.

They were nearing the gates when Ian said quietly, “Stop.”

When Lina did, she saw that Gorry had vanished into the crowd.

Lizzie stood beside her.

They stood so until Ian said, “Here they come now.”

Following his gaze, Lina saw the Laird of Colquhoun striding toward them.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:13 am

Not a word,” Ian muttered to Lina and Lizzie. He was nearly certain that the men nearest them were all Colquhoun’s men or Rob’s. Even so, he hoped to avoid his father’s attention at least until they were away from Dumbarton.

The two lasses were obediently silent, although Lady Lachina had glanced toward Colquhoun and Rob.

Ian had turned his head away as soon as he had seen them, so he doubted they had noticed him, let alone recognized him. Lady Lina had not let her gaze dwell on them, either, but had looked immediately away.

She was submissive enough, but he could not help wondering what she was thinking now, about him. She had nearly jumped out of her skin earlier when he had touched her arm. Then, when he had put a light hand to her back to urge her along, she had stiffened up like a poker.

“Who is that?” Lizzie murmured, diverting his attention to her.

“Dinna stare,” he murmured back. “We’ll talk anon.”

Colquhoun walked to the gate with equal disregard for the pelting rain and the men making way for him. He also set a pace fast enough to inform the gate guards that he would not take kindly to delay.

Noting with relief that Jed Laing was one of the guards, Ian watched closely. But neither Jed nor Colquhoun as much as glanced at one another. Jed knew his danger. And Colquhoun, despite his notions of courtesy and enduring belief that every

nobleman was open to civil discourse, was not a fool.

As Ian passed Jed, their gazes met. Ian allowed himself a wink.

He kept a close eye on Lina and Lizzie as they walked down the steep path. It was dangerously slippery and rutted, with rainwater turning every rut into a rill.

Neither lass complained. Each moved as if she were used to such terrain.

Looking up, he saw a man approaching the bottom of the path, wrapped in a heavy-looking, well-oiled leather cape.

Head down to give his cape's hood a chance to block the heavy rain, Dougal was thinking about his plan. Originally, he had thought he might take further advantage of Colquhoun's visit to slip Lina out while Colquhoun met with James Mòr. But her flat refusal to go with him had rendered that option unfeasible.

He could hardly force a reluctant woman all the way down from the southeast tower chamber and through the courtyard full of Colquhoun men and James Mòr's watchers without someone attempting to interfere.

However, he might be able to persuade her to be more cooperative later, when things were back to normal. Once she was in his power, of course, she would quickly learn to obey without question and abandon her damned insolence.

He would enjoy teaching her to mind him.

Hearing muffled footsteps above him on the muddy track, he glanced up and saw a score of oilskin-wrapped men coming down.

"Sakes, Colquhoun is already leaving," he murmured with relief.

Watching more closely, unmindful now of the rain, he thought it might amuse him to see the laird's defeated expression, and those of his men.

Keeping an eye on the man approaching them, Ian moved up a little to screen Lina and Lizzie from his view. He had a good idea who the man would be.

Lina glanced at him, her quizzical look telling him that she had also seen the man, now on the path and walking more quickly. His head was up, his face visible.

It was, as he had expected, Dougal MacPharlain. Looking back at Lina, Ian saw that she had shifted her position as well, as if to shield Lizzie.

Returning his attention to Dougal, he saw the man smile. He had just passed the head of their line, so he was amused to see Colquhoun leaving as he was, and doubtless thinking it was sooner than the laird liked and gloating about that.

Lina had indeed seen and recognized Dougal. She had also seen that he was looking closely at the men ahead of them. Fearing that Lizzie might see him and inadvertently draw his attention, Lina eased closer but saw then that Liz was watching where she was putting her feet and following the men ahead of them.

Glad they were not alone and even glad that their feet were as muddy as anyone else's and therefore unlikely to draw notice despite their smaller size, she followed Lizzie's example and kept her head down until they had passed Dougal.

Pleasant though it would have been to teach Dougal better manners, Ian just hoped he was not counting Colquhoun's tail. The rain was still heavy, though, and the next time he looked, Dougal had pulled his hood farther forward and was looking down.

No one else paid them any heed then or as they trekked back across the rain-drenched river plain to the forest and the lads waiting with the horses.

Having ridden near the rear of the tail without being last when they had come, Ian led his charges to take the same position again, expecting at any moment to hear someone comment on the two additional cloaked figures.

When no one did, Ian realized that the men were all tension-tired. Their time in the yard had been mercifully short. But the reason for its brevity was only too obvious. Colquhoun's mission had failed. The grim way he had marched from the keep to the gates had announced his mood loudly to them all, as well as to Dougal.

Hurrying past the last of Colquhoun's tail, Dougal shifted his hood back long enough for the sodden guard on the wall to recognize him and shout down to let him in. Then he hurried through the gateway.

Crossing the yard, he saw that although men were still doing chores there, including the chap who looked after the women and the lad who always went with him, there were fewer now. As he headed for the door into the southeast tower, he hoped that his luck had changed and he'd be able to get Lina away sooner than the evening. Smiling, he took the stairs quickly and used his key to open the door.

He stood in the doorway and stared, stunned, at the empty room.

When his gaze alit on the scrap of vellum on the floor, he moved quickly to pick it up. Reading its message, seeing his own initial scrawled—as if he would ever sign anything so—he knew he could not linger. Shoving the scrap under his jack, he closed and relocked the door.

Fury threatened to overcome him. They had escaped. But worse, Lady Lina had dared to try to make it look as if he had taken both of them, for surely it was she and not the much friendlier Lizzie who had scrawled the note. Thinking swiftly, noting that the upper stairs were clear, he descended again to the yard.

He had taken what little he would need to the galley on his first trip. If he went down again at once, he would have witnesses to the fact that he had come in alone for just a short time and gone out again alone. Meantime, wherever Lady Lina might be, she would certainly head for home as soon as she could.

The wretched lass might unwittingly have made everything easier for him.

The heavy rain continued. The mood was somber, the riders quiet.

Ian kept a close eye on his charges, but they kept silent and remembered to keep their heads down.

If one or another of Rob's lads gave Ian a quizzical look as they rode, he ignored it, his thoughts speeding ahead to Dunglass and his father's likely reaction.

The rest of the journey passed quickly... too quickly.

Men on the walkway overlooking the landward approach to the castle had seen and recognized their party. The gate was open. The riders passed through the gateway to find gillies splashing across the yard to take their horses.

The darkest clouds had passed. The rain had begun to ease its pelting.

Dismounting and handing his reins to a gillie, Ian moved to help the lady Lina only to see her cast one breeks-clad leg adroitly over her pony's rump and slide to the ground with a light splash. Lizzie, too, dismounted without aid.

"I wish I could wear breeks all the time," she confided in a low tone to Ian. "They are much better for riding."

Colquhoun's voice sounded behind Ian, saying sternly, "Ian, bring those two lads and

come with me. I want a word with ye inside.”

Meeting his father’s gaze, Ian said only, “Aye, my lord.”

A glance at Lina and Lizzie assured him that they knew Colquhoun referred to them. When they fell into step with Ian, he noted with relief that each continued to keep her head down as they followed in the laird’s wake.

No one else looked at them, but Ian knew that any number of the Colquhoun men had at least an inkling of what he had done. And many of them, if not most, had faced Colquhoun’s wrath before, just as he had.

He had no doubt that he was about to face it again.

Lina’s heart was pounding, and she could tell that Lizzie’s tension had increased, too. The younger girl’s hands clutched each other, making Lina yearn to reach out and touch her, to ease her anxiety.

She could not do that. Ian had made it as plain as anyone could that they were not to reveal their identities or even that they were female.

Although she had to lengthen her stride as much as she could to keep up with Ian and his father, she knew better than to complain. She wished she could at least say something to thank Ian for what he had done or to assure him that Colquhoun was not as angry as he seemed to be.

Rejecting that last thought as quickly as it had come, knowing it for a lie, she decided that she would be wiser to keep quiet and hoped that Lizzie would, too.

So far, Liz had shown wisdom beyond what Lina had come to expect of her. But the tension she displayed now...

Lina prayed that the Fates would aid them both. She prayed, too, that they would somehow reveal what, if anything, one might do or to say in the next few minutes to stem the tide of Colquhoun's anger.

That hope lingered briefly and faded.

Who was she to imagine that she could do such a thing? She could not stem her own father's rage when it erupted. And she did not know why Colquhoun was so angry. She just knew that he was.

He had ordered Ian to bring them along. So he must know who they were.

Was he angry that his son had rescued them? Had he ordered him not to?

Common sense told her he was angry. And since his anger was likely to vent itself soon, she would do well to keep silent unless Ian or his father spoke to her.

She had evidently grown accustomed to Ian's presence, though. She could hear normally and she could think. Whatever force had affected her before when he was near her or disturbed her thoughts had evidently passed.

At the entrance to the keep, Colquhoun led the way inside, then up four or five steps and across the great hall to the dais. Minions who scurried about, preparing for the evening meal, hastily made way for him. Stepping onto the dais, he continued toward a door at the rear of it.

He had acknowledged no one in the hall. Nor had he spoken.

A gillie setting a jug on the high table saw the laird coming and nearly upset the jug in his haste to open the door for him.

With a brusque nod of thanks, Colquhoun strode into the room.

Ian held up a hand to stop the departing gillie and gestured just as silently for Lina to follow his father. She did so and felt Ian lift the oilskin off her as she passed him. Glancing back to be sure that Lizzie was behind her, she saw him take Lizzie's oilskin as well and hand both to the gillie.

Turning back toward Colquhoun, Lina paused, remembering then that he used the inner chamber primarily for himself and the business of his estates, the way her father used a room across from his bedchamber. A dark, polished table extended from near the hooded fireplace on the hallside wall toward the center of the room. A low peat fire burned on the hearth. Myriad candles burned in sconces and in a chandelier overhead, giving Colquhoun's chamber a warm glow.

The chill she felt coming from the laird, however, banished all warmth.

Lizzie stopped beside her as the door latch fell into place with a snap. Lina saw that although Liz still looked anxious, she no longer wrung her hands.

Ian stepped past them to stand in front of them, facing Colquhoun.

The laird had moved behind the table. A back-stool was there, but Colquhoun continued to stand. He gazed, sternly thoughtful, at his son.

The silence grew, deepened, and stretched until it felt palpable.

Ian stood quietly, apparently content to wait for his father to speak.

Watching them, Lina felt her tension begin to ease.

"Have you lost your senses?" Colquhoun asked in an icy tone that made the fine hairs

of her nape stand on end and her tension surge back in tidal force.

She heard Lizzie gasp beside her but dared not look at her.

Ian remained silent for so long that Lina, too, wondered about his sanity.

The color in Colquhoun's cheeks deepened. "Have ye nowt to say?"

"Aye, sure, I do, sir," Ian said. "I'd prefer to keep this talk between the two of us, though, if you will permit that. These ladies—"

"—are here thanks only to your lunacy," Colquhoun interjected. "I ken fine that you would prefer to hear what I say alone. But where would you have me put them if not here with us?"

"Surely, my lady mother—"

"You have lost your senses. Your lady mother is not to know they were even here. Do you understand me?" He glared at his son. "That is a command, Ian. They cannot stay here, not tonight. Sakes, they cannot even come here again until we can somehow resolve this trouble with James Mòr. What you did today endangers not only our neutrality and any other chance I may have to treat with him but also the very safety of Dunglass. You are not stupid, Ian. You must see that."

A slight, impatient jerk of Ian's right shoulder and what Lina could see of the set of his jaw swept him back into the nursery before her very eyes. As large as he was and respected—a knight of the realm—and despite the six years that she knew separated them in age, the recklessly daring Sir Ian Colquhoun turned for those brief seconds into a sensitive bairn too angry to hide his fury.

Her heart went out to him. But she swiftly lowered her eyelids, lest Colquhoun or,

worse, Ian himself somehow see her sympathy in her eyes.

Ian said brusquely, "Where would you have had me take them, sir?"

The door behind her opened without ceremony. That fact, and the rustle of silken skirts as the door shut again, told Lina who had entered before anyone spoke. She did not need the gesture from Colquhoun to ignore courtesy and keep still.

Ian looked over his shoulder, and she saw that familiar gleam of unholy amusement leap to his eyes. Her protective instinct vanished, but when that still twinkling gaze shifted to her, she nearly smiled back at him.

"My dear sir," Lady Colquhoun said from behind Lina, "I understand that you have brought us two guests. Did you mean to hide them from me?"

Ian was amused. But he wondered whether his plump, always comfortable-looking, quiet-spoken mother had just saved him from paternal annihilation or made things worse. Glancing at his father, he feared it would be the latter.

But her ladyship had already helped. Her unexpected entrance had banished his own soaring fury with Colquhoun for taking him to task in Lina's presence.

Colquhoun looked briefly chagrined but rallied swiftly to say, "I had hoped to spare you worry, my lady. We do have guests. But Ian was wrong to bring them here. Especially with you in residence as you are, my love," he added sternly.

Ian knew that Colquhoun meant that tone for him, not her ladyship. But he had himself in hand again and retained his composure easily.

"With respect, my lord," Lady Colquhoun said in her amiable way, "prithee do not talk like a noddy. I have heard many rumors today. If the least of them is true, James

Mòr Stewart seized two female hostages days ago and took them to Dumbarton. Then, this afternoon, you rode off without a word to me, Ian also vanished, and now you return with two guests. I am not a noddy, sir. I can piece together such items of information with ease. Who are they?"

Colquhoun hesitated.

Lina did not hesitate. She turned and made the best curtsy she could manage in the awkward costume she wore. The only thing resembling a skirt—unless she pulled her own too-long-worn skirts free of the breeks—was the dreadful blanket-cloak. It steamed now, embarrassingly redolent of damp, seldom-washed wool.

Lady Colquhoun gaped at her. "Mercy! Lachina MacFarlan, is that you in those horrible clothes?"

"I fear it is, my lady," Lina said, rising and pushing back her makeshift hood. Politely indicating Lizzie, who had bobbed a semicurtsy and risen when Lina had, she added, "I think you also know the lady Elizabeth Galbraith."

"Mag's youngest sister, of course," Lady Colquhoun said, moving to greet them with a hand extended to each. "You are most welcome here, both of you."

"Nay, then, they are not," Colquhoun said curtly. "Nae one must ken they are here, Arabella, especially James Mòr. He must go on thinking that we are neutral, or we will all be in danger. These lassies must go tonight, I say."

"But where?"

"To Inch Galbraith, of course, under strong escort. Lizzie must want to get home. Forbye, Lina's mother and sister will be near there if not on the islet itself."

“Then they must go, of course, sir,” she said equably. “I do not question your decision. But they cannot go as they are. I doubt they have seen hot water in days. To send them out in such weather without properly warming them first would be cruel. They also need fresh clothing and a good hot meal.”

“Now, Arabella...” Colquhoun hesitated when she shook her head.

“In troth, my lord,” she added, “I can see that you are aching to ring a peal over Ian, who doubtless deserves it for wearing those noisome rags if for naught else. But you will both be more comfortable if I take these two off your hands until we sup. If you will order a tub and hot water carried to my dressing room, I shall whisk them up our privy stair at once and conceal them until the tub is full.”

Lina returned her gaze to Colquhoun.

He glowered for a moment at no one in particular and then nodded.

Hearing a sigh from Lizzie that echoed her own relief, Lina followed their hostess out. She doubted, though, that their leaving made Ian any more comfortable.

Ian doubted that the women were beyond earshot when Colquhoun said grimly, “If ye’ve aught to say to me, say it now.”

Meeting his gaze, Ian said, “I did have reason for my actions, sir, and no time for debate if aught was to be done.”

“I’m listening.”

That was the best thing about Colquhoun, Ian thought. He would always listen. Ian hoped he would give his own sons, when he had them, the same respect. He did not think for a moment that his reason for acting as he had would spare him. But he knew

that Colquhoun would at least try to understand why he had done it.

“Gorry sent word to me, too, sir, when the messenger brought James Mòr’s invitation to you. The reason I resisted speaking before now in front of Lizzie and Lady Lachina was that Gorry had heard that Dougal MacPharlain meant to abduct Lina and leave Lizzie alone there. Just as Dougal had decided that Lizzie would be valuable to James Mòr because he could use her to pressure Galbraith, I believed—”

“—that Dougal wanted Lina for a similar purpose,” Colquhoun said. “But if you or Dougal thinks Andrew Dubh would give Pharlain the last piece of Arrochar that Andrew holds in exchange for Lina’s return, ye’re both daft.”

“Do you think he would not ?” Ian asked, stunned.

“I think Andrew would raise an army against Pharlain instead. And, by God, I’d help him. In troth, though, lad, I doubt that Pharlain is stupid enough to keep any young woman hostage. It is one thing to seize a man’s land, another to seize his daughter. What fool decided to capture those two lassies in the first place?”

“Dougal,” Ian said.

“Neither of us has ever thought much of him,” Colquhoun said.

Dismissing Dougal, Ian said, “I am sorry for any trouble I may have stirred for you or Dunglass, sir. I knew that you were fain to leave for Dumbarton, though, and would not brook delay or debate. So I decided to ride in your tail. Sithee, today’s rain may have provided the only such opportunity. I dared not miss the chance.”

“You had no business doing it, even so,” Colquhoun retorted. “What if James Mòr’s men had caught you in that rig? Sakes, I cannot imagine how you got inside, let alone how you smuggled those two out again without being caught.”

“I had help, sir, not least of which came from the downpour and James Mòr himself, by insisting that your men and those others stay in the yard. None of the men watching ours could do so closely enough in such weather. But I entered that tower after Gorry informed me that James Mòr had said you would be coming on a fool’s errand if you expected him to release their ladyships.”

“I see. Do you mean to say that you would not have made the attempt had Gorry not told you that?”

Ian decided it would be wiser for once not to reply.

“I thought as much,” Colquhoun said. “Well, ye ken what I think of what ye did, and I’ll not belabor ye with my reasons. I’ll also not deny that I’m thankful that Lina and Lizzie are free. ’Tis a wonder we’ve not had Galbraith and Andrew Dubh both down on us, clamoring to hear news of them.”

“If they must go to Inch Galbraith, sir, I’ll take them.”

“A good notion, that, and one that Arthur will appreciate.”

“Likely, he’ll feel much as you do, my lord.”

Colquhoun nodded. “I do still have more to say to ye that ye’ll liefer not hear. But first, I’ll let ye change out of those wet clothes and get ready to leave.”

“With this weather, it might be better—”

“Nay, do not fling the weather at me now, lad. As it is, we’ll take supper here and ye’ll send Hak on to warn Arthur that ye’re coming. It’s ten miles from here to Balloch, and ye’ll not get away for an hour or more. Although ’tis summer, this rain does mean it will be night-dark long before usual. It may take three hours to reach

Balloch if ye have to skirt the Vale of Leven, then another to Inch Galbraith. And James Mòr may already have men out in force, searching for those lassies.”

“I did cast a rub in his way, though,” Ian said. He went on to explain about the message he had left, and the missing keys to the tower chamber.

“What did the message say?”

“ ‘Prepare to leave as soon as I return.’ I signed it with a scrawled ‘D.’ ”

“D’ye ken for a fact that Dougal could have written such a thing?”

“Aye, sure, he can read and write. Pharlain did not stint his education.”

“Nor I yours, my lad,” Colquhoun retorted. He went sternly on from there.

Since Ian had never expected him to postpone a word of what he had to say, he decided when at last he escaped that he had been fortunate.

Considering his father’s options...

When Lizzie insisted that Lina bathe first, she accepted with alacrity.

Lady Colquhoun left the room when the tub was full, but her attire woman, Carsey, stayed to help. Carsey greeted their attire with a sniff of disapproval but said only that they would be glad to use her ladyship’s French soap.

“I’ve brought fresh clothing for you, my dears,” Lady Colquhoun said when she bustled back into the room shortly after Lina had stepped out of the tub.

Carsey had bundled her into a big warm towel and wrapped another around her wet

hair. Lina sat now with her feet on hot bricks wrapped in layers of cloth, and Lizzie was in the tub, scrubbing away with the rose-scented soap.

“We regret putting you to so much trouble, my lady,” Lina said.

“Blethers,” her ladyship replied with a smile, handing her a clean linen shift.

Lina choked back a gurgle of laughter and glanced at Lizzie, whose lips had pressed tightly together. As their eyes met, Lizzie burst out laughing.

Unfazed by their amusement, Lady Colquhoun said, “That is one of Adam’s favorite words, and I must say it does a body good to say it now and now. You have put me to no trouble at all, my dears. I confess, though, that I am curious beyond measure. I do hope your captivity was not utterly horrifying. That is to say...”

“When she paused expectantly, Lina sobered at once and shook her head. “We were together the whole time, madam. Dougal MacPharlain did try to frighten us with threats. But he only threatened. I do think, though, that Sir Ian would liefer we not talk yet about our captivity and that his lordship would agree with him. His lordship is worried that word of our being here at Dunglass might spread.”

“Well, I am not going to tell anyone, nor will Carsey. She does not repeat anything that happens when she is with me. Come to that, she does not talk much more than a rabbit does unless I want to discuss something with her. A gey comforting companion, Carsey is.”

“She is gey kind, too, my lady,” Lizzie said, smiling at the attired woman.

Carsey was holding a towel for her. So Lizzie stepped out of the tub and quickly began drying herself.

With her ladyship's assistance, and Carsey's, Lina and Lizzie dressed in clothing that had belonged to Ian's sisters. To Lina's surprise, her ladyship also provided two pairs of soft, well-tanned breeks.

"You will be warmer tonight if you wear these," she said. "You need not don them now. But since Colquhoun is sending you to Inch Galbraith, you will be glad to have them, because in this weather, heaven knows how long that will take. 'Tis a pity you cannot stay at Balloch Castle. The keeper there is a friend of ours."

Lizzie said, "Then perhaps—"

"Nay, for they say that Isabella is on her way to Inchmurrin, and she might take it into her head to stop at Balloch. It would not do for her to find you there, because she would view it as her motherly duty to return you to James Mòr. Even if she did not, she would tell him that you had been there."

Lina said, "The weather will slow us. But I cannot believe that even in a downpour like this afternoon's, the journey could take longer than it did for us to ride from Loch Lomond to Dumbarton after Dougal captured us."

"Aye," Lizzie agreed. "Lina said he was making a show of force to frighten the people we saw in villages and clachans."

"Some men do think that ordinary folk are thus easily frightened," Lady Colquhoun said. "In troth, though, I think it is often the ordinary people who gain most of the wisdom the Fates hand out."

"Dougal is a villain," Lizzie said. "But he's a devilish handsome one."

Lady Colquhoun looked at Lina and raised her eyebrows.

Lina shook her head and turned around so her ladyship could do up the buttons on the back of the pale pink wool kirtle that she had helped her don.

“You’ll want this shawl, too, dear,” Lady Colquhoun said, draping a soft one of gray and pink wool over her shoulders. “If Colquhoun means for as few people as possible to learn of your presence here, he will order our supper served in the inner chamber. In troth, I believe we can trust our people. But Ian and Colquhoun both fear that James Mòr may have slipped a supporter or two in, even here.”

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Supper in the inner chamber passed fast enough to suit even Ian's impatience. Since Rob and Alex knew about the afternoon's activities, Colquhoun had invited the two men to join them but had asked them to enter from the privy stair.

"I don't want to stir dissension amongst our other guests," he had explained to Ian. "I'll tell them I wanted to talk with ye, lad, because ye'll be away for a time on another matter. Sithee, Adam will sit in for me at the high table, and I've agreed to meet them all after supper to discuss my meeting with James Mòr and how we might proceed with him. I ken fine that ye dinna trust the man, and with good reason. But if we can settle the matter peaceably..."

"That would suit us all, aye," Ian said when he paused. He had no faith in such negotiating because he knew they could not trust James Mòr's word. But since the last word would be Ian's, he was content to let his father test his well-honed skills and let James Mòr think that Colquhoun alone was handling the matter.

At the table, the three ladies sat at one end with the four men at the other. They chatted casually while the gillies were there, trusted or not.

When the gillies left, the ladies continued talking to each other, so Ian said quietly to his father, "Do you mean to tell anyone else here about their ladyships, sir? A few may learn that they were captives, if only because men at Dumbarton will talk."

"My hope is that folks will learn only that one of James Mòr's men stupidly seized two female hostages and that he released them without a stir," Colquhoun said. His gaze moved from Ian across the table to Rob and then to Alex. "I trust that all three of ye have given orders that your men are not to talk about today's events."

“My lads know little about them,” Alex said. “Only that you met with someone at Dumbarton, sir, and that we were to guard your back.”

Colquhoun’s gaze shifted to Rob.

“ ’Tis much the same with mine, sir. Some recognized Ian and wondered why he rode in our tail. I made it plain to them that I’d take a dim view of loose talk.”

“Good enough,” Colquhoun said, and Ian agreed. Rob was not a man to cross, and anyone who served under him knew it.

“I would like Rob and Alex to ride with me tonight, sir,” Ian said quietly. “If James Mòr has men out searching, I’d liefer—”

“Aye, sure,” Colquhoun said. “But take care that your party is not so large that its size alone causes talk. Fifteen or so should be enough, although you must take young Peter Wylie with you, as he is still here.”

“I’ll take my men,” Alex said. “Then Rob need take none. We’ll likely return tomorrow, and it might raise questions if we both go and take all of our men with us. Most of the lads here know that I take mine wherever I go.”

Ian agreed, and they soon finished their meal. Less than a half-hour later, they were on their way. The rain had eased in strength but remained steady.

Ian eyed his charges, wondering how they’d weather another journey. He had sent Dobb Colquhoun, captain of his fighting tail, and three others on with orders to see that the hilltop path east of the vale was safe. Two others rode just ahead with oil torches that even in the rain should burn long enough to see them safely to the path.

Lina rode beside Ian, and Lizzie rode next to Rob, behind them. Alex, the captain of

his tail, and the rest of the men, including Peter Wylie, followed.

The wind had died, and Ian prayed that it would not revive, since any wind would lower the temperature and help the rain soak them all through again.

In the flickering torchlight, he thought that Lina looked as calm, wide awake, and dignified as usual. Lizzie looked tired and unhappily thoughtful. Recalling his earlier suspicion that she had been at fault in their capture, he signed to Rob to slow down, giving himself more room to speak privately with Lina.

Keeping his voice down, he said, “I haven’t had a chance yet to learn how you were captured, my lady. I’m wondering if perhaps Lizzie...”

She frowned, so he paused and waited, wondering if she actually distrusted him and might therefore refuse to talk to him.

Then she glanced back at the two behind them. Evidently reassured that Lizzie could not hear them, she said, “No good can come of casting blame, sir.”

“So it was her fault,” he said. “What did she do? Nay, do not frown at me. She looks worried, which is leading me to think she is not as eager to get home as one would expect her to be.”

“That is possible, aye,” she said with a sigh.

Lina knew it would be futile to refuse to tell Sir Ian how Dougal had captured them. He would be angry if she refused, and she did not want that. Her inexplicable feelings about him befuddled her enough as it was.

Accordingly, she described what had happened, omitting her feelings from the tale and trying to make Lizzie’s actions sound ordinary. But the moment she said that

Lizzie had urged her pony on ahead while the three of them were riding down the Glen Fruin trail, he said grimly, “That lass wants a good skelping.”

“Well, prithee, do not tell her so,” Lina said, trying to read his expression. “Rescuing us does not give you license to scold Lizzie or me.”

Ignoring the stricture, he said, “What the devil were you thinking to be riding away from the safety of Bannachra at all? And with just one unarmed gillie?”

She opened her mouth to tell him that Peter had worn his dirk. But it felt decidedly rash to make such a statement to an armed knight who had provided an escort of seventeen other men-at-arms as protection against enemies who would also have to be daft enough to travel on such a dark, rainy night.

“Did you want to say something?” Ian asked softly. When she shook her head, he added, “I must say, I’d never have expected you to be so reckless. Not as quick as you are to condemn others for what you merely perceive as recklessness.”

Raising her chin, she wished she had not when rain ran down her neck. She wiped it off as well as she could with one gloved hand before she said, “We meant to ride only as far as the loch, sir. I told you that before.”

He did not answer. So she looked at him again and could tell that he was trying not to laugh. Doubtless he had seen her wipe the rain from her neck.

Overcoming his amusement, he said, “You also told me that there could be naught amiss in such a ride. Your capture belies that statement, does it not?”

“You are the last one who should condemn anyone else’s error, sir. Especially when it comes to recklessness. To sneak into that tower dressed in rags and carrying peat, as you did, has to be the most reckless thing anyone has done in a long while. To do it

again was just daft. Had James Mòr caught you, he'd have hanged you."

"In troth, I don't think so," Ian said. "He'd more likely have viewed capturing me as just such a stroke of luck for him as capturing you and Lizzie was."

She sighed. "Mayhap you are right. But did you think about that before you acted?" Taking his silence for his answer, she nodded. "So you were reckless then. And you were even more reckless today. I don't blame your father for being furious with you. I'd wager he was just wishing you were a mite smaller."

"You would lose that wager," he said. "I will admit that he said many of the same things to me that you have. But do you honestly believe that if he had thought a beating would teach me a needed lesson or change me for the better, he would not have ordered me to submit to one? If you think that, you are wrong."

She knew she was. Even if she were right, she had overstepped civility by daring to suggest that she knew what Colquhoun had been thinking.

Just as the laird would order a man-at-arms flogged for disobeying his orders, he would punish his sons in like fashion if he believed they deserved it. Any man who understood fairness would, and Colquhoun's principles were strong.

She knew, too, that had Colquhoun ordered punishment, Ian would have submitted. But the laird would not have punished him for so daring a rescue.

For years, she had rarely seen father and son together, because Ian had often been away training or fighting. But she had seen enough to know the love Colquhoun felt for his sons and the deep respect they had for him.

"He seemed almost angry enough, though," she said.

“Do you wish I’d left you and Lizzie in that tower? Do you think he does?”

“You know I don’t,” Lina said, giving him a reproachful look. “I could not think such things. I am too grateful to be free again. Faith, I know I should not chide you, even if I had the right to do so. But you are reckless, sir, and it frightens me. Forbye, you have ignored good advice since childhood and seem to assume that you are always right and anyone who disagrees with you is wrong. Moreover, I heard enough today to guess that your father went to Dumbarton to speak for us. Why did you not trust him to treat with James Mòr?”

Ian distrusted James Mòr, not Colquhoun. Still, in the diminishing torchlight, the look Lina gave him stirred a sense of guilt, although he could not regret what he had done. Even his father was glad that he had succeeded in freeing them.

Nevertheless, she was eyeing him as if he had behaved badly.

Thanks to the six-year difference in their ages, they had never had much in common. When the MacFarlan ladies had stayed with his family, he had been more interested in Andrena than in her little sisters, because Andrena’s love of woodlands and adventure had matched his own. Also, coming from so much younger a child, Lina’s disapproval of his behavior had annoyed him even when he’d deserved it.

Looking into her eyes, finding them deeper and darker in the torchlight than they had seemed before and solemnly fixed on him... He looked away but only, he assured himself, to judge how much longer the torches would last in the rain.

The afterimage of those dusky, perceptive eyes lingered. Sakes, it burned through to his core as if to bare all he’d lieber keep hidden. She was still watching him. He could feel her gaze as if it had fingers touching him. When he could not resist looking at her again, she said, “Tell me what you are thinking.”

Feeling as if an unknown force prevented him from refusing, he said, “I do trust my father. But I knew he could not persuade James Mòr to release you before Dougal abducted you. Or did you imagine that you could prevent that?”

“Shhh,” she warned. “You cannot want the others to hear you.”

“Don’t quibble,” he said, lowering his voice. “Answer my question.”

“Dougal suggested marrying me,” she said bluntly.

“Blethers,” he said. “Even Dougal could not be as daft as that.”

“Well, he did say it, so he must be that daft,” she replied with careful dignity. “But I doubt that he wants to marry me. He said the notion was Pharlain’s.”

“Even more outrageous,” Ian muttered.

“My father would say that the notion is contemptible. Apparently, Pharlain suggested it as a way to reunite Clan Farlan.”

Ian snorted. “If Pharlain suggested it, I’ll wager he did so before Andrena married Mag. I’d also wager that he wanted Dougal to marry Andrena, not you.”

She was silent for so long that he wondered if she had mistaken his derisive snort for something other than his disbelief that Pharlain would seriously expect Andrew to accept such reasoning. Had he somehow offended her instead?

“You may be right,” she admitted soberly. “But Dougal said only that Pharlain suggested marrying one of the MacFarlan sisters. I am one of them, sir.”

“Aye, sure, you are. But, if I am not mistaken, as the eldest one, Dree will inherit

most of whatever Andrew leaves. Moreover, Andrew means to win back his other lands, which is why he wants good-sons who are warriors, like Mag. Recall that to marry Andrena, Mag had to agree to adopt the MacFarlan name, because your father wants to ensure that MacFarlans from the true line inherit Arrochar and Tùr Meiloach when he wins back his chieftdom. Dougal must know that.”

She wrinkled her nose thoughtfully, nearly making him smile.

Usually, every inch of her was smoothly, even elegantly, groomed and garbed. One simply did not think of the lady Lachina having wrinkles anywhere. Thinking of how smooth the rest of her body might be briefly distracted him.

“I doubt that Dougal concerns you much now,” she said at last, rather distantly. Then, in a sharper tone, she said, “What are you thinking, sir?”

Abruptly meeting her gaze again, he felt guilt he had not felt since boyhood surge through him at the notion that, like her older sister, she might somehow know his thoughts.

The woman was clearly dangerous. She was also, Ian decided in the same breath, too intriguing for a man to dismiss easily from his thoughts.

Lina had been trying to sort her own thoughts when she noticed that Ian was staring at her. Her simple question then had made him look guiltier than he had when she had accused him of not trusting Colquhoun to treat with James Mòr.

In truth, she knew that he must trust his father in such matters, because the laird was renowned for his skill at mediation. Moreover, she believed that Ian had rescued them not only because he thought Dougal might abduct her but because he feared leaving Lizzie alone with James Mòr and his men.

Doubtless, Ian would have had to answer to Mag had he let that happen.

Despite all of that, Ian's reaction to learning that Dougal—or Pharlain—had suggested marriage to her required clarification. “Do you think it is impossible that Dougal might simply want to marry me and doesn't care a whit about our land?”

Ian blinked, as if he had snapped out of some sort of reverie. “Nay, of course, I don't mean that,” he said rather curtly. “Doubtless any man seeking a wife would want you. I meant only—”

“Horses coming, sir, a pair o' them, we think,” one of the two riders carrying the torches said just then.

Immediately reining in, Ian said, “Ride up and meet them, you two. Keep your torches to throw at them if you have to draw steel.” Twisting in his saddle to look back, he said, “Alex, get those men off the trail. In this rain, ten or fifteen feet should be far enough if they can keep their beasts quiet and if those approaching us lack torches. I want our lads near enough to surprise anyone who threatens us.”

“Aye, sure,” Sir Alex replied.

“This lassie is asleep, Ian,” Rob said quietly.

Looking back, Lina saw that Lizzie not only slept but that Rob MacAulay had somehow shifted her from her horse to his own without waking her.

Sir Ian could see as much, too.

Rob added, “Do you want me off the track, too? Or shall I wake her?”

“Stay as you are,” Ian said. “We'll count on our own lads to fend off trouble. If a

larger group is following these two, we'd have heard as much by now. So the two approaching us are either mine or a pair that slipped by Dobb and the others."

Lina doubted that any of Ian's men would let that happen.

The darkness that had enveloped them when the torches moved on made it possible to see only his shape now. But Lina had heard confidence in his voice.

She wondered if he would view an oncoming enemy army as merely another challenge to overcome. He was clearly a man whose duties came first, so the presence of two young women would doubtless just enhance that challenge.

Nevertheless, she felt calm. As that realization struck her, she said impulsively, "All three of those approaching riders are yours, sir."

Ian resisted pointing out that he had just said as much or that he doubted that two had become three. He eased his mount forward so that it blocked hers.

A low whistle sounded then above the whispering rain, and he knew the approaching riders posed no threat. Although the riders lacked torches, he was sure that his two torchbearers must have met the others and were returning with them.

When three shadowy figures of horsemen grew visible in the murk ahead, he glanced at Lina's dark slender figure beside him and wondered how she had known three riders were coming.

The first of them reached him a minute later, the others close behind. "More riders ahead, sir, a score or more," the first man, one of his erstwhile torchbearers, said. "But Tobias here says they be a-heading down in tae the vale."

"Art sure, Tobias?" Ian asked the youngest of the three.

“Aye, sir. Dobb says he reckons they come from Drymen or somewhere else near the southeast shore o’ Loch Lomond and be heading back tae Dumbarton.”

Ian trusted Dobb’s judgment. However, if James Mòr had sent Dumbarton men east, he had sent others to Loch Lomond’s southwest shore. They would have to approach Loch Lomond with increased care.

He said quietly, “Did Dobb say aught else, Tobias?”

“He did, aye, sir. He did say ye should dispense wi’ torches as ye ride along the hilltop. It does seem clear o’ strangers ahead, though.”

“We’ll ride on then,” Ian said. “Art freezing yet, my lady?”

“No, sir. Your lady mother gave us breeks to wear under our skirts. I suspect, too, that I am wearing her favorite and warmest cloak. The one thing I regret about leaving Dumbarton is that I had to leave my own new cloak behind.”

He grinned. “We could send a message asking James Mòr to return it.”

Over the susurrous rain, her soft chuckle floated to his ears, and his body startled him with its strong, sensual reaction to the sound.

Despite the chilly air, he felt hot. And riding was less comfortable for the next mile or so. But they reached Balloch in less time than Colquhoun had predicted and passed through the dark village in near silence, despite the necessary splashing.

Approaching the ford across the river Leven, which flowed out of Loch Lomond, Ian gave thanks that it was midsummer and not spring. When the snows were melting, any ford within a mile or two of the loch became unusable.

As it was, he felt vulnerable while crossing, and more so when Rob crossed with Lizzie still sleeping contentedly, her head resting against his shoulder. He held her in place with one powerful arm while he guided his horse with his other hand.

When they reached the opposite bank, Ian said to him, "Perhaps you should wake her now and let her ride her own horse the rest of the way."

"We'll let her sleep," Rob said, his deep voice barely audible above the rain. "She'd have fallen off her horse earlier had I not noticed in time to prevent it. She's exhausted, as much from fear of what lies ahead as from what lies behind."

"Likely, you're right. Galbraith will be relieved to see her but will have much to say about what happened that she won't want to hear."

Rob grunted. "She said your father was so angry that she hates to imagine how angry hers will be. Said she'd always heard that Colquhoun was a man of peace."

Ian said dryly, "He is, aye, unless one of his sons crosses his will. I was lucky to get off with a whole skin."

"So far, anyway," Rob murmured.

Biting back a laugh, Ian said, "Just don't lose her, Rob. I don't want to face Galbraith or Mag if we do."

They had not gone far beyond the ford when another horseman approached. "There be three men afoot waiting near this track a quarter-mile on, sir. They dinna look tae be armed, so Dobb talked wi' them. Their spokesman be an auld codger wha' says his name be Lippin Geordie and that he be a-waiting for ye."

Ian was about to ask if Hak was with them when Lina said, "Lippin Geordie is

Galbraith's man, sir. He lives in the clachan on shore across from Inch Galbraith and has a son named Dolf. They row boats to the islet and back."

"Then Geordie is a friend, lad," Ian said. "Did he say whether he had seen Hak or any men from Dumbarton?"

"He talked wi' some riders earlier and told them there were nary a sign o' life at Inch Galbraith, that likely the laird be a-visiting at Culcreuch."

"If that is so—"

"When Dobb said the laird would be expecting us, because our master had sent word ahead, Geordie admitted that the laird be at home, sir. He has his sister the lady Margaret and her guests wi' him, and Geordie said he had set watchers, too. So it be safe tae come ahead."

"Aye, then we will," Ian said, signaling to his men that they would ride on.

Lina could see little in the darkness but had realized soon after the departing torches had plunged them into blackness that Ian's night vision was excellent. None of the men seemed concerned about the darkness—or the rain.

Lizzie slept contentedly through it all.

Never one to bemoan a situation she could not control, Lina tried to ignore the unsettling fact that, despite the oilskin she wore, the front of the cloak that Lady Colquhoun had lent her had soaked through to her bodice.

In fact, the stiff oilskin had creased just above her right shoulder, providing a channel for rain to stream down the front of her. She had soon learned to judge when it was about to happen and to ease the skin up with a finger to make the water stream away

from her. Nevertheless, she was overjoyed to see Lippin Geordie and his two companions when they finally reached them.

“God bethankit, ye’ve brung our wee lassie home,” Geordie exclaimed when he saw Lizzie. If he gave Rob a speculative look, it vanished when Lizzie awoke and said, “Geordie! Are we home then?”

“Soon enow, lassie,” he said soothingly. “Soon enow.”

After that, things moved quickly. Geordie told Ian that he, Sir Alex, and Rob were welcome at Galbraith’s tower. “Himself did say that them others, along o’ your ponies, should find room in our clachan,” he added. “We’ll be a mite crowded, sir. But your men and beasts be welcome, and we’ll get them all out o’ the wet.”

“They’ll be grateful for shelter,” Ian said. “I did send my man ahead to let Galbraith know we were coming.”

“Aye, sure, sir. He’s a-waiting for ye at the tower. Himself did say that Hak could look after your friends, too.”

“He will, aye. You have my thanks, Geordie.”

“Good then. We ha’ boats for ye yonder.”

A half-hour later, after crossing from the shore to the islet’s landing in two small longboats with four oarsmen each, they disembarked onto the wharf.

Lina noted that Lizzie’s mood had shifted from delight at seeing Lippin Geordie to a more somber, silent one. When she stood on the wharf, gazing at the path to the tower but making no move toward it, Lina put a gentle hand on her arm.

“He will not murder you, Liz. Nor will he be as horrid as Dougal or James Mòr would. He loves you, and he has been gey frightened for you. Remember that.”

“Aye, sure,” Lizzie muttered. “If you will recall, though, in that horrid tower room, you told me that you’d have no sympathy when I came by my just deserts.”

“I said, too, that I did not look forward to facing Galbraith any more than you did,” Lina reminded her. “Now, it appears that I must also face my mother.”

“Lady Aubrey will just be glad you are safe,” Lizzie said.

“I’d like to hope so,” Lina said. “But, she expected me to look after you, so I fear she is disappointed in me. And that will be harder to bear than her anger.”

“We must go in, though,” Lizzie said with a sigh. “I see Hector coming.”

Lina had met Hector, Galbraith’s elderly steward, on her first visit. As he hurried down the path toward them, his lantern swaying, she recognized him easily.

“Sir Ian?” the old man said, raising the lantern to peer at their group.

“I am here,” Ian said from behind Lina just as she sensed his approach. He touched her shoulder lightly, urging her on.

“How angry is he?” Lizzie asked the steward as soon as they met.

“Your da be eager tae see ye wi’ his own eyes, lassie. Ye, too, Lady Lina,” he added. “Your mam and the lady Muriella be here, as is our own lady Margaret.”

“Thank you, Hector,” Lina said. “Have you met Sir Ian before?”

“Aye, sure,” the old man said. “I ken Sir Alex, too, but not t’other ’un.”

Ian introduced Rob. Then Hector urged them inside, leaving their baggage for the oarsmen to carry up to the tower.

Lina and Lizzie no sooner stepped into the entryway than they heard Galbraith shout, “Hector, are ye back, then? Hie them along in, man!”

Abruptly, Lizzie stopped.

Ian, Rob, and Alex were right behind Lizzie and Lina, so they all came perforce to a halt as suddenly as Lizzie did. To Ian’s astonishment, Rob reached forward, put one large palm to her shoulder, and urged her gently forward.

Glancing at him, she made a face, then drew a breath and followed Hector.

The steward led them toward the archway into the great hall and paused squarely in the middle of it to announce in stentorian accents, “The ladies Lachina and Elizabeth, my lord. Also, their escort: Sir Ian Colquhoun of Dunglass, Sir Alexander Buchanan of Clarinch, and Master Robert MacAulay of Ardincaple.”

When Hector stepped aside, Ian saw Lina smile reassuringly at Lizzie and make a barely perceptible gesture for her to go first. Without hesitation, the younger lass led the way with Lina a step behind her.

Ian followed with Rob and Alex in his wake.

Galbraith stood by the huge fireplace. On the nearby dais, two noblewomen sat at the high table. Ian had met Aubrey, Lady MacFarlan before. He surmised that the woman next to her was the lady Margaret Galbraith of Bannachra.

“Come to the fire, all of ye,” Galbraith said. “ ’Tis a wicked night, withal.”

Lizzie sank to a deep curtsy, still some distance away.

Stepping forward and extending a hand, Galbraith drew her up, saying, “ ’Tis grand to see ye safe, lassie. Make your curtsy to your aunt and Lady Aubrey, then warm yourself. Hector has ordered supper, so we’ll eat when ye’ve dried off and donned warm clothing. Lady Lina, ye’ll share Lizzie’s bedchamber tonight. Your clothes and your maidservant await ye, so ye can both go as soon as ye’re warm.”

“Arthur, do you not mean to permit me one moment with my daughter?” Lady Aubrey asked him with a smile. “You were not alone, you know, in fretting yourself to flinders over our daughters’ capture and imprisonment.”

“Aye, sure,” he said with a rueful smile. “Ye should have gone to your mam straightaway, Lina, but I did want to thank ye for looking after our Liz.”

“She did, my lord, and gey well, too,” Lizzie said.

“Ye can tell me all about it after we sup, lassie. We’ll have a wee talk then.”

Ian paid little heed to their exchange. He was watching Lina. It struck him only then that when she had said earlier that she, too, worried about facing Galbraith, she had not just been trying to cheer Lizzie. Lina was apprehensive.

“I’ll also want to hear from ye, Sir Ian,” Galbraith said. “Your man said only that Colquhoun tried a tactful approach but that ye’d got them out and away.”

“That tale will take a while, sir,” Ian said. “We’ll have more time tomorrow.”

“Dinna act the dafty, lad. Ye’ll tell us all whilst we take our supper. Forbye, ye’ll all

be leaving at dawn. Ye canna stay any longer than that.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:13 am

Lina barely heard Galbraith's words as she hurried to the dais. She was watching her mother's expression, hoping to discern her ladyship's state of mind.

Lady Aubrey stood and walked around the table to meet her with a hug. With Lina clasped in her arms, she murmured, "Ah, love, what a fright you gave us!"

"It was frightful for us, too, Mam," Lina said, leaning into her and holding her tight. "In troth, though, I never felt as if we were in grave danger."

"I wish I had felt so," Lady Aubrey murmured. "It would have made the waiting easier. Whatever possessed—Nay," she said, cutting off her own words and gently releasing Lina. "No recriminations. I suspect that I know what happened. But we'll hear about it at supper. Go now and make your apology to Lady Margaret for alarming her. Be polite, but pay no heed to aught she might say in rebuke."

Nodding, Lina obeyed, walking around the high table to the wiry, gray-haired woman who sat silently waiting for her.

Lady Margaret was stick thin and had what Lina thought of as permanently pinched lips. She was the sort of woman who said what she thought, insisting that she preferred blunt speech but rarely, if ever, welcoming bluntness from others.

Curtsying, Lina smiled and said, "'Tis good to see you, your ladyship. I fear we were exceedingly rude to vanish as we did. But I promise it was not by choice."

"Very likely not," Lady Margaret said. "You cannot deny that there was mischief involved, though. Not if you are as honest as your mother says you are."

“I would prefer to say that misjudgment was at fault, my lady. We were unaware that James Mòr’s men might venture so near Glen Fruin.”

“Nor had they any right to do that. Galbraith, d’ye hear? That villain James Mòr dared to send men near our Glen Fruin! That must not happen again, I say.”

“We have already taken more precautions,” he assured her. “But do not keep Lina standing on the dais when she must be yearning to warm herself.”

Gratefully, Lina bobbed another curtsy and hurried to the fire, noting that her entire escort had disappeared.

“Where did the men go, Liz?” she asked, turning her chilled back to the fire.

“Father sent them to change for supper,” Lizzie said. “Did you not hear him then? We are all to leave in the morning.”

“Surely, he meant that the men would be returning to Dunglass,” Lina said, feeling rather depressed as she said it. “He will not send you away again so soon.”

“But he will,” Lizzie insisted. “I heard him talking to Sir Ian. He said it would not be safe here for any of us.”

Hector had shown Ian, Alex, and Rob to a chamber on the third floor of the tower with several cots in it.

“Ye should be comfortable here,” he said. “That wall yonder gives off heat when the fire below is burning. The weather will clear tonight, too, so the morrow should be fine. We’ll likely ha’ mist, though.”

Hak had arranged the men’s baggage. He had also provided hot water for them to

wash and laid out fresh tunics and plaids.

“Galbraith was hardly forthcoming, was he?” Alex said. “I have no wish to linger, but he might have explained his lack of hospitality.”

Ian agreed. Despite the laird’s declaration that they could not stay, when Alex had asked him why not, he had just said again that it would be too dangerous.

Since the hour was late, they changed quickly from their wet garments to dry ones and returned to the hall.

Lady Aubrey was standing by the fire with Galbraith when they entered.

Excusing herself to him, she approached the three younger men with a smile. Greeting Rob and Alex, whom she also knew, she said earnestly to Ian, “My dear sir, you have my deepest gratitude. Will you forgive me if I admit having to resist flinging myself at you and hugging you as hard as I hugged my beloved Lina?”

“Aye, sure, I forgive you, madam. I never reject hugs from beautiful ladies.”

“So Andrena has told me,” Lady Aubrey said with a mischievous grin. “But you must know that you have done us a great service. I suspect that Arthur may not have made his gratitude as plain as I do,” she added with a glance toward the fire.

“I believe that Sir Arthur feels much as my own sire does,” Ian said. “Father fears that I have endangered the Colquhouns’ neutral stance and thus undermined any further attempts of his to persuade James Mòr to see reason.”

“Colquhoun is skilled at bringing two willing sides to agreement,” she said. “But tact alone is rarely enough, and even the most skilled mediator cannot talk sense to unwilling or truly evil men. I shall tell your father so, too, when I see him.”

Ian knew that his surprise must show. He had met her ladyship many times, but he had been unaware until then that she believed, as he did, that some men were simply evil. Colquhoun insisted that all men were fundamentally good, that one had only to appeal to that goodness to persuade anyone against wrongdoing. He doubtless believed even now that he would have persuaded James Mòr to release Lina and Lizzie unharmed if Ian had just given him enough time to do so.

He nearly asked her ladyship if he had understood her correctly.

She spoke first, saying gently, “Do come now and tell us about the rescue. Muriella is especially eager to hear your tale. Although she is still in some disgrace for trying to reach Lina on her own as soon as she sensed that things had gone amiss, I have permitted her to sup with us.”

He noticed then that Lina’s flaxen-haired younger sister sat at the high table beside the lady Margaret. He knew that Muriella collected tales of daring to tell at ceilidhs and like gatherings. Even so...

“If you will forgive me, madam, I would like to wait until Lady Lina and Lizzie come downstairs. His lordship means to question us, too, and I’d liefer endure that ordeal only once.”

“Poor laddie,” she said, hugging him then. “I was so worried about Lina and how tired she looks that I failed to see that you are exhausted, too. By my troth, I shall wait patiently to hear your tale after you have eaten and slaked your thirst.”

Sixteen-year-old Murie would be the impatient one, Ian knew. He could see that she was already wriggling on her stool. Hearing Lina’s and Lizzie’s voices behind them, he turned with relief, then stopped and stared.

Lina had apparently decided to forgo a veil and had arranged her hair in long, loose

plaits, most likely to let it dry in the warmth of the hall.

Her plaits reached to her waist, making him wonder how long her hair would be if she combed it out. He had never seen her with her hair so before. It had always lain neatly coiled under her veil or hidden beneath a proper coif.

She wore a soft rose-pink kirtle with an even softer-looking shawl of gray-and-pink wool draped over her shoulders.

Her luminous, darkly-lashed eyes met his gaze serenely.

He wondered why he had never noticed before how beautiful she was.

“Hector tells me they are ready to serve us,” Galbraith said. “Lizzie, the lady Aubrey will sit by me, your aunt Margaret next, and ye’ll sit next to Margaret, then Lina and Murie. Ian, ye’ll sit at my right with Alex and MacAulay beside ye.”

When Alex moved as if to escort Lina, Ian gave him a fierce look and stepped forward to offer his arm.

“If I may, my lady,” he said politely.

She raised her eyebrows much as his mother might have done. But she put a hand on the forearm he’d extended and smiled demurely. “You are most kind, sir.”

“Sakes, lass,” he muttered. “Do you mock my courtesy? Can I do nowt to win your approval?”

She gave him a direct look and said in a normal tone, “Faith, sir, do you seek my approval? You must know that you have earned my gratitude.”

“But you still disapprove of how I won it, do you not?”

“That is unfair,” she said. “I have already admitted having mixed feelings about that. I do still believe that one should think before leaping into danger.”

“What makes you imagine that I do not?”

“I know you don’t always think before you act.”

The challenge was irresistible.

“I defy you to name any such occasion,” he said as they stepped onto the dais. “I’ll wager you won’t name one for which I cannot provide good reason.”

“Then give me your ‘good reason’ for doing what you did to Andrena that caused Mag to heave you into the Loch of the Long Boats.”

“Faith, was Sir Ian the man Mag threw into the loch?” Lizzie exclaimed.

Ian gaped at her. Looking around, he saw the others, all of them apparently having heard the exchange when he’d felt as if he and Lina were alone. Although, thinking back, he had been vaguely aware of murmuring voices and distant sounds.

Those sounds—Hector directing the two gillies as they carried food to the high table, Lady Margaret conversing quietly with Muriella, Alex and Rob murmuring behind him, and Sir Arthur’s quick footsteps on the timber floor as he crossed the hall—had all ceased after Lizzie’s exclamation.

Only the crackling of the fire remained.

Lina’s breath caught in her throat. A bubble of laughter rushed up to meet it, nearly

choking her.

Then Sir Alex laughed, and Rob joined him.

Galbraith silently ushered Lady Aubrey to her place.

When Alex could speak, he said, “ I want to hear that tale.”

“Me, too,” Muriella said, rising politely from her stool at the approach of her mother and Galbraith. “No one told me that Mag had done any such thing. It sounds like a good tale for retelling.”

“It is no such thing,” Ian said sternly. “If I should hear that a saucy lassock who imagines she is a seanachie has been telling a tale like that one at ceilidhs , you will answer to me, my lady.”

“Will I?” Murie said, grinning.

“That will do, Muriella,” Lady Aubrey said, taking her seat. “You know you must not repeat every tale you hear for other people’s entertainment.”

“Yes, madam,” Murie said quietly and so meekly that Lina was suspicious.

Love of storytelling was second nature to Murie, and her flawless memory meant that she could repeat exactly what she had heard and describe or sketch in graphic detail anything she had seen. Even so, she would not defy their mother.

The dais end of the great hall was warm. As Lina took her place, she looked for somewhere to put her shawl. When one of the gillies caught her eye and offered to set the shawl on a nearby shelf, she accepted his offer gratefully.

Galbraith said, “We are all curious about that tale now. But it is up to Sir Ian to decide if he prefers to share it or to admit that he has lost the wager he made with Lady Lina. In any event, I suggest that we eat whilst we talk.”

Lina hoped that the subject of Ian’s unexpected swim in the Loch of the Long Boats had died a gracious death. But Sir Alex soon raised it again.

“About that wager,” he said glibly. “In troth, Ian, now that Lady Lina has teased us with the event, methinks you do owe us an explanation.”

“I’ll tell you later, if you insist,” Ian retorted. “But I’d remind you that whilst we eat, courtesy suggests that we let our host choose the topic.”

By the look of Galbraith, that point had been about to leap from his own tongue. But he said mildly that he would like to hear about the rescue instead. Contrary to Lina’s expectation, though, he did not demand that she account for her actions or Lizzie for hers. He let Ian tell a brief tale and asked few questions.

Ian ended his account with their arrival at Dunglass the previous evening, adding, “Since my father values both peace and his neutral position—”

“Aye, sure,” Galbraith interjected. “I ken fine how he thinks, lad. As ye also ken, I was in agreement with him about how best to treat with James Mòr. So I would hear what stirred ye to intervene. Ye left that detail out of your account. I do understand that the ladies’ presence may deter ye. Nevertheless...”

When he paused pointedly, Ian said, “I will gladly answer all of your questions, sir, before Rob, Alex, and I return to Dunglass tomorrow.”

“As to that, ye must realize that the ladies cannot safely stay here. Although Lippin Geordie deterred one set of James Mòr’s searchers, others will come, so I must stay

or leave the tower at risk. But neither Lina nor Lizzie can be here if they do come, so all the women should leave for Tùr Meiloach in the morning. Sithee, Andrew Dubh will take part in naught that ensues at Dumbarton. So he can keep them safe until we sort that out. I did expect our Patrick to protect Lizzie. But—”

“He did naught but say that I’d come by my just deserts,” Lizzie muttered.

“We will talk more about that before ye leave,” Galbraith said, leaning forward to give her a look that subdued her again. “See you,” he added, shifting his attention to Lady Aubrey, “since Patrick has reaffirmed his loyalty to James Mòr, I cannot know that even Lizzie will be safe here or at Bannachra. Nor will Margaret if this whole affair has drawn the rebels’ attention to us.”

“Margaret and Lizzie are both welcome to stay with us at Tùr Meiloach for as long as you think they should,” Lady Aubrey assured him.

“Thank you, I knew you would say so, and Andrew, too. Sithee, Rory could arrive any day, too, since he travels with the duchess. She will be unsympathetic to anyone who hopes to drive her sole remaining son out of Dumbarton.”

“These are difficult times,” Lady Aubrey said. “We must do what we can.”

“We must, aye,” he said. Then, to Ian, he said, “I shall be of more use to ye, too, lad, if I know that Lizzie is safe.”

“I’m glad we’re going with you,” Lizzie whispered to Lina.

“Me, too,” Muriella said from Lina’s other side. She grinned when Lizzie turned toward her, and the two soon fell into conversation across Lina.

Changing seats with Lizzie, Lina conversed politely with Lady Margaret until Lady

Aubrey turned to them and murmured, “Shall we go upstairs now?”

Receiving nods, she asked Galbraith to excuse them and rose from her chair.

The other four ladies stood, too. However, when Lizzie moved to follow Lina, Galbraith said, “You will stay, Liz. We’ll talk anon.”

Obediently if unhappily, Lizzie sank back to her stool.

When all the ladies but Lizzie had left the dais, Galbraith turned to Ian. “I’d liefer spare no men to escort them, lad,” he said. “I need my men here, and many of them are fiercely disinclined to set foot on Tùr Meiloach land, as ye might understand. I doubt, though, that your men share that fear.”

Ian knew the tales told about Tùr Meiloach but tended to disbelieve them. Colquhoun insisted that no odd or unusual terrors awaited those who trod on what Andrew Dubh insisted was the sacred land of Tùr Meiloach.

The name meant “little tower guarded by giants,” and men claimed that the beasts of its forests and birds that flew above them were fiercer than normal, that its bogs reached out to drown the unwary, and that mountain landslides had swallowed whole armies. The craggy, precipitous peaks between Loch Lomond and the Loch of the Long Boats did form a toothlike granite ridge, though. And the plain truth was that although Ian had visited Tùr Meiloach, he had done so only by invitation.

He realized that the tangent his thoughts had taken was ill-timed, because Galbraith was eyeing him as if he expected an answer to a question that Ian had failed to hear. He was about to admit his lack of attention when Alex said, “I have my men with me, sir. I would be honored to escort the ladies to Tùr Meiloach.”

Glancing at Lina’s retreating back as she neared the archway, admiring the way her

backside moved beneath her softly clinging skirt, Ian collected wits enough to say gruffly, “Nae need for that, Alex. I brought the lassies this far. I’ll see them to their destination.”

“I’d be grateful to ye, aye,” Galbraith said. “But it does occur to me that Colquhoun must be expecting your swift return.”

“I believe, sir, that it will be at least a sennight yet before any Borderers reach Dunglass. Until they do, we can delay making any decisions. In troth, I’d liefer let them all debate their own plans with each other before I take any part.”

Galbraith’s eyes twinkled. “A wise course, lad. In my experience, every man comes with a plan of his own and will fight buckle and thong for it without listening to anyone else until they all wear themselves out. But do you not fear that such debate may undermine your position as leader?”

“No, sir. I have Jamie’s royal warrant to show if I must. I also have the support of Rob, Alex, and their men, as well as our own. But I doubt that I will meet resistance when the time comes. I just want to avoid squabbles. Meantime, I can see the women safely to Tùr Meiloach. If Rob will come with me, Alex can return to Dunglass to reassure my father and the others that I’ll return as soon as I can. He might also encourage them to discuss every way they can imagine to breach an impregnable castle. Someone just might suggest a plan that can work.”

“You seem confident,” Galbraith said, smiling.

Ian grinned. “When a plan is required, sir, one will present itself.”

Lina followed her mother and Lady Margaret upstairs, with Muriella at her heels. “I’m glad you’ve come back, Lina,” Murie said quietly. “I missed you, and I was terrified for you. Had Galbraith not met me halfway down Glen Fruin and ordered me

to turn back, I'd have gone to rescue you myself. Mam was furious with me. But she does understand. I haven't wanted to worry her about anything else, though. What do you think is amiss with Dree?"

Hearing Lady Margaret assure Lady Aubrey that she never snored and thus assured of their inattention, Lina stopped on the stairs and turned to face her sister.

"What makes you think that aught is amiss with her?" she asked.

"I don't know exactly. I just knew she was in distress."

"Most likely, she was worried about me," Lina said. "I feared that you would both try to find me, which would have been gey foolhardy. Sithee, I was in the topmost tower of a castle that sits on a sheer, two-hundred-foot-high rock."

"Dree's distress was much greater than what I felt from you that first day," Murie said. "I think she was in pain, Lina, and gey frightened."

"It was dreadful for us that day," Lina said. "She must have sensed that. But when I realized that they weren't threatening to kill us, I stopped worrying about myself. I did still worry about you and Dree, though. And everyone else."

From the landing above them, Lady Aubrey said, "Lina, you, Murie, and Lizzie will all sleep in Lizzie's room. I'll send Tibby down shortly to see if you need her. But get to bed quickly, and do not talk long. We leave early in the morning and will have plenty of time to talk on the way home."

"Yes, Mam," Lina said. Bidding the older women goodnight, she opened Lizzie's door and motioned for Murie to go ahead. As Lina moved to follow, she remembered the shawl, "Mercy, I've forgotten Lady Colquhoun's shawl. It was so warm that I took it off, and a gillie set it aside for me. I must fetch it at once."

“I should go with you, or you should wait and take Tibby.”

“Nay, you need not, and I do not need Tib, either. It is not as if this place were teeming with men. The room where Sir Ian, Sir Alex, and Master MacAulay will sleep is on the south stairway, as far from here as it can be. I’ll wager that no one is downstairs now except Galbraith, who is talking to Lizzie, and perhaps Hector. I’ll slip down, fetch the shawl, and be right back.”

“Aye, sure. But if the men are still down there, come back for me. And if Mam comes looking for you, do not expect me to tell her aught save the truth.”

Lina smiled. “When have I ever asked you to tell an un truth?”

Murie grinned saucily. “Never. But if you did, I would not.”

“How virtuous you are,” Lina said, shaking her head. “I shan’t be long.”

Nor did she mean to be. But as she rounded the last turn before the hall landing, she nearly collided with Sir Ian, carrying his mother’s shawl.

“Oh!” Lina exclaimed, coming to an abrupt halt a step above his.

“Rather careless of you to leave this behind,” he said.

He was too close.

“Aye, it was,” she agreed, stepping back up a step to gain more space.

His eyes danced. “Mayhap I should demand a penance before returning it.”

“You dare,” she said, stiffening and wishing he were not so fiendishly beguiling with

that boyish gleam of mischief in his eyes. He was definitely not just a mischievous boy anymore, though. And, for a lady to encourage such behavior...

He looked up, as if to heaven, and murmured, “Just one wee ki—”

“Shame on you, Sir Ian Colquhoun,” she interjected, thinking she sounded just like her mother. “Galbraith cannot know that you are on this stairway.”

“Once again, you are wrong, lass,” he said, his eyes still alight. “He is still with Lizzie on the dais—giving her a well-deserved scolding, I trust. I saw that you had left the shawl and offered to find a maidservant to return it to you. But this is much better. I do think you should thank me prettily for taking so much trouble.”

“I will thank you. After you have returned it to me.”

Cocking his head, he held the shawl higher, so she’d have to reach for it.

When she did, he moved it back out of her reach.

Lina lowered her outstretched hand to her side and eyed him sternly from her slightly superior height. “I thought you sought my approval.”

He stepped up to the stair below hers, putting the shawl out of reach again. His face was now inches higher than hers and his body again much too close for comfort.

“I’d prefer something else just now,” he said softly, looking into her eyes.

Reaching with his left hand for her right wrist, he held it firmly. Apparently oblivious of her attempt to snatch it free, he pressed the shawl into her hand and let go of her wrist, his gaze never leaving hers.

She waited to see what he would do next.

He smiled then, wryly, as if he dared her to walk away.

His lips were tantalizingly close.

Lina shut her eyes.

“Coward,” Ian murmured, enjoying himself.

Her eyes flew open. Then, to his astonishment, she leaned forward, brushed her lips against his right cheek, and whirled, snatching up her skirts in her free hand as first her right foot and then her left blindly sought the next stair upward.

Reaching out, he easily caught her arm. “Not so fast,” he said, turning her back to face him. “You must not kiss and run, lass. That’s against the rules.”

“The lady makes the rules, sir. Let go of me.” She was two steps above his again, looking disdainfully down her nose at him. She did not try to pull away.

She was testing him, he knew. But she was right about who made the rules.

Even so, the urge was strong to seize her and teach her what kissing was all about. However, he also wanted to make her desire that kiss enough to abandon her disapproval. And that was the greater challenge.

Sakes, if he were seeking a wife and had no royal duty commanding him...

Shifting his grip to her hand, he drew it to his lips and slowly kissed each knuckle. Then he kissed the silky skin above them, turned her trembling hand palm up long enough to breathe gently into that tender palm... and released her.

With a barely discernible gasp, she turned away, her dignity apparently still—or again—intact. He enjoyed watching her move, so he stood where he was to savor the sight. His reward came when she stopped before vanishing around the next curve and looked back. Her lips parted softly, invitingly, in surprise.

He bowed and had the delight of seeing her whirl again and hurry away.

“I shall win this battle, I think,” he murmured to himself.

Pleased with the progress he believed he had made, he returned to the hall.

Crossing it, he saw that Galbraith and Lizzie were talking amiably and decided the evening was going well. Then he remembered that Alex—and likely Rob, too—still wanted to know more about his so-unexpected swim in the Loch of the Long Boats. Both men were indeed still up and eager to hear the tale.

Glibly, Ian explained that he and the lady Andrena had enjoyed a mild flirtation while sailing with Mag on a Colquhoun galley. “Sakes, we were never out of his sight,” Ian added. “I did not realize until he picked me up bodily and heaved me into the loch that he was the jealous sort.”

Alex laughed longer than Ian thought necessary.

Rob contented himself with a smile. But when Alex stopped laughing, Rob said, “You’ve known Mag since childhood, my lad. So you got what you should have expected. In his place, I’d have done more than dampen your impudence.”

Ian raised his eyebrows but made no comment. He was not a fool.

The three friends retired shortly thereafter, rose again soon after dawn, and entered the hall to break their fast less than a half-hour later.

Greeting them, Hector said, “The laird sent a lad across to the clachan, Sir Ian, to tell your men they should ready your horses. Sir Alex’s, too.”

“I did wonder about taking horses,” Ian said. “I’ve heard that the so-called pass at the top of Glen Luss is impassable for horses and nearly so for men.”

“So they say, aye. Most folks hereabouts use garrons tae carry baggage and anyone as canna walk the distance. But well-trained horses with experienced riders can survive the journey. In troth, ’tis the spells Andrew Dubh weaves wi’ his tales that stir men’s fears and thus their troubles. Since his lady welcomes you, you will be safe. Tae be sure, though, ye might just ask her ladyship about your horses.”

Ian did not think Andrew was more capable than any other man of weaving spells, but he decided to take Hector’s advice and put his question to Lady Aubrey as tactfully as he thought his father might. “I have heard that the terrain of Tùr Meiloach can be treacherous,” he said. “I hope my men and horses will be safe.”

“Aye, sure, they will,” she said, smiling. “We will be with you, after all.”

Muriella chuckled, her eyes dancing wickedly. “The only danger you might face, Sir Ian, is if my lord father decides to make you marry Lina.”

Ian stared at her in disbelief.

Then he remembered what had happened to Mag.

“Muriella, finish your breakfast,” Lady Aubrey said. Then, to Ian, she said, “We are most grateful to you for your escort, sir.”

Ian hoped that Andrew Dubh would be grateful enough to dismiss any such errant, nonsensical idea as his marrying Lady Lina. He was not ready yet to marry.

Noting the dismay on Lina's face, he felt himself relax.

He—not his parents, and certainly not Andrew Dubh MacFarlan—would decide when and whom he would marry.

Meantime, he'd enjoy persuading Lady Disdain that she need never worry that such a marriage could happen, and then make her sadly regret that fact.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:13 am

A bruptly recalling that her father had arranged Mag's marriage to Andrena just as Murie had suggested he might urge Ian's to her, Lina fought to recover her composure. Remembering the previous evening on the stairs was bad enough.

His kisses had burned into her hand, because she could still feel the warm pressure of his lips on it everywhere they had touched it. She knew that he saw her resistance as just another challenge to conquer. Moreover, he was a knight of the realm. His primary duty was to his King, so he would have little time for a family.

Galbraith's announcing from the archway that the boats were at the wharf and their baggage loaded helped her recover her dignity.

"We have a thick, low mist to conceal your trip across the water," he added. "But ye'll likely find yourselves above it by the time ye're halfway up Glen Luss."

Lina hastily swallowed the last morsel of her bread and stood when her mother and Lady Margaret did.

Ian was talking with Galbraith by then, and she overheard the laird say, "Hector packed food for the day, and Peter Wylie, your own man, and Lady Aubrey's Tibby will be with ye to serve it. I sent most of your baggage across earlier so the men could load the garrons. Your cloaks await ye in the entry hall."

Despite Galbraith's efficiency, the usual delays for last-minute needs occurred. An hour later, though, their party was on the west-loch shore, mounted and bidding farewell to Lippin Geordie, his kinsmen, Sir Alex, and his men.

“Tell my father and the others I’ll return as soon as I can,” she heard Ian tell Sir Alex. “Urge them to discuss any plans they have devised. I don’t want to return and find that every man-jack of them still has a pet plan he’s sticking to against any other. Sort out the impossible from the perhaps before then if you can.”

“I’ll do my best,” Sir Alex promised, waving as he and his men rode away.

Lina watched them go, then turned back to see that the other four ladies had paired off—Lady Aubrey with Lady Margaret and Murie with Lizzie.

Tibby was well behind them, riding with her brother, Peter.

As Lina urged her horse in behind Lizzie and Muriella, she could barely discern the dark shape of Inch Galbraith through the fog to her right. The nearby water was dark and eerily still. Mist clung to shrubbery and dripped from the trees.

She heard Ian directing the captain of his tail and three others to lead the way and to ask Peter Wylie to guide them if it became necessary later. Then he told Rob MacAulay to take charge of his other four men and Hak.

As the leaders headed northward on the shore path and Lina urged her mount to follow them, she heard Ian’s voice again, behind her: “Ye’ll follow us, Rob, so tell the lads to keep their eyes and ears open, especially to the rear.”

“As much as this fog permits, aye,” Rob replied.

For a time after they left the clachan, the only sounds she heard were the soft thuds of horses’ hooves and the murmuring voices of Lizzie and Muriella.

Lina was sorry that the mist cloaked the larger, forested islands nearby and hid the magnificent snow-capped peak of Ben Lomond in the northeastern distance. The men

behind her were too far back for her to pay them heed.

She became aware of Sir Ian's approach before she detected the more rapid pace of his horse above the slower hoofbeats of the others behind them. Something in the air still changed noticeably whenever he came near her.

The closer he got, the more aware of him she grew. Determined to conceal how easily he affected her, she gazed—she hoped musingly—into the mist to her right and deftly eased her mount that way so he could pass by her easily. She assumed that he would ride on to take charge at the head of their party.

Instead, he drew in beside her and said more loudly than she thought necessary, "I was glad to see you breaking your fast at the high table, my lady. The way you ran up those stairs yestereve, I feared you might have injured yourself."

Only too aware of younger, eagerly listening ears just ahead and the doubtless equally interested ones of her mother and Lady Margaret beyond them, Lina gave him a look and said bluntly, "I would thank you to talk sensibly, sir."

"Would you?" he asked with that mischievous gleam in his eyes. "In troth, lass, I have seen little of your gratitude. Of late, I meet only resistant disapproval."

"Prithee, sir," she murmured, "I ken fine that you are teasing. But you must know that you've said enough to land me in the suds. If that was your intent—"

"Nay, it was not," he said in a lower tone, slowing his mount. "I want to talk with you, so let us let give those ahead of us more space. We'll meet with no danger here, because Galbraith has men keeping watch over all of this area. Forbye, we will soon be riding up the Glen Luss track. And if your father does not have as many watchers there as Galbraith does, I shall own myself astonished."

“I do not know as much about my father’s practices as Andrena does,” Lina confessed. “She rambles all over, whilst I spend much of my time inside.”

“Tell me more about yourself,” he said. “How do you spend your days?”

Willingly, she described her weaving and her fascination with plants and potions. He was an able listener. That he showed interest in all she said was an unexpected and heady experience. She had never known another man to do that. Magnus had thanked her sincerely for making him a tunic and shirt and weaving him a new plaid. But Ian’s interest in her abilities and pastimes was different, and most attractive.

So engrossed were they in their conversation that she was amazed to realize that they had left the loch path and started up the Glen Luss trail. The steep banks on either side were thick with trees turned ghostly in the mist.

Ian enjoyed watching Lina while she talked. It did not matter what subject she chose, her expressive face revealed more of her thoughts and feelings than her words did. He realized that he had misjudged her when her sister Andrena was with her. Dree was a stunning beauty and so animated that she commanded notice in any room. By contrast, Lina had been the quiet, dependable, capable sister, not to mention the one who so frequently disapproved of him.

Now, as she described her days, he found her fascinating, although he could not have said why. Perhaps he was seeing how lovely she was in a different, more comfortable, quieter way. Or perhaps it was only that he noticed how clear her eyes were, how deeply into them a man could look, and how kissable her lips were, especially that plumper, lower one.

They talked of many things as they rode. It seemed no time at all before they were above the mist with blue sky and drifting clouds overhead. Behind them in the distance rose Ben Lomond, spectacular and still wearing its snowy cap.

Everything ahead and behind seemed peaceful. There were fewer trees now.

Lina had fallen silent. Her attention had shifted to the precipitous crags above.

Feeling the old, irresistible urge to see if he could ruffle her, he said, "It occurs to me, lass, that I saved you from a much worse fate than I knew by rescuing you from Dumbarton and from Dougal. He would have made you a terrible husband."

"No worse than most, I expect," she said, still eyeing the crags.

"Nonsense, even I would make a better husband than Dougal, had I any wish yet to marry. You might at least admit that much."

She stiffened, thrusting her plump bosom out enticingly. "I have no desire to marry Dougal, as you ken fine," she said. "Nor do I want to marry you. You are both, albeit in different ways, equally objectionable to me as husbands."

"Now I am stung," he declared, affecting great indignation. "You have made your disapproval of me clear since you were eight years old. But, other than a too-frequent accusation of recklessness, which I dispute, what fault do you find in me?"

So sorely tempted was Lina to list his faults for him that she had to bite her tongue to keep the words from flying off it. Everyone had faults. She certainly did. Ian himself doubtless thought her too critical, too disapproving. He was just testing her, and she would not lower her dignity by rising to such obvious bait.

He raised his chin, jutting it as if he were still indignant. But she saw his old, boyish look of speculation, too, as if to judge whether he had irked her or not. "Do you think I cannot take criticism?" he demanded. "I thought you knew my father."

"Your father loves you as much as your lady mother does," she said confidently. "He

is filled with pride in your accomplishments. You know he is.”

“That does not stop him from verbally flaying me when we disagree.”

“Nor should it.”

“You don’t even like me,” he said. “So what stops the words I see dancing on your tongue? Art being cowardly again, as you were last night?”

“I was not cowardly,” she retorted. Grimacing but incurably honest, she said, “If you must know, I was gey astonished at myself then for doing what I did. Faith, but your teasing is one of your greatest faults, sir. Not as great as your recklessness, though, because...” She paused, knowing she had already said too much.

“Don’t stop there. What else is wrong with me?”

Unable to resist a blatant invitation, she said, “Aye, then, you are not merely reckless but dangerously so, because you don’t think things through before you act. I ken fine what disasters can result from such lack of thought, because Andrena has the same fault. Although I should not say so to you,” she added conscientiously.

“Just as you would not reveal your opinion of me to her, I expect.”

She bit her lower lip.

“Aha,” he said. “So you have already shared that opinion with her.”

Feeling guilty but doubting that she had true cause, she said, “I did say to her that a knight should never tell lies. That is true. And you did tell lies. You do!”

“Doubtless, you refer to the journey that Mag and Dree took with me a few months

ago on my galley, when Dougal MacPharlain stopped us on the loch.”

“You told him that Dree was your sister Alvia and soon to be betrothed. So you lied not only about Dree but about Alvie, as well. A gey dangerous course, sir.”

“I view it as being creative under pressure. I had a greater necessity at the time to avoid danger, lass. Do you not recall what Dougal would have done to Mag had he caught him then? Since Mag was in plain sight, Dougal would likely have seen him, had his gaze not been fixed on Dree the whole time.”

Swallowing hard, as memory of that fact rushed back, she said, “I do recall that, aye. And I’ll admit it had slipped my mind. Likely, I thought of the occasion when I mentioned lying, only because that’s also when Mag threw you in the loch.”

“But you must see now that I was not as much at fault as you had thought.”

Dignity required that she simply nod and change the subject. Something deeper within her rebelled at such a tame course, though, and the challenging, expectant way Ian watched her made speaking the brutal truth to him more palatable. Accordingly, she said, “You have many other faults.”

Before he could protest, she went on, “I have seen how quick and hot your temper can be. Also, you take a sadly careless attitude toward rules, any rules. In fact, you seem to think you can break them at will and suffer no pains for it, strict father or none. Even when Colquhoun is with you as he was at Dumbarton, you take matters into your own hands whenever it suits you, whether it is wise or not.”

“Sakes, lass, you are glad enough to be here now rather than there.”

“I am, aye. But surely other courses of action existed that did not include casting your father’s needs to the winds. Treating for our release cannot have been the sole

purpose for his meeting with James Mòr. Did he not also hope to persuade him eventually to release the royal burgh, castle, and harbor of Dumbarton?”

Annoyed with himself for raising the subject, Ian said, “Aye, he did hope to do that in time. However, his only goal yesterday was to free you and Lizzie. He thought he could do it by talking, but I knew James Mòr would not let you go.”

“Had you given your father time to apply to his better nature—”

“James Mòr hasn’t got a better nature.”

“Aye, sure, he does,” she insisted. “Everyone has a conscience, sir. If one—”

Feeling impatience stir again, he fought it back, saying, “Lass, you should have this discussion with my father. He would agree with you. I have seen and heard of too much evil in my life not to know that a man can be sick in his soul. Sithee, I told you Dougal wanted to take you and leave Lizzie to whatever fate might befall her in that castle of vipers. I’m telling you now that he meant to do it at once.”

“How can you know that?”

“When I arrived, Gorry said that Dougal had gone down to the harbor. If he did that with so much going on, he went down to make sure his boat would be ready when he was. I’d be surprised if he meant to wait overnight. More likely, he hoped my father would keep James Mòr talking long enough for him to whisk you away.”

“I see,” she said, glancing at Lizzie, who was, Ian saw, chatting away with Muriella, both of them oblivious to his conversation with Lina or anything else.

Turning back to him, Lina said, “We should not talk about that here, sir.”

“Perhaps not,” he said, adding virtuously, “What’s past cannot be mended, lass. So there can be no reason to talk more about my faults, either.”

Lina raised her eyebrows, wondering if he believed that. How could one learn from past mistakes if one did not reconsider actions that had led to them?

“Don’t say it,” he said with a smile. “You’ve nae need to. I resist reflecting on the past, because my actions rarely look as brilliant afterward as they did at the time. They never do when the reflection hits me from my father’s perspective.”

She chuckled. “I think you fib about the dimming of your brilliance in your own mind, sir. But the rest is true, as I know for myself. Sithee, if Mam heard what you said to me earlier, I’ll soon hear her views about young ladies who linger with gentlemen on stairways after they’ve been ordered off to bed.”

His lips twitched. When he bit hard on the lower one, the echo of her own words returned, and the unintended image they had created enflamed her cheeks.

“You know that I meant after I had been ordered to bed,” she muttered.

He grinned. “Do I?”

She shook her head at him and fell silent, hoping he would stop teasing long enough for her to recover her equanimity.

Watching her blushes deepen, Ian decided that it was as well that Rob rode some distance behind them with the lads. The thought made him think again, ruefully. He would not have teased her in such a way had Rob been near enough to hear him.

Just thinking of Rob served to remind Ian that he did have a conscience. He had wanted to ruffle Lina’s dignity ever since he had seen that she could retain it even as

a captive in Dumbarton Castle. But now that he could congratulate himself that he had, somehow satisfaction eluded him.

They had left the forest behind for granite slopes. The crags loomed nearer.

With little if any thought for his motives, Ian exerted himself to coax Lina into chuckling again if not laughing out loud. He got his first smile by describing an amusing incident that had occurred at his sister Susanna's wedding.

When he concluded his tale by describing his good-brother's head awash in punch that Susanna had flung at him, Lina eyed him thoughtfully and said, "Susanna and Birdie are happy in their marriages, are they not?"

"Aye, sure. Why should they not be?"

"I just wondered because you said earlier that you had no wish to marry."

"I do want to someday," he said. "At present, though, I like my life as a knight of the realm. Sakes, I'm too busy with my duties to his grace to think of marrying yet, and thanks to my brothers, the Colquhoun succession is safe enough."

"That would be the most important thing, aye," she said, watching him.

Since he had not spared the Colquhoun succession much thought, he knew that it was not as important to him as his other duties. He had simply thought that Lina might wonder about it because her father had for so long fixed his attention on securing his own succession.

He had not wanted her to imagine that he was unfeeling toward his family. Now, however, he felt not only as if she had caught him in another lie but as if she had reminded him that his father did care about the Colquhoun succession.

Colquhoun also expected him to be the one who secured it.

Searching for a change of subject, Ian saw that they were nearing the crest of the ridge between Loch Lomond and Andrew Dubh's sanctuary.

A rattle of stones some distance ahead near the top of the talus-and-scrree-filled hillside to his right diverted his attention. His breath caught at the sight of a magnificent stag, poised majestically, perfectly still, staring right at him.

The beast was awe-inspiring, fourteen points at least to its antlers.

The others had seen it, too. They drew rein to watch.

The stag looked down at them, silent, unmoving.

"How splendid he is," Lina murmured softly.

Ian nodded. "Superb. I have a sudden yearning to go deer hunting."

A hastily stifled gurgle of laughter made him glance at her. "What?"

She was still smiling, looking toward the stag. "You sounded so sure of yourself, that's all," she said. "By the look of that chappie and his impressive antlers, he has outsmarted any number of hunters as cocksure as you are."

So she thought he was cocksure, did she? He looked back and saw that the stag had vanished. "Which way did he go?"

"North," she said. Pointing, she added, "Through that dip yonder."

"We should stop soon to eat our midday meal," he said, still staring at the empty

hillside.

Lina reached out and touched his arm, giving him an odd start. Looking at her, he noted first that her eyes looked blue, rather than their usual gray, as if they reflected the color of the sky. And although her expression remained calm, he felt definite warmth emanating from her before she said quietly, "I know that you care deeply about many things, sir, even if you do not like to talk about them. Your family and clan are but two of them. I should not have spoken as I did before."

Seeing the stag had put their earlier exchange out of his mind. But the feelings she had evoked with her scornful comment rushed back. Did she know that she had made him recall the duty he owed to Clan Colquhoun and his father?

He had heard many rumors about the MacFarlan sisters. And he knew that Andrena could sense more things about a person than most people could. But this with Lina was different. Not until she had blinked and looked away did he feel able to speak again... if he could just think of something to say.

Watching him, Lina reflected on how easily he revealed the boyish side of his nature. While charming, it also exposed vulnerability, and at times she sensed a kind of fear in him. She told herself she was being presumptuous, that knights of the realm, especially Ian, feared nothing. Things that terrified most people were but challenges to him. Yet, fear or something akin to it lurked deep within him.

They stopped shortly afterward to eat. When they rode on again, they went single file, wending their way up the east side of the ridge to the narrow pass. Peter Wylie led the way. Ian and the three men who had led before followed him.

Before long, the path narrowed considerably, making the footing more treacherous for the horses. Lady Aubrey reined in and declared that the women would dismount and lead theirs. Ian sent Peter and two others to help them.

Lina dismounted with Ian watching her, but then he shifted his gaze to Lady Margaret just ahead of her, sitting determinedly on her large, rawboned horse.

Ian's gaze shifted again, this time to a point behind Lina, to Rob MacAulay.

Without a word exchanged between them, Rob dismounted, handed his reins to one of the other men, and strode past Lina to Lady Margaret.

Smiling at her, Rob said, "I ken fine that you can manage any beast, my lady. But if you will allow—"

"Indeed, I can, sir," she interjected in a firm, haughty tone. "Forbye, this beast is mine own. I do not require any man to look after me, I promise you."

"I ken that fine, madam," Rob replied equably. "I would count it a great honor, though, if you would permit me to walk beside you for a time. I believe you knew my grandmother MacAulay, did you not, my lady?"

"I did."

"I know little about her. But my da tells me she was kind and generous."

"I suppose she was," Lady Margaret agreed.

Then, to Lina's surprise—and doubtless that of anyone else who had seen her rise in the midst of a conversation, brusquely excuse herself, and abandon a room without further ceremony—she chatted amiably with Rob MacAulay right up through the pass and down the precipitous west side of the ridge.

When they had passed the worst parts, Peter and one of Ian's men helped the other women remount, and Ian rode past to see if anyone needed additional help.

Rob told Lady Margaret then he ought to make sure all was well with the men behind them. She graciously excused him, and he rode back to them with Ian.

“Did you see that?” Muriella demanded some minutes later, having changed places to ride beside Lina as soon as the trail widened enough to accommodate pairs again. “Why, she talked to him like a normal person.”

Lady Margaret having rejoined Lady Aubrey, the two rode just ahead.

“Keep your voice down, Murie,” Lina murmured.

The nearby air seemed to take on energy of its own just before Ian said from right behind them, “Aye, you ill-contrived bairn. Show some discretion.”

Turning, Murie made a face at him but lowered her voice. “I’ve never heard her speak so kindly before. She does not talk much at all about others, come to that. Although she does sniff when one mentions certain family names.”

“Then do not mention them,” Ian said.

“Was Rob MacAulay’s grandmother a great friend of hers?” Lina asked him.

“Sakes, lass, I don’t know. I didn’t know Rob had a grandmother.”

Murie laughed. “That’s daft. Everyone has a grandmother. Two, in fact.”

Ian laughed then but warned her again to mind her tongue.

Lina wondered if he still worried about Tùr Meiloach’s ability to protect its own. She believed the tales were mostly products of her father’s fertile imagination but saw no reason to explain that to Ian. He would likely disbelieve her.

Andrew's ability to plant seeds of stories that had grown to full-blown legends had protected them. As for other events that had contributed to those legends and were not mythical, she said naught of them, either.

She realized that Ian was watching her and that Murie was watching him.

Abruptly and appraisingly, Murie shifted her gaze to Lina.

Lina was doing it again, Ian decided.

Muriella cleared her throat. When he looked at her, she grinned as knowingly as ever Andrena had. What was it about the MacFarlan women, he wondered, that produced such notions in him? He'd be wiser to stay with his men.

He was seeking some other place to fix his gaze when it collided with Rob's. Excusing himself, he slowed his horse and motioned for Rob to join him.

When he did, Ian said, "What's amiss?"

"Nowt," Rob said. "Was just wondering the same about you."

"Aye, well, that's nowt, too," Ian said. "Let's ride on ahead for a time. This trail through the woods is a good one. We'll let the horses stretch their legs."

Accordingly, they set their mounts to a gentle lope until they had passed the forward party. Slowing then, they continued to ride silently until Ian began to feel as if the very leaves of the trees and shrubbery watched them.

"What do you know about this place?" he asked abruptly.

Rob shrugged. "Pharlain wants to own it. Andrew Dubh wants to keep it. He also

wants to win back the ancient MacFarlan lands of Arrochar.”

“Do you think he can?”

Another shrug.

Knowing Rob well, Ian waited.

Rob glanced at him. “I do not like Pharlain, and Andrew’s a good man.”

Ian nodded. “Just what I think myself,” he said.

A quarter-hour later, MacFarlan’s tower loomed through the trees ahead. Soon afterward, they could see the high wall that surrounded it, and shortly after that, they watched the timber gates open and their host step out to greet them.

Andrew Dubh looked just as he had the last time Ian had seen him. He wore a Highlander’s plain saffron tunic beneath a green-and-golden plaid. And, like most men at that time of year, he was barefoot. His dark brown hair, free of gray, hung loose to his shoulders. His dark eyes lit with pleasure at the sight of his family.

Despite his nearly fifty years of life, Andrew looked fit and strong.

Recognizing Ian, he nodded at him.

“You’ll remember Rob MacAulay, I think, sir,” Ian said.

“Aye, sure, I do. How fares your father, lad?”

“He is well, sir, thank you,” Rob said.

“Well, dinna be dawdling here, ye two. Ye’re welcome inside. Your lads can camp in the woods if they prefer it, without fearing for their lives.” Smiling then, he waved them through the gates and strode to meet his wife and daughters.

They were no sooner all inside with the gates shut behind them and heavily barred, however, than a sentry on the lochside wall walk shouted, “Galley below, laird! They’ve flung anchors out, and they be flying Pharlain’s banner!”

Lina dismounted as Andrew acknowledged the warning. He hugged her, saying, “I’m glad ye’re home safe, lass. Ye, too, my lady,” he said to his wife, who deftly caught hold of her horse’s mane and dismounted. “And ye, Murie-lass,” he added. Take Lizzie on in wi’ ye, and tell Malcolm she’ll be staying for a time.”

His lack of surprise at seeing Lizzie told Lina that he had heard from one of his watchers that she was with them.

He turned then to Lady Margaret and said with a polite nod, “Ye’re welcome, too, m’lady, for as long as ye like. Ye dinna seem to have aged a month since last I saw ye, though it must be a score o’ years or more.”

She gave him a wary smile but let him help her dismount.

Lady Aubrey said, “The news that Lina and the Galbraith ladies are here must not go beyond our wall, sir. James Mòr will be searching for Lina and Lizzie.”

Andrew looked at Ian, saying, “Might Pharlain ken aught o’ what happened?”

“He may know that they were prisoners, sir, but not much more, unless—”

“Laird, laird!” the sentry shouted. “It be Dougal MacPharlain in yon galley, and he’s a-shouting summat. One o’ our lads be a-coming up the noo!”

“Pluff!” Andrew shouted to the boy at the postern gate, “Let him in when the man above ye tells ye it be safe. Aubrey, take the women inside.”

Lina said to Ian, “You must come, too, sir. Dougal must not see you here—or Master MacAulay, either, since he was at Dumbarton with your father.”

“We’ll join you shortly, my lady,” Ian said. “I want to learn more first. You go along in, though, and don’t fret. We won’t let Dougal see us.”

“Go in now, all of ye,” Andrew said. “ ’Tis best if the lad coming up doesna see ye, either. That road, he canna tell anyone aught that we’d liefer keep from them.”

Despite her distrust of Dougal’s motives, Lina had no choice but to obey.

Pluff was at the gate, and the man on the wall was waving for him to open it.

Ian watched her go inside. But when the skinny, red-headed boy by the gate reached to open it, Andrew said, “Hold there, Pluff.”

The boy stopped with his hand at the latch, and Andrew said to Ian, “Take MacAulay and your lads, and get on inside. If you and he stand by the door, ye’ll hear what the lad has to say, but dinna let him see ye. He may remember ye, and neither Pharlain nor Dougal has ever done this afore.”

Ian, Rob, and Ian’s men went in through the door that the women had used and found themselves in an entryway that was little more than a stair landing. “The hall is on the next level,” Ian said. “You lads go up there, and we’ll join you anon.”

He cracked the door open enough then to hear. The narrow postern gate opened, and a man hurried in, talking. “Laird, Dougal MacPharlain demands speech wi’ ye. He’s promised tae come up alone. Says he has an offer tae make ye.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:13 am

Going upstairs with the other women, Lina's curiosity about Dougal's arrival and his purpose in coming to Tùr Meiloach nearly overwhelmed her. But she knew that her mother would frown on expressing it on the stairway or in Lady Margaret's presence. The older woman was intolerant of such interest in the business of others.

Nor was Lina looking forward to private speech with Lady Aubrey, although her ladyship had said naught yet about their capture except that she was grateful for their safe return. However, Lina thought, having expected to hear the whole tale at Inch Galbraith and then hearing only about the rescue, her mother's curiosity was likely burning holes through her customary courtesy. Also, since any such talk would likely focus on what Lina's duty had been to Lady Margaret as their hostess, and to Lizzie...

They had reached the fourth floor of the tower. Lady Aubrey led the way into the ladies' solar, where the windows were open to the late-afternoon breeze.

Lina's loom in the corner where she usually sat was a welcome sight, and she saw Muriella hurry to her spinning wheel and touch the spindle as if to be sure that all was right with it. On the loom, a half-finished length of wool fabric in the soft shades of mossy green and red that Dree favored called to Lina, but its voice was too faint to overcome her yearning to know what was happening below.

"Ye canna stay here by the door, lad," Andrew said tersely after sending the messenger back down to the shore. "As ye heard, I've sent that lad to tell Dougal I'll hear what he has to say. Have ye any notion what he wants?"

Ian shook his head. "In troth, sir, when you asked me before if Pharlain might know

aught of what happened at Dumbarton, I was about to say that if Dougal had returned to Arrochar, he might know more about that than I do.”

“Was Dougal there?”

“It was he who captured the ladies Lachina and Lizzie,” Ian said. “The man who helped me rescue them from the castle told me at the time that Dougal was at the harbor. I suspected then that he was preparing to leave for Arrochar.”

“If he set out straightaway, he’d ken nowt o’ the rescue.”

Ian considered telling Andrew that Dougal had planned to abduct Lina. But he wanted to know Dougal’s mission at Tùr Meiloach first. If he had come to issue threats on behalf of his father, Dougal might know little or naught of the rescue. Surely, if he had had to face James Mòr, he would still be at Dumbarton, trying to answer for missing keys and a message in the tower room signed with his initial.

Andrew shifted impatiently, so Ian said, “I have my own suspicions about Dougal, sir. But I have no evidence yet to prove them. I need to hear what he says before I can tell if what little I do know has merit enough to share or not.”

“Aye, good enough. But ye cannot be present, lad, nor leave the door cracked as ye did afore. I’ll talk with him in the yard, where my lads can keep watch without hearing all we say. When I’ve heard him out, I’ll come to ye, and we’ll discuss whatever he’s said to me.”

Ian nodded, and Andrew went back outside to wait.

“You know more than you told him,” Rob said as Ian shut the door.

“Aye, but I dared not tell him all I know just when he has to treat with Dougal,” Ian

said. “Sithee, if I tell him what that villain had planned for the lady Lina—and Lizzie, too—Andrew will throttle him and we’ll learn nowt.”

Rob gave him a long look. Then he nodded. “Andrew could do that, aye.”

Moving to the next landing, they waited there in the silence that develops between men who’ve known each other since childhood and hunted and made war together. They had small need for words. A look or gesture was usually enough.

Thinking about that, Ian decided that his relationships with Alex Buchanan and Mag Galbraith were similar. He had just seen Rob more often over the years than he had seen the other two.

He was still engaged in idle reverie when he heard the door below open.

“We’re here, sir,” Ian said quietly, knowing Andrew would hear him.

When the older man came around the curve in the stairway, his expression was grim. “Upstart vermin, that’s what Dougal is,” he snarled. “But we willna talk here on the stairway. My privy chamber lies above.”

He led the way past the hall landing to the one above it, where he opened a door to a chamber smaller than Colquhoun’s at Dunglass but boasting a large, solid-looking table, shelves, and scattered stools. Leaning with his hips against the table, Andrew gestured vaguely toward two of the stools.

Ian and Rob remained standing.

“What did Dougal want?” Ian asked.

“Our Lina’s hand, that’s what.” Andrew crossed his arms against his chest.

Ian stared at him, resisting an urge to grind his teeth.

“In marriage?” Rob asked.

“Aye, sure, in marriage,” Andrew said, his thick, dark eyebrows knitting together. “The knave dared to tell me that such a marriage would reunite Clan Farlan. Then he had the gall to ask if I didna want such an end to the trouble and strife of the past two decades. Come to that, I expect it might serve such an end.”

Ian felt as if the Fates had kicked the wind out of him. But he gathered enough air to say, “You didn’t... that is, you couldn’t have agreed to that.”

Rob’s eyebrows shot up then, and Ian’s peripheral vision caught that rare sign of surprise in his friend.

Andrew grimaced. “Nay, I couldna agree to any such thing,” he said. “The idea! As if I were caperwitted enough to believe that a clan reunified so would have aught to do with its rightful chief. I’ll see him and his da in hell first, and so I told him.” Looking from Ian to Rob and back, he added, “Sent him back to his boat with an escort and told them to keep that galley well away from our shore. Dougal could swim to it, I said, and welcome. Och, the threats he made then!”

“What threats?” Ian demanded, although he could guess.

“Villainous threats is what. Perverted and dishonest threats as I saw for m’self when I saw our lassie safe and smiling again. The man’s a liar and worse.”

Dougal returned to his galley in a fury. That they had forced him to swim was an outrage. He would protect himself against the potential, if hidden, mockery of his captain and crew by pretending he had made the choice himself to swim.

He had made it look as if he had by diving in, forgetting how cold the Loch of the Long Boats could be even at the height of summer. To ignore his chattering teeth, he made himself remember not only what had happened but also such other plans as he had in mind already to teach the contentious old devil a lesson or two.

His anger increased when he remembered that he had done the honorable thing by requesting the right to her ladyship's hand from her father, and giving him good reason, too. For Andrew to have rejected him so rudely was reprehensible.

As he swam, he noted that he was warming. He also recalled how Pharlain's men had accessed Tùr Meiloach just months ago. The distance from one side of the great waterfall to the other was not even so great at present, and the place where Andrew's men had made him swim was close to the surface of the water. At low tide, it might be even more accessible. An army, even a small one, might never again succeed in reaching Tùr Meiloach that way. But one man could.

He would teach Andrew Dubh a good lesson, one way or another.

"Prithee, sir," Ian said, controlling his impatience, "tell us what Dougal said."

"He said he'd tell the world that he's had his way with our Lina, even shared her with his men. Och, but I wanted to hang him from the tree outside me gate right then! In short, if Dougal canna have her, he'll murder her reputation. So, in my fury, I've condemned my daughter to the sad future of an unmarried, unwanted woman. A future in which others will revile her, if Dougal has his say. Och, I'm a villain m'self to do such a vile thing. Mayhap I should think more on it, unless..."

He looked at Rob, who stared silently, blankly back at him.

After a glance at Ian, Andrew chose a point midway between the two men and said with a slight, self-deprecating shrug, "I dinna suppose ye'd... either o' ye... be

willing to marry the poor lassie and save her from such a dreadful fate.”

Ian saw the pit yawning before him, but he barely heeded it. Having saved Lina from one wretched fate, he did not want to watch her fall victim to another.

Impulsively, he said, “I... I’d be willing to give the idea some thought, sir.”

“Good lad,” Andrew said cheerfully. “I’ll let ye have her. I doubt that your father or your lady mother will object. They’ve both long since taken a liking to our lass. Forbye, since our lands abut, such a marriage would suit us all gey well.”

Ian could not argue that point. His father would approve, especially if Andrew were able to reclaim the vast lands of Arrochar north of Tùr Meiloach.

Andrew claimed to possess the original charters to Arrochar and needed only to show them to the King. However, Jamie’s chief concern was to reclaim the royal properties that his uncle Albany had given away to build his nefarious alliances while conspiring to keep Jamie captive for two decades in England. Nevertheless, Jamie had promised in Ian’s hearing to provide Andrew the opportunity he sought as soon as the King could arrange a meeting at Inverness with the Highland chiefs.

He hoped to do that soon, to learn who was loyal to him and who was not.

Meeting Andrew’s steady gaze, Ian said, “Did you really tell Dougal that you would see him and Pharlain in hell before you would let Lina marry him?”

“I did, aye. After he made his vile threats, I also told him I’d gut him and feed his entrails to the beasts o’ the forest here afore I’d give him our Lina.” He added mildly, “I think the man understands that I didna like the notion.”

Hearing a strange sound from Rob, Ian darted a glance at him to see that his friend

had clapped a hand to his mouth. Above it, his eyes twinkled merrily.

“Did you just laugh ?” Ian demanded.

Rob shook his head, lowered his hand, and eyes still atwinkle, said, “I choked.” Extending a hand to Andrew, he said, “It is an honor to know you, sir.”

“Aye, good, for I’ve one more daughter t’ marry off, ye ken—our Muriella. She’s a mite young yet, her mam says. But if ye’d be interested...”

Sobering instantly, Rob said, “You do me great honor, my lord, and I thank you. But I’ll not inflict myself so on any female at present.”

Andrew gave him a long look but said no more on the subject of Muriella.

Instead, he turned to Ian and said, “Shall we send for our Lina and tell her the good news, lad? Or d’ye need me to tell ye what a rare prize the lassie is, so ye can think more on the notion?”

Ian’s thoughts had flown to Lina’s likely reaction to the “good news.” She would scarcely receive it as such.

But Andrew’s suggestion that she was a rare prize gave him pause, because he knew that was true. She was as beautiful in her own way as Andrena was and much more comfortable to talk to. She was quick-witted, kind, thoughtful, and she possessed composure beyond her years, a quality that calmed and impressed him even when it stirred his ever-mischievous attempts to undo it.

Just the thought of taking her to his bed...

Before he could change his mind, he said, “By heaven, I’ll do it.”

“Art sure?” Andrew asked.

“I am, aye,” Ian said. Avoiding Rob’s gaze, he added firmly, “See you, sir, the Colquhoun name linked with yours should silence Dougal. But we cannot wait long if we are to disarm his threats. Forbye, I have a duty to which I soon must attend, and I rarely need much time or prolonged thought to know my own mind. If Lady Lina is willing, we should marry straightaway.”

“So I thought, m’self,” Andrew said.

Looking at Rob, Ian saw that he’d surprised him again. In truth, he was surprised himself at how deftly Andrew had manipulated him. He could see now that Andrew had, and gey easily, too. But Ian had let him, and he felt no remorse.

He did wonder, though, if the so-called magical properties of Tùr Meiloach included bewitching men to marry its women.

He would ask Mag for his opinion on that question.

Meantime, he heard Andrew order a gillie to fetch Lina.

Having indulged in a relaxing bath, Lina was back in the solar at her loom, working quietly and listening with half an ear to Murie and Lizzie, while Ansuz, her orange and white cat, lay curled near her feet, purring. The younger girls were comparing the merits of living on a cliff above the Loch of the Long Boats to those of living in a tower on an islet in Loch Lomond. The breeze drifting in through the open shutters had cooled. But the solar was not yet cool enough to warrant a fire.

Lady Aubrey and Lady Margaret stitched silently if companionably near the window, where the light was strongest.

“I love Tùr Meiloach,” Lizzie said. “You have more people around you here than we do on Inch Galbraith. Moreover, you have your sisters and mother to—”

Glancing up to see what had stopped her midsentence, Lina saw that the door had opened to admit Tibby, looking wide-eyed and wary.

Dropping a curtsy to Lady Aubrey, Tibby said, “Himself would see the lady Lina at once, m’lady. In his chamber below, he said.”

“Why, it is nearly time for supper,” Lady Margaret said, frowning.

“It is, aye, m’lady,” Tibby replied, bobbing another curtsy in her ladyship’s direction. “But Himself does want to see the lady Lina straightaway.” She cast Lina a sympathetic look.

Oblivious to it, Muriella said, “Prithee, Lina, make haste. We’re famished!”

Feeling only curiosity and an odd tremor or two, Lina looked at her mother.

Lady Aubrey smiled. “Go along, dearling. You must not keep him waiting.”

Setting down her shuttle, Lina followed Tibby out and closed the door. The orange cat slipped through the narrowing doorway at the last minute.

“Tib, did the laird say any more?” Lina asked.

“I dinna ken, m’lady. One o’ the lads told me tae fetch ye to him.”

That information increased the strange tremors Lina had felt when Tibby had entered the solar. Her father did not frighten her, although he could be loud in his anger and intolerant of misbehavior. But she had not misbehaved. Nor had she ever trembled

before when summoned to his presence.

She was trembling now, though. At the door to Andrew's privy chamber, she paused to draw a breath and let it out while Tibby scooped up the indignant cat.

As Tibby vanished round the next turn of the stairs, Lina rapped on the door.

Rob MacAulay opened it. He filled the doorway, but she knew that Ian was behind him in the room, with Andrew, and the knowledge did not reassure her.

Rob stepped aside for her to enter. Then, to Andrew, he said, "You do not require my presence, sir. I'll find someplace to clean myself up for supper."

"You and Ian can share the chamber just above us, opposite the ladies' solar," Andrew said. "Ye'll ken which is which, because ye'll hear our Muriella's voice a-nattering away behind the other one. Forbye, Peter Wylie will likely have taken that Hak chappie up there already."

"Nodding, Rob went out and shut the door behind him.

Aware that her skin was prickling as if she had fallen into a patch of nettles, Lina strove to act as if she were merely curious and said, "You sent for me, sir."

"I did, aye, for we ha' good news for ye," Andrew said. "Um... sithee, Sir Ian here has... That is to say, I have agreed to let ye marry Sir Ian Colquhoun."

The voice at the back of her head shrieked, "What?" Forcing herself to ignore it, Lina gathered her dignity and said as mildly as she could, "This is a surprise, sir. You must have your reasons, but I doubt that Colquhoun or his lady kens aught of so sudden a decision. May I at least ask where you expect us to live?"

Raising his bushy eyebrows, Andrew looked at Ian.

Ian had been imagining ways to punish Rob for abandoning him, so he satisfied himself by shooting a look of irritation at Andrew.

Andrew met it blandly, and silently.

Marveling at Lina's composure, despite the stress he sensed in her, Ian said, "Your father neglected to mention one important detail, my lady. You know that Dougal MacPharlain came here to speak to him. What you do not know is that Dougal requested your hand in marriage and made certain threats..." He paused, knowing that she could easily fill in the rest.

"The same as he made before, I expect," she said. "To render me unworthy?"

"Aye," he said. "As to where we might live, I believe you are fond of Craggan Tower. If Craggan would suit you, we can live there. I ken fine that you would liefer stay near your family than be even as far away as the river Clyde."

Lina stared at him. She had often imagined how pleasant it would be to live forever near her family after she had her own home with her children and her then-unidentified husband. She had never confided as much to anyone else, though.

And Sir Ian as that husband? Never had she imagined such a future as that. Nor did he want to marry anyone yet. He had said so without equivocation.

However, living at Craggan would make up for much if she did marry him, and Dougal's actions and threats had left her little choice about that—if Ian was truly willing. Also, his duties to his father and the King would keep him busy and yet allow him to be home often enough to provide the children she wanted.

It occurred to her then that, despite the faults that occasionally stirred her annoyance, he also had many good qualities. He was handsome enough to suit the most particular female, and he possessed undeniable charm. He was an avid listener, he seemed to like her, and he had that unusual ability to excite her senses just by being near her. He could also make her laugh.

Andrew, sounding impatient, said, “Will ye do it, lassie?”

Blinking, Lina realized that she was still staring at Ian.

He smiled, and so compelling was his smile that her own lips twitched in response. “It is up to you, lass,” Ian said quietly. “I’d like it fine if you would.”

Warmth spread through her at those simple words.

The tremors and prickling sensations that she had felt earlier seemed to have bloomed into a single warming sensation that radiated through her. Her lips parted slightly. And, strangely, her breasts seemed to swell, their nipples tingling where they touched the fabric of her shift.

She felt heat in her cheeks but could not look away.

Andrew said again, “Well, lass, will ye?”

“I will, sir,” she said. The words no sooner left her tongue, though, than she felt another tremor and wondered if she’d just made the worst mistake of her life.

Aware that he had been holding his breath, Ian exhaled. The thing was done. He waited for the rush of regret, if not shock, that he’d expected to engulf him.

Instead, as he relaxed, his cock expressed utter elation with his decision. It had

twitched when her lips parted. Then her blushes had stimulated it more. Now...

“I’ll send for a priest straightaway,” Andrew said, rubbing his hand together.

Diverted from incipient lust, Ian said, “Is not the nearest priest in Balloch?”

“Aye, but if I send a running gillie—”

“Sir, that could take days, and we cannot wait.” Looking hard at Andrew, he added, “Think, my lord. Our very reason for haste...”

Frowning, Andrew said, “ ’Tis true, aye. What d’ye suggest instead?”

“Marriage by declaration,” Ian said. “We can set things right with the Kirk afterward if you like, or if Lina does. But since there is little of property or—”

“There must be a settlement, lad,” Andrew said firmly. “Ye ken fine that Andrena and Mag will get most o’ what I leave. I must be sure that Lina—”

“Aye, sir, I can attend to that,” Ian said hastily. “My father has settled land on me already and my knighthood will entitle me to more when Jamie has his royal affairs sorted. Meantime, I will sign any agreement you suggest that can suit us both. I will eventually inherit nearly all of the Colquhoun properties, and—”

“Aye, but ye may be killed in this Dumbarton affair o’ yours, lad. I must—”

“You know my father well, sir. He will honor any agreement I sign. So will my brothers if Father and I should both die before I inherit. You have noted yourself that both of my parents love Lina. They will do everything in their power to protect her and any children we may have.”

“They would, aye,” Andrew agreed. “Art agreeable to such haste, lass?”

“I have agreed to marry Sir Ian,” she said. “The manner of it matters not.”

“Good,” Andrew said. “Let’s get on with it then. I’m hungry.”

“You might be wiser to tell my lady mother and the others about this first,” Lina suggested dryly.

Ian looked swiftly at her, fearing that such abruptness had changed her mind.

She looked as calm as ever. Then her gaze met his, and she smiled.

His cock leaped again.

Sakes, he thought, the damned thing was practically crowing!

Following her father downstairs, Lina was too conscious of Ian’s presence behind her to worry about what sort of reception their news would bring when Andrew announced it. But as they neared the hall landing, her feet seemed to slow of their own accord. What would everyone else think of such a hasty decision?

When Andrew stepped through the archway into the great hall, she heard Ian say quietly behind her, “Wait, lass.”

Pausing at the landing, grateful for any respite, she turned. “What is it, sir?”

“I think we should let Andrew tell them first, don’t you?”

“Mam and the others from the solar are not even in the hall yet,” she pointed out.

“We would have heard them coming downstairs.”

He stepped down beside her. "I did hear them."

She looked up into his face. "But how could you when I did not? Murie does not go anywhere quietly. Nor, I think, does Lizzie."

"They were muttering to each other, aye," he said. "Andrew had just said he would send for the priest, though. Perhaps you were paying such close heed to him that you missed hearing them."

She swallowed, remembering that she had heard her father's words and realized only then how quickly he and Ian meant for the marriage to take place. Even so, it seemed odd that she could have been so lost in her own thoughts that she had failed to hear the passage of four people down the stairs outside the room.

The door was thick and well fitted, but if Ian had heard them...

She stared at Ian's broad chest while these thoughts sped through her mind. Distantly, from the hall, she heard Andrew's voice. A slight tingling was the only warning she had before Ian put both hands on her shoulders.

"What is it?" he asked. "Art having second thoughts?"

It was hard to focus on anything save the warmth of his hands and the fact that they could evidently spread their warmth to other parts of her body.

"Lina?"

Gathering her wits, she said, "I will keep my word, sir. I was just trying to imagine how I could have missed hearing them."

"I have gey sharp hearing. And you did have other things on your mind."

Nodding, she glanced toward the archway and said, "We should go in."

He took her near hand in his and raised it to his lips as he had once before. This time, he kissed it lightly, looking at her as he did, his expression unusually solemn. "Aye, sure, we'll go in," he said. "Just as soon as you look me in the eyes and tell me you're doing this willingly and not just because you said you would."

She looked him right in the eye then and said, "You first."

Ian laughed as much at the look of determination on Lina's face as at the challenge she had flung at him.

When she continued to watch him, he sobered. He was still holding her hand, so he gave it a warm squeeze and said, "I'm more willing with every minute that passes, lass. I believe that we will suit each other well."

"This may be the most reckless thing you have done, sir."

"It may be, aye. But you are doing it with me, so I'll wager that you won't carp and correct me at every turn as some wives try to do."

"I would not do that in any event," she said, peering into his face in that way she had that made him feel as if she could see right through him to his core. "I wonder if my opinions matter to you, though. I'm unlikely to change my feelings about many things that you do. Nor will I agree with you in all that you say."

"Then, likely we'll fratch from time to time," he said. "Would it help if I were to promise that I'll always listen?"

"It might," she said doubtfully. "It would help more if you did always listen."

He choked on another bubble of laughter. Forcing himself to speak seriously, he said, “Have you hitherto found me an un willing listener?”

She shook her head, looking at his chest again. “No, sir, not recently.”

Cupping her chin with his free hand, he tilted it up and kissed her gently on the lips. “Then, we must leave it there, I think. Your father is calling to us.”

Her lips had parted. She stared at him blindly.

“Lina?”

“We must go in, aye,” she said. Whirling, she stepped through the archway, only to stop in her tracks when the hall erupted in applause and cheering.

Rather pleased to know that his kiss had ruffled her more than any teasing had, he followed her. To his surprise, he was looking forward to his wedding... and even more to the night that, by every tradition, would come afterward.

Lina stared at their people, gathered as usual at trestle tables in the hall for supper, standing now and cheering. She had missed Andrew’s announcement of the wedding to come, and she failed now to see him striding toward her until he was right in front of her.

Catching hold of the hand that Ian had so recently kissed, he raised it high.

Then, turning so that he stood between them and taking Ian’s hand in his other one, Andrew raised it, too, shouting, “ ’Twill be a grand union, this one, aye?”

“Aye!” they shouted back. More cheering erupted. Young Pluff jumped onto a bench, put two fingers in his mouth, and emitted a piercing whistle.

Lowering their hands, Andrew drew the two together as he stepped back until Ian stood beside Lina, holding her hand.

She looked up at him to see that he was waving at everyone in the hall with his free hand and grinning widely.

Knowing that she should smile, too, but feeling as if her life had just spun beyond control, she briefly shut her eyes. Opening them she saw red-headed Pluff looking straight at her and grinning as if he had arranged the whole thing himself.

Unable to resist the boy's infectious grin, she grinned right back at him.

Feeling surprisingly happy but oddly alone, despite the warmth of Ian's hand clasping hers, she looked toward the high table, seeking Lady Aubrey. But her ladyship had moved to the narrow archway leading to the service stairs, where she was talking with Tibby and Tibby's mother, Annie Wylie.

At the high table, Lady Margaret looked pinch-lipped but resigned.

Ian released Lina's hand, put his own to her elbow, and urged her to follow Andrew, now striding toward the dais. When he stepped onto it, he declared loudly, "Now that I've told ye all what's to occur and why we've dispensed with a parson for the nonce, we'll get on with it. Step up here, lad, and speak your piece."

Lina felt the spinning sensation return and drew a breath to steady herself.

Without taking his hand from her elbow, Ian murmured, "Will you stand beside me, lass, and face everyone? Or would you liefer take your usual place at the table? I'll escort you there myself if you like."

The world righted itself. Quietly, she said, "I'm not such a feardie, sir. As you said,

we're doing this together. I would not want anyone to think otherwise."

"Good lass. I ken fine that you have great courage. I just thought you might feel more dignified or more at ease to stand at a distance."

"Is that what a woman usually does during a declaration?" she asked.

His eyes twinkled. "Sakes, I don't know. I've never attended one."

A gurgle of laughter escaped her. "I doubt that one actually attends such events. They tend to be rather more spontaneous than that, I think."

"Then you ken more of them than I do," he said. "Let's ask your father."

Andrew was already arranging his stage. "Ye'll stand here before the table, lad, and face them all," he said. "Ye need say nae more than that the lady Lachina MacFarlan is now your lady wife. Likely, they'll cheer again. But dinna let them be going on about it all night. I'm gey hungry."

"What about me, sir?" Lina asked. "What do I say?"

"Nowt, lass. Just dinna contradict the man. 'Tis a bad habit in any marriage."

"I missed hearing what you told them about why we are doing it this way."

"I just said that since ye've decided to marry and Sir Ian has to return to his knightly duties afore the parson could get here, and may be going into battle, we're doing a declaration. I also said that we'll have the parson here when he returns to make all right with the Kirk. So, now, art ready, lad?"

"Aye, sir." Taking Lina's hand and facing the lower hall, Ian said, "I declare to you

all that now and forevermore the lady Lachina and I are man and wife.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:13 am

As Andrew had predicted, applause erupted, making Lina search her feelings again. With her back still to the high table and thus to the other women and Rob MacAulay, she could not even imagine what their feelings might be.

Ian was enjoying the applause, and she did enjoy his company. Moreover, everyone in the hall seemed to approve, so smiling back at them was easy. The truth, though, was that she could not define her feelings for Ian further than liking, although she had been willing to marry him despite the flaws in his character. So she had clearly ignored some of the standards she had set earlier for her husband.

She had expected, at least, to marry a man whose opinions regarding risk taking and family responsibilities echoed her own. Had those standards been so trifling to her that she could fling them aside for a too-daring, dutybound warrior simply because of his handsome face, persuasive charm, and infectious impulses?

“Come along now, ye two,” Andrew said. “ ’Tis only supper, but it will serve as a wedding feast. So take the central places of honor, and I’ll say the grace.”

The seating, thus ordered, placed Lina and Ian between her mother and father. So, when Andrew finished the grace, Lina turned to Lady Aubrey and said quietly, “I ken fine that you must be dismayed, Mam. By my troth—”

“Your father explained everything,” Lady Aubrey interjected gently.

“Did he? I doubt that he was away from us long enough to do that.”

“He may have left out a few details,” her ladyship said. She added in no more than a

whisper, “I needed to know no more than that Dougal had had the temerity not only to offer for you, my love, but to threaten you!”

Wincing, Lina said, “He made those threats before, to Lizzie and me. Moreover, he was going to take me away and leave Lizzie with James Mòr.”

Patting her hand, Lady Aubrey said, “You need not think about them again, dearling. I will admit that I’d not have objected had your father hanged Dougal for his insolence. But he cannot harm you now. You and Sir Ian will consummate your union. Then he will attend to his business for the King, and all will be well.”

A shiver slid up Lina’s spine as her mother said the last few words.

Lady Aubrey raised her eyebrows in query.

Having no idea what had caused the shiver and hoping to divert her mother from inquiring about it, Lina said, “Are we to consummate our marriage at once then, Mam? I thought we would wait for the priest to bless it first.”

“Nay, nor should you, Lina. Yes, I will have some lamb,” she added in a normal tone when a gillie offered a platter of sliced meats for her inspection. After he had served her and moved on, she said, “Annie and Tibby are preparing Mag and Andrena’s bedchamber for you. You need not worry about prying ears at the door, either. I’ll keep Murie and Lizzie with me. Your father will see to the men.”

Lina bit her lip, because prying ears were just what she had been imagining.

She had recalled that after Mag and Andrena married, a group of drunken men had carried Mag upstairs and deposited him in their chamber naked. Lady Aubrey often seemed to know what her daughters were thinking, although her greatest gift was a rare, uncanny ability to see things before they occurred.

Lina chided herself then for reacting as she had to the chill she had felt before. Would her mother assure her that all would be well if it would not be?

To be sure, her ladyship could not predict the future at will. Certain events just appeared in her mind, unbidden, and usually well before their time. Not always, though. Her warning of treachery just before Pharlain and his men had seized Arrochar years ago had given Andrew and her ladyship just enough time to flee with their newborn Andrena to the safety of Tùr Meiloach.

“Eat your supper, love,” Lady Aubrey said. “I must not ignore Margaret, and you will be glad later to have had sustenance now.”

Unwilling yet to think about “later,” Lina turned her attention to her trencher. Somehow it had acquired food, although she had not selected any.

Realizing that the gillie who had served Lady Aubrey had not even offered any meat to her, Lina stared at the array on her trencher and then looked at Ian.

He smiled. “It did not get there by magic, lass,” he said. “Whilst you were enjoying your conversation with her ladyship, I took the liberty of serving you myself. I believe a husband does have that right.”

She remembered that a husband had many rights, and heat suffused her cheeks. Wondering how anyone had ever thought she was the serene, unflappable member of her family, and hoping her voice would not reveal her nervousness, she said, “Mam just told me that we should consummate our union right after supper.”

To her surprise and unexpected delight, she saw his cheeks redden.

Ian knew that he must be fiery red and was fervently thankful that Rob sat on Andrew’s right, rather than on his own. Had Andrew not been between them, Rob

would surely have overheard Lina's comment and seen Ian's reaction.

Had that happened, Ian knew he would never have heard the end of it.

He was also glad they were at the table, so that no one but he could detect the immediate and painful response of his lower body to Lina's words.

Bad enough that he was blushing. Men, real men, and certainly warriors and knights of the realm, did not blush. Never. As in not ever. But the fire in his cheeks now was evidence that it could happen to even the most unlikely chap.

Perhaps females did not know that, though. In any event, it would be well to control it. Andrew would know, if he chanced to note the phenomenon. And Rob might choose that moment or the next to lean forward. With these thoughts uneasily in mind, Ian kept his attention on Lina and saw a twinkle dawn in her eyes.

The cheeky lass was pleased with herself for stirring his blushes.

With sweet retribution in mind, he said, "Your mother is right, lass. Eat up. You are going to need all the energy you can muster."

To which, she replied without hesitation, "Everyone thinks you mean to leave me here when you return to Dunglass, sir. But I must certainly go with you. What would your parents think if I did not?"

Ian sobered instantly. His first thought was that he had been right to warn her that they would fratch. Not over her going with him, though, because he would put his foot down on that. She would be unhappy, but he would allow her no choice. She would be much safer at Tùr Meiloach, so here she would stay.

Nevertheless, he was not fool enough to make that declaration now.

Instead, he said, “We can talk about that later. Art finished eating?”

“Not yet,” she said, shooting him a speculative look.

Ignoring it, he signed to a gillie to pour them some wine and asked another to bring back the meat platter. Then he said, “Mayhap you will tell me more about your people as we eat. I have met your father’s steward, Malcolm Wylie, and a number of the others. But who is that red-headed chappie who whistled so well?”

Lina was happy enough to talk about Pluff and the Wylies.

Ian seemed fascinated to learn that Pluff watched the postern gate and helped tend the animals inside the wall, so she cheerfully answered his other questions. Still, and despite having evidently drunk a goblet and a half of wine, she felt as if only minutes had passed when Andrew said abruptly, “Annie tells me that your chamber is ready, Ian. So ye should take your lady wife to bed.”

“Aye, sure, sir,” Ian said as he stood and extended a hand to Lina.

She began to rise but paused when Muriella said, “Prithee, Father, not yet!”

Murie got up so hastily then that she would have knocked over her stool had Lizzie not caught it. Heedless of Lizzie’s action, Murie said coaxingly to Andrew, “I am going to tell the tale of how Sir Ian rescued Lina and Lizzie. Liz told me all about it, and I know that everyone else will want to hear it, too.”

Lina stiffened, but Ian gave her hand a squeeze and drew her upright.

People began to cheer again, but they broke off abruptly when Andrew raised his hands, palms out. “We’ll have nae tales tonight,” he said. “This night belongs to the bridal pair, and I’ll allow nae hindrance. D’ye hear me, all of ye?”

Someone began to clap then. When others joined in and still others stomped their feet, Ian waved and bore Lina off to the service stairs.

“I trust this stairway will take us where we need to go,” he said, grinning at her. “I don’t trust those men enough to parade you across the hall to the other one.”

“We can go this way,” she said. “We’re to use Mag and Andrena’s room. It’s at the top of the stairs, above the solar and just under the ramparts.”

“Good,” he said. “I know I’ll fit with you in Mag’s bed. I was thinking I might have to sleep in one with my feet hanging over.”

The image his words created made her smile. But when he urged her to precede him up the narrow stairway, her nerves began to tingle and her heart to pound. Not only was she more aware than ever of his presence behind her but she also felt unsure of what lay ahead. She had heard people talk of coupling and had helped Andrena prepare for hers. She also had a vague idea of what happened when men and women coupled. But she had never seen the act performed.

Ian’s confidence assured her that he knew much more about it than she did. The thought gave her pause to wonder but did little to steady her nerves.

“Here is their room,” she said when they reached the landing below the door to the ramparts and outside the large bedchamber that had, at an earlier time, contained pallets for men-at-arms who now slept on pallets in the hall or in cottages outside the wall. When she opened the door, she half-expected to see Tibby rushing about, attending to last-minute details. But although the room was aglow with soft golden candlelight, it was empty. The bed, turned down, awaited them.

Hearing Ian bolt the service-stair door and watching him cross the room to bar the main door, she said, “I must fetch a fresh shift from my room for the morning, sir.

Tibby forgot to leave one out for me here.”

“Never mind that,” he said. “You won’t need it tonight. Forbye, I feel safer with the doors locked. I’d not put it past those others or your father—”

“Nay,” she said. “You heard him. He will brook no hindrance, which means no intrusion. He said it as much for you and me as for the others. Faith, sir, if he were the sort of man to let them disturb our bedding, Mam would not permit it.”

“Even so,” he said, leaving the bar firmly in place, “whatever you need tomorrow, your Tibby can fetch then.”

She had not thought about Tibby entering their bedchamber. “Will your man, Hak, come in here, too?” she asked.

“Not until I send for him,” Ian said, looking around as if to memorize every detail. “Come to that, I don’t know where your steward put him.”

“Mag’s man sleeps in the wee room across the landing from this one. So Malcolm or Peter Wylie likely put Hak in there. Do you want him?”

“Not now,” he said. “I just want to be able to shout when I do.”

“Well, you can go and look, but I’ll wager he is there, because female guests sleep in the room that Lady Margaret has now, across from the one where Lizzie and Muriella are sleeping. And male guests usually sleep across from the solar, where Rob MacAulay is. But Tibby sleeps in a tiny room downstairs near the kitchen.”

“Then, if she hasn’t come up on her own when you need her, I’ll send Hak or Rob to fetch her,” he said, moving toward her.

The sudden intent look on his face made her more nervous than ever. But a lady did not allow such sensitivities to show. Doubtless, she thought, Lady Aubrey had gone to her wedding-night bed with nerves of steel.

“I haven’t kissed you properly yet,” Ian said, taking Lina by the shoulders and drawing her slowly nearer, tantalizing himself with lusty images as he did.

Someone had lit a cresset on a corner table and several branches of candles, so he had light enough to see her eyes widen and her pupils enlarge.

Her dusky eyelashes fluttered lower.

The bed—invitingly large—stood behind her, its dark red curtains tied back to show that someone had turned down the covers for them.

Putting two fingers beneath her chin, Ian tilted her head up and touched her lips gently with his as he had earlier. Feeling her tremble, he pressed harder and eased his free hand from her warm shoulder down her back. Then, he urged her closer, wanting her to feel the length of his body against hers for the first time.

“I think I’ve dreamed this,” she murmured against his lips.

“Have you?” he murmured back. “I hope not all of this. That would be most unseemly for a maiden, lass. Did you dream this part?” he added, sliding his tongue into her mouth. Then, moving the hand at her chin to cup the back of her head, he held her so that she would not pull it back.

As he explored her mouth with his tongue, he deftly removed her veil. Then, casting it aside, he wove his fingers into the thick, silky coils of her hair. His tongue continued working busily, tantalizingly, in the velvety confines of her mouth.

He felt her soft breasts swell against him.

When she moaned softly, he eased his fingers through her hair, finding pins and loosening the coil and then her golden plaits. His free hand drifted from the small of her back to the curve of her bottom.

“You taste like honey,” he murmured against her lips. He savored the taste and tasted again.

She was silent but wonderfully submissive as if she were willing to learn as he explored her, and once again, he marveled at her calm. But it stirred him, too, as it had in the past, when it had stirred him to mischief. Now, it stirred other senses.

He wanted her even more than he had anticipated. But, his father had often said that a marriage was a long and often thorny relationship. One did well to remember that and not proceed as if one had just received a new plaything.

“I see that you have set me a new challenge,” he whispered in her ear.

“What?” Her breath touched his neck, sending blood coursing through him.

“To make you want me just half as much as I want you.”

With a little gasp, she pulled back enough to look at him, her rosy lips softly, sensuously parted. Her eyes warmly reflected the golden glow of the candlelit room.

Sure of himself now, he reached for her kirtle laces.

Lina stiffened when he tugged at her laces. But he had said that he wanted her, and the sensations he had stirred all through her when his tongue had plunged into her mouth were still going strong. She did not want them to stop.

Since his hands were at her laces, he no longer held her head, and she was nearly certain that he would not seize it again if she tried to pull away.

How do you know that? the voice deep in her mind asked. For once, the voice was too distant to heed. The sensations were stronger, especially when he put his hand on her bottom and pressed her hard against him. She could feel his body move and harden in a place she had not known could harden.

He kissed her again, thoroughly, even playfully, encouraging her tongue to dance with his in her mouth. Before she was ready to stop playing, he eased his tongue out again and murmured teasingly, “Well, have you?”

Feeling strangely bereft, she blinked, then swallowed. “Have I what?”

Chuckling, he said, “Have you dreamed all of this before?”

Trying to collect herself, she said, “I... I don’t know. I only felt as if I had dreamed of you, or perhaps someone else, holding me so. Have you not had moments when you’ve felt as if you had dreamed what is happening to you?”

“I never remember my dreams,” Ian said, knowing it for a lie but reluctant to admit to her that he remembered the sexy ones. He had not dreamed of her. But he was as certain as he could be that, after touching her, kissing her, and doing the other things he would do with her as soon as possible, he would dream of her, often.

Her hair smelled of summer and felt like silk. He had not yet completely undone her plaits, and he wanted to see how long her hair was. More than that, he wanted to measure himself against her and for her to be naked and in his arms.

On that thought, he parted her laces, giving himself access to the shift beneath, which had its own silken ties. To his delight, it was the kind of shift that, once untied, would

open wide enough to slip down over her shoulders and her hips.

Suiting that thought to some action, he untied the bow and spread the loosely gathered neckline wide open. When she shivered, he said, “Art cold, lass?”

“Nay, but I do not know what I am supposed to do.”

“You need do nowt yet,” he said, baring her breasts. “I want to look at you.”

Her lips parted in a gasp, and he needed no further invitation to claim them and keep them busy while he dealt deftly with the narrow chain girdle at her hips, released its clasp, and let it fall with a jingling sound to the floor.

Then, pushing her bodice and shift lower yet to see the smooth skin of her midriff and waist, he held her away a little to see how her breasts looked so. They were full and firm with rosy tips, their nipples hardening as he watched.

“It does not seem fair for you to take my clothes off whilst you keep yours on,” she said, eyeing him reproachfully.

“I am your husband now. And I want to undress you.”

“Another husbandly right, aye,” she said. “Is it not my right to undress you? Sithee, I do not know. Mag was undressed when the men shoved him in here.”

“ You saw Mag naked on his wedding night?” He grinned at the image she had produced for him. “I thought maidens were barred from such events.”

“Murie was there, too, and Mag had managed to keep his shirt,” Lina said. “He held it in such a way that we could not see all of him.”

His breath caught with those last few words, when the amusing image of Mag abruptly shifted to a pulsing desire of his own to see all of Lina.

He stepped back a pace and said, “Push your kirtle and shift all the way off now, lass. I want to see you, every beautiful inch of you.”

At those words, Lina’ muscles contracted in unusual places and surprising ways. But she could not make her hands obey him. Cool air caressed her bared torso, making her nipples feel as if they led secret lives of their own.

“Look at me,” he said.

She didn’t want to. She wanted to savor the feelings his voice stirred in her body, the invigorating way it reacted to his commands. When an irresistible urge within her made her look at him, his gaze captured hers and held it.

“Push them off, or I will strip them from you myself,” he said, his voice low, compelling, and with a vibrant note now that stirred responsive vibrations in her.

Still unable to look away, despite a sudden blaze raging through her body that stirred new feelings everywhere it touched, she obeyed him. Standing in the pool of clothing, she experienced more stimulating contractions when he reached for her. A light touch on her breast made her shiver again. But she was not cold.

He stroked her breasts gently with his fingertips, his expression intent, his breathing faster than before. His fingertips were rough enough to make her nipples leap in response to their touch. He seemed pleased with what he saw. Her whole body reacted no matter where he touched her. She could hardly breathe.

“Now,” he said, his voice harsh, even raspy, “turn around and walk away from me to the bed. I want to watch you climb into it. Don’t pull up the covers.”

Every fiber of her had come alive. If she had ever been aware of his presence before, it was nothing to what she felt as she obeyed him. She could barely feel the chilly floor. Every skin cell, every tiny hair of her body was tinglingly aware of Ian.

“Stop and shake out the rest of your plaits. Show me how long your hair is.”

She did that easily, quickly, just as she did whenever she brushed her hair. Then she stepped toward the bed again, feeling her hair brush against her bottom.

“Pull your hair forward now,” he said, his voice even lower, raspier. “I want to see all of you, and it’s in my way.”

Reaching back to do his bidding, she felt her breasts rise and tauten. She had never been so aware of her body as she was now, knowing that he watched her.

She was one of those rare women who were more stunningly beautiful naked than clothed. Her skin was like gilded ivory by candlelight, and smooth. He had known she was slender but not how exquisitely so or how soft and smooth her luscious curves would be. The Fates had formed her hips perfectly. Her firm bottom was a delight to the eye and an undeniable temptation to touch and squeeze.

Her legs were slender, well formed, and exquisite from her firm thighs to her delicate ankles, feet, and wee toes. The play of her muscles when she reached the high bed and climbed onto it took his breath away. She had tensed just before putting her right knee up, telling him that she felt a little uncomfortable. But she did as he had bidden her anyway. Looking heavenward, he prayed that the rest of his wedding night—sakes, his entire marriage—would proceed in the same way.

“Now lie back, leave the covers as they are, and wait for me,” he said. He wasted no time but stripped off his clothes and strode to the bed, deciding to let the candles gutter. He wanted to watch her as long as he could.

Lina watched Ian, wholly content to let him tell her what to do, since she was enjoying it and, otherwise, would have had no idea what he wanted from her. Also, if she let him have it all his way now, he would surely be more conciliating when she explained how necessary it was that she return with him to Dunglass.

He was in a hurry now. He had pulled off his boots and stripped off his plaid, tunic, and breeks at a speed that she might have thought impossible for any man.

Then he straightened and faced her, rampant.

Gasping, she nearly bolted upright. Surely, what she had believed must happen when they coupled could not.

As he stood looking at her, he seemed to grow larger there before her eyes. Then, he moved to the bed and stood there, gazing down at her.

A draft across her breasts made her tremble.

“Prithee, sir. You look as if you mistake me for a tableful of food at a feasting, as if you are trying to decide what to taste first.”

His eyes opened wide at that. He choked back a laugh, and they twinkled merrily. “You are impatient,” he said, grinning. “I like that in a lass. Move over a wee bit more, though. I’m larger than the space you’ve left for me.”

As Lina scooted over, Ian watched to see how she managed her hair. The flickering candlelight played on it, intriguingly rearranging shadows and highlights. The long tresses did not appear to concern her, though, as she made room for him. When she had settled into place again against the pillows, revealing that the wee hollow of her throat was dewy, he decided to taste that first.

Then his gaze shifted to her breasts, which were moving gently up and down as she breathed. They were medium sized but fully enticing, suggesting that a man's head might pillow itself between them. But he had other plans in mind first. He had experience with women but not with maidens, since knightly honor forbade trifling with any but the most willing and experienced females. But he was no dolt. He had asked those women many questions and considered himself knowledgeable.

Accordingly, he proceeded to tease and caress her, kissing and stroking every part of her body that he could reach without contorting her or himself or penetrating her. By paying close heed to her every movement and moan, he soon satisfied himself that although she was shy, she enjoyed submitting to him. So when the time came for him to claim her, he took advantage of that.

Deciding that she was ready for him at last, he said, "I am going to do something different now. You must lie perfectly still."

He had one hand on her belly then and fingers of the other tickling one of her nipples. Moving to claim that nipple with his lips, he eased his hand to the fork of her legs and tickled the opening there.

When she stiffened, he said, "Relax, lass. Breathe in and let it out."

Although she obeyed him, she moved her thighs closer together.

"Spread your legs more," he murmured. "Not all of this will be pleasant. But it is necessary, and I want to prepare you well."

This time, she took a deeper breath and let it out more slowly and completely. He felt her relax beneath his hand.

Finding the nub known to be the most sensitive part of a woman's body, he teased it

with his finger until she was moaning again, then slid the finger inside her. Feeling her open for him, he moved gently over her and eased himself in.

She gasped. “You’re too big!”

“Be easy, lass, a woman’s body adjusts itself.”

If, in the end, it was not that easy, he was skillful and she remained submissive. So the task was done.

Pounding to his culmination, he knew he must have hurt her. But coupling was necessary for any husband and wife, and initiating it was the duty of any new husband. In any event, Lina seemed relaxed afterward and made no complaint.

In fact, he thought, she seemed strangely distracted. Too sated to twitch a muscle, let alone to talk, he concentrated on recovering enough energy to move.

Stunned—and abruptly unaware of anything else that was happening to her, other than a rather distant ache—Lina had found herself staring at Lady Aubrey and wondered how her mother had entered a room with two locked doors.

Obviously, she could not. No one could do that. But her mother stood right there, not six feet from the bed. Lina opened her mouth to ask what she was doing, but when she tried to form the words, her lips would not cooperate...

While she puzzled over this oddity, she realized that Lady Aubrey was not in the room at all but in another chamber altogether, as if a wall between the two had opened to reveal her standing there. She knelt then, opened a carved wooden chest, and reached into it.

As she did, a muscular arm reached around her from behind and a large hand clapped

over her mouth.

Startled, Lina tried to scream but heard no sound. Feeling weight bearing down on her, she realized that Ian had collapsed atop her and was breathing hard.

Apparently aware that he was crushing her, he muttered, “Sorry, lass. I hope I did not hurt you too much.”

“No, sir, I barely felt a thing,” she said, finding her voice when he rolled halfway off her and no farther. “Forbye, the strangest thing just happened.”

“Aye, sure, but you’ll get used to it,” he muttered, and snored.

Since it was clearly not the best time for her to try to explain what had happened, she decided to think more about it before telling anyone. Sliding out from under Ian, she poured water from the ewer on the washstand into the basin and cleaned herself. As she did, she realized that she was sore down there. The aching eased quickly, so she blew out the candles and climbed over Ian—apparently without disturbing him in the least—and slept soundly beside him.

When she awoke Wednesday morning, he still slept, so she lay quietly until he, too, awoke.

When he turned over and saw her, he said with a grin, “Good, you’re awake. I’ve a rare hunger for ye, lass. I think this marriage is going to be a good one.”

When he reached for her, she sat up, clutched the covers to her breasts, and scooted away. Returning his smile with a wistful one, she said nonetheless firmly, “First, sir, I would explain why I must go with you to Dunglass.”

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:13 am

Having three sisters, Ian knew better than to declare that he needed no explanation, because he had made up his mind. His attention having shifted to other parts, he offered the tactful suggestion that they could discuss the matter later.

“I would prefer to discuss it now,” Lina said with her usual tranquility. “Sithee, sir, if you do not take me home with you, just think how it will look.”

“How do you think it will look?”

She cocked her head, as if she wondered why he had to ask. Then, soberly, she said, “Do you not mean to tell your parents about this, about us?”

“Of course, I’ll tell them,” he said, although the truth was that he had not spared that forthcoming event a thought. The only time he had considered his parents’ opinion was when Andrew had said they would not object to his marrying Lina. Nor would they, he reassured himself. However...

She continued to watch him. Her expression was unchanged, but he had that feeling again that she looked right into his mind and knew all that was there. That would explain why he could sense so strongly that she was dissatisfied with his answers. In fact, for all the heed that she had paid to the last one...

“Did you hear me?”

“Aye, sure. I just think you should give your decision more thought.”

A shiver shot up his spine. “Look here,” he said, “you begin to sound like Dree. Do

not tell me that you also think you know what people think and feel.”

“Of course not. I can only tell when you are not being entirely truthful.”

“Oh, is that all?” He wanted to shake her. “Just what makes you think you can do that?”

Her smile was rueful, not triumphant. “Likely, I’ll wish I had not revealed my secrets,” she said. “Sometimes I don’t know how I know. I just do. But I can often tell by your expression or the way you tug that strand of hair you are holding.”

Flicking the offending strand behind his ear, he exhaled with what his sister Susanna would call his long-suffering sigh and said, “I’ll admit that I hadn’t given my parents much thought, lass. But you ken fine how much they love you. Do you imagine that they will not welcome you to our family?”

“I know they like me,” she said. “And they have always been welcoming. But they will be more so if you tell them straightaway and do not seem to hide me away here. Mercy, sir, you could be gone for months. What would anyone think?”

“Everyone will think exactly what your father does, that I’m leaving you where you will be safe,” he said, keeping his temper with difficulty. Where had her delightful submissiveness gone? Weren’t wives supposed to obey their husbands?

“What people think will depend on you,” Lina said. “If you ‘forget’ to mention a little thing like your marriage, I expect they will think any number of things, none of which will redound to my credit. But if you take me with you—”

“You can put that notion out of your head,” he said curtly. “Dunglass is but three miles from the rebels at Dumbarton. I want you far away from there.”

To ease his temper, he thought fondly of his mother, who always submitted to Colquhoun's decisions without argument. Regrettably, however, the image that leaped to mind was his father's chagrin when Lady Colquhoun entered the inner chamber uninvited to declare that he could not send Lina and Lizzie away at once.

"Your lady mother is there," Lina said calmly, as if she were just clarifying her thoughts and not sending chills through him again. His hands itched to catch hold of her but not to shake her. He wanted to rip the covers off and, if she was not too sore from their previous exercise, to reveal more pleasures of coupling to her.

Instead, he said brusquely, "If, by the time I return, my father has not sent my mother to join my sister Susanna, I'll be gey surprised. Dunglass itself may be teeming with Borderers and other ruffians by then. It will be no place for you."

"Why are so many ruffians coming?"

"To do battle, if necessary," he said. "You guessed when I rescued you that my father hopes to persuade James Mòr to yield Dumbarton to his grace. What you do not know is that the King ordered me to take back the castle for the Crown."

Her lips parted and color drained from her face. "That castle is impregnable," she protested. "No one could take it. James Mòr was able to do so only because the men who then guarded the castle still knew him as Murdoch's well-behaved son and welcomed him. James Mòr will trust no one."

"He would trust his mother," Ian said, simply because broad statements like that one deserved contradiction. Although the thought was an intriguing one.

Lina raised her eyebrows in another speculative look. "You are gey good at disguising yourself," she said. "And I have never clapped eyes on Duchess Isabella. But I doubt that she is over six feet tall or has shoulders as broad as yours."

Her tone was solemn, her expression likewise. But the wench's eyes danced.

"Come here to me," he said.

"What are you going to do?"

"Provide you with yet another reason that James Mòr would never believe I am a woman, let alone one daft enough to marry into the Stewart family."

"Will you agree to tell your parents straightaway about our marriage?"

Meeting her gaze and holding it, he said, "I don't bargain, Lina. Not after I have made a decision. Now, put those covers down and come here to me."

Lina was not afraid of him, although she did wonder if he had thought she might be, or had even hoped that she would be. He still held her gaze, but she looked steadily, silently back at him until his lips moved, diverting her attention to them. They thinned, and a tiny dimple showed just to the right of them.

Without thinking about what she did, she let the covers slip. Then, sensing a new, exciting kind of tension, she licked her lips and looked into his eyes again.

They were smoldering. He reached for her and she leaned toward him as he did. Without effort, he pulled her into his arms, captured her lips with his own...

... and began tickling her.

Lina shrieked, but Ian's lips muffled the sound, and he was too strong for her to escape. Soon, though, he was no longer tickling but stroking her, teasing her nipples, making her blood race and her heart pound. His tongue slid into her mouth, and hers darted to meet it.

When he moved over her, she spread her legs to receive him without giving thought to the initial pain she had felt the night before. By the time she did think of it, he was inside her, moving gently. She felt a distant, residual ache, but the other feelings he stirred soon banished all thought of pain.

When he climaxed, he fell away from her. But he lay for only a moment before he said, “Don’t move yet, lass. I want to teach you one more thing to keep you from forgetting me whilst I’m away.”

“How could I forget you,” she murmured, smiling.

Without replying, he kissed her breasts and her belly. Then he moved lower and lower, his legs between hers again as he eased toward the foot of the bed, kissing and licking her until she began to squirm and moan.

Then his fingers returned to where his cock had been earlier, and she could feel his breath there, too. He murmured, “Be still now. Just feel and enjoy.”

His fingers moved away, and his tongue began to do things she had never imagined a tongue could do. Soon afterward, she cried out again in pure pleasure.

When she could breathe normally, Ian moved up beside her, drew her into the shelter of his arms, and said with a smile, “Will you remember?”

“Always, aye.” Lowering her lashes, she wondered briefly if she had any hope of persuading him to take her with him and decided she had none. He had made up his mind, and he was a gey stubborn man. She would have to study him more to learn what persuasive measures, if any, might work with him.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

Knowing that to share those thoughts would merely supply him with another challenge, she kept silent.

“Tell me.”

She felt much more comfortable with him now than she had expected she ever could, and she wished he were not leaving. But she would not tell him those things either. So, she said truthfully, “I was thinking what a puzzle you are to me.”

“How so?” He sounded more sleepy than curious.

Nevertheless, she said, “My family thinks of me as the persuasive one. I can nearly always persuade my sisters and others to heed me. But you are a puzzle.”

“I told you we’re likely to fratch, lass. If you are wise, though, you won’t fight me after I’ve made up my mind.”

“You did promise always to listen.”

“I did, and I will but only up to a point. If you have already said it without persuading me, saying it again or haggling with me won’t aid you.”

“I would not do those things,” she said. “I do hope, though, that you will tell your parents straightaway that we have married.”

“I will tell them,” he said. “I did not mean for you to think I would not. I just disliked the bargain you offered. That one won’t sway me, Lina, ever.”

Remembering, she felt a little guilty. But a woman had so few weapons. Quietly, she said, “It is important to me that you tell them. I feel as if we have married without their permission. And I don’t like the feeling.”

“Nor would I if I felt the same way,” he said. “But my parents have been urging me to keep my eyes open for a wife since I turned eighteen. So I am as certain as one can be that our marriage will please them. They’ll also understand that you will be safer here than anywhere nearer Dumbarton, let alone at Dunglass.”

His saying that she would be safe sent a shiver up Lina’s spine just as Lady Aubrey’s assurance of her future well-being had done. Determined to be sensible, reminding herself that she and Ian had married and should make the most of their time together, she summoned up a smile and said, “How soon must you go?”

“Not today,” he said firmly. “I’m too worn out from making love to my lady wife. Sakes, I may have to stay in bed all day to recover,” he added.

When she shook her head at him, he said, “In troth, I want to give the men at Dunglass time to reduce what are like to be a plethora of plans to a possible few.”

“Who has yet to come?”

“Jamie sent for Douglas to come, and Douglas will bring other Border lords to make up Jamie’s army. I’ll welcome them after I’ve taken the castle, but the last thing I want is tension between powerful Border lords who think Jamie should have put them in charge. I’d liefer take the castle with men from Loch Lomond clans.”

“But everyone’s loyalties have split. Faith, nearly all of us here descend from Earls of Lennox. Yet look at us. Thanks to Lennox and the House of Albany, clans, even families, have divided. We fight amongst ourselves as much as we fight others.”

“We aren’t fighting now,” he said pointedly. “Art sure you want to get up?”

“I hope you won’t command me to stay in bed,” she said. “I look forward to enjoying more such activity, but I’d liefer get up now and break my fast. We can walk outside

the wall afterward if you want to see more of Tùr Meiloach. Or we can go somewhere quiet, talk, and get to know each other better.”

“I do need to talk with your father today, to help draft those documents he mentioned yesterday,” Ian said. “We did not take time to do it then, and we must do that before I go. Shall I shout for Hak and send him to fetch your lass?”

Lina agreed. But when he strode to the door, naked, opened it, and shouted across the landing, she dove back under the covers until Hak had received his orders and gone to find Tibby. Then, suddenly shy about getting out of bed naked, she felt immense relief when Ian pulled on his breeks and a tunic and said he would go and find out when Andrew wanted to draw up the marriage documents.

When he had gone, she relieved herself in the night jar and put on her shift from the day before. Memory returned then rather abruptly of Lady Aubrey’s eerie intrusion during their previous night’s activity.

When that image had appeared and then vanished as if unseen breath had blown out its light, she had felt dizzy and disoriented. Now she wondered if her captivity with Lizzie and all that had followed it might have affected her mind.

Guiltily, she realized that she ought to have told Ian about the incident. Before she could even ponder that thought, though, a more startling one took its place: What if she had inherited her mother’s gift and seen some future event?

Feeling silly even to wonder such a thing, she discarded that notion, too.

Surely, if she had inherited the gift, or curse, of seeing into the future, she would have known it long before now. The strangest of Andrena’s gifts presented itself soon after her birth. And Andrena had known since childhood that she could tell how people were feeling, what they might be thinking, and if they were trustworthy. Muriella,

too, had known as a child that she had an extraordinary memory.

Striving to imagine what to say if she did tell Ian, Lina decided she lacked the courage to try. He would likely insist that she had been daydreaming at a time when she ought to have kept her attention on their consummation and him. In short, he'd be annoyed, and she did not want to irk him again so close to his departure.

A light rap on the door announced Tibby's arrival with a fresh shift, Lina's favorite blue kirtle, and a crisp white veil. Tib helped her dress and was handing her the silver chain girdle to clasp around her waist when Ian walked in.

Startled, Lina nearly objected to such a lack of ceremony but recalled in time that another right of husbands was to walk in on their wives whenever they chose.

He cocked his head as if he had noticed her mixed reaction. But he made no comment other than to say he had talked with Andrew. "If you'd like to enjoy some fresh air, my lady, I thought we might go down to the shore. I could not see from inside if the tide is in or out—"

"It is in and on the turn, sir," she said.

"Sakes, how do you know? One cannot see well enough from that window, and I doubt that you have left this chamber."

She shrugged. "I don't know how I know, but I do. After living here so long, I expect it is just something one learns to sense from the sounds of the waves."

"I don't hear any waves."

"Then perhaps that is how I know. In any event, we cannot go all the way down, if that is what you had hoped. But we can walk on the cliffs or in the woods."

He said dryly, “Not thinking of sinking me in one of your hungry bogs or feeding me to one of the fierce beasts we hear so much about, are you?”

“Nay,” she said, smiling. “Not if you behave.”

He grinned at her and turned to Tibby. “Take that veil off her ladyship, lass. I want to see her hair in the sunlight.”

Hearing his tone, Lina wondered what else he might want to see.

Dougal was in the woods above the tower, waiting for Lady Aubrey. His father had watchers everywhere. Andrew Dubh likely did, too. But Pharlain had one or two living amid Andrew’s people. Thanks to one of them, Dougal knew how much her ladyship loved the wee burn-fed pond just below him in the woods.

She came often, his informant had said. Moreover, she had not been able to visit the pond since leaving for Bannachra Tower. She would come today.

Because of his swim, he wore only his tunic, which had quickly dried. He had not been so foolhardy as to come unarmed, though. He had carried his dirk in his teeth and had it in hand now, but he did not expect to use it. The women of Tùr Meiloach felt safe on its land. That simple fact would work in his favor.

He heard her humming, and then he saw her. As expected, Lady Aubrey had come alone. When she knelt by the pond, he stepped out from behind a tree.

She heard him and looked up. “You were foolish to come here,” she said.

“Ye ken who I am, then.”

“Aye, sure. You look much as your father did at your age. But do not think you will

harm me. I have only to scream to bring warriors down upon you.”

“They would not catch me,” he said confidently, although if the truth were known, he felt edgy. Things that men had said about the MacFarlan women were whispering themselves to him. “Ye won’t call them, though, for I mean ye nae harm today.” He put slight emphasis on the last word and saw that she had noted it.

“What do you want?” she asked.

That was easy. “The charters to Arrochar. They belong to us, and we’ll need them to show his grace when he comes north. Ye must ken where they lie.”

“I fear that I do not,” she said, apparently unperturbed.

“Ye’re a Seer, so ye’ll find them,” he said. “Ye’ve seen how easily I found ye and how safely I walk on this so-treacherous land of yours. I can find your daughters, too, madam, wherever they are. If ye don’t get me the charters, ye’ll lose one daughter, then another, and then the last. That last one will be the lady Lina, for I want her to feel the pain of losing her sisters and all that I shall tell others meantime about her shameful behavior.”

“Lina has done naught for which she need be ashamed,” she said calmly. “Moreover, you will harm her only at your peril. She is married now to Sir Ian Colquhoun, who will avenge any stain cast upon her character.”

So Colquhoun and his son had somehow aided the chit’s escape, had they?

Dougal wanted to curse, but he did not. Instead, he moved closer to her, saying tersely, “Then I’ll take the one I find first, madam. Do not think I will not. Will it be a daughter ye lose or those wretched charters?”

“Do you think you can come here again so easily?” she asked.

“Not here, but elsewhere, a place I ken where nae one can lay a trap. Ye’ll find the charters, and ye’ll bring them to me. I’ll find a way to tell ye where to meet me, but do not delay or tell anyone. If ye fail me, ye’ll not get a second chance.”

“Sakes, how do you imagine that I can simply leave Tùr Meiloach to meet you elsewhere?”

“Use your Tùr Meiloach magic, woman,” he said harshly. “But ye will meet me or suffer grave consequences. Believe me, for the very fact that I stand facing ye should prove that nae one here is safe. ’Tis plain, too, that ye had nae ken ye would meet me here, despite all the daft tales of your being a Seer. Ye’ll do as ye’re bid.”

She continued to gaze steadily at him, but he knew that he had frightened her, so he refused to go until she promised to meet him when and where he chose.

Afterward, eerie dark shadows that looked ominously like wolves followed him through the woods, making his flesh creep. He had to await darkness again to make his escape safely, but when nothing else happened, his confidence increased.

After all, he was as much a true MacFarlan as anyone at Tùr Meiloach.

Ian was beginning to enjoy his marriage, even to feel pleased with it.

When they entered the hall, the dais was empty. Since that meant the others who broke their fast at the high table had likely done so, he was delighted when Lina accepted his suggestion that they take bread and apples and go on outside.

“My sister Susanna would say that to walk about with food like this is improper,” he confided to Lina as she led the way to the service stairs. “I’m glad you don’t trouble

your head about such things.”

She looked back, smiling. “I know you often feel confined within doors, sir.”

“I do, aye,” he admitted.

In the yard, when Pluff opened the postern gate for them, Lina smiled at him, too. She had a lovely smile that went to her eyes, which, in the morning sunlight, were the same shade of blue as her gown. Ian found himself smiling as she led the way to the cliffs. They soon came to a place with boulders suitable for sitting.

“We can eat here and watch the view,” she said, and he agreed.

A thin layer of mist clinging to the water showed that the tide was in and quietly turning, just as she had said. They ate and watched gulls soar overhead.

Several soon swooped near them, and Ian learned that Lina had brought extra rolls to share. She handed him one, and they tossed pieces high for the gulls to snatch out of the air, laughing when the silly birds fought over them.

“You know,” Ian said after a time, “another reason my father will approve is that he’ll assume that I’m ready to assume more responsibility for our estates.”

Without taking her eyes off the swooping gulls, she said, “You don’t have to think of more reasons, sir. I trust you to know what they will think, although I’d not be surprised to learn that they had hoped you’d marry a wealthy heiress.”

“Since you admire honesty, I’ll admit that my father hopes to acquire more land, and I ken fine that you will not inherit much. But that does not trouble me. A knight should win land of his own through feats of duty.”

“Do you think his grace will reward you with land if you can reclaim Dumbarton for him?”

He shrugged. “No one ever knows what Jamie will do. He did promise Mag and me, after we helped foil the coup against him, that he would award us land to go with our knighthoods. At present, though, he is eager to reclaim estates that his kinsmen awarded to themselves and to men they wanted to bind to their service.”

They talked more as they wandered along the cliffs. The day was bright and sunny with a low thin mist still clinging to the Loch of the Long Boats. The water looked calm, and the air was still. Finding a sheltered, private place amid the boulders, Ian took off his plaid and spread it on the ground.

Standing again, he reached for Lina’s laces. “We’ll take this off,” he said. “Your hair looks like gold in the sunlight. I want to see how the rest of you looks.”

With a little gasp but with eyes a gleam, she said, “I don’t want to alarm you again, sir, but I had a feeling that you might demand such a thing.”

They spent the rest of Wednesday and most of Thursday together, in bed and out, and to Ian’s delight, Lina soon abandoned the last of her shyness with him.

He did take time Wednesday afternoon with Andrew to discuss and agree on the documents. Andrew prepared them Thursday, and they signed them on Friday.

Saturday morning, shortly after dawn, Ian bade his bride farewell and rode away through the forest with his men and Rob MacAulay, back over the southeast pass and down through Glen Luss. Since he and Rob had scarcely seen or spoken to each other in the meantime, they rode together.

“I wasn’t bored,” Rob assured Ian soberly. “Andrew Dubh entertained me with tales

of hawks, badgers, and wolves attacking intruders, and other unlikely events, whilst he showed me more of Tùr Meiloach. I think the man is full of blethers, but he has kept his family safe with those tales of his, so he's a canny fellow. Certes, I'd liefer keep him as a friend than have him for my enemy."

Ian agreed. Conversation between the two was desultory. Neither felt much need to break their companionable silence. Reaching the clachan near Inch Galbraith by midafternoon, they found Lippin Geordie awaiting them.

"The laird did tell me tae look out for ye, sir," Geordie explained. "He'll be a-riding back wi' ye, an ye dinna mind his company."

"How soon can he be ready?" Ian asked.

"Men on the ramparts be a-watching, too. So as soon one o' ours saw ye coming, our Dolf went over tae collect Himself. He sent word earlier for the men in his tail tae ready themselves and tae meet him afore ye reach Glen Fruin."

Geordie then inquired about the lady Lizzie and others at Tùr Meiloach. By the time a man from the clachan brought out the laird's horse, saddled and bridled, the boat carrying Galbraith was nearing the landing.

When they had mounted and turned southward, Rob dropped back to let Galbraith take his place beside Ian.

"Has Lizzie turned Tùr Meiloach upside down yet?" Galbraith asked him.

"The tower remains upright, sir. As to Lizzie herself, the truth is that I've seen almost nowt of her. She and the lady Muriella have become fast friends."

"Aye, Lizzie told me that before she left," Galbraith said. "Aye, well, if I can trust

anyone to keep my lassie out of trouble, Aubrey MacFarlan is the one.”

“Aye, sir,”

“Have you devised a plan yet for Dumbarton?” Galbraith asked.

“Have you suggestions of your own, sir?”

Galbraith gave him a long look, then smiled. “I see, aye. Well, then, if you were my son, I’d encourage you to keep your ideas to yourself until you’d heard all of the others. Many of the noblemen you are gathering at Dunglass are much more experienced than you are and will pay little heed to your views until they have fully expressed their own. You mentioned that you expect Borderers to come, which would likely mean Buccleuch and Douglas since both are loyal to Jamie. They are fine warriors, so Jamie likely included them to give you advice.”

“Perhaps, sir,” Ian said. “But when his grace gave me his warrant, he told me straight out to make my own decision about how to handle the matter. He said, correctly, that I know Dumbarton’s weaknesses better than any Borderer could.”

“Do you ken them better than your sire, lad?”

Ian smiled. “My father is a gey canny laird, sir. But he loathes warfare. Sakes, he hates conflict of any sort. He is a fine leader of men, and he will support whatever I decide to do. He may even offer advice. But I have a devious mind and he does not. He respects mine though, as long as I don’t use it to deceive him.”

Galbraith laughed. “You never answered my question. Have you got a plan?”

“I’ll have one when I need one,” Ian said. “That is what matters. Have you heard aught from your sons, sir?”

Galbraith had not but was willing to talk about them. He did so until the trees on the hillside to their right thinned and the path up Glen Fruin appeared ahead. Eight armed horsemen awaited them there.

Galbraith said, "Those are my lads. I'll have them fall in behind us."

They continued riding, therefore, without pause. Soon, dense woods loomed ahead, and Ian realized that they were nearing the area where Dougal and his men had captured Lina and Lizzie.

He was about to point that out to Galbraith, when movement just west of where the path entered the woodland diverted his attention. The stag stood there, poised to dart up the hillside. Ian raised a hand, signaling those behind him to stop.

"Hold, sir, and look yonder," he said, reining in but making no other movement than a slight jutting of his jaw westward. "See him?"

"Aye," Galbraith said quietly, staring. "Magnificent."

The stag stood out against the greenery for several moments. Then it turned smoothly and, with quiet dignity, disappeared into the woods.

"We saw him Tuesday on the Glen Luss trail," Ian said against the murmur of men behind them, who were also discussing the great beast.

"From the sound of our lads, they'd relish a hunt," Galbraith observed.

"Not today," Ian said. "My father likely assumed that I'd return at least two days ago. By now, he must be struggling to keep his temper whilst striving to keep peace amongst his guests."

“You had good reason for your delay, I’m sure.”

“I did,” Ian said. He nearly told Galbraith about his marriage. But, recalling Lina’s concern about his parents’ feelings, he decided that they should know first.

Galbraith said, “Colquhoun would not thank either of us for dallying. But when we have reclaimed the castle, mayhap we’ll celebrate with a venison feast.”

Ian agreed. He would relish such a hunt.

He sent two of his men to see which direction the stag had taken, knowing that such information might help them find it again. But they found no sign of it.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:13 am

By midafternoon, Lina realized she missed Ian more than she had thought she would. She had expected to return easily to her usual duties and chores. But even her weaving seemed dull compared to the time she had spent with Ian. Reminding herself that men always left women behind when they went into battle did not help.

Nor did Muriella or Lizzie help. Having become friends at Bannachra, and delighted to reunite at Inch Galbraith, they had hardly stopped talking since.

Lina realized that for the first time in her memory, she was lonely.

The door opened to admit Lady Aubrey, looking distracted. Visibly startled to see Lina but recovering quickly, she said, "I thought you had walked to Annie's, darling, with Muriella and Lizzie."

"I had begun weaving this length of fabric before we left for Bannachra, so I decided to work on it instead," Lina explained, resting her shuttle. "I don't want to offend Annie, though. Perhaps I'll walk over later and visit her by myself."

Lady Aubrey smiled. "Those two lassies have become fast friends," she said. "But doubtless you are worried about Ian, too. Your father told me why he returned to Dunglass without you. 'Tis a difficult and dangerous task he undertakes, I fear."

Feeling a twinge of guilt but having no fondness for falsehoods, Lina said, "In troth, Mam, I do not worry about his safety as much as I worry that he might fail. Everyone says Dumbarton Castle is unassailable."

"You cannot help him by worrying, love. He will do what he must do."

“You looked as if something were troubling you when you came in, Mam. Is aught amiss?”

“Nay, love, just a wee puzzle that I must sort—”

The solar door flew open then, diverting both of them. “Mam, Mam,” Muriella cried, dashing in with Lizzie moving more soberly at her heels. “Andrena and Mag are coming home! They must be near, too, because Lizzie and I were talking and talking, so I did not realize what I was sensing until it grew too strong to ignore. But we did not want to go and meet them without telling you.”

“That was considerate of you,” Lady Aubrey said dryly.

“I thought it was,” Murie said on a note of satisfaction. “So may we go?”

“Did you not visit Annie at all?”

“We saw her, aye. But she was taking a basket of things up to one of her kinsmen on the mountain, so we came away again.”

Lady Aubrey nodded, but Lina said, “I thought you said that Dree was dreadfully worried or sick, Murie.”

Lady Aubrey gave Lina a keen look. “They are returning much sooner than we had expected,” she said with a frown.

Realizing that if Andrena was pregnant, their mother would likely know of it, Lina said, “I did sense her worry after Murie spoke of it, Mam, but not pain or fear.”

“She is no longer fearful,” Murie said. “But something is amiss.”

Lady Aubrey said, “Wait here for them then. If you sense that they are near, they are likely at Craggan, and if Andrena is unwell, they may spend the night.”

Lina nearly said that they were unlikely to stop at Craggan, since Colquhoun was at Dunglass. But she held her peace because just thinking about Dunglass sent her thoughts flying from Andrena and Mag back to Ian.

The rest of Ian’s journey home passing without incident, he and his party reached Dunglass shortly before midnight Saturday night.

Learning from a gillie that, although some of their guests were still up, Colquhoun and his lady had retired, Ian said to his two companions, “We’ll get some sleep, too, then, but I must speak with my parents first in the morning. So, Rob, I want you to find out from Alex and Mag what progress, if any, the others have made. My father will have thoughts to add, too, so we’ll confer with him later. Then, after the midday meal, I’ll want to meet in the hall with everyone.”

Rob nodded without comment, so Ian turned to Galbraith. “I’ll take you in now, sir, and turn you over to my father’s steward. I hope you will forgive me for abandoning you. But you’ll want supper and a room, and I don’t know which ones are in use and which are not. When I see my father, I’ll tell him that you are here.”

“Aye, sure, lad, do what ye must,” Galbraith said. “I’ll look after myself and will likely find someone amongst your guests to bear me company.”

After giving orders to the steward to see to Galbraith’s comfort, Ian added, “Have someone wake me when my parents begin stirring. And, prithee, tell them that I would speak privately with them before they break their fast.”

Assured that all was in train for the morrow, Ian went to bed. But he felt as if only minutes had passed when Hak shook him awake at dawn on Sunday. “The laird and

his lady be dressing,” Hak said. “He said they’ll meet ye in the solar.”

Knowing that his parents rarely dallied in the morning, Ian performed his ablutions hastily but with care. Then, donning a fresh tunic and his blue-and-gray plaid, he went directly to the solar and found his parents waiting for him.

Greeting his mother by kissing first one soft hand and then her cheek, Ian straightened and turned to his father. “Good morrow, sir.”

“Glad ye’re back but sorry ye missed seeing Mag and Andrena yesterday, lad,” Colquhoun said, giving him a paternal double-clap on the shoulder.

“Sakes, I thought Dree meant to spend a month in Ayrshire.”

“She had been unwell,” Colquhoun replied. “Glad as she was to meet Wilhelmina and Erskine, she had been worrying herself sick over Lina. I told Mag to take her on home in the galley. That way, he can get back here faster.”

“Strange that she would go home, though,” Ian said. “You must have told her that Lina is safe now.”

“It did seem odd, aye,” Lady Colquhoun said. “But one does not inquire too closely, you know, when someone appears unwell and yet reluctant to speak of it. When they left, she did have more color and seemed to be her usual self, but even so, your father told Sir Magnus he should stop at Craggan last night to let her rest.”

Wondering if Andrena had sensed his marriage to Lina and was worrying about that, too, Ian braced himself and said, “I have news for you.”

Smiling, Lady Colquhoun said, “Good news, I trow. What is it?”

Colquhoun remained silent, but his gaze was sharp.

Meeting that gaze, Ian said, "I'm married."

Lady Colquhoun's jaw dropped. She looked at her husband, whose lips had tightened to a thin line.

Colquhoun recovered first. "You are what?"

Hardly what one would call an explosion, so Ian said, "I married Lina MacFarlan. Sithee, sir, it was like this..." In explaining what had happened, he would have preferred to leave out Dougal's exact threats in deference to Lady Colquhoun's sensibilities. But he realized that, if his parents were to understand the need for such haste, he could not. When he told them about his declaration and then paused to let them speak, both were silent.

Then Lady Colquhoun gave herself a little shake and beamed at him. "That is good news, dearling. I shall adore having Lina as my good-daughter. I am gey sorry to have missed seeing you marry, but I do think you made an excellent choice."

"Thank you, Mam, I do, too," he said. "You missed only the brief declaration, and we do mean to have a priest marry us properly in the Kirk later. Everyone can attend that ceremony."

"I, too, have no objection to Lina, but why so hasty, lad?" Colquhoun asked. "Could you not have protected her by simply declaring yourselves betrothed and waiting for the parson? In troth, you did not need to rush back, as you did. After all, persuading James Mòr to yield Dumbarton will take time."

"Our betrothal would not have deterred Dougal," Ian said. "I ken fine that the Kirk takes that ceremony to be as powerful as a marriage, sir. But in fact, it is not. By

Scottish law, a husband can return an unchaste bride. If Dougal had a chance to spread his venom, that alone would have destroyed Lina. But now that she bears our name, I doubt that Dougal will dare do her harm.”

“Aye, perhaps,” Colquhoun said. “But ye’ll be occupied for some time here.”

“Have you arranged another meeting with James Mòr then?” Ian asked, certain he already knew the answer to the question.

“Nay, not yet. He must soon bow to reason, though. His rebels control the harbor, so ships refuse to enter, and many local folks have hidden their beasts and grain out of fear of rebel marauders. He must be getting low on supplies.”

“Where do you and Lina mean to live, dearling?” Lady Colquhoun asked.

Grateful for the diversion because, despite any lack of supplies, he could not agree that James Mòr would be reasonable, Ian said, “We’ll live at Craggan, Mam, if that will suit you and Father.”

“Aye, sure,” Colquhoun said. “Choose where ye will, lad. Likely, ye’ll take more of an interest in our estates now.”

Ian nodded, although he was more interested in retaking Dumbarton for the King so he could return to Tùr Meiloach and collect his lady wife.

One small rub did still exist. Although the ever-unpredictable Colquhoun had expressed no objection, he had likewise not yet given the marriage his blessing.

Mag and Andrena reached Tùr Meiloach in time for Sunday’s midday meal, and one look at her older sister told Lina that Murie was right.

Something was amiss.

However, when Murie demanded to know what was wrong, Andrena said she was fine. And, in truth, Andrena did look much as she always did, albeit somewhat pale and quieter than usual.

When Murie pressed harder, Lady Aubrey intervened.

“Eat your dinner, Muriella,” she said. “And do not indulge your curiosity so far that you ignore Lizzie. Remember that she is our guest.”

As they ate, Mag asked a few questions about Lina’s and Lizzie’s capture and captivity, but Lizzie went on chatting quietly with Murie, leaving Lina to answer him. She said only that the man leading the rebels was Dougal MacPharlain and that the rebels were much farther north than anyone had thought they would be.

Lady Margaret said curtly, “A dreadful thing, that! They had no right, Magnus. I have told your father that he must not let that happen again.”

Mag looked at Lina, then at Lizzie, whose eyes were fixed on her trencher.

“Have ye more questions, lad?” Andrew asked. Without awaiting a reply, he added, “Because if ye don’t, I should tell ye that, yestereve, right here on this dais, Sir Ian Colquhoun declared himself and our Lina married.”

“Good sakes!” Andrena exclaimed, turning to look at Lina. “You’re married?”

“I just said so, aye,” Andrew said. “That devil MacPharlain threatened to ruin her good name. And that after having had the temerity to beg for her hand himself.”

Lina leaned forward to see that despite Mag’s instantly avowed outrage at Dougal, his

eyes were brimming with humor. He wished her happiness in her marriage as if the very thought of that marriage amused him.

Andrena was also smiling, but she shook her head, as well. “What demon possessed you to marry Sir Ian of all men?” she asked. “Do you care for him?”

“He is kind to me, and I like him,” Lina replied. “So do you, come to that.”

“I do, aye. But you have so often disapproved of him. What changed?”

“I’d liefer not discuss that here,” Lina said. “But one does easily develop affection for a man brave enough and clever enough to sneak into an enemy castle at the risk of his life simply to discover if one has come to harm there.”

“He did so again to rescue you,” Andrena said, nodding. “Sakes, but it is exactly the sort of thing he would do, too, just to prove that he could. Marrying you, though, even to protect you from Dougal, surprises me much more. But your agreement to marry him is even more astonishing.”

“Aye, well, I have no regrets... not yet, at all events.”

Andrena said more soberly, “Mag told me that the King has asked Ian to reclaim Dumbarton for him.”

Lina nodded. “I don’t know how he can possibly do that, though.”

“Ian is most resourceful. If anyone can do it, he will. Aye, Mam,” Andrena added, leaning forward to look past Lady Margaret and reply to a quiet question from Lady Aubrey, “I am ready to go upstairs. In fact, I’m ready to sleep.”

“Get along to bed then, lass,” Andrew said. “I mean to keep your husband yet a

while, because I've reason to think that Pharlain is gathering men and arming them, so he may try again to seize Tùr Meiloach. Sithee, Dougal was gey angry when I refused to let Lina marry him, and he and his da be gey quick to leap into battle. Pharlain also declared that any charters I have must be forgeries."

"That villain!" Dree exclaimed. "He didn't!"

Lina glanced at Lady Aubrey and saw confirmation in her expression—and something else, too—before Andrew said, "Some dafty told him that Jamie wants landowners to show him the charters that prove their rights to their estates. Since Pharlain canna produce any, he's putting it about that mine be false." Pausing, he added thoughtfully, "I've caught nae spy here yet, but I ken fine that Pharlain may have a man or two here just as I have mine at Arrochar. Doubtless, I'd be wise to look over my documents to be sure that nae one has tampered with them."

Feeling an inexplicable sense of alarm, Lina glanced at her mother just as Lady Aubrey said mildly, "Pharlain may hope that you do that very thing, sir. He may have set an informant to watch for you to reveal your hiding place. You would perhaps be wiser to stay well away from it."

Beside her, Lady Margaret muttered, "Excellent advice, that."

"Aye, true enough," Andrew agreed with the warm smile for Lady Aubrey that he reserved solely for her. "In any event," he added, "since Mag returns to Dunglass tomorrow, I want to get his opinion afore then on some tactics I have devised. None o' the rest o' ye need linger."

Lina saw Mag and Andrena exchange glances. Then Mag looked at Lina.

Understanding his silent plea, she nodded. "I'll go up with you, Dree. We can talk more whilst I help you prepare for your nap."

Andrena nodded, and Murie began to stand just as Lady Aubrey said in a tone that brooked no argument, “Muriella, you and Lizzie will come to the solar with Lady Margaret and me, as usual, when her ladyship has finished her claret.”

With a nod and a barely concealed grimace, Muriella sat back on her stool.

“Sakes, what a din!” Alex exclaimed as he, Rob, and Ian were going downstairs to Dunglass’s great hall for their midday meal.

Ian realized that his meeting had already begun.

“What we hear proves you were right,” Alex said to him as they neared the great hall entrance. “Everyone has a plan. And no one likes anyone else’s.”

Entering the hall and striding to the dais, Ian scanned the men already seated at the high table with his father. Lady Colquhoun was taking her meal in the solar and would be leaving Dunglass soon to stay with Ian’s sister Susanna.

At least a dozen lairds and knights were present. Most came from areas away from Loch Lomond. Of them all, he easily deduced that the two most powerful Border lords, the Earl of Douglas and Scott of Buccleuch—both much older than Ian himself and accustomed to command—would take the lead if he let them.

Douglas saw him first. “Just the lad we want,” he declared in stentorian tones. “Ye’ve a supple mind, Ian Colquhoun. We need that now, for we’ve come to the dismal conclusion that none o’ these damnable plans can succeed against Dumbarton. We might take the town and secure the harbor, but that castle remains invincible. Nowt we’ve heard yet suggests otherwise.”

“Does everyone here agree with your assessment, my lord?” Ian asked, scanning the gathering again as he stepped onto the dais.

“I say we should let your father handle this, lad,” another, rather bull-like laird declared brusquely. “Colquhoun’s reputation for persuasion is unsurpassed. He has met with James Mòr once and will soon contrive another meeting.”

“Sakes, d’ye want to sit by whilst such talks plod on?” the dark-haired, wiry Buccleuch demanded. “James Mòr kens fine that nae army can take that castle.”

Argument erupted on every side. Voices from the lower hall, although quieter, echoed those of the noblemen.

Ian said loudly, “I do have a plan that may work.”

Those nearest him fell silent, and the silence spread rapidly outward.

He waited until he knew that everyone would hear him.

Colquhoun was watching him intently, sternly.

Meeting his gaze, Ian said, “I would suggest that my lord father invite James Mòr and the whole garrison to join him for a day of deerstalking and a grand feast.”

Taking leave of the others who were still at Tùr Meiloach’s high table, Lina and Dree went silently upstairs and met Tibby on her way down.

“I’ve put fresh sheets on the bed, m’lady,” she said. “Your things, Lady Lina, be in your own old room now.”

“We used your bed,” Lina confided when Tibby had gone on downstairs.

“I’m glad you did,” Andrena replied. “With such a hasty wedding, you certainly had no time to prepare. And Ian is nearly as tall as Mag is.”

No sooner had they shut the door to Andrena and Mag's chamber, though, than Andrena turned and said, "I know that you and Murie sensed something amiss with me, Lina, just as I knew that something horrid had happened to you."

Lina grimaced. "I thought your worry was about me. But it wasn't, was it?"

"Nay. I ken fine that Mam has not told you—"

"That you are with child?" Lina said, moving to the washstand. "Nay, she said naught about that. But I suspected it before you left. When did you tell Mag?"

Andrena smiled ruefully. "Not until we reached Ayrshire. I feared if I told him at once, he'd not let me go, and I wanted to meet Wilhelmina. I knew he'd be wroth with me for not telling him until then. But I also knew he'd understand."

Pouring water into the basin, Lina glanced at her. "Then you got sick, aye?"

"Right after he left," Andrena said, deftly undoing her laces. "Oh, Lina, I've never been so sick. Wilhelmina found a skilled herb woman, but I wanted you. Mag says now that the bairn must be a wee lassie just as contrary as I can be. I thought that I would lose my baby, though, and I was terrified."

"I suspect that, after he learned how sick you had been, he was even angrier about your failure to tell him," Lina said, handing her a wet cloth to wash her face.

"He was furious," Andrena said. "And even more so when he learned that I'd sensed your danger and tried to leave to look for you. In faith, I've seen him angrier with me only once." She sighed. "I'm still sick now and now, but not like I was then. And I know you'll have something to help me."

"I can concoct something, aye. But I have a question for you. Have you sensed

anything amiss with Mam?"

"Only when she feared that our father might lead an enemy to his charters. I'll admit that I felt some alarm at that, myself, though."

"I did, too, aye," Lina said, relieved. "I expect that's all it was."

"Good," Andrena said. "Now, tell me about Ian and how you came to marry him. By my troth, I doubt that you've ever surprised me as much as you did today."

They chatted comfortably until Mag came upstairs a few minutes later.

Ian stood facing his father in Colquhoun's inner chamber. The two were alone but would not be so for long, because Douglas and Buccleuch had demanded to be party to any discussion of Dumbarton. Ian knew that if his father stood against him, the others would, too. Any chance to take Dumbarton would end then in chaos.

Colquhoun sat behind the big table where he had stood after the rescue of Lina and Lizzie. That table was where he usually attended to the accounts for his estates. However, he sat now as he had often sat when calling his sons to account. His face was stony, his demeanor anything but receptive.

"Prithee, sir, I can explain what I propose to do," Ian said. Tempted as he was to continue and explain as fast as he could, he knew better than to do that.

Colquhoun would cut him off as coldly as he would have before Ian earned his knighthood, but the silence between them lengthened, straining Ian's patience.

His mind suddenly produced an image of Lina—calm, unflappable, even serene, despite being held prisoner by a villainous rogue and an erstwhile prince of the realm who yearned to be King of Scots. Her image steadied him.

If his lass could retain her composure, even her precious dignity, under such circumstances, he could constrain himself while he stood before the man who had sired him and who loved him despite his many faults.

“Aye, then, I’ll hear ye out,” Colquhoun said at last. “But I think ye’re daft to be suggesting a day’s stalking to the men ye’ve got here as a way to take back Dumbarton, and so I tell ye. I’d be remiss in my duty as your father if I did not.”

“I know it sounds daft,” Ian said, taking care not to address him as “my lord” or even “sir.” “In troth, that is the very reason I think it might succeed.”

Colquhoun motioned toward the nearest stool. Then he stood and fetched a jug of wine and two mugs from a niche beside the fireplace.

Recognizing both gestures as indications of his father’s greater willingness to listen, Ian drew the stool closer to the table and sat down.

Leaving Andrena with Mag, Lina went down to the kitchen where she found a pot of warm water on the hob and put it over the fire.

Turning to one of the cook’s minions, a skinny lad about Pluff’s age, she said, “Prithee, take a mug from the shelf yonder and fill it with barley for me.”

When the lad had dashed off with a mug, she went to the pantry to find the wee covered pot of ginger powder and some close-woven linen mesh.

By the time she returned to the kitchen, the boy was there with the barley.

Mixing it with the ginger powder, Lina poured the mixture onto a square of linen mesh and tied it into a ball with string. Then, she dropped the ball into a crockery jug, scooped boiling water over it, covered the jug, and left it to infuse.

Afterward, she found Mag and her father near the hall fire, talking.

“Is Dree asleep?” she asked Mag.

“Went straight off,” he said. “I promised to wake her for supper.”

“She told me what was wrong, sir. You have told Father, aye?”

“I have, but she does not want it to become common knowledge,” Mag said. “She fears...” He hesitated.

“I ken fine what frightens her,” Lina said. “It must be horrid to feel such a fear. But in troth, although I usually feel such strong emotions with her, I cannot. I have tried, but something inside me resists. Instead, I feel as if all will be well.”

“Then I hope you have inherited your mother’s gift, lass,” Mag said.

Lina shook her head. “Nay, how could that be? Would I not know if I could see things before they happen?”

“Such gifts are rare,” Andrew said. “My lady cannot foresee things at will and has experienced such events only two or three times in her life before now.”

“My words were but wistful thinking,” Mag said. “I don’t want my lass to worry whilst I must be away.”

“I wish I could reassure you,” Lina said. “The truth is, though, that the gifts I do have are not nearly as strong as those that Murie and Andrena have. Sakes, I did not even sense Dree’s fears or her illness. I did have a sense that she was worried. But that was all. Sithee, I selfishly assumed that she was just worried about me.”

“She was worried about you,” Mag said. “So I’m glad I returned to Ayrshire. When I arrived, she was in a rare tirrivee with my good-brother, Erskine, because he had forbidden her to try to find you. I saw straightaway that she was gey sick.”

Andrew frowned. “She looked hale enough to me.”

“She is better,” Mag said. “But the bairn makes it hard to keep food down, and she must take care of herself. But now I know that Lina will look after her.”

“I will, aye,” Lina said. “I am brewing a tisane now to ease her sickness. I know some foods that will be easy for her to digest, too, and Mam can help. After all, she birthed six children.”

“So she did,” Mag agreed. “I’ll be leaving Dree in safe hands, then.”

“Ye are, aye,” Andrew said. “Ye might put a drop o’ whisky in that tisane o’ yours, though, lass. Cures any ailment, whisky does. Then, as long as we can fend off Pharlain and his gallous son if they try to steal ye back, we’ll all do fine.”

Lina smiled. “I don’t think they will do that now, sir. What could they hope to gain by such an act other than to bring the Colquhouns down on them?”

As she said those words, the fiendish, tickling chill slid up her spine again, and she wished she could take them back.

In the inner chamber at Dunglass, Ian faced Colquhoun across the big table. “Sithee, sir,” he said, “my idea hangs on the fact that you have taken such pains to maintain our neutrality. And although I ken fine that I may have damaged it when I rescued Lina, I doubt that James Mòr can know the whole tale of that even now.”

“D’ye imagine that Dougal MacPharlain will have told him nowt of it?”

“I don’t know what Dougal said to him, or if he said anything. That would depend on who found the note I left in Lina and Lizzie’s chamber. If one of James Mòr’s men found it and gave it to him, James Mòr would have summoned Dougal and demanded an explanation.”

“True,” Colquhoun agreed. “But since, as ye’ve said, Dougal was at Tùr Meiloach when ye arrived, threatening to ruin Lina, he must have avoided such a confrontation. Sakes, he had begged James Mòr to give him Lina, so James Mòr may well suspect that Dougal had a hand in the girls’ disappearance.”

“It is to James Mòr’s benefit to pretend that that’s exactly what he believes, even if he does not,” Ian said. “He can then continue parleying with you and pretend to be doing so in good faith. I still doubt that he is acting so, though.”

“James Mòr has done nowt yet to suggest that he suspects us of any involvement in the lassies’ disappearance,” Colquhoun said musingly. “But what if he learns that they are at Tùr Meiloach or, worse, that ye’ve married Lina?”

Ian had not considered those possibilities. But since Alex’s men might know where the girls had been going from Inch Galbraith, and his own men were excited about his marriage, someone could reveal either or both facts. Sakes, Mag had said more than once that Andrew Dubh suspected he might have spies at Tùr Meiloach.

“Gorry will likely tell us if James Mòr hears rumors about those things,” Ian said at last. “If he does, mayhap I can ask him and a few others to put it about that I followed Dougal and rescued the girls from him on the Loch of the Long Boats. In troth, Dougal is the most likely person to speak of their whereabouts or learn about our marriage. But James Mòr is unlikely to take Dougal’s word for much. He must know as well as we do that neither Dougal nor Pharlain is noted for honesty.”

“I won’t lie to James Mòr,” Colquhoun said sternly. “However, I could say that you

rescued and married the lass to protect her from dire threats that Dougal had made against her. That is true. I can also disclaim personal knowledge of Lizzie's exact whereabouts whilst admitting that I did hear she is with friends of Galbraith's. That may cast suspicion on Patrick Galbraith, however."

"Patrick is James Mòr's shadow, not Dougal's. James Mòr will likely know that Patrick had nowt to do with it. He may not be as sure of Galbraith, though."

"Aye," Colquhoun agreed. "Mayhap I should know exactly what you mean to do before I talk with Arthur."

"I mean to spread word of a magnificent stag that dares to roam at will in the woods between Dumbarton and Loch Lomond. In troth, I saw it first near the pass above Glen Luss. Yesterday, it was near where Lina said she and Lizzie fell captive."

"It is not strange to see deer in either of those areas."

"Sir, this stag is fourteen points at least. Forbye, he is real, so word of his presence will spread quickly. I mean to have Gorry spread word of it throughout the castle, where they have enjoyed little meat of late. After I tell Gorry, you might suggest to James Mòr that in the name of making peace—or even just a brief cessation of haggling—you'd like to invite him and as many of his men as he can spare to stalk that splendid beast and enjoy a venison feast together afterward."

"I doubt he'll be daft enough to agree. But, if he does, what then?"

Ian allowed himself a smile and a slight shrug. "Why, Rob MacAulay, Alex, and I will ride to Dumbarton, profit from the reduced guard, and seize the castle."

"Sakes, Ian, d'ye think that can be done so easily?"

“Aye, sure, sir. But there is one thing that I hope you will do for me first.”

“And what would that be?”

“I want Douglas and Buccleuch out of my way, but I don’t want to fratch with either of them. I’d liefer see you use your persuasive skills to get rid of them.”

A rap on the door drew an uncharacteristic oath from Colquhoun. But Ian welcomed the respite, however brief it might be.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:13 am

For much of Sunday afternoon, in momentary expectation of an irate summons to present himself again, Ian carefully considered each of the arguments he might use to persuade Colquhoun that the plan could work. He tried to imagine which of them was most likely to do so without first infuriating him.

As a result, when Rob and Alex insisted that he accompany them to the yard shortly before supper, Ian was astonished to find Douglas and Buccleuch on the point of departure with all the men who had accompanied them to Dunglass.

“Are you leaving us, my lord?” Ian asked when Douglas smiled at him.

“Aye, lad, for the nonce. Your father tells us that his talks with James Mòr will likely take a fortnight or longer, and we canna leave our men camped outside Glasgow that long without upsetting its citizens. Nor can we bring our men here without James Mòr’s getting wind of it. But Jamie is moving from Cambuskenneth to Paisley Abbey, none so far from here across the river Clyde. We’ll join him there tomorrow or the next day and wait to hear from ye. If ye come up with a way to take the castle afore Jamie makes other plans, ye’ve only to get word to us there.”

Douglas mounted, and Ian turned to find the wiry Buccleuch approaching.

“Douglas told ye we’re leaving, aye?” he said as Douglas turned his horse away. When Ian nodded, Buccleuch added with a grin, “I ken fine that ye hold Jamie’s warrant, man, and I’ll wager that ye’re aware that the news doesna cheer Douglas. He’ll try tae persuade Jamie tae entrust him wi’ taking back yon castle.”

“If he finds a way to do it, he’ll have my support,” Ian said. When Buccleuch raised

his eyebrows in disbelief, he added, “If I haven’t taken it myself by then.”

Buccleuch was still laughing when Colquhoun joined them.

Bidding the two powerful Border lords farewell and Godspeed, Colquhoun stood with Ian, Rob, and Alex and watched them depart.

When they’d passed through the gates and the gates had swung shut behind them, Ian turned to his father and said, “You never cease to surprise me, sir.”

Colquhoun said, “I had to leave you earlier because two of Buccleuch’s men had got into a fight with two of ours. Buccleuch had it sorted before I got there, but I realized then that the Borderers would be of little use to us for some time yet.”

“I ken fine that you don’t have much faith in my deer hunt,” Ian said. “But you know as well as I do that Dumbarton—like Stirling—requires only the men manning its gates and its north hoarding to hold the castle against any army.”

“But for how long can they do that before they run out of food and water?”

“I don’t know,” Ian admitted. “But I do know that many more local people will be injured or killed if any army occupies the area around Dumbarton Rock.”

“We could not have taken Buccleuch or Douglas on the deer hunt,” Alex said. When Ian grimaced, he added defensively, “James Mòr knows them both! He might believe Douglas had switched sides again, but the Scotts have been Jamie’s all along.”

“Both men will be good to have with us later, though,” Ian said. “If my plan succeeds, we can fly Colquhoun banners from the ramparts to signal them. Jamie will be at Paisley, too, near enough to send the Borderers and others, come to that.”

Colquhoun clapped him on the back. "I'm thinking that ye may have summat in your brainbox besides air, lad. Why don't ye all come inside now with me, and we'll have supper. Then we can discuss your plan with Galbraith and the others."

The evening seemed long to Lina, but at last she retired to her old bedchamber, where Lizzie and Muriella shared Murie's bed and Lina had the one she had shared with Andrena, growing up.

She had not realized how tired she was. Despite the cat nestled against her legs, purring loudly, she fell asleep soon after her head touched her pillow.

Sometime later, an errant moonbeam touched her face, waking her. For a time, she felt restless and tried to get comfortable...

The woods were dark, the path impossible to discern, but the woman hurried on as if she followed one. She was a shadow, nothing more, a shadow in a long flowing cloak, her hip-length hair also flowing free behind her.

The place was unnaturally silent. Her footsteps were silent, too, as if she walked on duff or damp leaves. A glimmer of silvery light in the distance was enough to show that she cradled something in her arms... nay, several things, long and tubular. As the light grew stronger ahead, the tubes revealed themselves as scrolls of parchment or vellum, three of them.

As the woman passed between two tall trees, she cradled the rolls more tightly and increased her pace to cross a clearing. On the other side, a tall, slender tree trunk had bent oddly back on itself halfway up. When she passed beneath it to re-enter the woods, a disembodied hand reached out from it, caught the woman's arm, and yanked her behind the tree.

Briefly, before she vanished, moonlight revealed Lady Aubrey's face.

Lina sat bolt upright in bed, trembling, scarcely able to breathe. Thanks to the pale moonlight beaming through cracks in the shutters, she could see Ansuz at the foot of her bed, glaring at her for disturbing him. Looking toward the other bed, she saw that Murie and Lizzie still slept.

Her thoughts were in such turmoil that she could not make sense of them. She could think only of her mother and the danger that awaited her if, instead of a nightmare, the dream had been evidence of the foresight Mag had suggested she might have inherited. A more horrifying thought struck then.

What if what she had seen had happened as she had watched it or was happening now while she sat in bed, trying to control her terrors?

On the thought, she flung back the covers and got out of bed. Barefoot, without even thinking of finding slippers, she ran to the door, quietly lifted the latch, and slipped out with the angry cat darting downstairs past her. Hurrying down to the next landing, she paused outside her parents' room to listen. A cresset was alight on the landing there, casting a softly flickering golden glow on the walls.

Andrew slept heavily and sometimes snored, but when Lina put her ear to the door, she heard nothing. Fearing that her mother might already be a captive, she took courage in hand and carefully, with utmost silence, opened the door.

Putting her head in, she strained to see through the darkness to the bed.

"What is it, Lina?" Lady Aubrey asked quietly. "Is Dree sick again?"

Deeply relieved, Lina said, "Nay, Mam. I... I had a bad dream and just needed to hear your voice."

"Aye, well, you have heard it now, love, so take yourself back to bed."

“Goodnight, Mam, I love you,” Lina murmured. Then, shutting the door, she returned as silently as she had come. But it was a long while before she slept.

Monday morning, having persuaded Colquhoun, Galbraith, Rob, and Alex that his plan was worth trying because they would lose nowt if it failed, Ian and the others persuaded more of their supporters. After that, a plan began to take form.

Ian sent word to Gorry and Jed Laing to make it known that men had seen a fourteen-point stag in a wood between Balloch and the south end of Loch Lomond. He also told them to let him know when word of the stag reached James Mòr.

Colquhoun, having received no reply to his request for another meeting with James Mòr, sent a message with the same messenger, suggesting they might discuss how James Mòr meant to proceed if he remained Keeper of Dumbarton. Colquhoun also promised to guarantee his safety if he wanted to meet at Dunglass or some other neutral location to escape his tedious confinement at Dumbarton.

“ ’Tis nobbut talk,” Colquhoun said. “I want him to reply. The more inanities I offer, the more likely I am to stir his ire or pique his interest enough to do so.”

Ian smiled to himself. His father had a devious bone or two, too, whether he would admit it or not.

Lina awoke late that morning to find that Lizzie and Murie had arisen before her. Surprised at herself for sleeping later than usual, she got up, quickly performed her ablutions, and dressed. Then, hesitating on the landing, nearly certain that Mag had left Tùr Meiloach by then and wondering if she ought to look in on Andrena, she decided in favor of going down to the great hall first, to see who was there.

Andrena was at the high table with their mother and Lady Margaret, so Lina went in. Greeting her mother and Lady Margaret with a smile, she went around the end of the

table to join her sister.

Andrena smiled, clearly relieved to see Lina. Taking her usual seat beside her, Lina asked one of the gillies to bring her toast and a boiled egg. Then, to Andrena, she said, “Mag left early, then.”

“Aye, and I miss him already.”

“How do you feel this morning?”

“Better,” she said. “Your tisane helped, and Mam suggested eating more often. She said it helped her to graze like a sheep, a nibble here, and a bite there.”

Lady Margaret said abruptly, “I expect I shall be leaving in a day or so.”

Both sisters turned as one to stare at her. “So soon, my lady?” Lina said. “We have scarcely just arrived.”

“Aye, well, your father has been talking about that Pharlain person again.”

“Do you fear he will attack?” Lady Aubrey asked her. “I can assure you that Andrew has kept us safe in this tower for twenty years.”

“Aye, through telling lies,” Margaret said. “I know.”

Andrena said, “He does not lie, my lady. He merely repeats tales others have told about Tùr Meiloach. Forbye, strange things do happen here. People have—”

“What Andrena means,” Lady Aubrey interjected, “is that Andrew devised strategies which, aided by the more superstitious amongst us, have kept others from trying to invade Tùr Meiloach. But if you are not happy here, Margaret, then of course you

must return to Bannachra.”

“Not unhappy,” Lady Margaret said. “I enjoy your company. But it’s noisy.”

“Then, if you do go, I hope you will let me go with you and stay long enough to see you settled again. You must not travel without a female companion, after all. And since you did not bring your woman...”

“I had no need of her at Inch Galbraith. Nor did she want to go there.”

“Aye, she told us so quite plainly,” Lady Aubrey said with a reminiscent smile. “But if you will let me accompany you, I would not mind another journey.”

Lina exchanged a look with Andrena and saw the same surprised expression on her face that she felt on her own. For Lady Aubrey to encourage a guest to leave was strange enough. To insist on accompanying her on a full day’s journey only to return a few days later was, as Ian might say, devilish odd.

“Why don’t you just invite James Mòr to join the hunt?” Ian asked his father Tuesday afternoon in the great hall when they still had not heard from Dumbarton.

“Building a foundation for such a thing takes patience, lad,” Colquhoun replied. “If I fail to make my invitation plausible, your ruse is bound to fail.”

“But he must have heard about our stag by now. The men are all talking about it. Even Maggy agrees that my plan may work,” he added, looking across the table at Mag, who had returned from Tùr Meiloach the previous evening.

Adam Colquhoun and Mag composed the audience for this exchange at the high table, where the four men had gathered at the end nearest the fireplace. Every other person in the hall was intent on business of his own. Several, including Alex and Rob,

occupied themselves with a dice cup near the great hall fire.

Adam refilled Mag's goblet from the jug and gave Ian an impatient look. "I do not see why you think anyone at Dumbarton will be eager to hunt a stag as old as that one must be. Sakes, with fourteen points, he's at least a great-grandfather and will be as tough as boot leather to eat."

"It is not the eating that will interest them, my lad," Ian said, taking the superior tone that he knew irritated his brother. "I'd wager that James Mòr himself will want its head almost as much as he wants Jamie's. Just think of it! Fourteen points mounted on his great-hall wall for all to see and marvel at."

"Aye, perhaps," Adam said doubtfully.

"No 'perhaps' about it," Ian said. "James Mòr has a high opinion of himself. But I doubt he believes that many folks other than his closest followers share that opinion. To be able to show such a trophy... I promise you, the man will salivate."

"He's right, Adam," Mag said. "Men will do much to kill a stag like that."

Adam still looked doubtful.

When Wednesday morning passed without word from James Mòr, Ian could tell that the other men were fast growing impatient.

Deciding to proceed as if all were in train, he sent gillies to invite local landowners and tenants to prepare for a day's hunting on Saturday. Hunters would be welcome to stalk the stag on foot or horsed and free to take as many other deer as necessary to provide a grand roast venison feast afterward for everyone. They could either gather at Dunglass at dawn or join the hunters along the way.

That most of the venison taken in such a hunt would likely be royal venison was a minor detail, but one that did cause Ian to pause and take a breath. Reassuring himself that Jamie would care more about regaining control of Dumbarton than he would about the loss to the Crown of a few deer, Ian relaxed again.

At Tùr Meiloach, Lina watched Andrena grow more somber by the day. She seemed unduly worried about Magnus, and her concern was evidently contagious, because Lina fervently missed Ian. She dreamed about him nightly and had begun to fear that it might take months if not years for him to reclaim Dumbarton.

Andrew had received more information from watchers at Arrochar and near the passes and had, accordingly, doubled his guard around Tùr Meiloach's perimeter. He had also ordered the women to stay inside the wall.

"I shall go mad if I have to stay inside, mending things and tending to other tedious work," Andrena confided as she and Lina settled to their tasks in the solar that afternoon. "I want to walk on the cliffs and elsewhere as I always do."

"Where are Murie and Lizzie?" Lina asked. "Murie could at least entertain us with one of her stories."

"They went outside," Andrena said. "Murie told Lizzie that they could climb to the wall walk and see what there was to see from there. I will not be surprised, though, if the two of them slip out to visit Annie. Murie has wanted to see her again, since they had so little time the other day, and Mam went to Annie's yesterday without her."

"Would Murie dare to take Lizzie?" Lina asked. "Father would be furious."

"Aye, perhaps. But Mam and Lady Margaret are packing to leave tomorrow, so Murie may get away with it. In troth, I'm tempted to slip out myself. The idea that an enemy might catch me walking on our cliffs is absurd. I would sense any enemy

presence at Tùr Meiloach before the danger came near.”

Lina agreed, but she felt obliged to remind Andrena of one detail that she had apparently forgotten. “You would be safe enough on the cliffs from an enemy and mayhap even from Father,” she said. “But would not Magnus be angry to learn that you had defied his orders in such a way?”

“Mag is not here,” Andrena said crossly, revealing yet again the true source of her restlessness.

“You do have someone else to consider, too,” Lina said gently.

“I ken fine what you are trying to do, Lina. I also ken fine that I am behaving badly. I do care about the bairn I carry. I care even more right now about Mag, and I would feel much better if I were at Dunglass with him—even if he were angry with me—than I feel here without him. And don’t say that you do not feel the same way about Ian, because I can sense that you do.”

Lina had nothing to say to that, because it was perfectly true.

Her thoughts turned to Ian again that evening while Lady Aubrey was explaining to Lady Margaret that she had arranged for them to take an armed escort with them to Bannachra. Staring into the low-burning fire, wondering what Ian might be doing, Lina found herself staring into dense woodland instead...

Recognizing the clearing and the oddly shaped tree that had appeared in the strange reverie she had had just after Ian left, and feeling it tug her memory in another way, she recognized the place, as well. As that thought floated through her mind, she saw a moving dark shape beyond the clearing. Black and featureless, it darted from tree to tree. The hair on the back of her neck twitched and tingled, warning of...

“Lina, Mam has twice spoken to you,” Andrena said sharply.

Startled from whatever fantasy had claimed her, Lina looked dazedly around and saw with relief that she was still in the solar and that her mother was sitting, hale and alive, beside Lady Margaret. Both women were staring at her, their heads cocked, each one’s posture a replica of the other’s.

“Are you all right, dearling?” Lady Aubrey asked. “You looked as if your thoughts had gone somewhere else.”

Taking time to draw a breath, Lina said, “I was just thinking, Mam, that if Lady Margaret ought to have a female companion on her journey home, so should you. So I’ve decided to go with you. That way, when you come home, you won’t have to travel for a whole day with only male companions.”

“That is thoughtful of you, Lina,” her mother said, holding her gaze in such a way that Lina could not look away.

To her surprise and relief, however, she was able to meet that piercing gaze without faltering. She felt as if something deep within her were guarding her from revealing the guilt that her small deception had stirred.

Lady Aubrey added, “Much as we would enjoy your company, I fear that Andrena will need you here. Not only are Muriella and Lizzie little company for her, but she may also require your skill with potions.”

“I make poor company for anyone just now, Mam,” Andrena said quietly. “Forbye, Lina’s remedies have already done their part. If she thinks she should go with you, I agree that she should. If Father will permit it, I’d like to walk a short way with you myself. What vexes me sorely is having to stay inside our wall.”

“Ladies do not walk about by themselves,” Lady Margaret said austere.

Smiling at her, Lady Aubrey said lightly, “Dree has done so without incident since she was a bairn, Margaret. I see no reason not to enjoy your usual walks, Dree. You are sensible enough to stay nearby, and I know you will take the dogs.”

“May I go now, Mam? I’m yearning to walk on the cliffs.”

Lady Aubrey hesitated. “Your father has gone out with his men, dearling. I cannot discuss the matter with him until he returns.”

“Devilish dangerous to walk on a cliff, if you ask me,” Margaret said.

Sensing Dree’s growing frustration, Lina said, “I could go with her, Mam.”

“That would just compound the difficulty.” Lady Aubrey paused. Then she said, “If you take Peter and Tibby with you, and the dogs, Andrena, I doubt that your father will object. I will talk with him as soon as he returns, but despite what you may think, he does not always bow to my persuasion.”

Sensing that Andrena was satisfied, Lina said, “I’ll go and sort clothing that Tibby can pack later for me, Mam. How long should I expect us to stay?”

Seeing Lady Margaret stiffen, she held her breath.

The older woman pressed her lips together and said nothing.

Lady Aubrey said, “Just two or three days. I shall want time enough to rest and to see Margaret settled in comfortably. But I will be eager then to return.”

Lina nearly asked if her mother was ailing in some way. She could not recall Lady

Aubrey ever anticipating a need to rest, even after traveling long distances.

Recalling other signs, including a kind of uneasiness that was distinctly unusual for her mother, Lina held her tongue. But later that day, when memory of her strange reveries assailed her again, she recalled those other signs and told Tibby to pack her old green wool cloak. The woods might be chilly.

Doubt arose again that night when she went to bed, and just as she was drifting off to sleep and was thinking lazily, amorously of Ian, his image loomed large in her mind, frowning. His eyes looked unnaturally dark and menacing, his jaw clenched tight. The color in his cheeks was high.

It occurred to her then that she had never seen him angry. She had no idea how he would react if he should learn that she had followed her mother into danger without saying a word to anyone else about her concerns.

Aware as she was of Andrena's feelings, they seemed to exacerbate hers. By the time she slept, she had persuaded herself that no matter how angry Ian might be with her, if he should actually be angry, she wanted him home and in bed with her.

Thursday morning, Colquhoun received a message from James Mòr expressing his willingness to meet one more time, without mentioning a date. He had added the caveat that Colquhoun would have to forgo his tail and come alone.

Ian, his brother Adam, Mag, Sir Alex, Rob MacAulay, and Galbraith were all in the inner chamber when a gillie brought him the message.

Adam reacted fiercely. "You must not do any such daft thing, sir! Sakes, James Mòr will likely take you hostage if you agree to that."

"The lad is right, Humphrey," Galbraith said.

Ian looked from one laird to the other. “It does not matter, since I doubt he will want to meet before Saturday, when we’ll have our hunt. Recall that I invited the local lairds and declared the hunt open to all. I suggest we invite James Mòr, the garrison, and the burghers to join us. Perhaps you, sir, might point out to him that since he and the rebels control Dumbarton, we can legally claim any deer we kill.”

Colquhoun chuckled. “If that doesn’t stir him at least to respond, I shall own myself amazed. He cannot claim to own the deer, though.”

“Aye, sure, he can,” Mag said with a grin. “Anyone would, in his place.”

“I might do that myself,” Galbraith agreed. “The difference here is that Jamie is unlikely to hang Ian for making the statement. He would hang James Mòr for claiming the deer. But he’ll hang that gallous villain anyway if we can catch him.”

“I agree,” Ian said. “Moreover, James Mòr lacks the local lairds’ support. He may be canny enough, though, to try to curry favor with them by joining us.”

The trip to Bannachra took Lina, her mother, and the Lady Margaret all day Thursday. But the sky was clear, and it was such a fine day that Lina soon noted her mother’s distraction. The three women rode garrons—the surefooted Highland ponies so well suited to the rocky terrain of the peaks—and her ladyship’s nerves seemed to be affecting her mount. The normally even-tempered garron shied twice while they were in the woods. Her ladyship easily controlled it, but Lina wondered.

When they were halfway up the ridge to the southeast pass, Lady Aubrey glanced over her shoulder as if she thought someone might be following them.

Lina, riding behind her, said, “What is it that troubles you, Mam?”

“Naught, dearling,” Lady Aubrey said, glancing back again with a smile. “I love the

scenery hereabouts and do not want to miss anything.”

Lady Margaret, ahead of them, following Peter and Pluff, made a noise like a snort. But Lina knew better than to ask if she had heard that correctly.

Behind Lina rode four armed men, and Peter carried his sword and dirk, as well. Moreover, before their departure, Pluff had informed her that he had his bow and a quiverful of arrows with him and had been practicing regularly.

“I can hit whatever I aim at now,” the boy assured her confidently.

Lina smiled at the memory. But she also wondered if their escort would prove in the end to be sufficient protection.

Recalling how many men had been with Dougal the day he had captured her and Lizzie was not reassuring. But she had heard Lady Aubrey assure Andrew that naught would harm them on their journey or at Bannachra. Surely her mother would not have said such a thing if she did not know that they’d be safe.

Lina realized that she was not so sure of that, though.

Reminding herself that Lady Aubrey was a truthful person, not to mention a woman gifted with uncanny foresight, Lina tried to persuade herself that no danger existed. But the images of her mother that she had seen at Tùr Meiloach rose again in her mind’s eye then, as clear as they had been before.

Their little party stopped long enough on the ridge crest to enjoy the view of Ben Lomond in the distance and Loch Lomond below. They could see the end of the loch and the woodland where Lina and Lizzie had fallen captive.

When Lady Aubrey reached out and squeezed Lina’s shoulder, she knew that her

mother was thinking about that day just as she was. “It was such an awful thing, love,” Lady Aubrey said. “I nearly fainted when I heard what had happened.”

“How did you find out?” Lina asked, realizing that from one cause or another it had not occurred to her to ask that question before.

“A rider brought a message the next day, saying that you and Lizzie were safe at Dumbarton but would remain hostages to ensure your fathers’ cooperation.”

Lady Aubrey changed the subject then and asked about Lady Colquhoun. Not until after they had arrived at Bannachra and had their supper did Lina give more thought to that brief exchange and wonder who had sent the message. Had it come from James Mòr or from Dougal MacPharlain?

Lady Aubrey was helping Lady Margaret see to chores that Margaret had insisted must be done before she could sleep. Lina offered to help, hoping to find time to talk more with her mother. But the two older women shooed her off to bed.

She was ascending the stairway when a wave of dizziness struck her.

Steadying herself against the cold, curved stone wall, she drew a breath and shut her eyes to make the stairwell stop spinning...

The woods were darker than before and chilly, as if clouds hid the sun. She was hurrying, although she had felt just seconds before as if she were standing still and fighting dizziness.

Now, speed was important, nay, urgent.

The misshapen tree appeared beyond the small clearing. Under the tree, in shadow, the feminine figure lay stretched on its side, unmoving.

Rushing to kneel beside it, she put her hand on the woman's shoulder and, terrified, drew it toward her.

Lady Aubrey's face was bruised, her eyes shut, her body unresponsive.

A noise from below startled the vision away. Disoriented, dizzy again, Lina welcomed the feeling of the cold stone stairway wall still beneath her hand.

Hearing Lady Aubrey's voice below in the distance, she drew another steadying breath and tried to think, to decide what to do.

Her thoughts refused to sort themselves. But surely her mother would understand what was happening if it was some sort of peek into the future. The best thing, clearly, would be to talk to her in the morning.

However, the two older women seemed determined to keep her working. By Friday afternoon, Lina was sure that her mother wanted to avoid the very talk that Lina wanted to have with her.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:13 am

Filled with preparations for the hunt, Friday passed quickly at Dunglass, especially after word arrived from James Mòr that he and his guests would join it.

On Saturday, Colquhoun, Galbraith, and other invited noble guests left at dawn with their men and Colquhoun's greyhounds and rode off through the woods. They would cross the plain in view of the castle and head north to meet other hunters and stalkers at a gathering place at the south end of Loch Lomond.

Stalkers were already combing hills and glens in that area for signs of deer.

Shortly after the riders left, minions followed, leading garrons to carry back any deer that the hunters killed early enough to roast for their celebratory feast.

Meantime, waiting only until they heard from their own watchers that the environs of Dunglass were free of intruders or anyone else who might carry tales of their interest in Dumbarton, Ian, Mag, Rob, Alex, and their men rode into the woods to a place where they could safely tether their mounts. There they waited until men watching the steep path down from the castle reported signs of activity there.

At the woodland site, Ian twitched impatiently, then paced until Rob growled, "Enough, man. Ye'll drive me daft."

Grinning and primed for action, Ian said, "I want to know what our lads ahead of us can see. I must learn for myself what is happening."

"Then go," Rob said.

“Art sure your man is on the gate?” Mag asked as Ian turned to leave.

“If he is not on it now,” Ian said, “he soon will be.”

He walked quickly but cautiously amid the trees but had gone only a short way when one of his lads emerged from shadows ahead. “What news?” Ian demanded when he was near enough to make himself heard in a normal tone.

“Many ha’ been leaving, sir, many riders and gey more afoot. The horsemen rode ahead, o’ course. One o’ them flew the Stewart banner, and at least six or eight wi’ him wore noble garb. Doubtless, it were James Mòr and his nobles, along wi’ his usual armed tail o’ men.”

“So he has kept his word and will join my lord father,” Ian said, relieved. Pointing, he added, “Go to the men yonder, and tell Sir Magnus I’ve gone on. He must send a horseman to tell the laird how many are riding his way and that some are armed. Then Sir Magnus and the others should meet me where we agreed.”

The others soon joined him in a wood near the river Leven, with Mag leading Ian’s horse. Dismounting beside him and handing him its reins, Mag said, “That lad you sent told me that there are at least four watchers on the walls.”

“They won’t trouble us,” Ian replied. “Rob and I are going there to pay respects to James Mòr from MacAulay of Ardincaple, who was sadly unaware of any deer hunt. By following the river Leven south from here, we’ll look as if we had forded it, aye?”

Mag shook his head, but his hazel eyes twinkled appreciatively.

Ian and Rob had no need to offer their spurious explanation at the gate. With eight men riding behind and one riding before them, flying the MacAulay banner, they reached the top of the path unchallenged.

Jed Laing opened the gates before they reached it, and they rode right in.

As they had hoped and expected, the remaining guard at the castle was small. From the look of the place, most of the men who had been inside were taking part in the hunt, hoping to bring back venison to augment the castle's depleted stores.

Ian did note one unusual detail, however.

"Most of the men I see here are men who served Gregor Colquhoun," he said when Gorry hurried to meet them. "I see only a few that I don't recognize."

"Aye, but there be Stewarts inside," Gorry said. "Except for them on the wall, these outside be underlings. The captain o' the guard did tell them on the wall tae keep close watch for trouble. 'Twas the senior man on the wall that tellt Jed tae open the gate when he saw ye were MacAulays," he added with a grin.

"Tell Jed to leave that gate ajar," Ian said. "We have more men coming." He glanced at Rob. "You and I can attend to those on the wall before then, aye?"

"Aye, sure," Rob said, drawing his dirk.

Leaving the men in their tail to look after the Stewart minions in the yard, Ian went up one stairway and Rob another. The four men keeping watch from the wall all faced outward, so they accomplished their task with ease and in silence. Then Ian waved one of the rampart flags to summon Mag and Alex with their men.

"We'll wait now for our chief guests to return," Ian said. "I look forward to seeing the look on James Mòr's face when he discovers our wee surprise."

Less than an hour later, riders appeared in the north, riding hard until they reached the track to the castle. Men on the wall recognized Colquhoun's banner.

The gates opened. The horsemen rode in.

Their leader flung himself from his horse near Ian.

“Himself said tae tell ye quick, sir! The only men wha’ came from the castle a-seeking him tae hunt were afoot. We saw nae riders. They’ve all disappeared.”

He was touching her, his fingers lightly stroking her skin, making her arch upward, trying to press harder against them. But he teased her so until flashes of heat roared through her body and she moaned deep in her throat.

His hands, fingers, and lips had been all over her, delightfully touching and tasting her wherever they roamed.

Faith, but the man could stir her senses in so many ways and more than anyone she had ever known, often without touching her at all!

She could smell the leathery scent of him.

The tormenting fingers drifted to her breast and belly, then up again.

Catching hold of that tormenting hand, she pulled it to her mouth and kissed it, touching it with her tongue to taste its saltiness. But when she would have moved it lower, past her belly to the fork of her legs, the hand shifted in hers. It gripped hers now, and firmly, so that she could not pull it free.

Raising it to his mouth, he sucked her little finger, then the next, and the next, until she wanted to scream.

He moaned then. The sound tormented her even more.

“I want you,” she murmured. “Please, I want you inside me.”

“Do you?” he asked. But her increasing passion had stirred his, too, and he did not wait for an answer. He moved himself over her.

She reached for him to help, but his eager cock had already found the entrance to its favorite sheath, and...

Lina’s bedchamber door opened abruptly, and a female voice said, “The mistress sent me tae ask if ye mean tae lie abed all day, m’lady.”

Staring at the elderly maidservant and striving to conceal the mixture of dismay, fury, even embarrassment, that filled her, Lina said, “Thank you for telling me. I shall be down directly.”

The woman left without comment, and Lina got up and swiftly performed her ablutions. She was determined to have private speech with her mother.

Unless she was dreaming of Ian, the image of Lady Aubrey on the ground under the misshaped tree haunted her. But it was as if her mother and Lady Margaret conspired to defeat any chance of private talk. Lady Margaret seemed to have changed from a woman who sought solitude to one who could not bear to be alone. Either that, or she was determined to perform a belated spring cleaning.

“James Mòr and his lot have escaped, then,” Mag said when Ian told him what the messenger from Colquhoun had said.

“They have, aye, but we’ll go after them,” Ian replied grimly. “First, we’ll secure the Stewart men who are still here. Mag, you and Rob check inside. Alex and I will confine the ones in the yard. Gorry, if you still have the key to that tower room, you can lock some of our prisoners in there if you need to.”

The Stewart followers were soon secure. Ian gathered his men around him.

“Mag, you, and Rob, and your men will ride with me. Gorry, you come, too. Alex, I’m leaving you and your men here with Jed Laing and his lads to welcome whomever Jamie sends here. Don’t let anyone—especially Douglas or Buccleuch—inside these gates. We don’t want either one taking over this castle before Jamie arrives. Tell them they are to secure the burgh and the harbor for his grace. And warn everyone not to mistake friend for foe,” he added, giving Alex a direct look.

In return, he received a barely discernible nod. Alex would look after any Colquhouns who had remained at Dumbarton.

“And, Alex,” Ian added as an afterthought, “be glib with the Border lords but... um, tactful.” Hearing his father’s favorite word from his own lips, Ian smiled. Then, to Alex, he added, “You’ll have your eight men plus the Colquhoun lads who were inside.” He looked at Gorry. “Another dozen, you think?”

“Ten,” Gorry said.

“Enough to do the job,” Ian said. “I’ve a sack on my saddle full of Colquhoun banners. Hang them from the ramparts for Jamie’s watchers to see.”

“We’ll attend to that,” Alex said. “You look after yourselves.”

Nodding, satisfied that Dumbarton was in capable hands, Ian shouted for his men to mount. Flanked by Mag and Rob, he set off down the road from the castle and heard the heavy gates shut behind the last of their men.

“Which direction do you suppose James Mòr will have taken?” he asked the other two as they scanned the Vale of Leven ahead and its river plain below.

Rob frowned thoughtfully.

Mag shrugged.

Woodland lay to the east and ahead to the north, the river Leven to the west. Since the river was nearing its confluence with the Firth of Clyde, it was wider and deeper there than farther north. The road to Loch Lomond stretched alongside it.

Mag said, "James Mòr's lot took no boats. Someone in the burgh would have reported it if they had. 'Tis unlikely, too, that they'd ford the Leven straightaway. They'll also want to avoid Colquhoun or MacAulay lands, aye, Rob?"

Rob nodded.

"Nor will they have traveled eastward along the Clyde," Mag added. "Your own people would have seen them."

"They might try to reach Murdoch's castle at Doune," Ian suggested.

"Too far," Rob said. "Also, Jamie has taken possession of Doune."

"They may not know that yet," Ian said. "Jed Laing said that James Mòr took more than two score men with him. So where are they?"

"Out of sight somewhere," Mag said. "If they are daft enough to try for Doune, they'd head up east Lomondside rather than go cross-country, I think."

"And to head west, they'll go from west Lomondside," Rob added. "They'd have to ford the Leven, and there is a ford in the woods a mile north of here."

"Aye, sure," Ian said. "I ken that place fine. By a clachan that's nobbut an alehouse

and two cots. But if we ford it there, and they stay on this side—”

“They’ll run into your father and the hunters,” Mag said. “I’m thinking they may head north to Arrochar or into the Highlands beyond. Many Highlanders looked dimly on Jamie’s return. They may welcome James Mòr.”

“The Loch Lomond road is what we want for now,” Ian said. “The one on the other side of the river winds more than this one does. We’ll have hunters on both sides, and the locals will help,” he added. “The day the rebels captured Lina and Lizzie, Dougal and his men made a show of strength that must have irked many of them. I’ll wager that someone will soon tell us exactly which way they went.”

Neither of his chief companions accepted the wager.

They had ridden little more than a mile from the base of Dumbarton Rock and had just passed the clachan with the alehouse when they met two young men afoot. One led a garron with a small deer roped across its back.

Ian signed to his men to draw rein.

“Have you seen a party of riders recently, on this bank or yonder?”

“Aye, a party o’ two dozen men or more flying a banner we dinna ken,” one replied. “They be riding toward the loch. Said they was a-seeking the hunting party. But when we told ’em the ones after the great stag be in the woods east o’ Balloch, they kept tae the road. Said they’d head west and find their own deer.”

“Likely, they’ll see few deer at all, that road,” the other man said.

“I’ve seen you before, I think,” Ian said.

“Aye, Sir Ian, me granddad runs the alehouse yonder.”

Thanking them and extending his respects to the lad’s grandfather, Ian waited only until they were beyond earshot before he said to the others, “That party they saw, unknown banner or none, has to be James Mòr’s.”

“Aye, and I’m thinking they’ll stay west of the loch,” Mag said. “Patrick must be with him, but they certainly won’t ride to Inch Galbraith.”

“Or any other island,” Rob said. “Too confining, too easily besieged.”

“What about Dougal, though?” Ian asked. “Mayhap we should look more closely at his sudden departure. Gorry, to me!” he shouted over his shoulder.

Andrew Dubh MacFarlan and his men were moving along a ridge high above the Loch of the Long Boats, watching the shoreline but keeping to the heights. They were afoot, and Pharlain’s three galleys were ahead, well south of them, on the loch.

The galleys had left Arrochar at dawn. But no banners flew over them, which was unusual for Pharlain. The boats contained no extra oarsmen. Nor were they heavily laden with armed men, as they would be for invasion or battle.

In fact, the three boats carried fewer men than usual.

Those boats had stirred Andrew’s curiosity enough to want to keep an eye on them. When they passed beyond Tùr Meiloach’s south boundary, he had led his men upward, knowing that they would see much farther from the ridgetop.

The boulder-and-talus-strewn route they followed now was unknown to most people. Its treacherous terrain had claimed lives and thus had supplied some of the tales that had helped protect Tùr Meiloach.

Nevertheless, Andrew and his men knew it well and traveled swiftly.

They had gone above the headwaters of his south boundary onto Colquhoun land some time ago. Below them to the east lay Loch Lomond. Earlier, they had looked down the length of Glen Luss, and he could see Glen Finlas ahead.

Glen Fruin lay just beyond it.

He had left Malcolm and a few guardsmen to keep the tower secure. Annie Wylie was inside to watch Murie and Lizzie. He also had watchers on the passes and on each of Tùr Meiloach's borders. No one had reported anything unusual.

But Pharlain was up to mischief, and Andrew had been uneasy ever since his wife and Lina had insisted on returning to Bannachra with Margaret Galbraith.

Dougal had captured Lina and was doubtless furious to have lost her. What if he knew where she was now? What if he knew that Aubrey was with her?

A distant shout from below to the east caught his sharp ears. He raised a hand to stop his men.

The shout came again, and someone shouted, "That be Calum's Tam, laird!"

Calum Beg guarded Tùr Meiloach's southeast pass. Tam was one of his sons, so Andrew nodded to his hornsman. Two light blasts would bring Tam right to him.

Minutes later, Tam, a wiry man much the same age as Andrew but thinner and graying at the temples, hurried up to him and touched his cap.

"Me da sent me, laird. There be trouble a-comin' this way from Dumbarton."

“What kind of trouble?”

“The Laird o’ Colquhoun sent tae tell ye that James Mòr and dunamany men wi’ him left Dumbarton shortly after dawn tae join Colquhoun in a great hunt at the south end o’ the loch. But them from Dumbarton vanished, and the laird fears they forded the river Leven and be makin’ their way north tae Arrochar.”

“If James Mòr goes to Arrochar, he may find nae one home,” Andrew said. But he was thinking rapidly.

“Aye, me da said he’d no seen a sign o’ them yet. But since her ladyship and the lady Lina did go to Bannachra, he kent fine that ye’d want tae know.”

“Laird!” someone cried. “Be that lot going ashore yonder, d’ye think?”

Ahead, Andrew saw that Pharlain’s lead galley had turned toward the shore. It was a quarter-mile off Colquhoun land now but well south of Craggan. If men disembarked there, they would be but a two-hour walk from Glen Fruin.

Horsemen coming up the glen could cover the ground even faster... if naught delayed them.

Soon after Ian shouted for Gorry, the man reined in beside him. “Aye, sir?”

“You will recall that message I dropped in their ladyships’ chamber before we departed with them. Do you know who found it?”

“I can tell ye that scrap o’ vellum were gone when next I opened the door,” Gorry said. “I’d heard nowt of it, nor o’ their ladyships. So me lad and me had a peek. Finding them gone, we reported their disappearance, which nae one else had done yet. But if anyone else found that scrap, sir, I’d ha’ heard, though it puzzles me how

anyone else could get in without he had a key.”

“Do you have the only key to that room, then?” Mag asked, frowning.

“At present, Dougal has the only other one,” Ian said. “Right, Gorry?”

“Aye, sir,” Gorry said. “Me lad and I had tasks tae do after ye left that day. So it wasna till someone asked did I forget their ladyships that we went up together and found them gone. I’d seen plain enough that ye dropped that message in the middle o’ the floor. It wasna there later, nor the lassies neither, o’ course.”

“What happened next?”

“I sent the lad tae fetch the captain o’ the guard and showed him what we’d found. He asked some questions. But dunamany folks had seen me all the afternoon a-doing me usual chores wi’ the lad. Nae one accused me o’ nowt.”

Rob said, “Dougal found it himself then, aye.”

Nodding, Ian said, “He must have, which means he was coming back for my lady to take her with him. I doubt that he’ll be returning to Dumbarton, though, especially if James Mòr is heading for Arrochar.”

“Aye, if Dougal is wise, he’ll stay home for a long while,” Mag said.

“Look,” Rob said. “Is that not one of your lads coming yonder, Ian?”

A man that Ian recognized as Hew Laing, a Dunglass gillie, dashed out of the dense woods ahead of them and ran toward them as fast as he could pelt.

“I saw them Stewarts from Dumbarton, Sir Ian!” he shouted as he neared them.

“They passed me t’other side o’ the river. We were all off the road amidst the trees, so they didna see me. I heard one say Glen Fruin be but a few miles ahead.”

“Glen Fruin? Art sure they spoke of Glen Fruin, not Arrochar?” Ian asked.

“Heard it plain, sir. I’d hid soon as I heard ’em, fearing they’d seek tae ken me business did they see me in such a haste. See you, I were tae fetch a garron tae carry our deer. I feared that lot might ha’ took the deer, did I let them see me. But when I crossed tae this side, one o’ our lads said ye was a-looking for that lot.”

“Where are most of the deer hunters now, Hew?”

“They cut eastward. My lot stalked one just northwest o’ the ford nearest Balloch. We’d carried that deer a mile afore we thought tae fetch a garron.”

“Damn their souls,” Mag snapped. “They’re making for Bannachra.”

“Can we get there before they do?” Ian demanded.

“Aye, if we cross the muir,” Mag said. “The nearest ford lies just ahead.”

“Show us,” Ian said. Then to Hew, he said, “You find Colquhoun or the Laird of Galbraith, or both. Tell whoever you find what you told me. Also tell him that I said you should ask him to lend you a garron for that deer of yours.”

“Aye, sir, I’ll run all the way.”

As he dashed off, Ian motioned to his men and said, “Lead on, Mag.”

A short time later, they splashed across the ford and into the woods on the west side of the river with Rob and the other men close behind.

Confident that Mag would take them into the glen well above James Mòr and the rebels, Ian felt the familiar zest for battle surge through him.

They would capture the treacherous scoundrel and his closest followers.

Then he would present them all as a fine gift to his grace, the King. It might be fine enough, when added to the recovery of Dumbarton Castle, to persuade Jamie to let him return to the arms of his serenely delectable lady wife.

Thankful to know that Lina was safe and sound at Tùr Meiloach, Ian rode on.

Lina was hungry, and it was past the usual time for the midday meal. She had been shaking out bed curtains and draperies, and rearranging linen and clothing kists—airing out, Lady Margaret had called it, and Lina hadn't minded.

The remnants of her dream earlier stayed with her, reminding her of how her life had changed since Sir Ian Colquhoun had strolled into it. He had encouraged her to trust her feelings and to try things that she would never have imagined doing on her own. Just thinking of his touch or his voice brought the images back.

Those feelings stirred again when she thought about him as she went downstairs, expecting to join her mother and Lady Margaret for their midday meal.

To her surprise, she heard no voices as she approached the dais entrance to the great hall, where she had assumed that both Lady Margaret and Lady Aubrey would be expecting her. A lone gillie stood at the end of the dais nearest the fireplace, bereft of any fire now with the weather so warm.

“Where are their ladyships?” Lina asked him.

“Sakes, m'lady, they ate nigh an hour ago.”

“Are they in Lady Margaret’s solar, then?”

“Nay, m’lady. Whiles, Lady Margaret did go down tae the kitchen tae speak wi’ the cook. Then she did say she would tend tae her stitchery and doesna want tae be disturbed. Lady Aubrey did go outside tae walk.”

“Which way did she go?” Lina could hear her tension in her voice.

“She didna say. But that lad ye brung wi’ ye, Pluff, said he seen her heading up the glen. What will ye ha’ tae eat, then?”

“Bread and a wedge of cheese if there is some,” Lina said. “But make haste. I want to catch up with my mother.”

As soon as she had her food, Lina hurried out into the yard to find Pluff.

Having followed Mag by a circuitous route through the woods and across a boggy, peat-scented muir into higher country, Ian’s party crested the hill between the muir and Glen Fruin in less time than he had expected. From the hilltop, he and the rest of the men looked down on Bannachra Tower, which sat below them on a slight rise less than a quarter-mile away, overlooking Fruin Water.

“Either they’ve already passed by, or we’ve beaten them here,” Mag said.

“Nowt about that tower suggests that they’ve been here,” Rob observed.

“Then we’ll head down the glen,” Ian said. “We can welcome them.”

He glanced at the tower again. Something about it was wrong.

“Hark!” Rob said, looking eastward. “Hear that?”

Below them in the glen, Ian did hear a distant sound of hoofbeats and the clank of weapons and armor that usually heralded an armed force.

“We must stop them before they reach the tower,” Mag said. “My aunt will have left only a few men-at-arms to guard it—mere bodyguards, though, not a fighting force. Weir,” he shouted to one of the Clan Farlan men, “go to the tower and warn the lads there of their danger. Then do what you can to secure the tower, whilst we attend to those coming up the trail.”

Ian said, “We’ll wait for them at that narrow curve beyond the tower, yonder. I’m thinking we can hold them there.”

“We’ll surprise them, I’m sure,” Mag said. “And, judging by the sounds they make, we have almost as many men as they do.”

As they made their way down the hill, Ian glanced at Bannachra Tower several times more, wondering what it was about the place that seemed odd.

It struck him when they reached the track along the Fruin Water.

“Maggy, is not your aunt still a guest at Tùr Meiloach?”

“Aye, sure, she—” Breaking off with an oath, Mag added, “Blast the woman! Her banner is flying over the tower. She must have come home.”

Ian glanced back again and saw a thin, red-headed lad running toward them.

Tension swept through him. “Is that not Tùr Meiloach’s Pluff?”

“It is, by God,” Mag said, frowning.

“You and Rob take the lads and meet James Mòr and his lot,” Ian said. “I’ll make sure that Lady Margaret is safe and”—he swallowed a sudden obstruction in his throat—“and find out if anyone else is here with her. If so, I’ll see to them, too.”

Although Pluff had assured her that Lady Aubrey had taken the trail up the glen, Lina was beginning to wonder if she had come the right way. Fruin Water sped by alongside her, curving back and forth on itself as it tumbled down the glen. The path took the same course as the burn, and she had been following it for at least half an hour. But she had yet to see any sign of her mother.

Not long after climbing a steep bit of the path, beside a waterfall, she rounded a sharp curve and paused to scan a broader view of the glen ahead. The burn widened there and seemed shallower than it had been. It was much quieter in its passage, too, bubbling along as if it were talking to itself.

Pluff had offered to accompany her, but she was glad she had not let him. She had told him to make himself useful to Lady Margaret’s cook if need be.

The path continued its serpentine course up the glen. Birds chirped to each other, and a hawk soared overhead. High above it, an eagle soared lazily, as if it had no interest in food or aught save fresh air.

The thought made her smile. But the smile froze, and so did she, when she heard a man’s voice and realized it had come from close behind her on the trail.

Without stopping to think, she slipped around the next curve as fast as she could while making as little noise as possible. Then, with relief, she saw that if she climbed a short distance above the trail, a huge boulder there might conceal her.

Suiting thought to action, glad that her bare feet were as tough as whitleather and as sure on the granite slope as any garron’s hooves, she slipped behind the boulder. She

could see the trail above but not the part behind her. Listening, with every other sense alert, as well, she heard more voices, quiet ones, and horses.

Looking up the glen again, she saw a woman on the steeply sloping hillside across the burn. She was striding up a grassy slope with scattered patches of dense shrubbery. The woman wore a green shawl over her head, draping to her hips, and was clearly visible as she neared trees above her on the hillside. The men were sure to see her.

The woman glanced over her shoulder.

Although the shawl concealed much of her, Lina easily recognized Lady Aubrey. Still hearing the voices and sure that any number of men were riding toward her, she kept perfectly still and willed her mother into the safety of the trees.

Keeping her head low, Lina peeped cautiously around the boulder, saw the nose of a bay horse, and eased back. Her mother had vanished.

The men passed below the boulder, two of them still talking. She did not know their voices or who they were. There were six men in all but no banner to identify them. None looked familiar until the last one rode by.

Her skin turned cold then, her face numb. She had never seen James Mòr Stewart or any nobleman who was close to him. But she did recognize Patrick Galbraith, and she knew that James Mòr was the only man Patrick followed.

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A fter sending the others to meet James Mòr's men, Ian had not waited. He was confident that with Bannachra in the balance, Mag, Rob, and the twenty men with them would easily defeat anyone coming up the glen.

As he spurred his horse across the hillside to meet Pluff, Ian knew from the boy's terrified expression that the news he carried was bad.

Wrenching the horse to a halt a short distance from the gasping boy, he said curtly, "What are you doing at Bannachra?"

Bending over, hands on his thighs, trying to catch his breath, Pluff looked up at him helplessly.

"Out with it, lad! Who else is here?"

"No to say... 'here'... exactly," Pluff gasped out, grimacing.

"Tell me!"

" 'Tis her ladyship... She went out o' the castle. And the lady Lina—"

"Lady Margaret and Lady Lina went out?"

"Nay, our lady Aubrey did leave tae go a-walking."

"Then what did Lady Lina do?" Ian asked, although he could guess.

“See you, that were later, and none so long ago, neither.”

Wanting to shake him, Ian growled, “What was later?”

“Lady Lina followed her mam. I’d ha’ gone wi’ her, but she didna want me.”

“Which way did they go?” Ian asked. Fear that they had gone east toward James Mòr and the rebels caused his throat to close on the last few words, making them barely audible.

Understanding enough to point westward, Pluff said, “Yonder, up the glen, sir. I dinna ken how far or where. Nor did our lady Lina ken where her mam went, neither, ’cause she asked me.”

“Does either of them have a dog or a manservant with her?”

Pluff shook his head.

“What are they wearing?”

Pluff’s brows knitted together in thought. “Lady Lina had a yellow gown on. Her ladyship wore a reddish-brown-colored one, I think. Aye, and a big green shawl that looked too hot tae wear on a day like this ’un.”

“You have good eyes, Pluff.”

“There be another thing ye should ken, though,” Pluff said.

Impatient to be away, Ian had begun to turn his horse but paused. “What?”

Hastily, Pluff said, “There was riders, sir, six o’ them. They passed by none so long

after the lady Lina left. They slowed, so I think they meant tae stop. But one o' them pointed tae the ramparts and muttered tae the others. Then, they rode on."

"Thanks, lad," Ian said, trying to suppress his surging fear for Lina. "Go back inside and look after the lady Margaret. I'll find your ladies, never fear."

"And ye'll take care o' them, aye," Pluff said, nodding.

"I will," Ian said grimly. He could hear a clash of arms below in the glen, so battle had begun. What the devil Lina and her mother had meant by coming here—sakes, by letting Lady Margaret leave the safety of Tùr Meiloach—was a question to which he meant to have an answer before he was much older.

Crossing the burn as soon as the men were out of sight, and realizing that she knew, or thought she knew, where her mother was heading, Lina paused to ask herself why she was trying to catch up with her. To reach the hillside clearing they had visited with Lizzie, they had turned back eastward for a time after crossing.

Suspecting that her mother was indeed going to the clearing, Lina wished that she had thought to wear the mossy green cloak that she had brought, because it would help her conceal her presence in the woods. Too late to be thinking about that now, though, she told herself firmly.

If the clearing was where Lady Aubrey was going, it might be quicker, she knew, to try to get ahead of her by angling that way as she climbed the hill.

"But what if that dream, or whatever it was, was wrong and Mam is just going somewhere near there?" she murmured as she hurried up the grassy slope toward the woods above. "If I go the wrong way, I might be too late."

Guiding his horse up the track along Fruin Water, Ian urged it to a lope for a short

distance until the track made a sharp curve to his left and another back to his right, following the rocky course of the water rushing nearby.

Hearing a roar ahead, he soon reached the waterfall making the racket. The track was steep there, so he let the horse pick its way. Cursing all willful women, he tried to focus on what he'd say to the two of them when he caught them—and not let his fertile imagination provide gruesome images of dangers they might have met.

Trying to imagine himself telling Lady Aubrey what he thought of her haring off on her own at such a dangerous time daunted him, given what he knew of her and of her husband's respect for her abilities. But the thought of Lina following her out of concern for her safety made his intent clearer. He would flay them both.

Rounding a curve a short time later, he caught a glimpse of movement to his right on the steep, forested hillside beyond the fast-moving burn. Yellow fabric, certainly a woman's skirt, whisked out of sight amidst the trees there.

"How the devil...?" He shook his head, scanning the burn. Despite its rapid flow, he could see the bed beneath it a few yards upstream. Urging his mount closer, noting how the animal's withers trembled, he said, "Now, lad, it's not as deep as the Leven was. And we're far enough above the falls now to be safe. Hie in, laddie."

Tossing its head with a snort, the horse obeyed.

As it made its way across the burn, Ian forced himself to relax lest his anxiety increase the horse's disquiet. On the far side, it scrambled up the bank—slipping here, sliding there—but it was a canny beast and sure-footed.

Riding up the steep, grassy hill to the trees was another matter. He felt exposed in the meadow and he had seen no sign of the riders Pluff had mentioned. Reaching the woods, Ian decided he might be wiser to tether his mount if only to move more

quietly. Heaven knew where or how far the women would go. But it was clear to him that whatever they were doing, they were behaving oddly.

Just then, he glimpsed the yellow skirt again. Dismounting and tethering the horse, he adjusted the sword on his back and the dirk in its sheath, and set out on foot, moving quickly. Thanks to the thick layer of pine duff and beech leaves underfoot, he also traveled silently. He soon saw that his instinct had been right.

The woman he followed was Lina. She did not look back.

“Foolish lass,” he murmured. “I’d teach her a gey good lesson if I walked up behind her and slung her over my shoulder... or over my knee.”

Aware that her sense of danger had increased significantly and attributing the increase to the scene she was sure lay just ahead, Lina hurried on. She had not seen Lady Aubrey again. But if she remembered how to reach the place they sought, she still had some distance to go.

Moving faster, she kilted her skirts higher to keep them from tangling around her legs. Her sense of danger grew stronger, more impending, until it filled the very air around her. But her mother was still ahead of her. Certain that danger threatened Lady Aubrey, Lina could not let her own fears force her to look behind every tree.

Then, ahead, she caught sight of movement beneath the trees and saw what looked like a faint trail winding through denser shrubbery. Snatching hold of her skirts, she ran that way, then stopped when she saw a flash of russet through the greenery—only to startle violently seconds later when a grouse broke cover with clapping wings and the eerie, low-pitched double-hoot common to the bird.

Taking a moment to collect herself, she scanned left and right but saw nothing moving. The sensation of danger now lurked behind her. Instinct urged her on.

Deciding that she was letting her imagination run riot and needed to focus on finding her mother, Lina went determinedly forward.

The lass had jumped nearly out of her skin, so she was sensible enough to be nervous. She'd lost sight of her mother, though, and heaven knew where she was.

Ian sighed. Recalling again the men Pluff had seen, he wondered where they were but dismissed them without hesitation. He had seen no sign of horses in the woods, and one could easily reach Colquhoun land from Glen Fruin. It lay just the other side of the hills that cradled the head of the glen, so, for all he knew, they had been Colquhouns who had joined the hunt and were heading back to Craggan.

He saw Lina moving again. She was now some yards below the crest of the hill. Aware that she might well be heading over that hill into Glen Finlas, he strode up behind her until, in just three long strides, he would have her.

She whirled, and color surged into her cheeks. "What are you doing here?"

"I came after my foolhardy wife," he retorted. "You deserve a scolding if not worse, little wife, for taking a risk that may be greater than any I've ever taken."

"How could it be?"

"There is a battle raging below us, even now, in the lower part of the glen."

"Faith, who is fighting?"

"James Mòr and his followers escaped from Dumbarton. They fight my men, Rob MacAulay's, and the MacFarlans who serve Mag. Where is your mother?"

"Ahead of me somewhere. She turned back toward Bannachra."

“Then we will also turn back,” he said, fighting to keep his hands off her. “But we will return the way we came, on the trail, because I must collect my horse.”

“I can’t go back. You don’t understand!”

“Nay, Lina, you will do as I say.”

She clutched his arm. “Mam is walking into a trap, Ian. Sithee, I know she is, and she does not know it.”

“Then tell me where she is going,” he said. “I’ll follow her whilst you stay safe here,” he added reasonably. “Think, lass! I can protect her. You could not.”

“She will go to a clearing in the trees,” Lina said with a sigh. “I cannot describe the place well enough for you to find it, though. I know where it is only because Lizzie, Mam, Murie, and I went there one morning soon after Galbraith brought us here. We took our midday meal with us. I recognized the place at once.”

“What do you mean, you recognized it?”

She hesitated, nibbling her lip.

“Tell me.”

“You will think I’m daft or telling a falsehood,” she said.

“Lass, I ken fine what your opinion is of any sort of falsehood. If you’ve ever told one in your life, I shall own myself amazed.”

“Well, I don’t think I have. But since you—”

“We are not discussing me. How do you know where she is going?”

“I saw the place, and more than once, sir. The first time was on our wedding night. I’d have told you then, but you were nearly asleep, and I thought you would be irked that I had paid heed to such a thing at such an important time.”

“Aye, sure, I would have,” he agreed, knowing that was an understatement. “But how did you know the clearing? There must be many on these wooded hills.”

“There is a tree, a misshapen one. It must be a beech because it is gey tall with a slender trunk. But beeches’ trunks are usually as straight as straight can be. This one turns back on itself and then grows straight again.”

“I warrant I can find such a tree if it is near the crest of this hill.”

“I don’t recall that it is near the crest. Anyway, I must go with you. It would be more dangerous to stay here alone. There is danger in the upper glen, too.”

“Aye, Pluff told me he had seen six riders ahead of the others. Sithee, a host of men, many on horseback, left Dumbarton with this morning to join my father in a hunt for that magnificent stag we saw. That made it possible for others to help me retake the castle. But James Mòr and his closest followers had already fled.”

“I’m glad you took the castle and sorry they escaped,” she said, fervently hoping to avoid more discussion of those six riders. If Ian learned that they had nearly caught her, there would be further argument and thus further delay. Hastily, she added, “But they are gone now, and we must not stand talking. Mam is in grave danger, sir. I have seen that danger four times now, and in much the same way. She is walking through a wood, and she may be carrying things in her arms.”

“What things?”

“Scroll-like things,” Lina said warily. “Then, as she passes the tree, a hand reaches out and grabs her.”

“Sakes, lass, that sounds like the sort of nightmare a man has after a night of too much drinking,” Ian said. “You will have to do better than that.”

“I cannot help what it sounds like. I have never endured such a thing before. Nor do I think that aught occurred on our wedding night to account for it.”

“Our wedding night!” But as he said it, he recalled her mentioning that night just moments before—something about trying to speak to him then.

“Right in the middle of things, aye,” she said. “Moreover, I do not think I’ve ever before dreamed the same thing twice, let alone four times—or whilst standing on stairs or staring at a fire. You must heed me, sir, but let us walk as we talk. We can come back later for your horse. Forbye, he may have returned to his stable.”

“Since his stable is at Dunglass, I hope he did not. But he is well tethered, lass, so we must fetch him.” He spoke a bit distantly, because he was thinking of all that she had said and recalling his sense that she had seemed distracted... at the highest point of their first coupling!

Wanting to shriek at him that they had no time to fetch his horse but knowing that if she did, she would more likely inflame his temper with hers than persuade him of anything, Lina forced herself to calm down. She hoped that if she could compose herself, he might grow calmer, too. That had sometimes happened with Lizzie, so perhaps it might work with Ian, too.

Quietly, she said again, “Mam is in grave danger. I know that as well as I know that you stand here, Ian. You have spoken of the magic of Tùr Meiloach—”

“This is not Tùr Meiloach,” he said curtly.

Clearly, her self-imposed calm was not affecting him.

“I am as sure of her danger as I can be,” she said. “Prithee, sir, believe me.”

“You are imagining things, lass,” he said. Then, apparently noting that she had stiffened at those words, he added hastily, “We can walk a bit farther as we talk. But I’ll wager that your mother is simply returning to Bannachra.”

“Walk swiftly, then,” she said, relieved but more fearful than ever for Lady Aubrey. “The place she seeks lies this way. I was too busy trying to follow her without letting her see me to think about the distance, so I am not sure how far.”

“Aye, I can imagine that she might have been peeved to catch her daughter spying on her. By my troth, Lina—”

“If you saw your mother behaving as you had never known her to behave before,” she said, “would you not want to know why she did so? If she suddenly became furtive, watchful, and nervous, would you not be concerned for her?”

“I would,” he agreed, trying but failing to imagine his amiable, ever-sedate mother in such a role. “To tell the truth, lass, my mind flatly rejects such an image.”

“Just so,” she said. “My mother is also unlikely to behave in such a way. But for days now, perhaps a sennight, she has behaved oddly. And then, suddenly, Lady Margaret declared that she wanted to return to Bannachra.”

“What demon possessed the woman?”

“She said it was because Father doubled the guard at Tùr Meiloach. Strife unsettles

her, she said. In troth, she is a woman who likes solitude. But she is also indolent and hates traveling. I suspect she declared her intent to leave because Mam wanted to come back here and could offer no other good reason to do so.”

“Sakes, did she have a good reason to come with Lady Margaret?”

“Aye, sure, a plausible one, too. She said it was unseemly for Lady Margaret to travel so far with only men as companions. Since she had not brought her woman with her to Tùr Meiloach, even my father saw naught amiss in Mam’s coming here with her. The flaw in their plan, if it was a plan between them, was that Mam did not suggest that her own woman should travel with her . So when I said that I would come with them, she could hardly forbid it.”

“I don’t understand. If she was scheming, why did she let you come?”

“How could she not? She had just said that Lady Margaret needed female company. Then I said I should go, too, so Mam would not find herself in that same predicament when she wanted to return home. Good sakes, sir, even Father would have wondered if she had refused to let me come with them after that.”

“But she is the Seer in the family, is she not? If it was dangerous for her to come here, would she not know it?”

“Her foresight almost never predicts aught that will personally affect her,” Lina explained. “It did warn her to leave Arrochar all those years ago when it was under Pharlain’s attack, but it has never let her know if my father’s charters will protect Tùr Meiloach or if he will win back his chiefdom.”

“He will win it back,” Ian said, putting a welcome arm around her shoulders. “We’ll see to that, betwixt the lot of us.”

The woods ahead of them seemed to darken then, and Lina held up a hand. "Listen," she murmured. "Do you hear voices?"

Ian did hear them and recognized Lady Aubrey's voice by its calm firmness.

"I expect that you are gey pleased with yourself," she said. "I came to meet you here only to tell you that you have wasted your time and will continue to waste it if you threaten me or my family again."

"Lest ye've failed to notice, madam, ye're nae longer on Tùr Meiloach's soil. Moreover, we are alone here, and ye've nae defense against me. So ye'd do better to keep your word." The voice, unmistakably Dougal's, was harsh, his tone confident.

Ian reached back for the sword in his baldric but stopped with his hand still raised when her ladyship spoke again.

"It matters not if we are on Tùr Meiloach's ground or in some other place," she said. "You named me Seer, Dougal MacPharlain, so you should believe me when I tell you, you won't harm me. Nor would your father thank you if you did."

"Ye do not control me, nor can ye ken what my father would do or not do. Where are the charters I commanded ye to bring me?"

Hearing Lina gasp beside him, Ian put a finger to her lips. Then, motioning for her to stay where she was, he drew his gloves from his belt and pulled them on as he stepped silently toward the voices.

"The charters are safe," Lady Aubrey said.

"Believe me, madam, before I release ye, ye'll tell me where they lie."

“Nay, Dougal. They belong neither to you nor to me, so I will not.”

Ian moved closer. He could see the two of them through the trees ahead.

“Then Andrew Dubh will bring them,” Dougal said. “If I take ye hostage, I’ll wager it will not take him long, either, not with your life at stake.”

“As I said, you will not harm me,” she said. “Not only would your father recoil at such a thing, but my Campbell kinsmen would cease to receive you or anyone else for whom you declare support. They would also seek vengeance.”

“D’ye think so? I do not. Ye fail to understand the importance of one man whom your Campbells do support most strongly. But that matters not to either of us now. I have nae cause yet to harm ye. But ye’ll come with me, madam. Now.”

“I won’t.”

“Ye will. Ye’ll come either willingly or by force. Choose how.”

Leaving his sword where it was, Ian silently slipped his dirk from its sheath.

Moving as silently as Ian, Lina followed him and felt as if her heart were trying to thump its way out of her chest. She had all she could do not to shout at Dougal that he was not alone with her mother. When Ian drew his dirk, she wanted to stop him, to tell him to put it back, lest Lady Aubrey be hurt.

That Dougal would dare to threaten Lady Aubrey was bad enough. That he had expected her to bring him the charters for the Arrochar estates horrified Lina.

Had her mother agreed to such a betrayal?

Lina's imagination rejected that thought as swiftly as Ian's had rejected the image of his own mother behaving furtively or even nervously. Lady Aubrey would do naught to jeopardize her beloved husband's chieftdom.

How had Dougal got here ahead of them? Had he been riding with James Mòr's lot and she somehow failed to see him? How had he known where to go?

Ian looked back then and caught her gaze. Anger, nay fury, contorted his features and he gestured unmistakably for her to back off.

Instead, she moved more quickly toward him.

Lady Aubrey cried out.

When Ian turned toward the sound, Lina dashed past him to the edge of the clearing beyond. The strangely formed tree she had recalled stood ahead of her as it had before. Beneath it, she saw that Dougal, wearing a leather jack, breeks, and boots, had grabbed her mother.

He had not seen her yet, so Lina stood where she was.

Lady Aubrey struggled to free herself until Dougal twisted her arm hard.

"Leave her be!" Lina cried.

To her shock, Dougal grinned at her and twisted Lady Aubrey's arm harder, bringing her to her knees. To Lina, he said, "Come here to me, or I'll break her arm. Two hostages must always be better than one."

"I don't think you'll take any hostage today," Ian said from behind Lina.

The fury in his voice, she knew, was meant as much for her as it was for Dougal. But she was glad to hear Ian's voice. Even his heavy hand on her shoulder, holding her firmly in place while he stepped in front of her, was a comfort.

Dougal put two fingers to his lips and whistled. "To me, lads!" he shouted.

In a rush of terror, Lina expected to see a large force of men-at-arms leap from the trees and shrubbery. When two men with swords and dirks drawn stepped into view beyond Lady Aubrey, Lina tried to tell herself that two were nothing. But her knees declared otherwise, quaking so that they threatened to buckle beneath her.

Three men could surely overwhelm and kill one, knight of the realm or not.

"Run, lass," Ian snapped without looking back at her.

But she could not. Her weakened knees would fail to support her. In any event, her feet would not move. Terror for her mother and for Ian, or some equally powerful force of which she had no ken, froze her where she stood.

Knowing as well as if he were watching her that Lina had not moved, Ian wished he could pick her up and throw her to safety. That being impossible, he watched the two swiftly approaching swordsmen and cursed himself for not having brought at least two of his own men with him.

That thought withered away at birth. Lina's actions had angered and terrified him, but he would not have let others see his anger with her or his fear. That was not in his nature. He would never purposely expose her errors or foolhardiness to anyone else, especially to any man who served him. He would attend to her himself.

"Come to me, lads," he murmured. Gripping his dirk with his left hand, keeping the right one poised to draw his sword, he glanced at Dougal. Would the man attack him,

order his minions to do it, or would all three charge him at once?

Dougal jerked Lady Aubrey to her feet. Pulling a thin rope from his jack, he swiftly tied her wrists behind her and shoved her back down to the ground.

Then, as the other two men stepped into the clearing, Dougal said curtly, “Kill him and don’t waste time about it.”

“Coward,” Ian said loudly as the other two stalked toward him, widening the distance between them as they did. He knew they hoped he would be unable to watch them both closely enough that way. Still speaking to Dougal, he said, “I expect you always have others do your work for you, you hen-hearted coof.”

“It is what I pay them for and why I brought them,” Dougal retorted. “I own, though, I never expected to see ye here, Colquhoun. I thought ye’d be stalking deer today with your da and the others.”

“Just how do you know about that?” Ian asked, keeping his eyes on the other two. “You’ve been cowering at home ever since you let your captives escape.”

“When my lads finish with ye, if they leave aught to question, I’ll learn how ye came to marry our Lina. Not that that matters now. One day, I’ll own all of Arrochar, including Tùr Meiloach. Then I’ll leave it to mine own heirs at the end.”

From a too-short distance behind Ian, Lina said, “You will have no heirs, and Tùr Meiloach will reject you.” But Ian dared not turn. He continued to watch the two swordsmen, only one of whom had paused at Lina’s words.

“You, Dougal MacPharlain, lack proper respect for Tùr Meiloach,” she went on sternly. “You should give thanks to the Fates that you do not stand on its sacred soil now, because that very soil would betray you. But you will learn your error. By my

troth, if you fail to change your wicked ways, you will rue them sorely.”

“Lass, ye’re devilish insolent,” Dougal said. “Either that, or ye’re a witch and a daft one at that. ’Tis as well I didna marry ye.”

“You will marry no MacFarlan. But you should heed my warning,” Lina went on solemnly. “As punishment for your crimes against the true chief of Clan Farlan, the Fates have decreed that one whom you deem a friend will betray you.”

Hearing those words and her eerily distant tone, Ian felt a chill slither up his spine. His left hand tightened on his dirk, and he reached back with his right hand to draw his sword. But he had no need to move quickly.

His two would-be opponents stood gaping at Lina, their swords wavering.

Dougal likewise seemed to have grown roots, and his face was ashen. But he recovered faster than the others did. “Kill him, damn ye!” he snapped.

When the two warriors moved to engage Ian, Dougal left Lady Aubrey long enough to skirt the three swordsmen, grab Lina, and drag her to join her mother.

Livid, but unable to confront Dougal without first dispatching the other two, Ian leaped to the attack.

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:13 am

Not another word,” Dougal snarled at Lina, gripping her tightly enough to leave bruises. “If ye think I won’t kill ye, ye’re wrong.”

Fighting to regain senses that seemed to have deserted her, Lina also fought to regain her calm. She had a vague notion that she had said something that had made Dougal angry. She had heard him clearly enough when he shouted at his men to attack Ian. But whatever occurred before that was just a buzz without meaning.

“Did ye hear me?” Dougal demanded, giving her a shake.

“Aye, sure, you said you would kill me. So what if you did?” Lina asked, struggling now to ignore the clanging swords behind him. “Do you think you can force my lady mother and me to go all the way to Arrochar with you? You’d not get past Inch Galbraith with us.”

“We won’t go that way,” Dougal said, feeling inside his jack, doubtless for more rope. “A boat will fetch us at the Loch of the Long Boats.”

“We ken fine that James Mòr escaped from Dumbarton,” Lina said, shooting a glance at her mother and noting that she was lying as she had lain in the vision. “I suspect, too, that he thinks you helped Lizzie and me escape.”

“He has nae ken of that,” Dougal said. “If ye’re thinking of yon scrap—”

“I’m thinking not only that you asked him to let you have me, but also, as far as I could tell, that you and the manservant who brought our food had the only keys to our chamber. Since I saw that man with others in the yard when we slipped away, I ken

fine that he will have witnesses aplenty to say that he did nowt to aid us.”

“I don’t know how ye escaped,” Dougal admitted, shifting slightly to look toward Lady Aubrey. “Nor do I care. I do care that ye left that message, trying to make it look as if I’d released ye. But, since James Mòr never saw it and expects my father and me to see him to safety, he won’t care what becomes of ye.”

The noise of clanging swords in the clearing had diminished.

Glancing that way, realizing that Dougal no longer blocked her view of the combatants, she saw that one villain had fallen. Just then the second one leaped at Ian, sword raised in both hands as if to split him in half from head to toe.

Before she could react, Ian danced nearer the man and eluded the descending sword. When the too-powerful, irreversible stroke brought his opponent within reach, Ian drove his dirk upward with his left hand in a powerful arc. Thrusting the weapon’s point in just below the man’s ribs, Ian lifted him to his toes with it.

The man’s sword fell to the ground near his erstwhile companion in arms. When Ian yanked his dirk free, the man collapsed at his feet with a thud.

Looking at Dougal, she saw that his face had paled. Then color flooded back, and he shoved her with so much force that she tripped and fell over Lady Aubrey.

Snatching up his sword, Dougal growled an epithet and strode toward Ian.

Lina rolled off her mother and to her feet. But as she did, Lady Aubrey said urgently, “Let be, love, and keep silent. You must not interfere.”

Knowing that her mother was right made no difference to Lina’s feelings. But she ruthlessly suppressed them, wrapped herself in calm, and knelt to find the knot in the

rope that bound Lady Aubrey's wrists.

Wiping his dirk clean with scooped-up duff, Ian watched Dougal, hoping the man knew that he would need help to control two women and would not try to force them to flee with him. He wanted Dougal to fight.

Never having matched swords with him, Ian knew not what to expect. He guessed that, lacking character, Dougal would be a sly rather than skillful warrior.

That he had abducted Lina and Lizzie had shocked and infuriated Ian. That Dougal would set a trap for Lady Aubrey fit the view that Ian had long held of him. And what had just happened enhanced that low opinion of the man. Only a coward hid behind women while minions fought his battles.

If anything surprised Ian, it was seeing Dougal draw both his sword and his dirk and stalk toward him with confidence evident in every move and gesture.

Often, when approaching a battle, Ian had worried about disappointing his father or failing his King. But he had always easily shed such concerns when the fight was at hand. Now the thought of possible failure swept through him.

He would not, could not fail Lina.

Seeing her kneeling, uninjured, to untie Lady Aubrey, he hoped the two would have the good sense to slip away while he dealt with Dougal.

His own weapons in hand, Ian focused his attention on his opponent.

Dougal sneered. "I hope when ye married her, ye were shriven of your sins."

"You think you can best me ?" Ian taunted softly.

Seeing color sweep into Dougal's face, Ian realized he could anger the man with ease. Tucking that helpful wee fact into his imaginary weapons chest, he made a show of returning his dirk to its sheath and gripped his sword with both hands.

"Tired?" Dougal asked, moving lightly to his right and holding his sword out straight as if to flaunt his strength. He kept his dirk in his left fist near his thigh.

"You may hope," Ian replied, turning just enough to maintain their respective positions. As always, when certain danger and an unpredictable outcome confronted him, time came to a near standstill. Even his pulse slowed.

He had been breathing heavily after his battle against the other two. Now, he felt as clearheaded as if someone had doused him with revivifying ice water.

Every sense had come alert. He could hear Dougal's feet on the soft ground and his sheath creaking softly as it swung from his belt. His baldric made noises, too. Ian heard them all and noted every movement of the other man's eyes, face, hands, and feet, as if he had many eyes instead of two. He could smell the piney air and the man's sweat, although they had not yet begun. Ian felt every ridge in his sword's hilt right through his gloves. He sensed the weapon's weight and slightest movement.

He had never understood the familiar phenomenon, but he treasured it.

As Dougal's sword made its movement at what seemed to be a snail's pace, Ian felt his muscles tense in response. Images passed through his mind, one after another as clear as could be, of what he would do and how he would do it if Dougal lunged left, right, or straight at him. He felt as if he had all day to decide.

Dougal attacked deftly and without much warning by shifting left while attacking to the right. But Ian's sword flashed up to meet his with a clang that echoed through the silent woods.

From that point, things moved with blinding speed, because Dougal was a fine swordsman. The deftness of his movements and agility matched Ian's own.

Even so, Ian's ability to think faster than he acted and to remain aware of every sense and detail remained steady. His eagerness for the battle had increased as it always did against a worthy opponent. The only time he had been hurt, the worst of it was his knowledge that the swordsman had been less experienced and that the injury had been his own fault. He had been careless.

With no room for carelessness now, he fought hard and well.

Dougal eased to his right and forward as he had many times before, forcing Ian back to his own right. When Ian expected Dougal to leap to his left, as he had each time before, Dougal flashed forward to his right instead.

Hastily shifting his sword and position to parry the blow, Ian failed to heed a branch no thicker than his forearm on the ground behind him. His right heel came down on it, rolled back with the wood, and cast him off balance just as Dougal's sword swept toward his head.

Gasping, Lina clutched her hands to her breast and clamped her lips shut. Feeling helpless, she called on the Fates with every fiber of her being to help Ian.

She was sure in that moment that, with Ian falling, Dougal would win.

It happened so fast that she could not be sure what Ian did. He seemed to hit the ground with his left shoulder and roll catlike to his feet, facing Dougal again, with his sword at the ready. Without pause, he charged, taking Dougal by surprise. With one deft, slashing stroke, he knocked Dougal's sword from his hand and away.

"Yield, and you will live," Ian shouted.

“The devil I will!” Dougal shouted, rushing Ian with his dirk held to stab.

Swinging mightily with both hands and the side of his sword blade, Ian hit Dougal’s upstretched arm hard enough to send the dirk flying from it into the trees.

When Dougal turned away to run after it, Ian put down his sword, drew his dirk, and dashed after Dougal to finish him.

“Nay!” Lina cried. “Do not kill him!”

When Ian paused and Dougal scrambled away toward his dirk, she wanted to bite off her tongue. She dared not look at her mother, certain that Lady Aubrey would condemn such an outcry. Ian would have much to say about it, too.

Worse, she could not defend herself because she had acted without thinking. As often as she had condemned Ian’s doing so...

Dougal stopped abruptly, turned, and leaped toward Ian, apparently hoping to strangle him with his bare hands.

Ian raised his dirk again.

Lina clamped her mouth shut and squeezed her eyes shut as well.

She heard a loud crack, then a thud, and then silence.

As Ian rubbed his fist, doubtless bruised from its hard contact with Dougal’s bony chin, he looked at Lina and nearly smiled at her expression. Determined to keep that touch of amusement out of his voice, he said sternly, “Open your eyes.”

Her eyelids squeezed tighter, and her lips pressed together so tightly that he was sure

her little white teeth must be gripping the lower lip.

After a swift, oblique glance at her nearly smiling mother, Ian waited.

Lina's cheeks grew pink. She opened her eyes. Her lips relaxed.

He did not know what he had expected her to say, but she said firmly, "You must not kill him, sir. It would only make matters worse if you do. Pharlain would call it murder, and you would have no defense, because he'd deem Mam and me to be unacceptable witnesses. And all who oppose the King would agree with Pharlain."

Glancing at Dougal, who was either still unconscious or pretending to be, Ian said, "What would you have me do with him?"

Handing him the rope that had bound her mother's wrists, she said, "We should take him back to Bannachra with us and decide there."

Ian eyed her sternly. "If you are hoping that I'll have no more to say to you about all this, you should know that your hope is misplaced."

"I do know that," she said, meeting his gaze. "But I also know that I am right about Dougal. You must not be the one who determines his fate."

"You seem to know much today," he said. "What was all that about Dougal coming to ruin through a friend?"

"All what?"

Her expression was as guileless as ever he had seen it. Knowing what she thought of liars, he found it impossible to imagine that she was lying now to him.

Silently taking the rope from her hand, he moved toward Dougal, who was beginning to stir.

Lina followed him. “What did you mean by that?” she asked as he knelt and bound Dougal’s wrists behind him.

Feeling the icy chill he had felt earlier, Ian said, “We’ll talk about it later.”

Lina would have liked to press the matter then. But Dougal was conscious.

Turning toward her mother, she met Lady Aubrey’s most penetrating gaze, the one she employed so usefully whenever one of her daughters had misbehaved.

Resigned to a well-deserved rebuke for crying out to Ian in the midst of a fight as she had, Lina drew a breath and went to hear what her mother would say.

To her surprise, Lady Aubrey said quietly, “How do you feel, love?”

“How do I feel?” When her ladyship nodded, still eyeing her in the way that made Lina feel as if her mother knew her thoughts, she tried to think of an acceptable answer to the question. “I feel as I usually do, Mam. Although, I confess that I’m gey curious. Did you know that Dougal would be here?”

“Aye, because he surprised me in our woods and made me agree to meet him and not tell anyone. Later, I found a message telling me when and where to go.”

“You should have told Father.”

“He will doubtless agree with you when I do tell him,” Lady Aubrey said with a wry little smile. “But once I knew what Dougal wanted, I also knew that I had to keep my promise to meet him. Sithee, love, meeting him was all I promised. I knew that I need

not fear that meeting, and there was one other thing, too.”

“I’ll wager that the villain threatened to do us harm if you refused, aye?”

“Aye, he threatened us all, but that is not what I meant,” Lady Aubrey said gently. “I meant that I knew you were somehow involved.”

“You saw something,” Lina said.

Lady Aubrey nodded. “I dreamed it. Whilst you were captive and I was sick with worry, I dreamed of you here in this place, confronting a man whose face I could not see. The dream comforted me, because it suggested that you would survive your captivity. So, when Dougal told me where he wanted to meet, I knew I had to come here. I learned long ago not to ignore such dreams when they occur.”

“Did Lady Margaret know about this dream?”

“Nay, but she may have noted that my behavior was unusual, especially when she began to complain. Sithee, I had received Dougal’s message by then, naming this place, so I did not exert myself to make her feel comfortable. Forbye,” she added dryly, “she was happy enough to put us both to work when we arrived.”

“What did you mean about learning not to ignore such things?” Lina asked, wondering if, in view of her own recent experiences, she really wanted to know.

Looking toward Ian, who was still dealing with Dougal, Lady Aubrey said, “We’ll talk more about that later, love. But tell me what else you feel now.”

“I don’t know exactly what I feel other than relief that Ian defeated Dougal. I’m also relieved that he did not kill him.”

“Why should he not have killed him?” Lady Aubrey asked.

Surprised, Lina said, “Dougal was unconscious. It would have been murder.”

“He was not unconscious when you shouted that Ian must not kill him, love. And Dougal would have killed Ian, had he been at Dougal’s mercy so.”

That was true, Lina realized. Not to mention that two very dead bodies already lay on the clearing floor. Might Dougal accuse Ian of murdering them ?

Meeting her mother’s gaze again, albeit less confidently, she said, “The truth is I don’t know why I cried out, Mam. It just seemed that I must. I thought afterward that it had been just a thoughtless impulse. And so it must have been. I know that Ian is irked with me.”

A twinkle lit her ladyship’s eyes. “He is likely irked about more than that, my dearling. What brought you here?”

Lina felt heat rushing to her cheeks but knew she had to tell the truth.

Meeting that penetrating gaze again, she said, “By my troth, Mam, I saw it all happening. That is, I saw you walking here and someone grabbing you. I saw it four times! And it was always the same... or nearly the same. The first time, I saw you in a room with a chest, reaching into it.”

“You’d better tell me the rest later,” Lady Aubrey said, looking beyond Lina.

When Lina turned her head, her gaze collided with Ian’s, just feet away. She could tell that he was still angry with her, although his face showed no expression.

“Mam and I can fetch your horse, sir,” she said. “I remember where it is.”

“We’ll all go,” he said.

Dougal looked even more disgruntled than usual, but he made no comment. With his hands tied behind him—doubtless securely—Lina knew he must be uncomfortable. And thanks to the hard whacks Ian had given his chin and dirk arm, they must hurt, too. But she had no sympathy to waste on Dougal. A dry voice in her head suggested then that she ought to reserve all her sympathy for herself.

Shaking her head at that unwelcome thought, she caught Ian’s gaze again.

“Do you mean to debate my decision with me?” he asked softly.

Realizing that he thought she meant to quibble over his decision that they would all go to fetch his horse, she shook her head again, more fervently.

“A wise choice, aye,” he said. “Dougal will go first. Walk carefully, my lad,” Ian added. “We would not want you to fall and hurt yourself.”

Dougal gave him a sour look.

Only then did Lina notice that Ian must have found a second rope, because one now tethered Dougal’s ankles, leaving just enough slack between them to walk.

“What about my men’s bodies?” Dougal asked.

“I’ll send someone,” Ian replied, urging him back the way they had come.

Lina did not want to let her mother out of her sight, so she let her go next.

When they were able to walk side by side, though, Lady Aubrey said quietly, “You were telling me about something you saw, dearling, where I was reaching into a

chest. Do you recall more of that dream?"

"It was not a dream, Mam. Nor do I think that yours was a dream, either."

"Were you not asleep?"

Feeling fire in her cheeks again, Lina remembered where she had been the first time and what she and Ian... mostly Ian... had been doing.

"Nay, I was not asleep the first time or the other times. I... I was nearly asleep once, but otherwise I was doing ordinary things. I think..." She glanced at her mother, who nodded encouragingly. "I think you know what happened, Mam."

"I think so, too," Lady Aubrey said. "I also think we had better talk about it later, rather than now where we might be overheard. You should discuss the matter with Ian before then." She jutted her chin slightly but meaningfully toward the men.

Lina saw that, despite Dougal's rope shackles, the men had moved faster than the women and had stopped some distance ahead. Ian looked impatient.

"We'll walk faster, Mam," she said. "But before we catch up with them, tell me what you meant when you said you had learned not to ignore such events."

Lady Aubrey glanced at her, nodded, and said, "You know the story of your father's and my departure from Arrochar, with Andrena as a baby, aye?"

"Aye, sure, we have all heard it often."

"What you do not know is that I had had versions of that vision several times and had simply wondered at them, fearing to tell your father I had seen Arrochar in enemy hands, lest he think I was daft. Sithee, I'd had odd feelings before then that something

was right to do, or wrong, or that a decision would turn out well. Such things had all come about as I had sensed they would, but I still had no confidence in what I had felt or ‘seen.’ Only after Pharlain and his followers invaded Arrochar did I realize that I ought to have paid my ‘dreams’ more heed. I told your father at once then, but it was too late to save our three small sons. Had I told him sooner—”

“Mam, no!” Lina exclaimed fiercely. “You must not blame yourself for what happened. My brothers’ deaths are on Pharlain’s head, not yours!”

From what little Ian had seen of Lina’s conversation with her mother by glancing back now and again, he would have liked to hear what they were saying.

First, he had seen Lady Aubrey speaking, then looking intensely interested when Lina replied. And Lina had gone from a thoughtful look to sober speech, but not as if she were defending herself.

That was just as well, too, he decided. If anyone was going to scold his wife, he would. That right was not one he would let anyone usurp. In truth, he looked forward to it. He had missed the lass sorely. And if he could avoid it, he would not let anyone part them until he had had his say and some private time with her.

Heated desire flowed through him with that last thought.

Glancing back again, he saw Lina speaking with visible passion.

Catching her eye, he gave her a look stern enough to silence her, but when the two women drew near, he said only, “Try to keep up, lass. I want to see what is happening below.”

“We’ll walk faster, sir,” Lady Aubrey said. “After all that turmoil, I wanted to be sure that I was steady on my legs, but I’m fine now.”

Ian didn't believe she had been unsteady, but he would not contradict her. Scowling at Dougal, he said, "You've had enough rest. Move along now."

"I wish ye joy of your wife, Colquhoun," Dougal said.

"Take care how you speak of her, you glittous crackraip. She is the reason I nearly killed you and the only reason that you can still walk and talk. Bear that in mind and keep a civil tongue in your head."

"How is the lady Elizabeth?" Dougal asked dulcetly.

Ian nearly growled but kept silent long enough to remember that Mag was at Bannachra. He said more cheerfully, "Do you know all of her ladyship's brothers?"

"Aye, sure, I ken Patrick Galbraith well. He's one of James Mòr's lads and nae threat to me. Nor would Rory Galbraith trouble me."

"I meant her brother Magnus. Unlike the other two, Sir Magnus Galbraith is a knight of the realm. He is also much more protective of his sisters than Patrick is."

"I don't know the man."

"You should. He was a prisoner of your father's for nineteen long months."

To his satisfaction, Dougal tensed. His face paled. "I do not recall the name."

"But I think you do," Ian said. "They called him Magnus Mòr, because the man's as big as a mountain. I think you remember him gey well. But lest you have forgotten, I'll reintroduce you to him shortly. He awaits us at Bannachra."

Ian could not be sure, but it seemed to him that Dougal lost more color.

They were walking downhill, nearing the place where Ian had tethered his mount. Since he did not know what lay ahead of them, he decided to have Lina lead the horse and keep close behind them with her mother.

He had seen no sign of trouble from the hillside. Nor had he heard aught to suggest that the battle had moved nearer. Again, he recalled Pluff's six men.

"Ye ought to release me now," Dougal said.

"Should I? Why?"

"I'm expected to be on the other side of yon pass anon."

"At the Loch of the Long Boats, aye. So you told me. If you are taking this route, you must mean to cross Colquhoun land. I'd advise against that."

Dougal shrugged. "The people I'm to meet will be south of Craggan. So one must assume they have Colquhoun's leave to be there. He takes nae sides, but he has taken many a meeting of late with the true heir to the throne. He even invited him to hunt with him, as I told ye before. Sithee, the laird is a gey canny man."

"He is, aye," Ian said. "Recall that he is my sire. Do you expect me to believe that he treated with James Mòr and gave him leave to cross our land?"

Dougal smiled. "I do not give away royal secrets. Think what ye will, but ye might just ask yourself what purpose James Mòr had in agreeing to yon daft hunt."

" 'Tis plain enough to me that he agreed so he could flee before Jamie put Dumbarton under siege and starved him out," Ian said. "You can ponder the fact that the castle is now in Jamie's hands again. Or, you might better use your time by deciding how to use any persuasive skills you possess on Sir Magnus Galbraith."

Dougal opened his mouth and shut it tightly. Looking away, he lengthened his stride so that he nearly tripped on the rope that shackled his ankles. Hearing a snarl from the man, Ian smiled, certain that he had ignited true fear of Mag in him.

Lina willingly led Ian's horse and was glad that Ian set as fast a pace as he could with Dougal hobbled as he was. She and Lady Aubrey kept close behind the two men, so there was little conversation between them.

When they reached the burn and Ian suggested that the two women take turns riding across, both of them just kilted up their skirts and waded. The cold water felt good to Lina. If some of the pebbles were sharp and the water swift, it was also shallow at the ford and Highland-bred women had leather-tough feet.

From there, the rest of the journey passed quickly. Approaching Bannachra Tower from above, as they did, they could see the tower long before they saw any activity there. As they were cresting the last rise, Ian stopped just above them to scan the view below, then turned back to them and nodded.

Lina and Lady Aubrey went to stand beside him and the still silent Dougal.

Ian said, "Look yonder."

Lina's initial impression was that she viewed a sea of moving men, nearly all of whom were afoot. Since Ian had mentioned his father's hunting party, her first thought was that most of the hunters must have followed Ian and his men to Bannachra. Then she saw a familiar banner waving in the midst of the milling throng, its device of three black arrows stark against a yellow background.

"Faith, that is my father's banner, is it not?"

"May the Fates preserve us," she heard her mother murmur faintly.

“That is Andrew Dubh’s, aye,” Ian said, smiling. “Mag has his own banner from the King—a Galbraith bear’s head backed by MacFarlan arrows.”

Lina knew that. “But my father never leaves Tùr Meiloach, so something dreadful must have happened,” she said. “What else would bring him here?”

“Let’s ask him. He and Mag can decide who will look after Dougal.”

Dougal grimaced, as well he should, Lina thought.

Andrew came beaming to meet them. Passing Ian and Lina, he hugged his lady first. When Lina demanded to know what was amiss, he said it was nowt.

“I saw Pharlain setting out this morning with all three of the galleys he has now at Arrochar. So I gathered men and followed them. Sithee, thanks to all the rumors we’ve heard of mischief against Tùr Meiloach, I thought he meant such. But he passed us by. Then he passed the place where Magnus came ashore to us.”

“Where was he going?” Ian asked. Lina noted that he watched Dougal and that Dougal was looking discouraged. In fact, he seemed more interested in scanning the sea of men in the yard than in paying heed to anything else.

Andrew shrugged. “I thought Pharlain might be going to Craggan or even to Dumbarton to help James Mòr seize control of the firth. But since ye’re here, and since Magnus, Rob MacAulay, and these others are likewise here—no tae mention this fool, Dougal MacPharlain—I’m thinking now that that canna be how it is at all. Sithee, one of my lads shouted that a sizeable force of men was riding toward Loch Lomond, so I hied me this way in time to see them heading up Glen Fruin.”

Dougal was still watching the sea of men, and just then he stiffened. Looking for the reason, Lina saw Mag wending his way toward them through the crowd. He stood

head and shoulders above the others.

He strode up to them, smiling. Ignoring Dougal, he said to Ian, “You found them both safe, then.”

“Aye, for the nonce,” Ian said evenly. “As you see, I also found Dougal.”

Greeting Lady Aubrey, Mag said, “I trust that our Lizzie is safe, too, madam.”

“Aye, sir,” her ladyship said. “She and Muriella stayed at Tùr Meiloach.”

Andrew looked at his lady and then at Lina, as if something had occurred to him. He said to Ian, “Did ye find Dougal all alone then wi’ my lady and our Lina?”

“As well as two other men of his, sir, who lie dead where we fought.”

“MacFarlan men, belike?”

“I should think so, aye. But they served Pharlain.”

“Nonetheless, they’ll be men of my clan. I’ll have my lads see that they get proper burial.”

Lina caught Mag’s gaze. “They lie in that small clearing Lizzie likes to visit, sir. She took Mam and me there, and somehow, Dougal must have learned of it.”

“Ye can tell us all about that later, lass,” Andrew said. “Ian, Rob MacAulay, and Mag will escort the prisoners we took back to Dumbarton with them.”

“We’ll take Dougal, too,” Ian said. “Unless you mean to hang him, sir.”

Andrew looked Dougal over as if he were examining a sorry specimen. Then he said dourly, "I'd like fine to hang him for taking our Lina captive and making his vile threats against her, let alone for what mischief he's conjured up today, as I can see he has. However, I ken just as fine that Jamie would no thank me for stirring more trouble with Pharlain just when his grace is trying to settle this country down. If we were on me own land, I'd say different. In times past, where I stood didna matter, but Jamie's changed the times, and I have nae legal jurisdiction here."

"I do," Mag said grimly.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 4:13 am

Andrew looked from Dougal to Mag with a twinkle in his eyes. “ ’Tis true,” he said to Mag. “As son of the Laird of Galbraith, ye do wield power here.”

Lina held her breath—and her tongue—looking from one man to another.

Dougal said, “Galbraith won’t want trouble any more than ye do, Andrew.”

“That be true, too,” Andrew said, nodding. “Ye ken fine that Arthur wouldna like it, Magnus. Still and all, mayhap ye could just make the man disappear.”

Ian said firmly, “With respect, sir, I’d liefer have both Mag and Rob see our prisoners safely to Dumbarton.”

Andrew sighed. “I thought ye might,” he said. “But Jamie won’t want to hang this villain either, not whilst he’s trying to persuade the Highland chiefs to meet with him, and whilst Pharlain can block Arrochar’s pass to the Highlands.”

“Then what do you suggest we do with him,” Ian asked.

“I’ll have some of me own lads deal with him,” Andrew said, signing to two men hovering nearby. “Get him out of me sight and see him well on his way, with my compliments,” he said to them, emphasizing the last three words. “We’ll keep his weapons, his plaid, and his boots here, so when ye turn him loose in nobbut his tunic, he’ll be harmless to others. Then, if the Fates allow him to get home, mayhap his father will return the boon someday when he catches one of our lot.”

Ian nodded but said, “Then I’ll leave Mag and Rob to see to our prisoners, sir. They’ll

have enough men to get them to Dumbarton without trouble. His grace will have his own men there by now, as well as those of the Douglas, Buccleuch, and Sir Alex Buchanan. The castle, harbor, and burgh should all be secure.”

“Art sure, lad?” When Ian nodded, he added, “Then your da and Galbraith must have settled their minds about that venture since last I saw ye.”

“They both played their parts, aye,” Ian said with a smile.

Andrew’s eyebrows shot upward. “Did they now? Ye did fine then, and I’m proud to have ye for me good-son. Sithee, I’d suspected that the armed force I followed up the glen might belong to James Mòr. But he wasna with them.”

“I saw him,” Lina said then, avoiding Ian’s eye. “When I was on the glen path earlier, I heard riders behind me and hid. They were in such haste that they did not see me. Nor did they see Mam hurrying up the other side of Fruin Wat—”

She broke off, eyeing her father warily, knowing that she had said too much.

Andrew looked at his lady. “I’m a wee bit curious about that stroll, m’self.”

Lina held her breath, but Lady Aubrey met Andrew’s stern look easily.

He shifted his gaze to Lina. “I didna ken ye’d ever seen James Mòr, lass.”

“I had not seen him before,” she admitted. Deciding to get it all over at once, she looked at Mag and added, “But it must have been James Mòr and some of his closest followers, sir, because your brother Patrick rode with them.”

Ian said, “Then those boats of Pharlain’s that you saw this morning heading south, sir, were most likely headed for a meeting place on our south shore.”

“On Colquhoun land?”

“Aye, or MacAulay’s.”

Andrew’s eyes glinted but with humor or anger even Lina could not tell.

Ian said, “Will you be returning at once to Tùr Meiloach, sir?”

“We will,” Andrew said, shifting his gaze back to meet Lady Aubrey’s.

Ian said, “Then, with Mag’s agreement and that of the lady Margaret, I mean to stay here tonight with my lady. We have matters to discuss.”

Mag said, “You are welcome to stay, Ian. You don’t need Aunt Margaret’s permission. If she thinks you do, just leave her to Lina to bring round.”

“Lina is going to be busy explaining a few things to her husband,” Ian said, giving her a stern look.

Emotion surged through her then, a mixture of delight that he would stay, wonder at how he expected her to get home if her parents both left, and a touch of trepidation. She could sense his anger again. But even that filled her with delight one moment and made her wonder the next if she was mad to welcome it.

Ian wanted to get his hands on Lina, on all of her. His cock stirred at just the thought of touching her and teaching her more of what it meant to be married.

But first, he had a duty to see his prisoners on their way to Dumbarton in Mag’s charge and Rob’s.

“I suppose you remember that I, too, have a bonnie wife, my lad,” Mag said dryly.

“Forbye, she is with child and awaits me at Tùr Meiloach.”

“I do know that, but Dree will wait. I would remind you that I am but newly wed. Even so, I will grant you a choice. How many prisoners did you take?”

“Fifteen, mayhap two or three more. Andrew’s men slew several, coming round from Glen Finlas and trapping them between our two forces, as he did.”

Ian nodded. “If you start at once, you should reach Dumbarton before dark. Even if you don’t start immediately, it will take you only three or four hours, and there will be a moon tonight. It will take Andrew longer to reach his tower from here. But, since he takes his lady with him, he won’t mind the journey.”

“What is my other choice?” Mag asked.

“Camp here in the yard with them overnight and leave in the morning. You have Rob and his men to aid you. I’ll lend you mine, as well, to keep watch.”

“And thus hand my head to my aunt for washing,” Mag said with a chuckle. “I thank you for letting me make the choice, but I’m in as much of a hurry to return to my lady as you are to be with yours. I’ll get this lot moving as soon as we eat.”

“The hunters planned to roast venison,” Ian reminded him.

“I know they do. But since I do not mean to inflict our prisoners on them, I’ll raid the larder here. I ken fine that we’ll find ale and bread enough for all. I expect we’ll have enough cheese and dried meat to dole out, as well. If I see Jamie or Colquhoun, when should I tell them to expect you?”

“Sometime tomorrow,” Ian said. “I don’t mean to linger here.”

“What about Lina?”

Ian glanced toward his beautiful wife, still standing with her parents.

“That is my choice to make,” he said with a wry smile. “It will depend on the explanation she offers for her actions today.”

Mag’s eyes twinkled. “Whatever you do, don’t treat any explanation lightly. I had a similar experience with Andrena, and I cannot say that I behaved wisely.”

“Aye, well, we’ll see,” Ian said. “I can’t have Lina taking her own road as she has been doing of late. Only see where it led her this time and the last.”

“In troth, I’m gey thankful that she was with Lizzie,” Mag said, sobering.

“And I’m glad that Lina was not alone. Even so...”

“Their capture was Lizzie’s fault, you know.”

“I do. But Lina should never have agreed to ride down the glen with her.”

“Do as you will then, my lad, but if you would be wiser than I was, tread with great care.”

Ian noted then that the twinkle had returned to the big man’s eyes.

Lina listened to her father with half an ear while keeping track of Ian and Mag in her peripheral vision. Andrew chatted casually, inquiring about their journey to Bannachra and Lady Margaret’s well-being. But Lina knew he wanted an explanation of her mother’s meeting with Dougal, and one for her own presence there, as much as Ian did. And Andrew’s temper was even more volatile than Ian’s was.

Nevertheless, Lady Aubrey's tone remained calmly conversational.

Although Andrew fairly radiated determination, neither he nor his lady seemed distressed or angry, so Lina's own earlier torrent of emotions began to settle into a semblance of her usual calm... until peripheral movement diverted her.

Ian had parted with Mag and was striding toward her through the crowd.

Tentacles of tension slid around and through her, stirred by a mixture of emotions. Her body reacted strongly, sensually, to the look of purpose on his face. Too-delightful images and feelings from their wedding night and afterward filled her mind and body until she could scarcely think of anything else.

As he strode nearer, the expression on his face was enough to make the men between them stand aside to make way for him. She recalled then his saying that her decision to follow her mother was more reckless than anything he had ever done.

Her calm shattered. Her tension grew. She could not claim that following her own mother ought to have been safe, not without lying to him. Nor could she honestly claim ignorance of any danger in what she had done. The danger threatening her mother had been the very thing that had forced her to act, and she had already declared as much to him.

She tried to think of something to say, anything that might disarm his temper. But her imagination failed her.

Striding up to them, Ian nodded to Andrew, then to Lady Aubrey, saying crisply, "I would ask you both to excuse us now. Lina will stay here with me tonight, and I must return to Dumbarton tomorrow."

His tone tightened the tentacles gripping her and sent heat and apprehension through

her in equal, if wholly disparate, measures. The heat she welcomed. She yearned for him to make her feel it strongly again all over. The apprehension....

Without looking at her, Andrew said lightly, “What will ye do with our Lina, lad, if I may ask ye?”

Lina swallowed hard at her father’s choice of words.

“You may ask me any questions you like, sir,” Ian said. “In troth, I do not know the answer to that one yet. I would like to take her with me to Dumbarton—nay, to Dunglass and from there to Craggan. But you will agree that I’d be leaving her in good hands if I decided to leave her here for a time with Lady Margaret.”

To Lina’s shock, Andrew nodded. Her mother kept silent.

Then Andrew said, “I’d ask only that ye visit us soon at Tùr Meiloach, lad. I ken fine that ye’ll likely take ship from Dunglass tae Craggan when ye go there. But we’ll want to see ye as soon as the pair of ye settle in at Craggan.”

Lina opened her mouth to remind them that most of her belongings were at Tùr Meiloach, which would make settling in anywhere else difficult, to say the least. But a glance at Ian’s harsh countenance stopped the words on her tongue.

He nodded as if her silence pleased him. Then, to Andrew, he said, “We will see you anon, sir, I promise.”

“Then take yourselves off, although ye might want a bite of supper first.”

“Perhaps,” Ian said. Offering his arm to Lina, he added, “We’ll see.”

Without hesitation, she accepted his arm. Her own temper had begun to spark.

Having noted the set of her delicate jaw and the thinning of her so-kissable lips, Ian urged her across the yard. Again, men saw them coming and made way.

“I must speak with Lady Margaret,” Lina said. “She will need help if she is to provide supper for this crowd.”

“We won’t trouble her,” Ian said. “Where is your bedchamber?”

“Good sakes, sir, would you send me to bed without supper? I’m not a bairn.”

“Mag and Rob will see to the men’s supper with the aid of the Galbraith people here. Lady Margaret’s own people will look after her and will perhaps provide us with supper, too, later. Meantime, I want to talk to you, and I do not want anyone to interrupt us. Now, where is your bedchamber?”

“This way,” she said, moving away from him toward the main entrance. Following her inside, to an entry that was no more than a broad landing on a spiral stone stairway, he saw a smaller landing and an archway into the great hall a few steps above them. Steps to his left led downward. Despite apparently being the tower’s main stairway, it was as narrow as the service stairs at Tùr Meiloch.

“Defending this place would be nigh as difficult as attacking it,” he said. “I wonder if James Mòr knew aught but that this tower stands in Glen Fruin.”

“Why do you say that?” she asked, glancing over her shoulder as she crossed the great hall landing to the next flight.

“Because your lad Pluff said that one of those six men pointed to Lady Margaret’s banner on the ramparts and said they would ride on. They had got well ahead of their other men by then, so I’m thinking that James Mòr expected those following them to delay pursuit if any presented itself. Or mayhap, he planned to bide here for a time to

take a meal or even to seize the tower.”

Looking thoughtful, she led him to the next landing and one more after that before she gestured to one of two doors off the second landing.

“That is where I slept before Dougal captured us,” she said. “Lizzie and Murie shared that room yonder. I think this must be the one where Mag usually sleeps when he stays here, though. The bed is longer than any other one here.”

“If the bed suits Mag, it will suit me,” Ian said. “And he won’t sleep here tonight. He and Rob will take the prisoners to Dumbarton as soon as they’ve eaten.”

Leaning past her, he opened the bedchamber door and urged her inside. Following, he shut the door and bolted it.

The room was small, the bed against the wall to his left as long if not as wide as the one they had shared at Tùr Meiloach. The only other furniture was a washstand with the usual basin and ewer, a pair of wooden kists, and two stools flanking a small square table near the only window, across from the door.

“Now, lass,” he said, leaning against the door, “let’s have it.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to tell me again about seeing your mother in the woods before you decided to follow her to her meeting with Dougal.”

“Faith, I didn’t know then that she went there to meet Dougal.”

“Don’t quibble. She did. He said he told her to bring the charters.”

“But she did not bring them. She had promised only to meet him.”

“So you asked her about that, did you?”

“Not exactly, but she said he threatened harm to us if she did not promise to meet him and that meeting him was all that she had promised to do.”

“Then she should have told Andrew, and plainly she did not. That, however, is his business and none of yours or mine. What you did today is my business, and I mean to get to the bottom of it. So, tell me everything that happened. What did you see? Describe it all to me. How did you feel?”

She hesitated, and he could not tell if she did so because she was sorting her thoughts or because she was trying to think how she might avoid the discussion.

“Don’t try me too far, lass. My temper is unreliable at the best of times, let alone on a day like this one has been. So sit on that stool and begin with what happened on our wedding night.”

Knowing that she had little choice, Lina gathered her dignity, called on her ability to compose herself, and obeyed him. When he drew up the second stool and sat facing her across the table, she described all that she could recall of the events.

For a time, as she talked, she expected him to interrupt her at any moment, as her father often did, to demand more detail. But Ian kept silent.

If, at times, he frowned or showed other indications of doubt, he controlled any urge to cross-question her, and she was grateful for his reticence. It allowed her to search her mind for details that she might not otherwise have thought to include.

After describing the scroll-like objects that Lady Aubrey had carried in her arms

during the second episode, she hesitated until Ian frowned before she said hastily, “Mam was not carrying anything today. I did think at first that she might have such things under her shawl. But she had naught when we saw her with Dougal, so what came to pass today was not exactly as I had seen it before.”

“Did you think the scrolls were the Arrochar charters?”

“Not at the time,” she said. “Only after Dougal mentioned them today.”

“Had you seen such visions as you’ve described before our wedding night?”

“Never before that one,” she said. “I have experienced some strange things in the past, though. Things to which I paid little heed when they happened.”

“Such as what?”

“For one, when Peter and I rode after Lizzie that day. The sun was shining, but the woods ahead seemed to darken, as if day were turning to night.”

He looked darker himself, hearing that. “What did you think that meant?”

“I didn’t think about it then at all. I thought only of stopping Lizzie.”

“What do you think now?”

“That it meant danger lay ahead. That I should have heeded the warning and found some way to stop Lizzie sooner.” She was opening herself up to him. That felt dangerous, too, because he had revealed little to indicate what he was thinking.

“Did anything like that happen today?”

She froze, remembering. Then, warily, she met his gaze.

“I see,” he said grimly. “What else?”

She wondered if she ought to tell him about her ability to calm Lizzie or if, in truth, that ability had ever existed. She did not want to lie to him, nor, she decided then, did she want to tell him anything that she doubted herself.

“Well, lass? Art going to spit out whatever it is that’s hopping up and down on your tongue? Or must I—?”

“I don’t know if I believe it myself,” she admitted. “But if you must know, I’ll tell you. I think that, whilst we were captives, I was able at times to spread my calm to Lizzie. It even felt once as if, when I willed her to compose herself, she did.”

“Sakes, you do that to me all the time.”

Lina stared at him. “I don’t!”

“Aye, sure, you do. You did it just a few minutes ago.”

Ian wished he could take back his last few words, because he had not meant to challenge or interrupt her. That first sentence had slipped out. Then, when she contradicted him, he reacted as he always did when anyone challenged him.

Frowning, she shook her head. “By my troth, sir, I don’t know what you mean. I have not tried to do any such thing... not successfully, at all events.”

He allowed himself a wry smile at the rider and could see that his smile gave her no comfort. Nor should it have.

“Art sure that you do not try to impose your will on me?” he asked softly.

He could almost feel her temper rise at the suggestion that he might now take it into his head to doubt her. She said flatly, “I do not lie to you.”

“Forgive me if I begin to wonder whether you can will such things,” he said, matching her tone. “It was bad enough to learn that Dree can nearly hear my thoughts as I think them. To discover that I may have married a—”

“A what?” she demanded “I ken fine that some people have called Dree a witch. I also know that Mag has asked you not to call her Dree. But I will refrain from comment on that.”

A good thing that is, too , he thought.

“What I will say,” she went on tersely, “is that if you want to discuss what happened today in a civil—”

“I am always civil,” he snapped. “I was just reminding you that having one woman in the family who thinks she knows what I am thinking or feeling is bad enough. To be married to one who can toy with my emotions would be worse.”

Knowing that her temper was about to slip its leash, Lina fought to maintain her dignity if not her composure. As she did, she glanced at Ian and saw that he was fighting a battle of his own, either to calm himself or to avoid eruption.

Mercy , she thought. Still watching him, she drew a deep breath, let it out, and focused on relaxing and dissipating her anger. Next, eyeing him more warily than ever, she tried to imagine him as Lizzie or anyone more easily soothed than she had believed Ian could be. Then, as she had with Lizzie, she willed Ian to be calm.

To her wonder, she saw the sparks in his eyes dim as he, too, inhaled deeply and exhaled. His gaze slid upward when he did that, to a point above her head.

Then his gaze met hers again. “What just happened?” he asked her.

“I don’t know exactly,” she admitted.

“You did something.”

“I did, aye. But I swear to you, I have never tried to do that before.”

“So you can control me.” He did not sound astonished, just resigned.

“By my troth, sir, I did naught to control you , only to control myself. Sithee, then I saw—Faith, I do not know how to explain this properly, for I have never—”

Deciding to start again and just tell him what had happened, she said, “The fact is that you stirred my temper when you ordered me to sit down and explain myself. Then you stirred it nearly to exploding when you snapped at me. I realized that my anger was inflaming yours, so I fought to control myself, not you.”

“But you did control me.”

“With respect, sir, I doubt that,” she said. “I may have some ability to aid you, but you influence me, too. You have only to look at me as you did earlier when you came toward me to make my knees quake. Good sakes, you scared all of those men out of your way. Grown men, warriors all, leaped to clear a path for you.”

“My temper does evidently have its own reputation,” he admitted.

She wanted to smile at that understatement but judged it wiser to say, “I have heard

that, aye. But I swear I had never before tried to control you. Mayhap our tempers simply sway one another, and we are both making more of what just happened than it deserves. If I am calm, you are calm. If I get angry..." She spread her hands.

"I don't know," he said. "I felt something then, something unusual."

She sighed. "So did I. Mayhap it is all part of having foresight, if that is what I have been experiencing. As I said, I had never had episodes like those before. Nor did I ever have cause before Lizzie and I were captured to try to calm any—"

Her sisters' images loomed before her, bickering with each other.

"What is it now?" he asked. "What are you thinking?"

She smiled ruefully. "I'm thinking that I have a reputation, too, not for temperament but for family peacemaking. Sithee, Andrena and Murie often quarrel or begin to quarrel. I can calm them, but by my troth, I never thought of it before as willing them to behave. Nor do I think I ever did such a thing. But I did do that with Lizzie at Dumbarton at least once, I'll admit. I was terrified that she would speak rashly or act so and make matters worse for both of us. She thought Dougal was handsome and that he liked her. I knew he just wanted to use her as a pawn."

"You were right."

"Have I satisfied you, then?"

"Not completely." He stood and held out his hand. "I want satisfying now in another, more stimulating way."

Desire swept through her, and she let him draw her to her feet and to the bed.

“Will you take off your clothes, or shall I?” he asked softly.

Since his fingers were already at her laces, loosening them, she murmured, “I think it must be your turn.”

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I an wasted no time disrobing her. Remnants of his anger lingered, but the last shreds of them vanished when he bared her breasts. He stripped the rest of her clothing from her, and when she was naked, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

“Take your clothes off now,” she said. “They are prickling me.”

“You do it,” he replied, grinning but wondering if she would obey.

Looking him in the eye, she said, “I will gladly assist you. But just as it was your turn to take off my clothes, it is my turn to give the orders, sir. Surely, you would not want me to think that you behave unfairly.”

Chuckling but ever willing, he took off his jack and let her unlace his shirt and his breeks. Then impatience stirred, and he quickly stripped off the rest.

When he reached for her again, she stepped back, saying, “Nay, sir, you will not touch me until I give you leave. This time, I want to watch you walk to the bed. You seemed to derive pleasure from watching me. I want to see how that feels.”

“Aye, sure,” he said. Recalling their wedding night, he remembered other things that he had commanded her to do and strode willingly to the bed.

Lina followed him. “Now stretch out and let me look at you,” she said.

What followed was educational for him, and mayhap for her, too. She seemed to like giving him orders, and she had learned much from him in a short time about pleasing a man. He soon realized, though, that it was not in his nature to remain inactive at

such times. Even so, she was right. Fair was fair.

But when she moved on top of him and began licking and sucking him from his nipples downward, he could bear it for only a short time before he rose up, captured her, and rolled over with her.

Laughing, she looked up at him, her beautifully clear eyes alight with her laughter. “You do not play fair, Sir Ian Colquhoun.”

“Do I not, my lady? See what you think of this.”

Her next gurgle of laughter turned into a gasp when he reached between them to find her nether lips and slide his fingers inside.

With that, he claimed her as his own again, and her response was as passionate as any man might have wished. He took his time, watching her expression until he realized that he did not need to watch her to gauge her feelings.

He could tell just by the way she moved and the little sounds she made. Each difference in movement or sound fired his senses as much as her touch did.

It was a long while before they fell asleep, exhausted.

Furious and frustrated, Dougal MacPharlain strode along the west Lomondside path with four of Andrew Dubh’s men following him and with only the light of the moon and stars to guide him. Although he hoped they would abandon him when they reached the track up through the pass, he knew that any opportunity to pay Andrew back had vanished... for the nonce. He had also learned, painfully, just what seeing him on his way with the laird’s compliments meant. With each blow the men had struck him, they had recited those words.

Battered and bruised he might be, but Andrew had made a grave mistake by letting him live. The fool ought to have hanged him when he had the chance. He did, after all, still have an unwed daughter. And other opportunities would come.

They overslept, making Ian glad that he had not promised Mag they would leave early. But they made good time, and when they reached the river plain about two hours after midday, Dumbarton loomed ahead. As they neared the end of the woods, a dozen riders or more came into view, riding toward them.

The rider leading the way carried Colquhoun's banner.

"This is a surprise, sir," Ian said when the two parties met.

His father grinned. "I feared ye'd make straight for Dunglass, lad. Sithee, his grace wants to see ye. And he's not a patient man."

"Sakes, have I offended him?" Ian asked.

"Nay, how could ye when ye took back his castle for him? 'Tis more likely the man wants to thank ye. But, sithee, Mag told me ye'd sent half of your tail back with him from Bannachra. I just thought that, as my heir and a knight of Jamie's realm, ye should make a greater show whilst approaching the gates of Dumbarton than to ride up that hill and through them with nobbut four men to support ye."

Ian suspected that Colquhoun wanted to be at his side when he met with the King, but he was delighted and nonetheless grateful for his thoughtfulness.

"I'd be proud to join forces, sir, if you will ride in with me. Otherwise, I'll willingly accept four of your men to ride with mine. It would be unwise of me, I think, to risk Jamie's anger by arriving with a larger tail than I'm allowed."

“Aye, sure, I’ll go with ye,” Colquhoun said, leaning sideways to put an arm around Lina and give her a fatherly hug.

“Did anyone kill the great stag on your hunt, sir?” Ian asked then.

“Nay, lad. We never laid eyes on the wily creature.”

Ian smiled, delighted that the splendid beast still lived to roam the woods and heights. A glance at Lina told him that she was also pleased.

At the foot of the road to the castle gates, he said, “It might be more tactful for us to take only my men the rest of the way, sir.”

“Tact? From ye, lad?” Colquhoun’s eyes danced. “I thought I’d never see such a thing. It must be your lady’s good example. Forbye, I should tell ye that his grace would have ye present her to him.”

“She sets a fine example, to be sure,” Ian said, smiling at Lina.

She gazed back solemnly. “I am not properly dressed to meet his grace, sir. This old gray kirtle is unsuitable for such an august occasion. Mayhap whilst you speak with his grace, your lord father will be kind enough to bear me company.”

Colquhoun chuckled. “I’d bear ye company any time, lassie, right willingly. But I doubt his grace would be so ill-willed as to disparage your dress. Even if he were disposed to such behavior, ye’re as beautiful as any other noblewoman in the land, whatever ye wear. So, unless your husband objects or Jamie’s mood has soured afore then, I warrant that all three of us will meet with him.”

Ian was determined to keep Lina with him, whatever his grace said, so he was glad to find Jamie not only in a good mood but demanding to see them at once.

He greeted them with smiles, striding toward them when his chamberlain announced them. Inches shorter than Ian, the King was solidly square-built, with a muscular torso, broad shoulders, and the powerful legs of a fine swordsman.

“I am glad to see you again, Sir Ian,” he said, offering his hand. “You have done me a great service, sir, although I confess, I laughed when I heard how easily you accomplished what I had thought must be an impossible feat.”

“No more impossible than it was for your cousin, the Lord of the North, to take Stirling, your grace. But, if I may,” Ian added, making a subtle gesture toward Lina. At Jamie’s nod, he went on, “I would present my lady wife to your grace.”

Lina made a deep curtsy.

“Sir Magnus told me you had married,” Jamie said, extending a hand to her. “Arise, Lady Colquhoun—Nay, though, you will be Lady Ian, will you not?”

“Why, I do not know, your grace,” Lina said, looking to Ian for help.

“We haven’t sorted that out yet,” he said. “I suppose it will be Lady Ian Colquhoun, since my mother is Lady Colquhoun.”

“Whoever you decide to be, my lady, I have been fain to meet you,” Jamie said. “Sir Magnus tells me that you are also his lady wife, Andrena’s, sister.”

“I am, aye, your grace.”

“Splendid,” Jamie said. Turning to Ian, he added, “This marriage of yours pleases me, sir. Sithee, it also aids the plan I have for you.” Turning his head slightly, he said, “Will, you may bring those documents to the table now.”

Lina, feeling pleasantly relieved by the King's friendliness, saw a slender man a bit taller than his grace emerge from shadows at the far end of the chamber and move lithely toward them. She had not known anyone else was in the room.

The man picked up two rolled documents from a table and carried them to a larger table near the King. Laying one roll down as it was, he spread the other open for his grace, who reached for a quill and dipped it in a nearby inkpot.

Handing the quill to Ian, he said, "If you will sign here, Sir Ian..."

Looking stunned, Ian said, "May I know what I am signing, your grace?"

"Aye, sure. I'm naming you Governor of Dumbarton," Jamie said, grinning.

"Governor!"

"I told you I'd have land for you after I retrieved some of the properties my uncle gave away as enticements to certain nobles. You retrieved the royal property that I consider most important, so I mean to put you in charge here. You will have more land of your own in time, too. But be aware that you will hold the position here that my uncle Burleigh held when those villains murdered him. So you must look after yourself, sir, especially since James Mòr remains at large."

Ian grimaced. "Sakes, sir, he is likely out of the country by now. And, in troth, I did little to stop him. You may want to think again about this document."

"You did what I asked of you, even though I fully believed that I had asked too much. Come to that, I had my chance to kill James Mòr when he attacked me in the midst of the rebels' failed coup. Before you sign that, though, I should explain to your lady wife that you will live here. I hope you will not object to that, my lady."

“Not unless you expect him to live here alone, your grace,” Lina said with a smile, realizing that her erstwhile image of living at Craggan while Ian carried out duties elsewhere had long since died an unmourned death. “I would object to that.”

“Since I suspect that he would not like that either, I should have made myself plain,” the King said. Indicating the man who had brought the documents to him, he added, “This is my steward, Sir William Fletcher. I want you and Sir Ian to take up residence as soon as you can, madam. So, if there is aught that Will can do to make things easier for you, you have only to make your needs known to him.”

Laughing, she said, “Since nearly all of my belongings except for the cloak I left here are still at Tùr Meiloach, Sir William must needs be a magician, I think.”

Chuckling in response, the King said, “I did not mean for you to think you should plant yourself here today. You may have a day or two at Dunglass to collect yourselves whilst I remain here. Doubtless, Sir Magnus and the others will aid me.”

Lina gasped. “But how long will that take? Forgive me, your grace, but if I am to do my part here, I will need—”

“Nay, lass,” Ian interjected, diverting her attention to him. “That can wait.”

She gaped, realizing that, in her shock, she had been arguing with the King. Glancing at him, she saw that his eyes were twinkling and relaxed.

Amused to see Lina’s consternation and grateful that Jamie had a strong sense of humor, Ian said, “We will see to all that later, lass. If his grace can spare Mag for a few days, I will send him and a galley to collect whatever you will need immediately from Tùr Meiloach. Although,” he added, looking at Jamie, “I did promise her father that we would visit him as soon as we could.”

“Then, after all is in order here and we have our own people in place throughout Dumbarton, you may take a fortnight for yourselves,” Jamie said. Meantime, we can trust Sir Alex and Rob MacAulay to aid us here.”

Dismissed soon thereafter, the Colquhoun party headed for Dunglass. Although Ian was weary, he felt a surge of new energy when he realized that at last he would enjoy his bride in his own chamber and his own bed.

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Tùr Meiloach, two months later

The hushed audience listened, transfixed, as the tale neared its conclusion:

“Wicked Donal fought the peat man in a gey fierce fight.

But the Fates had turned our peat man into a noble knight.

So the virtuous ladies are safe and Wicked Donal is defeated,

He will never win, nor his dastardly deeds e’er be repeated.

Wicked Blackheart can no longer on Lomondside abide,

For the brave Sir Goodheart would fain hang him high.

Sithee, Wicked Donal Blackheart betrayed his rightful chief,

So when he ends in Hades; may he linger there in grief!”

Muriella barely finished reciting the last few words before her listeners in the lower hall burst into tumultuous cheers, applause, and foot-stomping.

Those at the high table applauded more politely. But Lina had to choke back gurgles of laughter and dared not look at Ian, knowing what he must think of himself as Sir Goodheart.

Fortunately, he sat at her father's right with Mag between them.

Andrena, sitting at Lina's right, on that first night of Ian's long-promised visit to Tùr Meiloach, said faintly, "Do you suppose Murie knows how well she captured Dougal's nature in that silly tale? She described him as if she had known him long and well. Yet I'm nearly certain that she has yet to clap eyes on the man."

"I am certain she has not," Lina said. "She questioned you thoroughly after you met him, though, and she said that Lizzie had told her everything about our capture and captivity. You know how Murie stores up such details."

Lady Aubrey, sitting at Andrena's other side, said, "We should adjourn to the solar now. In troth, Lina," she added, "I do not want to share you with everyone else in the hall on your first night here."

Someone had begun to play a lute and sing, and others were singing along.

When Lady Aubrey spoke to Andrew, he nodded, rose, and said something to the other men at the high table. The result was that everyone there followed her upstairs.

Lina waited for Murie, who hurried up to her, grinning. "What did you think? Did I get all of the details right? Why is everyone leaving?"

"Because Mam wants us to be together as a family tonight," Lina said. "And I would liefer talk to you and the family than listen to the singing here."

"Well, I am not so sure that I want to go up there with everyone," Muriella said. "Mag did not seem to like my tale, nor did Master Robert MacAulay. I do not know why Ian brought him along. He is not at all amusing, Lina."

"Well, Sir Alex is here, too. You like him, do you not?"

“Aye, sure. He is much merrier than Master Robert. But I am glad that I do not mean ever to marry. I doubt a man exists that I could love longer than a day.”

Amused, Lina said, “Never?”

Murie grinned. “Never. Sithee, I want to learn all I can, and when I say that to Mag or to Master Rob, they just shake their heads at me.”

Trying to think how to put her thoughts tactfully, Lina said, “I think you might have to add Ian to the head-shakers after tonight, Murie. He will not properly appreciate your description of him and what he did.”

“What man does not want to be a hero? Ian has not complained before.”

Since she was not sure that Ian had ever heard any tales about himself, Lina said, “I noticed that you said naught about Mam’s part in any of this.”

“I knew she would not like it,” Murie said. “Forbye, she would not tell me anything about what happened to her. But I can add that after you tell me about it.”

“I’m afraid I won’t do that,” Lina said gently. “Nor do I think you would be wise to ask Ian. He is more likely to take you to task for having said as much about Dougal as you did. You must ken fine that Dougal will not like that, either, Murie.”

“Dougal is not here,” Murie pointed out. But she cast a glance up the stairway, where the door to the solar had come into view.

Ian stood there, frowning. He smiled when Lina caught his eye. But when they reached him, he said, “I wish you had let me hear your tale before you recited it to everyone, Muriella, especially as so much of it was about me.”

“I told them naught but what happened,” she said defensively.

“We’ll talk more about that anon,” he said. “Right now, I want you to go on into the solar and sit near your mam, because I mean to sit with my lady wife. We have both been gey busy these past weeks, and I have seen too little of her.”

Without argument, Muriella went into the solar. When Lina moved to follow her, Ian put a hand on her arm. “Must we stay?” he asked her.

“For a time at least,” she said, smiling at him again. “You were gey tactful, sir. I warrant you’d much rather have—”

“You don’t know what I’d like to do to her,” he said. “But right now that doesn’t concern me much, either.”

He had wanted to throttle Muriella each time she had mentioned blasted Sir Goodheart. But his sole concern now was to get his lady wife all to himself, preferably in their bed. “Art sure we must go in?” he asked her again.

“I am,” she said firmly. “And tonight, sir, you will do as I say.”

“Will I, your ladyship? Will I, indeed?”

“You will if you know what is good for you.”

He kissed her thoroughly then and without sparing a thought for the others. “I do know what’s good for me, my beautiful love. You are.”

“I’ve just recalled that there be summat ye dinna ken yet,” Andrew said, rather suddenly and most irritatingly filling the doorway beside Ian.

“What is that, sir?” Ian asked, striving for patience.

“Me charters have gone missing. I thought me lady might have taken them when she

left here with Margaret for Bannachra. Sithee, earlier Aubrey had feared I might want to have a look at them to be sure they were safe. She was right, too, because I did that verra thing after she left. But she vows she never touched them, and I'm bound to say that I dinna ken how she could, for I never told her where I put them."

Ian drew a breath before he said, "What would you have me do, sir?"

"Nowt that anyone can do," Andrew said. "We'll just have to think how to oust Pharlain from Arrochar and take it back ourselves, I expect."

"Then, perhaps, we might talk more about that later, sir. At present..."

When he paused, Andrew looked from one to the other of them before he said, "Och, aye, I'll leave ye be tonight then."

"Thank you, sir. Now," Ian added, taking her in his arms, "where were we?"

"We were about to go in there with the others," she said. "Did you really just call me your beautiful love?"

"I did, and we were not just about to go in with the others."

"But we were," she said, meeting his gaze mischievously. "I thought you had learned to be tactful. But it would be most un tactful simply to walk awa—"

Her words ended in a muffled shriek when he put a hand over her mouth.

"Tact is overvalued," he said. "Now, come to bed."

Laughing, she allowed him to urge her up the stairs. He was grinning, too.

Inside the chamber that Lady Margaret had occupied before, where earlier they had

found, to Ian's relief, a new and longer bed, they hastily disrobed and fell onto that bed together. There, they playfully teased each other to heights that he realized they had scarcely begun to explore.

He brought her nearly to her peak and then possessed her, so that they rose again together. Their culmination revealed that, just as her serenity could calm him and her anger could ignite his, her passion for him enflamed his desire for her.

"We will be happy much more often than we'll fratch," he murmured.

"Is that a command, my love?"

"Aye, sure," Ian said drowsily.