



The Rightful Highland King (The Last Celtic King #4)

Author: *Alisa Adams*

Category: Historical

Description: "Can I make ye feel even a fraction of the way ye bespell me?"

With the rebellion at the gates, Neala McNair fights alongside her brother—the rightful Highland King. Yet her heart still aches for the tormented son of the usurper tyrant.

Punished for his failures, Ansel is bound to marry a traitor's daughter, even though his soul belongs to the one woman he can never claim—the lost princess of a rising rebellion.

As war looms and secrets tighten their noose, desires ignite and destinies are rewritten.

Will their love rise with the new world—or die with the old?

The Rightful Highland King by Alisa Adams weaves mystery, breathtaking twists, and fated romance against the rugged beauty of the Scottish Highlands.

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Prince Ansel Ashkirk, son of the conquering King of Scotland, stood in the pelting rain, his dark hair slicked to his face and his clothes sticking to his skin.

He watched the far distance as the little speck that had once been his horse disappeared over the horizon, carrying Neala McNair away with it.

His body shivered with a chill that had little to do with the icy weather.

Frozen shards pricked at the inside of his veins as he tried to understand what he had just done.

She'd lied to him from the first moment they'd met.

Everything he'd known about the woman who had captivated him so had been untrue.

The name she'd given him, Abigail, had been borrowed from her dead sister.

Her claims of a father who taught her to read and play chess had been fabricated on the memory of a man who'd died long, long ago.

Even her hair, hidden under dark dye, had been a falsehood.

Ansel had never seen it in person, but he'd seen many a portrait of the McNairs, and he'd met Cailean McNair face-to-face.

Underneath Neala's dark hair mask was hidden a waterfall of woven gold.

All lies from the very first moment. Despite that, Ansel couldn't bring himself to hate her. Yes, she'd pretended to be someone else, but she'd done so to preserve her own life. If his father had known who she was, he would have killed her on sight. Or worse.

And Ansel himself? What would he have done? The thought troubled him more than he'd like to admit—because he knew the answer. He knew that he would have obeyed his father's whim without a thought, because that was all he'd ever known.

But Neala had infected him. Her lovely dark eyes, shining with intelligence beyond her supposed station, had intrigued him, and as he'd gotten to know her, her sharp perception and perseverance had captivated him.

Something inside Ansel had shifted for the first time, something awakened, something changed.

She'd called out to his soul. Somehow, she'd reached out not to the Prince of Blackthorn Castle, heir of Edric Ashkirk, but to Ansel, child of Seonag McDonald, the boy who had been buried long, long ago under his father's commanding gaze.

Ansel scowled, tightening his fists, allowing the battering rain to draw him back to the present.

He couldn't allow this kind of weakness.

He had allowed a moment of weakness when Neala had leaned against him; he'd given way to a desperate, fleeting impulse which painted him as the most flagrant of traitors.

She was the true daughter of a legacy his father had tried desperately to squash for twenty years, and the sister of the man who was currently trying to overthrow the

throne.

Self-loathing flooded Ansel as he wiped the rain from his face.

It wasn't as though he had ever been fooled, not really.

Oh, he hadn't known the details, but he had known from the first moment that Abby—Neala—was not who she claimed.

He had known that she was lying, which was one of the reasons she had so intrigued him in the first place.

Of course, he'd never dreamed that she would reveal what she had. He'd never dreamed...

He growled under his breath, pacing back and forth.

He needed to get rid of her, purge her from his mind.

He'd allowed a chink to form in the armor he'd so carefully spent his life crafting, and now he needed to close the gap.

But the more he tried to tear his mind away from her, the more he saw her.

Neala, peering curiously down at the chessboard, discovering his trap.

Neala, weeping openly as she held her mother's words.

Neala pressed close to him, her lips a breath away from his, his body urging him on even as his common sense ripped him away.

Ansel burst out with a wordless shout of frustration, anger, and pain, the sound instantly whipped away by the wind.

Impossible girl! She had given him a sickness, and he needed to purge it if he was to ever fulfill his father's wishes for him.

His pacing faltered suddenly as he felt something underfoot, softer than a rock but harder than grass, and he looked down.

A little doll lay in the grass, its wooden face staring up at him, its painted uniform worn by time but still clear.

A toy soldier, keeping its weary guard after more than twenty years.

Ansel stared at the thing, blinking rapidly.

It was not the first time he had discovered this same little soldier.

He had witnessed Neala tuck the thing into her cloak, but she must have dropped it when he had forced her to flee.

He stooped down and picked up the toy. A tiny capercaillie was painted on its breast.

"Left behind by another fleein' McNair, eh?" he whispered. "And I found ye again. If I was a superstitious man, I'd burn ye 'til ye're nothin' but ash."

The toy soldier stared up at him with painted black eyes.

Ansel snorted, chiding himself for his silliness.

He raised his hand to throw the little soldier into the trees but paused.

In his mind's eye, he saw the wideness in Neala's eyes as she'd gazed at it, saw how she'd smiled as he told her to keep it.

He inhaled, the cold air painful on the inside of his nostrils, and lowered his hand, securing the little toy in his pocket.

He could not bring himself to throw it away.

With a wry smile, he thought that at least he'd be bringing something of the McNairs back to Blackthorn Castle.

A short time later, the thundering hooves of his men sounded. The foremost amongst them pulled his mount to a stop as he saw Ansel at the side of the road, though he waved the rest of the army to keep going.

"How in the blazes have ye managed tae lose yer horse?" the rider asked, and Ansel, squinting through the rain, recognized his friend and confidante, his older cousin Baldric.

Baldric was the son of his father's sister, sent to the king's court at fifteen, and since then the two boys had been close.

Fifteen years later, Baldric served as Ansel's right-hand man, covertly supporting Ansel even when there was conflict between the prince and his father.

Ansel was very glad that, of all of his men who could have stopped, it was his cousin.

"The daft thing got startled and rode off," Ansel replied, the lie coming easily to his lips. He would trust Baldric with his life, but he could not trust him with the truth. If even a whisper of the truth got back to Edric's ears, it would spell disaster. "Move up, then. We can ride double."

Baldric grinned and held out a hand, helping Ansel climb up on the horse behind him. They started off, settling back into the ranks of the Ashkirk men streaming back along the road toward Blackthorn Castle.

Ansel sighed, closing his eyes. She was waiting there with those dark eyes and those pouting lips, begging him to come with her, begging him to turn away from the darkness.

He scowled, shaking his head. She did not belong in his mind.

He had sent her away in body, and he willed desperately for the rest of her to go before it destroyed him.

"What happened tae the lass?" Baldric asked.

Startled, Ansel snapped his eyes open. "I... what?"

"The lassie that ye had with ye. The maid ye were so fond of. What happened tae her?" Baldric asked. "I suppose ye brought her as a lover, but she seems tae have disappeared."

"I killed her." Ansel's reply was sharp and harsh, brokering no further questions.

"A spy?" Baldric guessed, then let out a low whistle. "Well, at least ye dispatched her before it was too late. Me uncle has plenty tae be furious about without bringin' one of them back with us."

They rode on in silence. Ansel tried to focus on what was ahead of him.

There would be a punishment for his failure.

It had been a long, long time since he'd failed his father—he'd learned from a young age how harsh the price could be.

His men would have questions, too, Baldric first among them.

He'd felt the dissent from many of them when he'd given the order to abandon the Sloe Stronghold—McNair Castle.

Ansel did not doubt that this would come back to reckon with him in the near future, but at least he could count on his cousin at his side to back him up, whether he agreed or not with Ansel's decision.

But no matter how much he tried to think of these practicalities, all his mind wanted to focus on was her.

What would the McNair lad think when his sister rode up to the castle? Probably that it was some kind of trick, a plot by Ansel to come back and do greater harm later. That was what Ansel would suspect if he were in Cailean's shoes.

But what did Neala think?

"I ken the real ye," she'd pleaded. But she didn't. She had no idea.

He was Prince Ansel Ashkirk, son of the conquering King of Scotland, and he would face his duty. No matter what the cost.

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Chapter One

The storm grew worse, and the men grew more and more discontented.

Ansel knew that he should make haste back to Blackthorn Castle, but he also refused to put his people more at risk than he had to.

And, if he were honest, he was in no rush to get back and face his father.

He still hadn't thought of precisely what to tell him.

They spent four days in a nearby occupied village, sheltering while the worst of the storm made its way past. Its people gave up their space without question when they saw the Ashkirk banners, some even offering their own homes and beds.

Ansel turned this down where he could, but he did not protest when his men insisted.

They were still at war, and he was still the prince, and he would not show any more weakness than he already had.

As he expected, the men descended upon him with questions about their retreat from the stronghold. He was brusque with the truth: that the leader of the rebellion had outplayed them, and that there was no way that they could have survived the attack. It had been a tactical retreat.

"But how," one man, Tam, asked, "Did some rebel upstart outsmart ye ? How did he find a way intae the stronghold?"

The truth there came a little less easily.

The truth was simple: the rebel leader had won because he genuinely was Cailean McNair, and the king's men, Ansel's men, had been occupying Cailean's home.

Even with all of Ansel's careful planning, the rebels had possessed the advantage the entire time.

If he'd been free, Ansel might have been able to keep the course and find a way to overwhelm the attack, even despite that, but Neala had put a stop to that the second she'd locked them both in that room.

That was the truth. But it was not what he answered his men.

"They had a spy in our midst," he replied.

"The maid. She must have gotten word of our plans out tae them before the attack.

I caught her in the library amongst our plans and architectural drawin's.

It's why I captured her and brought her away from them; I needed tae ensure there was nae way she could escape or tell them more. "

The men muttered amongst themselves. Tam said, "So ye killed her?"

"I did. I hid the body amongst the bushes. If they follow, they'll find her, and they'll have our message," Ansel replied. "And I hope I'm given the chance tae make up me folly tae me father."

Only after the rest of the men had retreated for the night did Baldric approach, a mug of ale in one hand. He held it out, and Ansel accepted it.

"He'll ken what happened by now," Baldric told him, clinking their mugs together. "It's nae gonnae be an easy one for ye."

Ansel grunted and didn't answer, instead drinking deeply.

"I must ask ye somethin', cousin," Baldric went on after a moment of silence. "The maid. The spy. Why did ye bring her with us in the first place?"

The ale stuck in Ansel's throat. He coughed hard, spluttering, and Baldric smacked him on the back until the air entered his lungs again. Breathing heavily, Ansel took a moment to collect himself, then just said, "I... I'm a prince. It's nae surprisin' I'd want a personal maid."

Baldric peered at him with a little too much understanding. "She caught yer eye, eh? Well, she was a bonny thing. It's a pity ye had tae dispose of her."

Ansel responded with nothing but a slight noncommittal sound. Baldric's sad smile was too knowing, but he didn't press anymore. Instead, Baldric patted Ansel's shoulder again.

"Finish yer beer and get some rest," Baldric said. "Ye'll need it. The storm's almost over. We'll be back home in a few days—and me uncle will have a lot tae say."

Though the storm was over and the sun was peering through the cautiously blue sky, it still felt like a heavy grey cloud was following Ansel's men as they completed their journey back to Blackthorn Castle.

Morale had never been lower after such a spectacular defeat and retreat, and while Ansel would usually commit himself to raising it, he found himself at a loss.

He did not know how to motivate his men when he couldn't even fully comprehend

what had happened himself.

He wondered how much it would shatter them all if they knew the truth of what he had done.

Fear flooded them all. Though Ansel knew he would bear the brunt of the king's rage, he also knew he could not prevent some of it from being taken out on the men.

They had failed as well—his father would take their retreat as nothing but cowardice.

Ansel would do everything he could to ensure that the blame lay firmly on his shoulders, but he could not stop the men from being scared.

After all, his father was not the kind of man who was crossed or failed lightly, even by those closest to his service.

Ansel himself had been the weapon to show James O'Sullivan that not so long ago.

Ansel led the men up the hill to Blackthorn Castle, images of darkness and silent judgment in his mind.

To his surprise, though, as they entered through the gates of his father's home, the whole courtyard was buzzing with activity.

Servants were running back and forth, carrying huge baskets of food and decorations; well-dressed guests were milling around, talking and laughing, many of whom Ansel did not recognize.

There was an air of excitement, even celebration, which seemed drastically at odds with what should be happening.

Ansel frowned, leaving his horse with the stablemaster and instructing Baldric to sort out the men while he went ahead to face his father. He entered the main building of the castle, expecting to head straight to the king's private chambers. However, a servant caught him just as he stepped inside.

"Yer Highness!" the servant gasped. "At last! Yer father was hopin' ye'd arrive in time."

"In time?" Ansel asked, caught off guard. "In time for what?"

"The feast!" the servant explained, sounding amazed that Ansel would even be asking. "They're already in the great hall, Yer Highness—ye better hurry."

Before Ansel could question him more, the servant darted off to carry out whatever duty had been placed upon him.

Ansel watched him go, nonplussed. A feast?

Why would his father be throwing a feast ?

Had he somehow misunderstood the news that had reached them from McNair Castle?

It seemed unlikely, but what other reason could there be to celebrate?

All Ansel wanted to do was go to his rooms, sink into a hot bath, and then sleep. Instead, though, he turned and started toward the great hall. It seemed there was more to do before this long journey was over.

He reached the massive metal doors of the great hall, which were so out of place compared to the wooden carvings that decorated most other castles.

His father was paranoid, though perhaps rightly so.

Even through those doors, he could hear muffled chatter and ribaldry from inside.

Even more confused, Ansel pushed open the doors and stepped inside.

A blanket of noise and the scent of cooked meat overwhelmed him.

A huge feast was laid out in front of him, tables full of representatives from almost every clan that had not yet defected to the rebels' cause.

Ansel noted many among them that he knew, including Murtagh McKenzie, who looked haggard and tired.

His daughter, Sorcha, was nowhere to be seen, which seemed strange—McKenzie usually never let the girl out of his sight.

"Ah, me son returns," a voice boomed.

Silence fell over the hall, the words carrying the weight of a hammer over all of their heads. All eyes turned to the door through which Ansel had just walked. Ansel's own gaze snapped to the table at the head of the hall, where his father sat in the center, crown glinting on his head.

Ansel instantly swept into a deep bow. "Yer Majesty. I have returned with me men. Forgive me for interruptin' yer feast."

Edric beckoned, and Ansel stood straight, moving forward between the tables until he stood before the king.

Edric was usually accompanied at the top table during his feasts; he would sit with

his advisors and whatever woman or women he had taken to his bed for the week if he felt like spoiling them.

Today, though, he sat there almost alone with only one other person at his side.

She was a young woman with dark hair and eyes and a pinched expression on a face that would otherwise have been very pretty.

Her dress was entirely black. Something about her itched at Ansel's mind—he felt like he had seen her very recently.

"Ye are nae interruptin', of course," Edric told him. "And it is nae me feast. It is yers."

Warning bells clanged in Ansel's mind. He fought to keep his expression blank, not betraying any of the turbulent emotion fighting to overwhelm him, and his body stiffened, his back straight, drawing himself to his full height.

"Father, I... have ye nae heard the news of what occurred at McNair Castle? "

Edric's expression was completely unreadable. "At the Sloe Stronghold, ye mean."

"Nay. It isnae that anymore, sire. Forgive me.

" Ansel was conscious that every eye in the room was upon him, and he could feel their stares burning into his back.

He ignored them, keeping his focus only on his father, working hard to keep his voice neutral.

"The rebels were waitin' for us. They had been made aware—they were prepared.

I had nae choice but tae flee and save our men. "

If Edric had raged, Ansel would have been prepared for it. If he had taken his heavy goblet and thrown it at Ansel's face, Ansel would have been ready.

But instead, Edric gave a brief, calm nod and spoke in a voice that wasn't shaken at all. "The events and our loss have been reported tae me. This isnae the time tae discuss it."

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He spoke so softly, so calmly, that it was the first time that Ansel truly felt scared.

The prince swallowed, clenching his hand to stop it from shaking.

Very little could terrify him—in fact, nothing at all.

Nothing, that was, except for the man in front of him now.

Before his father's cold gaze, he felt like a four-year-old boy again, lost and alone, punished over and over for not being everything a prince should be.

The boy had soon learned, but it seemed the man he had become still had lessons ahead.

Mind racing, Ansel bowed his head again. "Of course. But Father, we must speak. May we go somewhere in private, perhaps, and?—"

"Nonsense!" the king exclaimed. "I wouldnae deprive me guests. They've all been waitin' for ye, after all. As, of course, has our bonny lass here."

Ansel finally looked back at the girl again, studying her more closely. She looked pale with dark circles under her eyes, but she stood tall and proud. When she caught him looking, she sank into a curtsy, lowering her eyes so as not to meet his direct gaze.

It hit him in an instant. He had recognized this girl, but he had last seen her in person many years ago.

More recently, just a few days before, in fact, he'd seen her sister.

"Nessa O'Sullivan," he breathed, trying not to let any of his surprise or confusion sound in his voice.

"Welcome, miss. Or, should I say, welcome, Lady O'Sullivan. "

"It's an honor, Yer Highness," Nessa whispered.

"That's right! As ye had so wisely suggested, Nessa here took control of her father's lands until such time as we can find her a husband," Edric said affably.

"But what a burden such a thing is upon the shoulders of a young, bonny woman!

Hark, though—I have found a solution to her issue and a way to reward ye for yer actions as well. "

A shiver crept across Ansel's skin. He did not speak.

Edric smiled. "A feast!" he exclaimed, raising his cup. "A betrothal feast for me son and Nessa O'Sullivan!"

The crowd cheered. Ansel stared at Nessa, who would not meet his eyes.

So this was it, then—this was how he was to be punished.

He was to be wed to the traitor's daughter, shamed before the entire country, and used as a pawn to help his father's grip tighten upon the land, all in one masterful stroke.

Nessa would not be a willing wife; he could tell that from her posture, but she would be a dutiful one.

Though Ansel had turned down many marriage offers over the years, he knew that would not be an option now.

He and Nessa were both to be vehicles to carry on the Ashkirk name, and neither had any choice left to them.

Edric smiled coldly at him. "Are ye nae pleased, son? All of this is for ye."

Ansel swallowed. "Of course I am pleased, Father," he replied. "It's an honor. But may I speak with ye?—"

"What ye may do, lad, is go and clean yerself up. Ye look a mess. Be back soon, though; I willnae have ye unpresentable at yer own betrothal feast." Edric waved a hand dismissively. "Go now."

Ansel wanted to argue. He wanted to protest and explain why this would never work.

He wanted to insist that his father speak with him now and discuss their next steps.

And more than that, he wanted to let this pale, grieving girl go home.

He, personally, had slaughtered Nessa O'Sullivan's father in this very castle.

He was the reason she was now Lady of the O'Sullivan clan—and, inadvertently, now the reason that the O'Sullivan lands would be entirely absorbed under the Ashkirk name.

He bowed again, lower and more subservient than before. "As ye say, Yer Majesty. May I be excused?"

His father dismissed him, and Ansel hurried out of a side door, racing for his rooms.

He was not interrupted as he rushed through the halls, and when he reached his rooms and slammed the door behind him, he had the sudden urge to stay hidden there forever.

But instead, after taking a long, shaky breath, he moved to the washroom. Someone had already drawn him a hot bath. He longed to sink into it, but instead he washed himself quickly, then moved to his wardrobe to pick out clean clothes.

He stopped still as he passed the center of his room.

His chessboard sat there, the pieces still laid out as they had been the night before he left for McNair Castle.

He could see her shaking hand reaching for the pieces, hear her cautious but confident voice explaining her moves, see the surprise in her eyes when he had beaten her—but only just.

Ansel groaned and shook his head, banishing Neala from his thoughts.

She did not belong there. With any luck, he would never see her again.

If Cailean McNair was as smart as he seemed, he would send his sister away across the sea until this was all over.

Ansel fervently prayed that this would be so.

He changed, then, with a deep breath, made his way out of his rooms and back down to the feast.

When Ansel reentered the room, the tables had been pushed to the side and dancing had begun. The music faltered when Ansel walked in, but Edric immediately spoke.

"The prince has returned!" the king announced. "Now that he is ready, let us drink! Let us dance! And let us celebrate." Edric raised his cup in Ansel's direction. "To the future of the Ashkirk legacy! To the future of our country!"

A cheer went up, and Ansel caught Nessa's eye from across the room. The girl quickly ducked her head, but not before Ansel saw it there.

The dread.

The fear.

The hopelessness.

He would know it anywhere. After all, it had followed him his whole life.

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Chapter Two

Neala could not believe how much her life had changed in such a short time.

Laura and the other Sparrows had returned to their base or scattered to other strategic positions to further their mission, promising to be back in a week or so to solidify the plan to rescue Morag and Ann.

According to what they had heard from the reports that Elspeth had managed to sneak out from inside Blackthorn Castle, the two Sparrows were still alive.

Laura and Cailean had agreed that storming the castle right away, especially so soon after their victory here, would simply put the spies in more danger.

For now, though, there was so much good news.

Being part of Breana and Eoin's wedding had filled Neala's heart with joy.

Though she did not know them particularly well yet, they already felt like a part of her extended family.

Cat and Iona had explained to her how dedicated the two had been to their task to find her, and it was clear from how both Cailean and Maeve interacted with Breana and Eoin that they were precious members of the family.

Neala was honored to be a part of it. Now, a few days later, the castle was still echoing with the hope and promise that the rebel victory and the wedding that had

followed had brought.

Neala thrived in it. She walked the corridors with her brother by her side, still scarcely able to believe that she was here , right in the home where she had been born.

That first night, she'd taken Cailean back to the secret room in the library and revealed the chest full of their family's treasures.

Cailean had wept, and so had Neala, though this time they had each other to hold.

She'd only realized days later that she'd lost the little doll she'd found, but she never mentioned it to Cailean.

She did not want any disappointment to color their new joy.

Now, the two of them sat in the little garden that had once been their mother's, their heads close together as they read from her notebook.

It's hard tae imagine that one day me wee lads will be big, strong men with wives of their own.

I cannae imagine what brave lassies will tame them!

Barry's wife will be queen one day, so she'll need a shrewd mind indeed.

But oh, the patience she'll require! I've never met such a lively lad.

And me Graham, God bless him, will need a lass who can listen well and offer her wisdom.

He lives his life in a dream, and he'll need a woman who can both meet him there and bring him back tae earth when he needs it.

And what kind of daughter-in-law will me sweet, gentle Cailean bring to me?

He is still young yet, but I can already see who he will be.

Soft-spoken but strong, just as his father before him.

His wife will have a spark of strength in her heart, but a warmth too.

She'll be the balance that draws him out of his tight wee shell.

As for me lassies, I cannae even dream of such things! Perhaps I'll keep them tae meself forever. Rabbie would certainly prefer that! But I ken that one day, just as I did, both me lassies will meet a good, kind man who will steal their hearts. For me princesses, only a prince will do.

Cailean laughed. "Well! Our mother certainly had her plans for us, it seems."

Neala wiped her eyes and grinned, though she had to force herself to ignore the twinge her heart had felt at the last words. Instead, she focused on what Fiona had written about her brothers. "I wish I'd kent Barry and Graham. Abby, as well. They all sound like they were such characters."

"I dinnae remember them all that well," Cailean confessed.

"But those memories I do hold, mostly of our brothers, are precious tae me.

I worshipped our brothers, especially Barry.

I always thought he was born tae be a king, and I wanted tae be like him with all me heart.

" He smiled, though there was a little bittersweet sadness to it, too.

"Mother was right. It would have taken quite the woman tae be his queen. "

Smiling slightly, Neala said, "And what of her plans for ye? Do ye think she'd be pleased?"

"With Maeve?" Cailean asked. Neala loved the way his voice grew warmer just at the feeling of his wife's name on his lips. "How could she nae be? She couldnae have imagined I would find a woman so perfect as her."

"Ye're flatterin' me!"

Both Cailean and Neala turned to see Maeve and Breana approaching, the sisters arm in arm as they strolled across the garden. Neala smiled to see them—her new sisters—and waved them to approach.

"It's nae flattery if it's true, me love," Cailean replied, getting to his feet and kissing Maeve as soon as she reached them. His lips lingered on hers until Neala and Breana both cleared their throats.

Maeve pushed back from him, laughing. "None of that, Bre. I had tae practically pull ye apart from yer own husband tae get ye tae walk here with me."

Breana blushed a pretty pink, but did not try to deny the accusation. They all settled down on the benches, and Neala explained what they had been reading.

"Cailean told me about the diary," Maeve said. She gently touched Neala's hand. "I'm

so glad ye have it. Ye deserve a way tae reconnect with yer family. Yer parents sound like they were wonderful people, and they'd be so happy that ye're back home."

"Thank ye, Maeve," Neala replied, though she felt a little twist of sadness.

Maeve would never have what she did. Yes, she had Breana—but neither of the sisters had ever experienced parents who truly loved them.

Neala's parents had died before she'd known them, but even all these years later, she could feel her mother's love echoing from these pages.

"I never thought... I never suspected that any of me family might still be alive.

Tae be here in me family home with Cailean by me side, it's more than I could have ever imagined.

And tae gain all of ye as a part of it as well... "

"It's overwhelmin'," Breana said understandingly. "Aye. I thought Maeve dead when I was married off tae... well, I thought she was long gone. But she saved me, and brought me here, and look at me now."

"A good kind of overwhelmin', I hope," Cailean teased gently.

Maeve winked. "Always." She nudged Breana. "Shall we tell him the good news?"

"Good news?" Cailean asked, raising an eyebrow. "Even more?"

"Eoin heard back from Fergus at the Campbell Clan, where they have been hiding Lady McKenzie," Breana explained, her eyes shining. "The plan is workin'. The False King still believes that Campbell is on his side—and Murtagh McKenzie believes that

Fergus is Laird Campbell's nephew and heir."

Neala tilted her head. She had not heard about this plan.

She knew of Murtagh McKenzie, of course, and of Lady McKenzie's miraculous escape from his clutches.

Still, she could not imagine what integrating Fergus with the Campbell clan in such a way would do to help the rebellion.

Laird Campbell had no male heir, but it was widely suspected that the lairdship would be passed to his son-in-law, who had taken on the Campbell name years before.

Why would Fergus appear as a false nephew to oppose that, especially if Campbell was on their side?

"So he's been fooled!" Cailean said triumphantly. "Flora will be thrilled."

Maeve clapped her hands together excitedly.

"Murtagh accepted the proposal on his reception of the letter two nights ago, in exchange for half the Campbell lands after the wedding.

Sorcha is already on her way to Campbell Castle.

By the time Murtagh realizes that it was all a lie and Fergus has nae rights to the lands, it'll be too late—Sorcha will be with her aunt again, and she'll be safe, just like I promised her. "

A wide smile spread across Cailean's face. "Good," he said. "Good. Fergus has done

well. And who kens—perhaps he'll be able tae cheer the lass up a bit while he's there. Lord kens she needs a friend."

Neala listened to all of this, and her admiration for this group of people kept growing more and more.

She had grown up amongst the White Sparrows and knew more about honor and loyalty than many people would ever learn in a lifetime.

But she'd found a different kind of nobility here amongst the rebels.

The Sparrows knew that sometimes sacrifice was necessary, and the rebels, for the most part, knew that too.

But to see the most important figures in the rebellion band together in this way just to save the life of one lost daughter of a terrible man...

it filled Neala's heart with hope and love in a way she couldn't even begin to describe.

"Ye're amazin'," she said. "All of ye. Ye're just amazin'."

Cailean laughed. "Dinnae flatter me too much, Neala. I'm still yer older brother, and I gather we're supposed tae bicker."

"Och, let her get tae ken ye better. Ye'll be arguin' before ye ken it," Maeve replied.

All four of them laughed. They continued to chat and good-naturedly tease each other for some time. Neala stayed back from most of it at first but soon warmed up and was even joining in with the jokes by the time the fifth person arrived.

They were all laughing at a comment Cailean had made when a shadow fell over

them, and they looked up to see Eoin smiling down at them.

"Nae laughin' at somethin' I did, I hope?" Eoin asked. "Me wife has many stories tae share, I'm sure."

Neala raised a hand over her mouth to hide her smile.

In the days since Breana and Eoin's wedding, the two had called each other "my husband" and "my wife" to the point of exhaustion.

Many of the men had started to tease Eoin about it, but Neala herself thought it sweet.

It was as though the two of them couldn't believe their luck.

"Dinnae be so paranoid," Maeve told him. "Come, join us. We were just discussin' Cailean's early days trainin' under Senan and Kier. Apparently, our king had two left feet as a wee lad."

Eoin smiled, but Neala, with her years of training in body language, noticed a stiffness to his shoulders and a tightness to his expression. Something was wrong. Her own body tensed in response, her eyes flicking to the rolled-up letter he was holding in his hand.

"Who is that from?" she asked.

Everyone looked at her in surprise, then, as one, turned their eyes to Eoin.

He sighed and lifted the hand holding the letter. "It's from Darren," he explained. "I brought it for ye, Cailean."

"So ye're here as a captain of the guard rather than me husband," Breana said softly.

"That doesnae bode well."

Eoin gave her an apologetic look but nodded.

Cailean pressed his lips together for a moment before speaking, accepting the letter from Eoin's hand. "I suppose this is the end of our run of good news, then?"

"It seems like it, I'm afraid," Eoin replied. He hesitated as Cailean scanned his eyes over the letter, and all of them watched as the young king's expression grew dark.

"What?" Maeve demanded. "What is it? Let me see."

Neala's heart thudded in her ears. Her whole life had been filled with covert messages passed back and forth, and she'd seen this reaction before.

Something terrible had happened—something that was going to shatter the brief peace they had found.

She wanted to run, to block her ears, to do anything to prevent herself from hearing the following words.

"It seems," Eoin said after a long pause during which Cailean did not speak, "That the False King has made his next move. Darren is on his way back from O'Sullivan Castle as we speak."

"Nessa wouldnae come with him?" Breana asked, looking crestfallen. "We kent it was a possibility, but..."

"What do ye mean his next move?" Maeve asked sharply. "Has he hurt her? Is she?—?"

"She's alive." Cailean's voice was low and gruff. "Our intelligence was correct; Ashkirk has named her Lady O'Sullivan and gifted her yer father's lands. But we all ken that the False King's magnanimity always comes with a cost."

"She's been taken to Blackthorn Castle as a ward of the king," Eoin explained softly.

He reached out and took Breana's hand. "It seems he's...

found her a husband. To take the burden of ruling from her womanly shoulders, so the word he's spreading says.

A kindness, even despite her father's betrayal of the throne. "

"A husband!" Maeve exclaimed. "Well, there we have it, then.

All Nessa ever dreamed of was a husband approved by me father and the king.

It isnae ideal, but it may work in our favor.

If we can manipulate the situation, we could even have her wed tae a clan that's already on our side, or one we think we can turn. This doesnae need tae be a disaster."

Neala narrowed her eyes, studying Eoin's and Cailean's faces. "Nay. There's more."

Cailean nodded, his expression grim. "Ye misunderstand, love," he said. "She is already betrothed. The king has already selected a man for her who will ultimately help him gain more power. Yer sister is betrothed tae be wed tae his own son, Ansel. The very man I let go free."

The shock doused Neala like a bucket of ice water, and her veins froze, her pulse

feeling like it had almost stopped.

"To Ansel?" she whispered.

And then all hell broke loose.

Chapter Three

Everyone started talking at once, a cacophony of sounds that made it hard to pick out individual voices. Breana's face drained of all color, and she stood up to grab the letter from Cailean's hands. He gave it to her and she quickly read it, and then stumbled backward into Eoin's waiting arms.

"Nay, this cannae be happenin'," she gasped, her words strained, panic pulsing through each word. "It cannae! This is me fault, I did this. I should have agreed tae go and rescue her when we had the chance. Eoin!"

"Bastard. Bastard!" Eoin growled. "As if ye havenae suffered enough. Damn the king and damn his son too."

But it was Maeve who transformed the most in an instant.

Maeve, whom Neala had so far noted as one of the calmest and most put-together people she had ever met, was wild-eyed and frenzied as she jumped to her feet and paced back and forth.

"This cannae be happenin'. It cannae. I dinnae care how foul Nessa has been, we cannae leave her in the hands of that monster. I'm goin' tae Blackthorn Castle. Now."

Despite herself, Neala bristled. It felt wrong to hear Maeve say those words when the last thing Ansel had done for them was an undeniable act of kindness in letting Neala go.

Even Cailean looked alarmed at Maeve's reaction. He put a placating hand on her arm. "Me love," he said, "Be reasonable. Did ye nae counsel me tae be cautious in the exact same situation just days ago?"

"Reasonable!" Maeve snapped. "Neala was never in danger!"

She's a trained White Sparrow, and she was here as a spy.

She was never in danger of being bound tae that devil for the rest of her life.

Nessa is an untrained daughter of a Laird who pampered her for her whole life. Ansel Ashkirk will devour her."

Cailean grimaced. He did not look like he disagreed, but he was obviously trying to calm the sisters down. "He let Neala go. Ye told me that yerself. Argued with me about it even."

"Aye," Eoin said darkly. "And sometimes I'll let a fish go from me net when I fish down by the river. It doesnae mean I'll spear a hundred more."

Maeve nodded frenetically. "We dinnae ken why Ashkirk let Neala come tae us. Given what we ken of him, it may be part of a wider plan. Perhaps it was even at his father's command. But what I do ken is that we cannae leave Nessa in his claws."

Cailean turned his gaze to Neala, and she saw a beseeching tone behind that look. Cailean, too, agreed that this was terrible, but he also needed to get control of the situation. "What say ye, sister?" he asked. "Ye're the most acquainted with the man."

"I say we approach yer council," Neala said, trying to remain calm while her heart was threatening to choke her. "And see what they have tae say. If we're gonnae act, we need tae have input from everyone."

Cailean squeezed Maeve's shoulder. "She's right. We need tae consult the others. We're already missin' Darren and Fergus, and Kier is back at Bruce Castle. We cannae go runnin' off without informin' them."

Maeve's expression was thunderous, but she nodded. "Let's go, then. Now."

The council room was bare, stripped of the portraits left by the occupiers but not yet redecorated by the newly-reinstated McNairs. Nevertheless, the core members of the rebellion who were present in McNair Castle sat around the table as Cailean explained the situation to them.

Neala stood next to Ewan and Hamish, the two men who had once been under her father's employ and had come to be leaders of the rebellion.

She felt a great deal of affection toward the pair of them, and she enjoyed the way that they fussed over her.

They'd given her identical huge smiles when they saw her walk into the room, but those smiles had faded as Cailean had described the letter, and both men now looked deadly serious.

Senan was here too, the man who had helped raise and train Cailean and who had rescued Maeve and taught her to fight.

He was watching the whole situation with a keen eye, his expression impassive.

Neala hadn't met him before she had come to McNair Castle, though she knew that he had once been a close friend of Morag's, and still exchanged frequent coded letters with the White Sparrow leaders.

Finally, in place of Kier, Darren, and Fergus, Ferda had invited herself as a

representative of the Bruce Clan.

Nobody even tried to argue with her. She had more than proven herself an essential player in the rebellion despite the fact that she was not a warrior, and even now, her arm still in a sling, she looked fierce.

"...so it seems that Nessa O'Sullivan is tae be wed tae Ansel Ashkirk within the next few weeks," Cailean concluded. "And since me wife and sister-in-law rightfully believe we cannae stand back and allow such a thing tae happen, we must decide what tae do about it."

Maeve immediately started insisting once again that they march on Blackthorn Castle immediately, but Ewan spoke up.

"Forgive me, Maeve, but that isnae gonnae work," he said. "We already discussed this when we found out about Morag and Anne, and again when Cailean wanted tae rescue Neala. We're simply nae ready for an all-out attack."

"We're almost there," Hamish agreed. "But nae quite. We just need a little more patience."

"I dinnae have more patience!" Maeve snapped. "He has me sister! "

"And mine," Breana added. "I've already shown meself capable. Give me a bow and I'll go and fetch her. I let her down once, I willnae do it again."

Neala felt Cailean's eyes upon her again, and she knew that this was it: her first test as the princess.

She needed to speak up and try to help calm this building frenzy.

"Please," she said. "Please remember this is what I've trained for me whole life.

We have a whole network of people who can help us. Let me use it."

"What do ye mean?" Hamish asked.

"The White Sparrows," Neala explained eagerly, seeing that she was successfully gaining their attention.

"Elspeth is still stationed in Blackthorn Castle, and I'm sure now that I've gone and things have changed, Laura has placed more girls there besides.

Let me reach out tae them. I can find out how Nessa is doing, and maybe we can work out a way tae get her out. "

"That will take too long," Ferda insisted. She sounded strained, and looking at her, it was clear she hadn't been sleeping well. "We've got all the information we want, but Ann and Morag are still rottin' in a cell, and now Nessa is there too. Let me go. I'll break them out meself."

"With yer broken arm?" Eoin asked. "Darren would kill us if we let ye go off anywhere in such a state."

Ferda glared at him. "And ye with that healin' wound in yer chest? Ye think ye'll be more help?"

"Dinnae take it out on him!" Breana shot back. "This isnae about yer pride, either of ye. It's about me sister. I think Maeve is right, we need tae attack."

Senan cleared his throat. "Ye're all approachin' this the wrong way.

We need tae be strategic, aye, but it needs tae be a wider plan.

We cannae keep makin' wee rushes, nay when we've gained so much momentum.

It's time tae finish gatherin' our allies and tae make a final attack.

We can free Morag, Ann, Nessa, and all of the hundreds of other people who are trapped under the False King's tyranny.

We can destroy Edric Ashkirk once and for all, and once Cailean is where he should be on the throne, then we will all be free. "

The words were so surprising from the usually-lighthearted Senan that even Maeve stopped talking for a moment.

But the silence only lasted for a second before the riotous shouting started all over again.

The arguments overlapped each other, the feelings were burning so hot that they were attacking each other with words, and nobody seemed to agree with anyone.

Neala, used to the calm cooperation of the convent then the ominous quiet of the castles, found herself completely overwhelmed.

She grabbed at her own forehead, pressing her fingers into her temples, trying hard to fight off the pounding headache that was forming there.

Maeve's voice raised over all of them as she announced loudly, "I will never leave me own sister there with that monster. Never!"

The pressure burst, and Neala whipped up her head, meeting her sister-in-law's gaze

directly. "He's nae monster!" she protested, shouting so passionately that the others turned to look. "He isnae! If he was I wouldnae be here!"

Maeve scowled. "We already talked about this. He could have freed ye for any reason. I dinnae ken what he did tae ye, but?—"

"He never touched me!" Neala interrupted. "Nae once. Nae even—" she cut herself off before she could finish the sentence. Nae even when I wanted him tae.

"Never touched ye?" Breana asked quietly. "Neala, he cut ye. He held a knife tae yer throat and threatened Cailean with yer life. Maeve told me what happened in that room. It wasnae a joke."

Neala shook her head. The room felt like it was spinning around her. She saw that moment again: the moment Ansel's fingers had brushed her throat, the horrified self-hatred in his eyes burning into her soul. "He wouldnae have hurt me."

"He would have hurt us all," Cailean said darkly.

"I saw those catapults. I saw the plans they left behind.

If ye hadnae trapped him in that room, he would have sat back and allowed all of me men tae be slaughtered by his own.

If I'd have agreed tae the duel he requested, he would have happily stabbed me in the heart if he'd had the chance, and let me blood run on the floor.

Just as his father once did to our own family. "

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She flinched. There was no way to argue with him, not in a way that would be convincing.

Everything he was saying was correct. But they hadn't seen Ansel by the side of the road when he was tearing himself apart.

They hadn't heard the agony in his voice as he'd fought with himself to choose between duty and freedom.

"Ye're wrong," she whispered. "He's nae monster.

He's just a man. A man with a terrible father. "

"We're all just men and women. And Maeve, Breana, and I all ken what it is tae be raised by a monster.

None of us allowed ourselves tae become one.

Ashkirk did," Eoin replied. "In me youth, I did wrong in me father's name, I'll nae deny it.

But I never took such glee in the horror as they say Ansel Ashkirk does in upholdin' his father's cruelty. "

"Did he even hesitate before he cut down James O'Sullivan—a man who had been nothin' but loyal tae the False King?" Hamish asked. He wasn't aggressive, but seemed curious, as though he was trying to understand where Neala was coming

from. "Cailean told me ye witnessed it. What was he like?"

Neala opened her mouth to answer. She remembered it so clearly. The flash of the blade. The horror in O'Sullivan's eyes. She closed her lips together hard and looked away.

"Exactly," Maeve said. "Exactly. He slaughtered me father efficiently and without remorse. If this is how he treats a man who was, as we all ken, a member of the False King's closest circle, what horrors will he inflict upon me sister if we leave her in his clutches?"

It was wrong. Wrong. Ansel had told her he would never force a woman, and never kill an enemy without a weapon in their hand.

Neala knew in her heart that it was true.

She'd told him that he was his mother's son, not his father's, and that he could free himself.

She'd saw he was a good man below all of the pain, and she'd given him a path to come with her and allow that good man to live.

But he had chosen to ride away. Now the monster's legacy was all he would ever be.

Cailean held up his hands. Neala wondered if he saw the tears on her face, or if he saw the pain in Maeve's, or if he was perhaps simply understanding that this conversation would go nowhere.

There were too many voices, too many opinions, and the meeting would never result in anything other than chaos.

When he spoke, his voice was subtly different. It was not the tone of Cailean, the rebel, but that of Cailean, the King. "Stop," he ordered, and gradually the room fell silent. "Stop now. We need a break. Go for a walk. Get some air. We'll resume soon."

"Cailean—" Maeve started.

"Please, Maeve," Cailean said gently. "Dinnae make me order ye. I dinnae want tae do that."

Maeve scowled, but she turned on her heel and stormed out of the room, slamming the door open on her way out. Cailean let out a deep sigh and sank down into his chair.

Senan shook his head. "I always kent she had a fire in her. That's why I brought her with me; I kent she would be the spark the rebellion needed. But ye best watch that ye dinnae let that wife of yers consume herself with her own flames, lad."

Cailean just rested his elbows on the table, rubbing his forehead with his fingers the same way Neala had been doing moments before.

Neala wondered if it was a habit they'd inherited from their parents.

How often had their mother and father sat in this very room, massaging their temples as they tried to deal with the most stressful parts of running the country?

Senan patted Cailean on the shoulder, then left the room. Ewan and Hamish followed next, Hamish giving Neala a quick gentle half-hug before he did. The little gesture was reassuring, but it didn't calm the swirling pressure that was threatening to burst out of her chest.

Breana let out a shaky breath. "We need tae do somethin'. I cannae live like this," she

whispered. Then she and Eoin left the room, hand in hand, leaving Neala and Cailean alone.

Neala stepped forward to her brother's side. "Cailean," she said. "Please, ye must listen tae me."

Cailean looked up. His eyes were tired, but they flashed with a certainty that chilled Neala to the bone.

"Neala, I cherish ye. The fact ye're with me is beyond anythin' I ever dreamed.

But I'm nae just yer brother. I'm yer king, and the king of every person in Scotland who has chosen tae swear loyalty tae me name. Our name."

She didn't protest. She could tell that he was not imposing power. If anything, he seemed unsettled to be frankly discussing his own power in such a way.

"I ken ye have a strange... affection for Ashkirk.

Maybe even a friendship of sorts, in yer mind at least. I dinnae understand it, but I'd be blind nae tae see it in how ye talk about him and how ye defend him.

" Cailean sighed and shook his head. "I dinnae blame ye.

I've heard... I've heard it happens sometimes.

When a person is taken from their family, when they're captured or kidnapped, and one of their captors shows them any sort of kindness, they grow attached. "

"That isnae what this is," Neala insisted, though embarrassment flooded through her. Affection, he'd said. Friendship. She wondered what Cailean would do if he knew the

words that Neala had tried to say when she and Ansel were separated. I think I'm startin' tae ? —

No. She doubted that Cailean would be quite as understanding then.

"Whatever it is, Neala, I cannae let it change me mind," Cailean replied. "Ye understand that. Ye must. Ye were raised by Laura and by Morag; I am sure they've taught ye that we have tae do what has tae be done, even if it's nae what we'd choose."

The pressure grew stronger in Neala's head, pressing against the back of her eyes. It was agony, but she did not even blink.

"I have a responsibility for ye. But I have a responsibility for them, too.

For Maeve, who is me wife. For Breana, and, aye, Nessa as well, who are also me sisters by law.

And even more than any of that, by acceptin' our father's legacy, I've taken on responsibility for this whole country.

" Cailean stood, shaking his head. "I have promised that I will lead the rebels tae victory.

Tae a new age. I've promised I will take the throne and purge them of the blight that's tried tae destroy the heart of our country these twenty years. Ye understand what that means?"

Neala nodded. Her throat was too dry to speak.

The Sparrows and the rebels had both done their research on the False King.

They knew him better than he probably knew himself.

Everyone knew that Edric Ashkirk's wife had died in childbirth.

He had only one son and no daughters. His parents were long in their graves, and his only other relative they knew of, a widowed sister, had died about ten years before, leaving behind only a son who now counted amongst the ranks of Edric's men.

If Ansel married Nessa, he would produce heirs.

More Ashkirks. More of the dark legacy of Edric's name.

And as far as the people of Scotland were concerned, it would never end.

Not as long as the bloodline lived. If Cailean carried the pride of McNair in his heart enough that the people loved him, then so too did Ansel carry the curse of the Ashkirks.

Cailean gently touched her cheek. "We'll talk later," he promised. "I must find Maeve. She needs me."

He walked out of the room, and by his posture, it was very clear that he was carrying the whole weight of what was going on. His shoulders were slightly slumped as he bore it, but he still stood tall and proud. Neala stood as she watched him go.

Once he had left, closing the door behind him, Neala's legs gave out.

She collapsed into the seat that Cailean had just vacated, and the pressure burst out all at once.

There had already been tears on her face, but now she wept from the heart, sobbing so

hard that it hurt her chest, her breathing refusing to steady.

She'd started this day feeling such joy, but now she did not feel like there was any sunshine left.

Ansel would be married. It might be selfish to hurt so much over that, but the thought of him holding another woman filled her with a raw sickness.

She'd been so close to him that she'd felt her heartbeat mingle with his, held so tightly by him that their breath had mingled in the air, but there had always been a part of him locked away from her.

He'd never been vulnerable before her, nor she before him.

Neither had been able to fully give the other that trust, though now Neala wished more deeply than anything she had.

Perhaps if she had tried a little earlier, pushed a little harder, let him know a little sooner that there was hope, he would have come with her when she begged.

But now he was to marry Nessa. Whatever plan the rebels undertook, it was unlikely to happen before the wedding night.

Neala tried not to imagine it, but she knew that Ansel would do his duty, and she could hear the sighs of another woman in his arms, stealing the kisses that she had never been brave enough to seek.

It was not Nessa's fault. She'd lost her father and was now being forced into a marriage, wasn't she?

Except... except from what Breana and Maeve had said about their sister so far, this

might have been Nessa's plan all along.

Perhaps she was delighted by the arrangement.

Perhaps she'd seduced Ansel already. Neala tried to push away the thought, but the sickness tightened in her stomach so much that she almost vomited.

Ye really dinnae ken anythin' about me , Ansel had said.

She gripped the table to steady herself.

She did know him, no matter how much he protested otherwise.

But she would never convince the others of that, not until it was too late.

And therein lay the real problem, the real reason strong, capable Neala now cried so hard she felt her heart would shatter.

The pain of Ansel's betrothal was unbearable. But what was even worse was the truth she could no longer deny after her conversation with Cailean.

Because if the rebels were to ever declare a true victory—if Cailean were to ever reclaim his father's legacy for good in the eyes of all of Scotland—then the Ashkirks had to be wiped entirely from the land. In other words, Ansel had to die.

And Neala and her family had to be the ones to kill him.

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Chapter Four

As the feast came to an end, Ansel had the sense that he had escaped one certain death sentence only to ride straight toward another.

He had spent the whole feast minimizing his interaction with anyone, staying in the wings of the room and watching as much as he could.

He danced with Nessa twice under his father's watchful gaze, though neither of them had made eye contact with the other, and neither had spoken a word.

The rest of the time, he'd stayed silent to the side, only speaking when one of the guests approached to wish congratulations.

Now, as the guests filed out of the hall, Ansel could still feel the King's gaze upon him.

His time was running out. He watched as the headmaid, Jessie, led Nessa out of the room, presumably showing his tired betrothed to her temporary bedchamber.

He hoped that the O'Sullivan girl would enjoy her rest while she could get it.

He imagined neither of them would be getting much peaceful sleep in the immediate future.

"Do ye want me tae sneak ye out of here, Ansel?" Baldric asked in his ear. He'd approached moments before with a cup of wine in his hand that, strangely, seemed

untouched. "I'm sure we can find some excuse. It wouldnae be the first time."

A part of him longed to agree. As a thirteen-year-old child, the arrival of his two-years-older cousin had seemed an impossible gift.

Baldrick hadn't often been able to protect Ansel from his father's rages and judgment, but even so, he had been the sole source of support in a world that had otherwise seemed filled with only darkness.

Every so often, Baldrick would find an excuse to sneak Ansel away or otherwise distract the king, and for just one brief moment, Ansel would be free.

These precious moments had faded to nothing as the boys grew into men, but having Baldrick by his side was still the main reason that Ansel had been able to keep going.

"Nay," Ansel replied after a short pause. He straightened his shoulders, settling the neutrality on his expression he'd spent a lifetime practicing to perfect. "There's nae escapin' this one, cousin. Ye may as well get out of here. Nae use ye bein' caught up for me own mistakes."

Baldrick frowned. "At least let me stay. I?—"

"That's an order from yer prince," Ansel said firmly. "Off ye go. I'm sure ye've got much work ye could be gettin' on with."

Surprise flashed across Baldrick's face, then he sighed. "Aye, yer Highness," he said at last. He shook his head before he turned and left.

At last, Ansel and the king were left alone. Ansel took a breath, then slowly turned to face his father.

"Follow," Edric commanded, then turned on his heel and walked out through a small door at the back of the room, which Ansel knew led to a private study. Ansel swallowed but did not dare argue. He set his jaw and then followed his father through the little door.

It closed behind them with a slam. They were completely isolated, alone together in this little room, and the rest of the castle's residents seemed a long, long way away.

Ansel stood still, watching his father's back the same way he might watch a wolf prowling around his campsite. He dared not move or speak. He didn't even want to breathe too heavily until his father gave him permission.

A clock measured the trickle of time on the wall. Each tick kept the rhythm of Ansel's heart and breath, each movement of the second hand a lifetime of anticipation.

At long, long last, his father broke the silence. "Well?" the king asked in his same steady, calm voice without turning around. "What have ye tae say for yerself?"

Ansel inhaled sharply. "Father, I?—"

"Father, ye call me!" Edric suddenly roared in a deafening shout.

He spun around so fast that he was a blur, and Ansel ducked just in time as something came flying toward him.

He heard a shattering just where his head had been, and suddenly, wine and glass shards rained down upon his hair and clothing.

"Ye dare call me Father ? Ye think ye have earned that right? "

Without blinking, Ansel straightened back up. He would not slump before his father.

He did not raise his hand to get rid of the mess, but instead stood in a soldier's stance of respect. "Forgive me. Ye are right, Yer Majesty."

Edric glared at him, his eyes burning. "Forgive ye. Ye, who has so many sins tae forgive. I should kill ye where ye stand."

Ansel did not move. Edric strode across to him, drawing out a long knife and holding it directly in front of Ansel's face.

"What do ye think, lad?" he asked in a growl. "Do ye want another scar tae go with that ugly mark on yer face?"

"Ye must do as I deserve, Yer Majesty," Ansel replied. He kept his voice mild, ignoring the screaming child who had awoken inside him at that memory. "Just as ye did then."

Edric lowered the knife, then roughly grabbed at Ansel's chin, his eyes darting over the scar that ran across the prince's jaw.

Ansel had been twelve the first time he'd disappointed his father, and the rage his father had shown had almost been the death of him.

After his punishment, bleeding and weeping, he'd been forced to kill the captured rebel he'd been trying to defend before his father would allow him to get his wounds treated.

Neither he nor his father had ever spoken of that moment again, but Ansel had learned since that moment that to ask for clemency was to ask for pain.

There was no such thing as mercy, not while Edric was king.

There was no point trying to fight it. Ansel had been born to be a weapon, and so that was all he allowed himself to become.

No mercy. No hope. It was safer that way for everyone. After all, the pain was inevitable.

"Aye. Ye learned a lesson that day," Edric said, then roughly pushed Ansel away.

Ansel resisted the urge to rub his jaw where his father's fingers had pressed into it.

"Or so I thought. But here ye are now, worse than ever!

Ye've served as a mockery of me power as the rightful king of this country.

Ye're supposed tae be me son! Me heir! How can ye ever be a king when ye fail at the single important task I have ever laid at yer feet? "

Part of Ansel wanted to argue. He had done much important work in his father's service, more than anyone, but he did not dare contradict the king in his rage. Instead, he kept his chin up and looked into his father's face, accepting the verbal beating as he had done so many times in his life.

"Ye think yerself irreplaceable because yer useless mother died before she could give me more sons?" Edric snarled. "Ye think ye're untouchable because I've been sure none of me bastard children lived long enough tae claim that they and their filthy mothers have a right tae me throne?"

Ansel's hand tightened into a fist, but he quickly hid it behind his back.

Most of his father's women who had found themselves with child had been clever enough to disappear, often with the help of other servants, and Ansel himself had

indirectly aided in such efforts.

Others had returned to their husbands, sparing their child's life by claiming it as the seed of their lawfully wedded spouse and swearing they would never let the king's name pass their lips again.

But a few women, too foolish or too brave, had brought their sons and daughters before the king, claiming he must take care of his kin.

The mothers and children had always disappeared, never to be heard from again.

How many children who carried Ansel's blood still lived out there?

There must be a number of them if they had not died in poverty.

Most likely, none of them knew the truth of their birth, but it wouldn't matter even if they did.

By the very circumstances of their conception, they were not Ashkirks.

They were not part of the legacy—they were free to live.

Their world could not be further from Ansel's.

Sometimes, he pitied them. Mostly, he envied them.

That was if they even existed. Perhaps they were only a dream.

"Ye arenae. I am still virile. I could wed some lassie tomorrow and make a son. I could make twenty sons," Edric growled. "I could take Nessa O'Sullivan and have her carry me heirs instead of givin' her tae ye. What do ye think of that?"

Ansel thought of the pallor of Nessa's face.

She'd seemed so scared. "Ye must do as ye think is right, Yer Majesty," he replied evenly.

"Though while ye could produce many mighty heirs, they will take time tae grow.

A grandson can be shaped much more easily while ye still contain the power through yer already faithful heir. "

Edric narrowed his eyes. "Ye always were a clever lad. Perhaps that's why ye're such a coward." Suddenly, he spat at Ansel's feet. "A coward! Just as yer mother's father was when he let me steal her away. Just as that rebel pretender is, hidin' behind the name of a dead prince."

What would Edric do, Ansel wondered, if he knew the truth?

How would his father react if he knew that Cailean McNair was no pretender, and that the rebels followed the legacy of the true king?

Instantly, a flash of horror filled him at his thoughts.

His father was the true king. Nobody else.

He could not believe he had allowed such a slip even in his mind.

Grabbing the front of Ansel's shirt, Edric pulled him close.

"Dinnae forget, I brought me useless sister's son here all these years ago for a reason.

He shed his dead father's name the moment I brought him intae me castle.

Baldric can be made me heir in an instant.

Shall I do that, lad? Shall Baldric disappoint me less than ye? "

Ansel kept his mouth shut. Anything else he could say would make it worse.

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Edric dropped his shirt. "How could ye do it? How could ye lose me stronghold and let them claim it as McNair Castle? It's a symbol tae those idiot masses, dinnae ye understand that, with all yer cleverness? Ye've ruined so much of what I've worked for! Speak!"

"I couldnae have won the fight. If I hadnae conceded the battle, most of our men would have been slaughtered," Ansel told him, not allowing any emotion into his voice. "They kent more than we did. Even I would likely have died?—"

"Then ye should have!" Edric howled. "Ye should have locked the doors and burned the place tae the ground for a second time, with yerself inside if necessary! Yer life should have been forfeit if it meant I could finally extinguish those rebel worms and their pathetic McNair pretender of a leader!"

Ansel lowered his eyes. "Aye, Yer Majesty." He did not want to think of those last moments in McNair Castle. He did not want to think of Cailean McNair. He did not want to think of her. "I failed ye. I will take whatever punishment ye see fit."

The clock ticked its sentence out on the wall.

Finally, Edric scoffed. "The men speak highly of ye. Many are loyal tae ye. It would be a hassle tae be rid of ye now. And ye have rarely failed me before. So listen closely."

Ansel flicked his eyes up again.

Edric leaned in. "Ye are bein' given a second chance, and a final one.

Ye will marry Nessa O'Sullivan and produce sons tae carry on me legacy.

Ye will serve loyally in every action. Ye will be king one day, Ansel Ashkirk, and ye will never concede again.

Ye will win, or ye will die. Either at their hands—or at me own. Are we understood?"

"Aye, Yer Majesty," Ansel replied. "Thank ye, Yer Majesty."

"Out of me sight. Go and remember how tae be me son," Edric replied. He turned his back again and walked to the other side of the study.

Ansel bowed then turned to leave. Just as he'd opened the door, though, his father called out again.

"Ansel?"

"Father?" he asked, turning back, risking the paternal form of address again and hoping it was the right choice to make.

Edric was watching him closely again. "The maid."

The shards of ice returned. "Maid?" Ansel asked, trying his best to keep his composure.

"Aye, the one ye took as yer lover. Abby, was it nae? I kent ye'd like her. I had already picked her out for ye when I met her in the throne room that day," Edric said. "She was a bonny thing."

Ansel did not bother to correct his father's faulty assumption about why he'd taken Neala with him. Edric would not understand how any woman could have any other

use.

"The men have been talkin'," Edric went on. "They say she was a spy. Probably one of those despicable Sparrows. Have ye clipped the wee bird's wings, Ansel? Truly? I ken ye have always had a weakness for bonny things."

Heart racing for the first time, fear pulsing in his veins, Ansel replied as truthfully as he could. "Abigail is dead. Ye neednae worry about her returnin'. It's impossible."

It was the truth in its entirety—if not an actual answer to the question the king had asked.

Edric considered him. "Ye killed her?" he asked. "Ye dealt with the traitor?"

Ansel clasped his hands together to stop them from shaking. "Aye. I dealt with the maid—the spy. I acted as I had tae, she got what she deserved."

With a nod and a wave of his hand, the king dismissed him.

Bursting out of that study was like returning to air after too long spent underwater.

Ansel stumbled through the great hall, now almost clean from the hardworking servants who were already tirelessly at work, his mind racing once more.

Too close. He had let things get too close.

He had to get himself back together and remember who he was.

No matter what Neala McNair had done to him, no matter what she had made him feel, no matter how tantalizingly she had dangled freedom before his face, he was Ansel Ashkirk, and he must never forget it.

He rubbed his jaw, tracing his fingers across the deep scar. There was no fighting against the king. It wasn't worth the risk. Should he talk to Baldric? The youthful part of him longed to, but he didn't want to put his cousin in danger. No, he would carry this burden alone.

He was so deep in thought that he didn't notice that he wasn't alone in the corridor until she stepped out of the shadows. He flinched in surprise, his hand flying to his weapon, then relaxed as he recognized her.

"Me Lady," he said quietly. "Did ye get lost? I thought the maid escorted ye tae yer rooms."

Nessa O'Sullivan stared at him with dark, haunted eyes. "I needed tae find ye. Ye avoided talkin' tae me durin' the feast—but if ye are tae be me husband, then we have much tae discuss."

Ansel offered his arm, and Nessa took it. "I'll escort ye back tae yer rooms, Lady O'Sullivan, but dinnae expect much else from me. We've been instructed tae wed, nae tae gossip in the corridors. Ye will do well here if ye learn quickly that it is easier tae simply obey."

Nessa made a slight sound that was almost a scoff, but not quite. "Ye think I havenae learned that lesson long ago?" she asked, something desperately sad coloring her tone. "I, who was me father's only loyal child?"

"And yet yer father couldnae carry that same loyalty forward toward his king," Ansel replied.

The coldness in his voice was harsher than he'd intended, but he did not pull away from it.

He did not want to endear himself to this girl.

She had suffered enough without trying to get close to him.

"It's a wonder ye've survived this long at all. "

Her hand tightened on his arm, but she did not pull away. They paced quietly through the corridors, both lost in their own silence.

"Is it true?" she asked once they reached the top of the staircase that led to her rooms.

"Are ye the one who did it?"

"Did what?" Ansel asked.

She gave him a reproachful look. "Ye'll make me ask it outright? Fine, then, if ye wish tae be cruel. Are ye the one who killed me father?"

"I am," Ansel replied. He led her to her door. They stood looking at each other for a moment, and he saw the sadness in her eyes, so powerful that he had to look away.

"The last thing he spoke of was ye."

Nessa let out a shaky breath. "I see."

Ansel paused. "How does it feel?" he asked. "To be betrothed tae me—to be weddin' the man who murdered yer father?"

She met his gaze, unwavering now. Coldness settled over her, her expression as stony as the walls around them. "Murder? Nae, Yer Highness. I ken ye killed him upon yer father's command. He was a traitor tae the Crown, and so he died. That's all there is tae it."

Ansel shook his head. "Ye allow yerself tae believe that, then? Ye'll allow yerself tae lie with the man who took his life? Tae mother me bairns? Tae take me name?"

Unsettlingly, she smiled, a cold, empty smile that left her eyes blank. "I'll do as I must. Just like ye. Goodnight, Yer Highness."

Ansel took her hand in his and pressed his lips against it. Her skin was cold. "Goodnight, Lady O'Sullivan," he replied.

Then she turned from him and entered her room, leaving Ansel in the corridor alone.

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Chapter Five

"We'll remove the sling, but ye still must be very careful," the healer, Patty, warned. "Though if I had me own way, ye'd be in it for at least another week."

"Ferda's arm has healed well," Neala said as she heated her knife over a flame to sterilize it. "It's best she starts usin' it again before she has tae retrain entirely."

Ferda beamed. "Listen tae the princess, Patty. This thing's been wrapped up for so long I'm nae convinced it willnae fall off when ye're rid of this thing."

Neala laughed as Patty tutted and shook her head.

The healer woman removed the sling then moved off to fetch a herbal concoction.

While she did, Neala took Ferda's bandaged arm and used her sharp knife to cut away the part most tightly bonded to the scout's arm.

The bandages fell away, leaving behind Ferda's bare arm, paler than the rest of her skin but otherwise whole.

"It looks good," Neala said encouragingly. "Ye'll be leadin' the scouts in nae time."

Ferda smiled at Neala as Patty returned.

She accepted the steaming hot potion that Patty forced her to drink, and gulped in down with a grimace.

"Ugh! Are ye tryin' tae kill me? Neala, ye may be actin' as a healer's apprentice for now, but ye're still the princess. Lock her up for tryin' tae poison me."

"Watch yerself or I'll do worse," Patty scolded, though she was grinning as she said it. "And Neala's nae me apprentice. She's just been helpin' me these last few weeks with some of the knowledge of the Sparrows. It's been a blessin'."

Neala shook her head. "Ye're the blessin', Patty."

Ye and the scouts and even Ben the cook—everyone who's shown me how tae get involved in different parts of the camp and show what I ken.

I'm determined that I'll be useful. I've been a Sparrow me whole life, and now I'm here.

I'll be more than just Cailean's sister. "

"And so ye should!" Ferda replied, grinning as she lightly punched her shoulder. "Ye and Maeve are a formidable pair for poor Cailean tae deal with. I'm honored tae be a part of it."

The three women continued to laugh and chat as they finished tending to Ferda's arm, but just as they were finished, the door to the healing room opened. Maeve stood there, and she impatiently beckoned.

"There ye are. Neala, Ferda, Cailean wants ye in the war room at once," Maeve said. She paused, glancing at Ferda's arm, and smiled. "Wonderful work as always, Patty."

Patty smiled. "Thank ye. Take these two away, then—they've been gettin' underfoot, and I've got work tae do."

Neala frowned, but Patty winked to show she was only teasing. The two younger women said their farewells to Patty, then followed Maeve out of the door.

As they strolled along the corridor, Ferda happily flexing her newly-freed fingers, Neala turned to Maeve.

"What's goin' on?" she asked. "I was plannin' on workin' with Patty the rest of the day. Has somethin' happened that Cailean needs us?"

Maeve glanced at her with an unreadable expression. "Darren's back," she said.

Ferda brightened at that. "Good! Does he ken we were expectin' him back from his journey over a month ago? I ken he wrote tae tell us he was goin' tae be longer, but I was worried I was gonnae have tae write tae me Uncle with the worst news."

Despite Ferda's obvious happiness, though, Neala could see something in Maeve's expression, hidden behind her careful neutrality. A flash of something dark. Something dangerous. And something all-too-familiar.

It had been a month since Darren had sent the announcement through Eoin that Nessa O'Sullivan was to be wed to the prince.

A whole month of planning and chaos and arguing that had shown Neala the full scope of the rebellion.

She had reached out to the Sparrows in Blackthorn Castle and been advised the wedding date had been placed three months from the day of the announcement, and, with that information, everyone had concluded it was best to wait and plan before acting.

They had time. Eventually, even Maeve and Breana had agreed to that path—though

Neala had felt a simmering undertone of resentment from her sister-in-law with each passing day.

Neala understood. She knew what it was to wait when your body screamed at you to act. And she, too, had lost someone to the darkness of Blackthorn Castle. The only difference was that she would never be able to rescue him as she hoped they could Nessa.

"Come," Neala said, taking both Maeve and Ferda by the hand. "It seems me brother is waitin'. Let's see what's happened now."

Darren Bruce sat at the head of the table next to Cailean. His hair was a little longer, and a short beard now decorated his face, but the real difference was in the tone of his voice. Neala had never heard the young man sound so serious.

"—more tae report than I'd like," Darren was explaining as he pointed at a map on the table. He cut himself off and looked up as Maeve, Ferda, and Neala entered the room. In a second, his seriousness was gone, and his usual easy grin appeared. "Well! Look who it is!"

He got to his feet and embraced his cousin, who hugged him back tightly then punched him on the shoulder and scolded him for taking too long. He hugged Maeve too, and then, to Neala's surprise, pulled her into one too.

"Oh!" Neala exclaimed, but she returned the hug. "I'm glad tae see ye're safe."

Darren pulled back and winked. "Of course I'm safe. I'm always safe. That's why Cailean cannae cope without me. Nice hair, by the way. Suits ye much better."

Neala touched her hand to her hair. It had grown back a little of its length, but more importantly, the dark dye was entirely gone. She and Cailean now both boasted the

woven gold of their family, and she vowed she would never hide it away again.
"Thank ye."

"Sit down and stop bein' daft," Cailean said, but he did smile at the three women.
"Come, sit, all of ye. Darren's been fillin' us in on what he's gathered in this month away."

The three of them found seats in their usual spots around the table, the rest of the council greeting them quietly as they did. Once they were settled, Darren began to speak again.

"As I was sayin', there's a lot. But first, the good news. I visited Lady McKenzie and Fergus. It seems the plan went further than we expected." Darren looked amused for some reason. "Me cousin, Fergus, is Fergus Bruce nae longer, assumin' the king approves this writ I've brought along tae say so."

A mutter sounded around the table, and both Ferda and Cailean demanded, "What?"

"It seems the false marriage became a wee bit more serious than we expected," Darren explained. "Who kent our Fergus was such a romantic?"

Breana was the first to gasp in understanding. "He married her! Fergus has married Sorch McKenzie!"

Darren nodded, laughing. "He did! Apparently the two of them fell in love or somethin' of the sort. Good thing I didnae go ahead and wed her as ye suggested, eh, Cailean?"

Cailean nodded, a small smile on his face.

"Let me guess the rest. Lady McKenzie approved the marriage, but under one

condition, am I right?

Since the death of her husband and family means there's naebody tae follow her once we win back her husband's land from Murtagh, she wants tae ensure the security of her family's true legacy. "

"Fergus McKenzie," Maeve said. "Oh, good for Sorcha. And good for Fergus, as well. Though Kier will be furious he missed the weddin'."

Ferda snorted. " I'm furious," she said, though she, too, looked thrilled. "They owe us a feast when this is all over."

Cailean signed the writ that Darren offered him. "So now we have the might of the Campbells and the revived McKenzies both, combined with the strength of the Bruce Clan. Every new bond is new strength for us. This is wonderful, Darren."

"Indeed," Senan replied. "And me older brother Angus—Laird Macrae—has declared for us after many years of stayin' out of things. Aye, it's a tiny clan, but it's another ally. We're accumulatin' power at an alarmin' rate, Cailean. We're nearly ready tae make our final strike."

"And tae get our sister back?" Breana asked. Neala hadn't even noticed that the oldest of the sisters was in the room; she had been so quiet until this point that she had blended into the background. Now, though, her quiet voice rang like a clanging bell.

The elation in the room dimmed a little. Eoin took Breana's hand. All eyes turned toward Cailean, Neala's included.

Cailean let out a breath. "Breana, ye ken Nessa is one of our main priorities. But Neala's given us the information we needed—she's safe for now. Until we have the strength tae fully attack Blackthorn Castle and succeed, she's safer where she is."

Hamish nodded. "Aye. And Neala's assured us that Ansel Ashkirk isnae the demon he's been made out tae be.

Even Maeve's agreed tae wait, we all did.

We ken the false prince is nae an ally, nae by any means, but it seems based on what the princess has assured us, he's nae gonnae hurt anyone without cause.

Aye, he'll need tae be defeated, but he's nae an active threat.

So long as this is true, we've already agreed?—"

Darren cleared his throat. Everyone else fell silent, turning to him. "I'm sorry," he said. "But there's more I need tae tell ye."

Something caught Neala's stomach in an iron grip and bile burned the back of her throat. Whatever Darren was about to say, she knew that she didn't want to hear it.

"Speak," Cailean told him. "Ye asked for a map. What was it ye wanted tae show us?"

Darren's expression was serious again, so much so that he looked like an entirely different person. He jabbed a spot on the map with his finger, then reached for a piece of charcoal that was in the center of the table.

Neala leaned closer to see, and several of the others did the same.

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"Clan McIntyre," Ewan said. "What of them? Laird McIntyre is already sworn tae us. He returned only recently tae gather more of his clansmen for the cause. They're a wee clan, but strong."

Darren shook his head and drew a thick cross over the area.

Neala gasped in a breath that felt like a knife.

"They're gone," Darren said quietly. "They raised our banners, Cailean—and he destroyed them. Laird McIntyre and his whole family are gone. The whole clan is gone."

Then he drew three more crosses over three more areas on the map. After a pause, he drew a circle around one more area.

"Clan McFall. Clan Mullen. Clan McCabe," Hamish said, studying the map with horror in his eyes. "All of them?"

Cailean swore, slamming his fist down on the table. "I feared this would happen. I warned them! I told them tae be subtle! I told them he'd come for them if they didnae take care! He's the devil made flesh. Those men?—"

Darren sounded sick. "Each attack has grown more brutal, and Clan McIntyre was hit the worst," he said.

"It wasnae just the men. It was the women."

Bairns, too. They attacked in the night—it was a mass execution.

There were a few scattered survivors from the other clans, a few who managed tae run, but there's nothin' left on McIntyre lands but ghosts and ashes. "

Pain pulsed behind Neala's eyes as a headache threatened to overwhelm her. She didn't want to ask, didn't want to know, but the words slipped out before she could stop them. "Is the False King himself leadin' the attacks?"

"Of course he isnae," Eoin snarled. "He wouldnae concern himself with the deaths of peasants."

Darren nodded. "Edric Ashkirk hasnae left Blackthorn Castle in a long time," he replied. "But his son is leadin' the charges against these clans. Ansel Ashkirk has been at the front of every attack—every massacre—and he's shown nae sign of stoppin'. Nae sign of mercy."

Neala sank back into her seat. It couldn't be true.

There had to be some mistake. Women? Children?

Unarmed men in their beds? She remembered the horror in Ansel's eyes as she'd forced him to recall how his father had slaughtered the people of Broken Windmill.

Could he really be doing such things in turn?

Had she been so utterly fooled—so completely wrong about him?

She could not believe it. She wouldn't. She felt Breana's eyes on her and shrank back against the silent accusation.

Maeve jumped to her feet. "There! Now we ken it. Nae matter what he did tae Neala tae make her say such things, he's shown himself now. Do ye expect me tae leave me sister there? Do ye expect me tae leave Nessa in the hands of a true monster? She's trapped in Blackthorn Castle while he?—"

"Nay," Darren said. "She's nae in Blackthorn Castle. Word has it she rides with him through each and every one of the attacks. She stays back and watches the slaughter."

Breana let out a despairing cry and Eoin held her close. Maeve went pale and slowly sat back down. Neala, meanwhile, felt like her heart had stopped beating.

Cailean's face was like thunder, his grey eyes swirling with the darkness of the storm. He caught Neala's gaze, and she felt it there—the strength of her brother. The power of a king who would no longer allow his people to suffer.

"Enough is enough," he said, his voice eerily calm. "We act now. We cannae attack Blackthorn Castle yet, but neither will I leave me sister-in-law in their grasp for one more moment."

"And if she's on their side?" Ferda demanded.

Both of the sisters glared at her, but she did not shrink back.

"I'm sorry, but we must acknowledge the possibility.

Maeve, Breana, ye've both told us how yer sister was always yer father's pet.

Now we learn that she's accompanyin' that demon tae slaughter bairns.

What will ye do if we return her here and she's nae more than a pawn of the False King? "

A pawn. Neala thought of a game of chess, long clever fingers manipulating the pieces, and her eyes filled with tears that she refused to let fall.

Maeve swallowed, but a cold determination filled her voice when she answered. "We will bring her back here. We will give her the chance tae understand, just as Breana and I were both given that chance."

"As was I," Eoin said roughly. "I, who committed crimes in the name of me father under the orders of the False King, have been forgiven. As have many of those who are now our finest warriors and allies. We must at least give Nessa a chance."

"Ye never did anythin' like this, " Ferda argued. "It's nae the same."

"It's exactly the same," Breana replied in that same soft voice. "Nessa will be rescued and given her chance. And if she proves tae be loyal tae our father—and tae the False King—then she will be imprisoned and face justice the same way as any other."

"And if she needs tae be dealt with permanently?" Senan asked. His eyes were on Maeve, a strange expression there. "Could that lass I rescued from an inn do such a thing?"

"Nay," Maeve replied. "But a queen could. If she had tae." She took a breath, then looked to Cailean. "If it comes tae that, I will kill her meself. But first, we give her the chance tae live."

A small proud smile flickered on Senan's face, though Neala thought that she was the only one to notice it. Cailean, meanwhile, was studying Maeve's expression for a long time. Then he sighed, nodding.

"We get her out," he said. "And face what we must. It isnae even just about Nessa anymore—if this weddin' goes ahead, the False King's control of the O'Sullivan clan

and their lands and allies will be solidified.

We cannae allow that. Nessa is Lady O'Sullivan, and the clan is hers. We need tae make it ours."

"A plan, then," Hamish said. "What do ye suggest, Neala?"

Neala blinked in surprise as everyone turned to her. Her head was pounding, her eyes watering, and it took a few tries before she could speak. "Me?" she asked.

"Ye're the White Sparrow," Eoin told her. "Ye're the one who kens the art of subtlety much better than we do. This kind of task is best suited tae yer strategies. What do we do tae get Nessa away from them?"

Neala gulped. She tried desperately not to think of Ansel or of what they said he was doing. She could not meet either Maeve's or Breana's eyes. She glanced at the map and, voice shaking, said, "Darren, what's the fourth place? The one ye circled?"

Darren looked down at the map. "The most recent tae declare themselves for our cause. News will reach the False King soon enough—and I suspect that's where he will act next."

Senan balled his hands into fists. "Clan Macrae. Me people. Of course."

"Then we use it tae our advantage. We lure them out," Neala said. "I will reach out tae the Sparrows for help. We'll get her back."

"Aye," Cailean replied darkly. "And perhaps we'll rid ourselves of a monster in the process."

Chapter Six

Ansel rarely spoke in the war room. He sat at his father's side, listening quietly as the advisors and warrior captains debated and jeered about their recent successes and future plans.

Edric spoke proudly of the slaughter at Clan McIntyre and the bright promise it showed for the Ashkirks as the rightful kings of Scotland.

"Me son has slipped, but he hasnae faltered!" Edric exclaimed, poisonous triumph booming around the room. "See how he repays me for his follies at the Sloe Stronghold! See how he shows nae mercy tae the remains of the McNair vermin!"

The men cheered or shouted congratulations.

Ansel accepted it in silence, his skin rippling with discontent.

Sitting here and acting like he'd planned the massacre of Clan McIntyre to go the way it had...

it felt more than wrong. He had no shame in his victory; he was proud of his strengths as a military commander. But the cost. The cost.

He wanted to squeeze his eyes shut and block his ears, but instead he sat up straight, his mask on tight, his expression unfaltering. He must do his duty. Nothing else mattered.

Across the table, Baldric caught his eye.

Ansel's cousin was not cheering or celebrating.

Instead, his dark blue eyes glinted with understanding and even sympathy.

Baldric alone had known the true aftermath of the attack on the McIntyre Clan.

Only Baldric had witnessed Ansel's flaming rage at the men who had disobeyed Ansel's orders, and witnessed the secret that his father could never know.

Ansel tore his eyes away from his cousin.

He could not allow his thoughts to dwell on any of this.

It didn't matter. Things had gone the way they had gone, and Ansel needed to forget about it.

No matter what, he was the prince—Edric's son—and this was his duty.

The scar on his jaw burned with a phantom itch.

He could not allow himself to fail. What was it his father had said? Ye will win, or ye will die.

"And so it comes tae the reason I've gathered ye here," Edric announced. "The next chance for me son tae make me proud. The next chance for our empire tae grow in its glory!"

One of the advisors stood, indicating a spot on the map before him. Ansel leaned forward, reading the map.

"Clan Macrae," he said, recalling the information he knew of them.

Ansel had made a point over the years to remember as much as he could about any potential enemies or allies.

"They're wee, but wealthy. The laird had a younger brother who disappeared more than twenty years ago.

There are three sons, two of whom are ages with me. "

"Well-remembered," Edric said approvingly.

Ansel would never cease to be amazed at how different his father sounded when they were with other people as opposed to when they were alone.

"Well, it seems that the brothers have reconnected.

The younger has been runnin' with those treacherous rebels these twenty years, and now he's pulled the whole clan intae it.

They've declared fully under the McNair banner. We must teach them a lesson. Ansel?"

A heavy weight settled on Ansel's shoulders. He felt a deep weariness flooding through him, and he wondered if it would be possible to simply sink into the floor and disappear forever. Life was draining him in ways he had never known possible, and he was not sure how much he had left in him.

No. He could not allow himself to think this way. He had to remember who he was.

"Aye, Father," he replied. "I'm ready, of course."

Edric nodded. "Ye ken what must be done. Make an even greater example of these ones than the McIntyres. Make sure they ken exactly what it is tae stand against their king."

"Sire, the prince is due at wedding preparations with his bride this week," one of the advisors reminded them. "Should we cancel the events?"

"He has plenty of time for such things. There are still two months to go until they are wed—enough time tae make the event a celebration for everyone who is still loyal tae us," Edric replied.

"Ensure ye take Nessa with ye again. This time, bring her closer.

Yer men have informed me she is stayin' way back from the violence.

Keep her safe, but ensure she stands close enough tae see the bloodshed. "

Ansel stilled. He could still remember Nessa's face after he had returned to her last time, Baldric leading him, Ansel's own face and clothes covered in blood that was not his own. She'd kept her composure, but he'd seen the horror in her gaze. He wondered if her fear ever stopped.

"Sire, I think it's best we leave the O'Sullivan lass behind. We dinnae want tae risk me bride bein' in any danger." Ansel tried to reason with him, though he knew even before he started speaking that it would not work.

"She will go," Edric replied firmly. "She will see first-hand what happens tae traitors."

"But—" Ansel started.

He shut his mouth abruptly as he saw it—the darkness crossing his father's eyes. Though he did not change his stance, he felt the wariness that had been his constant companion since he was a small boy curling inside him. He'd gone too far.

"Everyone leave," Edric said calmly. "Out."

The advisors did not need telling twice. Everyone stood up as one and filed out of the room. The door swung closed behind the last, leaving only Edric, Baldric, and Ansel in the room.

Baldric spoke up. "Uncle, if I may? The lass has already forsworn her father and her sisters. She's proven her loyalty tae us. It may be that Ansel is right, and she should stay here with the other women."

Edric glared at Baldric. Ansel's heart lifted slightly at the sight of his cousin trying to protect him, even though he knew it was pointless.

"Everyone includes ye , Baldric. Dinnae make me ask ye a third time," Edric commanded.

Baldric bowed and left the room, but not before shooting Ansel a reassuring look.

When they were alone, Edric turned to face Ansel. "Well?"

"Forgive me," Ansel said immediately. "I didnae mean tae question ye."

"But ye did," Edric replied in a deadly low tone. " In front of me men. Have ye nae mind at all? Do ye wish tae force me intae violence?"

Ansel flinched internally, doing his best to wear a contrite expression. "Father, I?—"

"Ye will take the lass. Ye willnae fail me again. I already told ye what would happen if ye did. Have ye forgotten?" Edric hissed. "Ye already lost me three of me best men at Clan McIntyre. I overlooked it due tae yer success, but ye are treadin' a thin line. Ye hear me?"

"Aye, Father."

"Ye are replaceable. And Nessa O'Sullivan is replaceable as well," Edric reminded him. "So what will it be, lad?"

Ansel stood and sunk into a bow. "I willnae fail ye, Father," he promised. "I live tae serve."

Ye will win, or ye will die.

Ansel reached Nessa's room just as the door opened, and, of all people, Baldric walked out. His cousin smiled at him and patted his shoulder on the way past, but did not say a word. Ansel did not try to stop him, but frowned deeply as he watched him go.

He knocked on the door a few moments later, and Nessa answered, fully dressed and as pale and drawn as ever.

"Men shouldnae be seen comin' and goin' from yer rooms," Ansel told her. "Least of all me own cousin. Me father would be very upset tae hear of it."

Nessa scowled. "Dinnae make it sound so sordid."

Baldric came here tae talk tae me, nae more.

He informed me of the distasteful task ye expect me tae undertake tomorrow and that

ye'd be on yer way here.

It seems he's the only man in this castle who's nae a brute.

And why do ye talk of yer father bein' upset? What of yerself?"

Ansel did not rise to the obvious goading of her choice of words.

He had barely spoken a word to Nessa beyond the necessities in the last month, and he had hoped that when he finally did it would at least be cordial.

This, though, was far from it. He folded his arms. "I dinnae care what lovers ye take, before or after we are wed, so long as any bairns are our own.

Ye wouldnae be the first lass in a loveless marriage tae seek a man tae warm yer bed.
"

To his satisfaction, her eyes widened in shock, and a deep blush crossed her cheek. "That's nae—that isnae?—"

He shrugged. "I would advise ye dinnae let yer heart get set on me cousin, though." It was true. Baldric spent most of his time in the kitchens these days; Ansel was fairly certain that his cousin was having some sort of relationship with one of the cooks. "Other than that, I dinnae care much."

Nessa actually stomped her foot out of anger. It was the most expression that Ansel had ever seen from her. "Why do ye taunt me?" she demanded. "I have been nothin' but charmin' in the rare times we have spoken. I have been the perfect lady. Does it give ye joy tae torment me?"

Ansel stopped short at that. He hadn't been intending to do so, and in fact he could

say the same to her—but he could see why she'd seen it that way. But when he looked at her, he only saw another victim of his father, and a reminder that he himself was a tool.

A detached part of him wondered why he didn't want her. She was pretty enough, though her eyes were the wrong color and her features too soft. Her manners were pristine, though he found himself challenging her cold politeness, seeking heated sparring of wit on wit.

Internally, he scowled at himself. If he would allow himself to admit it, he knew why he did not want Nessa, and why he doubted he would ever want another woman again, no matter how perfect.

Because every time he closed his eyes he saw that look, that outstretched hand, that pleading for him to run.

And the sight of her riding out of his life forever.

He shook his head, gathering himself as best he could. "I have nae intention of tormentin' ye," he told her, letting the coldness seep back into his voice. "So long as ye play yer part well. Forgive me if I have been unwelcomin'."

She seemed surprised at that, but nodded her head gracefully in acceptance.

Ansel unfolded his arms and stood straight. "Ye should get yerself ready quickly. Baldric has told ye where we are goin'. We leave at dawn, so make sure ye rest tonight."

Nessa hesitated. "Why... why does the king insist? Why is me presence necessary?"

"Because ye are the daughter of a traitor," Ansel told her without pause. "Yer father

failed yer king. Yer sisters, too, quite literally are abed with the rebels who threaten our kingdom."

"And yet ye're tae wed me," Nessa challenged.

Ansel smiled, not feeling it at all. "I am.

Father has decided tae extend ye this courtesy.

But that doesnae take away from what ye are.

Ye have traitorous blood, and that stain will follow ye forever, even as me queen.

Only by bein' taught properly may our bairns be free of the stain.

The king doesnae forgive. He doesnae forget. "

"That's absurd," Nessa replied coldly, "And I dinnae believe for a second that ye think it is the truth. Ye cannae blame me for the actions of me family. I think ye may ken that better than anyone else."

Ansel did not reply. He couldn't.

After a long silence, Nessa let out a tiny sigh, seeming to deflate.

"All right. All right, I will be ready." She paused, then said, "But tell me one thing.

Before the last attack—before ye told me tae stay back—ye ordered the men tae spare some of the men and only capture the women and bairns. Did ye change yer mind?"

For a moment he was there again, bursting into the little house amongst the flames

and blood, screaming at his men to retreat, Baldric right behind him.

For a moment, he saw them again—the father holding his son in a futile attempt to protect him, both dead at the point of one of the king's men's swords.

The mother, clutching a baby, both screaming in a corner as another soldier approached her.

The little girl, still forever now while a soldier bearing his father's colors withdrew his weapon from her body.

"Nay," he replied hoarsely. "I didnae change me mind."

"Then why? Why did ye try tae spare them?" Nessa asked.

He wanted to walk away, but he felt like he at least owed her this. "Because the majority of the clan that was there in that village was unarmed. I dinnae harm unarmed people. I dinnae kill those who cannae defend themselves."

Nessa wrapped her arms around herself. "They're still dead."

"That they are," Ansel replied, his stomach tight. "Because me father has nae such qualms, and neither do the rest of his men. I am nae the king—he is."

"Hm," Nessa replied. "Then I suppose our blood isnae what defines us after all."

Ansel blinked. He didn't have an answer, and he wasn't sure he wanted to push further. He turned to go. "Sleep well," he murmured, then started down the corridor.

"Wait!" Nessa called. "Wait, please."

He faced her once more. "What?"

Nessa chewed on her lip for a moment, looking up and down the corridor as if trying to make sure they were alone. Once she was satisfied, she said, "Baldric... Baldric told me what happened. He told me what ye did."

His entire body went rigid. "What?" he hissed. "Why would he do that?"

She shook her head. "I dinnae ken. But... but, Ansel, ye killed those men. Yer father's men. Yer men. Why?"

He was there again as the rage consumed him.

As he drew his sword without a thought and attacked, seeing nothing but the red of his anger and the blood.

When it lifted, the three soldiers were dead, and Baldric was already pointing the woman and the baby to the door.

Ansel didn't know where she had gone, or if she had managed to escape.

She'd run. She was probably still running.

Even now, he remembered the shock on the king's soldiers' faces, and the way his own blood had sung with righteous rage as he spilled theirs.

Nessa was still waiting for an answer. She was watching him too closely, almost studying him, and Ansel shifted in discomfort.

"Because they disobeyed me," he replied coldly. "Learn from that, me lady. And get some rest before tomorrow. Ye'll need it."

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Chapter Seven

The village was in sight, and Ansel felt the weight of what he was about to do so heavily that he was surprised that his horse did not sink into the ground below him.

He cleared his mind as best he could, determined to focus on the victory to come rather than the reasons for what they were doing.

The laird of this clan was another half-day's ride away with his family, but this village was the main hub of Clan Macrae, and if they took it out, they'd send the message more effectively than attacking the stronghold.

Then, if Laird Macrae did not come crawling back to the king's side, they'd dispatch him too.

He wished Baldric was with him, but his cousin had said he had work to do at the castle. Ansel assumed that the king had required something of Baldric, and he had not dared to question it. He'd already been warned off enough, and anyway, he was sure he'd find out when he returned home.

They stopped just at the top of the hill that led down to the gates of the village. He cast his eyes over the thatched roofs, wondering at the lives that might live within it.

"Nessa," he said, getting down from his horse and helping her down as well. "Ye will wait here with the horses. Ruadh and Wullie will stay here as yer guards. Ye'll obey his commands so long as they are within reason, understood?"

Nessa blinked. "I thought I was tae come closer tae the action today," she said.

"Ye can see perfectly fine from up here. In fact, ye may even have a better view from this angle than ye would close up," Ansel replied firmly.

Nessa bowed her head. Ruadh and Wullie got down from their own horses and got into place while the rest of the men dumped any supplies they had brought and prepared for the battle.

"We're about tae begin," Ansel announced.

"And there will nae be a repeat of what happened at Clan McIntyre.

That was a waste of land and of life. Ye will follow me lead , ye understand?

We are only tae kill those who fight back against us.

Women and bairns are tae be captured, as are any men who lay down their arms. We are here as conquerors, nae executioners. "

Many of his men nodded in agreement, but there was a murmur of discontent from several. One of them, a confident young man named Nicol who was a favorite of the king, spoke up. He was something of a chosen leader amongst the soldiers who were most loyal to Edric.

"We're here tae send a message on His Majesty's orders," Nicol argued. "Let's wipe this village from the earth, then when Laird Macrae comes tae beg, slaughter him as well. Our king is too powerful for pity."

Ansel shot him a level look. "It isnae about pity , Nicol. It's about strategy. Slaughterin' unarmed men and the innocent isnae the move of a good strategist, it's

the move of a brute."

"Then let us be brutes," Nicol snarled. "If that's what it takes tae stamp out the rebel scum for good."

"Eejit," Ansel snapped, his patience already thin. "Dinnae be such a fool. Every drop of unnecessary blood spilled is another drop in the cup of revolution. Dinnae ye understand that? The more we oppress them, the harder they fight."

"They cannae fight back if they're dead!" Nicol insisted, and a few men on his side cheered.

"Dinnae talk tae yer prince that way!" one of Ansel's more loyal men retorted. A few others shouted out in his defense.

The argument started to escalate, shouting on each side getting louder, each insisting, anger flowing around them. Ansel reared up his horse, shouting for them to stop. In the surprised silence that followed, he spoke more firmly than before.

"We attack now . Ye obey me. And we win. Understood?" he commanded.

"Aye, Yer Highness," many of his men said as one.

Ansel met Nicol's eyes. "Understood?" he repeated softly.

Nicol looked away first. "Aye," he replied. "Yer Highness."

Pretending not to notice the resentment in the man's voice for now, Ansel turned his horse around to face the village. With one last glance back at Nessa, he set off, hearing the thundering of his men as they followed behind him.

They raced down the hill and through the gates of the village, Ansel's mind whirling with what he would do. He would target the leaders; probably he would have to kill a few of them as they would definitely fight back, but he hoped that?—

Something was wrong.

As his men spread out across the village, kicking in the doors of houses and shouting for the residents to come out into the open, Ansel stayed frozen in the middle, watching around him.

His stomach swooped as the reality hit him, and his understanding of the world suddenly got flipped on its head.

There was no screaming. No fighting. No noise or movement at all.

The village was empty.

Nessa sat on the grass, staring bleakly down toward the village, her breath catching in her chest as she waited for the battle to begin. She could feel her two guards watching her.

"Ye dinnae need tae watch," Ruadh said with a fumbling awkwardness to his tone.

She turned to look at him—he was young with blazing red hair and freckles and wide blue eyes.

He didn't look like he should be involved in such things as warfare.

Perhaps that was why Ansel had left him behind. "Ye can look away."

"I'll watch," Nessa replied. "My husband-tae-be will win a great victory this day, and

as his future wife, it's me duty tae support it."

"See? The woman has more sense than ye," Wullie replied with a snort. He was a tall, burly man with hooded eyes and a dark smile. "Let's just hope the prince listens tae Nicol and makes it a sight worth watchin'."

Ruadh said something in protest, but Nessa had already stopped listening to them. She expected the first screams to have risen from the village by now, or at least the sound of a raised alarm, but there was nothing but silence.

"What's goin' on?" she whispered to herself. She got to her feet, straining to hear the sounds of battle.

Nothing.

The silence stretched out, peppered only with the sound of Ruadh and Wullie's argument, and Nessa grew increasingly confused.

She'd seen too many of these battles now.

She knew how it went. So where was the panic?

Where was the oncoming storm? Surely, even if Ansel had managed to convince the men to a more peaceful route—and that was unlikely—there would be some resistance from the village?

She peered down the hill, but despite Ansel's assurances, it was far too hard to see. She realized one thing for certain, though. For whatever reason, the battle had not started.

Her guards were still arguing behind her, and though Nessa knew that she should sit

still, something pulled her forward. She took a few steps toward the village, not even sure what she was intending to do.

A sudden thud made her jump, and she spun around just in time to see Ruadh fall to the ground and lie still. She cried out in surprise, at first thinking Wullie had attacked him, but the other guard came lumbering over with panic on his face.

Nessa hurried toward the downed young man, but before she could reach him, a man darted out from seemingly nowhere and pounced toward her. She wordlessly screamed as a hand gripped her arm and pulled her hard.

Wullie drew his sword and threw himself forward. "Let go of the king's property!" he snarled. "I'll kill ye where ye stand, rebel scum!"

"Wait here," her attacker said in a voice that sounded a little too lighthearted for Nessa's comfort. He turned and winked at her. "I'll only be a moment."

She stood, paralyzed with a mixture of fear and shock, and watched as the strange man ran forward to meet Wullie's attack.

She stared, wide-eyed, at this strange, impossible man who seemed completely out of place here at this moment.

His tree-sap golden curls bounced as he fought, laughing as he dodged out of the way of Wullie's attacks.

"Come on, now, ye're nae even tryin'," the attacker scolded with a snort. "Dinnae make me kill ye. I dinnae like winnin' against such a pathetic show."

Wullie roared and swung again. The man danced out of the way, his wild grin visible even through his short beard. "I'll kill ye!" Wullie snarled. "I'll kill ye before ye take

her! She belongs tae the king."

The man tutted, parrying another hit. "I ken some very powerful people who'd disagree. Now, last chance. Put yer sword down. Surrender and ye'll live."

Wullie screamed. "I'll gut ye! And the king will destroy each and every one of ye vermin!" He swung down with a heavy two-handed blow. "Die kennin' yer pretender heir will burn!"

Something in the man's posture changed. Something serious and dark overtook him.

He did not retort. He simply moved, almost too quickly for Nessa to follow, and sliced out with his sword.

Wullie fell a moment later, and it was clear from the thunk of his body on the ground that he would never rise again.

The man returned to Nessa's side. "Now, then," he said in that same cheerful voice from before, all traces of the darkness gone. "Shall we go?"

Nessa tried to run, but he grabbed her again, pulling her close.

She cried out, kicking at his legs, flailing her arms as she tried to fight against his grip.

He grunted, almost sounding surprised, but he fought back easily.

Nessa desperately wished she had a weapon.

She screamed, praying that Ansel or someone would hear.

The man overpowered her in just moments, holding her with her back flush against his chest and her hands crossed in his grip. He pushed her slightly, urging her forward until they reached a horse.

"On," he ordered, loosening his grip. "Come on. We've nae time."

Shaking, Nessa obeyed. She didn't know what else to do. Her eyes went from Wullie's body to Ruadh on the grass as her kidnapper climbed onto the horse behind her and reached past her to grab the reins.

"Did ye have tae kill them both?" she whispered.

The man flicked the horse's reins, and they set off at a gallop. Nessa was thrown backward, feeling the heat of his body supporting her as they raced away.

"The redhead isnae dead. He's gonnae have a hell of a headache when he wakes, though," he told her. "And as for the other one, I did warn him."

The horse sped down the hill and into the forest, galloping in the opposite direction to Blackthorn Castle. Nessa felt cold and empty, wondering where life was taking her next. She wondered if she'd ever choose a path of her own.

"Are ye gonnae kill me?" she asked. "Or are ye plannin' tae hold me for ransom?"

Unbelievably, the strange man laughed again. He really seemed to be enjoying himself—or maybe he just enjoyed every moment. "Kill ye! Ransom ye! After all this effort? God, Nessa. Nae offense, but it doesnae seem worth the trouble."

Nessa's brain scrambled as she tried to understand what he was saying and his odd tone of words. "Are ye mad?" she asked, partly sincere. "Have I been captured by a madman?"

Her kidnapper's arm tightened around her waist as they swung around the corner. Nessa gasped at the sensation.

"Possibly," he replied, "But nae mad enough tae let any harm come tae ye, never fear. After all—yer sisters are waitin'."

Chapter Eight

Hours had passed and night had fallen by the time the horse slowed to a stop. The kidnapper, who had told her his name was Darren, slipped off the horse and raised his hands to help her. Nessa obediently allowed him to help her dismount, ignoring the ache in her body from the relentless ride.

"Sorry we didnae rest earlier," Darren said, his keen eyes obviously noticing the way she stumbled. "We needed tae put as much distance between us and that prince of yers as we could."

Nessa did not answer. She had not answered a single thing he had said, not for hours.

He'd talked almost relentlessly throughout their journey, asking her questions, making jokes, and at one point even singing an old sailor's song.

Nessa had stayed silent and cold throughout, not once allowing her stoic outer shell to falter.

He could kidnap her. He could control her. But he could not force her to speak.

Darren sighed. "Och, come on now. I ken ye can speak, ye were doin' it just fine before we started the ride. Come inside and get somethin' tae eat while we wait for our friends, eh? It looks like it might rain again, and we dinnae want yer bonny dress gettin' ruined."

Nessa glanced down at her dress, a finely embroidered day gown in a dusky red with

gold accents.

The colors of Ashkirk. It was not a practical traveling dress, but her maids had suggested it as a way to please Ansel on the ride to Clan Macrae.

Nessa hadn't particularly cared about pleasing him, but she knew that seduction of the prince would be the best way to secure her role, though the thought of doing that scared her.

It didn't matter, though. He hadn't even noticed. That had given Nessa a strange relief.

She took Darren's offered hand and allowed him to lead her into a small tavern.

He sat her down at a table and went to the counter to order food, obviously secure in knowing she wouldn't run away.

He returned a few moments later with a thick bannock and two bowls of creamy potato soup.

He placed one of the bowls in front of her and then sat, ripping off a piece of the bannock and dunking it in his own soup with enthusiasm.

"Mm!" he exclaimed. "Ye should try some, Nessa. It's delicious."

Nessa's stomach rumbled, but she ignored the food. Instead, she leaned across the table and spoke her first word in hours. "Who are ye?"

He paused, another piece of bannock halfway to his mouth. "I told ye. I'm Darren." He grinned, and the smile highlighted the freckles on his cheeks. His brightness was strange, unlike anyone that Nessa had ever known, and Nessa felt wary and on edge.

"Darren who?"

He shrugged. "Eat some. Please. Yer sisters will never forgive me if I bring ye back a skeleton."

That was the second time he'd mentioned her sisters.

That meant he was definitely one of the rebels, there was no doubting it.

Nessa recalled that meeting with Maeve back in their childhood home, and her stomach clenched with unease.

She'd disobeyed her father at that moment and given her sister the chance to escape. Now, their father was dead.

She lifted her spoon and took a sip of the soup, mostly to give herself something to focus on other than that. It was surprisingly good, and she tentatively reached for some of the bannock, too.

Darren's smile grew softer, and Nessa had to look away. She felt like she was staring directly into the sun, and she feared that her eyes would burn. "There, now," he said. "And dinnae worry. It's me treat. I always pay when I take a lady out tae eat."

"Do ye often kidnap women from their betrothed?" Nessa asked acidly.

He didn't seem offended. In fact, he chuckled. "Ye'd be the first that started in such a way," he admitted. "And the first who hasnae spoken much for such a time as well. Lassies usually love the conversation I have to offer."

She scowled. "Perhaps ye're nae as interestin' as ye think."

Darren shrugged. "Perhaps!" he said easily. "Or maybe I'm just nae interestin' enough for ye . Ye're very intriguin', Nessa. And lovely as well."

Nessa's eyes snapped up to him. "Lovely? Ye're mistakin' me for me sisters."

He shook his head. "Nay. Maeve is a beauty, aye, and any man would admit it, and Breana is as bonny as the spring, it's true.

But ye are somethin' unique. Those cheekbones, the way ye hold yer shoulders, the look in yer eyes...

ye're one of the most intriguin' women I've ever met.

Truly regal. I see why the prince wanted ye. "

Wrongfooted and confused by the sudden unexpected turn of the conversation, Nessa felt her cheeks burning.

He was wrong, or he was lying—that was all there was to it.

Nessa knew she was not ugly, but she had never been beautiful like Maeve nor pretty like Breana.

She looked like their mother, who had grown into a handsome woman with age, but had been reminded again and again through her youth that she was plain.

Her only value was to make herself loved, no matter what the cost. Nessa had never had any delusions that any husband would want her solely at a glance.

That was why she'd worked so hard to get where she was—and why she could not believe that this rebel had ruined all of it.

"We have only just met. This conversation is inappropriate, borderin' on rude," Nessa snapped.

He tilted his head, seeming surprised by her reaction. "Well, I suppose kidnappin' is also inappropriate, borderin' on rude," he said. "I'm breakin' all the rules today. Forgive me if I caused ye discomfort, though—I only meant to be complimentary."

She considered telling him that she was not uncomfortable, just confused...

and suspicious as well. She wondered what he'd say if she told him that his words had lit an unfamiliar candle flame in her belly, sending a warmth she'd never known to her cheeks and flooding through her body.

But she'd long since learned that such emotion was best quashed.

So, instead of talking at all, she dropped her gaze once more and continued to eat.

A little while later, when the food was done, the door to the tavern opened and a group of four men entered.

They looked around, then spotted Nessa and Darren and made their way across the small room toward them.

Nessa tensed, not even sure what she was fearing, but worried that she was about to be stolen away yet again.

"Darren! Is this her?" the obvious leader of the men asked as he approached. He studied her with owlish blue eyes and a satisfied smile on his face. "Nae doubt about it. Ye did it!" He slapped Darren on the back. "Breana will be thrilled."

Nessa recoiled at the mention of her sister's name from this stranger's lips. He seemed

oddly familiar, but the nagging in her mind would not settle on an identification. "Breana?" she asked.

Darren caught her eye. "Nessa, meet Eoin Darach, captain of the true king's guard. And yer brother-in-law, I suppose."

She blinked rapidly as she processed these words.

Brother-in-law ? Could it be true—could innocent, dreamy Breana be wed?

Of course, Breana had been married off to Kyle Darach just as Maeve had been to Malcolm before her, but this felt different.

This was a young man who spoke Breana's name as though it was the most precious sound in the world—a love match? Could it be possible?

"Edric Ashkirk is the true king," she said automatically, no feeling behind the words. "Yer pretender is just that. I have nae interest in any of this."

Darren cocked his head to the side, studying her. "Ye believe that, do ye? Or is that just what ye've been taught tae say yer whole life?"

Nessa scowled, dropping her gaze. Didn't they understand that what she thought didn't matter?

She had her own beliefs somewhere deep within her, but she'd spent her life quashing and ignoring them.

The only thing that mattered for a woman in this world was survival—and that meant believing what she was told to believe.

Eoin cleared his throat. "Well, anyway. Ye're with us now, and we'll take ye back with us. I'm sure ye didnae want tae be wed tae the likes of Ansel Ashkirk. We'll keep ye safe."

She turned her gaze to him but did not speak.

It was true—she'd had no desire to be Ansel's wife, though the invitation to marry him had been a relief.

Her whole life, she would have given anything to one day be queen.

But the longer she had spent in Blackthorn Castle, the more she'd felt a dread every morning upon waking.

She'd walked from one cage into another, and there was no chance of escape.

Maybe there never would be, not for her.

"Yer sisters will be thrilled tae have ye back," Eoin told her. "They've been goin' out of their minds this last month tryin' tae find a way tae find ye."

Nessa pursed her lips. Now she knew that Eoin was lying. Maeve would never forgive Nessa for standing by when Cailean McNair was supposed to be executed, and the last time that Nessa saw Breana, Nessa had turned her back on her weeping sister as she was dragged away to be Kyle's bride.

None of this mattered anyway. Chances were that they would never reach McNair Castle.

Ansel would already know that she was missing, and he would come after them.

Eoin and Darren would be killed, as would the other rebels who had accompanied them.

That was what happened to traitors. If Nessa allowed herself to get caught up in all of this—if the False King suspected that she was colluding with the rebellion—then she would die too.

It was just the way things were. It was the way things always had been.

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She glanced up and saw that Darren was watching her carefully, seeming to observe her every minuscule movement. "What?" she asked, irritable. Something about this man kept breaking through her careful poise, and knowing that was just annoying her even more.

"Ye're thinkin' yer prince will come and slaughter us all before we have a chance tae get ye back, aye?" Darren asked.

Nessa's stomach jolted, but she kept her expression forcibly calm and did not reply.

"Dinnae fear," Darren went on. "We're already far ahead of him, and besides, we've given him plenty tae keep him busy."

Eoin nodded. "And if the Sparrows' plan goes ahead, he willnae be followin' us at all. Ever again."

Nessa saw a frown cross Darren's face at that. Whatever that plan was, he didn't approve of it—but neither did he argue. That meant that, agreeable or not, he believed it was going to work. Both of these men believed that there was no way Ansel would be able to follow them.

Her heart raced, and she felt a tingling at the tips of her fingers. None of this was what she had expected. None of this was anything she had ever dreamed. The rebels had kidnapped her—and they had a plan.

And that meant that, despite everything that Nessa had believed for her whole life, they might have a chance.

The ambush came so suddenly that two of Ansel's men were downed before they had a chance to cry out.

The rebel forces surged upon them, calling out the name of their king and racing forward with fierce pride in their eyes.

Ansel heard one of his men scream and reached for his sword, ducking out of the way just in time as an arrow whistled past his ear.

"At arms!" he roared, whipping his head around as the rebel soldiers flooded into the previously empty village. Rage pulsed in his veins as he realized what had happened. He'd been trapped. He'd been caught like an animal in a cage—the rebels had called him here to die.

Well, Ansel had no intention of dying. Not today.

They were outnumbered five to one, but under Ansel's command, most of his men jumped into action, fighting fiercely as the clanging of swords and screams of pain filled the air.

A few of the men disappeared in the chaos of battle, and out of the corner of his eye, Ansel saw Nicol lead his small cohort away to the edges of the village.

"Coward!" he snarled, but he didn't have time to act on that as someone swung a sword at his horse's flank. The animal was not hurt, but she screamed and reared up in fright, sending Ansel tumbling hard to the ground.

The impact shook his bones, and he thought he heard something crack as the pain lanced through him. He whacked his head as he fell, and for a moment his vision swam. The horse raced off into the distance as three men circled around him, approaching with their swords drawn.

None of them spoke. One of the men stabbed downward, and Ansel rolled to the side, ignoring the screaming in his muscles as he did.

The point of the sword stuck hard into the ground just where his head had been.

Another of the rebels went in for the kill, and Ansel took a wound to the shoulder as he raised his arm to parry the attack.

"Die in the dirt!" one of the rebels screamed. "Die, like me family did! Die! "

Ansel cursed and kicked out, his foot connecting hard with the shouting rebel's heel. The man stumbled into another, and as the two rebels tried to straighten up, Ansel took the opportunity to scramble to his feet, narrowly avoiding another blow from the third man.

He turned to block an attack from the third man and pushed hard, causing him to lose his balance. Ansel pushed the attack and slammed the broad side of his sword against the man's wrist. The rebel screeched in pain as his wrist snapped and he dropped his sword.

Ansel swung around as the other two rebels regained their footing and came racing toward him.

He sliced out with his sword and one of the men crumpled to the ground with a dreadful finality.

The other howled, stabbing out wildly, and Ansel grunted as he avoided the blow by a breath.

He fought back and caught the man through the chest, his sword piercing right through.

The rebel met his eyes as Ansel moved closer. To the prince's horror, the dying rebel smiled.

"Ye've lost," he breathed.

Ansel withdrew the sword and the man's body fell to the ground. As he did, a sharp agony pierced his back as a knife slid between his shoulder blades. He howled, spinning with his sword out, and cut down his attacker in a moment.

Breathing heavily, his shoulder and back pulsing with pain and three dead bodies at his feet, he surveyed the battle around him. Several of the rebels were dead, but several of his men had been downed as well. He started forward to join another battle, but stopped short.

As one, the rebels fell into a retreat. They ended their battles and ran, disappearing from the village. A few of Ansel's men gave chase, causing skirmishes here and there, but before long, the rebels were gone.

Ansel stumbled, falling to his knees. The pain from his wounds was almost unbearable. Two of his men hurried over to help him up.

"Do we follow, Yer Highness?" one of them asked anxiously.

"Nay," Ansel grunted, allowing them to pull him back to his feet. "We get back tae Nessa, and we go and report what has happened tae me father."

The two men exchanged looks, obviously uneasy, but nodded. Ansel clenched his fists, trying to clear his mind and ignore the pulsing pain. He set his eyes toward the hill, knowing that what was coming would not be pleasant—but he still had a role to play.

The first thing Ansel spotted was Wullie's body. He stared at the dead man, uncomprehending for a moment, then cast his eyes over the other still figure. As he watched, Ruadh stirred, and Ansel lurched toward him, kneeling at his side.

The young man's eyes fluttered open, then dilated in fear. "Yer Highness," he said. "Forgive me."

"What happened?" Ansel asked roughly. "Where is Nessa?"

"I was attacked—attacked from behind," Ruadh stammered. "I didnae see it comin'. I dinnae ken...I..."

Ansel closed his eyes and breathed deeply, trying to calm himself. "Where is Nessa?" he repeated.

Ruadh didn't answer.

It didn't matter. Ansel waved one of his men over to help him up.

"Look after him," he said, nodded to Ruadh, then peered out into the distance.

Whoever had taken Nessa—whoever had successfully distracted him enough to steal her away—was long gone.

It didn't take much thought to work out where she was taken.

He'd encountered Maeve just over a month ago when the rebels had reclaimed McNair Castle, and now—now she had taken her sister back, too.

His blood was boiling under his skin. Neala would be there to greet her. Cailean McNair had taken everything from him. Everything.

"Ye've lost her, then," Nicol said. "Me king will nae be happy. I kent this would happen. Ye show too much mercy. It's a cowardice—nae wonder they managed tae surprise us."

Ansel stared at the man. "Cowardice?" he growled. "Strong words from a man who retreated while his brothers died around him."

Nicol stiffened. "I serve me king. I needed tae return tae him, nae die in a pointless ambush."

Flames licked at the sides of Ansel's temples. "Ye serve me!" he snarled. "Ye are under me command. Ye are a traitor!"

Nicol made a dismissive sound. "Ye are a spoiled prince afraid of bloodshed in the name of glory."

Ansel gripped the pommel of his sword. "Ye want bloodshed?" he asked. "Draw yer weapon."

"Yer Highness..." Ruadh whispered.

Ansel ignored him. "Do it, man."

Nicol scoffed and drew his own sword. "Ye wouldnae dare," he said. "I am a favorite of the king's. I am?—"

The rest of his words were lost as Ansel pounced, his rage a cloak of flame around him. The screams echoed down through the valley and seemed to pulse through the world.

Chapter Nine

Ansel walked stiffly into the throne room, trying his best not to let the pain from his shoulder and back show in his stance or on his face.

He would need to get the wounds tended to and soon, or he would risk the chance of infection.

However, his father had summoned him directly to the throne room, and Ansel knew better than to delay.

As he reached the doors, he saw Baldric nearby in the corridor.

He was stooped over in deep, intense conversation with the second cook, Elspeth.

Ansel briefly wondered what they were talking about—his cousin seemed to spend all of his time with that cook these days.

She was about ten or fifteen years older than them, and of course a completely common woman, but could she be Baldric's lover?

It was unlikely, but Ansel couldn't think of any other reason.

He would never ask, though. None of them had much privacy within the castle walls, and he would grant his cousin at least that secret.

Baldric looked up as Ansel passed and gave him a questioning look.

Ansel shook his head, though he appreciated the implicit offer of company.

Whatever it was that his father planned to do to him, he'd face it alone.

The last thing he saw before he entered the throne room was Baldric's face creased in worry.

The doors thudded closed as Ansel entered the room. Edric was lounging on the throne, completely alone, simply waiting for him. He kept his eyes on Ansel, not speaking at all, until Ansel moved close and knelt with his head bowed.

"Yer Majesty," Ansel said. "I assume ye've received the report?"

"I have," Edric replied. "Stand up."

Ansel did, wincing.

Edric glared. "Look at yer weakness," he spat contemptuously. "Would that ye had simply died in yer failure."

Keeping his head bowed, Ansel knew better than to argue. He had failed, regardless of who had been at fault. The Macrae clan had escaped, and Nessa was gone.

The king stood and walked the few paces over to Ansel. He spat his next words with the force of a catapult, and with each point he kicked Ansel hard in the side. "Fallin' for a rebel ambush!" Kick. "Killin' one of me best soldiers!" Kick. " Losin' the O'Sullivan lass!"

Ansel toppled to the side as his father's boot drove into him, first his side and then his stomach, knocking the breath from his lungs. He resisted the urge to curl up on himself defensively, knowing that any further sign of weakness would only make this

worse.

After what seemed like an eternity, his father backed off. "Stand," Edric commanded.

It took a few tries, but Ansel was finally able to struggle to his feet. His shoulder ached and his back was on fire, and with the new bruises forming on his side and stomach, his body felt ready to fall apart. Nonetheless, he stood straight, not letting the agony show.

"Yer punishment awaits in the dungeons. Come." Edric abruptly walked toward the door, and Ansel did not hesitate to follow.

His guts churned and, no matter how much he battled it, a spark of fear careened through his body. He knew what was coming. He knew that the pain he was feeling now was nothing compared to what was coming next.

Following his father along the corridor, Ansel passed Baldric again. His cousin now stood alone, the cook nowhere to be seen. Baldric stepped forward despite Ansel shaking his head.

"Uncle," Baldric said. "Perhaps another punishment? Ansel is already clearly injured. Maybe we can?—"

"Out of the way," Edric snarled. "Dinnae question me, lad, lest ye want tae face the same punishment."

Baldric grimaced. "Then let me hold the lash, Uncle. Allow me tae learn the ways of yer strength."

Edric laughed, a cruel, loud guffaw that echoed around the walls. "Oh, very good! Ye think I'm a fool? I ken ye have a soft spot for one another. Ye think I'll allow ye tae

go easy on he who has failed me?"

"Uncle—"

Ansel stepped forward. "Father is correct, Baldric. I am tae face me punishment for me failures. Dinnae intervene."

Baldric looked aghast, but met Ansel's eyes, then gave a grim nod. He stepped backward, bowing his head. "Forgive me intervention, Uncle," he muttered.

The king gave Ansel a piercing look. "Hm. Perhaps ye're nae a total loss yet. Come."

Without any further words, Ansel followed Edric past Baldric and down the corridor. They reached the staircase leading to the dungeon and started down, every jolting step sending fresh stabbing pain through Ansel's wounds.

Edric led him through the dungeons in silence.

Usually when Ansel came down here he heard the prisoners crying out for help or mercy, but today they were silent.

No doubt they saw who had come. Edric led him to the darkest part of the dungeons, past the cells where they kept their most valuable prisoners.

"Ferda..." a weak voice muttered. "Run..."

Ansel turned to the sound and saw two women in the cell.

He recognized them instantly: the White Sparrows they had captured more than a month before.

They looked in a sorry state. The older woman knelt on the ground, her hair lank and tangled, deep circles under her eyes.

The younger one was a thousand times worse.

Her head lay on the older woman's lap, but she was so thin as to be almost emaciated, twitching and mumbling as the older woman tried to soothe her.

"She's goin' tae die," Ansel breathed, unable to stop himself. "What use will she be as a prisoner then?"

Edric glanced in the cage, contempt in his voice. "They're bein' kept alive until such time as I find the best value from them. If she dies, she dies. I only need the leader—and the spies and traitors dinnae need tae ken they're bargainin' for a corpse. Now, move ."

They moved on, but Ansel locked eyes with the older woman as they did. She did not ask for help, nor did she show any anger. She simply stared with a gaze that he knew would haunt him far longer than his scars.

At last, they reached an empty room with manacles on the wall and floor and a small shelf containing the instruments of the torturer's trade. Ansel looked around, frowning.

"Where is he?" he asked. "Cartwright never misses a chance tae flay the skin from a traitor."

Edric moved to the shelf, pondering the tools there. "I will act alone. Remove yer shirt and go tae the wall. Do I need tae use the manacles?"

Ansel shook his head, his stomach lurching. He removed his shirt as instructed and

walked to the wall, leaning his hands against it.

Edric approached after a moment. He prodded first at the wounded shoulder and then at his back, causing Ansel to grit his teeth and fight a scream.

"War wounds," Edric mused. "Poorly placed. This will hurt more." He paused, then added, "Perhaps it will make the lesson stick."

Ansel braced himself, and a second later the first lash slammed against his skin.

The pain was like a hot poker searing him, and as it sliced across the already-open wound, Ansel's vision turned white.

Before he had a chance to collect himself, Edric lashed him again.

This time, Ansel could not stop a cry of pain from bursting from his lips.

Panic flushed through him—a reaction meant an extra lash.

Edric did not wait before the third blow fell, then the fourth, then a fifth.

By the time he was done, Ansel was leaning heavily against the wall, knowing that if he let go he would collapse entirely. He could feel hot blood running down his back, the air stinging wherever it touched. Edric stepped back, surveying him like an artist viewing his work.

"That will do for now," Edric said after a moment. "There's a bucket of water in the corner. Clean the blood, put yer shirt back on, and go tae yer rooms. Dinnae let me see ye again today."

"A... Aye, Father," Ansel managed to force out, every word an effort.

Edric did not leave. "I'm waitin'," he said. "Will ye nae say it?"

Fighting the urge to vomit from the pain, breath so heavy that it hurt, Ansel knew that he had to speak or it would get worse. "Th—thank ye for the lesson, Father," he mumbled. "I will... I willnae forget it."

"Nay," Edric replied. "Ye willnae."

Ansel entered his rooms, his back burning, his body threatening to collapse.

He cursed himself for his own weakness. What was wrong with him?

He had faced lashings before, and much worse than this.

He should not be suffering as much as he was.

Tomorrow, when he was permitted to, he would visit the healers to give him the salves that would protect him from infection, but he had cleaned them for now.

He would be fine overnight if he just managed to gather himself together.

Carefully, he peeled the shirt from his back.

It was stained with blood, and he threw it to the corner of his room.

He'd burn it in the morning. He opened his wardrobe and turned his back, checking himself in the full-length looking glass.

His back was crisscrossed with angry red wounds, and his shoulder wound looked deep but clean.

None of it was concerning, though no doubt his bedsheets would be ruined.

He squinted at the mirror to see the stab wound on his back.

It was hard to see from this angle, especially with the lashes covering it, but there was something strange about it.

It didn't look right. Perhaps infection had already set in—he would need to see the healers in the morning.

He couldn't do it now, though. If he went to them now, his father would punish him all over again.

With a grunt, Ansel blew out his lantern, then stumbled to his bed and lay down. Rest was the only thing he could do for himself now. He could not lie on his back, and so rested on his side. The chess set was there, hidden in the darkness. It seemed to taunt him.

Where was Nessa now? Was she with Neala? Had Neala asked about him?

Did Ansel even want to know the answer?

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He scowled and rolled to his other side, ignoring the scream of protest from his shoulder. It took some time, but eventually, he fell into a fitful sleep. The last thing he saw in his mind's eye before unconsciousness took him were the eyes of the Sparrow leader, still staring into his soul.

"Ye shouldnae just let him hurt ye like that. Ye should fight back," Baldric insisted. "Or I'll fight him for ye."

Ansel shook his head. At twenty-two, Baldric was several years older than Ansel, but it was clear he still had a lot to learn about the way of the world. "Ye ken we cannae do that. He's the king."

"He's supposed tae be yer father!" Baldric argued. "I cannae believe he used the lash on ye. Ye didnae even do anythin' wrong. Ye've succeeded in every mission he's given ye. Ye've shown yer loyalty over and over. Even after he did that tae yer face years ago, ye've done nothin' but be a good son."

Part of Ansel pulsed in furious agreement.

He did not deserve the pain his father had inflicted upon him.

He was a man now, already seventeen, and he had done nothing wrong by offering his opinion.

But the greater part of him knew that there was no point in arguing.

He was his father's subject before he was his son, and as the prince, his duty was to

obey in all things.

"I contradicted him in front of Laird O'Sullivan," he explained patiently. "When I argued that we shouldnae execute Laird McKinstrie simply for holdin' on tae the capercaillie crest, I undermined the king. That cannae go unpunished."

Baldric scowled. "Now McKinstrie is dead, O'Sullivan has his lands, and ye are in agony. How can ye believe this is right? I cannae stand tae see ye hurt like this."

"It isnae about what's right or wrong," Ansel insisted. "It's all there is."

There was a knock at the door, and a second later, the new cook, Elspeth, entered. She was carrying a tray laden with breakfast food, a small pot of healing salve, and some bandages.

"Thank ye," Baldric told her, taking the tray. "I'll take it from here."

She nodded, giving him a smile before shooting Ansel a concerned look, then left. Ansel did not miss the way his cousin's eyes lingered on the older woman for a few moments before he turned back to him.

"Ye shouldnae accept things just because they are, Ansel," Baldric said. "Turn around. Let me see tae yer back."

"She could get intae trouble for this," Ansel replied, though he did as he was told. "So could ye."

Baldric chuckled. "Elspeth's a smart lass. She and I work well together. I wouldnae worry about such things."

After he was finished tending to Ansel's wounds, Baldric washed his hands,

uncharacteristically silent. Ansel pulled his shirt back on and then faced his cousin.

"I dinnae want ye puttin' yerself in danger for me, Baldric," he said quietly. "Especially nae for me."

Baldric sighed. He moved closer, then put a comforting hand on Ansel's shoulder, leaning close to rest his forehead against his. Ansel knew that, if his back wasn't in such a state, his cousin would have embraced him. "Listen tae me," Baldric said. "It's very important."

Ansel didn't speak.

"There are only two things worth puttin' meself in danger for, and ye are one of them, understand?" Baldric stayed where he was for a moment, then drew back, though he stared into Ansel's eyes. "I will always be there for ye. Always."

"I... I understand," Ansel replied, shaken by the intensity of Baldric's promise. He had never felt so secure in the fact that he was cared for, and it unsettled him. "Same tae ye."

Baldric smiled, and the moment was broken. "I'd better go," he said. "Eat yer breakfast. I'll be back later tae check on ye."

He made for the door and opened it, but just before he left, Ansel said, "Wait!"

"Aye?" Baldric asked.

"What—what's the second thing? Ye said there were two things worth the danger, and I was one. What's the other?"

His cousin stared at him for a moment, then smiled again, more sadly this time. "Och,

Ansel. I hope I can tell ye one day. I hope one day, ye'll be able tae understand."

Then, without another word, he slipped away.

Ansel woke up, gasping for air. His skin felt hot and clammy all at once, and for a little while, he could not tell where he was or even who he was.

Was it still ten years ago, with Baldric by his side tending to his wounds?

Or was it now, when he'd failed his father so catastrophically, and Neala was still so far away?

He struggled into a sitting position, his hands finding dampness as he pressed against his pillow to prop himself up.

He must have been sweating all night. A fever.

The world swam before his eyes, and nausea flared in his stomach.

His head throbbed with a dull ache, and he couldn't understand why nothing would stand still.

The door opened with no knock, and a man walked in. Ansel forced himself to focus and saw Baldric approaching, his face pale and creased with worry. Baldric sat at the foot of his bed and pressed something into Ansel's hands.

"What...?" Ansel asked, his words slurred. "What is this...?"

"Elspeth asked me tae bring it tae ye. Ye must drink it," Baldric told him. "She says ye could die if ye dinnae."

Ansel blinked, trying to clear his head. Elspeth? The cook? He'd had fevers before, and they'd never killed him. What would a cook know?

"Please," Baldric urged. "Ansel, ye've been poisoned. Ye must drink."

The things Baldric was saying made no sense. Ansel wondered if it wouldn't be better just to lie down and sleep more. He was so, so tired. But something clicked in his dulled mind, and he frowned. "What... what do ye mean? How would she ken I was?"

Baldric hesitated, but it didn't matter.

Something else connected inside Ansel's blurred brain like a shock of lightning jolting him back into consciousness.

Had it not been Elspeth who had recommended Neala for the job?

That was something Ansel had found out long after she was gone.

How would a cook have known how to smuggle a White Sparrow into the kitchen's of the king's stronghold? Unless, unless...

It all made sense. Baldric's secret meetings for the last ten years. The way the rebels kept getting information, even now over a month after Neala had gone.

"She's... she's one of them!" Ansel groaned. "She's a Sparrow! A spy!"

"Aye," Baldric agreed. "She has been the whole time. I wanted tae tell ye sooner, I?—"

Ansel's head throbbed. "How long have ye kent?"

"Ten years. Ansel, I'll explain it all, I promise, but first ye must drink," Baldric insisted. "Please."

"Nay!" Ansel's hand tightened on the little vial. "I cannae trust her. She wants tae kill me. They all want me dead."

Baldric leaned forward and grabbed Ansel's arm. "Ye dinnae need tae trust her. Trust me. "

He wanted to. Ansel wanted to trust his cousin, his best friend, more than he'd ever wanted almost anything.

But the poison was clouding his thoughts, and the fever was making it hard to think, and all he could understand was that Baldric had been lying to him for over a decade.

Paranoia surged within him. What if it was just a fever and the vial itself was the poison?

What if one of the only people he'd ever trusted had come here to send him to his death?

"Nay," Ansel murmured. It was getting harder to talk. "Nay."

Growling in frustration, Baldric dropped his arm and picked up the second thing he'd brought with him. It was a piece of paper, which he unfolded. "Maybe ye'll listen tae this, then."

Ansel lay back on the pillow, exhausted.

" Ansel, " Baldric read. " Drink from the vial. I ken you will not trust Elspeth's word, though she says she has someone in the castle who may be able to convince you. If

they can't, then trust me. You spared my life, and now I'm saving yours. "

"Neala," Ansel gasped.

" I'm sorry it came to this. I've tried to tell them, tried to explain.

I wish you'd come with me—I wish we could have done this together.

Ken that Cailean was against this plan. He wanted to face you in battle rather than let you die by poison.

In the end, though, they decided that they needed to do whatever it took to stop the monster.

" Baldric paused in his reading, an indescribable expression on his face.

" Ansel, I ken they're wrong. It's not too late to prove it. But first, you must live."

Baldric lowered the letter. He reached over slowly and removed the stopper from the vial. "Well?" he asked. "What's it gonnae be?"

Ansel lifted the vial to his mouth and downed the contents in one gulp. Then his eyes fluttered shut. The last thing he saw was Baldric's face.

Chapter Ten

Nessa clung to Darren's back as they rode through the gates of McNair Castle, too overwhelmed by the sight before her to even feel embarrassed by what she was doing.

The castle was beautiful, clearly undergoing renovations under the control of the rebels, and the capercaillie banner hung from the walls.

Nessa had been raised to fear and disdain that symbol, and to cheer whenever it was crushed underfoot.

Now she knew the truth. The McNairs had returned, not through a pretender but for real, and they were waging war against everything she ever knew. And now she was their prisoner.

"Nae that I'm complainin' about the embrace, but ye're clingin' on a wee bit tight," Darren told her in a low whisper.

She blushed and loosened her grip, hoping he couldn't hear the way her heart was hammering erratically through her chest with the anticipation of what was about to happen.

The horses stopped, and Darren slid off then raised a hand to help Nessa down.

She took it and allowed him to help her, mostly because she didn't know what else to do.

A stablehand approached to lead the horses away, and the rest of the men disappeared into the castle, leaving Darren, Nessa, and Eoin waiting outside.

Darren nudged Nessa lightly with his shoulder. "Dinnae look so grim. This isnae an execution."

Nessa wasn't so sure. She was about to say as much, but the words died on her lips as the doors opened and three figures walked out.

In the center, there he was: Cailean McNair.

The last time Nessa had seen him, he had been sparing her father's life.

Not that it had made a difference in the end.

Part of her longed to ask him why he hadn't just ended it there and then, but she could not bring herself to speak.

She didn't think she could even breathe.

The other two were her sisters, of course. Maeve was holding tightly to Cailean's hand, but Breana rushed forward, hurtling into Eoin's open arms. Nessa watched, frozen, as the couple kissed in happy reunion, then Breana whispered something in Eoin's ear.

Eoin's response was to embrace Breana again, more tightly this time, then lift her up and spin her in a circle. He was grinning and laughing by the time he put her down, and he kissed her once more.

"We'll talk soon," he promised her. "But I think ye've somethin' else ye should be doin'."

"Go on," Darren encouraged Nessa in a low voice. "Ye'll be safe here. I willnae let anyone hurt ye, but ye must take the first steps yerself. They've been waitin' an awfully long time."

Hesitantly, Nessa took a few steps forward toward Breana. Eoin retreated, and Maeve, seeming almost as reluctant as Nessa, dropped Cailean's hand and moved toward them.

At last, the three sisters met in the middle.

Maeve looked every bit a queen, as beautiful as ever, standing tall and proud.

She wore a fine but practical dress, and her chestnut hair had grown considerably since the last time Nessa had seen it.

She wore it loose, tumbling over her shoulders.

Nessa wondered if Maeve had ever known how much her youngest sister had coveted her beauty while they were growing up.

Almost unconsciously, Nessa touched her own dark hair, twirling a strand nervously around her finger.

Breana, meanwhile, hadn't changed. She was still soft, her light-brown hair and large thoughtful eyes giving her the look of innocence despite being the oldest of all of them.

Her hair was tied back in a plait that went down her back, and she wore a simple loose blue dress that made her look more comfortable and at home than Nessa had ever seen her.

Nessa had grown up envying her as well, not necessarily for her beauty but for her poise and grace.

They were not the O'Sullivan sisters, not anymore.

Both of Nessa's older sisters had been married not once, but twice, and both had chosen the second husband, their new clans, by themselves.

They had their family now, and Nessa, in choosing her father, had made sure that she was not a part of that new family, no matter what Darren thought.

Too much time had passed. Too much pain.

She stared at them and they stared back. She wondered how she looked in their eyes, and she did not imagine it was a positive image.

"Breana?" Nessa whispered, the word heavy on her lips.

Her oldest sister's composure broke, and tears filled her eyes before she ran forward and wrapped her arms around Nessa with as much enthusiasm as she had around Eoin.

Breana held Nessa close, stroking her hair.

The last time they'd hugged had been many years before, so long ago that Nessa could barely count.

Breana had tried to be a comfort to her—but Nessa had turned her away, over and over again.

Now, though, she leaned into the hug just for a moment.

Breana pulled back but kept her hands on Nessa's arms, running her eyes critically up and down her full frame, obviously inspecting her for damage or changes or something else that Nessa did not understand.

"Ye're thinner," Breana said after a moment. "Och, has that horrible man nae been feedin' ye? Cailean, will ye tell the cooks tae make her a meal?"

"I'm nae hungry," Nessa said. "Really, I'm fine, I..."

She trailed off as her eyes landed on Maeve, who was still standing back, watching her warily as though she wasn't sure what she was going to do. At last, Maeve spoke, not coming any closer.

"The last time I saw ye, ye covered me escape," Maeve said slowly, "But then ye went tae watch Cailean's execution without so much as a moment's hesitation. I dinnae understand. What side are ye on?"

Nessa felt her whole body tremble, but she straightened up, sticking out her chin and holding her back stiff as her mother had taught her.

"The last time I saw ye , ye told me tae escape with ye—and then, when ye fled, ye left me behind," Nessa told her quietly.

"And now ye've dragged me here. Whose side are ye on? "

Breana shook her head. "Nay, Nessa, it wasnae like that. Maeve told me what happened, and I was there in the castle that day. I?—"

"Ye didnae look for me," Nessa told her.

Just a flicker of vulnerability entered her tone at those words, but she stomped them

out almost immediately.

In a colder voice, she said, "Which I'm glad for, of course.

Ye've sworn yer allegiance tae these rebels.

By leavin' without me, ye were only doin' yer duty. As was I."

Maeve finally stepped forward. "Nessa, I think ye should come inside. We have a lot tae talk about, a lot tae discuss. And I think?—"

But Nessa shook her head. A sudden overwhelming exhaustion descended upon her, and she found it more difficult than she ever had in her life to remain standing.

She could not do this now. She wasn't sure she would ever be able to do this.

Nessa O'Sullivan had spent her whole life building up her composure, and she would not allow these two to shatter it here and now.

"I am tired," she said, which was not a lie. "It has been a long journey, and I need tae rest. Please, just take me tae me cell. If we must discuss things, let it be after I have had a chance tae sleep."

Breana took a few steps backward, and the two older sisters exchanged glances. Both of them surprised, though Breana's had an undercurrent of sadness while Maeve instead seemed a little annoyed.

"What do ye mean, cell?" Maeve demanded. "Do ye think I would bring ye all the way here tae throw ye in a cell? Dinnae be ridiculous." Then, as if she couldn't help herself, she added, "We arenae all the same as our father."

"Maeve, please," Breana said quietly. "That isnae helpful."

Cailean stepped forward, placing a placating hand on his wife's arm and addressing Nessa directly for the first time.

She could not meet his eyes, remembering the last time she had seen him, standing on that stage awaiting his execution.

"Welcome," he told her. "Go with Darren, if ye're tired."

He will take ye tae yer room, and we can all have a talk later. "

Darren took his cue and slipped an arm through Nessa's. "Come on," he said in her ear. "Let's go."

Nessa did not argue. She leaned on Darren's arm and went with him, using that tiny connection as the only comfort she had left.

She would enter McNair Castle, and she would wait at her sisters' whims until the tides changed again.

Because Nessa O'Sullivan had been born a pawn, and a pawn she would remain.

There was nothing else left in the world that she could do otherwise.

The chamber to which Darren led Nessa was small, but not unpleasant.

There was a small but comfortable-looking bed taking up the majority of one wall, clearly made for one person, along with a desk, a chair, a private partition for washing, a small wardrobe, and a shelf with a few books.

The books were a surprise. Nessa was not a huge reader—she had never had time for stories, even though she knew her sisters had loved them—but she felt touched that someone had thought of giving her something to do while she passed her day in imprisonment.

"Were the books yer idea?" she asked Darren.

"Mine?" Darren asked. "Do I look like the readin' type?" He winked after saying it, and as had happened so many times since she'd met him, she couldn't tell if he was joking or not.

Sighing a little irritably at his incessant cheerfulness, Nessa stepped further into the room. There was only one decoration on the wall: a landscape painting of bluebell woods, the trees rising powerfully up into the frame, the grass carpeted with the beautiful blue wildflowers.

"Oh," she breathed. "Bluebells. They're me favorite flower."

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Darren nodded. He leaned against the doorway, not quite entering the room, his arms folded as he watched her carefully. "Breana painted it. She wanted ye tae have somethin' that pleased ye in here. She's quite the artist, eh?"

Nessa blinked. Breana? She'd known that her sister liked to draw a little, but she'd never known that she had so much talent.

Overwhelmed, she flopped down to sit on the bed and looked up at Darren. He still stood there, half-in and half-out, watching her without speaking.

At last, she said, "Are ye just gonnae stand there?"

He grinned and waggled his eyebrows in a silly suggestive way. "Why? Did ye have a better idea?"

She rolled her eyes, exasperated. "Ye could come and sit down. Only sit down."

Darren paused, seeming actually taken aback for a moment by the invitation, then did as she asked. He entered the room and sat down next to her on the bed, leaving a careful amount of space between them.

"Why do ye do that?" she asked.

"Do what? Sit?"

Nessa shook her head. "Nay. Why do ye flirt like that? Ye've been doin' it since the moment we met. It's like ye cannae help yerself but be ridiculous. Like ye never take

yerself seriously at all."

Darren tilted his head and examined her face. "Ye're right," he said after a moment. "I never take meself seriously. But that doesnae mean that I'm nae genuine with me compliments and, aye, me flirtations too. I never make a suggestion that I would regret followin' through."

A shiver rippled across Nessa's skin at the implication of his words. He was sitting so close. She wondered what he would do if she moved closer. More of his dangerous games?

"I dinnae flirt," Nessa replied. "And so ye're engagin' with the wrong woman for such fancies. I have nae interest in such banter."

"I think ye do," Darren told her conversationally, leaning back in a relaxed fashion.

"I think ye have interest in many more things than ye allow yerself tae believe.

That's why ye invited me in instead of sendin' me away.

That's why ye smiled so widely when ye saw those books and that paintin'.

" He reached out and, without seemingly a thought, took her hand.

"There's a soul searchin' for joy in there.

I'd love tae see what she can do when she's let free. "

Nessa's pulse thrummed. She did not pull her hand away. "Is that what ye're lookin' for, then, with all of yer teasin'? Joy?"

Darren smirked, and his eyes sparkled. He leaned forward again, sliding so that the space between them closed and their sides pressed together on the bed. She breathed in sharply at the sudden heat between them.

"I'm always lookin' for joy," he told her. "Among other things."

Nessa gulped, trying to wrangle her imagination before it could lose itself in the wildness of his words.

Heat flushed through her skin, and she both wanted to demand that he leave and clench his hand tight so that he had to stay.

Drawing herself together with her most haughty expression, she said, "Then ye are lookin' in the wrong place.

I am Nessa O'Sullivan, the only remainin' recognized daughter of James O'Sullivan, Lady of the O'Sullivan clan, and the betrothed of Ansel Ashkirk.

I have nae joy tae give. When I marry, it will be for duty. That's all."

Darren blinked at her, then laughed. "Is that right?

" he asked. He squeezed her hand. "Well, I am Darren Bruce.

Son of Kier and heir to the Bruce Clan, and, until Cailean and Maeve get around tae havin' bairns of their own, the next in line tae the true throne.

Marryin' for love has never really been a prospect for me either.

Likely I'll wed a woman who'll bring a stronger alliance tae our cause.

I accepted that a long time ago. But...Nessa? "

"What?"

He moved in closer, turning his head so that he could whisper in her ear. His hair tickled her cheek, and she closed her eyes and inhaled his scent. He smelled of the forest and summer and fresh hay.

"Who said anythin' about marriage ?" he whispered. "I was talkin' about findin' joy. Wherever we can."

Nessa gasped out loud as something new uncurled deep in her stomach, her whole body flaring to life in a way she'd never known before.

She wanted to turn and catch his lips in hers—to take charge and show her kidnapper what it was to be captured.

She wanted him, in turn, to show her what it was to feel joy.

Just for one mad, shining moment, she wanted nothing more than to lose herself.

Darren pulled back. He was still smiling, but there was an intensity now to his gaze that made Nessa's heart hammer.

"I hope ye find it," he said. "I really do." He leaned over and kissed her cheek before getting to his feet. She raised a shaking hand to where his lips had been. "I'll lock the door, but there's always gonnae be someone nearby. If ye need anythin', just shout, aye?"

"A—aye," she stammered. "Aye, of course."

Darren nodded and headed out of the room. Before he closed the door, though, he paused in the doorway. "Once ye've done it—once ye've let her out and found that joy for yerself—ye'll let me ken, will ye nae?"

"I will," Nessa promised, barely knowing what she was saying.

He smiled and gave her a little wave then left, locking the door behind him.

Chapter Eleven

Neala watched from the battlements of her home as Maeve and Breana were reunited with their sister and tried not to allow the sick feeling in her stomach to overwhelm her.

Shame flooded her, but it was not enough to smother the other emotions that were swelling and battling in her breast, threatening to tear her apart as she tried to find herself within the chaos.

Of course she was glad that Maeve and Breana had their sister back.

Of course she was glad that Nessa was safe and no longer under the control of the False King after what had been a long and stressful month for everyone.

She'd have to be a monster to not see the positives in what had just happened, and she genuinely did.

And yet...and yet, the sorrow and some of its darker cousins were winning the war as she surveyed Nessa from above.

It was hard to make out what the girl looked like from up here, but if she was anything like her sisters, Neala had no doubt that she was beautiful.

Was that why she had been chosen to be the future queen?

Was that why Ansel had made her his fiancée?

Neala's stomach twisted. She knew that it was ridiculous to be thinking this way.

She knew she should not be thinking of Ansel at all.

Despite that, she could not help but wonder—how had it come about?

Had Ansel decided on the marriage as soon as he had arrived back at Blackthorn Castle, maybe as some kind of revenge on Maeve for shaming him?

That didn't sound like him, but she supposed it was possible.

Of course, there was the other reason—the one that she had refused to let herself think about ever since the news of Ansel's betrothal had reached her.

Perhaps he and Nessa had been courting since long before Neala had met him.

It wasn't as though Ansel and Neala had ever had time to discuss such things, nor even to discuss what their own budding relationship had really meant between the two of them.

Perhaps Ansel and Nessa's betrothal had been arranged long ago.

Perhaps he even... loved her. The tightness in Neala's stomach worsened, and she clutched her hands to her belly to fight off what felt like physical pain.

Whether it was true or not, she knew that Ansel would do his duty.

If he were to take Nessa as his wife, then he would do so with his whole heart, just as he did with everything he put effort into.

Had he kissed her yet? Had he done more than that?

Neala tried not to imagine it, but in the corner of her eye she could see it—Ansel, his lips pressed against Nessa's pale neck while he held her in his arms, whispering the words in her ear that Neala had never heard but had so longed for.

Tears burned at Neala's eyes, and she scowled, cursing herself for her own idiocy.

She needed to stop this at once. She turned from the battlements as the sisters, Cailean, and Eoin went inside, and headed back inside the castle herself, fully intending to go and join them.

However, her feet led her in another direction.

The library had already greatly changed in the last month, with storybooks and fascinating tales filling the shelves, but Neala wasn't interested in books at the moment.

She walked back through the library and right into the hidden room that still held the chest with the McNair sigil emblazoned on it.

Neala took a deep breath and settled down on the small chair inside, taking care not to accidentally let the door close. She had no desire to end up trapped in this room again. She reached over and opened the chest.

It was mostly empty now. Many of the books and papers had been filed in the library, while many of the tapestries and paintings now hung proudly on the walls around the castle.

However, a few odds and ends still remained in the chest, the precious remnants of their family that had no other place to go.

Neala had insisted on keeping their mother's diary here, and she reached for it now as

she had so many times in the past month and flipped it open, seeking comfort from beyond the veil.

I was already approachin' me twenty-fifth birthday when Robert took a fancy tae me.

Me parents despaired I'd never wed, and I was of the same opinion!

I had nae interest in sellin' meself tae some man.

But Rabbie was different from the start.

He saw me as a friend, nae just a woman.

I remember once, when we werenae quite courtin' yet, when all he wanted tae do was settle down and play a game of chess...

Neala's heart pulsed with pain, but there was a sweetness to it too. With a sad smile on her face, she turned the page and kept reading.

Ansel watched from the battlements of his home as night fell, and he worried that he'd made a deadly mistake.

He was now fully recovered from the poison, though his back and shoulder still ached whenever he moved.

In the few days that had followed, his life had been turned upside down, and there was no way to go back.

Baldric had explained it all. Elspeth was indeed a White Sparrow, and her entire employment here at the castle had been as a plant to spy on Ansel's father.

Several of the other maids, kitchen staff, and others who had come and gone had also been members of the organization, including two of the maids who had started their work just a few weeks before.

"I was already angry with the way things were," Baldric had explained with a gentle urgency.

"Ye must understand. Me father was a supporter of the McNairs, but he had tae hide that until the day he died.

He thought they had all perished and that there was nae hope.

All he wanted tae do was protect me and me mother. "

"I dinnae understand," Ansel had confessed. "Are ye sayin' yer mother—me aunt, me father's own sister—secretly was against his victory?"

Baldric had sighed. "It was complicated for her.

She kent her brother had done wrong, but she was a frail thing.

She never truly understood the monster he'd become, and, of course, that was in the early days, before things got as dire as they are now.

But me father taught me the truth. He taught me how Scotland was, and how it could be.

He told me there was a rebellion, and that one day, we could be free again, though he didnae ken how.

Mother died nae long after yer father stole the throne, and, as ye ken, Father went

seventeen years ago, when I was just fifteen.

I was brought here, named an Ashkirk, and taught the glory of Edric's power.

But I never forgot, Ansel. I held it close tae me heart. "

Ansel's head had ached as he'd tried to absorb the new information, but he hadn't tried to object. Instead, he'd nodded, encouraging Baldric to continue.

"Ten years ago, when I accidentally discovered who Elspeth truly was, it was like a sign from me father," Baldric had explained. "And since then, I've been actin' with them, feedin' them information where I could, doin' whatever I can tae mitigate me uncle's terrible actions."

A realization had struck Ansel like lightning. "Ye kent," he accused. "Ye kent who Neala was."

Baldric hadn't dropped his eye contact. "I did, though she had nae idea about me. It was Elspeth's secret, ye see. And I couldnae tell ye. I love ye with all me heart, but I didnae ken if I could trust ye—nae until I figured out that ye'd let her go."

Ansel had jerked in surprise.

His cousin had smiled. "The others believed ye, but I've kent ye most of yer life.

That day in the rain, I finally saw ye takin' the chance tae be who ye really are.

And now—now ye ken who I really am. And it seems that the White Sparrows and the McNair princess have saved yer life.

So me question is, Ansel, now that ye ken the whole truth, what will ye do? "

That question had haunted Ansel for a few days until he'd come up with the plan.

He'd known it was the riskiest thing he could do, and he'd even told Baldric not to get involved, but of course his older cousin was having none of it.

Ansel and Baldric had plotted right under the king's nose, and tonight they were pulling it off.

Tonight, Ansel would defiantly act against his father, protect the White Sparrows who had protected him, and most importantly, repay Neala for everything.

He could not change who he was. Ansel was still his father's son and heir, and he would never be able to change that. He could not be a revolutionary. He was not Baldric.

But he could do this one small thing.

Now, he strained his eyes, peering out into the darkness, waiting with held breath for Baldric's signal.

When he saw it, he'd know that their daring, reckless plan could be successful.

There would be consequences and fallout from this, but both Ansel and Baldric had experience of covering their tracks when the king was involved.

He was sure that they would make it out of this unscathed so long as everything went to plan.

Still, he waited. It was going to be a long night.

"Neala? Are ye in here?"

Neala jolted awake, dropping the diary in surprise. She wasn't sure when she had fallen asleep. She quickly got to her feet and scooped the little book off the ground, tucking it safely away in the chest.

"I'm here!" she called back.

The owner of the voice came into view. It was Ewan, an understanding smile on his face as he peeked around the slightly open door. "Readin' yer mammy's diary again?" he guessed.

"Ye caught me," Neala admitted. "I wish I'd kent her."

"I'm lucky I did," Ewan replied. He beckoned, and Neala exited the little room to stand beside him.

"She was one of the finest women I've ever kent in me whole life.

I respected yer father and cared for him, of course, but it was yer mother who made me the most proud to be a member of their household. Ye're a lot like her, ye ken."

Neala shook her head. "Nay. Everyone says Cailean is like her."

"He is," Ewan agreed. "In his face and his eyes and in some of the ways he makes decisions. But ye, Neala? Ye have her heart."

Saying that, he held out a folded piece of paper. It had no seal upon it, but it was clear that it had already been read.

Neala took it. "What is this?"

"It's a message from Blackthorn Castle, presumably from yer cook friend who still

works there," Ewan explained.

"Or that's what the messenger said anyway.

Though I'll admit, I read it— under orders, I'm afraid; we need tae make sure that more than one pair of eyes fall upon any messages from that place—and it doesnae seem like it was written by the woman tae me. "

Neala frowned. She didn't like that her private correspondence was being read, even if she understood why. She didn't object, though, instead unfolding the letter and reading over the contents.

Her heart stopped as she recognized the writing.

She tried very, very carefully not to let her expression change, knowing that there was no way that she could possibly explain to Ewan why she was so shocked.

Thankfully, if her emotions had shown on her face, Ewan didn't seem to notice.

In fact, he patted her once on the shoulder and turned to go.

"I'll speak with ye more at dinner, aye?" he said, then strolled away, apparently blissfully unaware.

Neala didn't answer. Her hands shook as she stood stock still, waiting until he was completely gone before she let her eyes flick back down to the note.

It was Ansel's writing. He hadn't signed his name, nor had he used his seal, but it was unmistakable anyway.

She'd seen his precise, sloping words too many times to mistake them for anything

else.

She winced as she remembered the last time she'd read words written in his script—on the plans for the catapults that were meant to slaughter her brother and his entire rebellion.

But he'd still let her go. She'd seen him that day, the real him. Hadn't she?

She'd sent the antidote and the message with one thought in mind: she could not bear to be in a world where he was gone. But what did that mean in the long term? The rebellion could not succeed while an Ashkirk lived.

Troubled, she finally let herself read the words.

I received your gift. In turn, ken that your friends are safe. I hope you are as well.

Thank you.

That was it. Just two vague lines that could mean anything. Neala's eyes remained dry, but her throat itched, and something pinched at the back of her nose as she took a few deep breaths to try to gather her emotions.

Why had he written to her? Neala read the words over and over again.

Her heart relaxed a little as she realized that this meant he must have received her antidote and that it must have worked.

She had been horrified when she heard the plan, and even Cailean had seemed discomfited when it had been suggested, but the rebels as a whole had voted to go ahead with it.

Neala had been desperate when she'd found and sent the antidote.

Your friends are safe, he'd written. He must mean Elspeth and the Sparrows. He'd keep their secret, then? Neala had hoped so, but having it confirmed was an enormous solace.

Folding the paper neatly, she tucked it away in her bodice. She felt the paper crinkling there against her skin, and she had to stop and let out a steadying breath.

This was good, but it was an exchange. That was all. Ansel was alive, and Neala had to be content with that. They'd likely never see each other again. It was only right.

But she knew that when night came, and she closed her eyes, he'd be waiting in her dreams.

Chapter Twelve

Nessa opened her eyes, her heart racing from a panicked dream she had already forgotten. For a moment, she couldn't understand where she was. She sat up, confused, and then her eyes fell on the painting of the bluebell woods. Breana's painting.

She remembered all at once. The kidnapping.

The long journey with Darren. Reuniting with her sisters.

And... and that strange moment the night before.

She glanced down at the spot on her bed where Darren had sat next to her the night before, and her heart gave a strange little stutter.

He'd been so intense. So close. If she'd have asked him to stay with her, would he have done it?

Nessa didn't know if she even wanted to know the answer.

Disturbed by her thoughts, she slid out of bed and into a pair of slippers that someone had placed next to her.

She moved to the washbasin, which someone had freshly filled overnight, and used the chilly water to quickly wash her face.

After a moment, she slipped out of her borrowed nightdress and washed her body as best she could.

Nessa longed for a soak in a hot bath, but she wasn't sure that was something that would be granted to her—and who would she even ask were she brave enough to do so?

A smile flickered across her face as she pictured the awkwardness of asking Darren.

"Why would ye need a whole fresh bath?" she said out loud in a silly imitation of Darren's voice. "Come tae me rooms, and we can share mine instead."

Nessa giggled at her own joke, but her mind raced ahead with the thought.

She could picture it so clearly in her head.

Darren would take her by the hand and lead her through the castle, teasing her as she would no doubt blush along the way.

They'd enter his rooms and close the door behind them.

The steaming hot bath would be waiting enticingly in the middle of the room, and Darren would turn to her, his hazel eyes burning with the same heat as Nessa had felt the night before.

He'd draw her close, reaching for the ties of her bodice, and...

A loud knock thudded at the door, and Nessa yelped in surprise as she was torn out of her fantasy.

She gasped, glancing down and seeing her own hand splayed on her belly, and she

felt her cheeks burning with pure embarrassment.

She sent a thankful prayer to whoever might be listening that the door was locked.

"A moment!" she shouted, trying not to let the panic sound in her voice. She raced to the wardrobe and flung it open, grabbing the first simple dress she saw and throwing it on. It was a little big for her, but she tied the belt as best she could and ran her fingers nervously through her hair.

The knock came again.

Nessa took a moment to collect herself. She glanced down at her feet and realized she was still wearing her slippers.

She hesitated, wondering if she should find shoes or fix her hair before answering, but there was no time.

Swallowing her pride, she made her way toward the door and called through, "Come in. "

A key turned in the lock, and the door swung open.

Nessa prepared herself to see Darren and endure his teasing for her haphazard appearance, but was surprised when instead two female figures stood framed in the doorway.

Her sisters peered into the room, both with matching uncertain expressions on their faces.

Nessa blinked in shock, so surprised she couldn't bring herself to speak.

Breana was the first one to speak. "Can we come in? Is that all right?"

It took a moment to collect herself, but Nessa eventually nodded. "Aye, if ye wish. I'm yer prisoner, after all."

She stepped to the side and waited until Maeve and Breana had entered before she closed the door behind them. Both of Nessa's sisters settled down on the edge of the bed. Hesitating for a second, Nessa moved toward the desk chair instead, turning it around so that she was facing Maeve and Breana.

"Ye're nae our prisoner," Maeve told her after an awkward pause. "I told ye as much last night, and I had expected Darren tae explain more last night."

Nessa bristled. It wasn't that Maeve had said anything particularly wrong, but she'd spent her whole childhood being contradicted by her brave older sister.

She barely had any control of the petty irritation that flooded out of her with her response.

"If I'm nae a prisoner, why am I bein' kept in this room under lock and key? "

Maeve and Breana exchanged glances, and Nessa felt a grim satisfaction in seeing how neither of them had an easy answer.

It had always been those two...and her. Maeve and Breana had always had each other, while Nessa, who their parents had shaped to be perfect, had only ever had herself.

Even when they had tried to reach out to her—especially Breana—Nessa had known in her heart that she'd never be able to be like them.

It looked like nothing had changed.

"For yer safety, Nessa," Breana finally said in her usual soft voice.

"Ye're the last O'Sullivan, and Ansel Ashkirk's betrothed as well.

The rebels are for the most part good people, but we can never be sure how much anger is left over from the pain Edric Ashkirk and even our own father have caused. "

Nessa shivered. The last O'Sullivan. It felt cold and lonely to hear it put to her in that way. Maeve was obviously a McNair now; that much was clear from everything from the way she held herself to the deep purple of her dress. And Breana...

She let out a little sound that wasn't quite a laugh at the conclusion she'd reached. "Ye're still a Darach," she said. "Ye remarried, and ye didnae even need tae change yer name."

Maeve scowled at her, and Nessa flinched as she realized how her observation might have sounded. She hadn't intended to be hurtful and mean. This was always the way when she tried to speak to her sisters, or, really, to anyone.

But Breana simply smiled. "I've been thinkin' about that a lot," she said.

"And Eoin and I have been discussin' it.

Neither one of us wish tae be associated with the Darach name any longer.

Eoin's mother's maiden name was Kerr, and she was the last of her line.

We intend tae go tae Cailean and ask him tae recognize us adoptin' that name as our own. "

Nessa tilted her head in surprise. "Ye... are?"

" she asked. The very concept seemed alien to her.

How could Eoin be willing to simply abandon the name of his father, regardless of how awful the man had been?

Nessa had known her whole life that to be an O'Sullivan was everything.

Surely Eoin had been raised the same way.

Breana nodded. "We've tolerated it for a month or so since our marriage, and honestly we'd likely have let it go on longer. But..." She leaned forward.

Maeve shook her head. "Bre, she doesnae need tae ken all of that."

Irritation stabbed at Nessa's skin. "What if I want tae ken?" she demanded.

Breana kept talking serenely, not acknowledging her sisters' building conflict.

She'd always been the peacekeeper. "Ye cannae tell anyone, mind, nae even Eoin until I'm sure.

It'll take a few months before I can be certain.

But... och, Nessa, it's excitin'. The moon's cycle hasnae come tae me this month. "

It took Nessa several moments to understand, and then she stared in shock that Breana would so openly speak of something of the sort. "Ye mean... ye think ye might be...?"

"There's nae way of kennin' until there's a quickenin', and that will take several months," Breana explained eagerly. "But oh! Can ye imagine! A new bairn with a new name, the first generation tae live in a whole new Scotland."

Nessa could not even begin to understand the emotions swelling through her now.

Could her sister truly be carrying a child?

It seemed an impossible thing, an absurd thing.

She imagined Breana holding a little child in her arms, Eoin at her side, and it was a picture so perfect that Nessa almost wanted to cry.

A scene so full of love and adoration... that was nothing like the world as Nessa had been taught it truly was.

"Ye seem so sure of a new Scotland," Nessa said eventually, retreating back into the neutrality which had long since be the only place she could control her emotion. "Perhaps ye should consider what the child's life will be like if Cailean's campaign doesnae succeed."

Maeve scoffed. "Aye. Nae surprise ye'd say a thing like that."

"I'm just tryin' tae be practical!" Nessa retorted. She folded her arms protectively across her chest. "Ye dinnae want Breana talkin' tae me, and ye're nae interested in anythin' I have tae say. Why are ye here?"

Breana looked worriedly between the two of them. "Now, sisters, dinnae?—"

"I'm here because I believe in somethin', which is more than ye've done yer whole life," Maeve replied sharply. "I'm glad ye're safe, I truly am. I fought hard tae get ye

back. But I had hoped ye might have changed. I see now that I was mistaken."

Nessa glared at her. "Why am I here, then?" she demanded. "Breana wanted her sister back, but what of ye, Lady McNair? This is yer castle now. Am I yer prisoner? Yer hostage? Is that what this is—am I simply a pawn for ye tae begin negotiations with the king?"

"Ye are our sister," Breana insisted. "Ye're the bairn I held when ye were too small tae even grip on tae a finger. Ye're the wee lassie who used tae listen tae Maeve tellin' stories and hope we didnae see ye. Ye're the young woman who wept when I was bein' taken away tae marry Kyle Darach."

There was no way that Nessa could respond. Her heart was thudding in her ears and she could feel herself shaking. She had no idea that Breana had seen her moment of weakness that day.

"We would never use ye," Breana told her softly. "Never. We willnae even keep yer room locked for more than a week or so, we'll?—"

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"That all depends on yer behavior," Maeve interrupted, cold distrust in every word. "What ye are here depends on ye yerself. How much can ye trust that?"

Nessa tightened her arms around herself. That was not a question to which she wanted to think the answer to. "I dinnae understand what ye want," she said finally in a small, strained voice.

"What do ye want?" Breana asked kindly.

"I'd be interested tae ken that as well," Maeve added. "What do ye want?"

It was too much. It was far, far too much. The tightness she'd been feeling exploded and her carefully contained feelings towered over her in a threatening wave then crashed down, dragging her under the surface. She lost herself in a confusing tumult of pain and hurt and fear.

"I dinnae ken!" she shouted, her voice echoing around her skull, her eyes screwed shut. "I dinnae ken what I want anymore, all right? I dinnae ken anythin'. Is that what ye want tae hear?"

There was silence for a long moment, then footsteps. A gentle hand was placed on Nessa's leg. Nessa opened her eyes after some time and saw Breana crouched in front of her, looking up at her with concern.

"What do ye mean?" Breana asked. "Tell us."

Nessa shook her head. She wanted to cry, but she hadn't done so in years.

She wasn't even sure that she remembered how to do so.

"I... I spent me whole life believin' that the king would be our salvation.

That me father was a great man, and a strong one.

That me life would excel beyond me wildest dreams if I was ever given the chance tae be the next queen. But it's all wrong."

"Ye've gotten exactly that," Maeve observed.

"Aye, and what has it shown me?" Nessa asked bitterly. "Our father is dead because the king killed him. He branded him a traitor. Father was many things, but above all he was loyal tae Edric Ashkirk. How could he be treated this way?"

Breana sighed. "Father may well have deserved tae fall for his crimes," she said quietly, "But it should have been at the hands of his enemies, nae at the word of a man to whom he'd given everythin'."

"Or perhaps it was a kind of poetic justice," Maeve said acidly. "An eagle may tolerate a lesser seabird. It may even share its space. But it will still devour it when it becomes hungry."

Nessa unfolded her arm, gently but firmly pushing Breana away from her and staring straight at Maeve. "I ken ye didnae care for him, but our father was the only thing I had in the world."

"And who was at fault for that?" Maeve demanded. "Ye could have had sisters. Instead, ye sided with him, over and over again."

"He was me father ," Nessa protested.

Breana stood. "Maeve, please, dinnae?—"

"He was a monster! He sold us tae the Darachs. He hurt people for fun. He tried to kill Cailean!" Maeve shouted. "He tried tae kill me , right in front of yer eyes!"

Nessa closed her eyes again, trying to fight off the memories of that day.

She'd stood at the side of the stage, horrified and helpless, watching as the sister she'd tried to let escape had run right into the middle of the fray.

She had been uneasy about the execution already, but she'd been able to rationalize it in her mind.

But when her father had turned on Maeve...

She'd sworn she'd talk to him about it when he returned from Blackthorn Castle. She'd been sure he'd be able to make her understand, the same way he always did. But her father had never returned, and now Nessa was adrift at sea with no bearing.

"That's right. Close yer eyes tae it like ye always have. I dinnae ken what I hoped tae achieve here. Ye'll never ken right from wrong." Maeve was no longer shouting. She sounded tired and dismissive. "Breana, we should leave."

"Nessa, please," Breana started.

Nessa opened her eyes again and stood. All three sisters were now on their feet.

Anger and hurt pulsed through her, obscuring her thoughts, making it almost impossible to think or control her own words.

"Such a strong sense of right and wrong, Maeve.

Such morals," she hissed. "Tell me, do ye think they'd be the same if another man was the first tae take ye tae yer bed? "

A beat of shocked silence passed. Even Nessa couldn't believe what she had just said.

"Nessa!" Breana exclaimed. "That's an awful thing tae say!"

Maeve's expression twisted, then she spoke with nothing but disgust. "It's how she's always been.

We just forgot." She gave Nessa a look. "Ye can stay or go as ye like.

We'll protect ye. We'll care for ye. But ken this, Nessa O'Sullivan.

Ye ken nothin' of Cailean, nor of me, and ye certainly ken nothin' of love.

I'm beginnin' tae wonder if ye ever will. "

With that damning sentiment, Maeve spun on her heel and marched out of the room. Breana watched her go then turned to Nessa, looking helpless.

"What do ye want, Nessa?" Breana asked. She sounded like she was about to cry.

Nessa sank back into her chair. "A bath," she said. "Just a bath."

Breana looked like she wanted to say something more, but she simply nodded and said, "All right. Let me see what I can do. I'll send a maid up shortly."

Then she left, and Nessa was alone again.

Nessa lay flat on her bed, staring up at the ceiling. She hadn't moved from there since

her sisters had left, and she was contemplating never moving again when the knock came. She'd almost forgotten that she'd ordered a bath.

"Come in," she called. "I think they left the door unlocked. Have ye come tae bathe me?"

The door opened. "If that's what ye want. I thought perhaps we should take a walk together before we get tae that point, though," Darren said laconically.

Nessa sat up straight, gasping. Her hand flew to her mouth as she spotted him there, leaning against her doorframe and watching her once again, just as he had the night before. She was about to ask him what he was doing there, but instead, she burst into laughter.

Darren grinned at her reaction and entered the room, closing the door behind her. "Good tae see ye in happy spirits," he said. "I was expectin' somethin' more maudlin. What has ye laughin' like this?"

She couldn't tell him that she was laughing at what he'd said and how close it was to how she'd imagined he'd react earlier.

Instead, she continued to giggle, enjoying the release of positive emotions for a change.

Darren simply watched her, bemused but pleased, until at last she calmed down enough to speak.

"What are ye doin' here?" she asked at last. "Ye'd better leave. I'm expectin' a maid."

"I came tae check on ye," Darren told her. "Maeve was havin' a rant tae Cailean a wee while ago, and I couldnae help but overhear. Sounds like it didnae go so well."

The lightness Nessa had felt from the laughter dimmed a little. "Oh."

"Cailean said she should give ye time. He reminded her how much she fought tae get ye here, even more strongly than Breana did. She was the one who asked me tae take on the mission because she only trusted ye with me." Darren shrugged. "She was quite forceful, too."

"I find that hard tae believe," Nessa replied dryly. "It was probably about spitin' the prince, nae about me."

Darren shook his head. "Cailean seems tae think ye'll change the longer ye're here. He thinks that bein' here will save ye, so long as yer sisters stick by ye."

"Does he?" Nessa asked. "He seems tae ken a lot about me considerin' we've never really spoken."

Grinning, Darren acknowledged the point. "He does that. He's been speakin' with authority since he was a bairn, our Cailean. But he's usually right. Never tell him I said that, though."

Nessa wasn't sure how she felt about that. Rather than thinking about it, she said, "What did Maeve say next?"

Darren made a face. "Not much. What followed was kissin'. Lots of kissin'. I ran as fast as me legs could take me."

Despite herself, Nessa laughed again. "Ye are ridiculous." Then she shook her head. "He thinks bein' here will save me. Who says I need tae be saved?"

She expected Darren to argue, but he seemed to ponder her words seriously for a few moments before he nodded.

"Ye're right," he told her. "Ye dinnae need savin'. Ye need tae learn tae save yerself."

Nessa sighed. Darren walked closer to her and reached down, taking her hand in his. His calloused skin felt warm and secure around hers, and she did not pull away.

"But Nessa? Ye dinnae need tae do it alone. We're all here tae help ye if ye need us."

Her eyes snapped up to meet his, trying to understand the hidden meaning in his words. She could not believe that this was how he felt. He must have some hidden agenda. Everyone did. "Oh, really?" she asked, guarded. "And how would ye help me?"

Darren lifted her hand and bent to lightly kiss the back of it. Nessa's skin tingled as he straightened back up and squeezed her hand. "However ye'll let me," he replied.

The door opened, and both of them turned their heads to see a maid standing there, staring, looking absolutely horrified. "Oh! I'm so sorry!" the maid exclaimed. "I knocked and ye didnae answer. I—I thought?—"

Nessa watched as the maid's eyes rested on her and Darren's joined hands. She quickly jerked her hand away. "Darren was just leavin'," she said. "Are ye here tae prepare me bath?"

"Aye," the maid said uncertainly. "Aye, I am."

Darren smiled. "Dinnae worry. I'm on me way out," he said cheerfully. Then he leaned over and whispered in Nessa's ear. "Unless ye want me tae stay?"

She scoffed, pushing him away. "Get goin'," she ordered.

He winked. "Aye, me lady," he replied. With one final grin, he hurried out of the

room.

When Nessa and the maid were alone, they made awkward eye contact for just a moment. Then Nessa said, "Please... nae a word. Nae tae anyone."

"Of course, mistress," the maid replied. "I'll start yer bath."

Nessa thought she heard the hint of a smile in the woman's voice, but she couldn't get too angry about it. Because, despite everything, there was a smile on her own face, too.

Chapter Thirteen

Two days after her arrival, Darren and Breana managed to convince Nessa to at last set foot outside of her rooms. She had steadfastly refused to explore the keep, not wanting to get to know any of the rebels too well and not ready to face Maeve yet.

But Breana had come that morning and told her that the nearby village was hosting a small harvest festival, and Darren had explained how spectacular it would be as the first celebration of the newly liberated village, and Nessa's curiosity had gotten the better of her.

She felt exposed as she walked through the castle with Breana and Darren, though her new dress was well-fitting and nobody gave her more than a cursory look.

Nevertheless, Nessa was sure that each one of the rebels must be talking about her, whispering about her, and making judgments.

She knew that this was how things went in a castle—it always had been.

"Dinnae look so nervous," Darren told her cheerfully. "If anyone tries anythin', I'll make an example of them."

"Darren," Breana said disapprovingly. "Dinnae make her worry about such things. Nessa, naebody is gonnae do a thing. Ye're fine. Just keep breathin'."

"All I'm sayin' is that if ye're nae , I'm here tae be the hero," Darren teased.

Nessa allowed their good-natured back and forth be her comfort and shield as they walked through the corridors and out into the grounds.

She didn't speak much herself, instead allowing her eyes to dart all around and take in everything around her.

It was... strange. McNair Castle was not like any castle she had ever been in, and the people seemed to interact very strangely.

She spied Cailean himself at one point, talking and laughing with a man who by his state of dress and accent was likely a kitchen porter or stablehand.

She saw women and men mingling, chatting naturally with nobody raising an eyebrow.

On the grounds, women trained with swords alongside men, and men tended the flowerbeds alongside the women.

Though there was definitely the awareness of the ongoing war overhead, there was an aura of hope in the air that Nessa could not fully understand.

It made her uneasy. She'd never experienced anything like it, and she found herself drawn toward it even as she pulled away.

They left the grounds eventually, walking down the winding path toward the castle village. As they entered the boundary, Nessa let out a gasp.

"It's fair bonny, eh?" Darren asked.

It was. The small thatched houses of the village had been draped with color.

Flags of the McNair purple flew alongside banners in every color of the rainbow, yellows and blues and even greens flying merrily on lines stretched across buildings.

Flowers lined the streets and decorated the hair of women and girls who passed, woven into flower crowns or poised behind the ear.

As Breana, Darren, Eoin and Nessa reached the center of the village, they were greeted with an explosion of scent, color and sound.

Fresh baked goods wafted a welcome into the air, while laughing children cheered a show of puppets and a musician strummed a jaunty tune while men and women danced.

Sizzling meat crackled nearby, and peddlers called their wares, their voices a discordant harmony.

"What do ye think?" Breana asked with a smile. "They've been plannin' this for weeks. I think it's turned out even better than expected."

"They're... happy," Nessa said, staring as a boy ran past, screeching with laughter as a little girl chased him brandishing a wooden sword.

"They're carefree. Even when they ken they're rebuildin' their lives on a target.

Even when they ken the king may slaughter them simply for bein' here. How is that possible?"

"They dinnae fear the False King, because the only king they recognize protects them from that castle up there," Darren replied, pointing up to the keep they had just left.

"They ken that the true king and queen, Cailean and yer sister, will do whatever it

takes tae let them live in happiness and freedom. "

Nessa wanted to object. She'd learned long ago that such things were for fools.

But... was it possible to deny joy when it unfolded before her very eyes?

Could she really deny the inspiration and hope that the McNair name had brought when she saw round-bellied women knitting baby clothes on their doorsteps and bashful young men chatting to giggling young women?

This was the world of fairytales, the world of cohesion and love and comfort she had been taught from birth could never be.

Her father had said that the contented would inevitably rise against their masters.

Yet how could that be, when these people seemed to love their leader so much?

None of it made any sense to her at all, and yet Nessa yearned to learn more.

The four of them wandered between the market stalls, sampling sweets and savory treats.

Darren bought a purple ribbon and handed it to Nessa, who, caught up in the moment, allowed Breana to tie it in her hair.

Eoin took part in a sparring competition and won, sweeping up the prize of a bouquet of flowers and presenting them to Breana with a silly little bow.

"Come, let's watch the puppet play," Darren said eagerly, grabbing Nessa by the hand. He tugged her slightly, causing her to cry out and laugh as she stumbled after him.

"It's for bairns!" she protested.

"Oh, aye?" Darren asked. "And how many times did ye act like a bairn when ye were one? Come on, before it starts again."

Breana nodded. "Go on," she encouraged. "Eoin and I are gonnae go take a look at the blacksmith's stall. We'll be nearby."

Eoin gave her a small smile, then he and Breana wandered off. Nessa turned back to Darren, who was grinning at her with his eyebrows raised in question. Nessa let out a little snort and shook her head.

"Ye're incorrigible," she scolded, grinning back. "Fine. Let's watch."

They settled down at the back of the crowd of children and watched as the puppet show began.

It was the story of the Battle of Bruce Castle.

Nessa watched in absolute fascination as she saw for the first time how the 'other side' saw what had happened to the Darachs.

It was strange to see puppets of her sisters, and stranger still to hear the puppet-commoners describe the woe they felt under Darach's power.

Cailean's puppet was by far the most lovingly carved, and every time he appeared on the stage, the children cheered.

Nessa found herself getting caught up in the story, gasping at the battles and smiling as the children made faces at the romantic scenes. When Maeve and Cailean discussed with a third puppet how to get into Darach Castle, Darren said, "That's

me!"

"Hush!" Nessa said, elbowing him lightly in the ribs.

He laughed and, almost as if he hadn't thought about it, put his arm around her shoulders. Nessa froze in surprise, but as the show continued, she leaned into his warmth.

She rested her head on his shoulder as the puppet play went on and found herself booing along with the children whenever Kyle Darach appeared and cheering when Cailean triumphantly defeated him.

When Kier Bruce's puppet took his place in the 'throne room' and Cailean raised the McNair flag, signaling the end of the play, Nessa clapped and cheered along with the rest.

She glanced up and was surprised to see tears shining in Darren's eyes, though he wasn't actually crying. She sat up, his arm falling from her shoulders as she did.

"Are ye all right?" she asked.

He turned to her, smiling, and wiped his eyes. "Och, aye. Just bein' daft. It's just... that's me home, ye ken? Me best friend got me home back for me and gave me da back everythin' he thought he'd lost forever. I think sometimes I'll never be able tae repay him."

Nessa stared at him, a strange shiver creeping across her skin.

She'd forgotten for a moment that the show was a version of the truth.

Darren, who had been so kind to her, had gotten more back from Cailean's victory on

a personal level even than the rebellion as a whole.

Nessa had been told at the time that Cailean's march upon the Darachs was driven by pure tactics and greed, but now... now she felt more confused than ever.

Darren was back to his usual grinning self a moment later. He scrambled to his feet and held out his hand to help Nessa up, which she took after only a small pause. As she was dusting off her skirt, Darren waved to someone.

"Neala!" he called. "Over here! I didnae ken ye'd be here today!"

Nessa went still. Neala... Did that mean Neala McNair?

Nessa had accepted a long time ago that Cailean was the real thing, even though officially, according to the king, he was nothing but a pretender.

But she'd had much more trouble believing the story of the returned princess, even when Breana had explained it all to her the night before.

Neala, the lost princess, the spy who had tricked Ansel Ashkirk himself.

Nessa knew Ansel now, and she could not comprehend how such a thing would be possible.

She turned as Neala approached. There was no mistaking this girl was Cailean's sister, but Darren introduced them anyway.

"Neala, this is the famous Nessa O'Sullivan. Nessa, this is Neala McNair, Cailean's sister. I'm glad tae introduce ye at last," Darren said.

Apprehension colored Nessa's thoughts. Neala was studying her too closely, and

Nessa instantly felt on her guard. "Pleased tae meet ye," Nessa said after a moment.

"An' ye," Neala replied, her voice oddly stiff. "I'm glad Darren was able tae get ye back safely. I'm sure it wasnae easy tae get ye away from the prince."

Nessa frowned. "I suppose, though he was otherwise occupied," she replied. "Darren didnae have much issue."

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"Hm." Neala fidgeted with her hands clasped in front of herself. "Did... that is... have ye been courtin' long, ye and Ansel?"

Ansel? Nessa blinked at that, taken aback by the familiar form of address. Why would Neala be referring to the enemy prince in such a way? "What concern is that of yers?" she asked, instantly suspicious, her sharp defenses snapping back into place.

"I'm sure she was just curious," Darren said quickly.

"Very curious," Neala replied. Her jaw twitched. "Is there a reason ye willnae answer? Did ye even wonder why he didnae come after ye?"

"I assume he's retreated tae plan," Nessa replied, folding her arms. "That's what he does, if ye dinnae ken. He's a very cunning man. More so than his father."

Something about that explanation seemed to anger Neala. Her eyes flashed and she shook her head. "Such diplomacy!" she said with a harsh laugh. "Nae wonder this is tae be the future queen. Ansel must have adored ye from the moment ye met."

The skin of Nessa's cheeks rippled with heat and she hated her body for showing her embarrassment and annoyance so plainly.

"I didnae ask for any of this," she snapped.

"I dinnae ken what yer issue is, but I didnae ask tae be wed tae that monster of a prince.

I didnae ask tae be forced tae watch as he slaughtered villages and followed his father's orders like a dog. "

"Like a dog!" Neala exclaimed. "Is that how ye talk of yer soon-tae-be-husband? Ye claim ye didnae choose this, but ye accepted the betrothal, did ye nae?"

"That's enough." Darren stepped forward in-between them, a new harshness in his voice that Nessa had never heard before.

"Neala, I dinnae ken what yer issue is, but we're all victims here.

Aye, Nessa may have accepted the betrothal, but so did Maeve and Breana when they were wed tae Malcolm and Kyle Darach. Would ye blame them, as well?"

Neala scowled, then turned and stormed away.

Nessa watched her go, shaken. She hadn't expected such an attack, though Neala hadn't been wrong—Nessa had accepted the betrothal.

When the offer had come, she'd even felt a thrill of excitement about it.

It had been everything that she'd been raised her whole life to want.

She'd always wanted the world to see the truth—that she had triumphed over Maeve, the bonny one, and been the one to be chosen as queen above her sisters.

Only after she'd arrived at Blackthorn Castle had her dreams soured and reality shifted in ways she didn't know how to handle.

"Are ye all right?" Darren asked her. "She's nae normally like that, I swear."

"I'm fine," Nessa replied.

Darren shook his head. "Ye're nae. But come on. Ye will be."

Nessa followed Darren into a building a little further away from the festival in the center.

She looked around and realized that they were standing in a vintner's shop, huge barrels of wine stacked up against the walls.

It smelled of sweet strawberries and fresh grapes, all muddled in with the heady scent of alcohol.

Darren winked and grabbed a pair of goblets from a table, then took them over to one of the kegs. He opened the lid of a standing barrel and spooned some of the rich wine into each of the cups.

"Ye cannae just do that!" Neala exclaimed.

Darren laughed. "I'll pay for it, never fear. The vinter kens me well. He keeps the castle well stocked. Come, drink. It's strawberry wine."

He held out a goblet and Nessa nervously took it. She sipped at it and gasped at how tasty it was, sweet and tangy and delicious. "It's good," she admitted.

Darren nodded. "It's me favorite," he confessed. "I asked Gerard—that's the vinter—tae make an extra barrel for me. I'm glad ye're enjoyin' it."

Nessa gazed at him curiously over her cup. "How is it ye have the power tae charm everyone? From the winemaker tae yer rebel council tae me sisters and even the king himself, everybody seems tae love ye."

With sparkling eyes, he beamed at her. "The king?" he asked. "Is that how ye're referrin' tae Cailean now? Or has Edric Ashkirk declared a love for me I dinnae ken about?"

Blinking rapidly in surprise, Nessa realized he was right.

She had referred to Cailean as 'the king'.

Just a few days ago, she would have never dreamed of such a thing.

What had caused that slip? She considered, then understood.

It was this place, these people. The castle residents and the villagers of the castle town spoke so highly of their king that it only felt natural to think of him in that way as well.

They loved Cailean McNair, not just for his name but for who he had consistently shown himself to be, and for the new Scotland he promised.

It was far, far too easy to get caught up in it.

She had never seen a person talk of Edric Ashkirk that way, not even those who had been his most loyal servants.

Things were so different here. Cailean was a king of the people—and so was his queen.

That still sounded odd to Nessa's ear. Maeve was the queen in the eyes of these people, and, if the rebels succeeded, Maeve would officially be queen of all of Scotland.

Of all three of the O'Sullivan sisters, Maeve would have been the last that Nessa had guessed would ever claim that title.

And yet, the more she thought about it, the more sense it made.

Maeve had always been a natural leader. She'd always been the strong one, the defiant one, and the one who followed her beliefs no matter what.

As a child, Nessa had secretly admired her, though she'd never have admitted it.

Well. None of that mattered now. Maeve hated her, Nessa was certain of it.

Her lightened mood soured as she thought of her confrontation not only with her sister, but also the one with Neala just a short time before.

The queen hated her, and so, it seemed, did the king's sister.

She put her goblet down, feeling drained and cold all at once.

Darren seemed to notice her shift in mood immediately. "What?" he asked. "What's wrong? Did I say somethin' foolish?"

Nessa shook her head. "Nay. I did. Darren, tell me truthfully now. Even if I was tae somehow change me ways—and I'm nae sayin' I will nor that it's even possible—but if I could suddenly be on the side of the rebellion and all that ye stand for, would I even be welcome here?"

"What do ye mean? We went tae all that trouble tae fetch ye.

What on earth makes ye think we'd send ye away?

" Darren frowned, setting his own goblet down beside hers and taking a step closer.

"Is it because of what Neala said? I wouldnae worry.

She's been all over the place since she returned, I think it's taking her time tae adjust. I'll talk tae her, or I'll talk tae Cailean, and?—"

"It's nae just Neala," Nessa interrupted.

She tugged at the sleeve of her dress, twisting the material around her finger nervously.

Her father had always yelled at her when she fidgeted, but she often found it was the only way she could stay calm.

"It's Maeve. Nay, that isnae right. It's everyone. "

Darren furrowed his eyebrows, looking irritated. "Who has been cruel tae ye?"

She shook her head. "Nay. It's just that they all ken who I am.

And, Darren, people dinnae like me . They never have.

Maeve has always been able tae charm people with her wit and her beauty.

Breana has a gentleness and a kindness that draws people in.

Ye—ye can make anyone like ye with a joke and a winnin' smile.

But it's never been like that for me. I make people feel uncomfortable and awkward because I dinnae think the way they do.

I cannae understand the different meanin's people hide in their words.

And so I've always taken refuge in bein' the good daughter, the one who makes her father proud, the one who survives as her mother taught her.

I do me duty because it's the only thing I've ever kent, and if it hurts people, well then, at least I kent I was doin' what I should be doin'.

She twisted her sleeve so hard that the material tore, but she hardly even noticed. Her speech was coming faster, her breathing less steady, and tears were budding in her eyes. Nessa was losing control, and without control, Nessa had no idea who she was.

"But if I've been wrong me whole life, how can I fix it?" she demanded. "How will people ever forgive me? Why would they want tae?"

"Nessa—" Darren started.

She shook her head. "Only Breana wants me here. Only Breana, even though I was so cruel tae her. But she'll forget me when the bairn comes. She'll realize I'm nae what she wants in her life, just as she should. How can I ever make people like me? How can I?"

Darren leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers.

Nessa gasped against his mouth. His arms slipped around her waist, pulling her close, though giving her enough slack to pull away if she wanted.

Her mind went blank as the world narrowed to the feeling of the kiss, and her eyes fluttered shut, her hands resting on his chest. He tasted of strawberries and wine, and she lost herself in it.

The kiss was over in a matter of seconds, and when it was done, Darren gently kissed her forehead and then pulled her in for a hug.

"I want ye here," he whispered in her ear. "Ye've let me ken ye, Nessa, while ye scolded me on the road here and admitted tae yer woes. I ken ye, and now I want tae be around ye all the time. If ye let the others get tae ken ye as well—the real ye—then I guarantee they'll want that too."

He pulled back from the hug, though still stayed close. Nessa stared at his face for a moment, stunned. This was the last thing she had expected to happen right now, and yet it seemed all of a sudden like her entire life had been moving to this moment.

"Will—will they kiss me too?" she asked with a weak chuckle.

Darren laughed. "I hope they dinnae, though of course ye're free tae kiss who ye like." He winked. "I'd prefer it was me, though. I'm happy tae offer kisses any time."

Nessa's heart was thudding in her chest. She couldn't think. She couldn't breathe. All she knew was that she didn't want to move away from Darren right now, and that for the first time, she felt like she might at last be somewhere safe.

"I dinnae think this method will work on Neala," she said after a pause. "And even less so on Maeve."

With another laugh, Darren offered his hand. Nessa took it with only a little hesitation.

"Ye're right," he said. "Let's find another way tae approach them, then. There's nae time like the present. But first, we need tae find Breana and Eoin before they think I've spirited ye away tae be inappropriate."

Nessa giggled, scarcely able to believe how much better she was already feeling. "Ye did, in a way."

"Well, dinnae tell them that!" Darren replied.

"I'll think about it," Nessa teased as Darren led her back outside. "Though what will ye give me in return?"

"For yer silence? Tell ye what. In exchange, I willnae tell them that ye just told me a wee secret I dinnae think I am supposed tae ken just yet." He turned around and gave her a knowing smirk, then started walking again.

Nessa frowned, trying to understand what he meant. She realized in a sudden burst of chagrin. The baby! She'd mentioned the baby! "Oh, Darren, dinnae say a word," she hissed. "I'm warnin' ye."

Darren snorted. "Guess we have a deal then?"

Both of them were laughing and teasing each other by the time they reached Breana and Eoin again. Breana had a worried look on her face, but she relaxed the second she saw Darren and Nessa approaching.

"What are ye two laughin' about?" Eoin asked, his eyes on their joined hands. He gave a pointed look toward Darren. "Been havin' fun, have ye?"

"Never mind that," Breana said quickly, cutting in before the conversation could continue. "Nessa, we saw what happened with Neala. I dinnae ken why—well, never mind. The important thing is, are ye all right?"

Nessa paused for a moment. She could still feel Darren's hand in hers, and she recognized the true concern in Breana's eyes. "Hmm, I think I might be."

Chapter Fourteen

The McNair war room was filled with new faces, and though the general atmosphere was excitement, Neala's joy was undercut with a low current of anxiety.

Four new clan chiefs had come to Castle McNair to declare themselves for the rebel cause, and by all reports, more were on the way.

Every day that passed, the scales seemed to tip more and more in favor of the rebellion, and what had once seemed like a barely achievable dream was becoming more and more likely to one day become a reality. Maybe even one day soon.

Neala had spent her life training and fighting for the moment that Edric Ashkirk would be overthrown.

She was as jubilant as the rest that this might finally arrive, and after only a single generation, her family might be restored to the throne.

Looking around the room as Cailean spoke with Chief Kian McDermott and Laird Joseph Blair, the members of the rebellion's inner circle were allowing themselves to bask in the cautious hope.

Ewan and Hamish sat close together as always, and both were listening carefully and grinning as Senan whispered something to them.

Next to them was Ferda, who seemed restless, no doubt because she was waiting for her chance to propose a rescue attempt for Ann and Morag again.

Neala felt a stirring of guilt at that thought; her friends had now been in captivity for over a month or maybe even longer, but she knew that Cailean was right that they could not attack Blackthorn Castle until they were fully prepared.

Now, though, with more and more support flooding in, that day was approaching faster than any of them thought.

Remembering the state that Ann had been in when Neala had seen her, she simply prayed that the Sparrow would survive that long.

Shaking her head, she moved around the room to see Darren, who was leaning forward and listening closely to Cailean's conversation.

Neala felt some guilt at that, too. She hadn't spoken to Darren in the two days since her awkward confrontation with Nessa at the festival.

She knew that she had been the one in the wrong and she would have to apologize to Nessa, but she could not bring herself to do it. Not yet.

Eoin was studying a map on the table while Breana pointed something out to him, both of them looking almost feverish in their hope.

They'd both been filled with light for days, and Neala only saw it growing as more and more good news arrived at last. No doubt they felt it was long overdue.

And beside Cailean as always, Maeve was taking as much part in the conversation as Cailean himself was, negotiating and discussing whatever points the visitors had to offer.

Neala realized with a jolt that she'd missed the last part of the discussion, so lost had she been in her own thoughts. She hastily focused once more.

"...all we really ask is an assurance, Yer Majesty," Laird Blair said.

"We are fully committed tae overthrowin' the False King.

We're even fully behind yer claim tae the throne.

But ye must understand, if I am tae risk the lives of the men in me service, I need a promise from ye.

" He paused, then bowed his head to Maeve. "From both of ye."

"We'll make any promise we have the power to give," Maeve told him steadily. "So long as it doesnae compromise our beliefs nor our mission."

Laird Blair shook his head. "I wouldnae think it would. All we want is tae ken that there is nae further threat of an uprisin'. When we win—and we will win, rest assured—we need tae ken that ye'll ensure that the stain of the Ashkirk name is erased forever."

"Aye," Chief McDermott agreed. "Mercy is well and good, but justice is necessary, even when it is harsh. Ye must swear tae us that there will be nae Ashkirks left wanderin' this country when the deed is done. They must pay for what they have robbed us all of these twenty years and more."

Neala's stomach tightened. That low current rose higher, the anxiety flooding her so strongly that she felt like she would choke on it.

As Cailean and Maeve assured the visitors that this would be the case, Neala bit her lip to keep her emotions in check.

There was no way that this war could be won without Ansel losing his life.

She'd known it all along, of course she had, but the closer it came to being a reality, the more the idea revolted her.

Ansel's death would not be justice. Neala had been trained as a spy and, though she had never acted on it, as a killer.

She had no objection to putting down monsters.

But, despite what these people thought, despite what the evidence seemed to scream, Neala alone knew that Ansel was no monster.

She had to do something to stop it. She had to speak up.

Yet...she was Neala McNair. The princess. The last woman of her line.

She must do her duty, no matter what. That duty meant dedicating herself first and foremost to Cailean's claim to the throne and bringing down the Ashkirks regardless of the cost. It was what she had been training for her whole life.

She kept repeating that in her mind as the meeting concluded, but she could not silence the voice inside her that screamed that this was wrong.

She could hear Ansel's voice in her ear, see him in her mind's eye as he helped his men through training, feel the way his hand had felt when it brushed against hers.

"That went well," Maeve observed as the laird and the chief left the war room to head down to the banquet hall. Tonight, they would all feast together. "Tomorrow, I think Laird MacIntosh is sendin' his son. We should prepare."

Cailean nodded, looking a little dazed. "I just cannae believe how well things are goin'. If we keep up this pace, we?—"

The doors burst open, cutting across his word, and one of the scouts came running in, breathless and wide-eyed.

"Cowal, what are ye doin'?" Ferda looked alarmed as she jumped to her feet. "What's happened?"

"I'm sorry tae interrupt!" the young man said hastily. "But—there's a carriage. An Ashkirk carriage."

"An attack?" Darren asked, frowning. "In a carriage?"

Cowal shook his head. "We let them in because the driver... she's a Sparrow."

Neala was the first outside, with the rest of the council close behind.

By the time they reached the carriage, which was now waiting right outside the main doors of the castle, the driver had slipped down from her seat and was reaching for the doors.

Neala saw that the young woman was dressed in the all-too familiar uniform of the maids of Blackthorn Castle, and she assumed that whoever it was had been one of the spies to replace her over the last month.

When she caught sight of the girl's face, though, her heart stuttered.

"Iona?" Neala gasped.

The driver stopped, spinning around, then broke into a broad smile. "Neala!" she exclaimed. She ran to Neala and hugged her tight. "Are ye proud of me?"

Neala blinked rapidly, her head spinning as she tried to comprehend what she was

seeing. Joy flooded her veins at seeing her Sparrow sister again, but it was clouded by confusion and fear. "Iona, what are ye doin' here? Are ye all right?"

"Cat, Ciara, and I have been workin' at Blackthorn Castle," Iona explained. "Those two are still there, but I was part of the plan. Never mind that now. Do ye have healers ready? We'll need them."

"The plan?" Cailean asked, taking a step forward, his wary eyes on the carriage. "What plan?"

"Healers for what?" Maeve demanded at the exact same time.

Rather than answering, Iona hopped away from Neala and returned to the carriage. She opened the door and turned back to face them. "Eoin," she said, obviously recognizing him, "And one of ye others, can ye come help us? She's nae doin' well."

Eoin glanced at Cailean, who gave him a slight nod. He and Darren moved forward together, peering into the dark carriage. Neala strained her ears to hear low voices from inside, then jumped as Darren swore.

Neala had never seen Eoin freeze, but he did now, the color draining from his face. It was as though he couldn't even figure out how to react.

Pushing past him, Darren ducked inside the carriage and exited a moment later with a limp figure in his arms. The woman's complexion was grey, her hair lank and lifeless, and if it wasn't for the faint rise and fall of her chest, Neala would have mistaken her for dead.

Neala recognized her after a moment, and she let out a shuddering gasp, her hands flying to her mouth.

"Ann!" Ferda shrieked in a wild mix of joy and fear and rage. She hurried to Darren's side. "Ann, my Ann, can ye hear me?"

"Come," Darren told his cousin quickly. "We need tae get her tae the healers. Help me."

The two of them hurried off without pause or word to the others, disappearing into the castle. Maeve let out a soft cry of shock and moved to Eoin's side, putting a hand on his arm.

"She's alive," Maeve said, though it sounded like she was trying to convince herself. "She'll be all right. She's safe now, just like she saved me so long ago."

Iona nodded. "It was the False King's nephew," she told them. "Did ye ken he was workin' with us all this time? He helped us escape, him and a few guards. We could barely believe it."

The False King's nephew? Neala had seen him in passing a few times, mostly chatting with Ansel or playing cards with the soldiers.

She hadn't taken much note of him—Laura had told her that Baldric Ashkirk was not a priority in her mission.

And now, at last, she knew why. Her throat burned and her hands started to shake until she firmly clasped them together.

What would Ansel do if he knew that his own cousin was a traitor?

"She's nae alone," Eoin said hoarsely.

"Ye're right." Iona peered into the carriage. "Come out now," she said.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 4:55 am

Another woman stepped out of the carriage without help. She looked thin and ragged after her months of imprisonment, but she still wore that unmistakable pride and power that Neala had always admired. She took Iona's offered arm, stumbling only slightly, and observed them all in silence.

Neala's heart thudded hard. "Morag," she whispered, her eyes filling with tears. "Oh, Morag, ye're safe. I'm so sorry I left ye. I'm so sorry I couldnae?—"

"Hush, lass," Morag soothed. Iona brought her closer to the group. "I'm here now. I gave ye a task, and oh! Look how well ye've completed it."

"I kent ye'd be back with us soon enough, ye tough old bird," Senan said gruffly. He moved forward, taking Morag's arm from Iona and giving her a swift but meaningful embrace. "Me oldest friend. Ye've looked better."

Morag laughed tiredly. "Still look better than ye, old man," she replied. She kissed his cheek, then hesitated.

Neala could scarcely believe it. She had never seen Morag hesitate before, not for anything.

The excitement in her heart at seeing her friends again was clouding her thoughts, almost overwhelming her, so much that she could barely remember what she had been thinking about a moment before.

How were they here? How were they safe? Was this a dream?

Morag at last turned toward all of the others who were gathered there. They all moved out of the way, parting until there was nobody standing between the head Sparrow and the king.

The world seemed to hold its breath. Eyes wide, Cailean took a few cautious steps toward Morag. There was a new, unfamiliar vulnerability on his face, and for the first time, he looked almost like an uncertain child. After what felt like an eternity, he reached her.

"Morag," Cailean said. "Ye're here. Ye really came back."

"More than twenty years too late, I ken," Morag told him tiredly. "Och, me wee lad. Look how ye've grown. Look what ye've achieved. Can ye forgive me? I thought I was doin' the right thing. I thought?—"

Cailean took two long strides and caught Morag in a tight embrace. He leaned into her like a boy hugging his mother, and the two of them held each other for a long time. A cheer rose up around them, and Neala, caught up in the jubilation of the moment, joined in.

When the two parted, both of their faces were wet with tears, and both were wearing broad smiles that shone with love. Morag wiped her face, then paused and reached into her inner cloak pocket, drawing something out and holding it out toward Cailean.

Neala's blood froze as she recognized it.

"Where did ye get this?" Cailean asked, his hands trembling as he accepted the gift. The little toy soldier was faded and a bit dirty, but otherwise no worse for wear than it had last been when Neala had last seen it. "Is it? It cannae be...?"

"It's yers," Morag told him. "Baldric said he found it in the castle many years ago. He

gave it tae me tae return tae ye as a sign of goodwill. He said it was time that all the McNairs returned home."

Neala could barely breathe. The air seemed to grow too thick, almost suffocating, and her knees shook as they struggled to keep her upright. She had dropped that doll, and only one person could have found it. Only one person could have made sure it was returned.

She wanted to shout it out, scream it from the top of her lungs, but she knew she could not.

She could not let anyone know that she yet knew that Ansel Ashkirk lived.

After all, as far as the rebels were concerned, he was dying or already dead from poison.

Even apart from that, nobody would take something as inconsequential as a doll as proof of...

Proof of what? Proof he was on their side? Neala was not naive enough to believe that. But it was proof he did have the heart she believed under all that darkness. This was more than just payment for what she had done for him, wasn't it? It had to be.

Before she could think more on it or decide what to do, Iona tapped her shoulder. Neala turned to see her friend looking a little uncertain.

"There's... someone else in the carriage," Iona said. "But she's nae... well, ye should go talk tae her."

"Elspeth?" Neala asked with another surge of excitement and hope. "Is it Elspeth?"

Iona nodded, but she wasn't smiling. "Just... go speak tae her, aye?"

Burning with curiosity and anticipation, Neala hurried over to the carriage and climbed inside. Elspeth was there, sitting with her face peering out of the far window and not moving at all. Neala paused, confused.

"Elspeth?" No response. "Elspeth, please look at me. What's goin' on?"

At long last, her friend turned around to look at her. She didn't seem hurt or sick, but her cheeks were pale and her shoulders shook. "Neala," Elspeth whispered. Then her words were lost.

Elspeth was crying.

Ansel woke up with a start. He groaned as his stiff body screamed in protest as he tried to move, and he rubbed his hands together to try to get some warmth back into him.

The sun was high in the sky, perhaps close to noon, and he cursed himself for falling asleep here on the battlements.

Luckily, nobody seemed to have found him here.

On the other hand, he'd missed Baldrick's signal, and he had no idea how their plan had unfolded.

Stretching and yawning, Ansel got to his feet.

He felt light in his heart, not nearly as troubled as he had expected he would be.

Regardless of the fact that he'd decided he must serve his father no matter what, he

still knew that he'd done the right thing by letting those Sparrows fly from their cages.

He and Baldric had been careful to make sure Ansel's name was nowhere near what had happened and that none of the actions could be traced back to him.

Still, the whole thing had been Ansel's idea, and he'd carefully and meticulously planned every step.

Now that it was morning, he would go and find Baldric and hear exactly how it had gone.

He'd only gotten a few steps along the battlements when he heard the commotion coming from the courtyard.

A mix of indistinct voices filled the air, some jeering and many others talking in voices that ranged from fury to fear to upset to glee.

It wasn't unusual for the king to gather people in the courtyard for a speech or a punishment, though Ansel did note that the reaction seemed more mixed than usual.

Maybe Edric had discovered that the Sparrows had escaped, though Ansel doubted it.

His father would never publicly announce that he'd lost his enemies.

Curious, Ansel made his way inside the building and down the stairs.

It was strange that Edric had started the speech or rally or whatever it was without Ansel there.

He usually took pride in having his son by his side.

Perhaps he was still angry about the failed attack on the village and the loss of Nessa, but Edric had always enjoyed showing off his strong, powerful heir before now.

Ansel reached the ground floor of the castle and paused, trying to decide if it was worth going outside to see what was going on or if he should just find something else to do.

After a night outside, he would appreciate the chance to rest.

Just as he'd decided, though, someone called out his name.

Ansel turned to see Ruadh running toward him, his face paper-white under his red hair.

The young soldier still wore a bandage around his head, but he was no worse for wear after the damage he'd received on the hill that day.

He was panting as though he had been hurrying around the castle for a long time.

"There ye are. I've been lookin' all over for ye," Ruadh said, his voice strained. "Yer Highness... Ansel... dinnae ye ken what's happenin'?"

"A rally of some sort, I assume," Ansel replied indifferently. "I didnae get an invitation, and that's fine by me. I think I'll miss it."

Ruadh shook his head frantically. "Nay. It isnae a rally. It's an execution."

Ansel's muscles tensed all at once as his brain processed the implication. There had been no execution scheduled any time soon, and the most important prisoners in the dungeon had escaped the night before. Which meant...

He swore and started running, not knowing or caring if Ruadh was following.

He burst out of the doors and into the courtyard to find it crowded right to the edges, people shouting and protesting what was happening even as others cheered.

The smell of rage and frenzy clogged the air.

Many of the castle's women were weeping, and many of the soldiers looked drawn and pale.

All eyes were drawn to the platform at the far end of the courtyard where Edric stood with his victim at his side.

"...and let this be a lesson tae ye all that nae traitor will be protected!" Edric was shouting as Ansel got outside. "Nae blood nor connection is enough tae excuse the betrayal of yer king and country! I will protect me people from this cowardly slime, even at great personal cost!"

Some people cheered, but more called out in anger. The voices around Ansel were an angry buzz. He could not make out any of their words as his eyes focused on the platform.

Baldric stood there, his usually carefully tousled hair matted with blood and half his face blackened by a blossoming bruise. He was stooping though he tried to stand tall. Ansel's stomach lurched, the bile burning his throat as he stared at the beaten, broken figure of his cousin.

"Nay," he whispered, then raised his voice to a shout. "Nay! Stop this!"

His words were drowned out by the crowd.

Ansel swore and pushed through the people in front of him, fighting to get to the front while the crowd seemed to tighten around him like a restriction.

It was like swimming through mud, desperately shoving people aside, tripping over things on the ground, losing sight of his direction. All the while, Edric kept speaking.

"The time has come!" Edric announced. "Nephew, dae ye have anythin' last tae say in yer defense?"

"I seek nae yer forgiveness or yer mercy." Baldric's voice was quiet, but it somehow echoed around the crowd. "I want nothin' from ye but yer failure. Aye, I freed those Sparrows—and I sent with them the knowledge the True King needs tae bring this accursed castle tae dust."

The noise of the crowd grew louder, and there was a hard thud and a grunt of pain as Edric attacked Baldric with the blunt end of the axe.

Ansel, who had stopped upon hearing Baldric's voice, started moving again, pushing harder to get to the front.

He didn't know what he could do, but he knew he had to act soon.

But nobody would let him pass, and he found himself trapped in the middle of the crowd.

"Move!" he shouted, shoving out with his elbows. "Move!"

"On yer knees!" the king roared. "I gave ye me name. I gave ye everythin'! Ye have tainted the Ashkirk legacy, and ye willnae be allowed tae live."

"Then let me blood be the first spilled from yer failin' legacy," Baldric spat.

Ansel stopped again, craning his head above the crowd to see.

His cousin was shoved to his knees by one of the king's men, and he knelt before a block, staring out into the crowd.

"Ansel. I ken ye're there. I need ye tae listen tae me before I go. "

"The lad didnae bother showin' up, or he'd slay ye himself for yer betrayal," the king hissed. "I'll nae let ye corrupt me son anymore. I ken ye've been behind his failin's—and now he will be free tae be me heir as he should."

Baldric did not even acknowledge that Edric had spoken. "Ansel, if ye can hear me, it's all true—I have betrayed ye. I have taken the side of Cailean McNair, the true McNair and the true king. I hope ye can one day forgive me."

Ansel knew what Baldric was doing. He was clearing Ansel of any sort of suspicion, ensuring that nobody suspected he was involved. " Move! " he screamed again, naked fear flaying him more harshly than any whip.

The king grabbed the back of Baldric's head and shoved him down until his neck rested upon the block. Silence fell over the courtyard, an awful, expectant silence that was louder than the noise that it had followed. "Then ye die for nothin'. The rebel king is a pretender, fool!"

The satisfaction in Baldric's voice was audible.

"He isnae, and I think even ye are startin' tae understand that, Uncle.

" He spoke with a serene calm that was jarring against the backdrop of blood and death.

"Ye ken the True King is comin' and ye will soon be dead.

Ye ken ye've lost already. I hope that terror follows ye tae the grave. "

"Enough," Edric commanded. "If ye love the McNairs so much, then ye can join them." He raised the axe above his head.

Ansel shoved through the last layer of the crowd and burst out at the foot of the platform. For a brief second, Baldric saw him there, and he gave him a sad, reassuring smile.

"Father, nay!" Ansel called. "Wait!"

Edric glanced his way. Then he shook his head and looked down at his nephew. "Nae mercy for traitors!"

And the axe came thudding down.

Chapter Fifteen

Elsbeth smiled weakly as Neala entered the room with two wine goblets in her hands.

In the two days since the carriage had arrived, this was the first time the two women had had a chance to just sit together and talk.

McNair Castle had been abuzz, most of the focus on ensuring that Ann was taken care of and making sure that the news of Morag's freedom reached the ears of the White Sparrows.

Maeve and Eoin, both friends of Ann, had been frantic about her state, but all of that had paled in comparison to Ferda, who had not left the young Sparrow's side in the healer's rooms since the arrival.

Morag had spent a lot of time with Neala and Cailean together, weeping with joy at their reunion and begging their forgiveness for separating them.

Neala had told her there was nothing to forgive.

She wasn't sure she agreed with Morag's decisions, but she understood where they had come from, and there was no accounting for choices made in war.

Cailean had been and was still captivated by Morag, the woman who had once been his second mother, and he had stuck close to her the whole time.

Senan, too, was jubilant to see his old friend, and Ewan and Hamish had taken it upon

themselves to spread the news to the rest of the Sparrows and to the people at Bruce Castle.

Elspeth, though, had retired to the room that they had given her and not spoken much to anyone.

Only tonight had Neala found the time to be by herself for long enough to reach out.

Now, she sat at the small table in her friend's room, not sure what she was going to hear.

That first night, Elspeth had wept that Baldric Ashkirk had been captured and would no doubt soon be dead, but Neala hadn't heard the whole story yet.

The silence ticked on, and at long last, Neala spoke. "I never really met Baldric," she said quietly. "Why did ye nae tell me when I arrived at Blackthorn Castle that the king's own nephew was secretly on our side?"

Elspeth smiled sadly, taking a sip of her wine before answering.

Neala noticed that the older woman's hand was shaking.

"He asked me tae keep his secret even from the other Sparrows.

Laura and Morag both kent I had a connection within the king's ranks, but they respected that I couldnae give them his name.

He's been me most loyal friend for the past ten years.

The castle staff used tae talk about the scandal of it—the king's nephew spendin' all his time with a cook a decade his senior!

But he never cared. He thought our work was more important. "

Neala hesitated. She didn't want to upset her friend more, but she had to know. "Was he... was he yer lover?"

Another sip of wine. Then Elspeth shrugged.

Her eyes brimmed with tears, but she did not cry.

"Does it matter? Lover or nae, he was the person I cared for and trusted most in the world.

I thought that, perhaps, when this was all over, we...

" She stopped and gave her head a sharp shake.

"Never mind. He's gone now. He kent the risks, just as we all do.

But he was brave, and we will remember him. "

Tight sorrow squeezed at Neala's heart. She hadn't known the man, but she could tell that Elspeth had loved him dearly, and her friend's pain was her own. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

Elspeth wiped under her eyes. "Me, as well." She shook her head. "Baldric was the one who helped me save yer prince. All the rebels here ken that Ansel Ashkirk is alive now, of course, but dinnae fear. I havenae told them how he survived the poison, and I willnae."

Neala's heart crushed even tighter as though a fist was closing around it. "Were he and Ansel... close?"

"Close as brothers, if Baldric spoke truly," Elspeth replied tiredly. "He always thought he could one day turn the prince tae the light. Perhaps, had he lived, it would have been possible. But now..."

"I believe that too," Neala said, her voice shaking.

It was the first time she'd said it out loud.

"I believe there's good in his heart, Elspeth.

He let me go, did he nae? And now he's freed his father's most valuable prisoners.

This wasnae just Baldric's plan. Ansel wrote tae me tae tell me ye were comin', though I didnae ken what it meant. "

Elspeth's smile was both knowing and sad.

"Ye saved his life. The lad has some honor, unlike his father.

Nae doubt he was returnin' the favor. But, Neala, he is faithful tae the False King.

Did ye ken that he was flogged for losin' Nessa at his father's own hand?

Even without the poison, he was sufferin' greatly that night.

Baldric said it wasnae the first time. And yet he still willingly serves him. "

Neala shook her head vigorously. "It's nae just that he let ye all go, or that he sent me home. The doll—the wee toy soldier that Morag returned tae Cailean—I dropped it before I fled. Ansel must have picked it up. Ansel was the one who returned it home. It was a message tae us, a message tae me. "

"Or it was a goodbye," Elspeth replied. She reached over and took Neala's hand. "If he wanted tae turn, he could have escaped with us. He wasnae a spy like Baldric. He could have just fled."

"But—"

"And besides, it has been many days since we escaped, and two since we arrived.

By now, Baldric will be—" Elspeth cut herself off, her voice cracking.

A tear ran down her face, but she didn't wipe it away.

"He'll be gone. Ansel is still there. I believe ye when ye tell me there may be good in the lad somewhere, but it isnae strong enough.

There's nothin' we can do for him, nothin' ye can do.

He's made his choice. And ye made yer own a long, long time ago. "

Neala nodded, picking up her goblet. But as she sipped her wine, she couldn't help but think that the story wasn't over. Not yet.

The world seemed to tilt on its axis over the next three months.

Nessa had watched in fascination as, since the moment the Sparrows had arrived at McNair Castle, each day seemed to bring more transformation toward a brighter Scotland than she'd ever expected to know.

As news of the king's execution of his own nephew had spread, many of the clan lairds who had been undecided finally committed themselves to the war on the side of the rebellion.

The cloud had lifted from the eyes of many, and they at last saw the tyrannical False King as he truly was.

Many were still on the side of the False King, of course, and there was still a war to win, but many now saw the hope of the rebellion as a beacon of certainty.

Inspired, the people of the McKenzie clan had risen up against Chief Murtagh, and he had fallen.

Now, Darren's cousin Fergus ruled the McKenzie land alongside his wife, Sorcha, and her aunt, Lady Flora.

It was another strong alliance, another promise of a Scotland full of connections and love.

The open declaration of the McKenzie clan to the rebel cause under their new Laird had caused a new wave of fury from the False King, and the fighting had increased.

Morag had returned to the Sparrows, taking Elspeth with her, though they would return in a few weeks to discuss the final attack.

With all the new alliances that Cailean had built, the time was coming closer and closer for the siege of Blackthorn Castle that would determine the outcome of the war for good.

Nessa still hardly believed that they had reached this point, but every new ally and every new declaration made it clearer and clearer to her that her understanding of the world had been wrong for longer than she could have believed.

On the other hand, though, Ashkirk war camps were springing up all over the country, and there was news of raids and attacks every other day.

People were still fighting and dying—but now they fought with more determination than before. Now they fought with hope.

Breana was starting to show the first physical signs of her pregnancy, and despite her careful attempts to resist it, Nessa found herself caught up in the excitement.

Things were still a little awkward between Maeve and Nessa, but Breana had embraced her younger sister openly, and they'd found a closeness that Nessa had never expected to have with one of her sisters.

She had just left Breana's rooms after a long discussion about potential baby names and was walking along the hallways with a smile on her face.

"Nessa? Can I have a word?"

Nessa blinked, surprised, as Maeve's voice cut into her daydreaming. Her sister was walking toward her along the corridor, but Nessa hadn't even noticed until she spoke. "I... I was just leavin' Breana's rooms. She's still in there if ye?—"

"Nay. I wish tae talk with ye, if ye dinnae mind," Maeve replied. Something uncertain shone in her dark eyes, and with a shock, Nessa realized what it was. Maeve seemed almost nervous. Nessa didn't think she'd ever seen uncertainty on that face before, and it made her feel a little shaken as well.

"Alone?" she asked, a little prickly as her defenses raised. "Why would ye want—what I mean is, we've nae been alone together all these months. Have I done somethin' new tae offend ye? Am I tae be scolded?"

Maeve scowled, looking ready to snap back.

Then she let out a breath and sighed. "Nay.

I should—I should have approached ye sooner.

Ye are me younger sister, after all. And Breana and Darren both seem so certain ye've been changin'.

I was just so afraid that I'd find out they were wrong, and—" She stopped, shaking her head.

"I dinnae ken how tae talk tae ye without fightin', Nessa.

Will ye let me try? Will ye walk with me? "

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Nessa still felt on her guard, but she sensed a genuineness in Maeve's words. Warily, she nodded, taking a step forward until she was at her sister's side. "Ye've nae got a weapon or somethin' on ye, have ye?" she asked.

Letting out a surprised laugh at the half-joke, Maeve pulled back the drape of her arisaid to reveal a swordbelt around her waist and a thin, sheathed sword secured upon it.

"Her name is Tailfeather, and she accompanies me everywhere," she explained.

"But have nae fear. I've nae intentions of drawin' her. Unless ye really annoy me."

There was a short pause, then Nessa laughed too.

It was a surreal feeling, to be chuckling over silly jokes with Maeve of all people, but nevertheless she fell into step beside her, and the two of them strolled along the corridors and out into the grounds of the castle.

They did not speak until they were outside.

"It's rainin'," Nessa observed, pulling her hood up over her hair while Maeve did the same. "It's growin' cold enough that it may even snow. Winter is well and truly here."

Maeve nodded. "Aye. Winter is me favorite season, ye ken."

Nessa glanced at her in surprise. They walked along the path, the drizzling rain not bothering them. "Aye? I thought it would be summer, like Breana. Ye were always

runnin' out in the fields when ye managed tae escape in the summer when we were bairns, until Father put a stop tae it."

"I remember," Maeve replied with a little laugh. "But nay. I learned tae love the winter when I was wed tae Malcolm Darach. It's the only season that's both an endin' and a beginnin'. One year finishes and another starts, but the winter continues. It's new hope, even in the coldest of times."

Nessa was silent for a few seconds. She hadn't much experience of the winter, not really.

After her mother had died of an inflammation of the lungs, her father had kept her mostly confined to the castle in the cold months for fear of the winter fever.

She had seen no reason to disobey. She had never seen a reason to disobey her father, even if her heart had felt otherwise.

She held out a hand and caught some of the icy-cold rain on her palm. It was halfway to freezing, and it almost tickled as it chilled the grooves of her hand.

"New beginnin's," she said. "I like the sound of that."

They kept walking for a while. Eventually, the rain died down, then stopped completely. The sky was still cold and grey, but Nessa lowered her hood and breathed in the fresh air, and Maeve did the same. They walked through an arch that led to a small flower garden.

"Why are we here?" Nessa asked after a moment. "I mean, why are we lookin' at flowers together? We've barely spoken all these months."

Maeve looked almost embarrassed. "I need tae ask ye somethin'," she said. "And

dinnae be cruel. I already told ye I'm tryin'. I need ye tae try as well."

Nessa thought that sounded more than fair, though she still felt a little uncertain. "What's yer question?" she asked.

It took a moment for Maeve to answer, but when she did, the question was so unbelievably blunt that it took Nessa even longer to answer.

"Is Darren courtin' ye?" Maeve asked, looking Nessa directly in the face. "Are the two of ye... together?"

Nessa knew that a blush had instantly flooded her face, and she hoped that Maeve might mistake it for a side effect of the cold.

The truth was, she didn't know how to answer.

She and Darren had never discussed an official courtship.

In fact, they had both proclaimed forcefully at the start that it was none of their concern what the other did when they weren't together.

But the kiss at the wine shop had been the first of many, and those kisses had grown into discreet touches, secret embraces, and a new kind of heated passion which had overwhelmed all of Nessa's thoughts.

When she was by herself or surrounded by others in the castle, she could remain serious, but when she and Darren snuck off together and were truly alone, she lost herself in the kisses and the sighs.

She found herself thinking of him upon waking and dreaming of him when she slept in an all-consuming flood that she never wanted to surface from.

Darren had tried to talk about what was happening with her, she knew he had.

Sometimes, after they had been together and she lay in his arms, he would start to speak.

But Nessa always stopped him, whether with more kisses or by changing the subject or even by simply leaving.

She knew that Darren's reputation as a flirt and a man adored by women was well-earned, and she was not yet ready to let her newly-exposed and tender heart face the fact that her secret joy would one day come to an end.

"We are friends," Nessa replied. That was true, too.

Even aside from the passion they had been exploring, Darren had become her closest confidante.

He had celebrated her growing closeness with Breana, defended her when others were suspicious of her, and helped her overcome her awkwardness to build relationships and even friendships here amongst the rebels.

She'd opened up to him, telling her stories of her past, and in turn, he'd described what it had been like growing up amongst the rebels.

The way he'd spoken of Cailean especially had fascinated her.

They were truly brothers at heart, perhaps even closer than that; Darren loved Cailean with all his heart, and when he spoke of him, it was hard for Nessa not to love him a little too.

Darren had told her many stories, from training under his father and Senan's watchful

eye to helping Ferda on her first scouting mission to the miraculous victories in reclaiming both Bruce Castle and this very castle they were in now.

Through Darren's eyes, it did not seem to be a rebellion.

It was a revolution. A restoration. Something... wonderful.

"Friends," Maeve repeated. Her lips quirked in a smile. "Aye. Cailean and I were friends. But, Nessa, take care. Darren is a carefree sort with women. A good man, one of the best I've ever known, but..."

"Are ye tryin' tae give me advice on the ways of men?" Nessa asked incredulously, then laughed at the strangeness of it all. "Who would have ever thought we would have reached this point?"

"Nae me," Maeve admitted. "But... I am yer older sister. Perhaps it's long since time."

Nessa held out a hand. "Perhaps ye're right," she replied. "There—there is a lot behind us. A lot I thought ye may never forgive me for. Who kens how long it will be before we can fully leave it all behind us."

Maeve took her hand. "Then let's get started."

Chapter Sixteen

Neala sat on the old wooden bench at the edge of the pond as the snow settled on the surface like a light dusting of sugar.

The pond was at the very edge of the castle grounds, and her mother had written of it often in her diaries.

It was where the late queen had come to think, and over the past few months, Neala had adopted that habit for herself.

She wondered how often her mother had sat on this very bench, wondering what to do next.

She'd tried to move on and forget. Despite her conversation with Elspeth three months before, she'd hoped, vainly, that she might hear from Ansel once more.

Surely, now that the king had slaughtered Baldric, it would be the last straw?

Surely she hadn't been wrong that the little doll had been a message?

But neither thing had turned out to be true.

As the days, then weeks, then months had passed, Ansel had gotten further and further from her.

News spread that he still stood by his father's side, helping lead battalions and set up

the new war camps that Cailean and the council were now strategizing to overcome.

Elsbeth had been right, then. Ansel had made his choice.

Still, though, she could not get him out of her mind.

In her heart and soul, she could not believe that he was preparing to kill her family, kill her, in his father's name.

Even though she'd been extremely busy these past months—returning briefly to the monastery with the Sparrows as an escort, returning to McNair Castle and making plans with the council, and greeting and negotiating with the many, many new allies who had come through the doors—Neala was flooded with impotent frustration.

There was a glaring problem before her that she wanted to overcome, and she hated having to accept that there may never be an answer that soothed her aching heart.

"May I sit?"

Neala looked up and smiled. Cailean was standing next to the bench, though she hadn't noticed his approach. She patted the space next to her in invitation.

"I kent ye'd be here. What's on yer mind?"

" he asked. "We missed ye in the war room tae read the news from Bruce Castle.

Kier is leadin' his men and launchin' an attack on the war camp in West Breddech tomorrow.

We'll have gained more land by eveningfall, I ken it.

The False King must be cowerin' in fear. "

"That's wonderful," Neala replied. She meant it with her whole heart, but she could not keep a little flatness from her voice.

Cailean frowned, obviously picking up on it.

Before he could press, she kept speaking.

"It'll be over soon. Another month or two, maybe less, and we'll ken one way or another where Scotland's fate rests.

I've nae doubt ye'll lead us tae victory. "

" We'll lead the way tae victory. Ye and me, the McNairs," Cailean replied, nudging her affectionately with her shoulder. "The people love their princess."

She smiled again, though the ache within her multiplied with every second that passed.

Soon, they'd overwhelm the war camp barrier enough that there would be nothing left between them and Blackthorn Castle.

They needed a little more time to prepare, but with the number of allies they had now, Neala believed they'd be holding the False King and his people at swordpoint before the spring.

"What will happen tae them?" she asked, staring out over the pond once more. "If... when we win, what will we do with the Ashkirk men?"

Cailean considered. "We'll offer most of them a choice, just as we did with the men

of Darach and Bruce and with all of the False King's old allies who now fight under our banners.

Those who are willing to reject Ashkirk and surrender or even fight by our sides will be welcomed into our new Scotland to rebuild their lives.

Those who remain faithful to him or threaten me people and my country in any way will face justice, whatever form it has to take. Ashkirk himself, of course, must die."

Nessa shivered in a way that had nothing to do with the cold winter air. "And the prince?"

From the corner of her eye, she saw Cailean turn to look at her, but she did not move her eyes from the pond.

"He is the Ashkirk heir. He will face the same fate as his father," Cailean replied matter-of-factly. "He may have survived the poison months ago, somehow, but he will not survive my sword. We will bring justice for our family and for our people once and for all."

"He does not need to die," Neala said, tightening her fists on her lap. She turned to face Cailean now and saw his expression slacken in surprise. "The False King, aye, his poison can never be cured while he lives—but Ansel does not need to die. He can change."

"Change?" Cailean asked. "Neala, he is Edric Ashkirk's son."

"As your own queen and her sisters were the daughters of James O'Sullivan and your captain of the guard was the son of Malcolm Darach.

People can atone for their past, Cailean—is that not at the heart of everything we

stand for?

" Neala's voice grew louder, her words faster, as she tried to make him understand.

He shook his head. "It isnae the same. Each of them turned their back on their pasts and came intae a new future. Ansel Ashkirk chooses his father's tyranny over and over again. He doesnae just support his crimes, he commits them. He must be ended."

Neala crossed her arms across her chest, looking sharply back at the pond so that Cailean could not see her eyes.

"Why are ye tryin' tae save him?" Cailean asked at last. "Why are ye doin' this again? I almost understood it when we took back the castle. Ye didnae want tae risk me life, and ye didnae want anyone else tae die that night. But now? What possible reason could ye have tae bargain for his life?"

"I just dinnae think he deserves tae die," Neala replied, though she could already feel that it wasn't going to work.

She'd already had this argument too many times.

"He's proven that there's good in him. He let me go.

Nessa says he tried to reduce bloodshed in his raids.

For all we ken, he may even have been involved in the plan Baldrick made tae free Morag and the others. "

The last bit had been a risk, but she hadn't been able to stop herself from blurting it out.

Cailean gave her a suspicious look. "Why would ye think that? What do ye ken?"

Neala bit her lip, regretting letting the words slip out.

However, she answered, "The wee toy soldier, the one I ken ye're keepin' in yer room now.

Baldric didnae find it in the castle. Ansel did, years and years ago.

He gave it tae me, but I—I must have dropped it when I fled.

Ansel is the only one who could have returned it tae ye. Cailean?—"

But Cailean was shaking his head, a severe expression on his usually kind face.

"Neala, stop. Even if what ye say is true, it doesnae mean anythin'.

Baldric could have found the thing anywhere.

Ansel could have sent it back as a taunt.

There are a thousand reasons other than the claims ye're makin'.

And even if ye were right, ye must remember that we are fighting for the lives and souls of our people, the entirety of Scotland.

I cannae—I willnae —risk the entire future of the country we've fought so hard for on the basis of a child's toy. "

Neala felt her argument crumbling to dust around her. She felt small and stupid, unable to explain her own certainty, unable to make him see. What if she was wrong?

It was possible.

"Ye mentioned Eoin and Maeve and her sisters," Cailean told her firmly.

"But it isnae the same thing. When they were given a choice, they chose tae be here.

Even Nessa, though she was brought here, chose to stay.

Ansel Ashkirk has chosen his father again and again, even when offered a path out, first by ye and then, if ye're right, by his cousin.

We must all face the results of our choices. "

Neala gritted her teeth. "There must be another answer," she insisted.

Cailean groaned and ran his hand through his hair, obviously irritated now. He got to his feet, and his voice raised a little. "Neala, enough . Enough! Ye've spent yer life as a Sparrow. How can ye be such a fool?"

"It isnae foolish tae hope for the best in people," a new voice interrupted them quietly. "Ye all are the ones who've taught me that. She may be wrong in her hope, but that doesnae make her a fool."

Both Cailean and Neala looked up to see that, of all people, Nessa O'Sullivan was approaching.

Neala's wrongfootedness grew worse at the sight as she tried to understand what was happening now.

Of all the people in the castle who might defend her, Nessa was the last one she had expected.

After all, Neala had been hostile toward the girl at first and indifferent to her ever since.

She hadn't meant to act that way, but every time she saw Nessa, she pictured Ansel.

It hurt more than she'd ever be able to explain.

Cailean blinked a few times, then nodded his head. "As ye say," he agreed. "Though I will add that hope cannae work miracles." He sighed. "Neala, I'm sorry for speakin' harshly. I dinnae understand the draw ye have tae the prince, but I need ye tae understand he is the enemy."

"Nay," Neala replied, getting to her feet too, her eyes now on Nessa. "Forgive me. There's nae need tae talk about it more."

He was right. Ansel was the enemy. No matter what she wanted to think. And yet, those words had triggered something in her mind, something she couldn't quite reach.

Cailean gave her a swift, sad smile, then addressed Nessa. "Did ye come lookin' for me?"

"For Neala, actually. Darren and I were with Ann and Ferda just now, and Ann was askin' for her. Will ye come?" Nessa directed the last words to Neala.

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"Go," Cailean said. "And thank ye for talkin' tae me. It means a lot, even when we disagree."

Neala nodded and squeezed his hand before passing and moving to Nessa's side. The two girls walked away, and only when they had left Cailean out of earshot did Neala speak.

"Thank ye," she said. "Ye didnae need tae intervene in me defense. I've hardly earned it from ye, the way I've acted."

Nessa nodded stiffly. "As I'd hardly earned yer trust at first. We should put our differences in the past where they belong. Breana says she suspects we could even be friends."

Smiling slightly, Neala said, "One step at a time. But perhaps one day."

Nessa smiled back. They entered the castle again and both took a minute to shake the snow and damp from their clothing. As they did, Nessa hesitated then leaned close. "Ye're right, ye ken. About Ansel, I mean. He's nae a monster."

Neala's heart stuttered. She looked around them, making sure they were alone.

Finally, at long last, she could know the truth—but now that it was here, she wasn't sure she wanted it.

"Were... were ye courtin', before yer engagement?"

" she asked. Hastily, she added, "Ye neednae tell me, of course. I just?—"

"I met Ansel Ashkirk when I was a bairn, but he never showed interest in me, nor in either of my sisters," Nessa interrupted. "Apart from official dinners with the king—the False King—we only properly met again the day that our betrothal was announced."

Neala's throat burned, and her eyes itched. She didn't know if she wanted to cry with pain or with relief. "And in the month ye were together..."

"We barely spoke." Nessa gave her a curious look. She looked around her carefully, then took a step closer to Neala, lowering her tone until she was nearly whispering. "Why are ye askin' these things? What do ye hope tae hear?"

"I..." Neala stammered, cursing herself for getting so caught up in the moment. "I..."

Nessa held up a hand, stepping back. "Nay.

Dinnae tell me. I dinnae think I should know.

" She paused then added, "But... for what it's worth, Neala, there comes a day we all need tae decide where our allegiances lay.

I've finally found mine, unbelievably, here amongst Cailean's people.

What will ye do when it's time tae choose yers? "

When they entered the room that had been granted to Ann for her recovery, Neala was horrified to realize that they had stepped directly into the middle of a serious conversation.

Ann was fast asleep in the bed, as she often was these days, while Darren and Ferda were exchanging heated whispers near the door.

"...sure about this?" Darren asked. He didn't sound angry, but his tone was definitely stressed. "Ye've nae idea how hard it's gonnae be for ye."

"We've been through hardship. We grew up movin' from rebel camp tae rebel camp. We lost our family. I've kent difficulty since I was born. This is nothin' compared tae that," Ferda replied. "I've made me decision."

Nessa gently pushed past Neala and moved to Darren's side. Neala noticed how natural it seemed as Nessa took Darren's arm. "What's wrong?" Nessa asked. "What's happenin'? I thought Ann wanted Neala tae help her write a note tae the Sparrows."

"She fell asleep," Ferda said. She glanced at the sleeping woman in the bed, and her whole expression changed to something soft. "She still sleeps a lot. It's been months, and she's gettin' better every day, but..."

Neala shivered lightly. Ann's condition had been so bad that she had slipped into a long sleep for weeks after arriving at McNair Castle.

Most of the healers had written her off as about to die, but Ferda had sat next to her bed day and night, ensuring she got water and sustenance, mopping her brow, doing whatever she could.

Ann had eventually woken, but she'd left something of herself behind.

Even now, three months after her arrival, her legs would not move at all.

Neala had heard the healers whisper that she would never be able to walk again.

"I'm sorry," Neala said. "We're interruptin'. We'll come back later."

"Nay," Ferda said. "Nay. Darren is just bein' protective, but I've already made up me mind."

When this is all over—when we've won—I will take Ann across the sea tae Spain or even Italy.

I've heard there are remarkable healers there, men of learnin' who can work wonders.

Even if she never walks again, they may be able to help her live well. "

"Who kens how long that will take?" Darren asked anxiously. "I care about Ann as well, deeply, but what ye're proposin' is goin' tae be difficult enough for a woman on her own, never mind one with an invalid who cannae walk. Who kens if it'll even work?"

Ferda shook her head. "It doesnae matter."

I'll stay by her side if it takes me whole life.

Ye ken that, Darren. Even if it doesnae work, even if we return home with nothin', I'll carry her if I need tae.

I'll go where she goes. I'll be what she needs me tae be.

Just as she'd do for me if things were the other way around, and ye ken it. "

Neala and Nessa exchanged glances, but neither of them spoke.

Neala was not as surprised as Nessa seemed to be; she'd heard of such relationships

amongst some of the other female Sparrows, though she'd never desired such a thing herself.

Still, she had not realized that such a bond existed between Ann and Ferda.

It seemed so strange to see it here in this world outside of the woman-focused Sparrows, and Neala's stomach churned in a secondhand nervousness as she thought about what it might mean for Ferda and Ann's futures.

Darren touched his cousin's arm. "I'll go with ye, then. When this is over, I'll go with ye. Dirk will come as well, I'm sure. If ye insist on doin' this, if it's this important tae ye and if there's a chance we can help her—then we'll be will ye all the way."

For once, Ferda looked lost for words. Nessa was staring at Darren with an incomprehensible expression on her face.

Darren kept talking. "But Ferda, I just want ye tae be sure. If ye do this—if this is the path ye truly choose—then it means ye'll lose things. Ye'll never marry. Ye'll never have bairns of yer own. Ye'll never be recognized by the world as a woman who has fulfilled her role."

Ferda's lip quivered as though she might cry, but then she sighed and gave a small smile.

"I understand all that, cousin, and I love ye for carin' for me in it.

" She looked at Ann once more. "I understand that choosin' tae remain with her isnae the way things are supposed tae go.

I understand that I'll have tae make sacrifices tae do it.

But, Darren, sometimes things are worth the risk—even if that means goin' against everythin' ye've ever learned.

Sometimes, just one person is worth the whole world.

I ken that one day ye'll understand that, too. "

Nessa let go of Darren's arm and stepped back.

As she did, Neala noticed how Darren's eyes flicked to Nessa upon Ferda's last words.

Before she could consider what that might mean, the cousins were embracing, and Nessa was back at Neala's side.

She took her hand and led her out into the hall, closing the door behind them.

"Let's wait out here," Nessa said. "Darren doesnae like showin' off that he has emotions in front of people."

Neala smiled politely at the little joke, but her mind and heart were racing over what she had just seen. The feeling of devotion in that room was still clinging to her, worming its way through her armor and into her heart.

I need ye tae understand that he's the enemy.

Some things are worth the risk—even if that means goin' against everythin' ye've ever learned.

Neala's soul shivered. She turned, grabbing Nessa by the arms in her sudden nervous excitement. "Did ye mean it?" she asked urgently. "When ye said ye wished tae be

friends—is that somethin' ye truly want?"

Nessa stepped back in alarm, shaking off Neala's hands, but nodded. "I did. I do," she said. "What are ye doin'? Are ye all right?"

"Nay," Neala said. "Aye. I dinnae ken. Nessa, I need yer help. There's somethin' I have tae do."

"What kind of somethin'?" Nessa asked warily. "What are ye plannin'?"

Neala grinned, the manic excitement flooding her. "Somethin' foolish."

Chapter Seventeen

Ansel trudged across the war camp, exhaustion weighing so heavily on him that he doubted he would even be able to make it back to his tent.

Every day, more and more of the king's men fell.

Every day, more and more of their lands were lost. The Ashkirk throne was shedding allies left and right, and the attacks upon their war camps were growing more frequent and more brutal.

Many of their men had been captured or killed, and many others had changed sides.

It was clear to anyone who cared to look that after more than twenty solid years of iron-fisted rule, Edric Ashkirk was slowly but surely losing this war.

There were only two people on their entire side of the war who did not whisper fearfully about the coming destruction. Only two people did not go to sleep with the bleak knowledge that their days were numbered, not because they would live, but because of the way they saw the world.

The first was the king himself. Edric had grown even more belligerent as the days passed, executing everyone he suspected of turning against him, from the lowest servant to the highest clan chief.

He had redoubled his violence on innocent villages, sending the most bloodthirsty of his men amongst the innocent to stamp his mark upon the land, his land, by force.

Every defeat drove him into more of a frenzy, and the people under his rule were suffering for it.

He did not, would not, or perhaps even could not accept that the end was coming, and so, in some ways, he was more of a threat than ever—to enemy and friend alike.

The second person who did not feel the encroaching horror of defeat was Ansel himself. It wasn't that he didn't know it was coming. It wasn't that he thought he would live.

It was just that he no longer cared.

In the three months since Baldric had been killed right in front of his eyes, Ansel's heart had grown as cold as the snow that fell around them, and his skin was stone.

His father had addressed him directly as soon as the deed was done, challenging Ansel to object, but all Ansel had been able to do was stand there and stare at the body of the only family member who had ever shown him love.

The only friend he'd ever been able to trust with all of his heart.

"See!" Edric had announced. "See how my loyal son doesnae defend the executed criminal! See how he kens I have done only justice! Come up on the platform, lad, and stand by me side!"

As if in a nightmare, Ansel had obeyed, barely aware of his own body.

He was frozen in that moment, trapped in the shield he'd built around himself to defend his screaming mind from the horror before his eyes, and he could not escape it.

The stone wall he had erected was now unmovable, stopping him from even considering what it might be to feel again.

Now, months later, Ansel was glad for it.

It was better not to feel. The moment that he felt again, he believed his body would collapse under the emotion.

Better that he allowed himself none at all.

Better that he simply served his role until the inevitable bitter end.

It would be easier for everyone, from the rebels to his father, if everyone just played his part.

And so, mechanically, he'd done as his father bid.

He'd headed up the war camp, directing the men, defending the land.

He hadn't led any attacks, ordering his men simply to defend, and he knew that there were divisions in his ranks between those most loyal to the king and those most loyal to him.

He knew that there was infighting. He simply didn't care.

Baldric was dead, and Ansel had watched. Neala was long gone, and her brother was on the way here to end Ansel's life. Perhaps it would be a mercy. Perhaps, at long last, those he had hurt over the years would get their justice.

It didn't matter, though. He was too tired to think of such things in more than passing, too cold to ponder the pain he had caused and felt, and too lost in the stone cage to

consider changing his ways.

It was all he could do to keep going. His life was worth little now, and so he'd use it how he always had, serving his father until the end came.

There was no choice and no question. Ansel had never known anything else.

He wasn't brave as Baldric had been, nor determined as Neala was.

He wasn't anything but a candle lit at both ends, the wax almost all melted away.

He would do the role that he was born for until the moment the light went out at last.

He slogged through the thick snow toward his tent, some of the dampness leaking through his shoes.

He'd meant to replace them a month ago, but the thought had shuffled to the back of his mind, and it was hard to see the point.

Boots wore out. Replacing them would only be a temporary reprieve, anyway.

Better that they spend their dwindling funds on food and clothing for the men who were fighting in his name, many of whom, he knew, were only here out of loyalty to Ansel himself rather than to any true belief in the cause.

He hated that. He hated that they had such faith in him when he knew that it was misplaced.

They thought him different from his father, and they were right in that—but not in the way they thought.

His father was a tyrant, but Ansel? Ansel was nothing.

Sighing at his own dark mood, he nodded vacantly to two soldiers who were standing near his tent.

Ruadh smiled at him, but Lorcan, one of his father's men, simply gave him a stiff nod in return.

Ansel couldn't find it in him to even care.

He'd been pushing for too long, and all he wanted to do was sleep.

At least, when he slept, there was no war.

At least in sleep he could allow himself to feel.

It was warm enough in his insulated tent which even had a small fireplace merrily blazing in the corner, and Ansel took a moment to ensure the entrance flap was secured before sighing and kicking off his boots.

The royal war tent was plush and comfortable, and despite Ansel's insistence that he didn't need such comforts, he was grateful tonight that he had an actual warm bed to sink into rather than a stiff cot.

He kicked off his wet shoes and peeled off the woolen socks, enjoying the feel of the woven carpet that acted as the floor under his bare feet.

He quickly discarded his clothing, getting rid of the damp shirt and trousers that were sticking to his skin, and shook his head to rid his hair of some of the excess snow.

He stood in only his leine, tiredness weighing on his shoulders.

Though his tent was heated, the cold still felt harsh against Ansel's slightly-damp nude body, and he moved toward the fireplace to warm up and reach for his sleepwear.

A shadow flickered in the corner of his eye, and Ansel tensed. He turned toward the dark corner of the tent where someone was clearly hiding and reached for his sword. Whoever it was may think him weak and exposed here only in his underwear, but they would soon learn how deadly he could be.

"Ye may as well come out," he said steadily. "Let's make this quick."

A figure stepped out of the shadows, and the breath was knocked entirely from Ansel's lungs at the sight.

A woman stood before him, her shining golden hair longer than the short dark maid's style he remembered. But he would never forget those eyes, those lips, or that expression of pure determination. He saw it every night in his sleep.

"Neala," he said, his voice coming out as a hoarse whisper. "Am I asleep already? Me dreams arenae often so cold."

Her perfect lips twitched up into a smile. "Neither, I imagine, find ye unarmed and surprised in yer underwear." She took a step forward, then stopped. "It's good tae see ye."

It wasn't a dream. Ansel rubbed his eyes, but she was still there when he looked again.

Silence trickled between them like the sand in an hourglass, and Neala's posture shifted.

She chewed at her bottom lip, seeming suddenly uncertain.

Ansel's eyes flickered to her mouth as she did, and his body stirred, a sudden powerful yearning threatening to break through his carefully crafted wall of stone.

"What are ye doin' here?" he asked at last in a low growl. "How are ye here? How on Earth did ye get tae the royal war tent in the center of Ashkirk power without gettin' yerself killed?"

Her eyes flashed in defiance, and his heart stammered in response. "I'm a White Sparrow," she reminded him. "I can go anywhere I please without bein' noticed. Yer soldiers are nae threat tae me."

"They will be if they catch ye," Ansel snapped, heat surging like a wave in his chest. "Are ye a fool? Why would ye come here? Did I give ye yer freedom for nothin'?"

She remained calm in the face of his anger. "I had tae see ye. I've wanted nothin' more than tae see ye from the moment I left ye behind. I couldnae just let ye die."

Ansel scoffed. This whole situation was absurd.

Here he was in nothing but his undergarments talking to a woman who was supposed to be dead who was now helping lead a war to kill him and everything he'd ever known.

It almost made him want to laugh. "What did ye think was gonnae happen when ye went back tae McNair Castle?"

Did ye think yer brother would spare me because I let ye go?

Did ye think me father would take pity?"

She kept her gaze steady. "I asked ye tae come with me."

"And I refused!" he shouted, barely aware he was raising his voice. "Was that nae enough for ye? I dinnae ken what ye think ye saw in me, but I warned ye. Ye ken nothin' about me, and now ye've risked yer life, and for what?"

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"For ye. Just as ye risked yers for me," Neala replied quietly. "Is it true that yer father beat ye for losin' Nessa? Ye must ken we were the ones who took her. And yet ye still kept me secret?"

Ansel picked up his sword and held it loosely in his hand. "Ye are me enemy. Ye have nae right tae be here. Leave. Now."

Neala simply shook her head.

He took a threatening step forward, his hand gripped tight around the pommel of his blade.

"I should cut ye down where ye stand. I gave ye yer chance.

I gave ye every chance. Ye were a spy, a traitor, the blood of me enemy, and I was fool enough tae let ye go.

Ye returned the favor when ye saved me life.

Now we owe each other nothin'. I'm givin' ye one more chance tae leave. "

Her eyes flicked to his sword, but she did not seem concerned. Instead, they filled with a deep sadness. "Ye did more than that for me," she told him, not moving at all. "Ye think I dinnae ken what ye did for me friends? For me. And I ken what ye lost as a result."

Pain stabbed at Ansel's heart so powerfully that he physically stumbled. Baldric's

grinning face swam through his mind, that night when he'd promised Ansel nothing would go wrong. He'd waited all night for the signal. Maybe, if he'd just been able to stay awake...

He closed his eyes and shook his head, desperate to rid them of the image. He could not let his emotions bleed in, especially not now.

"I'm sorry that I never kent Baldric," Neala said quietly. "He sounds like he was a wonderful man."

"He was. Much better than I will ever be," Ansel said roughly. "I'm nae him. I never will be. I watched him die, right before me eyes. His last words to me father were that yer brother lives and that the war is lost. And then I watched as me own father cut my cousin's head from his shoulders."

She shivered, tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said again. She hesitated, then said, "But why... why did ye nae leave? After that, surely..."

"Ye dinnae get it, do ye? I already told ye.

I'm nae Baldric. I'm nothin' but me father's son.

That's all I was ever born tae be. I killed me mother by bein' born, and me only purpose since has been tae serve him.

" He shivered again, though it had nothing to with the cold.

"What ye ken of me, what ye think of me, is nothin' compared tae the darkness I've seen.

The crimes I've committed. I am nae what ye want me tae be. "

Neala shook her head. "Nessa told me ye tried tae spare people. She told me?—"

Ansel's hand tightened on his sword. "I told ye tae leave!" he snarled, furious at the way his heart was thrumming in his chest. He had fought so hard to stop feeling, and it was crumbling around him just by her presence. "Get out! Go!"

"Ye serve him, but ye must ken it's a fool's game," she insisted. "Kill me if ye want, but what then? Cailean is comin'. The rebel army will soon eclipse the remnants of Ashkirk support. Ye must ken there's nae way that ye can win."

"Win?" Ansel laughed bitterly. "Who said anythin' about winnin' ? I dinnae have a choice. I said I'll serve me father, and I will. And when I'm finally cut down, maybe it'll be a mercy for all of us."

She sighed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Ye're wrong. It isnae too late. Ye can still come with me. Leave with me, right now. It will take a lot of work, but the rebels will warm tae ye, just as the did tae Nessa. They ken how tae forgive."

"Forgive." Ansel laughed again, this time with more darkness swirling in. He gripped his sword and moved closer. "I'm long beyond forgiveness, Neala. They'd kill me the moment they saw me, and they'd be right."

"I'd protect ye," she insisted, though for the first time, her voice shook. "I am the true McNair princess, the only woman left in the line they're fightin' so hard tae restore. If I vouch for ye, they'll listen to me."

There was a sudden crashing sound outside, but Ansel barely paid attention. Noise was barely anything new at the war camp. No doubt, another battle had begun.

He closed the gap between them and raised his sword, pointing it to her neck.

"Bein' the McNair princess does ye nae good in Ashkirk land.

I ken yer blood is true, but that will only make me father's men more eager tae spill it.

And despite what ye seem tae want, I am one of me father's men. That's all I've ever been."

For the first time, fear flickered in her eyes, but she looked up at him with defiance in her stance.

She swallowed, her throat moving dangerously close to the point of his sword.

"Do it, then," she said. Outside, there was shouting and the sound of footsteps running away from the tent.

"Do it, and call yer men tae see me body.

Do it, and prove tae yer father that ye truly do follow him—prove tae yerself ye're nae just his prisoner. "

The next beat of their hearts seemed to last an eternity, and Ansel didn't even breathe. He stared at her for a lifetime, lost in her eyes, drowning in her voice.

Then he cursed and shook his head. "Damn ye, woman," he snarled. "Ye should have stayed away."

He gripped his sword tighter, and Neala closed her eyes.

Then he threw the weapon aside. As it bounced off the woven carpet with a muffled clang, Ansel grabbed Neala's face roughly between his hands and pulled her close, pressing his lips hard against hers.

Chapter Eighteen

Neala leaned into the kiss, her eyes fluttering closed, the gasp rising in her throat escaping through her lips and mingling with his breath.

She melted against Ansel, her senses ablaze.

Her skin sparked under the rough grip of his hands contrasting with the intoxicating softness of his lips.

She leaned her hands against his hard chest, a token attempt to protest that failed when her fingers curled around the thin material of his leine and pulled him closer.

Ansel grunted and pulled away from the kiss, dropping his fingers from her face and staggering back a few steps.

His heaving chest strained at his thin undergarment, and she saw that the kiss had stirred his body, awakening his manhood in a way that was impossible to miss.

A deep flush traveled from Neala's head to her toes, hot and tight and delicious.

Had she really caused such a physical reaction in him?

Her body pulsed at the thought, urging her forward.

"All these months apart," Ansel growled, staring at her like a wary hunter might view a lioness. "All these months, I've tried tae forget ye. All these months, I thought I

could put ye behind me."

"I knew I couldnae forget ye ," Neala replied.

Her heart hammered so hard she felt it might burst from her chest as she tentatively moved toward him once more.

"The moment ye touched me hand when we played chess, I was lost. Ye told me when ye freed me that I had intoxicated ye, Ansel, but it was nothin'— nothin' —compared tae how ye've taken over me every breath. "

Ansel's eyes flicked briefly to her face before traveling down her body. He swallowed as his gaze took her in. She moved closer, and he did not back away. "I let ye go so ye wouldnae be lost," he said after a moment. "Dinnae ye understand? I let ye go so ye could be free."

Neala reached him and tentatively reached up to touch his face. He closed his eyes and stood still as her finger traced the scar on his jaw. "I am free," she replied. "Because of ye."

"Neala," he whispered. He opened his eyes and leaned closer, and his hand moved to her waist. "Is this real?"

"And ye're right," Neala went on. "Lost was the wrong word.

I've spent me whole life lost—until I met ye, and everythin' changed.

" She saw that her hand was trembling, but she didn't bother trying to hide it now.

Instead, she let go of him and moved her hand to her cloak.

Her eyes did not leave his as she undid the tie and let it fall to the ground, leaving her in her dress before him.

Ansel swallowed. His fingers tightened on her waist, and something burned in his strange green eyes. "There's still time tae leave."

She did not break eye contact. "I'm nae lost anymore, Ansel. But I think ye are. Will ye let me find ye?"

He pulled her close with a yank that made her gasp.

Ansel lowered his head to the crook of her neck.

Neala gasped at the sensation as his lips and teeth and tongue explored the sensitive spot, and she tilted her head to the side, gripping his arms for support.

His kisses and nibbles trailed up her neck, and he caught her earlobe before whispering to her.

"Ye may nae like what ye find," he breathed.

In response, Neala turned her head and caught his lips in hers once more.

Something snapped between them, and with a sound that was half groan, half wild growl, Ansel grabbed Neala around the waist and lifted her, his tongue exploring her mouth, his hands cupping under her buttocks.

She shivered at the touch and let her instincts take over, wrapping her legs around him and whimpering slightly as she felt his hardness press against her through an impossibly thin layer of clothing.

Her arms tangled around his neck, her fingers getting lost in his hair, the kiss and the feeling of his body all that was left in the world.

Ansel did not even stumble as he carried her across the tent, and Neala was so engrossed in the taste of him that she did not even realize where they'd moved until she landed with a gasp on her back against the bed, cold from the end of the kiss.

Her legs hung off the end. Breathing heavily, her breasts suddenly feeling too constricted by her bodice, she stared as Ansel stood before her, his face more intense than she'd seen it even in wartime.

"Do ye even ken the power ye have?" he asked. "Can I make ye feel even a fraction of the way ye bespell me?"

Suddenly, he knelt, disappearing from her view.

Neala scrambled up on her elbows to see, and then a jolt flooded through her body.

He removed her shoes and winter stockings, then his hands rested against her bare ankles.

She stared at the top of his head, her body throbbing with need, confusion and anticipation thrumming through her with every beat of her heart.

"Ansel," she whispered.

Slowly, he pushed up her skirt, exposing her legs inch by inch, taking an agonizing length of time as he did.

The skirt hitched above her knees, and without even thinking, Neala lifted her hips to help him.

Part of her felt that she should feel embarrassed or shy, but she was simply hypnotized by the sight of Ansel kneeling before her.

He looked up at her briefly, then lowered his head, gently kissing her inner thigh.

Neala cried out at the sudden unexpected feeling, the tiny brush of his lips sending ripples flooding through her entire body.

He kissed her other thigh, then took his time moving his way up, worshiping every part of her skin.

The heat was almost ready to overwhelm Neala even before he found her core.

When he pressed his mouth against it, her whole body jerked, her hips bucking against him.

Her elbows gave way, and she fell back against the bed hard, one of her hands gripping the sheets as he worked.

Her other hand flew to her own chest, clutching impatiently at her own clothing that was so cruelly keeping her restricted.

He worked against her more firmly, speeding up as he did, and every movement released a sound from Neala that she had never made before, a primal noise of need and pleasure that took her over more and more with each breath.

Her legs tightened around his head, drawing him closer, and she moaned and writhed beneath his work until it became almost too much to bear.

When it got to the point where it was beyond what she could tolerate, just as she was about to tell him to stop, he made one more movement with his tongue, and Neala's

mind exploded into nothing but heat and pleasure and Ansel.

She cried out his name, gripping so hard at the sheets that they came loose from the mattress as her muscles all tensed up at once, adrenaline and something glorious pulsing through her veins.

Slowly, slowly, her body relaxed, and Neala was able to open her eyes again. Ansel had gotten to his feet and was wiping his mouth, grinning down at her with a kind of gleeful satisfaction that she'd never seen before.

Panting, barely able to speak, she said, "That... that look suits ye."

"That look suits ye as well," he told her. The hunger still flickered in his eyes. "Pantin' and sweatin' and callin' me name. A man could get a little too used tae it."

Neala had thought herself spent, but at those words her body responded instantly, impatiently demanding more.

She was more than happy to oblige, but she didn't have the words to ask.

Instead, she pushed herself up to a sitting position once more.

Ansel watched her carefully, and she felt a thrill of satisfaction to see how his body reacted to her every movement.

She hesitated, then said, "This bodice ties at the back. Will ye help me undo it?"

Ansel swallowed. "Neala... ye dinnae need tae... this was more than enough. More than I could have ever asked for."

In answer, Neala simply held out her hand. Ansel took it, almost shyly, and crawled

onto the bed at her side.

Clothes fell away, first her dress and then her underclothes, then Ansel's one remaining layer.

They lay on their sides facing each other, bare and exposed and fully vulnerable with each other at long, long last. Ansel touched her breast lightly, worshipfully, and Neala closed her eyes and allowed herself to simply experience the feel of him.

When he moved forward and kissed her, she wrapped her arms around him, pulling him close.

Her fingers traced the scars on his back, and he froze, pulling away slightly.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I didnae..."

Ansel shook his head. "I'm yers," he said. "All of me."

He kissed her again, and this time it grew deeper.

Their bodies pressed together, skin against skin, and soon Neala rolled onto her back and Ansel settled atop her.

He kissed every part of her, exploring her neck and her breasts but always returning to her lips, and in turn her hands explored every dip of his muscles and every inch of his skin.

When he entered her, it was as easy as breathing, as if they had done it a thousand times before.

Neala gasped at the tightness, but soon they were moving together, their bodies in

rhythm, their breathing a mixed melody.

They found themselves and each other in a chorus of sighs and the wonder of one another. As the intensity built and the wave rose within Neala again, she opened her eyes and found Ansel staring back down at her; the same indescribable feeling in her heart echoed back in his gaze.

The wave crashed down, and her body curled around itself. Neala breathed out his name. As she did, she felt Ansel stiffen too, and he let out a deep grunt of ecstasy. They were together now, the way they should have been for so long.

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When it was over, they lay next to each other, hand in hand, as the fire-warmed tent dried the sweat on their skin.

They did not speak. They did not have to.

Neala knew that the moment they left this bed, things would be messy again, but for this one, precious moment, everything was right with the world.

At some point, they must have fallen asleep. It was the first sleep in a long time when Neala felt no nightmares haunting its edges. She cuddled into the warmth of Ansel's arms and allowed herself to rest.

A horn sounded somewhere nearby, signalling that morning had come. Both of them startled awake at once, and reality flooded unpleasantly into the warm bubble that had sustained them all night.

Ansel was the first to move. He slid out of the bed and reached for his leine, not quite looking at her as he covered himself again then moved to grab his clothes. "This... doesnae change anythin', Neala," he said softly at last.

All of the warmth Neala had been feeling turned to ice. She sat up on the bed in disbelief. "What do ye mean?" she demanded. "This changes everythin'."

Ansel shook his head. He bent down and picked up her dress from the floor, handing it to her, but still not quite meeting her eyes. "I shouldnae have... I should have..." He shook his head. "I've wanted ye all this time, but it was selfish of me tae give intae that."

"We wanted each other," Neala reminded him, annoyance coloring her tone. "Dinnae make this somethin' ye did." She pulled her dress over her head, only because she didn't know what else to do. "Dinnae pretend it wasnae more than just a simple physical need."

"It doesnae matter what it was," Ansel told her shortly.

He stared at the fireplace now as she dressed, not moving.

"It's done, and I'm still who I was. I cannae leave all of this behind, no matter how much I might—I just cannae.

Ye cannae change me. Ye cannae protect me.

Think of this as a goodbye. A true one this time. "

Neala's heart clenched painfully in her chest, and she felt sick. All the joy she had been feeling evaporated into the night air. "Please, Ansel. Dinnae do this, nae now. Dinnae make me leave ye behind again."

"I've done things. Many things. Things that can never be forgiven." Ansel shook his head. "I'm beyond yer help. Beyond anyone's. Please, Neala, if ye care for me?—"

"Dinnae ye dare ?—"

"If ye care for me, then go ," Ansel urged. "Please, before the rest of the camp wakes up or someone comes tae check on me. "Some of me men might bring ye tae me, but the rest..." He shook his head. "Go."

Neala swallowed. "And if I refuse?"

At last, he turned to look at her. His eyes were dull, his mouth drawn. There was no trace of the carefree joy she'd seen there only a short time before. "If I asked ye to stay, tae abandon Cailean and the rebellion, would ye do it?"

Her heart stuttered unpleasantly. "Never," she whispered.

"Then go," he told her. "And goodbye."

He turned his back again, and Neala felt a tearing in her chest as something within her broke.

After all these months of waiting and hoping, after all this time of falling deeper and deeper, it was done, and there was nothing more she could do about it.

She thought that the revelation might cause her to crumble, maybe shatter her heart or make her collapse in tears.

Instead, she stood up taller. She was Neala McNair, Princess of Scotland. And she had tried.

"I love ye," she told him. "Do ye ken that? I've loved ye from the moment we first spoke, I think, though I didnae ken it then. I dinnae love the Prince of Blackthorn, the son of Ashkirk, who plagues our lands. I dinnae love Edric's slave. But I will always love ye, even if I never see ye again."

He glanced at her over his shoulder, his voice settling into a cold indifference. "Unbelievable. Ye still speak as though those are different men." He sighed. "Ye really dinnae ken anythin' about me. Even now."

Neala took a breath and, with one last look, she turned and exited through the tent flap and into the cold air of morning.

She cursed as her feet trod on fresh snow and knew she'd have to hurry.

There was no way of covering her footprints now, and the guards would not be fooled into thinking these were the prints of a man's boot.

Looking around furtively until she was sure that there was nobody nearby, she broke out into a run, darting from tent to tent, hiding in the shadows as the sun rose threateningly into the sky.

She'd almost reached the forest when the Ashkirk men descended upon her.

"What were ye thinkin' ?" Cailean thundered.

Nessa actually shrank back at the power in his voice. She had never heard him sound quite so dangerous. Though she knew that he would never hurt her, her brother-in-law's power emanated from him as he voiced his fury.

"Nessa... how could ye help her with such a mad plan?" Maeve asked in something akin to stupefied disbelief. "What did she hope tae achieve from it?"

"That's enough," Darren said sharply, causing all the eyes of the worried council members to draw toward him. "What use is beratin' her goin' tae do? Nessa helped Neala get intae the warcamp because she believed it was the right thing tae do. Scoldin' her for that isnae goin' tae get her back."

"She's me sister, " Cailean snapped.

"Aye, and a White Sparrow," Breana spoke up. Nessa blinked in surprise at the unexpected support. "What was the plan, Nessa?"

Nessa almost shrank back as the attention turned to her, but Darren rested a

reassuring hand on her back and she took a breath.

She looked around the room. Ewan and Hamish both looked beside themselves with worry, while Senan was watching her with a sharp focus that made her stomach clench.

Beside them sat Darren's cousin Fergus, the new Laird McKenzie, and his wife Sorcha, along with her aunt, Lady Flora McKenzie.

Eoin stood behind Breana's chair, a small frown on his face, and Breana rested her hands on her rounded stomach as she took in the situation.

Ferda and Ann were still absent, but in their place were Laura and Morag, who had arrived with a contingent of White Sparrows the moment they had heard the news.

The intimidating and gruff Kier Bruce was here too, having arrived from Bruce Castle yesterday with news that his men were en route to join them.

Several other clan chiefs and lairds had now joined them, all crowding into the war room.

At the center of it all were Cailean and Maeve, the True King and Queen of Scotland, looking more worried than Nessa had ever seen.

All these people. All these good, wonderful, fearless rebels, who had worked so hard to bring light to the darkness. People who Nessa had once believed her enemies, but who had become her friends. Her family.

All of them, waiting for her to speak.

She glanced up at Darren, who gave her a nod.

She nodded back, then spoke. "Neala asked me tae help her sneak out tae get tae the main war camp," Nessa explained.

"She said she thought she could turn Ansel Ashkirk, and that if she could not, then she could dispatch him.

She said she could get closer tae him than any of us could—and I believed her. "

Cailean swore.

Maeve put a hand on his arm. "It wasnae such a foolish plan," she said, though her expression was grim. "She and the younger Ashkirk clearly had some sort of bond, we all ken that. She wouldnae be with us if he hadnae freed her. I've nae doubt that, if she had tae, she would have killed him."

"But he's nae dead," Cailean replied angrily. "For the second time, he's escaped death at our hands."

"She believed he wouldnae hurt her," Nessa told them.

Laura shook her head, looking distraught. "That lass. Her heart was always her problem."

"She's nae fool," Cailean said at last. "She kent what she was doin'. Her only mistake was bein' blinded tae who he was. Who the Ashkirks have always been. She trusted him—and now she's their prisoner."

"So we act," Darren said, speaking as though it was the simplest thing in the world. "We wanted more time tae prepare, but we're ready for this, Cailean. We've stormed the False King's castle tae steal back yer sister before. Let's do it again, but this time for good."

Many of the other war chiefs cheered at the suggestion, and Kier gave a slow nod. Senan, though, seemed worried.

"It's high time we ended this tyranny once and for all," Ewan agreed. "And we willnae let one of our own suffer while we wait. How long will we need tae amass the full strength of our army? The McKenzies, the Bruces, and many many more of our allies are already on the way here."

"Even if we account for the war camps slowin' them down, it'll be only a few days," Breana replied, studying the map in front of her. "It will be tight, but it's likely we'll have just enough time tae reach Blackthorn Castle before..."

Maeve nodded. "Then it's settled. We gather our army, and we launch our final attack. We get Neala back, and we end this war once and for all."

Eoin nodded, but he looked troubled. "Last time... when we got McNair Castle back, it was different. We had the advantage that it had been yer home, and ye remembered its secrets."

"Aye," Senan agreed. "And when we won back Bruce Castle, it was Maeve's experience of livin' there that gave us the edge we needed tae succeed in our attack."

Sighing, Maeve sank back down into her seat.

"Ye're right. Me sisters and I visited Blackthorn Castle only a handful of times when we were very small, and though Eoin, and I'm sure many of our allies have been inside the place over the years, it has been a long time.

We have the plans Breana stole, which will help, and the information the White Sparrows gained for us, but it isnae the same as havin' someone alongside us who can guide the way. "

Morag shook her head. "Elspeth cannae go back there. I willnae ask it of her. I've sent her off tae a mission in Ireland until she heals herself. And anyway, her knowledge is mostly limited tae the kitchens."

Cailean's jaw tightened, but he nodded. "The fact is that none of us have been close enough tae study its inner workin's in a very, very long time."

Nessa cleared her throat. "That's nae quite true," she reminded them. "And I think it's time I truly made meself useful." She glanced back at Darren, who gave her the kind of smile that flooded her with warmth. "After all, we've a war tae win."

Chapter Nineteen

Ansel returned to Blackthorn Castle with a heavy heart and a stone wall that had crumbled around him.

He felt naked and exposed, the pain he had worked so hard to fight off now nipping at his skin like persistent insects determined to tear him apart.

Everywhere he looked in this castle, he saw Baldric.

Every time he closed his eyes, he saw her.

He'd wanted to stay at the war camp, but when his father's summons had come only a few days after his fateful meeting in the tent, he had been given no choice but to return.

They had packed up the camp and retreated to the castle.

From the whispers of the men, it seemed like the soldiers were anticipating a direct attack, though of course the king would not hear of such a thing.

As far as he was concerned, there was no threat to the power of Ashkirk.

Edric believed even now that his strength was absolute.

Several of the men had gone ahead, and Ansel had brought up the tail of the party, taking his time to return home as the events at the war camp ruminated in his mind.

He couldn't believe he'd finally held Neala, finally kissed her, finally felt every intense emotion that he'd been keeping locked inside back from her.

He'd been so, so tempted to agree to her pleas.

He just wanted to run away, to be with her.

But he knew that there was no future for him outside of this castle, and, worse, no future for her if she'd tied herself to him.

Turning her away was the only path forward, even if it had killed something inside of him.

It was unlikely he'd survive this war anyway. Soon enough, he'd have time to rest, and Neala could live and move on.

Now, as he walked along the castle corridors, he frowned a little as he noted how empty they were.

Where was everyone? He knew the men from his war camp would be bathing or eating or getting some sleep, but none of the regular castle residents seemed to be wandering around as they usually were.

Ansel supposed that many of them had gone to the other war camps in anticipation of the coming attacks, but as far as he knew, they still had a month or so to go before the final battle would arrive. And where were all the servants?

Shaking his head to clear it of the thoughts, he approached his father's throne room. As he did, the door opened and Ruadh exited, looking pale and limping slightly.

"Dinnae go in there," Ruadh said immediately upon seeing him. He grabbed Ansel's

arm and pulled him to the side, then looked left and right before he spoke again. "Ye need tae flee."

Ansel blinked. The young soldier wasn't the most fierce of his men, but he was loyal, and he was never one to back down from a challenge. What could possibly have filled him with so much fear? "What is this?"

Ruadh swallowed. "I hope ye can forgive me one day, Ansel.

I tried tae stop him. I truly did. When he overheard—when he ran tae report ye—I tried tae follow him.

I wanted tae stop him, at least before we heard yer side.

But I wasnae fast enough. We werenae far from the camp when we ran intae a rebel ambush, and I barely escaped with me life.

By the time I got back... it was too late. "

"Stop what?" Ansel demanded. "Stop who?"

Before Ruadh could answer, the door opened again, and several of the king's men exited.

Leading them was Lorcan, walking with a smirk on his face that reminded Ansel of a cat who had discovered a bird's nest. Despite Ruadh's protests, Ansel moved forward to meet them.

Lorcan's smile only grew as his eyes landed on the prince.

"Ye'd best get in there," Lorcan told him. "Yer father is waitin' on ye. Yer Highness. "

Ansel frowned, then with one last glance back at Ruadh, who looked miserable, he pushed past Lorcan and the other men and entered the throne room.

The huge room was empty except for two figures. One was his father, who was lounging on the throne. The other, sitting on a small wooden chair with her arms tied behind her back and defiantly meeting the king's gaze, was...

"Ah," Edric said brightly as he entered. "Welcome, son. I'm sure ye recognize me new friend?"

His throat burning with acrid bile, his heart squeezing so tight that Ansel thought it might just stop, the prince walked forward.

He didn't look at the prisoner, didn't acknowledge her in any way, as he walked past her.

Even the smallest look he gave Neala now could mean the end for both of them, at least until he knew what his father had discovered.

Almost casually, he placed himself between the throne and the wooden chair, his back to Neala, blocking Edric's view.

"What is she doin' here?" Ansel asked, keeping his voice as neutral as he possibly could.

Edric stood. "She's a rare thing, is she nae? The lass who returned from the dead nae once, but twice."

A chill rippled across Ansel's skin. Twice. He didn't speak, determined not to incriminate himself further until he knew exactly how much knowledge his father had.

"Ye did tell me ye killed her, that maid. Abby, was it nae?" Edric mocked. He moved closer, standing eye to eye with Ansel. "She doesnae look very dead tae me."

"I escaped him. Baldric chased after me and told him he'd dispatched me, and Ansel didnae want tae admit his failure tae ye," Neala piped up from behind Ansel, speaking so seriously that even Ansel might have believed her if he didn't know the truth. "So he took the credit. That's all."

Edric blinked, then started to laugh. "So that was it! Baldric. I should have kent. Is that the story ye're tellin' as well, Ansel?"

Ansel still didn't speak. He could sense the danger in his father's voice and the jaws of a trap threatening to snap closed.

Suddenly, his father hit out with a hard punch, connecting with the side of Ansel's face and sending him staggering backward. He followed it with another fist to the stomach which knocked the air from Ansel's lungs. Dizzy, Ansel leaned forward, wheezing as he tried to catch a breath.

"How long did ye ken?" Edric demanded harshly, the false geniality disappearing to be replaced with an ugly hatred. "How long did ye ken who she truly is?"

"I... dinnae ken... what ye mean—" Ansel started.

The next blow smacked against his temple, and the room turned white as pain screamed through Ansel's skull. He didn't remember falling, but the next thing he knew, he was sprawled on the floor, his father glaring down at him.

"How long ?" Edric roared. There was spittle forming around his lips and his eyes were wild. "Did ye ken the whole time that I was harborin' a McNair under me own roof?"

Ansel's brain wasn't working properly, but the shock of fear at those words jolted through his body with the strength of a bolt of lightning. How did he know? How could he know?

"Lorcan overheard her in yer tent, ye fool.

The McNair princess. I didnae want tae believe it, but when I saw her, I saw that bastard Robert McNair starin' back at me.

" Edric spat to the side. "There's nae denyin' it.

And if she's real, then the dirty-blooded slime tryin' tae steal me throne truly is Cailean McNair. Is that right?"

When Ansel didn't respond, Edric kicked him hard in the ribs once more, and Ansel grunted through gritted teeth at the agony.

"I asked if that was right!" Edric snarled.

"It's right!" Neala shouted. "Me brother is the rightful king, and he's comin' tae destroy ye. The whole of Scotland has kent it before ye did. And ye call yerself a king!"

Edric's wild expression contorted as he tore his eyes from Ansel and toward her. "Ye plot against me. Ye corrupt me nephew and force me tae destroy him. And now ye conspire with me own son!"

Neala laughed coldly. "Yer son! Ye think this weak man kent anythin' of our plans? He thought me nothin' but a simple maid when I seduced him here in this very castle, and he would have killed me in a second had Baldric nae helped me tae escape first. Yer son is just as much of a fool as ye are."

Ansel's scrambled brain tried desperately to understand where she was going with those lies. What did she hope to achieve? He wished his head would stop aching so that he could do something other than just lie there and bleed.

"It was Cailean's idea," Neala replied in that same cold tone.

"He kent I had become the prince's lover durin' me time here.

We thought that I could manipulate him intae joinin' us.

The ultimate betrayal; turnin' yer own son against ye.

I should have kent he would refuse me. He's as worthless as ye are.

I barely escaped with me life—until yer men found me and brought me here, anyway.
"

Edric grunted. "Get up, lad," he ordered.

It took a few tries, but Ansel was able to pull himself unsteadily to his feet.

When his head stopped spinning, he faced Neala.

She had bruises on her face and arms, and when she met his eyes, she wore an expression of deliberate cold neutrality that Ansel knew all too well. His soul shook as he met her gaze.

Neala scoffed. "Pathetic wee dog ye've got there, Edric."

Edric moved forward suddenly and grabbed Neala's chin, yanking her head up so that she was staring at him. "Ye think ye're so clever. Ye think ye're better than me, stayin'

under me roof, stealin' me hospitality, manipulin' me only son with yer disgustin' feminine wiles."

"I think the dirt on me shoe is better than ye," Neala replied coolly.

Edric's fingers tightened painfully on her face, pressing hard into the bruises that were already there. Neala kept her expression calm, but Ansel saw the flinch of agony she tried to hide.

"Ye've done me a service today, whore," Edric told her. "Ye've proven tae me that me idiot son isnae the traitor I feared—just a pathetic, weak fool who allowed himself tae be manipulated and let ye escape him twice. Nevertheless, a fool can still have his uses."

"Father," Ansel started.

Edric ignored him, continuing to address Neala. "I had planned tae take ye tae me bed when ye arrived. But now that I ken who ye truly are, I wouldnae taint me body with yer filth."

"So what will ye do?" Neala asked. "Kill me? Go ahead, do it now. Me brother will take his vengeance from yer flesh."

Ansel wanted to scream at her to stop, but the words wouldn't come out. He felt frozen in place, completely unable to act, torn by his heart and his duty. If he moved now, he would ruin everything, but if he didn't...

"Me!" Edric laughed. "Nay, wee temptress. Yer execution will be public, as it should be. We'll show these rebels that their precious princess has fallen before the true king. And I willnae be the one who does it."

"Oh?" Neala cocked an eyebrow, looking devastatingly uninterested. "I hope yer swordsman keeps his weapon sharp, then."

Edric dropped her face and stepped back, clapping his hand on Ansel's shoulder. "This is yer mess, lad. Ye'll fix it."

"What?" Ansel asked. There was a ringing sound in his ears.

"Two days hence will be the first of a new month. Let it also be the last of a dyin' dynasty," Edric replied. "On the dawn of overmorrow, ye'll clean up yer mess and put her tae the sword in front of our gathered followers."

The ice around Ansel's heart grew so cold that it almost burned. The ringing in his ears was so loud that he couldn't think, and the pain pulsing in his ribs and skull took all of his focus.

This was it. This was the moment that he had to decide. He looked to Neala, then to his father, and there wasn't even a question. He'd known all along that there was only one path he could take—only one thing he had been born for, no matter what else might happen. No matter how much it might cost.

"Of course, Father," Ansel said, turning his back on Neala fully and bowing to the king. "I'd be honored tae atone for me mistakes. It's all I've ever wanted."

Chapter Twenty

"We're less than a day away," Nessa said, staring out over the horizon. "We'll be at the castle by midday tomorrow at latest."

Cailean, pacing back and forth swore, but did not say anything else.

Ferda poked the fire to keep it going and sighed. "We're limited. We've fought through three different war camps tae get this far, and there's nae kennin' how many of the king's men we'll meet in this final stretch. Between our injured and our dead..."

Maeve put a hand on her friend's shoulder.

"I ken ye're upset about leavin' Ann behind at the castle, but it isnae so grim as ye think.

We've scarcely lost any of our fighters, and we've gained victories so securely that even some of the king's men are now fightin' on our side.

There's nae limitation here, Ferda. We've already won.

It's just a matter of gettin' there on time. "

"Besides," Eoin said cheerfully, "There's nae doubt we'll get home safe. Breana's back there keepin' our bairn safe until it's ready tae be born, and Ann's waitin' on ye as well. We simply have tae get home."

"I'll die one day, but it willnae be at the hands of the False King's men," Darren added.

He casually wrapped his arm around Nessa's shoulders, and she leaned into his warmth with a smile on her face.

"Look at this massive camp we have followin' us, and we've left groups at siege points stoppin' supplies gettin' tae Blackthorn Castle. There's nae way we lose this."

Nessa wondered if the others shared Darren and Eoin's enthusiasm, and felt certain that they did.

The jovial and jubilant excitement crackled over their entire army, the certainty of their coming victory fueling them forward.

Most of their men and women were asleep in their tents, though some were still gathered in small groups like theirs, chatting or playing games or making plans for the next battle.

Ewan and Hamish sat a little further away, playing a card game, while Senan and Kier were in an intense discussion with Flora McKenzie.

Nessa's eyes lingered on them for a little longer before one of the others in their group spoke.

"We shouldnae underestimate the power of Blackthorn Castle," Sorchu said quietly.

She and Fergus made up the last members of their little group around the fire, and this was the first time the shy young woman has spoken.

"It's easy tae get cocky, but we mustnae forget that he is wily and strong.

There's a reason he was able tae destroy so many lives tae begin with. "

Fergus squeezed her hand. "Think how hard we've fought so far, love. We only need tae push a little further. Soon it'll all be well at long, long last."

Cailean growled, stopping in the tracks of his pacing and throwing himself down to sit next to Maeve at the fire. " Well ," he repeated, anger lacing his tone. "It doesnae matter. We're still gonnae lose."

Nessa stared at him, but Maeve was the first to speak. "What are ye sayin'?" Maeve asked, touching his arm. "Ye were filled with such energy earlier when we won the last battle. Why are ye feelin' so morbid now? Ye ken we can win any battle if we're together."

"We'll defeat the tyrant, I've nae doubt of it," Cailean replied darkly, "But we're restin' for too long."

"The men need tae sleep," Darren replied with a frown.

"Men and women," Ferda corrected, and Darren nodded in acknowledgement. "But Darren's right. They'd be in nae state tae fight without rest, and what's comin' is the most important battle of our lives."

Eoin nodded. "It's only another couple of hours, then as Nessa said, we'll be there by midday. With any luck, the False King will surrender when he understands he cannae possibly win, and we'll have taken the castle by sundown tomorrow."

Cailean buried his head in his hands. Suddenly, Nessa understood, and she raised her hand to her mouth. "It'll be too late," Cailean mumbled.

Nobody spoke. Because he was right. They would probably win, no matter how many

dangerous battles lay ahead.

They could hold Blackthorn Castle under siege for a long time if they needed to, and if they worked cleverly, it wouldn't even come to that.

The rebel army, the McNair army, had grown and trained to the point that it was unstoppable.

But at the last war camp, one of the soldiers had spitefully told them of Neala's capture. And by midday tomorrow, she would already be gone. They would win the war, but they would lose Neala—forever.

Nessa chewed on her lip. "This is my fault. I shouldnae have helped her," she whispered so that only Darren could hear. "If only I'd?—"

Darren pressed his lips to her forehead. "Neala is a McNair," he told her, speaking loudly enough that everyone else looked to him. "Ye couldnae have stopped her if ye tried."

Maeve gave a sad smile at that. "Aye, that's true. We all ken she willnae go down without a fight. But Cailean, even if we left now, there's nae way we'll reach Blackthorn Castle in time. All we can do is keep fightin'."

Cailean took a steadying breath. His eyes shone in the firelight, but a new determination now set in his jaw.

"Ye're right. And the last thing she'd want is me mopin' instead of focusin' on gettin' it done.

" He got to his feet again. "Go get some rest. We set out in two hours.

Let's go and make sure that none of this was in vain. "

Neala shivered in the cold of her cell, silently counting down the moments.

She didn't have much longer left, and she knew it.

She hadn't slept in the two nights since she had been here, but she had been able to keep track of the time by the movement of the guards who were visiting other prisoners with food and water.

There had been none of that for her. Her stomach growled, and her mouth felt dry and parched, but she had not called out to them.

She would die strong and proud, never asking the False King or his servants for a thing.

They'd put her in the same cell where they'd kept Morag and Ann. Neala had no doubt that it had been a deliberate slight, one last insult to her before the end. She had walked into it with her head held up high.

She had broken only when she was sure she was alone.

Her eyes burned from weeping the night before, lying awake curled up on the stone floor as she listened to the other prisoners' screams. Nobody was coming to rescue her.

She'd known from birth, training as a Sparrow, that it might end this way, and she was ready for it, but the looming threat of her own death was too much even for her practiced mind to bear.

She tried to take comfort in her memories.

Cailean's smile. Cat and Iona doing her hair.

Laura's hugs when she was a little girl and Morag's careful teaching.

Maeve accepting her as a sister, Nessa forgiving her, building friendships with the rebels.

She had so many warm thoughts to keep her company in the cold.

Most shining amongst them was the night she'd spent in Ansel's arms. Even though it was likely she would die at his hand in only a few hours, even though he had made it clear that he had chosen his father once and for all, she could not regret a single second of it.

She hoped that when she died, he knew that she still did not hate him. They all had their choices to make.

Neala rubbed her eyes, trying to gather herself together.

After Ansel had accepted the task of ending her life, the False King had called the guards to take her away.

Only while they were dragging her away had Ansel finally looked at her.

He'd mouthed something to her, only a word or two that she could not make out fully, but she understood.

She was fairly sure that he'd been telling her that he was sorry.

Well, so was she. After all, Ansel and the False King would not last much longer than she did.

She knew that Cailean and the rebel army would be on the way.

That thought comforted her, even though she knew it would be far, far too late for her own life to be spared.

"A small price tae pay tae end all of this," she reminded herself out loud. She believed it. But she was still afraid.

Less than an hour later, the guards arrived to lead her to her death.

One of them was a young red-headed man with a limp who seemed vaguely familiar, and the other she did not recognize at all.

The young one held out a hand and helped her up gently.

His expression seemed so mournful that Neala almost laughed despite the horror of it all.

"Cheer yer face up, Ruadh," the other man snapped. "Ye look like a wounded puppy. Yer precious prince will survive the loss of his whore, dinnae fear."

Ruadh opened his mouth as if to protest, then sighed and looked down at the floor. The other man took out rope and gestured for Neala to hold out her arms.

"There's nay need for that," Ruadh said. "She's on her way tae die. She's unarmed. There's naewhere she can flee."

The other guard shook his head. "She escaped twice already. Thrice, if ye count her disappearin' as a bairn. We're takin' nae risks." With those words, he grabbed Neala's wrists and tightly bound them. She winced as the rope dug into her skin, but she did not speak.

Ruadh pressed a hand gently to her back and propelled her forward.

The three of them trudged along the corridor, the two men on either side of her.

Neala could not see into the other cells as she passed them, but she heard the prisoners whispering or groaning.

She only prayed that her brother and his army arrived here soon so that they, at least, could be free.

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Her confidence held until they reached the execution yard.

Men from the few clans still openly loyal to the Ashkirk crown were gathered, as were many others who Neala did not recognize and did not care to know.

She kept her head held high as the guards led her to the center of the crowd, where a block was waiting.

Edric and Ansel stood behind it, Ansel holding a large, gleaming sword.

It sparkled with deadliness, and Neala's knees grew weak beneath her.

Ruadh caught her elbow. "Dinnae let them see ye fall," he whispered in her ear, his voice covered by the murmuring of the crowd.

They led her to the block, and she knelt in front of it without giving them the satisfaction of forcing her.

Her stomach tightened, and blood rushed through her head, distorting the sound around her and making her feel dizzy.

She could feel her pulsing heartbeat in her throat, and tears burned the corners of her eyes, but she would not let them fall. She would go to her death with dignity.

But when Ansel stepped forward and she saw the neutral look on his face, it was almost too much to bear. To die was one thing, but to die at his hands? She wanted to screw her eyes shut, but she forced herself to look. She couldn't show weakness now.

"Watch, friends, as me son destroys the spawn of me greatest enemy!" Edric announced with maniacal zeal. "The last woman of that accursed line falls today—and her demon brother will be next!"

Several of the Ashkirk men cheered, but even in her terrified state, Neala could see that others were watching silently, the young guard who had tried to help her most prominent amongst them.

There was a strange mix of emotion in the air, but she could not wrap her head around what any of it might mean.

Ansel stepped forward. "Have ye last words?" he asked in a voice as quiet as the wind. "It's customary tae ask."

Neala's stomach lurched and nausea flooded her. It took her a few tries and a few deep breaths before she was able to speak. "Only this. We'll win," she said simply. "Ye ken we will."

He stared at her for a long, long time. For many moments, the word seemed to disappear around them entirely.

There were only Ansel, Neala, and that sword shining between them.

Their gazes met, and Neala's heart thrummed like a bird as she gazed into those strange, beautiful green eyes for the last time.

"I ken," he whispered. He turned away from her and gestured. "Father. I willnae do this. I willnae lay a finger on this lass."

Murmuring broke out over the crowd, but Edric stepped forward, his expression making it clear that he had half-expected this. He laughed a dark, cruel laugh. "Is that

so?" Edric asked. "Tell me, lad, was the power of her body so strong that it has turned ye weak?"

"Weak or not, I willnae lay a finger on the lass, nae matter how ye insist," Ansel replied steadily. He held out the sword. "But ye're right in one thing. This has all gone on long enough. It's time for it tae end once and for all. Take it."

Rolling his eyes, Edric snatched the weapon from his son's grasp. "I'll deal with ye later," he hissed. He turned to Neala and raised the weapon. "Now, I'll show ye how a true king behaves."

He swung down, and despite herself, Neala closed her eyes as death came hurtling toward her.

The clang of the swords connecting rang out like a bell.

Neala opened her eyes and saw Ansel, now holding his own sword, had blocked the blow. A collective gasp rose around them, and furious disbelief pulsed from Edric as he stumbled back from the force of the parry.

"Traitor!" Edric howled. "Men! Take him! Kill him! Kill them both!"

The Ashkirk soldiers surged forward and Neala tried to get to her feet, stumbling off balance as the ropes tied around her wrists made it difficult.

Ansel darted to her side, his sword expertly slicing through the bonds without hurting her.

They stood beside each other, facing the coming wave of soldiers.

Neala's heart sang. She was unarmed and, despite Ansel's skill, there was no way they

could win. But at least she'd die with him at her side, fighting against the False King.

Before their attackers could strike, though, there was a chorus of other clangs around them.

The redheaded guard from earlier, Ruadh, now stood between Ansel and one of the attacking soldiers, his sword out.

Several other soldiers were surrounding Neala and Ansel, raising their weapons in defense of their prince.

Neala gasped as she realized that close to half of the king's men had taken Ansel's side and were now facing down men who had only moments ago been their brothers.

The fight that followed was as swift as it was brutal.

Neala grabbed a dagger from someone's belt, glad to have some sort of weapon.

She'd always preferred a short blade to a sword anyway, though she wasn't sure how much use it would be in this chaos.

Nevertheless, she gripped it tight, ready to defend herself.

The soldiers defending her, though, never gave her a chance to use it, acting as a bloody barricade to keep the attackers away.

She turned to say something to Ansel, but cried out in alarm when she saw he was no longer by her side.

"Ansel!" she shouted, ducking instinctively as someone swung at Ruadh who fought in front of her. He ducked too and parried the attack, fighting back with an impressive

amount of skill. "Ansel, where are ye?"

She thought she'd lost him in the crowd entirely, until the booming voice of Edric Ashkirk echoed through the air around them, somehow carrying over all the noise of the battle.

"Fine, traitor! I'll kill ye meself!" Edric howled.

Neala spun toward the sound and dashed forward through a small gap in the barrier. The world paused as she took in the sight before her. Edric rushed toward Ansel, the executioner's sword gleaming in his hands, while Ansel calmly faced him and did not move.

With a final roar, Edric pounced. Ansel moved so fast that Neala barely saw it, dodging to the side and slicing out with one expert movement.

Edric screamed, and that scream turned into a gurgle as he collapsed to the ground.

Those closest to them stopped fighting, gasps and shouts of surprise and confusion replacing the sounds of battle.

The ripple carried back through the chaos, and all around them, the fighting stopped, and all eyes turned to the center as everyone seemed to hold their breath.

Ansel knelt down by his father's side, pushing him so that he rolled onto his back.

The king's face was pale, and his eyes were roving wildly.

His chest rose and fell, but each breath was more shallow, and it was clear to everyone that the end was imminent.

Neala's head spun as she tried to comprehend the impossible thing she was seeing.

"Dinnae try tae speak," Ansel told his father when the king's mouth worked soundlessly. "It'll just cause ye pain. I didnae want it tae end this way, but perhaps it was always meant tae."

He looked up and caught Neala's eye. He did not smile, but she saw the relief in his eyes to see her standing there, and she felt it echoing in her own heart.

Ansel looked back down to his father. "I should have acted years ago.

I should have been as brave as Baldric, or as Neala, or as any of those Sparrows or rebels who've stood against ye all these years.

Ye've been a monster for as long as I remember.

These are yer last moments, and I want ye tae spend them kennin' this one thing.

I am yer only legitimate son. I am yer only heir.

And I will ensure that, when Cailean McNair arrives here, it is only tae accept the throne that we stole from him. "

The struggling king groaned.

"Rest now, Father," Ansel told him. "Perhaps in the next life, ye can seek forgiveness. But in this one, it's over. Just as I promised. Yer name will be forgotten and Scotland will thrive."

Edric Ashkirk died there, surrounded by silence, his eyes staring blankly at the sky.

Ansel stood. Unable to prevent herself, Neala rushed to his side, throwing herself into his waiting arms. Holding him tight, her heart at last settled into the beat that it was made for, matching his, and even when he released her from the embrace, it was only to take her hand and keep her by his side.

She knew then that she would never leave him again.

"He's dead," he announced, his voice carrying over the silent crowd. "The tyrannical reign of Edric Ashkirk is over. I ken some of ye, perhaps many of ye, were still loyal tae him, but he is gone. Before ye take yer vengeance, listen well."

Several of the soldiers who had defended Neala moved to the front of the crowd, subtly but securely creating protection around Ansel.

They were ready to protect him if they needed to.

Neala remembered watching him train these men what seemed like a lifetime ago, and she saw that loyalty and kindness reflected back at her from them now.

She still could scarcely believe what was happening, but despite the bloodshed and chaos that had been raging only moments ago, she had never felt so safe.

"I am Ansel Ashkirk, the only son born of Edric Ashkirk's only marriage, and his one true heir," he announced. "By the law of the land, the law of my father himself, I am yer leader now. If Edric was the king to whom ye swore yer loyalty, then that throne now belongs tae me."

Neala's breath caught. Surely Ansel had not simply staged a coup? Surely he would not fight Cailean and claim the throne for himself? But her breathing eased as he continued.

"And as yer new king, I tell ye this: the rebels will soon be at our door.

In a matter of hours, Cailean McNair will lead his army tae destroy the last remains of the Ashkirk legacy.

Ye may fight me if ye wish. Ye may fight them when they arrive.

But many of me men have already proven their loyalty, and when I surrender tae the McNairs, they will surrender with me.

Accept that it is over. Face the justice that the True King is bringin'.

Someone cried out, "And when he puts us all tae the sword?"

Neala shook her head. "He willnae!" she insisted.

She covered her mouth and glanced at Ansel, but he nodded at her to go on.

"Cailean willnae kill anyone who surrenders tae him with a genuine intention tae atone.

He doesnae wish for any more death than there has tae be.

The McNair name stands for justice and peace.

If ye dinnae fight, if ye commit yerself tae the new freedom of Scotland, then ye will live.

"But if ye fight," Ansel added, "Ye will die. Either by the rebels' blades—or by mine."

A crystalline pause followed that statement. Then, one by one, soldiers started to drop their swords. Weapons fell to the ground as men disarmed themselves, and those who had been fighting each other only moments ago moved to help the injured.

It was over.

Neala turned to Ansel, full-hearted and almost giddy as the reality hit her, but that joy turned to ash in her mouth as she saw the sad smile on his face.

What she'd said had been true. Cailean didn't want any more death than was needed. But she also knew that he'd made his allies a promise and that there was one more life that had to end. She stared at the dead king on the ground before them, and her stomach tightened.

It looked like Edric Ashkirk would have his final victory after all.

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Darren caught Nessa's arm as they made the final approach to Blackthorn Castle.

They were exhausted and bloodied after facing and defeating yet another ambush on the final push toward their destination, and many of the injured rebels were staying behind, taking the refuge offered by the terrified villagers who lived around the castle.

"Ye should stay here," Darren told her. "Ye're nae warrior."

"Me sister is goin'," Nessa replied defiantly. "I should be there too."

Darren shook his head emphatically. "Maeve is goin' because she's trained as a fighter, and because she's the queen.

This is her fight. But it isnae yers, Nessa.

There's nae shame in nae kennin' how tae wield a weapon.

We fight so that our own bairns and grandbairns may never have tae.

Think of yer other sister; Breana stayed home though she longed tae be at Eoin's side, because the wee one growin' in her belly needs her tae stay alive. "

"There's nae bairn in me belly," Nessa replied dismissively. "Come on. We need tae be at the front with Cailean and Maeve."

He scowled. "Nessa, will ye listen tae me? Dinnae ye understand that we cannae lose

ye? Maeve will be distracted if ye're around, wantin' tae protect ye. And I... if somethin' happened tae ye and I could have prevented it, I'll go mad. Stay here. Please."

Nessa blinked at him in surprise. "I... Darren, I ken ye care about me. But this is bigger than me. If I can be of any use, then I need tae be there, and ye ken it. Maeve will be fine. She kens how important this is."

"But—" Darren started.

She raised her finger to his lips, hushing him. "Stop. It isnae like ye tae be so serious." She smiled slightly at him. "I've been a part of this as long as I've been alive. It's only right I should be a part of its end."

Darren's eyes widened, and he glanced at her finger for a moment before looking directly into her face. He seemed, for the first time since she'd known him, at a loss for words.

"Besides," she said in an impish tone that wasn't quite her own. She'd borrowed it from him. "Who else is gonnae make sure those two dinnae do anythin' stupid?"

He stared a moment longer, then laughed. It was a warm, beautiful sound, and it made Nessa feel as though the snow around her was melting as the flowers grew. She hadn't known she could ever make anyone laugh like that, and she hoped that she'd get to do it over and over again.

Then Darren took her face between his hands and kissed her.

Nessa leaned into the kiss as she had what felt like a thousand times before, then gasped as she heard wolf whistles and laughter around them.

She pulled back and saw several of their friends and other rebels watching and grinning.

Maeve was close by, a look on her face halfway between amusement and concern as she watched.

"Darren!" Nessa hissed, "What are ye doin'? I thought this was supposed tae be a secret."

Darren chuckled. "Och, it's never been a secret and ye ken it. They've all kent we're together for months. And if I cannae tell ye I love ye before we rush off intae battle and maybe get ourselves killed, when can I?"

Nessa sharply looked up into his face, her pulse quickening. Surely she had misheard. "What did ye say?"

He winked. "Want me tae repeat it? I'm fairly certain everyone else heard."

She glanced around them. Everyone in their small vicinity was watching, and even Maeve had a glimmer in her eye. But then the reality of what they were doing here crashed down, and she shook her head. "Darren, it isnae the time for this."

Darren nodded. "Ye're right. Forgive me, we dinnae need tae talk about it now."

As if the spell was broken, the other rebels returned to their tasks, preparing to head out to the final battle.

Maeve went to find Cailean, though not without one final look toward Nessa.

Still feeling a blush on her cheeks, Nessa turned back to her pack when she and Darren were alone again and secured her things inside it.

"So, will ye stay here?" Darren asked once more.

"Nay," Nessa said. She paused, then added, " Especially nae now."

She glanced back at Darren and saw him give her a rueful grin, which she couldn't help but respond to with a smile of her own.

"I thought ye'd say that," he admitted. "So instead, I'll ask another question. When this is all over, will ye marry me?"

The part of Nessa that was broken thought it was a cruel joke.

That small portion of her that had so much healing still to do wanted to scream at him for mocking her and storm off, retreating into the safety of her coldness.

But the rest of her, the Nessa who had found her sisters, the one who had learned what it was to love and be loved, had a heart that brimmed over with so much love and joy that it spilled over, and it was time she let that stronger part take over for good.

She stood and turned to face him, trying to keep her wild grin under control. "Of course I will, ye idiot," she replied. "Now go make sure our king doesnae die."

Darren wrapped his arms around her waist, lifting her into his arms and spinning in place, kissing her fiercely before placing her back on her feet. He winked again, then kissed her forehead and her cheek before hurrying off to find Cailean.

Nessa stared after him, her heart racing, her soul singing, and her self whole at last. She stood for just a moment longer, then turned back to her pack, hefting it over her shoulder.

It was time.

Ansel held Neala's hand as they walked together through the main doors of Blackthorn Castle and into the sun that shone down upon the still snow.

The watchmen on the towers had warned them that the rebels were close, and Neala and Ansel had decided they'd make their way out to meet them together.

Ansel knew that he was probably walking toward his end, and he'd asked Neala to wait behind, but he had also known she'd never agree to it.

Besides, as she'd so carefully reasoned, her presence would at least make Cailean stop and listen.

The rebel army stopped, and Ansel saw many of them pointing and gaping at the white flags that flew from the turrets.

It only took a few moments after that for two figures—Cailean and Maeve—to separate from the group and move forward toward them.

Ansel and Neala moved too, walking to meet them in the middle.

Ansel knew his men had exited the castle and were standing behind him, and the rebel army stood behind their king and queen.

However, the two couples met in the middle with nobody else to intervene.

Ansel had been careful about ordering his guards to do this, and he was glad that Cailean had done the same.

There was to be no more death than there had to be.

"Neala," Cailean breathed as soon as the four of them met. Neala let go of Ansel's hand and ran into her brother's embrace, and for a second, nobody else moved or spoke.

Maeve watched Ansel carefully, distrust written all over her pretty face. She had her hand resting on the pommel of her elegant, thin sword, and it was clear she was ready for a fight. "Why the white flags?" she demanded. "Is this a trap?"

"It's nae trap," Neala replied, letting go of Cailean. "Ye must listen."

Cailean frowned and looked at Ansel. "What have ye done?" he demanded.

Ansel met his eye, then sank down to one knee, bowing his head. "Edric Ashkirk is dead," he said softly. "I am the ruler of Blackthorn Castle, and I surrender it to ye, Cailean McNair. And with it, this country. I return tae ye what me father took from yers. This war is over."

He looked up again when there was no answer. Cailean and Maeve looked at each other with matching expressions of astonishment, but nobody said anything.

Neala moved back to Ansel's side. "It's true.

He's dead. Ansel killed him, I saw it meself," she said, her words coming out all in a rush.

"He saved me, Cailean— again . His father was ready tae execute me, and Ansel stopped him.

The Ashkirks split in two, brother against brother, and Ansel led the fight in yer name. This is a real surrender."

Cailean shook his head slowly, not in disbelief, but as though he was trying to think. "I dinnae understand," he said eventually. He looked down at Ansel, who was still kneeling. "Why would ye do this?"

Ansel sighed. "I've kent for many, many years that I've been on the wrong side of history.

I've tried me best tae lessen the crimes of me father while also servin' him, but the truth is I never did enough.

Meetin' Neala... it changed me, and I resisted at first. She showed me a part of meself that I've spent me life denyin', a part that always made me shrink back in fear.

A part that wanted tae live for love, nae just for the whims of a tyrant because I felt I had nae choice. "

"Ye could have come tae us," Maeve replied, folding her arms. "Ye had chances. Many chances."

He didn't argue. "I was weak. Perhaps I still am.

When I freed those Sparrows, I told meself I was only doin' it for Neala.

When I watched as me father murdered me brave, wonderful cousin, I told meself that all I could do was forget what it was tae feel.

But Neala has been a part of me soul since the moment we met.

When she came tae find me again, when I realized that I love her with all of me bein', I kent it couldnae go on. I had nae choice but tae save her."

"Ye could have saved her without all of this," Cailean replied slowly. "Ye could have spared her life and taken her away, or kept her as yer wife while ye ruled as king."

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"I'm nae king," Ansel replied, shaking his head.

"I'm just a man who has acted on behalf of a monster.

But I had nae option but tae kill me father, because I understood the truth at last. This war would have never ended.

If it wasnae you, then another would have risen against him.

And all the while, me father would kill, and steal, and take, until this country had no breath left, and the grass could no longer grow.

The only way tae atone for me crimes is tae put a stop tae me father's cruelty forever.

And now that I've done that, Yer Majesty, I throw meself upon yer mercy. "

Maeve raised her fingers to her lips, looking shaken.

There were tears in her eyes, and Ansel wondered if she was thinking of her own father.

He regretted what he'd done to James O'Sullivan, not because the man hadn't deserved to die, but because he'd robbed this woman and her sisters of their right to see it to the end.

"I accept yer surrender," Cailean said at last. "Yer men will nae be harmed.

Those who have committed the worst crimes and those who continue tae resist will face trials under fair justice.

This war is over." He turned to the rebels and shouted the words with a kingly confidence that Edric had never possessed. "This war is over!"

A tumultuous cheer rose up both from the rebel army, and a second later, the same cheer was echoed by most of those gathered behind Ansel. Some of the rebels ran forward, and Ruadh and some of Ansel's soldiers did the same, obviously eager to combine their people at last.

But Cailean held up a hand, and silence fell once more. Everyone stopped where they were.

Ansel smiled sadly. He knew what came next.

"I swore tae me allies that nae Ashkirks would leave this castle alive," he told Ansel quietly.

There was a tinge of real regret in his voice.

"I thank ye for protectin' me sister, and for puttin' an end tae this bloodshed.

I thank ye for yer newfound commitment to our country.

I think, in another life, we could have been friends. "

"But this isnae another life," Ansel agreed. "It is this one. I am an Ashkirk, and ye are a McNair. There's only one way this was ever gonnae end."

Cailean nodded gravely. He drew his sword. "Stand back, Neala. Ansel, get tae yer

feet. I willnae kill a man on his knees."

"Nay!" Neala shouted. She ran between the two men, throwing her arms out to her sides. "Ye cannae kill him. I willnae allow it."

"Neala," Ansel said gently, "It's all right."

"Nay," Neala insisted fiercely. "Cailean, he is a good man, just like I've told ye time and again."

He ended this war without ye havin' tae kill.

He saved me, over and over again. He turned against his own father to protect this country.

And I... Cailean, I love him. Every part of me heart and soul loves him, and I cannae live in a world where me own brother destroys the person I adore. "

Ansel's heart clenched at that, and he felt a tear run down his cheek. He didn't try to wipe it away. There was no point in pretending now. If Neala's declaration of love was the last thing he ever heard, then he would die a happy man. He got to his feet but did not speak.

Cailean's expression twisted, uncertain and pained. "If I'm a king, I must keep me promises tae me allies. Ye must understand that. It doesnae matter what I want, or what ye want—it's about what our country needs."

"And our country needs Ansel dead?" Neala demanded.

"Our country needs a king who is true to his word after more than two decades of darkness," Cailean replied. "Move out of the way, sister. Dinnae make this worse."

Ansel touched Neala's shoulder. "It's all right," he told her again softly. "He's right. If the McNair name is tae truly rise again, then there can be nae more Ashkirks left walkin' this land. Ye must let me go."

Neala started to cry, clutching at his arm. He'd only seen her break down like this one other time, back when she'd discovered her mother's diaries. "Please," she whispered. "I dinnae want tae live without ye."

"Ye must," Ansel replied seriously. "Because ye're the sun itself, and this country needs yer light."

He gently shook her off, then stepped forward to stand right in front of Cailean. He took a deep breath and said, "Let's make it quick."

Cailean nodded and raised his sword.

"Wait," Maeve said quickly. "Wait."

Both men stopped and looked at her. Maeve had moved to comfort Neala and had her arms around her sister-in-law, but her eyes were on Cailean.

"Maeve, I made a promise," Cailean insisted. "Ye did too."

"I did," Maeve agreed. "We did. We agreed that nae Ashkirk would leave this castle. But what if Ansel lives, and still nae Ashkirk does?"

Ansel frowned, tilting his head as he tried to understand her meaning. "What are ye sayin'?" he asked.

"Neala, ye love this man?" Maeve asked.

"I do," Neala replied. "More than almost anythin'. I ken ye understand how that feels."

Maeve nodded. "And ye," she said, nodding to Ansel. "Ye love her?"

"Aye," Ansel replied slowly.

Cailean's eyebrows arched. He and Maeve seemed to have a silent conversation, and though he pursed his lips, he nodded. "Are ye sure?" he asked.

"Ye've fought so long tae end the fightin'," Maeve replied. "This way, ye regain yer family's legacy without havin' tae cause more death. Ye can lead us tae the new world nae with blood, but with love."

Cailean sighed, but he nodded again. "Well," he grumbled so that only those directly around him could hear, "I didnae think me first act as king would be this. We'll need witnesses."

Maeve moved to Cailean and kissed his cheek. She turned to the rebels and beckoned a few people forward. Ansel didn't recognize them all, but one of them was Malcolm Darach's son, and another, holding the hand of a handsome young man with golden curls, was none other than Nessa O'Sullivan.

"Nice tae see ye're alive," Ansel told her, unable to stop himself. Nessa smiled slightly, much to his surprise. It suited her.

A few other people approached at Maeve's beckoning, this time from Ansel's side—Ruadh, along with two other of Ansel's men. Once they'd arrived, Maeve gently took Neala's hand and led her to Ansel.

"Wait," Nessa said. She pulled a ribbon from her hair and handed it to Cailean, who

nodded in thanks.

Ansel stared at Neala's hand in his, knowing that now he was holding her once more, he'd never be able to let go. He looked up and met her eyes, then used his free hand to wipe some of the tears from her cheeks.

"Will ye take this man as yer husband, Neala?" Cailean asked. "Will ye guide him and teach him, and help him learn? Will ye help him work tae earn forgiveness from our people?"

"I will," Neala replied. "I want nothin' more."

Ansel's stomach fluttered. He understood what was happening, but it was so wonderful that he couldn't bring himself to believe it.

"And ye, Ansel, will ye take me sister as yer wife?" Cailean asked. "Will ye forsake the name of Ashkirk forever before these witnesses and swear yerself tae bein' better? Will ye give us yer loyalty and understand ye've a lot of work ahead?"

At first, Ansel couldn't get the words out.

But he met Neala's eyes, and calmness flooded through him.

This was it. This was right. "I will. I...

I cannae think of anythin' that would honor me more.

I place me whole life before her, me whole bloodline before ye all, and I can scarcely believe that ye accept me.

I'll work for the rest of me life tae earn it if I have tae. "

Cailean nodded, and Neala smiled at him with tears in her eyes, but Ansel could see that others looked less convinced.

He let go of Neala's hand for a moment and stepped forward, making sure he was in view of as many people as possible and raising his voice so he could be clearly heard.

"I forsake the Ashkirk name now and forever and commit meself tae the legacy of the McNairs," Ansel announced clearly.

He knelt before Cailean. "I am yer humble servant, and if the need should ever arise again, I will fight for ye and die for ye before I let harm befall me king or this country.

I will commit me existence tae protectin' nae only me life, but the lives of all of the people of McNair and of Scotland. "

Maeve actually smiled. She gave Cailean a look, and he nodded.

"I accept yer pledge," Cailean told him quietly. Then, louder, he said, "As the rightful king, I accept this man's pledge. Who would protest it?"

"He's still an Ashkirk!" someone shouted angrily.

Neala shook her head. "Nae for much longer." She moved to Ansel's side and offered her hand to help him back to his feet. He took it, wondering what he'd ever done to deserve her love, and stood.

"He is me subject now, just as all of ye are," Cailean announced. "The rebellion was founded on second chances. This man has slain the False King—his own father—in our name. Hasn't he earned it?"

Ansel squeezed Neala's hand, and looked at Cailean once more. "If I ever betray ye, may me life be forfeit." Then he looked into Neala's eyes, those beautiful dark eyes, and added more quietly, "And if I'm ever nae the husband ye deserve..."

"Ye're more than ye think ye are, Ansel," Neala whispered.

He shook his head. "Nay. Nae yet. But with the grace of yer brother and with yer love, perhaps I one day will be."

"Any other objections?" Cailean asked. Nobody spoke.

With a final nod, Cailean stepped forward and wrapped the ribbon around their joined hands, binding them together. "Then, Neala McNair and Ansel McNair, I welcome ye tae the new Scotland. May this first marriage of a new age be a sign of the love tae come in our world."

"Hurry and kiss the bride so we can all go home, eh?" said the golden-haired man.

Ansel didn't need telling twice.

That night, when they set up camp on their way back to McNair Castle, Ansel lay by Neala's side and stared at the roof of his tent.

His head was spinning from the events of the day, but having her in his arms was keeping him tied to earth.

He had left many of his men behind to bury his father and the other dead and to spread news of the True King's victory, and many of the rebel army had dispersed back toward their own clans, but Ansel himself was traveling back to what would be his new home.

"Are ye all right?" Neala asked softly, leaning against his bare chest and wrapping her arm around his stomach.

"When I woke this mornin' I was sure I was gonnae die," Ansel replied, gently stroking her hair as he spoke. "I kent I would save ye nae matter what it took, but I was sure me death was comin', either from the hands of me father or from the rebellion."

"And now?" Neala asked him.

"Now?" Ansel replied. "With ye here at me side and a name I can be proud of? Oh, Neala. For the first time in my life, I think I may get tae live."

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Nessa waited impatiently at the harbor, barely able to contain herself while the ship prepared to disembark its travelers.

It had been her decision to stay behind while her sister needed her, but now she was tired of waiting.

She had not been idle in the past year, working hard with Cailean and Maeve and the rest to rebuild the country, and indeed, The Hopeful Soldier was returning to a very different Scotland from the one it had left a year before.

The land was experiencing true peace for the first time in Nessa's entire life.

Clans that had been all but destroyed were rebuilding from the ground up, and people who had been afraid to live openly were now able to experience the life that they had been born to experience.

Trials had been held for those most closely associated with the Ashkirks, and though justice had been dealt, the sentences had been fair.

Many had sworn themselves to Cailean in the aftermath of the battle, and many more had renewed their promises to their king and the peace he had fought so hard to bring for them.

Nessa had stayed at McNair Castle. She had, after many weeks of discussion, convinced someone much more suitable to take over the clan lands her father had ruled for so long.

She did not believe that was a task meant for her, and the work of the new laird and lady of the clan had proven her entirely right.

The lands now known as the Kerr Lands had thrived under Eoin and Breana, and the birth of their daughter, Mary, had ensured the start of a new lineage that would continue for hopefully a long, long time.

Meanwhile, Nessa had worked hard with Neala and Maeve, helping create a Scotland in which women like them could flourish.

As well as hard work, there had been much joy in the intervening year between the downfall of Edric Ashkirk and now.

Blackthorn Castle had been torn down entirely, and from its ruins they had built an orphanage to take care of the many, many children who had been left alone thanks to the war.

The White Sparrows had taken over, raising those who needed it and opening a healing room to anyone and everyone.

Laura and Morag still trained women who wished to learn to protect themselves, but they no longer had to hide in the shadows.

Mary was not the only child to bless them.

Fergus was now a father too, much to Kier's joy, and most excitingly of all, Maeve was due to give birth any day now.

She was convinced she was going to have a boy, but Cailean was sure it would be a girl.

Nessa knew that, no matter what the child was, it would be the most beloved in the world.

Senan had set out to find survivors of the Campbell clan, and he now stayed with them, helping to restore his childhood home.

Ewan and Hamish, though, had remained at McNair Castle, acting as Cailean's most loyal councilmen to this day.

Many of the rebels had returned to their clan, but others, like Deirdre, Ben, and Patty, had taken on roles at the castle, continuing their loyalty to the king they loved so much.

As for Neala and Ansel, their transformation had been the most remarkable to watch of all.

Nessa had seen Ansel work harder to make up for his past than anyone had ever expected of him, and Neala had supported him all the way.

It had been hard work, but with Neala's help and the support of Nessa and the others, Ansel had slowly gained trust from those around him.

Against everything they had once expected, he and Cailean had become friends, and rumor had it that Cailean was ready to declare Ansel his new captain of the guard.

All of it had been wonderful, but right now, Nessa could scarcely care about it. All she cared about was the passengers on this ship, for whom she had waited so long that it felt like a lifetime. She was so anxious to see them again, to see him again, that she could barely keep still.

"Keep calm, lass," Kier said, grinning broadly as he patted her shoulder.

"I'll be calm when they're standin' before me," she replied, tapping her foot. Only she and Kier had been able to come and meet the ship, though she knew that, back at the castle, many were waiting just as impatiently.

At long, long last, the gangplank settled into place, and the sailors began to disembark. A few people later, a strange shape appeared, silhouetted by the sun. Nessa squinted, shielding her eyes, then understood.

Ann sat in a strange chair with wheels, color in her cheeks and a smile on her face.

Nessa marveled at the rolling chair. They had written to her about how a medical scholar in Italy had helped them craft it, but she'd never seen anything so wonderful.

Behind her, Ferda pushed the chair forward, smiling wildly.

The scout's hair had been cut short, and she wore a sailor's shirt and trousers.

"That lassie will never be proper," Kier said with a sigh, but he was beaming. As Ann and Ferda stepped onto solid ground, he hurried forward and gathered his niece in a huge bear hug, then let go of her and kissed Ann on the cheek. "Welcome back."

Nessa welcomed them too, but her eyes were still fixed on the gangplank. Dirk was the next down, much taller and more filled out than he had been when he left the year before. He smiled at her as he passed, but Nessa barely heard his words.

Because at that moment, Darren appeared.

His hair had lightened in the Southern European sun, and his skin, now lightly bronzed, was covered in bursts of wild freckles. His hair was tousled, his clothing a mess, and he looked every inch the roguish pirate. Kier saw his son and started to laugh with delight, but Nessa couldn't wait.

She started to run up the gangplank at the same time he spotted her and broke into a run as well.

They met in the middle with a clash, throwing their arms around each other and losing themselves in a deep kiss.

She wasn't sure how long they stood there, lost in each other, before a sailor behind them cleared his throat in annoyance.

"Sorry," Darren told him with a grin. He took Nessa's hand, and the two of them hurried back to the harbor, where Kier hugged his son in greeting. Darren never let go of Nessa's hand.

In the carriage on the way back to the castle, Darren had his arm around Nessa and she rested her head on his shoulder.

Only Kier was in the carriage with them; Ann, Ferda, and Dirk had taken another along with Ann's amazing chair.

Kier was politely looking out of the window and pretending not to see them.

"I missed ye," Nessa told him. "I missed ye more than ye can imagine."

"Ye did good work of describin' it in yer letters," Darren replied, kissing her hair. "Ye made me weep more than once. Rather embarrasin' when I was tryin' tae show off tae the sailors."

Nessa laughed. "So yer head wasnae turned by all the lovely Venetian women?" she teased.

He snorted. "Me head wouldnae be turned by Venus herself," he replied. "Ye made

me a promise a year ago, and I intend tae make sure we see it through. Assumin' ye still want that, of course."

"I see a year of travelin' hasnae made ye any brighter, son," Kier commented with a laugh. "The lass has spoken of nothin' else since ye left."

"In fact," Nessa replied, "They're waitin' for us now. If ye're ready."

"Och, Nessa," Darren said, "I've been ready since the day we met."

Breana fixed a bluebell in Nessa's hair while Maeve helped her set the sash around her dress.

They'd returned to the castle two hours before, and now it was time.

Breana and Maeve both talked of their own wedding days, and though Nessa adored them for their devotion and care, she could barely hear them.

Her pulse was racing, and she could barely concentrate on anything apart from her own amazement and joy that this was all happening.

"I didnae really have a weddin' day," Neala pointed out from where she was busy preparing a bouquet of flowers for Nessa to hold. "Perhaps I should do it again and get all this fuss."

"Ye'd hate all this fuss," Maeve told her. "And besides, I think that the day we saved the country is enough of an event."

Neala stuck out her tongue, and Nessa laughed. Maeve grinned back and touched her round belly, then said, "Are ye ready, wee sister?"

"More than ready," Nessa replied.

Breana took her hand. "Then let's go."

The ceremony was brief, but it would be imprinted on Nessa's heart forever.

Both of her sisters linked arms with her and walked her up the aisle, where Darren stood waiting in full formal dress, the Bruce tartan proudly waving in the air.

Nessa's heart fluttered when she saw him as if another year had passed, even though it had only been a few hours.

She wondered if she'd ever stop feeling like that, and she hoped that she would not.

When they reached the top of the aisle, Breana placed Nessa's hand in Darren's and kissed Nessa's cheek. "Be happy," she said.

"Aye," Maeve agreed, kissing her too, then looking at Darren. "And behave yerself."

That caused laughter from the gathered crowd, with Darren laughing louder than anyone. Maeve and Breana returned to their seats, and Cailean began the ceremony.

Darren and Nessa beamed like fools the whole time as they spoke the traditional vows, each lost in their world of happiness.

Nessa had never felt so giddy, and she could not keep her feet still.

She could hear the polite and loving laughter from those gathered as they watched her fidget, but she didn't care.

Every time she glanced at Darren and saw him looking back at her with so much love

and happiness in his eyes, she felt like she was about to burst.

"I will," she promised, to him, to the world, to anyone who would listen. "I will, a thousand times and more."

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Cailean performed a handfasting, then Darren let go of Nessa's hand and moved briefly to the side, returning with a shawl in Bruce tartan that his father had kept for him. He returned and asked her to turn. She did, and he placed the shawl around her shoulders, sealing their bond.

"It was me mother's," he whispered in her ear. "And now it's yers. It's what she would have wanted, I ken it. Welcome tae the family, Nessa Bruce."

Nessa let the tears flow at that, and she saw that Breana and several others were crying happy tears as well. Maeve's eyes were shining as she smiled. When Cailean said that they could now kiss, he had barely gotten the words out when Nessa threw herself into Darren's arms.

At last—at long, long last—she was home.

Nessa stepped away from the dancing area and toward the table that held the drinks, gasping for breath.

She'd been dancing wildly all night, and her feet hurt.

Ansel had been a particularly enthusiastic partner, much to everyone's surprise, swinging her around with carefree laughter while Neala danced with Darren and laughed.

Nessa had now danced with almost every man present, moving from her husband to Cailean to Ansel, then from Eoin to her many new cousins to her new father-in-law, each one getting progressively more merry as the night went on and the wine flowed,

and while her cheeks were flushed and her heart was full, she needed a moment to breathe.

Darren found her there just a few moments after she stopped. "Tired already?" he asked her with a grin. He'd been a menace of a dancer, too, creating laughter and joking indignation from most of the women there. "Ye've nae half the grit of me last dance partner, wife."

Nessa felt a little thrill at the word and rolled her eyes. "Och, I ken, but how am I tae compete with her loveliness? Look, now she's charmed Fergus as well."

She nodded toward the dancing area, where Fergus now held little Mary in his arms and was swinging her around while she roared with laughter, just as Darren had been doing moments before.

Darren put his hands over his heart. "Betrayed by me own new niece!" he announced. "Who will keep me company now?"

She snorted. "Ye're still daft, then, after a year away from me."

"I should hope so," Darren replied, sounding highly offended at the question. "Ye wouldnae have married me if I wasnae so daft."

Nessa shook her head and took his hand. "Come, then, husband, let's enjoy our last night at McNair Castle in peace before ye take me home on the morrow. We've entertained our guests enough."

He tilted his head as though he was thinking about it. "Oh?" he asked. "And where will we go? A stroll by the lake, perhaps?"

She led him toward a side door, taking care not to be noticed by the celebrators.

"Nay, I dinnae think so."

"A jaunt in the gardens, then? I suppose we could still see the flowers even in the dark," Darren suggested.

"Are ye gonnae simply tease me all night?" Nessa asked. They reached the door and headed through it, the sudden quiet of the corridor compared to the raucousness of the feast almost jarring. She stood enjoying it for just a moment before pulling at his arm to lead him along the hallway.

Darren laughed. "I might. Would ye like that?"

"Ye ken very well what I would like," Nessa replied with faux irritation.

They rounded the corner and Nessa gasped in surprise as they almost walked directly into Ann. The young woman blushed at the sight of them, but Ferda, who was pushing the chair, grinned at them.

"Sneakin' away from the celebrations, are we?" Ferda asked, giving her cousin that look of sibling-like mischief.

"Seems we werenae the only one with that idea," Darren replied. "Where have ye two been?"

Ann cleared her throat. "The garden," she replied, indicating a pretty bundle of flowers which rested on her lap. "Ferda wanted tae show me the winter blooms."

"I imagine ye want tae show yer new wife some things too," Ferda said innocently.

"Hush," Ann and Nessa said at the same time.

Ferda and Darren both laughed, and the cousins embraced. "Congratulations again, ye daftie," Ferda told him. "Dinnae mess this up."

"I dinnae intend tae," Darren replied. "Go back tae the party and keep them distracted, will ye?"

"We'll go back tae the party," Ferda agreed, "But I'll tell them the bride and groom have gone tae celebrate their first night together. I'm sure they'll understand."

She and Ann left, Ann lightly scolding her and Ferda chuckling. Darren snorted and took Nessa's hand again.

As they started walking again, Nessa asked, "Does yer family always have tae tease each other in such a way?"

"It's yer family too, now," Darren replied.

They reached their room some minutes later, and as soon as the door closed behind them, the air changed.

One look was all it took for Nessa's mood to change from amused to excited, and the fire that had been dormant within her all this time unspooled again with a burning glee.

They moved to each other without another word and fell into each other's arms. Darren gripped Nessa's waist and she leaned against him as they lost themselves in the kind of kiss that steals breath away, the world vanishing, their tongues and hands exploring as they stumbled across the room without stopping for air.

Collapsing on the bed, they finally broke apart, though Darren's hands still roamed across her back and Nessa was already loosening the ties at the front of his shirt.

"Do ye think," she asked in that brief pause for air, "that they really believe that?"

Darren rolled, pushing Nessa onto her back and straddling his legs on either side of her.

He leaned down and kissed her neck, moving to her earlobe unhurriedly, his hands now undoing her bodice.

"Believe what?" he hummed in her hear, the vibrations of his voice sending a tingle down Nessa's whole body.

"Believe that it's our first night together," Nessa managed to reply, though words were getting more difficult as his lips and hands grew more insistent.

Darren's throaty chuckle made Nessa's body throb. Her bodice fell away, and Darren leaned back, helping her to sit up so they could remove the top layer of her clothing more easily. Left in only her thin shift, she reached for the hem of his shirt and lifted it away in kind.

"Who cares what they believe?" Darren asked, returning to his position and to his work.

His kisses found the hollow of her throat and his hands worshipped her almost-bare breasts.

Nessa's eyes fluttered at the sensation of him, every kiss something brand new, every touch a revelation.

She ran her fingers along his spine, causing him to groan in a way that made her body pulse again.

"It's been a year since I saw ye. And ye're me wife.

I dinnae care about anythin' except here and now.

I've dreamed of ye every minute I was away. "

He pushed the top of her shift down, exposing her chest. His lips found her nipple, and he rolled it in his tongue, causing Nessa to gasp and her hips to jerk. She grabbed his hair as he tasted her, pulling a little too hard, but that only seemed to make him more enthusiastic.

By the time he had paid attention to her whole chest, Nessa's breaths were coming in short, sharp gasps.

When he pulled away and stood, she almost whimpered in disappointment at the sudden cold lack of him, but that need turned to hunger as she watched him loosen his kilt.

It fell away, leaving him bare before her—her Darren, her husband —staring down at her like she was the rarest treasure he'd ever seen.

Nessa sat up, and Darren moved, helping her remove the shift in one swift movement, removing the last layer between them.

Their bodies connected, skin to skin, in a passionate wave of heat and love, the indescribable feeling of togetherness almost too much to bear.

Nessa moaned as Darren kissed her hard, crushing her against his chest, the heat pulsing from his body in the same wild cadence as her own desire.

When she reached down and touched him, he groaned in such a deep, primal manner

that Nessa almost came undone then and there.

Darren pushed her gently until she lay fully on the bed, then positioned himself before her.

He leaned down and kissed her again, and she raised her hips to meet him as he entered her, their bodies keeping time with a perfect harmony.

They moved together through the night, lips brushing skin wherever they could reach, hands traversing each other's bodies like they simply could not drink enough of the other in.

Their hips bucked in tandem, and their breathing matched pace, quick and urgent and gasping.

The thrusts grew harder, more demanding, and Nessa met them with calls of Darren's name as her legs locked around his waist, needing him closer to her, needing all of him.

The dance quickened, and Darren leaned back, his arms on either side of Nessa's head as he looked down at her, occasionally gasping out her name or muttering how beautiful she was. Nessa's fingernails pressed into his back, urging more, more.

The climax hit all at once like the crescendo of the finest symphony, and Nessa's cry of pleasure was a song.

Her muscles tensed, and her legs squeezed hard, her fingers digging in so tightly that she may have left marks.

She cried out his name once more, the utter sensation threatening to pull her under.

Somewhere in the noise, she felt the heat and heard the grunt that told her he was joining her there, too.

Nessa sank back into reality like a feather settling on silk. Her body relaxed, every nerve tingling with pleasure, and she opened her eyes when Darren flopped forward atop her. They lay there like that for a moment, utterly content.

They rolled apart after some time, but only to readjust themselves. Soon, Nessa lay with her head on Darren's chest, his fingers gently running up and down her arm.

"Welcome home," she said softly. "Welcome back tae our new Scotland. It's brighter now ye're here."

"It was waitin' for us," Darren replied. "And now we're ready tae build this whole new world. Together."

"Ye really are useless with a knife," Neala observed, laughing slightly as Ansel threw the little dagger at the target and missed once more. "I've been tryin' tae train ye for a year. What happened tae me fearsome warrior?"

Ansel gave her a look of faux reproach, but amusement glinted in his eyes. "I fight men face tae face, sword tae sword. Me style doesnae lend itself tae precise targetin' from a distance, unlike yers, me wee spy. And me head is still swimmin' from the wine, which isnae helpin'."

Neala grinned, hopping down from the half-wall where she'd been perched and moving toward the weapons rack.

In the moonlight, the various blades and spikes glinted dangerously, and Neala gently ran a finger along the handle of one of the knives.

"Sounds like an excuse tae me. I've had just as much wine, and I'm fine. "

He chuckled. "Ye're as merry as I am," he teased. "Ye were singin' just moments ago. Even ye couldnae?—"

His words were cut off as Neala grabbed the knife and, with just a single glance at the target, threw it. He watched it sail through the night and stab directly into the center.

Ansel laughed, approaching and grabbing Neala around the waist. She squealed with delight as he pulled her close to him. Even after a year, feeling her pressed against him like this was the most bizarre and amazing thing. He still didn't understand how she was his.

"Ye're a menace," he told her. "And I think the wine has only made ye more so. Did ye only convince me tae sneak away from the weddin' tae prove yer superior skills? What if we offend the bride and groom?"

Neala giggled and stretched up on her tiptoes, pressing a kiss against the tip of her husband's nose. "Please. Darren and Nessa willnae even notice we're gone. And besides, as I pointed out tae the lassies earlier, we didnae really get a proper weddin' celebration."

Frowning, Ansel asked, "Is that somethin' that upsets ye?"

She touched his cheek. "Well, as Maeve rightly reminded me, I would have hated all the fuss. But this? Me and ye on the battlefield, a year after we found each other at last? That feels like the kind of marriage celebration that fits."

"Ah," Ansel said, letting go of her to tap his chin in pretend thought. "So ye brought me out here tae mock me failures as an expression of love ."

"Exactly!" Neala replied brightly.

She reached for another knife, but Ansel caught her wrist, pulling her close again. He could feel her pulse racing as she looked up at him, and his own body stirred in response.

"Ye wouldnae be so smug if it was a competition of swordsmanship. I have it on good authority that ye've been skippin' those lessons yer whole life," Ansel told her. He tucked her hair behind her ear with his free hand and leaned down to whisper. "It seems I beat ye after all."

She shivered and tilted her head back a little. "Well," she replied, "it seems like we each have a skill where we excel. This competition will have to be settled in some other way."

"Oh?" Ansel asked, applying a little more pressure to the grip on her arm. "What did ye have in mind? I have many talents, ye ken."

Neala suddenly moved, surprising him as she slipped out of his grasp. Before he could protest, she had pounced, throwing herself at him. He fell backward against the surprise attack, and soon they were play-wrestling in the grass, laughing wildly.

At last, Nessa had him pinned, and Ansel declared his surrender. She beamed and leaned down to give him a deep, lingering kiss.

"Some talents," she reminded him, "can always use a little more practice."

Ansel stared up at her, enraptured by her beauty framed against the night sky—this impossible woman, this spy, this princess, who had agreed to be his wife and saved him forever. "Aye?" he asked. "Well, then. Let ye be me teacher."

She grinned. "Gladly," she replied as she leaned down to kiss him again.

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Maeve put her hand on Ansel's shoulder, smiling slightly. "Ye neednae look so worried. I've nae seen such fear in yer eyes in over a decade."

Her brother-in-law gave her a reproachful look, and Maeve did her best not to laugh. Over the last seven years, it had become almost second nature to playfully antagonize Ansel, finding the fun in a man she'd once thought would be her enemy forever. He was still too serious at times, and all three sisters had made it their mission to help Neala keep the joy within him close to the surface—not that he needed much help when Neala was around.