



# The Scottish Laird (The White Lotus #2)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** He thought his heart was buried with his wife and daughter...

Malcom (Col) Thornton, the Laird Mac Sceachain, is a lonely widower and father of two wild sons, and he is not prepared for the chaos unleashed by a fierce little Chinese lass bent on killing him and his brother Merlow.

Her only thought was to escape and find her brother...

Aihan, desperate to discover what has happened to her older brother Liang, targets the only name she knows connected to his disappearance, the Mac Sceachain. Her interrogation technique backfires as she attempts to communicate with the stubborn Scottish devil who is holding her captive, and she fears she will never see her home country, China, ever again.

When East meets West...

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# Page 1

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## Chapter One

A ihan stumbled out of her cabin, clutching the walls for balance; the ship was listing dangerously, buffeted by the wind and the waves. She fought her way to the ladder that led onto the deck. Rain lashed her face as soon as she pushed the hatch up; the wind snatched it from her hand and blew it back on the deck with a slam. She scrambled out onto the deck, then fought to push it back into place and latch it down.

Around her, the crew scuttled about, tying things down. Three of them were wholly occupied in holding the rudder in an attempt to keep the junk from running aground. The anchor seemed to have slipped its mooring, and the vessel was heading for the rocks. Their shouts barely registered above the howling wind and the visibility was very poor, the clouds being so heavy and low. The sun was completely obscured.

She held tight to the railing, entirely drenched, her silk tunic and pants clinging to her thin frame indecently, her long dark hair plastered to her face. Where is Caishen? She looked about for her brother's student but couldn't see him. It had been several weeks now since Liang left the ship and there had been no word from him. The anxiety chewing at her was close to boiling point; then the storm had come up out of nowhere this afternoon. It was almost worse than some of the storms they had endured on the voyage from Canton.

"Caishen?" she called, but the wind snatched her voice away.

A loud crack rent the air and for a moment everything was bright as midday. In that second, Aihan saw him clinging to the rigging and swaying in the wind. In the next moment he seemed to lose his grip, and his body was falling. She screamed, racing

towards the spot, as his body plummeted into the water and disappeared from view in the choppy waves.

“Caishen! Help him!” She yelled at the crew, who stood near her staring at the place he had disappeared. They backed away, making the sign to ward off evil, and returned to their work.

The ship listed at that moment, flinging her sideways as a wave breached the deck, drenching her in cold, salty water. Coughing, she fought her way over to one of the coiled ropes and staggered towards the rail. Fighting to maintain her balance, she tied one end to the rail and the other around her waist. She climbed precariously over the rail, jumped into the turbulent water, and went under.

The cold almost robbed her of breath, and she surfaced coughing and shuddering as the icy water seeped into her bones. She turned around, looking for any sign of Caishen, but there was nothing. She struck out swimming, but the waves buffeted her so badly she made little headway and as she had completely lost her bearings, she was soon going round in circles, her limbs beginning to go numb with the cold.

Realising it was a fruitless endeavour and she would drown if she didn't get back to the ship, she fought her way back to the Shaolin and dragged herself up the side by the hooks. The crew made no move to help her as she heaved herself over the rail onto the deck, collapsing with a splash, the heavy, sodden rope dragging at her waist.

Aihan sprawled on the deck, panting for several moments. Eventually, with numb fingers, she wrestled to unknot the rope and release it from her waist. All the while, the storm continued to rage around the ship, making it roll and heave and rattle, the wind a constant howling, the rain almost horizontal, sheeting water across the deck.

Free of the rope, she clambered to her feet and staggered towards the hatch, fumbling with the latch, her fingers so stiff with cold they almost refused to work; she got it

open eventually. Her limbs were shaking so much she couldn't control them. She pulled the hatch back down over her head, latched it from the inside, and battled her way back to her cabin, where she stripped off her sodden garments and dried herself off as best she could, battling the list of the ship to stay upright.

She wrapped herself in a dry blanket and crawled into her bed, rolled by the ship's movement towards the bulkhead, pulled the covers over her head, and huddled into a shaking ball in an attempt to get warm.

Caishen is gone and Liang is gone. There was just her and a crew that only wanted to go home. What am I going to do? Tears stung her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. That was weakness and Liang had taught her not to be weak.

The storm blew itself out overnight, and Aihan emerged from her cabin with a plan. In the daylight the sea was calm, almost flat, and the ship was anchored once more, but this time it was nearer to the shore of the land called Scot-land. The strange name was awkward to pronounce.

As the current has brought the ship here to this harbour, perhaps it has also brought Caishen's body? She needed to find out.

She turned to the captain, Zhou Sheng. He and his men had grown increasingly truculent the longer her brother was gone and had made no secret of their desire to return home. "I am going ashore to look for Caishen's body," she said with decisive authority. If she showed any weakness, she would be lost. There was one of her and six of them.

"That is madness. We should go home. Master Ming is lost, Shen Caishen is lost. The Gods are telling us to go home!"

She shook her head, "I must find Caishen's body and my brother. Come with me. We

will find them together and then go home.”

The captain looked around at his men, who were all looking at the deck or the horizon, anywhere but at her.

He shook his head. “I will give you one day.”

“Three! Three days,” she bargained.

“Very well, for Master Ming’s sake. Three days. If you are not back by then we will leave for Canton.”

She nodded. “Row me to shore in the lifeboat?” They’d had three, but there was only one left. However, the one Liang had taken, or perhaps the one his men who had gone before him had taken, should still be there, and she could use one of them to get back to the ship.

The captain nodded.

Aihan went below and packed a small backpack, her weapons, her cloak, and the last of the strange coins that Liang had gotten in trade before they left Canton. These, he had explained to her, would give them currency in this peculiar foreign land. He had left her a dozen of them. She had no idea of their value.

Returning to the deck dressed in a fresh tunic and pants, boots upon her feet, cloak wrapped round her shoulders and the pack secured to her breast, she followed the first mate over the rail and down to the rowboat bobbing in the water.

He said nothing to her the whole way, wouldn’t even look at her. That hurt. She had spent twelve months of her life with these men and now they were treating her like a stranger, an enemy. Climbing out of the boat on the shore, she said firmly, “I will

return in three days. Do not leave without me!”

He nodded and set the oars to row back to the Shaolin . A shiver passed over her skin as a premonition washed through her that she would never see him or the Shaolin and its crew again.

She shook it off, straightened her shoulders, and turned to survey the view before her. Several foreign boats bobbed at anchor in this little harbour; beyond the harbour, trees blanketed the coast to the right. But ahead of her lay buildings and to the left a stretch of beach and tangled rocks and a low escarpment with scrub and wood above it.

She headed to the right first, looking for signs of Caishen’s body washed up by the tide, along with seaweed, shells, and dead wood. She walked for an hour and found nothing and no sign of the row boats either. Aihan turned back and retraced her steps, pausing occasionally to sip on her meagre water supply. The sun was warm on her back, although a breeze tugged at her garments and hair as she trudged.

Reaching her starting point, she set off to the left. This took longer because the terrain was more broken up by rocks and there were more places that a body might be wedged, but again after two hours, by the position of the sun, she had found nothing. She returned to the little harbour, her heart heavy. No sign of Caishen . She must conclude the water had taken him or beached him farther afield than she expected. And no sign of the row boats. But perhaps she could hire one to take her back out, if she found some trace of her brother....

This time she struck out for the buildings, conscious that she only had three days to find out what had happened to her brother before the ship would sail without her.

On the beach she had encountered no one, but venturing up into the village Aihan immediately began to attract attention. Her clothing, she noted, was very different

from that of the other females she saw, who all wore long gowns with high waists under their cloaks. Her blue silk tunic and trousers attracted stares and whispers and frowns of disapproval. She clutched her pack where it was strapped to her front and strode on, her face flushing with embarrassment.

These foreign women were all fragile things, ignorant and weak; they would not last five minutes in a fight. She had to find this Mac Sceacháin—that was the name her brother had given her. If she could find him, she could find out what had happened to her brother.

The streets were lined with rude buildings made of stone with hard edges and rough surfaces. Ugly by comparison with the elegant lines and curves of houses at home. She trudged along, her stomach rumbling and her mouth dry. I need food and drink. Will those strange coins purchase me sustenance? If so, from where?

Winding her way through the streets of the village, she came upon a building that appeared to serve food and drink to passersby. They had a stable, too, where horses were accommodated. A sign with a spotted chicken above the door swung in the breeze, and she entered, ignoring the stares of those who stood about outside.

Inside there was a long, chest-high bench along one wall separating the man who stood behind it from the rest of the room. A fire burned in a hearth at the back, and the room was filled with tables at which an assortment of men and a few women sat with jars of liquor and plates of food before them. The general hum of conversation stopped dead when she entered, as everyone turned to stare at her. Aihan ignored them and strode over to the man behind the high bench. She had one of the coins clutched in her palm; she laid it on the top of the bench and said, “Food! Drink!” in Mandarin. The man just gaped at her. She dredged her mind for the few words of Eng-ish, the native language of these people, that her brother had taught her on the long voyage. She gestured towards her mouth, making chewing motions, and then lifted an imaginary pot to her lips and swallowed. “Food. Drink.” She enunciated

slowly.

He nodded and said something she couldn't follow. But the coin vanished, and some others replaced it, which she scooped up and shoved in her pocket, and soon after a plate and a pot appeared on the bench. The plate contained a slice of some kind of pastry filled with meat, a wedge of pungent yellow cheese and a slice of crusty bread smothered in butter. The pot contained some dark liquid. She nodded and thanked him politely, although he had no clue what she was saying. She took the plate and pot to a table in the corner of the room, where she sat with her back to the wall, keeping the whole room in sight.

She ate the strange food and found it odd but largely not unpalatable. The pastry contained some kind of jellied meat. The cheese was hard and had an odd flavour. The butter she scraped off the bread, finding it too fatty for her taste.

The dark liquor was bitter but refreshing, and she drank it all, being very thirsty. Wiping her mouth, she sat back against the wall, closing her eyes momentarily to let her stomach settle. Mac Sceacháin , she repeated the strange words beneath her breath as her brother had taught her to say it: Mac Skeehain . She rose from her place and went back to the high bench where the man was still standing, serving pots of drink to customers. She waited until he was finished with several customers and then boldly caught his eye and beckoned him over. He wiped his hands on a cloth and made a noise: Aye? Whatever that meant.

“Mac Skeehain.” she said.

“Huh?” The man frowned at her.

“Mac Skeehain,” she repeated.

He shook his head at her.



“Mac Skeehain! Mac Skeehain!” Frustration made her voice rise a bit. She took a breath and repeated slowly “Mac Skee-hain . . . ?”

“Aye!” The man nodded with a smile. “Laird Sceacháin.”

“Where?” she asked, spreading her hands.

He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment and then disappeared through a door behind him. He came back in a moment with a piece of paper on which was a drawing. He pointed to a square on the paper and tapped the bench, then pointed at her and himself.

She nodded, pointing, “here!” She smiled.

He then pointed at a series of lines leading from the first square to another one. “Mac Sceacháin hoose.”

She grinned and bowed in thanks. She fished in her pocket and gave him back the coins he had given her in change earlier.

He gathered them up and nodded to her. “Guid luck, lassie.”

With the paper in hand, she left the building and tried to follow the directions in the sketch. It took her two hours and multiple attempts to communicate with the locals before she finally found the house that belonged to the Mac Sceacháin.

It was coming onto dusk, the sun dropping to the horizon, streaked across the grounds, catching the glazing in the windows and turning it to blinding gold. It was a big, solid building, made of grey stone, ugly to her way of thinking. Double story and double fronted, slate roofed. She circled it, examining it from all angles, keeping to the trees and shadows, careful not to be spotted. Not that there was anyone about that

she could see. The house had a heavy, sad air about it. Bad chi , she thought.

She crept into the stable. The horses nickered at her; she patted them and looked about for somewhere to hide. The wooden building had a thatched roof and, above the horse stalls, a mezzanine floor, accessible via a ladder. She mounted the ladder and found some hay and an old blanket. It was enough. She raked the hay up into a pile, spread the old blanket over it and, using her cloak as a wrap and her pack as pillow, settled down to sleep.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 12:24 pm*

### Chapter Two

Malcolm Douglas Thornton, the Laird Mac Sceacháin, or Col to a few intimates, stuck a fork in the piece of mutton on his plate and wrestled his knife through the tough sinews. The fire behind him crackled in the hearth and the clock ticked on the mantelpiece, the only sounds other than those of his dinner companions' knives wrestling with the meat. He sat at the head of the table as befitted the head of the house, and his sons—dark-haired Rory, twelve, and ginger Callum, ten—flanked him. Beyond them sat his elderly servant Fergus and Fergus's grandson Willy, a freckled ginger like Callum, but darker. Such was the extent of his household.

The blessed silence suited his mood; the melancholy had been bad since his brother Merlow had left with his new wife, Hetty, after a fleeting visit of but a fortnight. Hetty's presence, as wonderful as it had been, had stirred up all kinds of memories, and Col found himself plunged once more into the kind of dark fog he had not experienced for a year or more. The black melancholy had plagued him on and off in the six years since his wife's death, but less and less in the last two years. Now it was threatening to come back and swallow him whole once more.

To have a pretty woman in the kitchen cooking delicious meals, cleaning the layers of dust off the furniture, putting flowers in vases, and singing—singing! Col shook his head to shake off the memory. It hurt too much.

And to see his brother happy—not that he begrudged him his happiness. Merlow had waited a long time to take a wife, and he had chosen well. The lass was perfect for him: a vicar's daughter, full of good works and hardworking spirit, and the love between the newly-weds was palpable. And her presence had cut up all Col's hard-

won peace.

He had thought himself accustomed to his widowerhood, resigned to this lonely state before she came. After she left, he realised all over again what he had lost with Catriona's death.

"Ow!" exclaimed Callum, jerking in his seat and glaring across the table at his grinning elder brother. "What was that for?"

"I was aiming for the dog and your knee must have got in the way," said Rory, chewing on his bone.

"Ye'll nae kick the dogs!" roared Col, slamming his fist on the table and making everything jump.

Rory turned a sullen face towards him. "It was a joke, Papa, of course I wouldn't kick the dogs."

"But it's alright to kick me!" muttered Callum.

"Nae, 'tis not alright to kick ye," replied Col. "Ye'll apologise to yer brother," he addressed Rory.

Rory pursed his lips and remained silent.

"I said," repeated Col, dangerously slow, "ye'll apologise to yer brother."

Rory rose and threw his napkin on the table, turning to walk away.

Col shot out a hand and grabbed his arm, yanking him back around. "Ye'll do as I say, boy, or get yer breeches clouted!"

Rory stood silently seething, his fists clenched by his sides. “It was an accident. I swung my legs too far out, ’tis all! I didnae mean to kick him!”

“Tell it to him, not me!”

Rory turned his head and addressed his brother sulkily. “I’m sorry, ye little winger! I didnae mean to hurt ye! Ye’re such a puling little thing, always crying aboot somethin’!”

“Now sit down and finish yer meal!” Col yanked him back into his seat. Rory resumed eating and Col glowered at both boys over his pot of ale. Callum sniffed into his plate.

Col knew from experience this wouldn’t be the end of it. Callum wouldn’t be able to resist retaliating in some way.

The sequel came quicker than he expected. He’d withdrawn to his study with his dogs, Hector the terrier and Gussie the deerhound, for a glass of whisky, when a blood-curdling howl brought him out into the hallway.

“I’ll kill ye, yer little gobshite!” bellowed Rory, appearing at the top of the stairs, something clutched in his hands. “Ye’ve ruined me buckler! Ye fooking little worm!” He dropped the buckler and took off after a cackling Callum down the hall. A shout and slammed door told Col that Callum had made it to sanctuary and locked the door in his brother’s face. As Rory pounded on the door and shouted insults through it, Col climbed the stairs to deal with this latest chapter in the war between his sons. It had erupted following Hetty and Merlow’s departure and had been raging now for two weeks with no signs of abating. It seemed he wasn’t the only one impacted by Hetty’s absence.

Reaching the top of the stairs, he strode down the corridor and seized his eldest son

by the collar and shook him. “Enough! I’ll deal with this, go to yer room and stay there!”

“But he—” began Rory, red-faced and puffing.

“I said I’d deal with it. Now get!”

Rory threw him a venomous look and turned away, muttering.

“What was that?”

Rory stopped, his shoulders hunching. “Nothing, sir.”

Col yanked him round. “Say yer piece!”

Rory’s fists clenched and he let fly, “Ye always favour him, and he’s such a weakling! It’s nae fair! Grandpa would’ve flogged him for half the things he’s done!”

“If ye didnae bait him in the first place he wouldnae retaliate! Ye bring it on yerself, boy! Ye’re bigger and stronger than him and ye know it. But he’s the one with wits, use your heid a bit more, boy, and ye won’t find yerself in so many scraps!”

“Grandpa—”

“Yer Grandfather’s dead, lad, and ye’re stuck with me! Not yer preference, I know, but I’m Laird now and ye’ll do as I say. Now go to bed before I clout ye round the heid for disobedience!”

Rory brought his fists up. “Go on then!”

Col looked down at him and suppressed the urge to laugh, a faint wisp of pride

surging through his chest. Rory was a brave lad. Foolish, but brave. If he didn't infuriate me so much . . .

Col scooped the lad up under his arm and marched him down the hall while Rory yelled at him and rained wild punches with his fists against his stomach and chest. He opened the boy's bedroom door, dropped his eldest son onto his bed, and shut the door, turning the lock. "Stay there 'till yer heid's cool!"

A bellow of outrage and a few thumps of things being thrown at the door followed him down the hall to his other son's room. On the way, he stopped to pick up the dropped buckler and examine the damage.

A deep gouge across the Sceacháin escutcheon, featuring a bear rampant, which was carved into the buckler, bore mute witness to Callum's spite. The buckler was a family heirloom dating to at least the 16th Century and probably earlier. His father had gifted it to Rory as the eldest son and heir. The old man had made no secret of his favouritism towards Rory over Callum, an echo of his preference for Col over his brother Merlow as they grew up. That preference had driven Merlow from his home and caused him to be absent when their father died.

A sudden fury with his father seized Col at this evidence of the damage his favouritism wrought even beyond the grave. He himself was hard on Rory as his father had been on him, but tried where he could, to temper his natural toughness with his younger son, having seen what happens when a father rejects a more sensitive boy. Merlow had simply left home and never come back until after his father was gone.

But staring at the spiteful damage to a family heirloom made it difficult to be sympathetic towards Callum in this instance. Tightly reigning in his anger, he stopped outside Callum's door.

“Callum!”

Silence.

“Callum, open the bluidy door or ye’ll regret it!”

After a moment he heard the lock being turned, but the door still didn’t open. He pushed the door open himself and stepped into the room. Unlike Rory’s room, which was a mess, Callum’s was neat as a pin.

Callum sat on his bed staring at the floor.

Col shut the door behind him and leaned against it, the buckler clutched in one hand, his arms crossed. His heart thudded heavily in his chest, and he felt slightly sick. After a moment or two of silence he prompted, “Well, what have ye got to say fer yerself?”

Callum shrugged and kept his head down.

“I should belt the living daylights out of ye for this, Callum. This is a bluidy heirloom! Have ye nae respect for the family name?”

Callum shrugged again and something in Col snapped. Dropping the buckler, he strode across the room and hauled the boy up by his collar and shook him.

“If ye’ve none, I’ll teach it to ye!” he growled. “How dare ye take yer petty spite out on something that matters so much, not just to yer brother but the whole family! Generations past and future. There is nae balance in yer revenge, boy! Rory’s crime doesnae match your vengeance, nae even close!”

Callum hung his head but said nothing beyond a faint whimper.



“Drop yer breeches, boy! Ye’ll nae sit down for a week! And think yerself lucky to escape with nae more than a belting.”

He removed his belt as Callum let his breeches fall and bent over the bed.

Col left his son weeping into his pillow, his bottom red raw from the strapping. He unlocked Rory’s door, but there was no sound from within, and he left the boy alone, taking the buckler with him. Downstairs, he sat it on the table beside his chair and resumed his glass of whisky, staring at the marred design until his eyes blurred. Gussie lay at his feet and Hector leaped into his lap and settled.

He finished the glass and poured another from the decanter.

The morning light found him still in the chair, the fire burned down and the decanter empty. His head was pounding and his bladder full.

With a groan he moved, dislodging Hector, who leaped down to the rug and stretched with a squeaking yawn. Gussie sat up and thumped her tail, floppy ears flapping.

He blinked blearily at them and muttered, “Fook, me heid’s like to split.”

Rising, he staggered towards the door and out into the hall towards the kitchen and the rear entrance to the house. Emerging into the glare of the early morning, he squinted and headed for the pump, where he dunked his head in the trough and drank some fresh water from his cupped hands. Straightening, he stretched his creaking back and filled a bowl with water for Hector; Gussie was tall enough to drink from the trough.

Hector drank and then cocked his leg against the trough.

“Good idea, mate,” murmured Col. He moved over to a bush, opened his breeches,

and relieved his bladder.

It was a fine morning, slightly misty and judging from the position of the sun, still quite early. The dogs frisked about, and he said, “Alright, we’ll go fer a walk, shall we? Blow the cobwebs out.”

He left the courtyard behind the house, setting off across the lawn towards the trees. The dogs gambolled about chasing smells, and he lengthened his stride, wanting to get the blood flowing, his thoughts on last night. He needed to do something about the boys, but he was at a loss to know what. He was reaping the consequences of his own neglect of them following Catriona’s death. He’d been so grief-stricken with the loss of her and their third child, a girl, he’d lost sight of what was important.

He’d dragged himself out of that pit of despond eventually, but by then the damage was done. What frightened him now was the fear that he was about to slip back into that place again. It had been over six years since Cat was taken from him. He was resigned to being alone for the rest of his life, but it was unfair to his boys to let his misery dictate their lives as well. Callum’s actions last night had shocked him to the core.

The dogs had wandered off, and he was so sunk in gloom he didn’t register anything until the blow between the shoulder blades sent him stumbling forward onto his knees.

A cry of “Aiyee!” behind him was all the warning he got before he was knocked flat on his face by another blow and something heavy landing on his back. If he’d been less hungover and more awake, his reactions would have been quicker. As it was, he lay stunned with the breath knocked out of him for a moment before he heaved sideways, throwing off the person who had landed on him, and discovered his assailant was female.

At least he thought she was female, but she was the strangest one he'd ever seen. She had long straight black hair in a ponytail and a delicately featured face with long, narrow black eyes, and she was dressed in a blue silk tunic and wide-legged pants. She had a pack on her back, and she held a knife in her hand as she crouched, ready to attack him again.

Prone on his knees, he watched her, fascinated, as she circled him in a bent-kneed fashion and gabbled something unintelligible at him.

"I've nae the faintest idea what ye're saying, lassie," he said, grinning and rising. She feinted at him with the knife and came at him with a roundhouse kick that was so swift it sent him sprawling on his back. She leapt onto his chest, holding the knife to his throat, and gabbled at him some more.

No longer amused, he put up a hand and grabbed her thin wrist—really there was nothing of her—and twisted until she dropped the knife with a cry. Levering himself over, he squashed her flat beneath him on the grass and, gripping both her hands, he said, "That's enough!"

She wriggled beneath him, and he discovered that she was definitely female, or at least his body thought so. It had been so long since he'd felt anything resembling desire, it took him aback. Rising to his feet abruptly, he dragged her up and threw her, pack and all, over his shoulder. She shrieked at this treatment and kicked and wriggled and belted him with her fists, but he held her tightly and the dogs came running, barking and capering around him, leaping up and generally making a ruckus.

"Heel!" he snapped at them, and they settled, following him back to the house. This female was one of the accursed Chinese he'd heard so much about. There seemed to be a plague of them suddenly in this corner of the world, all to do, he suspected, with his brother. Since he couldn't understand this one, and she seemed somewhat dangerous, it would seem to be prudent to lock her up until he could ascertain what

she wanted.

Thus, he headed for the steps down to the cellar at the back of the house. Opening the door with one of the keys from the set on his belt, he entered the cellar and opened a second door, to the dungeon, as the boys called it. It was the place the laird, in times gone by, had locked up miscreants until they could be dealt with at council. There'd not been a council meeting since his Grandfather's day, but the cell was still here.

Passing through the second door, he reached the cell, which was locked off with bars and a door. He dumped his burden on the stone floor and beat a hasty retreat to lock the barred door behind him and then regarded her in the meagre light coming through the two doors from the outside.

She was screaming at him and shaking the bars, reaching through them to try to grab him, but he kept his distance. The cell was grubby with debris and cobwebs, not having been used in a while, and it lacked any amenities. He backed away.

"I'll fetch ye a bed and blanket and a bucket to piss in!" he said, knowing she wouldn't understand him, yet compelled to communicate with her, nevertheless. And food, he reflected. She was thin as a reed, a tiny thing, and enticingly feminine in an elfin way that made him think of how the seelie folk might look. He shoved that last thought away; it was disloyal to Cat to think of another woman as comely. No one could hold a candle to Cat's lush, dark beauty.

He had loved Catriona McTavish from the moment he set eyes on her. It had taken him six months to win her heart and her father's permission to wed, and he had considered himself the luckiest fellow in creation. They'd had seven wonderful years together before she was taken.

He returned to the cellar and entered the house via the stairs that lead up to the kitchen, where he found Angus skinning rabbits. For rabbit stew, again.

“We have a guest in the cell downstairs,” he said.

“Aye?” Fergus left off skinning to scratch his white beard with one bloodied hand, leaving a red mark among the whiskers. “What’s he done?”

“She,” corrected Col. “I’ll need a mattress and some blankets, a bucket, and some food and drink.”

Fergus goggled at him. “Ye can’t go around lockin’ up lassies, milord!”

“She’s a foreigner. One of those heathen Chinese,” he said. “Tried to attack me in the park and slit my throat.”

“Oh well, in that case . . .” He scratched his beard again. “There’s the mattress we made up fer yer brother and his wife in the daffodil suite.”

“Good idea, I’ll fetch it down.”

“Why ye going to keep her here? Shouldn’t ye hand her over to the magistrate?”

“I want to know why she’s trying to stab me. It’s something to do with Merlow, I’d stake me bollocks on it. But I cannae understand a word she bluidy says. I want to figure it out.”

Fergus shrugged and went back to skinning.

“Leave off that for a minute and fix her a tray of food and something to drink. That is, if we have anything but mutton? Those chops last night nearly broke my teeth.”

Fergus sniffed, offended, and went to wash his hands in a bowl of water. “Yer tastes been spoilt by yon lassie of Merlow’s. Ye didn’t used to complain.”

“Ye’re right, Fergus, the lass was a fine cook.”

“Well, ye can always put me out to pasture and hire some young flibbertigibbet from Dysart,” he said grumpily.

“Nae, Fergus, I’ll nae do that. We don’t need women here upsetting everything. Look what havoc Hetty caused in just a fortnight. The boys ha’ nae been the same since she left.”

“Aye well, they miss their mother.”

“Hmph. Don’t we all.” Col stomped upstairs, not best pleased to be reminded of the obvious.

The daffodil suite, as Fergus had called it, took its name from the yellow wallpaper and hangings put up by his mother almost thirty years ago. They were faded and dusty now, but the name had stuck. It was still the most elegant room in the house, the furniture being delicate and refined, unlike the heavy dark wood of the rest of the place. He opened the curtains to see and hauled the coverings off the bed, folding them haphazardly. Then he dragged the mattress off and slung it over his shoulder, and with that and the blankets and pillow, headed back down to the kitchen.

Fergus had prepared a tray, and it was sitting on the kitchen table.

“Ye want me to bring it down?” he asked.

“Nae, I’ll fetch it in a moment.”

“Anybody’d think she was a guest, you waiting on her and all.”

“Well, she is of sorts. I daren’t let her out, she’d be off in nothing flat I suspect, or try

to attack me again. I'm not sure which. I mean to find out what she wants. There must be a way to communicate with her."

"Aye, well good luck with that. By the by, Master Callum's a mite sore and sorry for hisself this morning."

"And so he should be. Did ye see what he did to Rory's buckler?"

Fergus raised a tufty white eyebrow.

"Dug a bluidy great gouge through it!"

"He never!" gasped Fergus. "Well, I hope ye tanned his hide good and proper!"

"I did, much good it will do!"

Col humped the mattress on his shoulder and set off for the cellar. Squeezing through the door with the mattress, he found his prisoner sitting on the floor with her legs crossed in a strange fashion, but she leapt up at sight of him and began jabbering again. He ignored that and unlocked the cell door, shoving the mattress through and effectively blocking the door. He pulled it shut behind him and threw the mattress on the ground, which caused a great cloud of dust to blow up, making both of them cough.

"Sorry," he wheezed, covering his face. "I'll bring a broom down. Here this is for you." He spread the blankets over the mattress and dropped the pillow on top. All the while, she stood watching him with a puzzled frown. He waved at the pile of linens. "All yours, I'll be back with some food in a wee while. Bide a bit."

He left the cell, locking it behind him, and tromped upstairs to get a bucket, a broom, and the tray. He brought these down and found her sitting cross-legged again, but this

time on the mattress. Like before, she sprang up as soon as he appeared, but this time she watched in silence as he set the tray of food down beside the mattress and set about sweeping with the broom. He set the bucket down in the corner.

“To piss in,” he said, squatting and hoping she got the point.

Sweeping the dust and debris into a pile, and using the head of the broom to get rid of the worst of the cobwebs, he backed out and left her to it. He’d give her a bit of privacy to settle in before he began his interrogation.

He needed a wash and change of clothes; he’d slept in them all night, and he felt seedy. To say nothing of some more water and something to eat.



### Chapter Three

A ihan surveyed the things the Mac Sceacháin had brought her, which suggested he intended to keep her locked up for a while. This was not good. She only had two days to find out what happened to her brother and return to the junk, or the captain and his crew would sail without her. She had no doubt he would do it, too.

Panic made her heart race and tightened her belly, which chose that moment to rumble, reminding her that she hadn't eaten since yesterday. She would eat and consider her options; there must be some way out of this cell.

She sat down on the mattress cross-legged and dragged the tray closer, inspecting what was on it. A large pot of the dark liquor they seemed to favour here. She took a large mouthful, thirsty again. She needed to ask for water. A round loaf of bread and a ball of cheese, this one soft and more like the cheese she was accustomed to at home. She sniffed it and nibbled a bit: salty and mild. And a crumbly mix of some kind of minced meat. She picked up a bit and sniffed and nibbled. Something made from blood and offal, good! She smiled, breaking the loaf open, then piled in the cheese and the offal mixture and, squashing it down, bit into it. The bread was a bit stale, but she was hungry enough not to care.

Chewing thoughtfully, she let her eyes run all over the cell. It was rectangular in shape and took up three quarters of the stone-lined room it was in. Three walls of the cell were of stone, and the fourth was a series of iron bars, somewhat rusted. The lock was a bolt with a padlock to which the Mac Sceacháin had a key. The light was meagre coming through the door from the outside. If the doors were shut, it would be pitch black in here; she hoped her captor meant to bring her a lamp.

The walls were a little dank and the atmosphere cool and a bit musty. She shivered, reminded that she had left her cloak in the stable. Aihan pulled one of the blankets round her shoulders and continued eating.

She considered the rusty bars her best chance of escape. Perhaps a well-placed kick would dislodge one from its moorings? She would test it later. Having made an inventory of her surroundings, she turned her thoughts to her captor.

She had watched him last night through the window of the house as he drank himself into a stupor before the fire. She was ready for him when he emerged from the house, and it was easy to creep up on him once the dogs wandered off, intent on more interesting smells in the woods.

He was big. She hadn't quite realised how big until he rolled her under him and squashed her flat. He was a mature man, too, not a boy. Not as old as her brother, but certainly more than ten years older than herself. That would mean his reflexes were not as good as hers, which had been obvious from the ease with which she brought him down initially. His hungover condition may have contributed to that. There were muscles under his shirt, and there had been no spare flesh on him.

His sheer size was the biggest problem; she could use that against him if she could get speed and leverage. It was obvious he'd had no exposure to the kind of fighting she was trained in. She should be able to best him, provided she didn't let him get too close. His physical strength gave him too much of an advantage in close.

His looks were foreign, strange to her eyes. Not only was he the biggest man she had ever seen, his colouring was peculiar too: flame red hair with a scratchy beard, and the strange wide-open, deep blue eyes of these foreigners. And he exuded an air of masculinity that assaulted her chi like a head-on collision. Even in his debilitated state, she'd felt it like a blow to the solar plexus when he rolled her under him and kept her pinned to the ground.

She'd felt his manhood stir, too, as she wriggled under him. That might be something she could use against him? Men were notoriously weakened by their desire for women. She ignored the little tug she felt between her legs when she recalled his weight pressing her into the ground.

Does he intend to rape me? Is that why he brought me here, as a sex slave? Aihan frowned, considering it objectively. She didn't think so, and even if that were his intent she was confident she could fight him off. She'd leave him dead in a pool of his own blood if that were the case. She'd met her fair share of bad men, and her brother had given her good instincts where men were concerned. She sensed some darkness in him, but not of that variety.

No, whatever he wanted with her, it wasn't that, she was fairly certain. It must be something to do with her brother. A wave of melancholy washed over her. She missed him. It had been over a month since she had woken in a cold sweat, convinced something had happened to him. In daylight she tried to talk herself out of the conviction, but it persisted. She very much feared he was dead, but she didn't want to admit it.

If this Mac Sceacháin was responsible, she would kill him.

Having finished her meal and used the bucket, she settled down to meditate. She would follow that with her daily training routine. The cell was big enough for her to run through the movements. It would keep her calm and ensure she was ready for anything.

She was halfway through her routine in mid-roundhouse when the Mac Sceacháin appeared again, this time with a jug of water, a bowl, and a lamp, as if he had divined her needs. She smiled at this largesse and watched as he juggled opening the lock with his burdens. She considered just overpowering him and making a run for it. But if she did that now, she would never find out what had happened to her brother or

what this man wanted with her. She needed some way to communicate with him, force him to tell her what she wanted to know. She had some Eng'ish, courtesy of her brother, but her pronunciation seemed to be so bad he couldn't understand her. And his accent was so thick, she couldn't understand him either. There was only one way she knew of to bridge the gap.

She waited until he had set down the water jug and bowl in the corner and the lamp beside it. It threw a mellow glow around it. As he was straightening, she struck, chopping and kicking, her blows raining down so fast he had no time to recover before the next one hit. Thrown off balance, he tried to ward off her blows, shouting at her. Presumably to stop, although the words were just a garbled sound to her.

She pressed the advantage, grabbing his arm and flipped him so that he landed on the mattress on his stomach. Before he could roll over, she used her sash to tie his wrists together and rolled him onto his back, straddling his chest and thus keeping his hands trapped behind his body. She applied a choke hold to his neck and leaned in.

With her face inches from his she said, "Ming Liang! Where is he?"

His expression of bewildered fury would have made her laugh if the situation weren't so serious.

"Ming Liang!" she repeated. "W? de xi?ngdì. My brother!" She gestured from her heart. "Ming Liang!"

He shook his head and muttered something she couldn't understand. She got off his chest and went to rummage in her pack, and he sat up, watching her. She came back with a tiny scroll, removing it from its bone case cylinder and carefully unrolling it she revealed the portrait of her brother painted onto the silk. Holding this up, she repeated, "Ming Liang!"

His eyes widened in comprehension, and he nodded. “Ming Liang.”

She leapt at him demanding “Where?”

He frowned, clearly still not understanding her. She slumped down, straddling his lap, then rolled up the scroll carefully, put it back in its case and slipped it into her pocket. Her throat tightened and she swallowed hard, refusing to give into despair.

She spread her hands. “Where?”

Col, leaning on his elbows, propped uncomfortably behind his back with his lap full of Chinese woman, was having trouble concentrating. She was straddling him, her silk clad trousers spread over his groin, heat seeping through the thin cloth and into his breeches, where a lot of heat of his own was being generated. He’d not been this intimate with a female since his marriage, and contrary to what he had hitherto believed, he was not, after all, dead below the waist.

Trying to ignore what was going on in his groin, he concentrated on what she was trying to say. Between her words—which he thought might be some mangled form of English, though her pronunciation was so atrocious he couldn’t follow it—the portrait, and her gestures he gathered she was looking for someone: a man, someone important to her.

A man called Ming Liang. Is he her husband? Her father? He looked older than a husband ought to, but who knew what marriage practices were common in China? It wasn’t that uncommon here for a much older man to have a young bride. The notion that she was married and looking for her husband made him feel slightly sick, particularly with the trend of his mind at present. But then if she is married, she has no business being this familiar with me. And if she isn’t married, she has no business doing so either. Is she a courtesan?

She was clearly frustrated by their inability to communicate, and he was feeling that frustration too. He wished she would get off his lap, but with his hands tied there wasn't a lot he could do about it. He wriggled his wrists; he could probably get out of this if he tried hard enough. He wondered at his reluctance to try. There was something disturbingly seductive about this situation . . . .

The thought was so alarming, he sat up abruptly, yanking at his bonds with real force. It tightened the knot but loosened the fabric, and he worked his hands free as she sprang up, backing away from him and dropping into a semi-crouch, her hands up as if ready to launch another barrage of attacks at him.

Free of the sash round his wrists, he shook out his arms, getting the feeling back into his hands. He then held them up in a placating manner and spoke slowly and with gestures to try to communicate his meaning. "Ming Liang. I will look for him. I will ask if anyone has seen him." He repeated this twice with gestures, and she straightened up slowly and nodded.

At least nodding seemed to be universal. A smile broke out on her face, and he had the notion the sun had come out from behind a cloud. He hadn't initially thought her attractive, but when she smiled it transformed her face. He smiled back, and something heavy in his chest lifted.

"Xièxiè!" She said, bowing with her hands clasped before her chest. Col guessed that might be a way of thanking him?

"Col," he said, tapping his chest.

She cocked her head to the side and repeated, "Coa?"

He shook his head and repeated, "Col," emphasising the L.

She tried again, but it was clear she was struggling with the L. “Coau” was the best she could manage.

He pointed to her and asked, “Ye?”

“Aihan,” she said. “Ming Aihan.”

“Ming Aihan,” he repeated, puzzled that she would have the same first name as the man she was looking for. Then he remembered that Merlow had told him that the Chinese gave the family name first. Was this man her husband, or her father? Or another relative? An Uncle perhaps? “Aihan,” he said again.

She nodded and said, “Aihan,” patting her chest. Her figure was slender and her breasts were small; she was like an elegant bird. The tunic did not reveal much of her shape, which prompted him to wonder . . . He blocked the wayward thoughts. He needed to leave now, before he got any deeper into this mire of unwanted attraction.

He nodded to her and repeated his promise to look for Ming Liang with the gestures. He held a hand up and asked, “How tall?”

She frowned at him, then comprehending, she held a hand above her head indicating that Ming Liang was a head taller than her and half a head shorter than him.

He nodded and gestured that he would leave her now. “I go.”

She bowed to him, and he felt compelled to bow back.

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*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 12:24 pm*

### Chapter Four

Col left the cell recalling the rumours he had heard about Chinese warriors roaming the countryside and terrorising people. He had dismissed them as lurid tales at the time, but perhaps there was truth to them after all and this Ming Liang was at the root of them? He tried to remember when he'd heard the stories. Soon after Merlow had left to go to London and didn't come back as he said he would, but three months later, and with a bride.

Given that Merlow had spent the last ten years of his life in China, it seemed logical to assume that if Chinese people had been seen in this vicinity, it had something to do with him.

Calling the dogs, he set off to walk into Dysart and ask some questions. The mist had cleared to a fine day, and he crossed the lawn where she had ambushed him that morning. Seeing something glinting in the grass, he bent and picked up the knife she had threatened him with, a drop of dried blood on the tip. The handle was carved ivory and showed a sinuous, many-scaled dragon. He tucked it in his belt and kept going.

He headed for The Speckled Hen. If anyone had heard of these rumours it would be Angus McMurtrie, the Hen's publican. Entering the taproom, he found McMurtrie behind the bar, pouring drinks for his customers. He was a big man with a generous stomach and bushy beard.

"Laird!" he exclaimed. "How might I serve ye?"



“I’ll have a pint of ale, please, and a mite of gossip.”

“Aye?” McMurtrie filled a tankard from the barrel on the bench behind the bar.

“Chinese. Had any in these parts recently?”

“Aye, had a Chinese lassie in here yesterday looking fer ye. She find ye?”

“She did. She’s looking for a relative, name of Ming Liang. Dark hair tied back, about so high,” he indicated with his hand. “Older fellow, in his forties maybe?”

“It’s possible. We had some Chinese fellows around a few months back.” He handed over the tankard as Col flipped him a coin. Angus caught it expertly and pocketed it. Jerking his chin, he said, “Yon Sassenach over there in the green jacket may be able to tell ye more. He’s been dining out on tales of the Chinese for months.”

“Thank ye,” said Col, tipping his tankard in toast as he took a sip. He wandered over to the fellow in green who was seated at a trestle table with three others playing cards.

“Afternoon lads, mind if I join ye?”

“Col! What brings ye out on this fine day?” asked Todd McTasker, the village blacksmith.

Col climbed over the trestle and sat down as Todd quipped, “It’s the laird, Bobby, best mind yer p’s and q’s.” He nodded to the man in green.

Col held out his hand. “Bobby, is it? Col Thornton.”

“The Mac Sceacháin!” said Todd sotto voce.

“Bobby Farrell,” said the man in green. “Pleased to meet you.”

Col knew the other men, who all greeted him with a raising of their tankards and a murmured Laird.

The dogs settled under the table at his feet.

Sipping his ale, he said, “Aye, I’m after a bit of gossip and told ye may know.” He nodded to Bobby. “Chinese spotted in these parts?”

Bobby’s eyes lit up and he smiled, rubbing his hands with relish. “Aye, you’ve come to the right place, my lord. I’ve made somewhat of a hobby of gathering tales about their antics. People like a story, and I’ve been happy to oblige. In fact, I was telling the story only a month or so back when a big Chinese fellow interrupted me in a very—entertaining way, shall we say.”

“That’s what ye call it, do ye, Bobby?” interjected one of the other men. “Ye’re a mad man tangling with them Chinese. Peculiar lot, if ye ask me.”

“What happened?” prompted Col, leaning forward.

“Well, I was telling the story of the three Chinese warriors that were harassing people in the countryside about three months ago now. I showed this piece of cloth from their uniforms.” He produced a piece of blue quilted cloth from his pocket and laid it on the table. “When out of nowhere, this Chinese fellow sprang up and threw a dagger, pinning it to this very table. You can still see the hole here.” He pointed to the tabletop and the cloth.

“Aye,” corroborated Todd. “Fair scared the shite out of us, he did!”

“What did he want?” asked Col.

“Wanted to know where I’d got the cloth. Seemed to recognise it.”

“How tall was this fellow?” asked Col.

“Big for a Chinese, but not as tall as you, Laird.”

“And how old would ye say he was?”

“Hard to tell, they don’t tend to show their age much. But he wasn’t a young fellow, thirties or forties I’d say.”

Col nodded. It seemed to him this was likely the fellow Aihan was looking for.

“Any idea where he went?”

“After one of his men died in his arms, seems likely he went south, chasing after the others. But you’d know about that, my lord, it was your brother they was chasing.”

Col, in the act of swallowing, choked. After mopping his streaming eyes and blowing his nose from his coughing fit, he said hoarsely, “Tell me about it.”

“You didn’t know? Quite a hero, your brother, by all accounts. Took ’em on, all three of ’em, and bested ’em in a fight. He left to go south the next morning, and they followed him. Last seen in Edinburgh, oh, three months ago now, give or take. The big Chinese fellow came nosing around about six weeks ago?” Bobby checked with the others, and they all nodded.

Todd added, “One of his men came back, but he was mortally injured. Died in the street out there,” he waved his arm. “The big Chinese fellow was verra upset.”

“Damn!” muttered Col under his breath. That explains Merlow’s sudden departure

then. Why didn't he tell me what was going on? Typical of bluidy Merlow to keep things to himself. He couldn't help a little rush of pride at the notion his younger brother had acquitted himself so well in a fight, though. Growing up, Merlow's lack of interest in the manly sports of fighting, drinking, and womanising had made their father despise him, prompting him to call him a Jessie and other insults in an attempt to get him to "man up" to his standards. To Merlow's credit, he took it on the chin and refused to buckle to the old man's bullying.

"Well, that's quite a tale, Bobby. Angus!" He called to the barman. "A round of ale for these gentlemen, please, on me."

An hour later he headed back to Sceacháin House, the dogs trotting by his side, while he mulled over what to tell Aihan. Some version of the truth, but perhaps not all of it. Not, for example, about the death of the man in the street. How did he come to be mortally injured? Was that Merlow's doing too? He didn't want her haring off south if his brother was likely to be in any danger from her. He had no illusions that the little woman wasn't lethal if she chose to be, and something told him she would likely hurt anyone who had hurt her relative.

He wished he knew what relationship lay between her and Liang. Irrationally, he fervently hoped he wasn't her husband. If only to save him the shame of having inappropriate thoughts about a married woman. Just recalling the sensation of Aihan straddling his lap did things inside his breeches he hadn't thought about in relation to a woman other than Cat since he'd met his wife fourteen years ago.

He descended the steps into the cellar and found his sons staring at Aihan through the bars of her prison. She was sitting cross-legged on the mattress, ignoring them, with her hands resting palm-up on her knees and her eyes closed.

"Athair!" said Rory, turning to him. "Who is she? And why have ye got her locked up?"

“Her name is Aihan, she is a Chinese woman looking for a relative. I locked her up because she attacked me in the park this morning.”

Rory crowed at this. “That slip of a lass felled the likes o ye?”

Col flushed and growled, “She took me by surprise.”

Rory guffawed in delight, slapping his thigh. “I’d have paid money to see that, Athair!”

“Aye, well, ye won’t see it, so never you mind. Get upstairs the both of ye, Fergus’ll have dinner on the table soon.”

Rory, still grinning from ear to ear, hove off, followed by Callum. Peace seemed to have been restored between them for the moment. Which surprised Col somewhat. He’d thought the war would continue. He’d question them both separately later. Find out what they were thinking. He did need to pay more attention to them.

“Aihan,” he said quietly.

She opened her eyes and looked at him calmly. All the fire and agitation he had seen earlier seemed to have melted away. She rose smoothly from her position, like a flower unfurling its petals, and came to the bars.

“Ming Liang,” he said slowly.

She nodded, leaning forward, her air of calm seeming to dissipate somewhat.

“He was seen around here.” He gestured to try to make his meaning clear.

She asked something that he thought might be “Where?”

“He is gone,” he said. “I don’t know where.” It took some time to convey his meaning, but he thought she finally understood.

Her shoulders slumped in disappointment, and she put her hands on the bars and said something else. She gestured to the lock. She wanted him to let her go.

He shook his head.

She hit the bars in frustration and let fly with a string of sounds that made no sense but conveyed her fury and disgust.

“I will find out more,” he said with gestures, but he wasn’t sure that she understood. She flung away from him and dropped onto the mattress in high dudgeon. She was clearly furious with him.

He sighed and left her. He wasn’t letting her out until he was sure she wouldn’t go after Merlow. If Ming had followed his brother south and not come back, something must have happened to him. He would write to Merlow and find out.

That night, Col’s sleep was disturbed by a dream from which he woke sweating and sporting a fierce cockstand. Lying on his back while his heart rate settled and the sweat cooled on his skin, he tried to recall the details of the dream, but they eluded him, blown away like a will-o’-the-wisp when he tried to grasp them. Vanishing like morning mist.

The cockstand persisted, though. Hot and insistent, his balls ached, and his cock twitched and leaked on his belly. Where has this sudden surge of lust come from?

The feel of Aihan straddling his lap came back in vivid, visceral detail, and he groaned aloud, his hips bucking involuntarily. Raw desire flooded his body, and he closed his eyes on a curse. His hand reached for and clasped his cock, as he moaned

in real distress. His cock pulsed, and he spat on his hand to provide some lubrication, stroking and squeezing. His other hand fondled his tight balls, and he cursed again, almost crying with the intensity of need.

Rolling onto his knees, he grabbed the headboard with one hand to steady himself and stroked his cock with the other, his hips thrusting violently into his fist. The tight coil of desire wound up and up, teasing his senses with nerve-tingling pleasure. His breathing ragged, his heart rate thundering, the pleasure spiked, and he thrust hard into his fist. Flinging back his head, he roared at the ceiling, “Foook!” as his seed boiled out of him, spurting all over the sheets and pillow in multiple exquisite shots.

He grunted and groaned with each wave of release and shuddered in the aftermath, his head hanging, as he gasped for breath. Tingles ran down the insides of his legs to the soles of his feet and up his spine to his scalp. His body quivered with the violence of his climax. And he puffed out a breath on another much quieter curse. “Fooking hell!”

He collapsed sideways onto the bed and just lay there in a kind of stupor for several minutes, drifting on a haze of post-orgasmic pleasure. Eventually cold air made him reach for the bedclothes and pull them up over him. He nestled into the mattress, which rustled beneath him, and he sighed, drifting off to sleep.

### Chapter Five

The Sceacháin brought her breakfast the next morning, but that didn't endear him to her. She was furious with him. She was also too smart to let it show. She had spent a considerable amount of the night trying to figure out how to escape. She had to, or the Shaolin would sail without her. She had established that she couldn't break the bars of her prison. They were a little rusty, but not rusted through enough to be dislodged by one of her kicks. She had tried and bruised her foot and jarred her leg. She needed another way, and that had to involve her captor.

She waited calmly, sitting cross-legged on the mattress while he juggled the tray and the lock, making no effort to help him. She wished she could communicate with him better, but there was no time to learn his outlandish language properly. The few words she had didn't seem to be helping much because, she suspected, of the local dialect and her own accent making it hard for each to understand the other, even when using words in the same language. She needed to escape today.

He shut and locked the door behind him and turned to her, holding out the tray as if in a peace offering, and said something that she assumed was a greeting of some kind. She listened carefully and repeated it back to him, trying to imitate his intonation.

"Good morning."

He smiled, nodding enthusiastically, and offered the tray again. "For ye."

"For ye," she repeated.



He shook his head and, setting down the tray, tapped his chest and said, “For me.” Then he waved at her and said, “For ye.”

Comprehension dawned and she nodded her understanding. She tapped her breast and said, “Me,” then waved at him. “You. Ye,” she corrected herself.

“Aye.” He nodded, grinning. The smile made him look less tired, younger. It lifted the heavy pall of—what? Sorrow? Yes, sorrow, that clung to him.

He picked the tray up again and set it down before her. She looked at it. A bowl with something pale and gluggy in it, some more of the crumbly offal mixture she had received yesterday on a separate plate, a small loaf of bread, a dish of butter, and a jug of milk. And two small pots with white crystals in them that she suspected were salt and sugar. Also, another mug of ale.

She inclined her head and clasped her hands in a gesture of appreciation.

She had observed him putting the key in his jacket pocket. She waved to the mattress and patted.

He hesitated a moment and then sat awkwardly. It was obvious he was not accustomed to sitting on the floor as she was. She picked up the ale and drank. She was thirsty. Setting the tankard down half empty, she turned her attention to the gluggy mixture in the bowl. It still had steam rising off it, so it was warm. She picked up the bowl and sniffed. Some form of grain? She stirred it with the spoon and tasted a small quantity. Not a lot of flavour, but it would be warming and filling, she supposed. Not unlike sticky rice in some respects.

The man was watching her. He waved at the milk jug and the two pots of condiments. She wet a fingertip and tasted each: salt and sugar, as she had surmised. She added a pinch of both to the mixture and stirred, but she ignored the milk. With the added

condiments, the mixture was better. She spooned it up and he grinned.

“Parritch!” he said nodding at the bowl.

She swallowed her mouthful and repeated. “Par-itch?”

“Aye, parritch. Ye like it?” His gestures made his meaning clear, and she shrugged and smiled. She scooped up some of the offal mixture with her fingers and sprinkled it over the top of the par—itch and spooned it up.

She was amused by his apparent delight with watching her eat and wondered how she could turn that to her advantage. He was off guard and relaxed, leaning back on his hands behind him, his legs straight out in front of him and crossed at the ankles. He was wearing breeches and boots today with a loosely tied neckcloth, shirt, and jacket. There was a casual masculinity to him that tugged at her in a disconcerting fashion. She recalled straddling him yesterday, and a pulse of warmth between her legs made her glance sideways at the front of his breeches. When he had flipped her and pressed her to the ground yesterday there had been a definite hardness there, and when she’d straddled him, it had happened again.

She continued eating, turning possibilities over in her mind. She waved at the offal and asked, “Name?”

He frowned a moment and then said, “Haggis.”

“Haggis,” she repeated. She then waved at each of the items on the tray to get their names too. He obliged, seemingly eager to communicate. She finished the bowl of par-itch with the haggis and drank the rest of the ale. And used one of the phrases she had learned yesterday. “Thank ye.” She bowed her head, hands clasped.

“Ye’re welcome,” he responded, and bent to gather up the tray.

She found it odd that he would wait on her like a servant, when he was the laird. He must be poor and could not afford servants. She had certainly seen no evidence of servants, or any females, come to that. Was that why he wanted to keep her here?

She stayed him with a hand. She needed to keep him talking, distracted, while she figured out a way to get hold of that key. So she started pointing to things and asking for the names. He seemed happy to oblige her as she roamed around the cell. She pointed to the lock on the door, and he gave her the word for it.

“Padlock.”

She mimed turning a key in the lock, and he fished the key out of his pocket and held it up in his palm. “Key.”

She came towards him and knelt, straddling him, her hand covering his palm, but not attempting to wrest the key from him.

“Key,” she said softly. He drew in an audible breath as she settled on him, her eyes locked with his. She could see his pupils dilate as she watched, and feel the growing heat and firmness where their groins connected.

Her captor closed his fist over the key and dropped it in his pocket, his large hands coming to rest on her hips. She rested hers on his broad shoulders and eased herself against him, with a slow and deliberate forward pressure of her hips.

She could feel the hard outline of his male member as she pressed firmly against him, and it sent a thrill of pleasure through her body.

His hands flexed on her, gripping tightly, as a growl escaped his throat. He said something almost entirely unintelligible. The only thing she caught was her name.

She smiled, moving her hips in a slow, sensuous rhythm that gave her pleasurable thrills. He said something that sounded like a curse, and the next moment, she was plastered to his chest by the iron bands of his arms and his mouth was on hers in a plundering kiss that would have caused her legs to collapse had she been standing. He fell back on the mattress and pulled her with him. The kiss went on and on as she squirmed on him, blatantly using him for her own pleasure.

Good distraction! This man had not had a woman in a while. She could tell by the hunger in his kiss and the hard rubbing of his hands over her body. He broke the kiss with a kind of wrench, closing his eyes and panting for breath. She pushed herself up on her arms and regarded him. His expression was—anguished, that was the only word she could find to describe it. She would assume he was in physical pain if he had been injured. She could only conclude that this was emotional pain of some kind.

Abruptly, he lifted her off him and got up. She scrambled to her feet and tried to reach for him, but he was pushing the key into the padlock and shrugging her off. He shook his head and when she tried again, he rounded on her with a roar. “Nae!”

She stumbled backwards at this ferocity, and he left the cell, clanging the door and locking it with visibly shaking hands. He turned and left with rapid strides that took him out of her sight in moments. She could hear his boots on the stone steps for a few heartbeats and then silence.

Col stumbled up the steps and out into the courtyard, rattled to the core. Tears streaked his cheeks as he crossed the courtyard towards the rose garden and the site of Catriona’s grave. He staggered to a stop at the headstone and sank to his knees.

“Cat!” He gripped the headstone with one hand and wiped his face with the other. “I’m sorry, love! I dinnae know what came over me. She has bewitched me with her seelie ways!”

He couldn't deny that his violent orgasm last night had been triggered by thoughts of Aihan, and his raw response to her just now underlined it unequivocally. He felt as if he had betrayed Catriona's memory and the sacred bond they had shared.

Over the years since her death, he'd often come to her grave to talk to her and weep for the loss of her. The sheer raw agony of it had tempered with time, but he still missed her like a lost limb.

"Cat?" he asked softly. "What ails me, lass? Has she bespelled me, with her seelie magic?"

A picture rose in his mind's eye of Cat, sitting in the rocking chair in their room with Callum to her breast, singing to him. Her dark hair loose round her shoulders, the robe she wore loosened to bare her breast for Callum's greedy mouth. Those moments were so fleeting and, at the time, perhaps not treasured as they should be. The tears ran down his cheeks as he gazed into his memory, blind to his surroundings.

Cat stopped singing and raised her head to look at him and smiled.

"All will be well, Col, ye'll see," she said softly in her lilting tones. She had often said that to him, when he was angry or upset or worried over something. Hearing her say it now in his mind soothed him. Like it always did. His racing heart slowed, and his breathing slowed. The tears dried, and he sat a long time with his eyes closed, just holding the picture of her in his mind and the soothing calm of her presence in his heart.

A shout from the house disturbed him, and he jerked upright, scrambling to his feet as Willy raced towards him, his red hair flying.

"The cellar's on fire!" he shouted.

Fook, Aihan!

Galvanised, Col ran towards him and the boy turned to join him as they raced back to the house, where, sure enough, smoke was billowing out the entrance to the cellar. Fergus and the boys had formed a bucket chain from the trough and pump into the cellar entrance. Fergus appeared through the smoke just then at the top of the steps, a neckcloth wrapped round his face to block the smoke.

Seeing Col, he blinked red eyes and said hoarsely, “Do ye have the key? I cannae get the lassie oot!”

“Aye, I’ll fetch her,” said Col, tying his neckcloth round his face and diving down the steps. His hand reached for the key in his pocket. The smoke was thick and made his eyes sting as he tried to breathe shallowly, his heart beating hard in his chest. What has the little wretch done? Set fire to the mattress?

When he reached the cell, that was obviously what had happened. Fergus was close behind him with another bucket; he’d been dousing the mattress with water, but hadn’t been able to reach the furthest parts, which were still alight. The cell was filled with smoke, and he could just make out Aihan lying on the floor in the corner.

Shite! He fumbled with the lock and got it open. Swinging the door wide, he dived through and gathered her up. Leaving Fergus to deal with the mattress, he headed for the stairs up to the kitchen and thence to his bed chamber, where he laid her on his bed and checked her pulse.

She is still alive! The relief that coursed through him made his knees go weak. He dropped onto the bed beside her and patted her face gently.

“Lass, wake up, ye’re safe. Wake up lassie!”

She took a sudden deep breath and coughed, opening her eyes and blinking up at him. He fetched a glass of water and offered it to her as she continued to cough helplessly for several minutes. Eventually she took it and sipped as the coughing subsided.

“What were ye thinking, lass?” he asked, not expecting to be understood. His heart had settled back into his chest, but the fright she’d given him was still causing ripples over his skin. He ought to be furious with her. If the fire hadn’t been stopped so quickly, she could have burnt the house down, as well as killed herself. But his predominant emotion right now was just relief that she was alright.

Fergus appeared at the door, wheezing. “The fire’s oot!”

“Thank ye, Fergus. Are ye well, man?”

“Aye—when I’ve coughed up a lung—no doubt I’ll be—fine!” he said, his words punctuated by hacking coughs. When he could speak again, he nodded at the bed. “She do it deliberately, ye think?”

“Almost certainly.” Col looked down at her, exasperated. “Ye coulda killed yerself, lassie!”

The only response he got was more coughing. Her eyes and nose were streaming, and he fetched her a handkerchief which she took with a grateful half-smile.

“Where are the lads?” he asked Fergus.

“I left ’em cleanin’ up the mess.”

“Good. If they find her satchel intact, have it brought up here. It is all she has.”

“Aye.” Fergus frowned. “What ye meanin’ to do wi’ her now?”

“I’m not sure,” murmured Col.

“Humph!” Fergus’s tone of disapproval wasn’t lost on him. “Best let her go, lad, she’s trouble,” he grumbled.

“Aye, ye’re nae wrong, Fergus,” he admitted. Trouble I can do without, yet . . .

How he could respond to Aihan’s blatant seduction with such visceral desire, he couldn’t fathom. The tender passion he felt with Cat had not been like that.

Whether it was because Aihan had such an otherworldly allure, or he had just been alone for too long and his body was craving touch, he didn’t know. But he couldn’t deny the powerful need she evoked in him; she was as dangerous as she was fascinating. And he was fascinated by her, he realised.

He should let her go. She wanted to leave. Let her. Let her walk out of his life and leave him in peace. Yet he knew the damage was already done. The lid was off Pandora’s box. His body was awake in a way that wouldn’t leave him in peace. She had snared him like a rabbit.

And he still feared what her intentions towards his brother were. He would not allow her to hurt Merlow. The man might be mystifyingly strange to him, but he was his little brother, and he loved him.

He sighed and wiped his face with the neckcloth he’d pushed down round his neck. It came away sooty.

Aihan was sooty too; she would need a bath.

Fergus had gone, leaving them alone. He went to the basin and soaked and wrung out a cloth, then brought it back to the bed and he offered it to her. She took it and wiped



her hands and face.

“Thank ye,” she managed in a hoarse whisper. Even that made her cough some more.

Col sat on the side of the bed, wondering what to do. The language barrier was frustrating.

“Did you set fire to the mattress?” he asked with gestures. Not hopeful he would be understood.

She cocked her head and stared at him fixedly for a moment, then nodded.

“Why?” he put up his hands.

She smiled that twisted half-smile and put up her hands as if grasping the bars of her prison and shook them. Then she held up her palm and made a walking gesture on it with the fingers of her other hand.

“Of course. Obvious.” He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

She grabbed his other hand, and, beseeching him with her eyes she said, “Please?”

Where she had learned that word he didn’t know, but the effect of her hoarse tone and her dark, red-rimmed eyes, combined with her touch, was powerful. Heat swarmed his groin again, and he shook off her hand, rising and backing away from her. She was a fae , he was convinced, and she had ensorcelled him. There was no other explanation for the power she seemed to have over him.

He should let her go, yet if she could do this to him, what damage could she wreak against his innocent brother? What if she could tempt him away from his precious Hetty and destroy him and his happiness? Goddamn it to hell , he was not going to

allow that!

He had to find some way to resist the lass and ensure she couldnae harm Merlow before he let her go free.

Another wracking cough from the bed brought his attention back to her. She was lying slumped against the pillows with her eyes closed, and her breathing was ragged.

“Ye didnae look in a fit state to be going anywhere right now in any case, lass,” he muttered.

Should he fetch the doctor to her? But what could a leech do for her? He’d rather not advertise the fact she was here. This was a small community, with everyone nosing out everyone else’s business. He didn’t fancy being the butt of more gossip than he already was.

If Merlow were here, he’d know what to do. Whatever his opinion of his brother as a Scotsman, he respected his medical knowledge; the man was a wonder. He wished for Merlow for other reasons too. He could speak the girl’s wretched language and sort out this coil. Perhaps the best thing was to write to him?

I’ll do just that .

Aihan seemed to have slipped into a doze, so he left the room and locked it behind him, heading down to his study.

He penned a long letter to Merlow, telling him as much as he could about Aihan and this Ming Liang. He omitted, of course, any mention of his seemingly uncontrollable physical attraction to the wench. That, Merlow didn’t need to know about. Letter written, he decided to take it to the mail office himself, as Fergus and the boys were busy with the cleanup, and Aihan was, for the present, safely locked in his room and

hopefully asleep. Rest would do her the most good.

He returned an hour later and ventured back upstairs to check on his prisoner. He opened the door quietly and found the bed empty. And the leaves of the casement window were open, the curtains blowing in the breeze. Damn and blast!

He raced to the window and looked out. It's a hell of a drop to the ground, how did she— then he spied the sheet tied to the central strut of the window. Of course, she is small enough to squeeze through one side of the window, and lithe enough to shimmy down the sheet. And drop the rest of the way to the ground from the end of it!

God, she could be halfway to Edinburgh by now! Not likely, unless she stole one of the horses. Were there any missing? He hadn't noticed.

He was about to withdraw when he noticed something in the grass about fifty feet away. Shite!

He bolted out the door, down the stairs, out through the kitchen exit to the courtyard, and round the side of the house that his bedroom overlooked. He ran towards the flash of blue he had seen from above and found her lying face down on the ground.

He bent and turned her over gently onto her back. Her face was bloodless, her eyes closed. But she was breathing, with difficulty. Laboured breaths that rattled in her chest.

“Lassie, what have ye done to yerself?” he muttered, picking her up with care and carrying her back to the house.

She struggled a bit, but he just gripped her tighter to his chest and murmured, “dinnae fash yerself. I shan't hurt ye, lassie.”

She subsided with something gasped out in Chinese.

He laid her back down on his bed, covered her with blankets and went to the window and shut it, frowning at it. Glancing back at her and trusting she wouldn't venture out of bed again in the next ten minutes, he went in search of a hammer and nails.

He was right: she hadn't stirred when he returned and nailed the window shut. It's now a case of protecting the wee lass from herself. She seems determined to kill herself, and I'm having none of that! There's been enough death in this house.

Assured she could not get out of his room now, he locked the door and went down to the cellar to see if the boys had found her belongings. They had. In fact, they were sitting on the floor looking at them.

Callum had unrolled the portrait of Ming Liang from its tiny case and was looking at it, fascinated, and Rory had found her purse and was counting out the coins.

"Eleven guineas, Cal! It's a bluidy fortune!" said Rory excitedly. His back was to Col, so he didn't realise he was there, but Callum did. Rory went on, "Best hide 'em before the old man sees 'em."

"Too late, lad," said Col, reaching over his shoulder and snatching up both coins and purse.

Rory sprang to his feet, red-faced. "I found them!"

"They belong to our guest," said Col mildly.

"Can I just have one? What does she need with all that money?"

"That's none of your concern, Rory. Are ye a thief now?"

“It’s reiving, nae thievery!” muttered Rory.

“Who taught ye that?” asked Col, gobsmacked.

“Grandpa! He told me about the border reivers.”

“Cattle thieves!” snapped Col, his temper flaring at last.

“I was born in the wrong bluidy century,” muttered Rory.

Col shook his head at him and bent to retrieve the portrait of Ming Liang, its case, and Aihan’s satchel.

“Lawless brigands is what they were, all of ’em. Scots and Sassenachs alike.”

“I thought she was a prisoner, not our guest,” piped up Callum, climbing to his feet.

“Aye well, she’s inhaled a deal of smoke, and it’s damaged her lungs, so she’ll be biding awhile until she’s better.”

“Where is she?” asked Callum, ever the nosy one.

Col flushed faintly. “In my room,” he admitted.

“Oh! Like that, is it?” said Rory, rounding on him. “How dare ye bring a whore into the bed ye shared with Mama!”

This hit Col on the raw so badly, he had to physically restrain himself from clouting Rory.

“She’s nae a whore!” Is she, though? She behaved with the boldness of one, riding

me the way she did.

Rory threw him a look of contempt and shouldered past him to the door. Callum frowned and, after a puzzled glance at his father, followed. Col leaned against the bars of Aihan's erstwhile prison and rubbed his face tiredly. He had let those boys down so badly, and every time he spoke to them it seemed to make bad worse.

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### Chapter Six

A ihan stirred. Her chest hurt, her throat was raw, her head ached. Her laboured breathing rattled in her ears, every breath was a struggle, and she felt exhausted. She had managed to get out the window, but as she attempted to flee across the grass, she'd passed out from lack of breath and the pain in her chest. And now she was back in his bed and too weak to get up and try again. Setting fire to the mattress had perhaps not been such a good idea after all. A shiver wracked her body, and she pulled the bedclothes more tightly around her.

She was stuck here, the Shaolin would sail without her, and she couldn't go after her brother while this foreign devil held her captive. Another shiver. Why am I so cold? Her head felt stuffed and achy. She couldn't think properly. I need find a way to get free . A convulsive shiver. But for the moment, she was just too exhausted to do anything but sleep . . . .

Col sniffed. The house still smelled strongly of smoke, a reminder of what damage she could have caused. Fergus was right: She was trouble, and he should let her go—when she was well enough.

He was hungry, and remembered he hadn't had breakfast. He raided the kitchen for food. Fergus was wheezing while he chopped vegetables for a stew.

“Shouldn't ye be resting, man?” he asked, preparing himself a plate of bread, cheese, and pickles at the big kitchen table.

“Nae, I'll be fine in an hour or two,” said Fergus, wiping his dripping nose on his

sleeve.

“Ye want some of this?”

“I already ate, thank ye, milord. I fed the boys and meself earlier, while ye was out.”

“Thank ye, Fergus, I dunno what I’d do wi’ out ye.” He filled the bread roll with cheese and pickles and squashed it flat before taking a bite.

“Do we have anything suitable to give the lass?” he asked when he’d swallowed a mouthful. “Her throat will be raw, I’m thinkin’.”

“We’ve some honey and lemons,” offered Fergus.

“Excellent suggestion, I’ll make up a mixture when I’ve finished this.”

“I can siphon off some broth from the stew later, if she’s not up to swallowing solids?” added Fergus, sniffing.

“Good idea.” Col drank half his tankard of ale and resumed his bread roll, his thoughts roaming back to his last conversation with Rory. “Fergus, did ye know Rory has this notion that reiving ain’t thievery? My father’s filled his heid with all sorts of nonsense!”

“Oh aye, the old laird was full of those tales, and the boys lapped em up.”

“Not in my hearing,” grumbled Col.

“Aye well, he knew that, which is why ye didnae hear ’em,” said Fergus, reaching for another turnip.



“It was one of the few things I agreed with Merlow about.” Col got up to wash his plate and tidy away the remnants of his meal. Then he went into the pantry to find the honey and lemons.

“Ye’re a mite taken with this lassie, ain’t ye?” said Fergus with a look from under his bushy eyebrows.

Col dropped the lemon he was squeezing into a jug, flushing. “It’s nae that. I fear she means mischief for Merlow, and I’ll not have that. And now she’s sick, which will keep her tied by the heels for a mite longer so I can figure out what to do wi’ her. I wrote to Merlow about her.”

“Well, that’s probably the most sensible thing ye’ve done yet!” said Fergus, beginning on the pumpkin. “Got his head screwed on straight, does master Merlow. Allus said that. Shame the old man gave him such short shrift.”

Col raised his eyebrows at this. Fergus was being unusually garrulous.

“I didnae know ye had a soft spot for Merlow.”

“Allus have. All the staff did, back in the day. The way the old Laird treated him was right cruel, and ye weren’t much better.” He threw Col a look under his eyebrows again.

Col flushed. “Ye’re right, I regret that.”

“And ye wonder why he wouldnae come home?”

“I understand it better now.”

“Ye was miffed with him when he went south and didnae come back until he brought

the lassie.”

Col shrugged. “I was hurt that he stayed for so short a time. I’d missed him more than I realised.”

“Aye, I ken that, but I’m nae sure he did. Did ye tell him?”

Col’s mouth gaped. “Ah, nae.”

“Hmmp,” said Fergus, dropping cubes of pumpkin into the pot.

Col fetched the kettle and added hot water to the honey and lemon mixture and stirred it thoughtfully.

Taking the jug and a glass, he went upstairs to check on his patient.

Her breathing was still laboured, rattling badly in her chest. And her face was flushed, her eyes closed, lids flickering.

Setting the jug and glass down on the table beside the bed, he bent over Aihan and touched her forehead lightly. Her skin was hot and dry to touch. As he watched, he saw her body shudder. She was running a fever! This was not good. Childbed fever had taken his Cat, along with the infant girl who only breathed a few moments after her birth.

The doctors had done nothing for Cat except bleed her and recommend that he pray. He wondered now if Merlow’s superior medical knowledge could have saved her. In any case, Merlow wasnae here, and he shied from fetching the local leech. The man hadn’t saved Cat, no more than his colleague from Edinburgh. Both men had shrugged and said that it was God’s will to take women in childbed. Col had lost his temper and thrown them both out. Nae, he wouldnae have those infernal leeches in

the house. He'd nurse Aihan himself, be damned to them. She is young and strong; she can beat a fever, can't she?

He recalled the conversation with Merlow and Hetty about the typhus fever they had dealt with in Pinner. Now, what had Merlow said? Cool compresses, or if the fever was really bad, a cold bath to get the patient's temperature down. And he'd made some concoction from Chinese herbs that helped treat the symptoms. Pity he hadn't left any here—or had he? Col hadn't been paying much attention at the time but if he had—Fergus will know!

He pelted back downstairs to the kitchen, where Fergus was scraping the meat into the stew pot over the fire.

“Fergus, d’ye recall if Merlow left any medicine for fever when he was here?”

“Aye, why?”

“Ye mean he did?”

“Aye, there’s a jar of it in the pantry. Brown bottle with a wax seal. On the top shelf on the right.”

“Bless ye, man!” said Col coming out with the bottle.

“The lassie poorly?”

“Aye, burning up. I’ll take a bowl of cold water and some cloths up.”

“Ye want me to send Willy to fetch the doc?”

“Nae. I’ll not have Henderson in the house after what happened to Cat. Useless as tits

on a bull!”

“Hmmp!”

Col filled a bowl with water, fetched a pile of cloths from the linen cupboard, and went back upstairs to tend to the lass.

He set everything down on the table and looked at the label on the bottle. One teaspoon every four hours. Damn, he’d not brought a teaspoon up with him. He glanced over at Aihan; she was restless and shivery still. He needed more pillows to help her sit more upright. That might help her breathing, too.

He fetched a teaspoon and more pillows and, lifting her, he banked up the pillows behind her. She was such a slight little thing, so slender and small-boned in his hands he was almost afraid of breaking her. Her skin was hot and dry to the touch, and the shudders that wracked her small frame scared the living daylights out of him.

“There, lassie,” he murmured, stroking her hair off her flushed face and reaching for a cloth. Wringing it out, he draped it over her head, causing droplets of water to run down her forehead to her nose. He caught the drop with his thumb and swept it away. Her skin was so smooth and soft. Her eyelids flickered restlessly, and she still breathed with difficulty.

He needed to get the medicine into her. It probably tasted foul. If he tried to tip it down her throat, she’d choke.

“Aihan,” he said, touching her face gently and patting. “Wake up, lass, I need ye to swallow this.” She moved her head and whimpered something unintelligible. “Aihan!” he spoke more sharply to try to break through her delirium.

Her head jerked and her eyelids fluttered open. She stared at him, and he wasn’t sure

that she even recognised him. He offered the spoon. “Here lass, it’ll make ye feel better.”

She parted her dry lips, and Col slid the spoon in. She grimaced as he withdrew it and swallowed convulsively. Then she coughed. It was a hacking, painful cough, and it made him wince in sympathy. He offered her some water to wash down the medicine. She took little sips between coughs, then subsided back against the pillows, visibly exhausted.

“Thank ye,” she murmured hoarsely, and he smiled at her good manners.

“Ye’re welcome, lass. We need to get yer temperature down. Ye’ll nae mind if I bathe ye?”

She waved a hand, and it fell to the sheets as if the effort to keep it upright was too much. After the intimacies they’d shared, it seemed a moot point to be worrying about the proprieties, and in any case, there was no choice. There was no woman to bathe her; it had to be him.

He lifted her tunic off over her head. She was unresistant and floppy, virtually unconscious again. With the sheets pulled back to her waist he set about laying damp cloths over her torso. Her breasts were small and had little pinkish-brown nipples. With the coolness of the cloths, the nipples tightened into tiny buds. Her stomach was flat and muscular. Her arms were thin, but also showed muscle definition.

He resolutely blocked any lewd thoughts; the lass was ill and in his care. He changed the cloths after a few minutes as they heated with her body. And gradually, the shudders subsided. Whether it was the cloths or the medicine or both he didn’t know; he was just relieved to see some improvement. Her breathing was still painful to listen to.

He and Cat had nursed the boys through some fevers in their early years, so he had some knowledge of what to expect of a fever running its course. And he knew enough to keep her fluids up.

He spent the whole of the afternoon and evening by her side. The dogs scratched at the door for admittance, having tracked him upstairs. Gussie lay at his feet and Hector took up his usual spot on his lap. He read a book between changing her cloths and feeding her sips of water and the honey and lemon mixture.

As the sun was going down, Fergus brought him some stew, some bread, and a small bowl of broth from the stew for Aihan.

“If she can sup it?” Fergus asked with a worried frown.

Col sighed and scrubbed his face. “Aye, if I can rouse her enough to take it.”

Fergus went to the fire to build it up and then lit some candles as the light was fading fast and the temperature outside dropping. Summer was a memory as they passed into autumn.

“Ye want some help with the lass?” asked Fergus, coming to his side after pulling the curtains across the window.

“Aye, if you’ll put another pillow behind her, while I hold her up?”

Fergus did as he asked, and he lifted Aihan higher, careful to keep the clothes covering her upper body in place, settling her against the pillows.

“Where ye fixing to sleep, milord?”

“Here,” said Col shortly. “I cannae leave her alone in this state, her breathing’s too

troubled. I'll no sleep much anyways."

Fergus headed to the door but looked back and said, "The lads are fair riled up about this, ye ken."

"Aye, I'll speak to them tomorrow, when I hope she'll be faring better. But ye needn't be thinking I mean the lass any harm. She's ill, I'm not the sort of man to take advantage of that!"

"I ken that right well, milord," said Fergus roughly.

"It's a pity my own son doesnae think so well of me!"

"It ain't that so much as it being yer marriage bed, milord."

"Where else was I to put her? We have no other beds beyond the Daffodil Room, and she burnt the bluidy mattress from that one. There wasnae time to make a new one!"

"I ken, I ken," said Fergus soothingly.

Col breathed out slowly and nodded. "Thank ye, Fergus, ye're a good man."

Fergus gave him a lopsided smile and whistled to the dogs. "I'll feed em for ye," he said, and left the room followed by the canines. Col looked at Aihan, still breathing sluggishly, her eyes closed.

She looked thin and fragile, lying against the pillows. Her temperature seemed lower; she had stopped her terrible shuddering. Removing the damp cloths, he ran a towel over her body lightly to dry it, and then pulled the bedclothes up to her chin.

She stirred and opened her strange dark eyes and blinked at him.

“Sceacháin,” she murmured, her voice still hoarse and low.

“Col,” he said roughly. “Do ye care for a little sustenance, lass?” He offered the bowl of broth.

She swallowed as if her throat hurt and whispered, “Thirsty.”

He put the bowl down and offered her some of the honey and lemon water. She took several mouthfuls before the coughing stopped her again.

The coughing was painful to listen to and Col flinched at the sound, offering her a handkerchief to wipe her streaming eyes. She took it, blowing her nose and wiping her face.

“Let it be a lesson to ye, lass, nae to set fire to things when ye cannae get away from the smoke!” he chided gently.

She blinked at him miserably, and he took her hand and squeezed it in sympathy. A more woebegone sight he’d seldom seen.

“Thank ye,” she managed again.

He smiled at her careful copying of his intonation. She’d be getting a Scottish accent to her English. Could he teach her the Gaelic or was that a step too far?

He held out the bowl and spoon again. “Can ye manage a sup, lass?”

She nodded, and he sat on the bed to feed her. By the look in her widened eyes, this surprised her. But she accepted the teaspoon he held out and swallowed slowly.

She smiled. “Good,” she said.



“Aye, Fergus is a fair cook when it comes to meat and game. He’s nae so good at the baking,” he said, spooning up more of the broth for her.

She finished most of the bowl before another coughing fit put paid to anymore. He wished he had something to give her to soothe her throat; it must be raw, between the coughing and the damage wrought by the smoke.

She settled back with her eyes closed once the coughing stopped, and he sat and ate his own meal. He had just finished wiping up the last of the broth with his bread when a scratch at the door heralded the return of the dogs. He set his bowl down and opened to the door to let them in.

“Fed and watered, are ye?” said Col as they bundled into the room, wuffling a greeting.

Aihan stirred and opened her eyes. Gussie lunged for the bed, and a slight look of alarm on Aihan’s face made him say sharply, “Gussie, sit and give a paw.” The deerhound immediately sat and put a paw on the side of the bed.

Aihan’s eyes widened in shock. The scruffy, grey-haired, long-legged beast lowered her muzzle to the bed, and with soft ears flopping either side of her long-muzzled head, gave her best impression of an apology.

Col chuckled at this display of disingenuity as Aihan stared at the dog, fascinated.

“Pat her,” suggested Col, and made a stroking motion with his hand. “Her name’s Gussie. Augusta,” he added.

Aihan put out a tentative hand and stroked the wiry fur on Gussie’s head.

Col grinned, and Hector got up on his hind legs, pawing at the side of the bed and

whimpering, clearly also wanting a pat. Aihan reached her other hand to the terrier's head and patted both dogs, a smile breaking across her face. Hector, in his enthusiasm, tried to leap into the bed and fell back, making Aihan start with a gasp, which in turn made her cough.

Col clicked his fingers and gestured to the dogs to move away. Obediently, they retreated to the hearth rug before the fire. Col gave Aihan some more lemon and honey water to soothe her throat.

She subsided back into the pillows and nodded. "Gussie," she managed.

"And Hector," said Col with a wave to the little terrier, who lifted his head at the mention of his name.

"Hector," she repeated with a weary smile.

"Close yer eyes, lass, and I'll read to ye, hmm?" he said, waving his book.

She lifted an eyebrow and nodded, nestling back into the pillows and closing her eyes.

She seemed to be understanding him more and more. If not his words exactly, his gestures and intent anyway.

He settled into his chair, opened the book where he was up to, and began to read. The words would be meaningless, but he hoped the cadence of his voice would lull her to sleep.

A little while later, he thought he had achieved his objective, and continued to read in silence until the clock on the mantle tinkled ten o'clock. Conscious of his own exhaustion—he'd not slept much last night—and noting that her breathing seemed a

mite easier, he rose quietly and got a plaid from the cupboard to use as a blanket. He removed his jacket and boots, cleaned his teeth, and lay down on the other side of the bed, wrapped in the plaid. He murmured a prayer to Cat—part of his nightly ritual—and closed his eyes.

He was jerked awake by an arm thumping him in the chest. Blinking in the light of the guttering candles, he turned his head to see Aihan, arms flaying as she appeared to be fighting off an invisible assailant and muttering something in a hoarse undertone in her own language. He sat up on one elbow and leaned over her, catching her flailing hands in one of his own.

“Aye, lass, settle, settle!” he said soothingly.

She gasped and her eyes opened. She blinked up at him, then stared as if having trouble bringing him into focus.

“Ah!” She let out a breath, her body relaxing as she visibly came back to herself. “Mac Sceacháin,” she said hoarsely.

He squeezed her hand. “Col,” he reminded her gently.

“Cou,” she managed awkwardly, and grimaced.

He smiled at her mangling of his name. Realising he was still holding her hands, he let them go and sat up. “You want a drink?” He mimed lifting a cup to his mouth.

She nodded and he got up, coming round to her side of the bed to offer her some more of the honey and lemon water.

“Bad dream, lass?” he asked, not expecting to be understood.

She swallowed. It was visibly painful; her throat must be so raw. He set the glass down when she'd had enough and found her grasping his hand tightly in both of hers. "Must go," she said slowly.

"Ye're nae well enough to go anywhere, lass. Ye saw what happened when ye got out the bluidy window!" He waved to the window. "Ye collapsed!" He made a falling motion.

She shook her head. "Must go!" She tried to get up, and he pressed her back into the pillows. "Nae, lass, I'll not let ye kill yerself!"

She slumped in defeat, closing her eyes, and the tears seeped out from under her lids.

He wiped at them. "Nae, lass, dinnae cry!"

She turned her head away, sniffing audibly. Col found another handkerchief and gave it to her, feeling helpless. He'd hated it when Cat cried, and he found he hated it equally when this lass did too. What was it about lasses that brought him undone? If his daughter had lived, he would have been putty in her hands for sure. The thought provoked a lump in his throat.

"I'm sorry, lass," he said, stroking the hair stuck to her forehead off her face. She stared at him for a bit and then closed her eyes. He wished he could communicate with her better. Seeing that she meant to sleep, he got up and went back to his side of the bed. Wrapping himself once more in the plaid, he settled himself to sleep.

He woke a second time to sounds of the dogs growling. He sat up and saw Aihan standing in the doorway, bailed up by the dogs. She was visibly shaking. He wasn't sure if that was from fear or the ague. Either way, he was out of bed in a shot and coming towards her. "Gussie, Hector, stand down!"

The dogs obediently stopped growling and sat on their haunches. Aihan bolted for the stairs. She had pulled on her tunic over her silk pants, but she wasn't dressed for venturing out into a Scottish night, even if she were well.

With a curse, Col gave chase as she ran barefooted down the stairs. She obviously hadn't been able to find her boots—he'd stashed them in the wardrobe. She stumbled as she reached the bottom of the stairs, and he could hear her rasping breath as she raced towards the front door. It was bolted, and as she wrestled with the stubborn bolt, he caught up with her.

“Nae lass! D'ye have a death wish? Ye'll catch the devil himself out there in yer flimsy silk outfit!” He pulled her round to face him and stared down into her eyes. In this light, they were dark pools of despair that tugged at his heart. Since when have I been such a softy? His father would be disgusted. Yet Cat had gutted him with a mere look. He was a sap for a woman. And this fragile little flower had her hooks well and truly sunk into him. He wasn't letting her go kill herself for anything.

He hefted her over his shoulder as he had done on their first acquaintance and carted her back up the stairs to the bed chamber. She struggled at first and then began to cough. He righted her in his arms at the first cough, carrying her upright the rest of the way as she coughed helplessly in his arms.

He tucked her back into bed and sat down on the edge, offering the lemon and honey mixture when she could stop coughing long enough to take it. Her abortive attempt to escape and the coughing fit had exhausted her, and she lay gasping for breath against the pillows.

“Why, lass?” he asked, setting the water down and taking her hand. Her desperation to escape was manic. Was her love for this Ming Liang so strong she'd put herself at risk to try to reach him? Was she the whore Rory had accused her of being? How to explain her forward behaviour with him, if Liang was her husband?

But she didn't answer him, closing her eyes with a kind of fatalistic despair that quite smote him in the chest. He wished he understood more about her motivations.

He sat holding her hand until he was quite sure she was asleep, then he rose, locked the door, and put the key in his pocket. He climbed back into bed with the plaid and prayed the lass would say put for a bit.

He woke a third time with the dawn and to the weight of the dogs on his feet and belly. They had snuck up when he was asleep, but he hadn't the heart to rouse them. Their warmth and weight was a comfort. He looked over at Aihan, who appeared to still be asleep.

He rose quietly, washed, put on a clean shirt, donned his waistcoat and jacket, and let the dogs out, locking the door behind him. He hated having to lock her in like this, but she gave him no choice. He wasn't going to let her out to collapse and die out in the fields somewhere. Once she was better, he'd let her go, of course. He had no right to keep her penned up forever. But by then, he hoped they might have established better communication, and he could grasp what threat, if any, she posed to Merlow.

He refused to think of the physical attraction that tugged at him whenever he looked at her or touched her. It was inappropriate and born, he was convinced, of his self-imposed celibacy. He hadn't thought of or touched another woman since Cat died, and he thought his libido had died with her. Apparently, it hadn't. Aihan had woken the beast by touching him. That was all it was, and when she was gone, he'd address the problem by finding a suitable woman to treat his malady. 'Til then, he would show some self-control. He wasnae a beast, even if he felt like one.

Having let the dogs out to do their business, he went to the kitchen, where he found Fergus coughing over the breakfast parritch.

"Man, ye'll cough up a lung!" he said, alarmed at the hacking and wheezing. "Ye

sound almost as bad as the lass. Ye should be in bed!”

“Nae, I’ll be fine,” croaked Fergus, wiping his streaming eyes. “It was the smoke.” He waved at the wood-fire stove. “I made the mistake of breathing in when I shouldn’t have.”

“D’ I have to come all lord of the manor on ye and order ye to go to bed?”

“Nae milord, I’m fine, really,” he said, blowing his nose with a loud honk.

“Hm.” Col eyed him sceptically. “Is the parritch ready to eat?”

“Aye, should be. I was about to serve it up to the lads. Ye going to join us?”

“Aye, when I’ve seen to the lass.”

He made her a cup of tea with a generous dollop of honey and lemon and put a small portion of parritch in a bowl with some sugar and salt to flavour and took these up.

He unlocked the door and entered to find her standing in the middle of the room. Likely she’d used the chamber pot, which reminded him to empty it. He was relieved to see she was well enough to get up. He set the tray down on the table and offered her the mug of tea.

“Better this morning?” he asked, patting his chest and raising an eyebrow.

She grimaced and nodded, accepting the tea from him, she sniffed it and sipped. “Thank ye,” she said politely, seating herself in the other chair that was still near the hearth. The fire needed tending, and he knelt to deal with it while she sat and sipped her tea. He was conscious of her bare feet on the hearth rug in his peripheral vision. They were small, neatly shaped feet like the rest of her. He should give her something

to put on them; they must be cold, surely? In fact, she needed to be wrapped up. A plaid to keep her warm. That outfit did not offer enough protection for the cooler days ahead.

Satisfied that the fire was burning nicely, he rose and rummaged in his drawers for some socks. They would be too big for her, but at least they would offer some warmth.

He held them out to her. “Here, keep yer feet warm,” he said.

She looked up at him, surprised. After a moment she set the tea down and took them. Unravelling them, she quirked a smile and said, “Thank ye,” again. She was polite when she wasn’t trying to kill him or beat him up, he reflected.

He pointed to her bag in the corner. “Your things are there. I’m going to have breakfast.” He mimed eating and pointed to the bowl on the tray. “If ye want?”

She nodded her comprehension. He grabbed the chamber pot and left her, locking the door again behind him.



### Chapter Seven

Left alone in the room, Aihan listened to his receding footsteps and then sprang up from the chair, setting the tea aside, and opened the cupboard against the wall. She had been about to search it when he came back.

Her throat was raw, and her chest ached, but she felt a great deal better than she had last night, and she had hours at the most to escape and make her way back to the Shaolin before it sailed—if it hadn't already. But she wouldn't think of that.

Her boots were in the cupboard; she pounced on them and, discarding the socks he'd given her, put them on. Finding her cloak also hanging in the cupboard, she seized that too and turned her attention back to the window, grabbing the poker from the fireplace. She had already ascertained that he had nailed the window shut with a board. Her plan was to use the poker to prize the board up and escape—again—through the window. With any luck, she would get far enough away that he wouldn't catch her. And her body wouldn't betray her this time, she hoped.

With a fervent prayer to the ancestors and the Great Spirit for good measure, she applied the poker to the board and worked on levering it off. It took longer than she had hoped, but she finally got it free with one last heave and screech of the nails pulling free of the wood.

Discarding it and wheezing a bit with the effort, she gathered up her satchel, flung her cloak round her shoulders, and approached the window with the sheet. Mac wasn't back yet, so she still had time. Pushing the window on the right-hand side wide, she tied the sheet to the central bar of the window, got a leg over the ledge, slid through

the narrow opening and, twisting so that she could lower herself down on her arms, she clung to the sill a moment, legs dangling, then transferred her weight to the sheet, lowering herself hand over hand, until she got to the end, and then dropped. She rolled easily with the landing and rose to her feet in one movement, then took off across the grass, heading for the trees. She needed cover as soon as possible. She restrained herself from running flat out—her lungs weren't up to that, and she didn't want to pass out like before.

The morning was fine enough, if a bit misty and cool, but the clouds were high and scattered, with patches of blue between, and the sun shone, dispersing the mist and warming the air. It was not likely to rain imminently.

She made it to the trees and paused, grasping the rough-barked trunk of one to hold herself upright while she fought for breath. She coughed a bit, but it wasn't as bad as before. When she had recovered sufficiently, she struck out through the trees in the direction—she hoped—of the water. She was fairly certain this bit of forest skirted the edge of the village, and from there, she could easily find the beach and one of the rowboats she had spotted on her first foray.

Col joined his sons, Fergus, and Willy for breakfast in the dining room, trailed by the dogs who had come in from their morning frolic.

Rory threw him a look of contempt as he pulled out his chair and sat down, but the lad didn't say anything, and he chose to ignore the look and its silent message. He'd deal with Rory later. He helped himself to the parritch, adding cream, sugar and a sprinkle of salt to the bowl as well as a handful of dried blaeberrys and dug in.

But Rory, it seemed, couldn't keep it in. "Left yer whore alone, have ye?"

Col stopped with the spoon halfway to his mouth. He put it back down carefully and stood up. Leaning on his fists, he said, "Ye think I'd dishonour yer mother so?"

Rory scrambled to his feet and, red as a firestorm, pushed his face into Col's. "She's in yer bed! What else d'ye call it!"

"The lass is ill, Rory. If ye think I'd take advantage of that, ye do not know me. And ye've nae sense of honour yerself to even consider it! Yer precious reivers might behave that way, but nae decent man would! If that's what ye grandfather's taught ye, I'm heartsick!"

With that, he sat down and resumed his breakfast, although Rory's accusation had destroyed his appetite.

Rory huffed a bit and then sat down, red now from embarrassment rather than anger by the shamefaced expression he wore. Good! The notion that his father had filled the lads' heads with such foul stuff made him truly sick to his stomach. He pushed the parritch away and rose, leaving the room without a word. He was conscious, though, of the boys' eyes on him. Callum had sat dumbstruck through his exchange with Rory, his mouth agape.

The dogs followed him out to the hall. He hesitated at the bottom of the stairs; he should go and check on the lass. Keeping her under lock and key didn't sit well with him. He climbed the stairs, the dogs' nails clacking on the wood behind him. He unlocked his bedroom door and pushed it open, and was confronted by the sight of the open window, the curtains blowing in the breeze, and the plank of wood he'd used to nail it shut discarded on the bed with the poker. And of course, no sign of Aihan.

With a curse, he ran to the window, but there was no sign of her this time. She had managed to flee without passing out, at least in seeing distance from the window. He slammed his fist on the window ledge in frustration. Does the lass truly have a death wish?

He clattered downstairs and out to the stable, leaving the dogs in the house. They would be less help than might be thought in running the lass to earth. Gussie was a sighthound, trained to course deer by sight, bring them down and kill them. He didn't want her spotting the lass and giving chase.

Saddling his horse, he headed out of the stable into the park and did a quick reconnoitre, looking for a fallen body. He was by no means sure she would make it very far without collapsing. Failing to find her, which was a mixed blessing, he set off to the village, for where else would she go? He headed for the Speckled Hen; if the lass had been seen in the village, Angus would know. And she was sufficiently unique in appearance to stick out like a sore thumb.

Giving his horse to a loitering lad to mind, he entered the pub and found Angus behind the bar.

"Yo Angus, any sighting of the Chinese lassie this morning?"

"Aye, she was headed towards the beach by all accounts."

"Thank ye." Col flipped him a coin, which the man caught deftly, went back to his horse, where he rewarded the lad with a coin likewise, and made for the beach.

The tide was halfway out, exposing a fair bit of wet, hard-packed sand, seaweed and pebbles, and the waves dumped themselves on the beach with hypnotic regularity, white-flecked, grey-green depths in the intermittent sunlight that emerged and hid behind the clouds overhead. The breeze had the sharpening edge of autumn; summer's heat was but a memory now. A couple of gulls screeched overhead.

He looked up and down the beach, not seeing anyone immediately. Then he spotted a figure in a wind-rippled cloak, sitting on the sand. The bowed head and shoulders spoke of defeat, and his heart quickened. Has she collapsed again?

He dismounted and tied his horse to a convenient tree branch, heading towards her.

“Lass,” he said, approaching her.

She turned her head and stared at him from tear-soaked eyes. Was she hurt? He crouched before her. “Are ye trying to kill yerself, lass?” he said. “Are ye hurt?” He put out his hands to offer her a lift up. She took his hand reluctantly and rose. But she was unsteady on her feet, and he picked her up, turning and trudging back up the sandy beach to his horse. She subsided meekly enough in his arms, shuddering a little with cold, and no wonder. He could feel the sharp edge of the breeze through his jacket. Her flimsy garments and even her cloak were not sufficient protection, despite the intermittent sun.

He marvelled again at how slender and light she was. She was like a bird, fragile and quick, yet with the determination of a lioness.

He settled her on his horse and got up behind her, an arm round her waist to stop her toppling off. He was conscious of eyes on them. It would be all over the village that he had been seen with her. So much for keeping it quiet. He sighed inwardly. The conclusion his son had made would be made by the villagers as well.

She had curled into his chest in a way that made him look down at her. He couldn’t see her face, for her hair had come loose and fell like a straight, thick black curtain over her shoulders and obscured her face from his sight. He could feel the warmth of her still-rasping breath through his shirt, where her face pressed against him and her small hands wrapped around his middle. Her shoulders still shook, and her breathing was troubled.

He returned to the house and took her back upstairs to the bedroom. Of the boys and Fergus there was no sign, so he was spared the necessity to explain what he didn’t understand himself. Why chase after her? Why bring her back, when she obviously

doesn't want to be here? Perhaps for the self-evident fact that she had nowhere else to go, and she was too weak to make her own way yet. When she was stronger, he'd let her go, of course he would. But she needed him right now. The notion that he was needed gave him a warm feeling in his breast.

The boys needed him too, but he didn't know how to be what they needed him to be. He seemed to be all wrong for them. Rory borderline hated him, and Callum wasn't fond of him either. He suspected they would both be happier without him. But he was their father, and they were his responsibility. He would have to figure out how to do right by them.

For the umpteenth time, he wished for Merlow. He might be younger, but right now Col felt as if Merlow were the older and wiser of the two of them. His time in China had changed him.

He set the lass down on the bed, removed the poker and the plank with the nails still in it, took off her boots, fetched the socks and put them on her feet, removed her cloak, and tucked her under the covers. All the while, she sat passively, letting him. Her eyes contained a deep sorrow that cut him to the quick. What is wrong? This is more than just her desire to chase after Ming Liang, he would swear.

He sat on the bed and took her hand. "What ails ye, lass? What is wrong?" he asked helplessly.

She said something in her own language, but it was just sounds to him. Then she pointed over his shoulder at something. Turning, he followed the line of her finger. On the mantle over the fire was a miniature of a ship. He had made it as a lad and kept it.

She said something else, and he turned to look at her.

“Yer ship, yer ship has sailed without ye?” He made gestures to try to convey his words.

“ Shaolin ,” she said. “Ship! Gone!”

“They have gone back to China without ye?”

She nodded, tears brimming her eyes and slipping down her cheeks.

“That was why ye were so desperate to escape!” His face screwed into a grimace. “I’m sorry.”

She punched him in the chest then. Surprisingly, the short, sharp jab hurt.

He rubbed it absently. “I’m sorry, lass. Ye’ll be wanting to find Liang.”

She nodded.

“When ye’re well, lass. Ye stay here until ye’re better.” He tried gestures to convey his meaning.

He glanced at the bowl of parritch he had left her. It was untouched. His stomach rumbled then, reminding him he hadn’t eaten either.

“Food?” he asked making an eating gesture.

She nodded. “Aye, please.”

He smiled at her manners. “Ye stay here.” He pointed at the bed and then mimed. “I’ll bring ye food.”

She nodded, relaxing into the pillows. He left her with the dogs to guard her and went downstairs to raid the kitchen.

To his relief, she was where he'd left her, still in bed, when he came back with a laden tray.

After they had eaten, he left her to rest and went to make up a new mattress for the Daffodil Room. With a freshly stuffed mattress, clean sheets and pillows, blankets, and a plaid for good measure, the bed looked comfortable enough. He flung the window open to air the room, cleaned the furniture of dust, and made up the fire, ready to light later. Satisfied that the room was as comfortable as he could make it, he went back to check on her. She was sleeping, so he left her and went to his study, where he stared at nothing for an hour, trying to work out what had happened to his life in the past few days.

When she woke later that afternoon, he transferred her to the Daffodil Room. If she wanted to run, she could. He wasn't going to lock her in anymore. But he rather fancied she wouldn't. Not yet. He hoped not, anyway.



### Chapter Eight

A ihan woke the next morning in the yellow room he had moved her into, feeling much better. She was still sad, still angry, but she was stronger. Her head felt clearer, her throat less raw, and her lungs less congested.

The urgency to leave, now that the Shaolin had left without her, was gone. Yes, she needed to discover what had happened to Liang, but she could afford to wait until she got her strength back now. And she could spend her time learning as much as she could from Mac. He had invited her to use his given name, Col, but her tongue couldn't get round the foreign 'l' sound, so she resorted to thinking of him as Mac, It was easier.

She couldn't deny that he had taken very good care of her. Even though she was angry with him for keeping her here, from preventing her from returning to the Shaolin and going home, she was conscious of a certain gratitude. He had saved her life, after all.

He was fascinated with her, too. He wanted her as a man wants a woman—that searing kiss in the cell had told her that. Why he fled from her, why he was so angry with her, she didn't know. But he wanted her, and she could use that. Her body pulsed with the memory of rubbing herself on his generous manhood. She had to admit the prospect of letting him bed her was an attractive one.

If she spent a little time here, learning the language and customs of this foreign land, it would help her when she was ready to go look for her brother. Liang had taught her the importance of preparation for any endeavour. A woman alone was vulnerable in

any environment, even with her skills. In a foreign land with neither money nor resources, when she looked so different, without being able to speak the language or understand how to get along, it would be dangerous and foolhardy.

She would bide her time, learn all she could, and gather her resources. Then she would go. She suspected that Mac hadn't told her all he had discovered about Liang in any case. Whether that was a deliberate omission or just because of the language barrier between them, she didn't know. But she would do everything she could to learn his barbaric language so that she could discover the truth. And she would use every weapon in her arsenal to bend him to her will.

A knock at the door jerked her out of her thoughts and she called, "Come in," in her own language.

The door opened, and Mac stood there with a large metal tub in his hands.

"Bath," he said, holding it out, and when she nodded her comprehension, he set it down by the hearth. Then he said, "Water," with a pouring motion into the tub, and she nodded again and smiled. A bath would be very welcome. "Thank ye," she said, clasping her hands and bowing from the waist in gratitude.

She stayed in the bed while Mac and the boys, whom she concluded by the resemblance were his sons, plus a younger lad and an older man, all filed in with buckets and filled the tub for her.

The boys stared at her much as they had done when she was in the cell. The redheaded one had brown dots on his skin like his father, as did the other lad with the tow-coloured hair. It seemed it was a common look in these parts.

Mac left her soap and towels and shut the door, opening it again a moment later to say, "Breakfast, downstairs." His gestures made his meaning clear, and she filed

away all these words for later use. It was a good thing she had an excellent memory. He shut the door again, and she ventured out to strip and step into the hot water. It was so wonderful she groaned, lying back in the water and letting the heat seep into her bones. After she had washed her hair and soaped herself all over and rinsed it off, she stepped out of the now-cooling water to dry herself off and discovered Mac had left her more than the towels and soap.

A brush and comb for her hair and a gown lay under the towels. The gown was one of the strange high-waisted ones she had seen the other women in this place wearing. It was made of a fine wool fabric in a pretty shade of sky blue and had long sleeves. She measured the gown against herself and found that the length reached to the ground. She would need to lift the hem when she walked to avoid tripping. Really very impractical compared with her sensible trousers, but warmer, she suspected, for this climate.

With the gown was an under-skirt and what she assumed must be another undergarment, a simple cotton sheath dress. There was another weird contraption with lacings that looked very uncomfortable. She wasn't going to put that on! And under it all was a pretty, cream cashmere shawl, with embroidered roses round the outer edge. As she picked up the shawl, something heavy fell out of it onto the floor. Bending, she saw that it was her little knife. She had dropped it when Mac captured her and thought it lost. He must have found it. Her fist closed round the little ivory-handled knife, tears pricking her eyes. It had been a gift from Liang for her fifteenth birthday. Nice of Mac to give it back to her.

She got herself into the strange clothes and did her best to lace up the gown so that it didn't fall off her shoulders. The front of it was a bit baggy; it was clearly made for a woman with larger breasts than she had. She had seen no women in this house, so she concluded that whomever these garments belonged to was no longer here. Which might account for Mac's air of sorrow.

Dressed and wearing her boots, she headed for the door to venture downstairs in search of the “breakfast” Mac had promised. She was famished.

She reached the ground floor and followed the sound of voices to a room containing a large table at which the entire male contingent of the house were seated. She wondered again at the absence of servants in a lord’s house. He was clearly impoverished, which the worn state of the house and furniture supported. The whole place needed female attention.

When she entered the room, Mac, who was seated at the head of the table and facing the door, rose to his feet and coughed. The other males stopped talking and, after a moment, rose too. This was clearly a courtesy paid to females in this country. Nice. She smiled and, holding up her too-long skirt carefully, came towards the chair on Mac’s left hand that had been set for her. The older man sat at the foot of the table and Mac’s boys sat opposite her, with the other young one beside her.

“Aihan,” said Mac, gesturing to the other males. “This is Rory, Callum, Fergus, and Willy.” He indicated each of them in turn. She smiled and bowed to them with her hands clasped politely, and they bowed back, but without the hand gesture. She took note of this and all their names. There was a lot to learn. Mac held her chair, and she sat, and he pushed it in for her. Another courtesy, she noted, was that the males only sat once she was seated.

Mac waved at the food, and she helped herself to the “parritch.” She was glad to see more of the crumbly offal mixture. She liked that, what was it called? Haggis.

She filled her bowl and began to eat, then became aware that the men had been silent since she had entered the room. The boys were staring at her, and even the older man was stealing looks at her under his bushy eyebrows. She lowered her eyes and kept eating. Mac growled something at the rest of them, and they resumed eating. But her presence seemed to have stifled conversation.

After a bit, Mac leaned towards her and said quietly, with a gesture to his chest and throat, “Better?”

She nodded, swallowing her mouthful. “Aye, thank ye.”

At the sound of her voice the others all looked up from their plates and the dark-haired boy said, “She can speak English?” English, that was their language. She knew that from Liang.

“She’s learning,” said Mac. “She is a quick study,” he added. The words didn’t quite make sense, but she divined a compliment in them somewhere.

The dark-haired boy uttered a “Humph!” noise and then said, “Are ye a whore ?” She didn’t know what a whore was, but the word made Mac roar at him.

The language Mac used to address the boy was not like the language he had been using to speak to her, and she understood not a word, yet she knew Mac was very angry with his son. The boy flushed bright red with equal fury and stood up, flung down his spoon, and marched out of the room.

Mac bolted after him and the rest of them stayed put at the table. The older man, Fergus, said, “I’m sorry, Lassie, the lad is might trína chéile .”

She blinked at the strange words and just nodded.

A few minutes later Mac came back, leading a tearful, red-faced Rory, and shoved him in front of her. “Apologise!”

“I’m sorry, Miss,” he said. looking at his boots.

Recognising the intent but not knowing the right words to respond, she inclined her

head in a nod with hands clasped and said, “Thank ye.”

Clearly a whore was something uncomplimentary. She suspected she knew what it was, but she would ask Mac later.

Rory sat back down gingerly, and she realised Mac must have punished him. She felt some sympathy. Liang had punished her and Caishen for transgressions in their youth. It had hurt, but they had learned and not done it again. It was interesting how much power women had here; Mac was keen to ensure she was shown respect by all the males in this house. She could certainly use that to her advantage.

When the meal was finished, the older man began clearing away the bowls and food remnants, which shocked her. Age in her culture was treated with the utmost respect. She immediately went to help him. The young boy Willy also helped.

Fergus said, “Thank ye, lass.” He led the way to the kitchens, and she could immediately see what she could do to help. She seized an apron from the hook on the wall, put it on, and set about washing the dishes. Fergus disappeared into what was obviously the pantry, coming out with a pile of vegetables.

She nodded to him. “Ye are Mac’s father?” she asked, digging into the meagre store of words she knew.

“Nae, lass.” He grinned, showing crooked teeth. “The old man is dead, these five years gone.”

She sorted that out in her mind as she scrubbed a dirty pot.

Mac appeared in the doorway then. “Ye got her working, Fergus?”

“Nae, milord, she did that all herself.”

Mac approached her. “Aihan, ye don’t have to—” he gestured at the sink full of dirty dishes.

“I want to help,” she said, making an effort to pronounce the words she knew as clearly as possible. She was beginning to get an ear for the accent these people used to speak their English.

Mac paused a moment, then smiled and gave her one of her bows with the clasped hands back. “Thank ye.”

“Don’t let her work too hard, Fergus, she is not at full strength yet. Aihan,” he said, turning back to her, “come to my study when you are finished. Fergus, show her where to come?” The words washed over her, she was catching more and more meaning from them. It wouldn’t be long before she was communicating much more easily.

An hour later she made her way to Mac’s “study” with Fergus’ help. Entering the room, she found him seated at a large desk, the dogs by the fire sleeping. A bay window at the front of the room provided a view of the approach to the house. The room was lined with bookcases, stuffed with books, and there was a portrait of a lovely woman and two children above the fireplace. The woman had long dark hair, and she thought she could detect some resemblance between the children and the boys, Rory and Ca’um. Was this the owner of the dress she was wearing? Mac’s wife? And if so, what had happened to her? The most likely answer was that she had died, which would account for his sorrowful air.

Mac had a big ledger open and a pen in his hand, but when she came in, he looked up and put it down. He smiled at the sight of her, rising and coming round the desk to greet her. He had shaved this morning and tidied his long red hair back into a queue. He was more dressed than she had seen him before, too, with a neckcloth and waistcoat beneath his dun-coloured jacket. He wore buckskin breeches and boots, and

despite the unfamiliar style of his clothing, he exuded a masculine energy that tugged at the place between her legs with an enticing pulse.

Seducing this hulking great Scot was going to be neither difficult nor a chore.

“Aihan,” he drew her into the room with a gentle hand and indicated one of the chairs drawn up to the fire. She sat and he took the other. Leaning forward, he spoke slowly with gestures to try to make his meaning clear. “I want ye to know, I am sorry. That yer ship has gone without ye. I feel responsible for ye now. Ye have a home here as long as ye want it. Ye ken?”

She nodded. “Aye. Thank ye.”

“Will ye stay, at least until ye are better?”

She smiled. This was so easy. He was offering her everything she wanted. “Thank ye.” She bowed, hands clasped.

“Good.” His shoulders relaxed, and he smiled. His strange features were becoming more attractive to her as she grew accustomed to them. His large, open blue eyes gave her a mirror into his heart. Was he aware of how transparent he was? How much he wore his heart on his sleeve?

“I want to learn Eng’ish!” she said. “Ye teach me?”

“Gladly, lass, and the Gaelic if ye’ve a mind.”

“Gah’ic?”

“Aye, that’s my native language.” He waved. “The local language of the Scots. I’m Scots, ye ken?”



“Ken,” she said, nodding. “Scots,” she added. “Ye’re Scots.”

He grinned. “Ye’re quick, lass.”

“What is whore ?” she asked.

He frowned at that. “It’s nae a nice word to apply to a woman. Ye’re a woman, ye ken. I’m a man.” He tapped his chest.

“Woman.” She tapped her breast. “Man.” She tapped his knee. “Whore?” She queried again.

“A prostitute. A woman who sleeps with a man for money.” His gestures made his meaning clear.

“Ah! Jin?!” she nodded. As I thought.

She pointed to the portrait. “Who is she?”

A shadow fell across his face as he looked at the portrait, and his expression softened into longing and pain. “My wife, Catriona.” He linked his fingers. “My wife, ye ken?”

She nodded. “Wife.” She touched his knee gently. “She die?”

“Aye. Six years gone.”

Aihan’s heart leapt and pulsed with a sympathetic ache at the patent sorrow in his tone and expression. He must have loved this woman very much.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured.

“Aye, thank ye,” he said with a shake of his head.

She gestured to the portrait. “Sons, Rory, Ca’um?”

“Aye, they miss her too.”

She nodded. The boys need a mother. Mac needs a lover. The house needs cleaning. Perfect. She would start with the house. She rose to her feet, which drew Mac to his feet also. She didn’t miss the bulge in his breeches. An answering pulse tugged between her legs. “I clean, you teach,” she said, firmly repressing her desire to reach out and touch him. She would leave that until his need of her was so strong it would overwhelm his reason. It shouldn’t take long. He was ripe already. And so was she.

He stared at her a moment, an expression in his eyes she couldn’t interpret. Then he did something that startled her. He took her hand and kissed it. “Thank ye, lass.” The jolt of his touch made her catch her breath. Yes, soon. Very soon.

She bowed her head in acknowledgement and left the room to go in search of cleaning cloths and a bucket.

Col watched her leave with a strange ache in his chest and a hot bloom in his breeches. There was something about her that cut to the quick of him. She looked fragile, yet she was as tough as leather boots and strong as tempered steel. He’d been plagued again last night by a rush of desire that wouldn’t be denied. Fortunately, he was alone and could assuage it with his hand. It left him wrung out and wanting. For the first time since Cat passed, he wanted physical touch with a ravening hunger that scared him witless.

When Aihan touched his knee just now, his cock had stiffened like a poker in his breeches. Her clean scent, with a hint of lavender from the soap he’d left her, curled into his blood and made it course hot and heavy in his veins. He couldn’t pretend to

himself he didn't want her, fiercely. Equally, he couldn't pretend he wasn't glad she was staying. He'd promised himself if she chose to go, he wouldn't try to stop her. But he acknowledged he'd have been hard-pressed not to.

He'd walloped Rory for his whore comment, but if he was honest, he was thinking of making her one with his lewd desire. His leman, anyway, for as long as she'd stay. Taking her to bed and assuaging his hunger. Making her feel good. He swallowed the saliva in his mouth at the notion and groaned aloud. Fuck, he was a mess! He turned to look up at Cat's portrait. "I'm sorry, love," he whispered.

Her warm dark eyes smiled down at him. The artist had captured her luminous beauty, her creamy skin, and her dark wavy hair that fell like a curtain round her shoulders in bed and enveloped them both. Her luscious lips and enchanting smile. How could he think of anyone but her?

Could any two women be more different? Cat was small of stature too, but much more sturdily built, with generous curves and a ripe, luscious beauty that had felled him practically on sight. There was nothing fragile about Cat; she had dominated a room with her graceful presence, her sunny laughter, and her peaceful demeanour.

And yet—there were similarities. Both were strong women, physically and emotionally. Both were practical and hardworking. And both pulled at him with a desire that threatened to bring him to his knees. He sat down abruptly, those knees giving out as he contemplated just how strong his attraction towards the tiny Chinese lass was. He didn't want to admit it, but it was stronger than anything he'd felt for Cat. But surely that was just the effect of abstinence? I've been without so long . . . .

He closed his eyes and breathed, trying to beat back the waves of desire battering at him. It was no use: He had to do something about it, or he couldn't function sensibly. He got up, locked the door, and sat down again to take himself in hand and fix it, for the moment at least.

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### Chapter Nine

“What are they?” asked Rory, poking at the little parcels of soft white dough on his plate.

“Pork buns,” said Aihan. “Try,” she said, picking one up off her plate and taking a bite. “Good!” she said round her mouthful.

Col hid a smile at Rory’s expression and took a cautious bite of his own bun. The soft, light dough was slightly chewy and sweet, and hidden in the centre was a pocket of crumbly sweet and savoury meat that was quite tasty.

He nodded and smiled at Aihan. “Good,” he agreed.

Fergus manfully took a bite, and his bushy eyebrows went up when he got the flavour of the meat. “Verra guid, lassie,” he growled.

Willy took a big bite and Callum did likewise. Callum glanced at Rory, who was still regarding the bun as if it were an intruder about to rob him, and said thickly, “If ye dinnae want yers, I’ll have it.”

That made Rory stuff the bun in his mouth and chew valiantly.

Col had kept his distance from the lass the last couple of days as she cleaned the house from top to bottom, and today as she took over the kitchen to cook them a Chinese feast, of which the pork buns were the first course. She’d had Willy running errands for her all day into the village for ingredients. When he had penetrated to the

kitchen to check on her progress, she had explained that she was having to substitute ingredients.

“Ye nae have many things I want,” she said, her hair tied back off her face and an apron over her gown. He noticed that she had lifted the hem of the gown so that she could walk without having to hold it up, and tightened the too-loose bodice. He should find her some others from Cat’s wardrobe. After all, they were just gathering dust.

However it was, she made do, and the food was strange but delicious. Even Rory enjoyed it in the end. She had made noodles , long strings of a type of dough, he supposed, and cooked a type of spiced stew with vegetables and meat that was more flavoursome than anything Fergus had ever served up. And she finished everything off with a custard and rice pudding dish like nothing he’d ever eaten before.

After dinner he took the dogs for their evening walk, planning to return to his study and read until bedtime. Aihan had retired early the last two nights, worn out from all her hard work. It had made it easy to avoid being alone with her. Tonight, he returned from his walk with the dogs to find her ensconced in a chair staring at a book, taken presumably from his shelves. She was sitting with her feet tucked up under her skirts, a hank of her hair had come loose from its confines and hung down the side of her face, and whatever she was looking at seemed to have her enthralled.

He checked on the threshold, but the dogs marched in, tails wagging, and she looked up to greet them with pats and exclamations in her own language. She glanced up and smiled at him.

His heart turned over and thudded hard, and heat stirred in his breeches again. She was as dangerous as a snake and as enticing as a siren. He should—he must—keep his distance. He came into the room, pushing the door shut behind him without thinking, and walked towards her. Crouching down by her chair, he said,

“What are ye looking at, lass?”

She held up the book: Drake’s Voyage by Edward Cavendish Drake, 1768 . She had the book open to a map of the world. Her finger traced over the map.

“My home,” she whispered. He leaned forward to see better and a warm drop of moisture fell on the back of his hand. “I lived here,” she said, pointing to a spot on the map. She sniffed, and he caught another tear with his fingers as it rolled down her cheek.

“I’m sorry, lass,” he said, husky-voiced. He dropped to his knees and hugged her against his chest, the book still on her lap between them. She rested her head against his shoulder and her thin shoulders shook with silent tears. He found her a handkerchief, and she blew her nose and wiped her face. He couldn’t imagine what it must feel like to be exiled from home. How would he feel if he thought he might never see Scotland again?

Conscious of the burning heat in his breeches, he rose and went to the fireplace to put some distance between them.

“I cannae imagine how ye must feel, lass. I’m that sorry.” Is there a way I can get her home? Then he recalled the Sassenach who had come looking for his brother. What had the man said, something about a British embassy to China, that the Government wanted Merlow to join? Could I get her on that ship? What did Merlow say about it when he was here with Hetty? Merlow had declined to join the embassy, obviously. He didn’t wish to be parted from his new wife. But he hadn’t said aught else about it. It might be too late, but he could make enquiries. Better not to say anything to the lass, raise her hopes only to have them dashed. If I teach her English, she will be useful to the delegation, and they’ll surely not refuse her passage then?

She was looking at the map again, the handkerchief clutched in one hand. He returned

to her side and knelt in front of her. “Show me, lass, where you lived?”

“Here.” She pointed to a spot on the map, turning the book around so that he could see. It was a map of the world, and it put into perspective just how far away China was. Whatever possessed them to pursue my brother all the way here? He would question her more closely when her English was better. Her finger rested above the rounded coast of China, adjacent to a large bay and about one finger width inland. “Beijing,” she murmured.

“The capital, Peking?” he asked.

She nodded and closed the book, as if looking at it any longer was too painful. She put it on the side table beside her chair and reached out a hand to touch his face. Her small hand cupped his cheek and sent a tingle of sensation over his skin. His cock, already half-hard from her proximity, stiffened further with a rush of heated desire that made it hard to think. Her eyes, dark and mysterious, had him fascinated.

“Thank ye,” she said. “Ye are kind.”

“Nae, lass, I feel responsible.” He was conscious of his heart rate accelerating and his breathing rising just from the touch of her hand and her scent. He should get up, move away . . . .

She cocked her head as if not sure of that word. Then, before he could move back, she leaned in and set her lips to his. It was a soft, gentle kiss and over almost before it began, but it fired his senses and loosened his control, which he’d been hanging on to by a thread. Putting a hand behind her head, he brought her mouth back to his and kissed her. She slid her arms round his neck and kissed him back.

He wrapped an arm round her waist, pulling her towards him, and she slid her knees to either side of his hips as he pulled her flush against him to the edge of the chair.

His mouth devoured hers in a kiss that sent his blood racing and made his overwrought cock leak in his breeches as he pressed into the apex of her thighs in an unconscious grinding motion, reminiscent of the way she had ground herself on him a few days ago.

She responded now with an unabashed rotation of her hips, seemingly as eager as he to find some relief from the nagging desire that was driving him crazy. Her legs wrapped round him, pressing her closer to the source of raging heat between them. Her breathing as ragged as his, she made a noise in her throat that sent a bolt of hot desire to his aching groin.

His hands dropped to her hips and then lower, cupping and squeezing her bottom, pressing her harder against him. Grinding. Rubbing. Her hips worked as hard as his to bring them mutual pleasure through the layers of their clothing. Fuck! This was obscene, and it felt so good he couldn't stop, and it didn't seem as if she wanted him to stop either.

She was as frantic for this as he was, their mouths taking each other with ferocious appetite, their bodies working themselves into a panting, groaning frenzy. "Yes," he groaned, and so did she, as her body convulsed, suddenly trembling, the movement of her hips going jerky as she moaned again and again, her head falling back, eyes closed.

It was too much, and he came hard in his breeches, panting and grunting like a beast as indescribable pleasure flooded his body. His arms clamped her tight to him as the wave receded slowly, and his head dropped forward onto her shoulder.

He kissed the exposed flesh of her neck and squeezed her tight, dragging in a slow, deep breath. "Bha mi dìreach a' suathadh ri nighean nèimh," he whispered. I just touched heaven, lass.



She blinked her eyes and said something he couldn't understand, a small smile tracing her lips. His own lifted in a half smile too, amused by their inability to understand a word the other was saying while their bodies communicated just fine.

Gradually, awareness of where they were—in his study, right in front of Cat's portrait—penetrated his sex-soaked brain, and he became conscious simultaneously of the pain in his knees and the wet and rapidly cooling mess in his breeches. Fuck, what have I done?

Her legs unwound from his hips, and he slowly let her go, edging back and rising to his feet, turning away from her, embarrassed and ashamed of his loss of control and the insult he'd just served the memory of his wife. Coming between the legs of another woman in full view of her portrait.

He leaned on the mantle staring blindly down at the fire, his shoulders hunched. He felt sick.

"Mac?" She touched his arm. He resisted the urge to shake her off and roar at her to leave him alone. He had just enough awareness to check that wild reaction. With difficulty he said quietly, "Ye'd best go to bed, lass."

"Mac?"

"Go, please!" he said, fighting to keep his voice level.

Another moment and then she obeyed him. He felt her move away, a cold puff of air that sent a shiver down his back, but that was probably just the sweat under his shirt congealing. He heard the door open and then close quietly. And he slumped forward, his forehead on his hands, gripping the edge of the mantelpiece.

He stood like that for some time, lost in a kind of anguished haze. Finally, he

straightened and looked up at Cat's portrait through a haze of tears. "I'm sorry, mo ghràdh." My love.

He turned away and made his way upstairs to his bedchamber, where he stripped, washed, and crawled into bed. Closing his eyes, he forgot to say his usual prayer to Cat, his thoughts a jumbled mess. He fell asleep in the midst of trying to work out what he was going to do.

Aihan, retreating to her room, was conscious of a heaviness of heart in the wake of the joyful pleasure she had experienced in his arms. For a few precious moments, she had felt that the differences in language were overcome by a more primal language that they both understood. But in the aftermath, his withdrawal and rejection destroyed that communion of souls and made her feel cheap and tawdry. It hurt.

She tried to shrug off the stab in her heart, but as she stripped off the foreign clothes and gave herself a quick wash, the tears came anyway, tightening her throat and clouding her eyes. The ache in her chest squeezed, and she suddenly missed her brother fiercely.

Ah Liang, where are you? I should just leave, but I don't have the information I need yet, for where would I go?

She climbed into the big soft bed with its rustling mattress and snuggled herself under the covers, Curling her feet up to keep them warm.

I must find out where you went, Liang. I shall come to you wherever you are, my brother. I need you.

Sleep took her before she could formulate a plan of any kind, but thoughts of Liang were a bittersweet comfort. Yet as she slipped into sleep it was Mac's face that teased her, his head thrown back, eyes closed, expression twisted, as his body convulsed

with their shared ecstasy. She had felt the flood of heat and dampness through her dress. He had come as hard as she did. His arms, tight round her at the end, had felt so good. So big and warm and safe . . .

### Chapter Ten

When Aihan appeared at breakfast for the fourth morning in a row in the same gown, Col realised he needed to give her some more dresses to wear. So, after breakfast, he went up to the attic and fetched down one of the trunks he had packed Cat's things in. He took it to the Daffodil Room and left it on the floor at the foot of the bed. He salved his conscience with the thought that Cat wouldn't want her things mouldering away in the attic if they could be used. She was very practical like that. A trait she and Aihan seemed to share.

He had expected there to be awkwardness at breakfast after what happened between them last night, but when he entered the dining room, Rory and Callum were having a fight. How it started he wasn't sure, but by the time he arrived they were tussling on the floor, and Rory had Callum pinned down with a hand to his throat.

He was about to intervene when Aihan rushed past him, setting the tray of food she was carrying on the table, and applied a swift kick to Rory's ribs, which sent him sprawling. Callum scrambled to his feet, his face red and tear-streaked as he got the table between himself and his brother, and Aihan grabbed Rory and threw him with a blindingly quick twist so that he landed on his back. Then she put a booted foot lightly on his throat.

"How ye like it, huh?" she asked, bending over him.

Rory blinked, staring up at her, stunned and winded.

"Ye leave him alone." She indicated Callum. "I teach ye to fight, Chinese style. You

like?”

Rory nodded, and she lifted her foot and gave him a hand up.

The boys took their seats at the table as Fergus and Willy came in with the rest of the breakfast things.

Helping himself to parritch, Callum said shyly, “Will ye teach me to fight too?”

“Sure,” said Aihan with a broad smile. She nodded at Willy, “Ye too?”

Willy nodded enthusiastically, as his mouth was full of bread.

Taking his seat at the table, Col wondered what just happened. Peace seemed restored, at any rate. He leaned towards her and murmured, “Thank ye.”

“No problem, I need to train every day. This just kill two birds with one rock.” She smiled. “I get that right?”

“Generally, we use stone instead of rock, but aye, ye used the expression correctly.” She was a very fast learner. There was so much more he wanted to know about her. She was intelligent and strong and fierce and brave. No highland warrior had more courage, he thought. And she was unabashedly passionate. He winced internally at that. He needed to keep his distance on that front. It would be difficult. He would be careful not to be alone with her again.

Aihan arranged to meet the boys in the courtyard mid-morning for their first lesson. All three of them were there ahead of her, waiting.

She bowed to them, placing her clenched fist against her flat palm and bending at the waist.

They all three blinked at her, then Callum imitated her, and she smiled. “Good.”

Willy followed suit and then, reluctantly, Rory.

“I am sh?fù. Teacher. You obey me.”

“Sh?fù,” they echoed awkwardly.

She bowed again. “Good. We begin with breathing.”

“I know how to breathe,” objected Rory. “I want to learn how to fight.”

“I do this long time. I know more than ye. Accept this or I not teach.”

“How long?” asked Rory.

“Since five years old.”

“How old are ye now?”

“Twenty-five.” She met his sceptical glare with calm. “Ye want to fight?”

He nodded.

“Good, ye listen and learn.”

Col, watching the lesson from the lee of the back entrance to the kitchen, marvelled at Aihan’s ability to get the boys to obey her. Even the truculent Rory seemed in thrall to her. He hid a smile, like father like son’s. For he was as surely in thrall to her as much as the boys, if for a different reason.

She was twenty-five, older than she looked. But then her calm demeanour spoke of maturity. She was no girl, and based on last night's encounter, no virgin either. He shuddered with remembered desire, his cock thickening. He took a breath, trying to push the memories away. What they did last night, the way they did it, he'd never done before. Even courting Cat—and they had done everything but fuck, before the wedding—he'd never rubbed himself fully clothed against her and come. And so hard too, he'd practically blacked out. He took another breath, bringing his attention back to the activities in the courtyard, resolutely blocking out thoughts of a repeat of last night.

At the end of the lesson, she sent them off with instructions to create a mattress so that they could practice throws without hurting themselves. They raced off to obey her, and she headed towards the kitchen. Not wanting to be caught spying on her, he beat a hasty retreat to his study. An hour later, she came in to let him know luncheon was ready and to thank him for the trunk of clothes.

“They belong to yer wife?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Ye don't mind I wear them?”

“Nae.” He cleared his throat. “Better they be used. Cat would be glad they were getting worn. She wouldn't want them going to waste.”

“Thank ye,” she said, accompanying him to the dining room. “I found sewing kit in drawers,” she said, indicating the changes she had made to the gown she was wearing.

“I noticed,” he said with a smile. “Ye're shorter and smaller than Cat.”

The fact that she was smaller-breasted didn't bother him. He had always thought he preferred larger ones. Seemed the size wasn't the deciding factor. For all his determination to stay away from her, he was failing miserably. She was like a lodestone luring him in. A magnetic force as powerful as a current.

He could feel his body reacting to her proximity, and it was addictive. He liked the thrill of arousal her mere presence stirred in him. He couldn't even pinpoint the cause. It was something in her aura, rather than anything in particular about the way she looked. He'd likened her to a seelie fae at first sight, with her slender build and indefinable air of glamour. But he didn't think it was that, unless it was in the power of her beautiful black eyes, which seemed to see right through to the heart of him?

He took his seat at the table after seating her and surveyed today's meal. More traditional fare today. Tatties and neeps, stew, and fresh bread. But the flavouring in the stew pointed to Aihan's touch. It was spicy and slightly sweet and salty. She had made her mark in a matter of days on all of them.

That evening, Aihan appeared for dinner in one of Cat's other gowns, and he was forced to eat his words about her attraction having nothing to do with her appearance. She had done something with her hair and altered the gown to fit. The neckline was low-cut and the deep blood-red of the gown's velvet fabric altered her colouring somehow. Made her appear more vibrant. It certainly drew the eye. A wide sash emphasised her waistline in a way that wasn't necessarily fashionable, but showed off her slender form. I definitely cannot be alone with her tonight in that!

Aihan had spent considerable time and effort on her appearance tonight, altering the gown to fit, pinning up her hair, washing thoroughly, and applying some rose water she had found in a sealed bottle. She had an agenda. She wanted more information, and she was prepared to use any methods to get it. And if she was honest, she wouldn't mind more of what last night had promised. The man aroused her. She wanted him, and she knew he wanted her. She could see no reason not to act on that.



Mac took the dogs out for their evening walk, and she went to his study again. The library was a treasure trove of knowledge that pulled at her. She was frustrated by her inability to read any of the texts, but the illustrations in many of the books were fascinating. She found one about animals with lots of pictures of creatures she had never seen.

Sitting down with it, she waited for Mac to return from his walk. He was gone much longer this time. It was almost ten o'clock, and she was dozing over the book when the door opened and the dogs muscled in, panting.

Like last night, she greeted them, putting the book aside to do so, and glanced over at the door where Mac stood, looking at her.

"I thought ye'd be in bed by now," he said.

So, he has stayed out to avoid me? Where has he been all this time? She rose and came towards him and the smell of whisky on his breath told her he'd been at the Spotted Chicken.

"I wait for ye," she said simply. She put a hand on his chest and looked up at him. He was a big man. His scent, a whiff of sweat, wood smoke and tobacco, something that was intrinsically him, made the place between her legs throb.

"Aihaan," he said helplessly, his blue eyes glowing with a fire that made her pulse race.

"Dinnae fight it," she whispered, reaching up to kiss him.

He shut the door with a backward kick of his foot and drew her tight against him with a noise part-way between a groan and a growl. "Lass, ye're killing me," he whispered between heated kisses.

“Me too,” she said, panting, pressing her body closer to him. She wanted to climb him like a tree. Make him take her to heaven, fully, properly. She had prepared for this with a strategically placed vinegar-soaked sponge. His big hands seized her bottom and squeezed, pressing her against him, so she could feel the hard heat of him. She wanted that.

He walked her backwards towards the fireplace and pulled her down into his lap on the chair. She squirmed about to straddle him. All the while they kissed, deep, devouring kisses, tongues and teeth clashing wanting to get as close to each other as possible.

She bunched the heavy fabric of her gown up to get closer to him, and he loosened the laces of her bodice, his mouth tracing kisses up and down her neck. She arched it for him and reached between them to find the buttons on his breeches.

One of his hands dipped inside her bodice to cup a breast and fondle a nipple, causing her to whimper with need, hot throbs of sensation between her legs making her wetter. The razor-sharp ache of desire made her hips buck, she was so desperate for touch there. Her shaking fingers scrabbled at his buttons, trying to work them loose and get at the treasure within.

His other hand reached under her skirts and ran up her thigh, and she moaned when his fingers finally touched her twitching, weeping flesh.

“Mac, please,” she begged.

He groaned. “Ye’ll be the death of me, lass!” he muttered against her shoulder, his teeth grazing her skin. His fingers stroked her flesh and she groaned, her voice cracking as she cried out with the relief and the increased ache all at once. His fingers slid along the wet channel of her sensitised flesh, stirring her to more intense desire. It was almost too much and yet not enough. Her fingers faltered on the buttons of his

breeches as his stroking touch tipped her abruptly over the edge with a convulsive jerk of her hips and a whimpering moan. The quick pulse of desire throbbed through her body as she caught her breath, a half-orgasm brought on by her overwrought condition. Not the full-body satisfaction she was looking for.

She renewed her attack on his breeches and got the last stubborn button undone, reaching within for the hard, hot length of him. His girth challenged the grip of her hand, her fingers wrapping round him as she stroked the hot, smooth flesh, iron encased in velvet. Provoking him to swear.

“Fook, woman!”

She would have laughed if she weren’t so overcome with desire. The rippling peak she had experienced moments before had only whetted her appetite for more. She moved, wriggling forward and kneeling up to guide him inside her. Her flesh engaged the head and she sank down, impaling herself on him with a groan of satisfaction, echoed by a guttural noise from him as his hands squeezed her hips.

He was big and firm within her, filling her, stretching her, assuaging the aching emptiness that had been plaguing her. She gripped his shoulders for balance and rode him hard, bent on her own satisfaction. Her gaze fixed on his face, mesmerised by his blazing blue eyes. He wore an expression of desperate, fierce hunger and something she couldn’t define. Awe?

She panted, pushing herself to her goal, her hips grinding against his flesh in just the right way to drive herself over the edge. It was glorious, and she flung her head back at the last, closing her eyes as the pleasure peaked fully this time, flooding her body with bliss, sending a cascade of tingles to the soles of her feet and all the way to her scalp. She cried out in joy, wringing the last drops of pleasure from her flesh and collapsing forward on his chest in breathless delight.

His arms gripped her tight, and he muttered something she couldn't understand. She suspected it might be in his native tongue, Gaelic. He had a habit of lapsing into that in moments of extreme emotion.

"Thank ye," she murmured against his neck.

Col shuddered with barely controlled desire, as he felt the ebbing contractions of her orgasm on his sensitised flesh. How he had not lost it when she hit her peak, he didnae know. He listened to her breathing slow, and braced himself to move her up and off him. If he didn't do it now, he'd lose the battle, and loose his seed inside her. The temptation was overpowering.

In the next moment, she confounded him by moving her hips in a sinuous, seductive circle and murmuring in his ear, "Yer turn."

"Nae, lass, the risk . . ." After losing Cat and the child together, he'd not risk another woman's life for his own pleasure.

"I use sponge," she said, interrupting him.

Her words penetrated his desire-soaked brain, and he groaned as his flesh pulsed. It knew what she meant before he fully comprehended it consciously. Obeying instinct, he surged forward off the edge of the chair, taking her down onto the hearth rug, which smelled of wood smoke, but in his frenzied condition he didn't care. Pinning her beneath him, he felt her legs go round him as he thrust forward deep and hard.

She surged up into him, meeting his every thrust with a twist of her hips, panting and moaning encouragement. She was insatiable, and he didn't think he could hold out any longer. His balls were practically blue with aching desire. He found her mouth and kissed her, speeding up his thrusts. Desire, held in check for so long, teased him with throbs of pleasure, and he groaned, pushing himself deeper and harder. Her

gown bunch up between them, made him think fleetingly that next time, they'd do this naked and in a bed.

The pleasure escalated, winding tighter and tighter, and she cried out, "Mac!" with a kind of wail, just as he hit the point of no return, and the wave crashed over him, flooding his body with tingling bliss, centred on his cock and radiating outwards in intense waves of pleasure. His grunts and groans went on for a seeming eternity as successive waves of delight gradually wound down until he collapsed on her in a panting heap, his body gone boneless and his mind completely empty.

Eventually, he stirred sufficiently to get an elbow under him and lift his head to look down into her face. She had her eyes closed, and her mouth was curved in a satisfied smile. Her hair had come loose from its pins and scattered round her head in a dark fall. Her pushed-down bodice partially revealed her small breasts, and her thighs had fallen slack either side of his hips.

"Are ye well, lass?" he asked, croaky-voiced.

"Aye," she said dreamily, her eyes still closed. "Wonderful!" she added. She cracked one eye open and looked at him. "Ye?"

"Aye, lass," he said with a smile. "Never better."

"Good," she said sleepily.

He shifted, and the movement dislodged his softening cock. He withdrew slowly, flopping over onto his side. He should feel guilty, but he didn't. He felt satisfied and relaxed. Happy. The emotion was so foreign he had trouble recognising it.

He rolled onto his back and his eyes caught the portrait of Cat and the boys above the fireplace. From this angle the picture was a series of shapes and colours, but he didn't

need to see it to know what the images were. They were seared into his brain. And for the first time, looking at it didn't bring pain.

Instead, he was conscious of a warm sense of affection. He loved her, he always would, but perhaps he was finally accepting that what they had shared could never be restored, but might be replaced by something different? He hardly dared to hope. He turned his head as Aihan rolled towards him, her head coming to rest on his shoulder and her hand on his chest.

He clasped that hand and squeezed it. He would investigate the possibility of that embassy journey; if he could get her included, she could go home. He looked at her dark head beneath his chin and wrapped an arm round her thin shoulders, conscious of a vague ache in his chest at the notion of her going away. But if it would make her happy, he would do it. The least he could do for what she had just given him. His first taste of happiness in six years.

He drifted a bit, in the borderland between sleeping and waking. They should get up off the floor and go to bed, but he was too boneless to move. By his foot, Hector whuffed in his sleep, and Gussie snored by his head. The pack only lacked the boys to be complete, he thought nonsensically.

When the clock on the mantle struck twelve, it woke him with a jerk, and he blinked in the rosy darkness. The candles had guttered out and the fire had banked to a warm glow of embers. He nudged Aihan, who was still draped across his chest.

"Lass, we should go to bed."

"Hm," she stirred, raising her head and blinking. "Huh," she muttered, sitting up. He rose and pulled her to her feet, her crumpled skirts falling round her ankles as she leaned drunkenly against him, obviously still half asleep.

“Wake up, Hana,” he said gently. “Bed.”

“Aye.” She raised her head and blinked at him, smiling. “Goodnight, Mac.” She reached up, kissed him on the lips, and wended her way towards the door.

He watched her go, his heart oddly full of conflicting feelings that were by far too complex to disentangle right now. He checked the fire, called the dogs, and made his way to his own room. He stripped, washed, and crawled into bed with the dogs at his feet, collapsing onto the mattress with a contented sigh.

### Chapter Eleven

Col rose early to take the dogs for their morning ramble, feeling more refreshed than he had in a long time. He returned to the house intent on writing to the British government to enquire about the embassy to China. It was his fault she was stranded here, and his conscience demanded that if it was within his power to ensure she could get home, he must do all he could to make that happen.

After breakfast, he saddled his horse for a long overdue visit to his tenants. He'd received several requests for assistance with repairs and damage from recent floods, and he visited each to authorise payments for repairs, settle a dispute between neighbours over a lost pig and a goat, and even to help with the repair of a roof. By the end of the day, he was tired but content and looking forward to returning home.

The emotions were both familiar and foreign. This was the way he used to feel when he had Cat to come home to. Since her death, his life had become grey and bleak, devoid of joy. Even the simple pleasure of a good day's physical labour helping a grateful tenant had eluded him. Everything had felt like a chore. Could last night have made such a difference to my previously bleak existence? Seemingly it had .

Riding home in the mellow light of late afternoon, he gave some serious thought to whether he should allow a repeat of last night's activities. His cock stirred in his breeches as he recalled the details, a bit of a blur at the time, yet visceral moments came back to him in heated clarity.

Losing himself in the delight of kissing her. The shock of her hand on his cock and the equally shockingly delicious feeling of being encased in tight, wet heat as she



engulfed his cock with her entrance and forced her body down over his. He caught his breath with the memory, uttering a low moan. His horse's ears twitched, and he patted the animal absently in reassurance.

Her boldness had both shocked and delighted him. And he recalled now her statement about using a sponge, which showed that she had planned the whole thing. She'd meant to seduce him and had succeeded. He had not resisted. It would have been beyond him to do so.

She was an experienced woman who knew what she wanted and grabbed it with both hands. The contrast with women of his own culture, so protected and hedged about with strictures and prohibitions, admittedly for their own protection, was stark indeed.

Recalling her bold, unabashed passion made him hard as iron. She had wanted him, quite desperately, it seemed. She had been so wet when he touched her, and she came so easily, freely indulging her passion, taking what she wanted, not waiting for him to orchestrate it.

Any uncertainty he might have felt about engaging in intercourse with a woman after so long an abstinence, was swept away on the tide of her passion. He'd not had time for nerves or uncertainty. She whipped him up into a passionate frenzy of need, before he could even think.

He couldn't pretend he didn't want to do it again, in a bed, without clothes to get in the way, but whether they should was another question. If she were to return to her home, was it fair to either of them to indulge a passion that might make parting difficult? Could he maintain sufficient detachment to protect himself from the hurt of loss all over again?

Because he didn't think he could bear that again. Cat had snatched his heart from his chest on first sight and taken it, he'd thought, to her grave. But the organ seemed to

be learning to function again in spite of that. He was unsure what that meant. If he came to care for Aihan, could he bear to give her up?

He had no immediate answers to any of this, but concluded that the more prudent course of action was to avoid any more intimacy. But he was ruefully aware that his body did not agree. He wanted her again, fiercely. If she tried to seduce him tonight, was he strong enough to resist?

The counter-argument, his body proposed, was that it was good for him. He felt marvellous. Where was the sense in denying himself something that felt so damned good and did no one any harm? If she continued to use protection there was no risk of getting her with child, a nightmare he couldn't face. She emphatically was not making him responsible for her feelings, and that was a priceless breath of maturity. He had enough trouble being responsible for his own. If she wanted him, and she had made it clear that she did, was it futile, even selfish, to resist something he also wanted?

But perhaps he was getting ahead of himself. Perhaps having got what she wanted last night, she wouldn't want a repeat? She had left him to go to her bed alone. That surprised him. He had thought perhaps they would retire together. And this morning over breakfast she had behaved quite normally, nothing particularly flirtatious in her manner and nothing awkward either. Perhaps she had scratched her itch and didn't need him anymore? The notion was somewhat deflating.

His conclusion, reached as he dismounted his horse and unbuckled and removed the saddle, was that he would wait and see what she did and act accordingly.

Aihan had missed him. Learning from Fergus that Mac had gone to visit his tenants for the day, she had tried not to mind that he hadn't told her himself that he wasn't going to be home for luncheon. As it was, she didn't find out until the meal was served and his place at the table remained empty.

Surprisingly, with their father away, the boys were on their best behaviour. But perhaps that had something to do with the lesson she had taught that morning. With the mattress available, she had taught them a couple of throws. She chose Rory to demonstrate on, and the lad was stunned to find himself on his back repeatedly, no matter what he did to try to evade or anticipate her actions.

He paid very close attention to her instructions on how to perform the manoeuvre and was gleefully delighted when it worked. Tomorrow, she would teach them the move to avoid it.

She smiled over the luncheon table, watching the boys chattering among themselves, and caught Fergus's eye as the old man winked at her.

Having discovered Mac's absence, she decided to take advantage of it and visit the village in the afternoon. Now that her English was improving, she thought she might be able to glean some information about her brother's whereabouts. She was still convinced Mac had not told her all he knew. And she had utterly failed to question him last night, caught up instead in the physical passion that sparked between them.

She had surprised herself by how much she wanted him. Planning to seduce him to get information from him, she realised with hindsight, was a ruse for what she had really wanted, which was him. She'd had several lovers over the years, nothing long term, nothing that meant anything after the first when, as a young and naïve eighteen-year-old, she had fancied herself in love.

Lesson learned, she had eschewed the notion of love and avoided all her brother's attempts to arrange an advantageous marriage for her. He loved her too well to force her into something she didn't want, and let her have her way. But he emphatically didn't know about her lovers. He would have killed them if he knew.

The attraction between herself and Mac was so strong she couldn't resist it and saw

no reason why she should. She wasn't planning on staying here indefinitely, and a bit of pleasure was a good balm to her sorrow over her exile and her worries about Liang. And the man needed it. She could see that very clearly. His grief over the loss of his wife was a palpable thing.

Besides, he had saved her life. Even if he had unknowingly trapped her here in his country. Her initial anger with him over that had burned itself out, replaced by something she wasn't sure how to define. Compassion, perhaps? Liking? She did like him; it was impossible not to when he had been so kind to her, nursing her when she was ill. She would be churlish indeed to spurn him in the face of that.

And the truth was she didn't want to keep him at arm's length. Last night had been superbly satisfying. It had been well over a year since she last took a lover. Closer to two, she thought. Her appetite for it had been strong last night; her practice of self-pleasuring wasn't sufficient to satisfy the craving she had developed for Mac in such a short space of time. The man was a mountain of masculinity who had got under her skin and into her blood. His shocking red hair and intense blue eyes, and his sheer size was an unexpected aphrodisiac. And that had translated into intimate size too! His cock was huge. She giggled, recalling the stretch and satisfying fullness of him inside her as she rode him hard to completion.

A rush of wet heat between her legs as sense memory engulfed her made her breath catch and her flesh pulse. When he pushed her down onto the wood smoke-smelling carpet and took her hard and fast, that had been even more satisfying. She bit her lip and uttered a small whimper of longing. Really, she wanted to experience that again, and soon. Tonight could not come quickly enough.

Surely, he would want a reprise? What healthy male would say no to a repeat of something that was so blatantly pleasurable for them both? But Mac, for all his bluster and boldness, was a sensitive man, encased in a large, strong body. His devotion to his dead wife was testament to that.

Did he regret last night? His demeanour over breakfast had given nothing away. He was his usual polite self, but did not speak to her intimately as he might have done, nor give her glances or accidental touches that spoke of a wordless understanding between them. Perhaps, for him their lovemaking wasn't something spectacular, but only routine? Yet she would swear he'd not been with a woman in a long time, based on his physical reaction to her. She, for her part, tried to act as if it hadn't happened. The boys and Fergus didn't need to know what they had been doing on the floor of Mac's study!

She sighed, partly from longing and partly out of contentment. She would see if she could gauge his appetite for a reprise after dinner.

Her excuse for visiting the village was shopping. Fergus gave her some money to buy supplies, and she took a satchel to carry the goods in. He also explained that she could order more bulk goods to be delivered by the local store. Eggs, flour, that sort of thing.

Dressed more or less like the other local women, she felt less conspicuous, and even though she could not disguise her Chinese features, she felt more confident going into the shop in her gown, cloak, and bonnet. She just hoped she would be able to make herself understood sufficiently to accomplish the task of ordering supplies.

She had thought of taking Willy with her. The lad didn't speak much English, but he understood enough of it to be able to translate things into the Gaelic. She was picking up the odd word and expression of that language too. Being surrounded by a language, it was surprisingly easy to pick up meaning, and her vocabulary was increasing by leaps and bounds, building on the foundations Liang had given her on the long ship voyage. And as her ear adjusted to the local accent, she adjusted her own pronunciation so that she could be understood.

But she didn't want word of her asking about Liang to get back to Mac, so she had

decided to dispense with Willy's escort. If Mac was keeping information from her about Liang, he must have a reason. She needed to know firstly what he hadn't told her, and then to figure out why.

She found the general store in the main street with the help of Fergus's rough map. It was a large double-fronted, double-story, stone-built building with mullioned glass windows that distorted the view into the store.

She opened the door to a tinkle of a bell announcing her entrance. Letting the door close quietly behind her, she looked around. The store had a floury, yeasty, musky, and spicy smell, like a mix of grain and spices. Shelves lined the walls and took up most of the space in the store. A counter at the back cut customers off from the rear half of the store, which was visible through a gap in the curtains of an alcove behind. The rear part was given over to bulk storage, from what she could see.

Behind the counter were a myriad of jars and bottles with mysterious contents of various colours. A couple of customers browsed the shop, and a tall dark-haired man with dark stubble on his jaw packed shelves to her left. A short, buxom woman stood behind the counter talking to another customer, a woman in a cloak and bonnet who had a child tugging at her hand restlessly.

Aihan moved towards the shelves to inspect their contents, moving along them looking for the goods she wanted. Mostly spices and herbs, but she was hoping to find some rice flour. She had been grinding her own from the rice supply in the pantry, but it was hard and time-consuming. Unable to find anything she could identify as rice flour, she approached the man packing shelves and asked, "rice f'our?"

He looked round and down at her, his dark eyebrows going up. The cast of his features looked vaguely familiar.

“Rice flour?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Aye, over here.” He took her to another shelf, where a dozen brown paper packages were stacked. Each was labelled, but of course she couldn’t read the labels.

“Thank ye.” She smiled in gratitude, taking two of the packages and adding them to her satchel.

He nodded and returned to his work. She approached the counter. The customer with the child had gone, and the woman was tidying up the counter as she approached. She looked up and smiled. “How can I—” She took in Aihan’s appearance, and her smile faded. “—help you today?” she finished.

Aihan tried not to flinch internally and, summoning her best smile, she laid her chosen purchases on the counter and then held out the list of bulk goods that Fergus had written out for her. The woman took it from her and read it, her eyes going round at something on the sheet. “These items are for Sceacháin House?”

Aihan nodded. The woman called out to the man packing the shelves. “Alex.” Her next words were in Gaelic and beyond Sceacháin , Aihan couldn’t follow them. The man took the list, stared at Aihan with a troubled frown, and disappeared through the curtain.

“The order will be delivered tomorrow morning, payment on delivery,” the woman said, beginning to tot up the pile of goods on the counter. “That will be one pound, two shillings and sixpence,” she said, holding out her hand.

Aihan, having no idea what that was, offered the contents of the purse Fergus had given her. The woman took a selection of coins and pushed the rest back to her.

Aihan needed to understand the currency better, or she would get robbed.

“Thank ye,” she said.

“Are ye Col’s new housekeeper, then?” asked the woman, putting the coins in a drawer behind the counter that she locked with a key on a chain from her belt.

“Aye,” said Aihan readily enough. It was as good a description as any, she thought.

“Hm.” The woman’s lips compressed, and she looked Aihan over again, as if appraising her worth and finding her wanting. Aihan bristled at this, but swallowed her ire. Col wouldn’t thank her for causing a scene in the village, she suspected. Gathering up her packages, she gave the woman a dignified nod and left the shop. But she could feel the woman’s eyes on her all the way out the door.

Her next port of call was the Spotted Chicken, or Speckled Hen, as she had learned was the actual name of the tavern. Entering the dark and warm interior of the tavern, she found the publican behind the counter as before. The tables were crowded with customers drinking and eating, and a comfortable buzz of conversation filled the air. A fire crackled in the large hearth, the source of the warmth. As she approached the counter, the conversation gradually died down as all eyes turned to look at her. She flushed faintly but ignored this and the conversation gradually resumed.

The big man with the red bushy beard raised an eyebrow at her and said, “Aye, lass what cannae do fer ye?”

“Information,” she said, placing one of her own gold coins on the counter.

He looked at the coin and back at her.

“Aye, what d’ye want to know?”



“Tall Chinese man. Ming Liang. Where he go?”

He leaned on the counter and stroked his beard.

“Well, I don’t rightly know, lassie. South, I guess, but where exactly?” He held up his hands and shrugged.

“Who know?”

“Bobby Farrell’s yer man. He was tracking the Chinese, full of it he was.”

“Where he?”

“Edinburgh at the moment, on business. He’ll be back in two or three weeks.”

She nodded and pushed the coin towards him. “Thank ye.”

He frowned at her. “Mac Sceacháin spoke to him, did he nae tell ye what Bobby told him?”

Aihan’s heart skipped at this confirmation of her suspicions. She shook her head and left. Like the woman in the shop, she could feel his eyes on her all the way to the street. She had a slightly sick feeling in her stomach that Mac had kept things from her about Liang. Her next task was to find out what and why.

### Chapter Twelve

Dinner was another one of Aihan's tasty concoctions of meat and vegetables, this time pan fried with spices and more of her noodles. When Col was preparing to take the dogs out after the meal, Aihan surprised him by appearing in cloak and boots and demanding to accompany him.

He smiled and shrugged. "If ye like, lass." It was a fine night to cap off a fine day, and although the air was nippy it wasn't cold by Scottish standards. Striking out across the grass towards the trees, the dogs sprinted ahead, not that Hector could keep up with Gussie, but the deerhound would circle back to collect her companion regularly, thus stretching her long legs twice to three times as much as Hector's short ones. If she suddenly took it into her head to course after something she saw, Hector would give up and come back to him to wait for Gussie to return. Which she would in her own good time.

He was conscious of Aihan striding out beside him. She didn't seem to have any difficulty keeping up with him, despite her lack of inches, but then she did have long legs for her height. Thoughts of those legs and what lay at their apex had latent heat stirring to life in his breeches. Was she contemplating a reprise of last night or not?

"My brother, Liang," she began abruptly, interrupting his train of thought.

"He's yer brother?" he said with some measure of relief. Not that he seriously thought the man could be her husband after she made such blatant overtures to him, but it was good to know the relationship.

“Aye,” she said. “Did I nae say?”

He shook his head. “Ye may have in yer own language, lass, but I didnae ken it.”

“I need to find him. Ye help me?”

“Of course, lass.” He hesitated and then went on. “He went south. If I tell ye where he was last sighted, will ye promise not to go haring off on yer own?”

She stopped and turned to face him. Putting a hand on his chest, she looked up into his face. The moonlight caught her dark eyes and made them glitter, casting part of her face in shadow. “Aye. Tell me.”

He frowned, still reluctant. But she had a right to know, didn’t she? “He was last seen in Carlisle.”

“Where that?”

“Just south of the Scottish–English border.”

She frowned, not understanding.

“I’ll show ye on a map when we get back,” he offered.

She nodded. “Good.”

He covered her hand where it lay burning a hole in his chest. “Nae running off?” he persisted.

She smiled slightly. “Nae running off.”

“Good,” he said, relieved. “Ye could come to harm, lass, on yer own in a strange country. Not all men are as nice as me.”

“I can protect myself,” she said calmly.

“Aye, I know, one to one, but can ye fight off a whole pack of men or prevent yerself being duped, or robbed? Ye’re learning the language right well, lass, but ye’re not up to snuff yet. And yer beautiful face will make ye a target.”

“Ye care?” she asked with a shy dip of her head and a look up through her lashes that fair sent him to the grass.

“Of course I bloody care!” he said roughly.

She reached up then and kissed him. His arms came round her instinctively, and it was last night all over again. Except they were standing in the middle of a field in the moonlight, with Hector sniffing round their legs and Gussie God knew where.

His cock was hard in his breeches, and he wanted to lay her down in the grass and—He broke the kiss and said, a trifle breathless, “Did ye prepare, lass?”

She shook her head. “Not yet.”

He cupped her face and kissed her forehead. “Go back to the house, and I’ll meet ye in yer room when I’ve found Gussie. That is, if ye want to?” he asked.

“Aye,” she said, reaching up and giving him a lingering kiss. Then she whipped away, heading back to the house, and he whistled for Gussie. Not that he had high hopes she’d come. The wee besom had a mind of her own and would come when she wanted, and not before. It was half an hour later that he made his way up the stairs, trailing both dogs, and knocked quietly on Aihan’s door.

She opened it and let him in. Stepping over the threshold, he saw she was wearing a loose robe in fuchsia pink, embroidered with green and gold leaves. The sight of it caused him a pang. He recognised it as one of Cat's, of course. And for a moment his heart turned over. Can I do this? Then she shut the door and slid her arms round his neck and his arms came round her and her mouth was under his, and he stopped thinking with his brain.

He pulled her tight against him, his hands slipping on the silky fabric, feeling the heat of her body through it, her slender limbs. He pushed the robe off her shoulders, baring her soft skin to his wandering mouth. She loosened the tie at her waist, and the whole garment fell at her feet, revealing her whole body naked to his sight. She was slim and muscular, small boned and refined. Her waist narrow, her hips slim, her breasts, as he already knew, small. He took a moment to appreciate her.

Something he had resolutely refused to do when she was ill. He wondered at his restraint then, but now he looked his fill and cupped her breasts with their pinkish-brown nipples, fine and pointed. He took in the dark, crinkly hair covering her mound. He'd felt it last night, coarse and curly, but not seen it.

"Ye're like a delicate bird," he murmured, massaging those breasts in his great hands. She flung her head back, arching her neck, her eyes closed, and made a noise of appreciation. He kissed her neck. Then he scooped her up and deposited her on the bed and wrenched his clothes off in desperate haste. The dogs had settled before the hearth.

Approaching the bed naked, his cock jutting firmly from his groin, he knelt on the bed. "Ye're sure about this, lass?"

She nodded, smiling and reaching for him. "Aye, Mac. If I wasn't, ye wouldn't be here."

With a soft groan, he pushed her back into the pillows, his body trembling with the pent-up desire he'd been struggling with all day. He would have thought last night would have assuaged his hunger, but it seemed to have made it worse. He wanted her with an aching longing.

He covered her in kisses, his hands everywhere. Her skin was smooth and warm, her body pliable and responsive to his touch. He found her nipples with his mouth and suckled, first one, then the other, making her mewl and pant in a very satisfactory way.

His hand wandered lower and found her as wet as he'd hoped to. His fingers stroked and probed, slipping inside her, and she pushed up into his touch, moving her hips in that entrancing, sinuous way she had last night. Her eyes were almost closed, and she wore a half-smile as she helped him make her come.

"God in heaven, lass, ye're beautiful," he whispered as her face flushed and she panted, closing in on her orgasm with softly uttered moans and gasps that made his cock leak and twitch.

He worked at a nipple with his mouth while his fingers stroked her within and his thumb pleased her without. She arched her body, crying out, and trembled with her crisis. He lifted his head to watch her face as her expression of desire twisted and disintegrated into satisfaction, her body relaxing in the aftermath.

He drew her close and kissed her softly on the forehead, waiting for her to come back to herself fully. Leaning over her, his weight on his elbows, he stroked a strand of black hair off her face as her eyes fluttered open, and she smiled up at him.

"Good, lass?"

She nodded. "Aye."

She stroked his face, her fingers catching on his stubble. He'd not thought to go to his room and wash and shave before coming to her. He should have. He'd work hard today, and he was sweaty and must stink, but she didn't seem to mind.

She pushed at his chest, and he backed away and in the next moment found himself flat on his back. She ran her hands and mouth over his chest, licking his skin.

"Mm," she murmured. "Salty."

He laughed and then choked on a groan as one hand reached for his cock, and grasping, stroked him firmly.

"Ye dinnae mess about, do ye lass?" he said breathlessly. Her small hand on his cock was a blessed torture, and in another moment he groaned. "Fook, Hana, I want ye."

She raised an eyebrow and moved to straddle him. "Ye have only to say," she said, guiding him into place. He watched, fascinated, as she sat down on him and the tight wet heat of her engulfed him in bliss. He closed his eyes, arching his neck back into the pillow. "Fook, that's exquisite," he muttered.

"Aye, good," she agreed, panting a bit as she rode him. He reached to touch her, and she bent forward to kiss him, an open-mouthed kiss that became sloppy and urgent as she moved faster on him. She broke the kiss on a groan, and he felt the flutter of her release in her muscles.

It set his own body alight, and he flipped her onto her back, driving into her hard and fast, unable to stop. He crested the wave with a deep groan as heat gathered at the base of his spine and pleasure poleaxed his senses, rushing up his cock, his muscles convulsing with release. "Oh, fook!" he moaned, riding the waves of shuddering delight. They gradually wound down, and his body collapsed on her in boneless bliss.

He shifted his head and kissed her damp neck. She tasted salty too. “So good, lass. So good,” he murmured. Her hands stroked his sweaty back and her lips grazed his temple.

“Aye,” she whispered.

Eventually he moved sideways and contrived to get them both under the covers, now they had cooled down and their skin was beginning to prickle into gooseflesh. Pulling her into his arms, they wriggled around until they were comfortable, and he said softly, “alright Hana?”

“Aye,” she repeated, nestling her head into his chest.

He closed his eyes, and it occurred to him that his musings earlier in the day—that it was unwise to continue this liaison if she was to leave—were absolutely correct. But it was too late. He was in deeper than he ought to be and heading for another dose of heartache. But the pleasure and peace in the here and now was too tempting to resist. His future self would pay the price for this, but right now—his arms tightened round her. He needed this. More than he had realised until this moment. He kissed the top of her head and let out a breath, his body fully relaxing into the rustling mattress.

He woke in the night when she got up to use the chamber pot. And when she came back to bed, he kissed her, stroked her, until they were joined and moving in silent accord towards a mutually satisfying climax.

He wasn't about to make comparisons with Cat. He'd loved her with a young man's fierce passion; this was different. Perhaps because he was older and had been alone so long? Everything with Aihan seemed simple and straightforward. Not that she was simple. He sensed depths to her, as yet unplumbed by him. The language barrier represented a hurdle of sorts. That was gradually being overcome. But the differences in their cultures, in what was accepted as the norm and what was not, were a mystery



to him.

Her self-possession and maturity made it easy to be with her, and that was an enormous relief. She did not demand a great deal from him, yet she was physically responsive and passionate. And provided he could trust her not to run off, he thought he could relax his guard a little. He sighed, nuzzling into the bedclothes and the warmth of her embrace. It was too much to think about right now. He'd take what he could while he could get it, mindful it couldn't last. That at some point she would leave. But not yet . . . .

### Chapter Thirteen

After breakfast, Col was showing Aihan where Carlisle was on a map in his study when Fergus stuck his head round the door and addressed him in Gaelic.

“Alex McTavish has brought the grocery order, and he wants to speak to ye.” He grimaced slightly and cast his eyes in Aihan’s direction as he said it. These facial contortions made Col frown.

Rising, he said, “Aye, I’ll come. Where is he?”

“Courtyard,” said Fergus, withdrawing.

“I’ve got to see to this order, lass,” he said, moving to the door.

“Delivery?” she said, following him.

“Aye.” He made his way to the kitchens and out to the courtyard, trailed by Aihan.

Alex McTavish was a tall, lean man, as dark in colouring as his sister had been. He was in the act of depositing the last of the sacks of goods on the ground for Willy to heft when Col emerged from the back door.

“Alex.” He held out his hand to his brother-in-law, who took it and wrung it firmly.

“Col.”

“Are ye done, want to come in for a dram?” he said with a friendly smile.

Alex gave him a frowning stare, his eyes wandering past Col to Aihan standing in the doorway. When he spoke, it was in Gaelic. “So it’s true, she’s yer housekeeper?”

Col bristled at the note of disapproval in the other man’s tone. “A guest, actually, if it’s any of yer business. The lass was stranded with nowhere to go.”

Alex cleared his throat. “Oh aye, and where’s she sleeping?”

“In her own room!” growled Col. “Although I still fail to see it’s any of yer business, Alex.”

“There’ll be gossip. In fact, there already is.”

“I’m aware of that,” lied Col. He wasn’t surprised, but no one had seen fit to confront him about it until now. “Ye can tell them there’s nothing to gossip about.” He added another lie to the pile.

“Can I now?” Alex eyed him sharply and Col felt his colour rising. Fook! Could I look any more guilty?

“Come in fer a drink, and I’ll explain,” said Col. He and Alex had been close once. They’d drifted apart since Cat’s passing, which was his fault.

Alex nodded and Col turned back to the house. Seeing their intention to enter, Aihan backed up and would have turned away had not Col caught her hand. “Nae lass, I’ll introduce ye. This is my brother-in-law, Alex McTavish, he owns the general store.”

Aihan glanced from Col to Alex and bowed and then recollecting herself, bobbed a curtsy.

“Alex, I’d like ye to meet Ming Aihan. We’d say Aihan Ming, but that’s nae how the

Chinese do it, ye ken?"

Alex appeared a little bemused by this, but he bowed politely anyway. "We met yesterday," he said. "When the lass came to the store to place the order. She was after rice flour."

Aihan grinned at this and nodded. "Thank ye, I made noodles last night."

Alex raised an eyebrow at this, and Col said, "And delicious they are too. Ye'll have to bring Fiona for dinner one evening. Come through," he added, leading the way to his study.

"I bring cake?" said Aihan helpfully.

"Aye, thank ye, lass," he said, holding the door for Alex, who entered and took a seat by the fire, from which the dogs hadn't budged this morning. Gussie seemed worn out from her run last night.

Aihan turned into the kitchen and took down the plum cake she had made a couple of days ago from a receipt book she found in the pantry. Fergus had translated it for her, saying it was Mac's favourite. She cut two generous slices and put them on a plate and fetched and filled two tankards with ale also. Putting all this on a tray, she carried it to Mac's study where she found both men engrossed in a conversation in Gaelic and sipping the local golden liquor they called whisky.

It was frustrating because she couldn't understand more than a word or two, and she was pretty sure they were discussing her. She would just have to ask Mac later. She hadn't understood much of the conversation in the courtyard either, but she gathered it concerned her and the man, McTavish, did not approve of her. Is my presence causing grief for Mac?

Mac thanked her, and she left to return to the kitchen and commence preparations for luncheon. While she worked, her mind roved pleasantly over last night's experience. She was not accustomed to sleeping with another person. She had never done so, and was surprised by how easy it was. Mac's big body kept her warm and made her feel safe in a way she hadn't even known she would like. So used to fending for herself, she was a little nonplussed to discover that, far from feeling suffocated by his embrace, she liked it.

She liked the way he touched her too, and his kisses and the size of his cock. In fact, she liked him altogether too much, she decided. She needed to be careful and guard herself against attachment. She would be leaving soon her promise to Mac not to run notwithstanding.

Mac and McTavish came through the kitchen on their way out to the courtyard, and she bade farewell to the man, who gave her another bow and even smiled slightly. It seemed his disapproval had dissipated somewhat. What did Mac say to him about me? She waved a floury hand and remembered to bob a curtsy instead of bowing.

Mac came back in a few minutes later. and wandered up to the large table at which she stood rolling out pastry. He helped himself to a handful of dried berries from the jar on the table.

"What are ye making, lass?"

"Berry tarts," she said. "Fergus explain receipt to me. Ye like plum cake?"

"Very much, thank ye. I haven't had that in years."

She smiled, a warm little rush of pleasure blooming in her chest. "McTavish not like me at first. Ye change his mind?"

“Aye. I told him how ye were stranded here, and that it was my fault. I’ve invited him and his wife, Fiona, to dinner one night. Will ye cook for them?”

She nodded and grinned. “Yes, I do special dinner for them. Tell me when.” She finished rolling the pastry and began cutting circles with a knife, using a saucer for the shape. “He a friend?”

“My wife’s brother.”

“Ah! I thought he look familiar yesterday. I can see resemblance to portrait.”

He leaned his hands on the table and lowered his voice a little. “Lass, I’ve done what I can to minimise the gossip. But what Alex suspected will be what everyone thinks. We need to be discreet.”

“Discreet?” This was a new word.

“Careful. Not to set tongues wagging.” She sorted this out in her mind and nodded.

She leaned forward and set her mouth to his ear. “We should not let people know you sleep in my bed?” she said softly.

“Aye,” he said, flushing, his eyes getting that intense blue look they had when he was aroused. It made her flesh twitch. She swallowed a giggle and nodded.

### Chapter Fourteen

C ol entered Aihan's bedchamber later that evening, trailed by the dogs, to find her sitting cross-legged on the bed in her tunic and pants with her eyes closed and her hands palm up on her knees.

The dogs settled themselves by the fire as he shut the door gently behind him. Aihan's eyes sprang open, and she grinned at him.

"What are ye doing, lass?" he asked, approaching the bed. He'd washed, shaved, and changed into a robe tonight.

"Still mind," she said. "Breathe, quiet mind," she added, as if that would help.

He shook his head, mystified. And then recalled Merlow's practice of—what did he call it? Meditation?

He moved closer, and she unfolded her legs and rose to strip off her tunic and pants before slipping beneath the covers. He shrugged off his robe and joined her. He wrapped his arms round her, pulling her close, and sighed. He'd missed touching her, he realised with a jolt. She raised her face for his kiss, and he sank into the delight of her mouth and the pleasure of her bare limbs tangled with his.

He kissed along her jaw to her neck and down to her breasts, his hands wandering over her body: breasts, waist, tummy, hips, bottom, and the damp prize between her legs. She made noises of encouragement, her mouth on his neck and shoulder, teeth and tongue sampling his skin, as his fingers speared her silky flesh and rubbed. His

cock, half-hard before he even climbed into bed, stiffened and pulsed.

Col moved down her body, pressing kisses to her flat, muscular tummy, until he reached the thatch of crinkly black hair. Pushing her fully into her back, he positioned himself between her legs and set his mouth on her, glancing up to see her reaction as his tongue pierced her lips and he tasted her. She jerked and sighed. “Oh aye, that’s good Mac.” It was something he’d been thinking about all day, and he was pleased by her reaction. Settling to his task, he licked and stroked and suckled on her flesh until she was whimpering and writhing under him, her thighs alternately gripping his head and squeezing and falling open as she pushed up into his face. He brought a hand up to slide two fingers inside her and crook them to stroke the right place within.

She moaned her appreciation and rewarded his efforts shortly after with a shuddering climax.

“Ye like that, Hana?” he asked softly, sitting up and stroking his cock distractedly.

She nodded, and smiled lazily at him.

“Ye want same?” she asked, waving a hand at his groin. Fook yes! A surge of desire loosened his tongue.

“I wouldnae say no to yer mouth on me, Aihan, but I’d like to finish inside ye. I’ve a fancy to try ye under me like a bitch. Ye ken?” He’d been thinking about that all day too! He didn’t think his filthy suggestion would shock her. Nothing seemed to.

“Ah, dog?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Aye, would ye like that?” he asked, leaning over her and kissing her before she could answer.



When he broke the kiss eventually, she said, “Aye, like dog.”

He growled at that and kneed his way up her body to give her his cock, grabbing the headboard to steady himself as she took him in hand and swallowed the crown in one luscious swoop.

“Oh fook!” he moaned, his head going back and his eyes closing. “That’s so good, lass,” he panted as his hips thrust forward involuntarily while her tongue swirled round the rim and she sucked on him like a lozenge. He stood it for as long as he could because it was delicious, but the warning tingle in the base of his spine had him pulling out hastily and squeezing the base of his cock hard to prevent the inevitable.

Panting, he backed up and flipped her to her front, and she scrambled to her knees, ready for him. His hand swiped up her exposed pink flesh, and he moaned with delight at the sight. She wriggled her bottom invitingly and panted. “Go, Mac! Want you!”

“Fook, yes—” he muttered and, lining up, he pushed inside her slippery cove. So good! He stroked hard and deep with rising force and speed, reaching round to rub her into another climax before he lost the last bit of his control. It was deeply satisfying when he felt the clench and flutter of her release accompanied by a deep moan, and the tingling pleasure at the base of his spine heralded his own orgasm. It barrelled through him hard and exploded with a fierce delight that wracked his whole body, sending him sprawling on her back in the aftermath as his legs turned to jelly. She dropped to the mattress under him and he lay on her, panting, feeling tingles run down his legs to his feet and up his spine to his scalp.

“So good,” he murmured.

“Hmm,” she agreed.

Eventually, when his heart rate and breathing had settled, he said, “I’m squashing ye, aren’t I?”

“Aye,” she admitted, “but I like it.”

“Do ye?” He nuzzled the side of her neck and eased his weight up a fraction without lifting off her completely.

“Ah.” She took a deeper breath and squeezed him with her inner muscles. His softening cock slipped out, and he rolled sideways off her.

“Ye like that position?” He watched her flop over onto her back.

“Oh, aye.” She grinned at him and reached for his hand with hers. “You have very nice cock, Mac.”

He laughed and kissed her hand.

“Ye make me come easy,” she said, rolling towards him. “Want ye all day.”

“Me too,” he admitted. “Thinking about ye all day.”

She nodded.

He pulled her in close and kissed her, then rearranged the covers. “Comfortable?” he asked.

“Aye,” she said drowsily. “Good fook.” She buried her face in his shoulder, and he tightened an arm round her. Aye, good fook. It felt like more than that to him. But was it for her? He couldn’t tell, and was too tired to puzzle it out right now.

### Chapter Fifteen

A ihan was in the kitchen when she heard the scream from upstairs. She raced into the front hall and met Mac at the bottom of the stairs, drawn from his study by the scream and now ongoing bellowing sobs emanating from upstairs.

“Fook! It’s Callum!” he said, bolting up the stairs. She followed him to Callum’s room, which was to the right of the stairs. Mac pushed the door fully open to reveal Callum on his knees in the middle of the floor, bits of burnt paper in his hands. The boy’s face was blotched red and white, his freckles standing out sharply and his eyes red and streaming tears.

“What the devil is the matter, Cal, are ye hurt?” asked Mac, going to his son and checking his hands for burns. Aihan held back a bit, watching, her heart beating heavily and quite wrenched by the boy’s distress.

“My sketchbook!” he said between sobs, holding out the burnt fragments. The outlines of drawings could be seen between the charred bits.

“How the hell did that happen?” asked Mac grimly.

“R-Rory!” sobbed Callum. “L-look!” He held out a scrap of paper on which was scrawled, in bold uneven letters, “REVENGE.”

Mac took the piece of paper and frowned at it.

“It’s fer the e-escutcheon!” sobbed Callum, wiping his face with one sooty hand and

smearing charcoal on his cheeks.

“Aye, I realise that,” said Mac slowly.

“I said was s-sorry. I th-thought he’d forgiven me.” Callum gulped, and Mac handed him a handkerchief.

“I told him I’d punished ye for that. But ye’ve brought it on yerself, lad. Ye shouldnae touched the bluidy escutcheon!” Mac’s voice was rough, but not harsh.

It made Callum sob harder. “I had drawings of M-Mama in that book!” he wailed.

Mac’s face twisted at that, and he put a hand on Cam’s shoulder and squeezed. “I’m right sorry, lad. And surprised he would have destroyed them.”

Callum continued to sob, and Mac threw Aihan an anguished look. It was clear he didn’t know how to deal with the boy’s tears. She dropped to her knees beside the boy and put her arms round him, wondering if he would shake her off. But he didn’t. Instead, he subsided into her embrace and let her stroke his red hair, soft and curly like his father’s.

Mac rose and said gruffly, “I’ll go speak to Rory, Cal. But ye’ve got to stop this war between ye.” He left the room, and Callum snuffled into the handkerchief.

It took Col some time to find Rory, as he’d had the sense to make himself scarce. But he eventually ran him to earth playing cricket on the village green with the local lads. Rory was at the crease with bat in hand and ready to receive a ball from Toby MacPherson when he saw Col and, flinging the bat aside, took to his heels and ran.

Swearing under his breath, Col took off after the lad, hoping he could catch the little sod before he got away from him, because he was fairly certain his son could outrun

him if he got enough of a head start. Fortunately, Col's legs were longer, and he caught up with Rory as he tried to duck down an alley. Catching the boy by the jacket, he hauled Rory round and pushed him up against the wall.

"Not—so fast," he puffed, holding the boy still while he caught his breath. Rory wriggled and almost got away. "Calm yourself, Lad, hold still. Running will not fix the problem. Ye'll have to come home eventually and face me. May as well do it now."

Rory, presumably seeing the sense in that, subsided and stared at the pavement.

"Well, what have ye got to say for yerself?" prompted Col, staring at the bent dark head. Rory was the spit of his uncle Alex, taking after his mother, and would be a handsome man when he was grown. It wouldn't be long before the lasses started noticing, and he started noticing them, if he hadn't already. And that would bring a whole other raft of trouble in its wake.

"It was fer the escutcheon! He shouldnae touched it!"

"Aye, I gathered that. I told ye I'd punished him for it. Ye had nae business to take the law into yer own hands, lad."

Rory remained silent at that. His fists clenching and his mouth compressing.

"Ye didnae think my punishment was sufficient?"

"Nae! A belting's nothing! I wanted to hurt him like the little bastard hurt me!" Rory raised his head, and his brown eyes blazed at him.

"He's nae a bastard, ye'll not insult yer mother so!" snapped Col.

Rory flushed at that and muttered something that might have been an apology.

“Ye ken, he had drawings of yer mother in that book?” asked Col grimly.

Rory nodded, not looking at him.

“Ye destroyed it anyway?” asked Col, incredulous.

Rory remained silent a moment, and then he sagged against the wall. “I took them out and destroyed the rest!”

Col was conscious of a wave of relief. Callum was an accomplished artist, and his drawings of Cat were lovely. The notion of them being destroyed had wrenched at his heart. To say nothing of the notion of Rory being the agent of that destruction.

“What did ye do with them?”

“Hid them.”

“Where?”

Rory compressed his lips.

“I said where, Rory?”

“He’ll not have them back; he doesn’t deserve them! Not after what he did to the escutcheon!”

“Tell me where.” Col’s voice dropped warningly.

“I shan’t tell ye and ye cannae make me!” said Rory and, ducking under Col’s arm,

he took off down the alley.

Col debated whether to chase him and decided against it. He'd come home eventually, he had nowhere else to go. Col would deal with him then.

Turning for home, he walked slowly back to the house, wondering what the hell he was going to do with the pair of them. Entering the house, he went up the stairs to Callum's room where he found the boy sitting on the bed with Aihan; they both had their heads bent over a book.

Callum stiffened at the sight of him and said, a shade defensively, "I was showing Aihan my journal. It has sketches in it as well. I suppose I'm lucky he didn't take that too!"

"Aye, ye'd' best keep yer door locked in future."

"I do. He got in through the window." Callum nodded to the casement window behind him.

Col rubbed his face tiredly. "He didnae destroy yer portraits of yer mam. He took them out before he burned the rest."

Callum swallowed and blinked. "Where are they?"

"I dinnae ken, lad, but I'll find out." He paused and went on, "This stops here, Callum. Nae more retaliation. Ye ken?"

Callum looked at him, and his eyes slid away. "Ye'll nae punish him like ye did me, will ye? He's yer favourite."

Col frowned. "Nae, lad, he's not. Ye're both my sons and I love ye equally. But I ken

ye're different. That doesnae mean I love ye less."

"Grandpa said I was like Uncle Merlow, a Jessie!"

"Aye, well, yer grandfather was wrong. Yer Uncle Merlow is a fine man, and if ye're like him that's a grand thing. Something to be proud of." God, he wished Merlow had stayed longer. His influence and example might have helped the lads, especially Callum.

He went on, "Ye'll leave the punishing to me, ken?"

Callum pursed his lips.

"Callum?"

He nodded, but his eyes slid away as he did it, and Col had a queasy feeling in his gut. Callum's genuine anguish earlier had cut deep. If Rory had intended to cause maximum pain to his little brother, he'd succeeded.

"Ye want to help me make dinner?" asked Aihan, distracting the boy. "I need someone to read the receipt out for me."

Callum looked up. "What are ye making?"

"Forfar bridie."

"My favourite!" Callum grinned at her. "Can we have carrageen moss fer dessert?"

"If we have the ingredients," said Aihan, rising. Callum jumped up and followed her. She glanced at Col and nodded to him slightly, as if to say I have this. You deal with Rory .



Col was grateful, but it didn't help his dilemma over Rory. It was fast approaching the point where he wouldn't be able to control him at all. In fact, he wondered if they were past that point already. I've lost my boy's respect. How have I got to this point? And what the hell can I do to mend it?

In many ways, it was natural that Callum should think he favoured Rory over him, because he understood Rory better. But the truth was, Rory rubbed him the wrong way far more than Callum did. They were too alike. And he was actually harder on Rory, because he instinctively felt that he could take it, that he would in fact not respond to a more coddling manner. But he wondered if he'd gone too far with Rory. Or is it down to my father's influence on the boy?

He had frequently disagreed with his father's approach to parenting. His views on the reivers were a case in point, but the fact was, there were long stretches where he'd abandoned the boys to his father's and Fergus's care and lost himself in a black fog of despair and the bottom of a whisky bottle. The two years following Cat's death were a blur to him, and by the time he'd emerged from the fog, a lot of the damage was done.

He went out to the stable because there was a hole in the roof that needed mending, and he'd been putting off fixing it. Doing something with his hands helped him to think. In the process of replacing the thatch, it occurred to him that this was the sort of task he ought to involve Rory in. But generally, whenever he asked Rory to do anything, it became a tussle of wills, and he had to force him to do it.

Aihan found him an hour later with a piece of plum cake and a cup of tea. He climbed down the ladder at sight of her.

"Thank ye, lass."

She sat down on a hay bale beside him while he ate the cake, sipping her own tea.

“Callum still in the kitchen?” he asked.

“Aye, he cutting out pastry rounds for pasties.”

“Thank ye for what ye did there,” he said, waving the piece of cake.

She shook her head. “He in pain. Such pain. It hurt.”

“Aye,” Col winced at the memory of Callum’s anguish.

“The boys have no sh?fù.” she said.

“Sh?fù?”

“Teacher. How they learn?”

“A tutor, you mean?” Col sighed. “Cat taught them their letters and I taught them some basic arithmetic. Then they attended the local school for a bit. But when Cat died— I’m not sure what happened, but they stopped going at some point. I don’t remember. My father was never a great advocate of education, he thought it addled the brain. Or maybe it was just because of what happened with Merlow, I don’t know.

“Callum reads a lot, I guess he’s kind of continued his own education from my library. But you’re right; I should organise a tutor for him, he would benefit from that. Rory—he needs something else. I should be teaching him about the tenants and the Estate. It will be his one day. The truth is, I’ve neglected both of them.” He rubbed his face, guilt stabbing him in the gut.

“Not too late,” Aihan said, squeezing his hand.

“You think so?” Col grimaced. “I think it might be with Rory. I don’t know how to

reach him.”

“You figure it out,” Aihan said, rising and gathering up his plate and empty mug.

“Thank ye, Hana.” He grabbed her hand and kissed it. She smiled at him and touched his cheek. Rising on tiptoe, she kissed it and went back to the house, leaving him feeling insensibly better.

### Chapter Sixteen

Rory didn't come home for dinner, which alarmed Col. So he went looking for him and found him at the MacPhersons'. He thanked Toby's parents for feeding him and hauled him off home. He was afraid Rory would make a scene, but hadn't bargained on the powerful effect of keeping up appearances in front of his peers.

Rory came with him docilly enough. As they walked back to the house, Col said, "I know why ye did it, lad. The escutcheon means a great deal to ye and it does to me as well, but if ye'd heard his anguish, lad—he thought ye'd destroyed his memories of yer mam. Did ye really mean to hurt him that much?"

He watched his son's face as Rory looked down. It was almost dark by now, but there was enough light to see his expression. It was stony. "Aye, I did. He did the same to me! Just that I don't squeal about it like a stuck piglet!"

"He's yer little brother, Rory! Ye've a responsibility to look after him."

"Fook! I'm sick of hearing that! I've had that all my life. Ye're a fine one to talk about responsibility!" Rory's look of contempt hit Col in the chest.

He closed his eyes a moment and let out a breath trying to ease the pain. After a bit of a struggle he said, "Ye're right, and I owe ye an apology fer that. I was so stricken with grief?—"

"And ye think we weren't?" snapped Rory, kicking a stone viciously with his boot.

“I wasn’t thinking at all, lad. I’m sorry.”

“Bit late now,” muttered Rory.

Col swallowed this in silence.

“I used to think ye were a god, when I were a wee lad. Ye could do nae wrong in my eyes,” said Rory.

“Aye, I used to feel the same way about my father, until I realised he wasn’t.” Col shoved his hands in his pockets. “I’m sorry ye had to discover I have feet of clay so early, lad. The fact is we’re all human and make mistakes. Sometimes ones we deeply regret. I cannae undo the past as much as I might want to. But I do regret losing sight of ye in the wake of yer mam’s death. But losing her and yer baby sister—” He stopped, swallowing the lump in his throat. “I didnae know how to go on, and that’s the truth. I was weak and I’m sorry. More than I can say.”

Rory stumped on a bit in silence. “Grandpa said ye were weak as piss to lose yer head over a woman so.”

“Yer grandpa was a sour old curmudgeon who never fell in love,” snapped Col.

“He did, actually. Her name was Daisy McMahan, and she played him false. He said women always play ye false and not to trust them. Is that true?”

“Nae it isn’t, yer mam never played me false, nor I her. We loved each other, Rory. Whatever I’ve done or not done in my life, I’ll never regret falling in love with yer mam, she was the grandest woman.”

Rory nodded thoughtfully as they skirted the front of the house to enter the courtyard via the rear of the stable. Col stopped at the entrance and clapped Rory on the

shoulder and squeezed. Rory looked at him a moment, nodded, and headed into the house.

Col remained standing there a few minutes and was surprised to find tears on his cheeks. He scrubbed them away and cleared his throat, heading into the house to fetch the dogs for their evening walk.

Over two hours later, he was in the act of pouring water into the bowl in his room prior to washing and shaving when a strange high-pitched shriek that cracked in the middle made him splash water all over the place. He put down the ewer, wrenched his bedroom door open, and burst into the corridor to see Aihan emerge, tying her robe on, and Fergus appear at the top of stairs, puffing.

“Rory’s room,” said Aihan with a nod.

What the fook now? Col headed down the corridor past the stairs to Rory’s room and banged on the door. “Rory?” A muffled sound from the other side of the door and the sound of something crashing. Col’s heart accelerated in alarm. Then the sound of the key turning in the lock. Col shoved the door wide and took in the sight of his son swaying in front of him, his lips swollen and turning blue, his breathing laboured. The room was a mess, which was nothing unusual for Rory, but the crashing sound had been the clothes pole falling over.

“Rory, what the fook?” asked Col in alarm.

“Adder!” he rasped. “It bit me! It’s loose in here somewhere.” He collapsed on these words and Col caught him. He lifted him up and turned, finding Fergus, Willy, and Callum in the doorway. “Out of the way and find the bloody snake!” he barked.

Callum was white as a sheet seeing his brother lying still in Col’s arms.

“Is he dead?”

“Nae, but he might be if we don’t do something!” said Col, striding past him to his own bedchamber where he laid Rory down on the bed. Aihan appeared at his side.

“Tie off the wound,” she said.

“Yes, if I can find it,” agreed Col. He began a search of his son’s body, the lad was dressed only in a night shirt, and it didn’t take him long to find the puncture wounds in his calf, the site already puffy and red. Aihan gave him the tie from her robe to use as a tourniquet, which he applied just below the knee, but rather thought it was a bit late with the symptoms Rory was already displaying. It seemed he was having some kind of extreme reaction to the venom. Adder bites weren’t generally fatal, at least not in adults. Rory was big for his age, but still not anywhere near full-grown yet. How did a bloody adder get into his room?

“I have herbal paste, may help,” said Aihan, and disappeared. She reappeared with a small, squat pot, from which she removed the lid and began to apply the paste with her fingers to the site of the bite and surrounding area.

Rory had regained consciousness, to Col’s immense relief, and was lying still, breathing audibly. “Feel sick,” he said.

Divining what was about to happen, Col dived for the empty chamber pot and got it to his son in time.

When the paroxysm passed, Col gave him some water to rinse his mouth, and Rory lay back with eyes closed. Aihan took the pot away.

Col sat on the bed, holding Rory’s hand and listening to him breathe. He’d never felt so helpless in his life.

A while later Fergus put his head in the door and said, “We got the wee besom. It was an adder right enough, quite a big one too.”

“What did ye do with it?” asked Col.

“Chopped its head off,” said Fergus. “Made a bit of a mess on the floor of Rory’s room, Willy’s scrubbing the blood off now. How is the lad?” he said, coming into the room.

“Not good,” said Col tersely.

“Athair?” Callum stood in the doorway his face still white under his freckles and addressed him in Gaelic. “Ciamar a tha e?”

“He’s nae well lad,” replied Col, also in Gaelic.

“He’s nae going to die, is he?” asked Callum, a note of panic in his voice.

“I don’t know, Callum, I hope bloody not.” Col’s voice was grim, and he’d not taken his eyes off Rory as he spoke.

“Oh God, I’m sorry!” whispered Callum. “Adders aren’t supposed to be fatal!”

Col looked round at him watching tears seeping down Callum’s white face.

“Aye, they’re not in an adult, it’s another thing with children and animals. It’s a matter of size to venom ratio, ye ken?” said Col with a grim look.

Callum’s knees gave out with a thump, and he grabbed the door jamb on the way down. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know!”



“What are ye blathering about, boy?” Col rose from the bed, and Aihan slipped into his place, taking Rory’s hand as Col hauled Callum to his feet and led him out of the room and down the hallway to his own bedchamber. Callum was full out blubbing by now and Col had a cold, sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Sitting Callum down on his bed, he crouched in front of the sobbing lad and said with careful restraint, “What d’ye mean, ye’re sorry, Callum? What have ye done?”

“I-I found the snake a few weeks ago. I’ve been k-keeping it in a creel in my room and feeding it mice. I put it in his bed!” He sobbed harder. “I th-thought it would give him a nasty fright, and maybe he’d be a bit sore from a bite. But I didn’t thin-think it would k-kill him!”

Col sprang up and walked away in a circle to restrain his urge to shake Callum till his teeth rattled. “Fook!” He turned back to Callum, who was cowering on the bed. “Bluidy hell, Callum! I told ye nae more vengeance! Well, I hope ye’ve learned ye lesson! Because if he dies, ye’ll never forgive yerself. I won’t, either! Fooking hell!”

“I’m sorry, Athair! I’m sorry!”

“Sorry won’t mend it, Callum. Not this time. Ye’ve gone too far. Fooking, bugging hell!” Col paced for a bit, trying to get his temper under control, listening to Callum’s sobs. He rubbed his face, his hand coming away wet. Jesus wept! He breathed for a bit and then thought about Callum handling a venomous snake as if it were a pet.

“The bloody thing could have bitten ye ! Did ye think of that? If ye’re going to have a pet snake, choose one that’s nae venomous!”

Callum just sobbed harder, and Col crouched down in front of him again. “Don’t take on so, lad,” he said wretchedly. “Rory’s big and strong, he’ll probably pull through. Fook, I wish yer uncle Merlow were here! He’d know what to do fer him.” He

sighed. “I need to get back to Rory, lad, but I cannae leave ye like this, buck up a bit, please!”

Callum made a manful effort to swallow his sobs and that, even more than his impassioned crying, brought Col almost to the breaking point. He wrapped his arms round him and hugged him. “Hold fast, boy.”

Callum clung to him a moment, and Col felt his heart crack. Praying to Cat, the saints, and Jesus Christ, he gave Callum one more hug and moved to the door. “I’ll come back and see ye in a bit. Have a rest boy, ye’ve had a big day.” He left, closing the door softly behind him, and strode back to Rory’s room, his heart thudding in his chest and his mind a muddled whirl.

Re-entering his bedroom, he looked to Rory, who lay with his eyes closed, breathing audibly, much as he had been before. Aihan sat on the bed his hand in hers and bathed his face with a cloth.

“He sweat,” she said. “It poison working through body.”

Col nodded and went round to the other side of the bed and sat to hold his son’s other hand.

They sat with him through the night, and by morning his breathing was better, although the swelling in his leg was worse. Callum came creeping in at midnight to see how he fared and was much relieved to discover that his brother yet lived.

With the dawn, Col jerked out of a doze to see Aihan curled up asleep at the foot of the bed. She had stayed with him and Rory all night, fetched and carried, prepared drinks, and wiped Rory’s body when he sweated. And regularly reapplied the ointment to his wound. When he asked her what it was, she said, “Chinese herbal ointment. Stop the skin from rotting. Snake bite often lead to skin rot. Ancient

receipt.”

Necrosis. Col shuddered at the thought.

### Chapter Seventeen

A ihan slept until midday at Mac's insistence. Rising, she washed and dressed, then emerged to check on Rory. She found Fergus with him, and the boy was sleeping peacefully. His leg didn't appear any worse.

"Mac asleep?" she asked Fergus quietly.

"Aye, lass."

She nodded. "I go cook. You stay."

Fergus smiled grimly and went back to mending his stockings.

She applied a little more salve to Rory's leg and left to check on the other boy. She knocked on his door and waited. After a bit a quavering voice said, "Who is it?"

"It's me," she said.

Another moment or two and the door opened. Cam, as she was prone to think of him, looked pale and tired, and like he'd slept in his clothes.

"I going to cook, want to help?"

He shook his head, looking at the floor.

"Why not? I need yer help, Cam. Yer father is asleep, he was up all night with Rory

and Fergus is watching him. How am I to cook if there's no one to read the receipt for me?"

He looked up biting his lip. "All right. I'll help ye."

"Good. Ye want to wash and change first?"

He shrugged. "If ye want."

"Aye, I do want."

He ducked his head. "I'll be down shortly." He hesitated. "How's Rory?"

"Better. Sleeping now. His leg's nae worse."

He managed a smile then.

"Good."

She left him and made her way down to the kitchen. She had taken over most of the cooking from Fergus now. He still brought her rabbits and game birds that he caught in his traps or shot with his gun. And he would dress the beasts for her. She was widening her list of Scottish dishes, working through the receipt book; alternating them with Chinese-inspired dishes and sometimes serving a mix of both in the one meal. The men seemed to like the things she cooked, and she was enjoying her new role.

The events of yesterday and last night had left her with a slight headache and another kind of ache in her chest. These boys! So much hurt.

She could have cooked Chinese style today, but she wanted to pull Cam out of his

melancholy. The boy had looked so miserable.

She set about preparing the kitchen for cooking and Cam appeared, his hair damp, wearing a fresh shirt and breeches, both of which showed signs of not fitting him anymore. The cuffs being too short and breeches somewhat tight.

“Rory does look better, don’t ye think?” he asked anxiously.

“Aye, I do.”

“Will he be up to eating dinner?”

“In bed, perhaps. You might take it up to him.”

He looked uncertain. “I don’t know if he’ll want to see me.”

“See when he wakes up.”

Cam nodded. “What we making?”

She waved at the receipt book. “Ye choose.”

He flipped through the book. “Scotch broth and marmalade pudding.”

“What in Scotch broth?”

He read out the list of ingredients to her, and she checked the pantry. “Aye, we can manage that. What in pudding?”

“Milk, eggs, stale bread, dried fruit, marmalade-”

“What that?”

Cam reached behind her and pulled down a jar of something orange.

“It is like an orange jam. It’s sweet and tart and a little bitter.”

She nodded. “Sound good.”

“It needs cream.”

Two hours later, the soup was on the stove, and she was just putting the pudding in the oven, when Mac appeared. Despite sleep, he still looked tired and a bit rumped. Cam was eating a slice of bread liberally spread with marmalade, but he dropped it at sight of his father and said, “How is Rory?”

“Awake and wondering what is for dinner,” said Mac with a grin.

“He’s better?” asked Cam anxiously.

“Aye, on the mend. He’s still tired, mind. I’ll keep him abed another day, but after that he should be getting back to normal.”

“Why don’t ye visit him and tell him what is for dinner,” suggested Aihan.

“Do ye think he’ll want to see me?” he asked.

“Aye,” said Mac. “He doesnae know it was yer snake, Cal, it’s up to ye what ye choose to tell him.”

Cam looked at Mac, his face working. “Ye didn’t tell him.”

“Nae, that’s yer job, Cal.”

Cam nodded, swallowing manfully. Then he gave his father an odd hug and ran out of the kitchen.

Mac watched him go with an expression on his face that punched a hole in Aihan’s chest. It hurt so much she gasped, taken aback by her own reaction.

Mac turned back to her, skirted the table and drew her into his arms. “I need to thank ye fer yesterday and last night, Hana. Ye were an enormous support.”

“Nae thanks necessary,” she said gruffly, staring at the open neck of his shirt.

“I love the way ye speak English with a Scot’s accent,” he said whimsically, and cupping her face, he kissed her. She leaned into the kiss, her arms going round his great bulk. He was satisfyingly and reassuringly solid. She derived a degree of comfort from that, which surprised her.

Melting into his kiss, she realised something was different. Previous kisses had been ravenous with need, but this one was—tender. Her heart did an odd flutter, and she tightened her arms round him involuntarily. He released her slowly and rested his chin on her head when she tucked her face into his chest. Neither of them spoke; she felt too full up and close to tears to say anything. The past twenty-four hours must have affected her more than she thought.

She was perilously close to caring too much for this man and his troubled boys. But the truth was, she was enjoying being here in his house, cooking and keeping house for these men who seemed so desperately in need of female influence. She liked the feeling of being needed; it was a new sensation.

She had kept house for her brother, of course, once she was old enough to assume the



duties. She couldn't remember her mother or her father; both had died while she was very young, and Liang had become both parents for her.

She had learnt to cook from a neighbour, a widow with two children who fancied herself in love with Liang. The emotion hadn't been returned, and the liaison had faltered and ended abruptly when Aihan was twelve.

By then she was competent to take on the running of the house for Liang and Caishen, and assumed full control of it while Liang continued to teach both her and Caishen how to fight and observe the traditions of his faith, the Tao. Because he was a soldier in the imperial army, serving in the capital, they lived in a small house just outside of the Forbidden City, where Liang went every day to earn the money to feed them.

Living here in this house in Scotland was very different in many ways, yet underneath there were similarities. She was comfortable in the domestic sphere; she knew what to do and how to do it competently, and she felt content. It gave her joy to see the men and boys devouring her food with so much enjoyment, and the pleasure she derived from being in Mac's bed was stronger and better than anything she had ever experienced.

And she liked them. She liked Mac with his slightly grumpy temper and surprising gentleness under the fire and passion. She liked seeing him smile when he had been so sad. She liked Rory and Cam too. And Fergus, and Wee, as she thought of him.

She stirred, lifting her head. "Do ye think Cam will tell Rory the truth?"

"Aye, I think he will. If he's any sense he'll tell him while he's still abed and cannae punch the living daylights out of him."

"Ye think he'll do that? Punch him, I mean."

“Aye I do, knowing Rory. But I think Cal’s learned a powerful lesson this last day. I think he’ll take his medicine like a man.” He paused and gave her another hug. “I’d best go and see what’s happening. There’s been no bellows or screeching, so that’s a good sign, I think. I’ll move Rory back to his own bedchamber.”

She nodded, letting him go reluctantly. But he cupped her face and gave her another lingering kiss. “Ye’re a blessing I don’t deserve, lass.” He let her go slowly and left the kitchen with one more backward glance, as if tearing himself from her side was the most difficult thing he’d ever done.

She leaned on the table, her knees gone suddenly weak and her heart beating fast in her chest. The oddest sensation of warmth and happiness suffused her chest, and she stared blindly at the mess on the table she had yet to clean up. She hadn’t felt this in a very long time.

Not since she was eighteen and— Oh no! I can’t be falling in love with him.

She groped for the chair and sat down heavily. But she was. She could feel herself falling off the cliff; in fact, she wanted to dive off and fly. The temptation was so powerful it made her breath catch and tears sting her eyes. No, no, no! She had to find Liang and then figure out a way to go home. She couldn’t stay here looking after Mac and the boys forever.

The heady sensation of joy was quashed under a pall of remembered duty. She must find Liang; he was her brother and the only reliable person in her life. Liang could be depended upon. No one else. She owed him everything. He was her rock and her rudder. And she loved him fiercely. Not in a romantic sense. He was family, her precious, only family. With a pang, she remembered Caishen. Her little brother in spirit, if not in blood. He was gone, but she could find Liang.

A voice whispered in her head that Liang was gone too, but she pushed it away. She

refused to believe that.

She wiped at the tears on her cheeks. It was tempting to think she could sink into the comfort of Mac's arms and let herself feel all those wonderful feelings of joy and bliss, but she knew from bitter experience they didn't last. And the cost, when the feelings died as they inevitably would, was far worse than not feeling them at all. She needed to guard her heart against Mac. He was altogether too tempting.

But he was still in love with his wife. It was obvious he was a one-woman man. She was just a stepping stone to help him through a rough patch. She had made no pretence that she expected more from him than sexual pleasure, and for a man that was sufficient. He wouldn't want anything more from her than that.

She sniffed, straightened her shoulders, and rose, attacking the kitchen table with a burst of furious energy. Love is for fools, and I am no fool.

When Col reached his bedchamber, he found the door ajar, and he paused to watch the tableaux within.

Rory was sitting up, banked by pillows, with a scowl on his face. Callum was kneeling by the bed with his face buried in the covers, sniffing.

"Stop yer snivelling!" growled Rory, sounding rather too much like Col himself, he thought. "Ye said ye're sorry. Ye can stow it now. It was just a wee bitty snake. I'm nae dead!"

Callum raised his face and spoke in Gaelic. "Athair said ye could have died, and it would have been my fault."

"Athair's an old woman! I wasnae going to die!" scoffed Rory.

Col stiffened at the old woman taunt and then grinned. Rory was putting a brave face on it for his little brother, wasn't he? There had been a moment last night when Rory had asked him if he was going to die, and Col had reassured him to the contrary. Either Rory didn't remember that, or he was trying to pretend it didn't happen. In any case, Col wasn't about to betray him. He made a noise to announce his arrival and entered the room a moment later. Callum climbed to his feet wiping his face, and Rory glared at him.

"Ye didnae need to scare the bairn out of his skull, Athair," he said.

"I was worried fer ye, lad, and somewhat overwrought. It had been an emotional day, if ye recall?"

Rory had the grace to flush then, reminded of his own part in yesterday's events.

"Aye, well," he paused. "Cal says there's marmalade pudding fer dessert. I've a mind to get up fer dinner."

"Nae, lad, ye'll stay put in bed till tomorrow. That leg is still a mite swollen, ye don't want it to get worse. Aihan's applied an ointment to stop the rot, but snake bite can lead to necrosis, ye ken."

Rory changed colour at that and flung back the bedclothes to look at his leg. Col took the opportunity to examine it himself. It was still red and swollen, with some bruising starting to appear. He applied some more of the ointment and said, "I'll put ye back in yer own room now, if ye like?"

"Aye." Rory moved to get out of bed and Col forestalled him, scooping him up and carrying him out of the room to Rory's protest.

"I can walk, I'm nae an invalid!"

“Best not to stir up the wound, lad, ye should keep yer weight off it as long as possible.” He pushed open Rory’s bedroom door. A dark stain in the middle of the floor bore mute witness to the snake’s demise.

“Fergus chopped its head off,” he said with a nod to the stain.

“Sorry I missed that,” remarked Rory as Col deposited him gently on the bed and helped him under the covers.

“Callum will bring yer dinner up when it’s ready and maybe eat with ye. If ye’ll have him?”

He glanced between both lads to see if this suggestion met with their collective approval.

“Aye,” said Callum, nodding. “And I’ll read to ye after if ye like?” He added, “There’s a new novel I’ve just read. Waverley . I think ye’ll like it. It’s about the Jacobite rebellion and has a very detailed description of the Battle of Prestonpans.”

This seemed to convince Rory, who nodded.

Col, satisfied that the war between his sons was in abeyance, at least for the moment, left them and made his way to his study. He sat at his desk, staring at nothing and trying to make sense of the events of the previous day and night.

His thoughts inevitably wandered to Aihan and the part she had played. She was from a completely different culture, yet she seemed to fit. For the first time since Cat’s passing, he didn’t feel lonely, and it was because of her. He tried to imagine what the experience of yesterday and last night would have been like without her and shuddered. He would have lost his temper and said all the wrong things.

Her presence calmed him somehow. He felt less like flying off the handle with her steadying influence. She had smoothly and silently comforted Callum when he wept hysterically, fetched and carried when Rory was deathly ill, and gave Col her silent, stalwart support with only a look and light touch of her hand.

She gave him hope that he could somehow fix the mess his relationship with his boys had become. He thought he'd made some progress with Callum, and the relationship between the two of them seemed to have shifted somewhat. But Rory was going to prove a harder nut to crack. The boy was wound up tighter than a drum. His father's influence on him had been more damaging than on Callum, who must have borne the brunt of his grandfather's contempt, yet was less affected by it than Rory, who had drunk up the old man's praise and values, setting him at odds with Col.

He sighed and scrubbed his face again. All this emotion had worn him out. He glanced up at Cat, watching serenely from her position over the mantle, his boys frozen in time along with her in the portrait.

"I'm sorry, love, if I've let ye down," he murmured.

He fancied he felt her stroke his hair reassuringly as she'd been wont to do. All will be well, Col, you'll see. Her words were a soothing caress to his troubled soul.

### Chapter Eighteen

A ihan stirred and woke as the bed dipped under Col's weight. She had wondered if he would come to her tonight or not, after the events they had just endured, and fallen asleep concluding that he wouldn't. She had tried to pretend it was for the best and ignore the ache in her chest. After all, hadn't she just decided that afternoon she needed to put him at arm's length?

But here he was, sliding in beside her.

"Aihan?" he said softly.

"Hm," She rolled towards him, no more able to resist him than the pull of the tide.

She nuzzled into him, and he hugged her close, their legs intertwined. She felt the weight of unspoken words between them, but was reluctant to break the silence. For what could she say? Better to say nothing than speak of feelings she was unwise to entertain.

His heart belonged to his wife. She had known that from the beginning, and she had thought it made him safe, for she couldn't become too entangled with a man who had no heart to give. But she had become entangled, she realised. His affection, as much as his passion, had snared her, and so had his need. It was so obvious he was starving for the care and touch she gave without realising.

"Hana?" he murmured over her head.

“Hm?” She lifted her head, and he kissed her. One of those soft, tender kisses he’d given her this afternoon. And tore the heart out of her.

That organ pumped hard now, as his lips teased a response from her, and she kissed him back, helpless to resist. What does he mean by this?

“Thank ye,” he said softly. “I know ye dinnae want my thanks, but ye have it anyway.” His face was in shadow; there wasn’t much light beyond the slight glow from the fireplace, so she couldn’t divine his expression, but she thought it was similar to this afternoon. Softened in a way that made her grow weak with longing.

She forced a chuckle to mask her feelings and said lightly, “Ye’re welcome. Anything else I can do fer ye?” She made her tone suggestive. Better to get things into more familiar channels. Sex was safer without emotions. She let her hand stray down his chest towards his groin.

His gasp when she clasped him, and the satisfying heft and firmness, told her that his gratitude hadn’t stifled his passion.

“Aihan,” The aching longing in his tone set her heart racing and made her wet. When has he uttered my name like that before? He usually called her lass, or occasionally Hana, a sweet diminutive; he seldom used her full name at all. She stroked him with more purpose, and he trapped her mouth with his. Kisses that devoured, and gave and took, as his hips surged urgently into her grip. She spread her legs for him, and he rolled into position between them.

His hand stroked her wet flesh, and she flexed her hips upwards, as eager as he to move things forward. Notching the head of his cock to her entrance, he pushed inside with a smooth thrust that made them both utter noises of satisfaction.

He drove into her with steady purpose, his hands pressing against hers, palm to palm



beside her head, his eyes on her face. She couldn't look away; his gaze held her captive as the long hard length of him ravaged her within. She writhed beneath him, reaching eagerly for that pleasure that teased her with possibility. He felt so good inside her; she panted, pushing herself to climax, her inner muscles flexing and squeezing him as he thrust deep and hard. Good, so good!

The pleasure built and built within her. She groaned from an excess of pleasure and frustration. So close!

“Ahh!” The cry tore from her throat as the wave peaked and held, and the hot release of him within her triggered her own climax. It crashed through her in a flood of pulsating delight, tingling to her extremities.

“Aihan!” His groan reverberated through her as their bodies melded in the boneless aftermath, and he lay prone and breathing heavily against her ear.

It was very simple sex, yet it had touched every part of her being. She squeezed him, arms, legs, inner muscles, in sudden gratitude. He made her feel so good.

He grunted and rolled off her, onto his back. Then he groped for her hand and kissed it. “Always good,” he murmured: so much an echo of her own thoughts, her skin prickled.

He reached for her, settling her into his embrace, and she got comfortable even as the thought of no longer having his arms around her taunted her. She pushed the thought away. She would leave soon; she must. But not yet.

Col lay listening to her breathing and let his body fully relax. The sex had been good, but he would have been content to just hold her tonight. Not that he regretted it. He felt buoyant and relaxed, and optimistic about tomorrow. Rory was out of danger, and he and Callum seemed to be getting on better. He just needed to improve his own

relations with both of them.

### Chapter Nineteen

Rory's leg was well on the mend a few days later when Aihan suggested to Mac that the boys needed some new clothes.

"They have outgrown most of what they have, or are about to," she said. "And what just barely still fits is worn and shabby."

Mac looked up from the paper in front of him with a guilty start. "Aye, ye're probably right lass, I hadnae noticed."

"I take them to buy new clothes," she said.

He nodded. "I'll give ye a note for the tailor, he can send the bills to me. Ye'd best get them some new boots as well." He reached for a piece of paper and a quill.

"What about Wee and Fergus?" she asked. "I notice Fergus mending his stockings."

Mac waved a hand. "Get whatever ye think is fit, and something fer yerself."

"Thank ye, but can you afford?—?"

"Aye, d'ye think I'm poor, lass?"

She pursed her lips. "You dinnae live like a wealthy man."

He grinned. "Aye, that's the secret to maintaining yer wealth, lass. Ye nae spend it

unless ye have to. I've a mind to take ye into Edinburgh for a spot of real shopping one day."

Thus, that afternoon, Aihan walked to the village with Rory and Cam to visit the tailor and the boot maker, armed with Fergus and Wee's requirements. The tailor sold off-the-rack items as well as made-to-measure garments. While the boys were having their measurements taken, Aihan selected some items for Wee and Fergus. Stockings and shirts, principally. And a new pair of breeches for Wee, as he, like Rory and Cam, was growing faster than he could wear out his clothes. And, mindful of Mac's instructions she chose a plain brown plaid for herself. It would be warm in the cooler nights coming on and useful when she left to go south. Her heart squeezed at the notion.

She didn't want to leave, but knew she must soon.

She added stockings and shirts for the boys to the pile and some neckcloths too, for Mac, for she had noticed his—when he bothered to wear one, which wasn't often—were grey and showing signs of wear.

The tailor's wife bundled up her purchases into two parcels, and they left the shop, each boy carrying a parcel, heading to the boot maker.

"Rory!" called a voice from the other side of the street. Rory turned his head, and a group of boys stood in a cluster round a slighter bigger boy with tousled brown hair. He was the one who spoke.

"Hey, Toby," said Rory in greeting.

"We're heading to the beach to fish, come with us."

"Can't," said Rory with a glance at Aihan. "Got to get boots."

“Yer servant telling you what to do?” taunted Toby.

“She’s nae a servant,” said Rory, showing hackle. Aihan hid a smile at his defence of her.

“Ahh! Then the rumours are true! She’s warming yer father’s bed!” Toby grinned lecherously and made an obscene gesture.

“Take that back, Toby MacPherson!” said Cam stepping into the road towards him.

Toby laughed. “Ye’re gonna make me, Jessie?”

“Aye, I will!” said Cam, dropping his parcel and running at him with a fist raised. Cam barrelled straight at the other boy before Aihan could move to stop him. And Toby, still laughing, knocked Cam flat on his back with a punch to the face. Aihan raced to his aid, dropping to her knees. Cam’s face showed a rapidly contusing black eye.

“Ye’ll pay for that, Ferguson!” yelled Rory, throwing his parcel away and launching himself at Toby. With two swift movements—that Aihan had taught him, she was pleased to see—he had Toby on his back, winded. He followed this up with a punch to the nose. Blood flowed copiously.

Rory turned to face the other boys, raising a fist menacingly. “Anybody else want some?”

As Toby and Rory were the biggest boys in the group, the rest backed away and dispersed. Only one stayed to help Toby to his feet, offering him a handkerchief for his bloodied nose.

Toby looked at Rory over the handkerchief and said muffledly, “Ye always called

him a Jessie!”

“That’s different!” said Rory. “He’s my brother. I’m allowed. Ye’re not! And don’t bad mouth my father and our house guest, neither!”

Toby eyed him with a strange look. “Where did ye learn that trick?”

“Aihan taught me.” Rory indicated her with a nod of his head, bending to pick up his discarded parcel and Cam’s as well.

“A girl taught ye to do that?”

“Aye, she’s a bonnie fighter.” Rory grinned, and Aihan smiled back at him.

“Are ye all right, Cam?” she asked quietly, helping him to sit up.

“Hurts!” Whimpered Cam, holding his eye.

Toby and the other boy slinked off, and Rory turned to look at his brother. “That was well done, Cal, but ye should have used the moves Aihan has taught us.”

“Forgot,” said Cam, getting to his feet with help from Aihan. “I just got wild and wanted to hit him for insulting Aihan.” But he smiled at Rory’s praise, and Aihan fancied his chest expanded a bit.

“Thank ye for coming to my defence, Cam,” she said. “And you too, Rory. Yer father would be proud.”

“Hm,” Rory grunted. “We had better get those boots and get him home before that eye swells up so much he cannae see.”

By the time they got home, Cam was reeling a bit and complaining of a headache and feeling sick. Surprisingly, Rory didn't rouse on him for being weak, instead he took him upstairs and put a damp cloth on his face.

"That'll help the swelling go down. Ye'll be a mite sore for a couple of days, and ye'll have bruises for at least a week," he said, demonstrating his superior knowledge of wounds acquired through fighting.

He then disappeared to his room and came back a few minutes later with something clutched in his hands. He held out the pieces of paper to Cam. "Ye'd best have these back."

Cam took them and Aihan craned her neck to see what they were. She saw drawings of a lovely woman. Cat. She smiled, watching Cam's face light up. The younger boy flung his arms round his big brother and hugged him.

Rory blushed and pulled away abruptly. "Leave off, ye Jessie!" But it was said affectionately, not as an insult.

Col had been out when Aihan and the boys came home from their shopping expedition, so he didn't learn of the day's adventures until he was confronted with Callum's bruised face over dinner.

"What the bluidy hell—!" he said, stopping in the dining room doorway at the sight of his youngest son. His eye fell on Rory, who said, "It wasnae me! Cal took exception to something Toby said and got punched for it. But dinnae worry, I avenged our honour and got Toby a good bob on the nose. Lots o' claret, there was!" He grinned, obviously pleased with himself.

He got the full story from Aihan after dinner, although he had to press a bit to get the full detail of what was said by whom. "Well, I suppose I should be pleased the boys

seem to be on good terms,” he remarked. “And that Rory saw fit to return the drawings to his brother.”

“ And the fact that Rory sprang to yer defence,” she said with a smile.

“Aye, that’s a turn up.” He smiled and pulled her down into his lap. He was sitting in the chair by the fire in his study. “I’m glad they saw fit to defend yer honour, my dear. There is some hope of turning them into gentlemen yet.”



### Chapter Twenty

Peace reigned for a week after that, but Col should have guessed some mischief was brewing because the boys were so quiet and well-behaved. It was well after midnight when a thunderous knock on the door woke him.

Aihan sat up. “What is it?”

He got out of bed, scrambling for his robe in the half light from the fire. “I dinnae ken, but it’s generally not good to be roused out of bed at this time of night.” Tying his robe round his waist, he headed for the door. “Stay here, lass, best if ye’re not seen in yer robe by half the neighbourhood!”

He ran down the stairs just as Fergus emerged from his quarters at the back of the house.

Col unbolted the front door and met the startling sight of Henderson and McBride, two of Earl Kirkcaldy’s retainers on his doorstep, with lanterns and stern expressions.

“Mac Sceacháin,” said Henderson, a tall, thin man with dour features and grey at his temples. “The Chief summons ye.” McBride, who was as tall but bulkier, with a dark, swarthy complexion, nodded.

“What the bluidy hell, it’s three in the morning, man!”

“Ye’ve a case to answer.”

“What—”

“Yer boys were caught attempting to steal the Chief’s cattle. Five head of his best cows from the pasture on the headland.”

Col blinked at him while his head reeled. Rory’s words came back to him: It’s nae stealing if it’s reiving.

“Fook!” he swore under his breath. “Aye, I’ll come, just give me ten minutes to dress. Where are the lads?”

“The chief has them detained.”

“Is my Willy with them?” asked Fergus over Col’s shoulder.

“He is.”

Col nodded. “Ye want to wait in the kitchen? I won’t be long.”

The men followed Fergus to the kitchen and Col ran up the stairs. Sticking his head into Aihan’s chamber, he found her dressed in shirt and breeches and swathed in a plain brown plaid, pulling on her boots.

“The boys?—”

“Aye, I heard. I’ll meet ye downstairs,” she said calmly.

“I don’t think it’s necessarily a good idea fer ye to come, Hana.”

“I’m coming. Ye’ll nae face this alone,” she said firmly. “Go get dressed.”

He hesitated a moment, kissed her, and went to his room to scramble into shirt, breeches, and jacket. He was tempted to wear a kilt as this was a clan matter, but it was too difficult to get the pleating right, he didn't have time for that. But he did swing a plaid over his shoulder and belt it round his waist, as Aihan had done. It was cold out. He must get her a Thornton plaid made up. She'd look bonnie in the green and blue.

He met her downstairs moments later. Fergus joined them with the Chief's men, and they left the house to collect two horses from the stable. He took Aihan up with him and Fergus rode Cat's mare. He noticed grimly that the boys' horses were missing.

The men's reaction to Aihan was to look at her sideways and say nothing. Col decided against introducing them. Let them think what they liked, he'd not apologise for bringing her.

It took them half an hour to get to Ravenscraig Castle on the headland. As the two towers linked by battlements hove into view, black shadows against the sky, Col's stomach muscles tightened with worry. The castle dated to the 1460's. It was built by James II for his Queen, as a functioning defensive stronghold, in troubled times, and bequeathed to the Kirkcaldy's, along with the title, by James III for services rendered to the crown. The landward side was blind, no windows—to make attack more difficult—which gave it a brooding, almost sinister air. Col shuddered in his plaid to think of his boys locked up inside its dungeons. The windows, Col knew, were all on the seaward side to take advantage of the ocean breeze.

Douglas Kirkcaldy was Chief of the Kirkcaldy Clan, of which Mac Sceacháin was a sept—a family, part of a clan with a different name. An attempt to steal his cattle was an egregious insult, and Col was sweating inside his plaid, despite the cold night air. He could only hope the chief would take a lenient view in light of the boys' youth. But he doubted it. This was far more than a child's prank. And if he'd raised them right, they would never have even thought of doing it. It was nothing short of

outrageous. So, it was on him. This was his fault.

They left their horses in the stable on the landward side and made their way across the bridge to enter the castle via the postern gate to the west tower, and around to the entrance to the tower on the seaward side, where a narrow circular staircase gave access to the upper levels.

Henderson and McBride led them up to the hall on the first floor. The room was large and rectangular, with stone walls and timber floor and ceiling. The huge room had six large wooden posts, carved in the shape of pillars to hold up the ceiling. A huge hearth was set into the western wall, with large chunks of wood burning brightly and casting out significant and welcoming heat. This counteracted the cooling effect of the stone walls and wind that still managed to penetrate the room through the series of narrow slit windows in the southern wall, despite the fact that they had been filled with glass in the last century.

Shutting the big heavy wooden door against the cold air that swept up from the staircase, McBride took his place by the door and Henderson went forward to address the clan chief.

Douglas Kirkcaldy sat in a large chair on the dais against the northern wall, upon which hung a medieval style tapestry depicting a deer hunt. He was a big man, of a size with Col and at least five years Col's senior, with thick, luxuriant brown hair and a curly brown beard with red highlights and flecks of grey.

Seated beside him, on a smaller chair, was his daughter, Isa. Col hadn't seen her for a while, and she had gone from awkward teen to beautiful young woman in the interim. Her long red hair was loose round her shoulders, and she, like her father, wore the clan plaid, but over a white gown. She looked every inch the proud Scots lass, and he wondered at her presence. Of his boys and young Willy, there was no sign.

“Chief, may I present Laird Mac Sceacháin, his woman, and Fergus McLeod.”

Col winced internally at Henderson’s description of Aihan, but supposed it was true, and they would have to acknowledge it soon if she were to stay.

He stepped forward, bowed, and said, “Chief. Where are my sons? I was given to understand they are here?”

“Aye, the miscreants are in the cellar. And there they’ll stay until I pass judgement.”

Col clamped his teeth together. It wouldn’t do to alienate the chief more than he was already. He nodded and waited. He was conscious of Fergus vibrating with fury beside him. But the old man had enough sense to keep his mouth shut and let Col do the talking.

“Are ye hard up, Mac Sceacháin?” asked the Chief.

Col stiffened, but recognising the jibe for what it was, he said as calmly as he could, “Nae, my lord.”

“Then what possessed ye to send yer boys to seize my cattle?”

“I dinnae do any such thing.”

“So, the plan was all their own?”

“Can I explain, my lord?”

“Aye, I’m all ears.”

“The root of the problem lies with my Athair. Ye knew him, Douglas. He was always

romanticising the reivers. He filled the boys' heads with stories. This would be an attempt to recreate those romantic dreams. I'm nae excusing them, my lord. They should never have done it, but I ask ye to consider clemency. They're only lads."

The chief stared at him under beetling brows and chewed on his words a bit. "Aye, I knew the old laird well. He was ever one to spin a tale, we all enjoyed them as lads." He paused. "But the fact is, yer lads are old enough to know the difference between dreams and reality."

"Ye're right, my lord, and I'll shoulder the blame fer that. So, I'll ask ye to point yer retribution in my direction, nae theirs."

The chief shook his head. "Ye lost yer way after Cat died, Col. And it would seem ye're still under the cat's paw." He nodded to Aihan. "Ye've gone soft. The lads willnae learn if ye treat 'em wi' kid gloves, man. They're nae lassies to be coddled."

"With respect, my lord, ye're wrong. They're my lads and I know what's best for them, and if ye think I'd go soft on them fer this?—"

"Ye've got balls to contradict me to my face, Col, I'll give ye that. But ye'll nae change my mind. However, if ye've a mind to share their punishment, and in addition pay me a fine for the bloody inconvenience of being dragged out of my bed in the middle of the bloody night to deal with such foolishness, I'll consider tempering the sentence I had in mind."

"Aye, I'll pay yer fine and stand whatever punishment ye'll see fit to press upon me, if it will reduce their sentence."

"I'll take it too," said Fergus, stepping forward. "Willy's my responsibility."

"Nae, Fergus!" protested Col.

“Yer sentiments do ye credit, McLeod, but I’ll nae test yer old bones for the lad’s trespass. Besides, I know who the ringleader of this merry band of would-be cattle rustlers is. For he confessed his guilt straight up and asked to take the lion’s share of the punishment.”

“Rory,” sighed Col, scrubbing his hair.

“He reminds me o’ you at a similar age, Col.” Douglas said with a smirk. “Or have ye forgotten what a hell-raiser ye were?”

“Nae, I haven’t forgotten.” It just feels like it was someone else’s life.

“McBride, fetch the lads.” McBride left the room; his footsteps audible as he descended the stone staircase. The wind swirled in the open door, making the flames in the hearth flicker and sending a cold shiver up Col’s spine in spite of the plaid he wore.

The minutes ticked by in silence, and finally the sounds of footsteps echoed on the stairs. Then the boys appeared, shepherded by McBride, bringing up the rear.

Rory strode into the room despite the clinking chains at wrist and ankles. He met Col’s eyes with a defiant stare and transferred his attention to the dais as he came to a stop before it. Callum and Willy ranged themselves behind him. Callum’s eyes were red, although there was no sign of tears now. Willy glanced at Fergus, shamefaced, and looked forward towards the dais.

“Well, gentlemen,” said Douglas, leaning an elbow on the arm of his chair and surveying them. “What d’ye have to say fer yerselves, now ye’ve had time to think on it?”

Rory straightened his shoulders, lifted his chin, and said clearly, “I told ye it was my

idea. Punish me, nae them, they just followed my lead.”

“Well, it doesnae quite work like that, lad, but I commend yer bravery. Yer father’s made me a similar offer, so ye’re a chip off the old block, I’d say,”

Rory glanced round at Col, who lifted his chin to him in encouragement.

“Each man shall take his punishment as metered out. But first I want ye to understand something.” He paused, and the boys shifted nervously. All but Rory, who stood still, his fists clenched before him, his jaw set and his gaze dead straight.

“Ye dinnae steal from yer own. Do ye know what would have happened to ye, if ye’d done that in reiving years?”

The boys shook their heads, even Rory.

“Ye’d be dead.” He let that sink in. “And yer Athair, and all yer kin.” He paused again and Rory swallowed visibly.

“The reivers were nae heroes, lads,” he went on. “They were criminals. Blood-thirsty, murdering criminals. Who held grudges for generations. The Scots and Sassenachs, both. If ye want to romanticise a hero from Scotland’s past, I suggest ye go back to Robert the Bruce. Now there was a man worth following.”

Callum managed a tremulous smile at this, and for the first time, Rory’s eyes dropped. Willy fidgeted.

“Now fer punishment. It’s three-fold. First, ye’ll be flogged.” He ticked this off on a finger and Callum and Willy flinched. Rory looked up and straightened his shoulders again. He nodded.



“Second, ye’ll work for me, one day a week for a year, to repay the fine Mac Sceacháin will pay as a bond. If ye shirk yer work, he’ll nae get his bond back, I’ll keep it all, and ye’ll still work for year and a week extra for everyday ye don’t give satisfaction. Ye’ll commence after Hogmanay. Are we clear?”

“Aye, my lord.” Rory spoke first, his voice firm.

The other two offered Aye, my lords in more subdued tones.

“And third, ye’ll watch the Laird Mac Sceacháin take a flogging fer each of ye. And bear witness to the pain he takes on yer behalf.”

Col felt Aihan’s hand clench his where it hung at his side in the folds of his plaid. He squeezed back but didn’t look at her. His concentration was all on the boys. Even Rory had gone pale at this last condition.

“Fetch the lash, McBride,” said the Chief.

“Ye’ll nae subject yer lass to watching this!” protested Col, realising his intent.

“Isa is no puling miss. She will be chief after me. As such, she’ll bear witness to justice being done.”

Isa sat straight in her chair and did not flinch at her father’s words, although Col saw her hands tighten on the arms of her chair.

McBride returned with the lash and presented it to his chief.

Kirkcaldy took it and descended from the dais. “Remove yer shirts, gentlemen,” he said. “Rory, ye’re first.” He nodded at McBride and Henderson. “Tie him to the post.”

Rory removed his jacket and shirt calmly. Col had tanned him a time or two over the years, with his hand or his belt, but he'd never whipped the boys in his life. His old man had whipped him, though, and he knew how much it hurt. The chief had not said how many strokes they were all to receive, but he hoped he had succeeded in pleading sufficient clemency for the boys. It was certain they would never forget this.

The two men tied Roy to the pillar, his arms wrapped round it rather than above his head. A mercy that Col noted, for it hurt a deal more if the recipient was hung up by his arms with his feet barely touching the ground. The Chief readied the whip, testing it with a crack or two in the air, which made the younger boys jump. Both of them were pale as milk and visibly trembling, but Rory stood resolute, embracing the pillar, his face blank of expression.

### Chapter Twenty-One

A ihan attended to the boys' wounds and put them to bed on their bellies. Fergus took care of Wee. Neither Cam nor Wee had suffered broken skin from the blows, as they only received five lashes each, and she suspected the Chief had pulled his punch with the younger lads, letting the whip crack before it touched the skin. The crack had made the younger boys jump with fright and whimper each time it came down, even when it wasn't directed at them; and she had seen poor Cam shaking with fear during the entire ordeal. But theatrics aside, the whip's touch was weakened considerably by the technique. Even so, the skin was red, bruised, and sore. And both boys were shocked and upset, both by the lashing they'd endured and what they were forced to witness.

Rory had suffered twice that number of blows. He had taken all but the last two in silence. Those two had broken the skin open, forcing a grunt from him for each one. He stood, with blood streaming down his back during the rest of the punishments, visibly shaking and pale, but refusing to sit. Aihan had itched throughout to go to his aid, but understood instinctively that she could not.

Mac's punishment came last. He was subjected to fifteen lashes, five for each of the lads. Like Rory, he took it mostly in silence, but by the end his back was a mess of bloodied lines. She was trembling with helpless fury at this diabolical behaviour and mystified as to why he let it happen.

Leaving Rory as comfortable as she could make him, she went to Mac's room. She found him bent over the basin, attempting to wash.

“Here, let me.” She took the cloth from him and ran water over his back, dabbing gently at the gashes. When she had got the blood off, she helped him to the bed to lie on his stomach. Then she cleaned the wounds with whisky, stitched the worst of them, and applied basilicum powder to seal the rest of the superficial cuts.

It was almost dawn, and the sun would be up very soon. All the same, she stripped and climbed into bed with him. She couldn’t hold him because of his wounds, but she could be here.

He lay with his head turned towards her, and she finally asked the question that had been burning in her all night.

“Why?”

He sighed. “Clan fealty, lass. The boys offered the Chief an enormous insult. He had to punish it. They know better now. He did the right thing.”

“How can flogging children be the right thing?”

“They will be men soon, and they need to understand what that means. Rory understood. He took it like a man. I’m proud of him. He understood he’d done wrong. It was a better lesson than any I could have taught him. If I’d raised them better, he’d never have thought of doing it in the first place. The fault was mine.”

She stroked his face; his jaw was bristled with ginger whiskers.

“This will heal, lass, it’s nothing.”

“You will be scarred!” she said indignantly.

He shrugged and winced. “A good reminder of my fault.”

She shook her head. "Scottish madness."

"Aye, lass. I'm sorry ye had to see that."

She leaned up on her elbow and kissed him. "Sleep, if ye can. Is the pain bad?"

"It throbs a bit, but I've had worse."

Col rose late afternoon and slung a robe over his breeches to go and pay a visit to his sons. He found Callum lying on his stomach, his chin propped on his folded arms, reading a book. Seeing Col enter the room, he went to get up, but Col stayed him with a hand.

"I came to see how ye're faring, lad." He inspected Callum's back and was relieved to only see redness and what would be slight bruising.

"It hurt like the devil at the time, now it's just sore." Callum eyed him. "You and Rory fared much worse."

"Aye, well, we're older, and more of the blame rested with us."

"How were ye to blame, Athair? Ye didnae do it, we did."

"I should ha' taught ye better, lad. That's my blame. I failed to explain the fealty ye owe to the clan chief, and what a transgression such an act would be. It just never occurred to me that ye'd take it into yer heids to do such a thing."

"Aye, I didnae want to do it, but Rory told me I was a Jessie if I didn't."

"I'll be having a word to him about that." Col frowned, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "Lad, ye're getting old enough, I hope, to understand this. Yer grandfather

had a very fixed idea of what manhood is, and if ye didn't fit into it, then ye were nae a man to him. He thought yer uncle Merlow were nae a man because he didnae do the things yer grandfather approved of. When I was Rory's age, I agreed with him. But I know now I was wrong, and yer grandfather was wrong." He stopped, clearing his throat.

"Yer uncle Merlow is the best man I know. It's a crying shame ye've not had more to do with him, for he would be the best role model I could offer ye. I suggest ye write to him, share yer thoughts with him. He'll understand ye much better than me. Ye'll find, I think, the two of ye share a lot in common."

"Aye, I was sad when he left," admitted Callum. "But d'ye really think he'd like to get letters from me?"

"Aye, lad, I do. It might even do ye good to go and stay with him and Hetty fer a bit, if ye want to of course?"

Callum nodded and smiled. "I'd like that. Hetty is nice."

"She is that." Col paused. "D'ye like Aihan?"

"Oh, Aye. Aihan is—different. Good different." He looked down and chewed his lip. "I know ye like her, Athair. And it's obvious she likes ye. Are ye—are ye going to marry her?"

Col jerked at this, his heart kicking up in alarm. "I can't, Callum, she has to go home at some point. Back to China."

"Why?" Callum's blue eyes, so like his own, clouded. "I thought she was happy here with us."

Col smiled sadly. "I think she is. But ye see, I stopped her going home with the ship that she came on. I must offer her the opportunity to go home if she wants it."

"Ye dinnae want to marry her?" pressed Callum, like a dog with a bone.

Col sighed. "I dinnae know, Callum. That's the truth. It's complicated."

"Is it?" Callum rested his chin on his fist, staring at the book in front of him.

Col reached out a hand to stroke his tangled red curls. And Callum dodged the caress. Col withdrew his hand. "Speaking of yer uncle Merlow, I thought I'd look into getting ye a tutor to prepare ye for school. Rory may not be cut out fer university, but I think ye might be. Would ye like that?"

Callum turned his head and blinked at him. "Someone to teach me Latin and Greek? And scientific principles?"

"Aye lad, if it's what ye want?"

"I would." Callum blinked and wiped his eyes. "Thank ye."

"Oh, lad, I'm sorry," Col said helplessly. Fook, I've let this boy down. "Ye shall have a tutor as soon as I can arrange one." He squeezed his arm and rose, heading for the door. "D'ye want to come down fer dinner or have a meal up here?"

"I'll come down."

Col nodded and left the room, closing the door quietly behind him and pausing to sort through that conversation. Callum's question about Aihan had thrown him. The prospect of sending her home gave him a nasty ache in the chest. He would miss her, dreadfully, he realised. He had come to rely on her a great deal. She was a comfort as

well as a source of pleasure. And as he had reflected before, she seemed to fit, despite being from a completely different culture.

He sighed and shifted his shoulders, trying to ease the ache in his back. He moved along the corridor, past his own room and Aihan's, to Rory's at the other end. He knocked and when bid, entered to find Rory, sitting up on the side of the bed, naked.

"Thinking of getting up?" he asked, moving into the room.

"Aye, I'm hungry."

"How's the pain?" asked Col, handing his son his breeches. Rory hauled them on, trying to hide a wince as he moved his arms and back to do so.

"I'll live." His face remained closed as he said this, but Col could tell by something in his eyes that there was a lot going on behind them.

Col reached for a robe and held it out. "This will rub less than a shirt."

Rory took it and shrugged it on with another grimace.

"Be careful ye don't open the wounds up again!" cautioned Col.

Rory stood a moment, staring past Col's shoulder, then took a breath and said, "Thank ye fer taking the blows for me and the lads. I'm sorry I brought shame on ye."

Col looked at him for a moment. It had taken something for the lad to say that.

"I'm glad ye can admit yer fault and take yer punishment so well, lad. I'm proud of the way ye took responsibility. Ye ken now why it was wrong?"



“Aye, I do.” Rory looked at his feet. “I’ve been so angry with ye,” he admitted.

“Nae surprise there, lad, I’ve let ye down and I’m more sorry than I can say.” Col swallowed the lump in his throat.

Rory nodded, and silence ensued for a moment or two. Then Rory said, “how’s Callum?”

“Sore, a bit bruised, but he’ll heal in a few days. Willy’s the same. The chief pulled his punch with those two.”

Rory nodded again. “He dinnae with ye though, did he?”

“I’m not a lad, Rory. If I could have, I’d have taken all the blows to spare ye lads. Ye must know that.”

“I do.” Rory raised his eyes to Col’s and gave him a tentative smile. “I’m right proud yer my Athair.”

Col’s face cracked. “I love ye, Rory. I cannae hug ye right now, but I would.”

“Aye, I love ye too,” said Rory awkwardly. Col gripped his hand tightly a moment.

Col broke the silence with a jest. “Then maybe ye’ll mind me a bit more from now on?”

“I doubt it,” said Rory with a grin. But Col fancied that he would, a bit.

He cleared his clogged throat and changed the subject. “I’m going to hire a tutor fer yer brother so he can prepare to go to university. I assume that’s nae a path ye want to follow?”

“Nae!” said Rory with visible horror.

“Dinnae think so. Even so, ye’d do best to share a few of his lessons. Ye’ll need a few more skills than ye have to be Laird. The rest I’ll teach ye. It’s past time ye started to learn the business of running the estate. The next time I visit the tenants, I’ll take ye.”

Rory nodded. “I’d like that.”

“Good, it’ll give ye more to think about than getting into mischief.” He paused and then went on. “There’s one more thing, Rory.”

His eldest son caught the seriousness of his tone and raised an eyebrow. The sullen resentment he usually regarded him with seemed to have evaporated.

“Callum. I’d take it kindly if ye’d cease calling him a Jessie. He’s different than ye. He’ll never be as tough as ye are, physically, it’s not in his nature or his build. But he has other strengths, and it’s time ye recognised them.”

Rory chewed his lip and nodded. “If he’ll stop tormenting me?”

“He’ll stop if ye do. Besides, I think the snake incident cured him of that. Has he done anything since?”

“Nae.”

“Will ye give me yer word, Rory?”

Rory straightened his shoulders and looked him in the eye. “Aye, I will.”

“Thank ye, lad.” He clasped his shoulder carefully and squeezed gently. “Now I

believe Aihan was preparing dinner, shall we go see what she's cooking?"

"Athair?"

"Aye?" Col looked back over his shoulder, wincing slightly with the twist of his torso, feeling the stitches pull.

"Aihan's a right one."

Col smiled. "She is."

"Is she going to stay?"

"I don't know."

"But ye'd like her to?"

"Aye, I would," Col admitted.

Rory nodded and they went downstairs to the kitchen.

### Chapter Twenty-Two

Col slept for the better part of the next two days, only rising for meals and an hour or so of conversation. The events of the cattle rustling night had taken more of a toll on him than he realised, or wanted to admit. He wasn't a young lad anymore. By contrast, the boys, even Rory, were up and about, a bit sore but not so poorly they were forced to lay abed like invalids.

The truth was, he suffered a slight fever from one of the wounds becoming infected, and Aihan clucked over him like a hen with one chick. Which he secretly rather liked. He shrugged off the fever, however, and the wound began to heal. But with time to lie abed he was able to think too, and he realised that the emotional toll was probably heavier than the physical one. He sank into a mild depression, reflecting on his shortcomings as a father since Cat's death.

In amongst those gloomy thoughts, he fretted about Aihan and worried that he hadn't received a reply from Merlow. It had been several weeks now since he sent the letter, and nothing. He hadn't received anything from the British government either about the embassy trip. He wasn't so surprised about that. It was a long shot that the letter would even be read by someone who could handle his request, let alone be willing to do so. But the silence from Merlow worried him more. Was he alright? Had he not received his letter? What could keep him from replying?

On the third day, he felt well enough to get up and try to have a normal day. The first thing he did was draft an advertisement for The Caledonian Mercury for a tutor for Callum. The newspaper was printed in Edinburgh and had a wide circulation. He was hopeful of finding a suitable applicant through that means.

Wanting the exercise, he took the letter into the village with the dogs. Aihan had been walking them morning and night for him. In between his worries over the boys, his thoughts about her had consumed him.

If the embassy wasn't an option, was there another ship going to China? Presumably ships working for the East India Company would include China in some of their itineraries. How did he find out if there was one willing to take her home? The London newspapers might have such information, but to find a copy of those he would need to go to Edinburgh, and they would likely be old papers, out of date.

He didn't want her to go, of course; the notion of her leaving made his chest ache. But it was the right thing to do, to offer her the option, at least.

Then it occurred to him that Alex McTavish might know something about trading ships. Running a goods store, he had contracts with traders that brought goods to Dysart from Edinburgh, and presumably he did business directly with Edinburgh merchants also.

After dropping off his letter at the post office, he stopped by the store to find him and ask. Telling the dogs to stay, and hoping to hell they would, he entered the shop and found Fiona behind the counter.

She smiled at him. "Col, what can I do fer ye?"

"Is Alex about? I've a question for him."

"Aye, he's out the back," she indicated with her head. "Filling orders." She held the counter flap up for him and waved him through.

The rear part of the shop was like a warehouse, with a large door at the rear with the cart backed in so that Alex could fill it with goods for delivery.

He was carrying a large sack towards the cart as Col entered and walked towards him.

“Alex.”

The other man turned his head and smiled. Dumping the sack on the cart, he turned and offered his hand in greeting.

“Col, good to see ye, what can I do fer ye?”

Relieved that the events of three nights ago didn’t seem to be common knowledge, Col gripped Alex’s hand. “This is probably a long shot, but do ye have any dealings with traders who might know of any ships sailing to China?”

Alex raised an eyebrow. “Is this about the lass?”

“Aye, having caused her to be trapped here, I feel honour bound to seek a way fer her to go home if she wishes.”

“I don’t rightly know, but I can make some enquires fer ye. I’m going to Edinburgh tomorrow for a two-day buying spree.”

“Would ye? Thank ye, Alex. We were still meaning to have ye over fer dinner. Can ye come tonight?”

Alex agreed to this, and Col returned to the street after issuing the dinner invitation to Fiona, who greeted it with enthusiasm. To find neither dog where he left them. Hector was getting patted on the other side of the street by two lasses, and there was no sign of Gussie at all. Sighing, he waved at the lasses and called Hector, who reluctantly left his pats to return to his side.

Col regarded Hector with a jaundiced eye as the terrier sat on his haunches obediently

and wagged his tail. “I don’t suppose ye have any idea where Gussie might be?”

Hector barked and panted, his tongue lolling and his tail wagging.

“Ye’re nae help at all, are ye?” said Col with disgusted affection. “Come on, she’ll come home when she’s ready.”

In fact, Gussie beat them home and was found asleep on the carpet before the fire in his study.

He went to the kitchen to tell Aihan he had invited Alex and Fiona for dinner tonight, which was greeted with indignation.

“Ye haven’t given me much time to prepare!” she said, arms akimbo.

“Sorry lass, d’ye?—”

“Never mind, I’ll manage. Go—” she hooshed him out of the kitchen and he went to have a nap. He was still tiring easily.

When he woke and came back downstairs, it was to delicious smells.

An extra leaf had been added to the dining room table, along with a cloth, flowers in a vase, and extra candles. The boys had been pressed into service laying out the best china and the silver cutlery, which he hadn’t seen since before Cat passed away.

Aihan appeared in one of Cat’s evening gowns, this one in green silk; she had altered it to fit, and she looked lovely enough to make his heart ache.

Alex and Fiona arrived at the front door and Col let them in, ushering them into the front parlour, which had also been transformed since he last ventured into it, with

flowers and beeswax polish, the holland covers removed from the furniture. He offered his guests a whisky and Aihan joined them, slightly flushed.

Alex bowed over her hand, and she bobbed a curtsy. The two women nodded at each other politely. Col had contrived to ask Alex not to mention his request for information about ships going to China; he didn't want to raise Aihan's hopes if the attempt proved abortive.

"Dinner is ready," said Aihan, and Col led the way to the dining room and saw their guests seated while Fergus and Willy, wearing their best outfits, produced the first course. The boys were also dressed in their best and on their most exemplary behaviour.

Col watched all this, bemused at the transformation in his household. It reminded him of the earlier days of his marriage when they used to entertain more frequently. His father had been alive then and the boys much younger. The house had more servants too. A butler and cook, maids, and even a footman. The outdoor staff included grooms for the stable and gardeners for the grounds. Fergus's job had been gamekeeper, and he seldom came into the house. How things had changed over the years.

Aihan had produced a range of finger food for the first course: those pork buns that had become a favourite with the boys, some pan fried parcels of some soft dough with meat filling, and some little balls of meat. All with a flavourful sweet and mildly spicy sauce in which to dip them.

Col watched Alex and Fiona eyeing the strange food with slight looks of trepidation.

"It's good, Uncle," said Rory with an encouraging smile to Alex, as helped himself to one of everything.



Alex cast a look at his wife and shrugged, reaching for a meat ball.

Fiona took one of the pork buns and bit into it.

“That what I want the rice f’our for,” said Aihan with a smile.

Fiona nodded, chewing and swallowing slowly. She took a sip of her wine—Fergus had found the best wine in the cellar. Col was surprised there was any still drinkable. “Very interesting,” she said politely.

Alex tried one of the dumplings next, and his grin showed that he like them. Reaching for another, he murmured to Fiona, “You need to get the receipt for these!”

Fiona raised an eyebrow and tried one. She nodded. “Um yes, I like those,” she said softly.

“I get Cam to write you out receipt,” said Aihan with a sunny smile.

The second course included noodles and pan-fried meat and vegetables in a spicy sauce, which seemed to go down well with the guests. For dessert, Aihan had returned to more traditional Scottish fare with a steamed fruity pudding and custard. By the time the last of the pudding had vanished, the initial constraint had evaporated, and conversation was free flowing and friendly. The copious quantities of wine imbibed might have had something to do with that.

Seeing his guests out the front door, Col was stifling a yawn, exhausted. His back was still sore. Shutting the door, he wrapped an arm round Aihan. “Ye’re amazing, lass, how did ye pull that off with so little time?”

She grinned and kissed his chin. “Fergus and Wee and the boys all assist me.”

He yawned and she said, “Ye go to bed, I take dogs out.”

Col retired to bed and was half-asleep when Aihan joined him after walking the dogs. He was still forced to sleep on his belly, and put out an arm to cuddle her as best he could. She rested a hand on his buttock and tucked her leg over the back of his thigh. She was naked, and her mound pressed against the side of his hip. It woke him up.

Lifting himself up on an elbow, he looked down at her. She was lying half on her side, half on her back, her hair a loose black cloud round her head and a slight smile on her face.

He bent his head and kissed her. They had shared a few kisses the last several days but nothing else. His body was reminding him of that fact now. They had been in the habit of having sex most nights. And some mornings too. She was always a willing bed partner, and he had ceased feeling guilty over the pleasure they shared a while ago. It seemed senseless to reject something that felt so damned good and was doing no one any harm.

He deepened the kiss, ignoring the slight twinge from his back. The hand that wasn't holding him up found one of her lovely little breasts, and his mouth traced kisses down her neck.

She panted a bit but said, anxiously, “Yer back?”

“Fook my back,” he growled against her skin. “I need ye under me, lass, it's been a sight too long.” He lifted himself up, and she arranged herself under him, her legs either side of his hips. Lowering himself into the cradle of her hips, he murmured, “That's better.”

Stroking her lips with his cock, he found her wet, which was no surprise. He'd yet to find he had to do much to arouse her. She always seemed ready for him.

“Oh, Hana,” he groaned softly, finding her mouth with his, as his cock sought the entrance to her body. He slid in easily and held still to enjoy the blissful, warm snugness of her.

She moved under him, and he let her, holding himself in place deep inside her while she worked herself into an orgasm. He enjoyed orchestrating her pleasure with his mouth and his fingers, but he’d found she was just as happy to make herself come on his cock, and seemed to have no difficulty doing so. It was, he found, deeply arousing, and made sex easy and uncomplicated when they were both tired and just wanted to get to the point.

With the current state of his back, it was good to let her take the lead. He’d come easily enough when she was done. Which sounded prosaic and unromantic. But in the throes of it, it wasn’t at all. It was fucking erotic.

“Fook,” he groaned as she worked her body against his, squeezing him with her internal muscles and gripping his upper arms tightly. She raised her head a fraction and bit the muscle of his shoulder and then dropped her head back, arching under him, and let out a cry of completion. She slumped under him, panting, and grinned sloe-eyed at him.

“Good, Mac.”

He panted and, unable to resist, drove into her a few times. “Felt very good to me,” he said, nuzzling her neck.

“Hmm.” She pushed up into him, writhing, and he stilled, pushing down against her, knowing she was going to take her second orgasm. Pulses of pleasure from his cock made him groan again as she writhed and squeezed and panted and moaned.

The flutter of her flesh and her moan of pleasure told him she’d reaped a second,

sparkling an agonisingly pleasurable contraction in his balls and a flare of heat in the base of his spine.

“Fook, lass, ye’d better be quick if ye want another, my cock’s about to explode!” He groaned again, desperately trying to hold onto his control. A wave of pleasure pulsed through him but, miraculously, his seed stayed put.

He closed his eyes, breathing and holding still as she moved again, chasing a third orgasm. Fook, it felt good when she did that. Feeling her come was exquisite torture. She was building again; he could feel it. His own breathing became ragged as he wrestled the need to fuck her—hard. He held off, and held off, his body thrumming with the need, tight hot desire in his groin.

“Aihan!” he gasped, losing the battle. His hips moved in spite of himself, driving into her with a hard, fast stroke, again and again and again. He groaned, helpless in the grip of desire to swamp the senses, as the rising wave crested and dumped him hard on the other side with a coruscating pleasure that made him shake, groan, and grunt like a beast.

He collapsed on her, panting, and when conscious thought returned, he said into her neck, “Fook that was good, sorry I couldn’t hold it any longer.” His back was throbbing a bit, but he didn’t care. The blissful aftermath was too good.

“It’s fine, Mac,” she murmured. “Ye made me come too.”

“Hm,” he grunted happily.

Eventually he moved, flopping onto his stomach, and they rearranged themselves for sleep.

Aihan watched him fall asleep and rubbed her thighs together, feeling the sticky

evidence of their joining. Sex with Mac was so satisfying. They seemed to know how to please each other with minimal talk, and she found him so irresistible that just looking at him could get her wet if she was in the right mood. Certainly, if he kissed her, she was guaranteed to be ready to take him into her as soon as he wanted.

For all that, he was the most generous lover she'd ever known. He would spend far longer than necessary to prepare her if she didn't stop him, and was happy to make her come repeatedly with his mouth and his hand, as well as his cock.

It was getting harder and harder to think of leaving. Not that she would while he was still injured. His wounds had given her another excuse to put off the inevitable. And the boys gave her pause too. She couldn't pretend they didn't mean something to her. Rory, with his intensity and latent strength, would be a formidable man one day, and so would Cam with his quick mind and sensitivity.

Even young Wee, with his silent appreciation of her cooking and, she suspected, his dry sense of humour had wormed his way into her affections. He didn't say a lot. Or at least he didn't say much that she could understand, since he spoke Gaelic and little English, and she spoke some English and no Gaelic except the odd word she had divined through Mac's use of it. But even with the language barrier, she felt the pull of his need for mothering as keenly as the others.

It was hard with Mac injured, because she couldn't hug him or curl up in his arms to sleep as she had grown accustomed to doing. She missed it. She had been glad he had initiated sex tonight; she'd missed that as well.

His cock was magnificent and fittingly large in keeping with the rest of him. But if she was honest, she was drawn to him now by much tighter bonds than just the undoubtedly strong physical attraction between them. Despite their dramatically different backgrounds, somehow, they felt right together. Why or how that was possible she didn't know, but she knew it was true, and she thought he knew it too,

although they hadn't discussed it. And they probably shouldn't if she was going to leave. For to bring all that out into the open would make leaving all the harder. Better to leave it unsaid.

She sighed softly, and a strange feeling of happiness and sadness tugged at her. Happiness to be here in his bed, sadness at the prospect of it ending. She had best make the most of it while she could do so.

She settled, getting as close to him as possible—he was a prodigious source of heat and comfort—while being careful not to hurt him. She closed her eyes and composed herself to sleep.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

When Alex returned from Edinburgh, he called to let Col know he had put out the request for information on ships going to China and hoped he might have something next week when he went back to Edinburgh.

By the end of the week, Col was so much better he decided to take Rory on a tour of the tenant farms. The day was an unqualified success; Rory was a hit with the tenants, who were delighted to welcome him and treated him with a deference that made him blush, much to Col's secret amusement. Not that he let it show that he had noticed his son's embarrassed delight. The boy was too young to be teased about such things, and Col was afraid to bring back the truculence of earlier. He liked being on good terms with his heir.

He was pleased to see Rory eager to lend a hand when it was needed, too. The lad lifted a heavy burden for a tenant's wife and helped her into the cart she was off to market in, and then pitched in to raise a fence blown over in a squall a week ago and aided with its restumping.

When they returned tired and hungry, it was to find Aihan and Callum in his study surrounded by books. Callum was teaching Aihan to read and write, for which his old wax tablet and slate had been pressed into service. He'd kept his, whereas Rory had lost his, probably accidentally on purpose.

With their arrival home, Aihan headed to the kitchen and Callum tidied away the books. After dinner that evening, they did something they had never done before: play cards. All of them, including Fergus and Willy.

Aihan came to his room when he was washing and rubbed oil into his back to stop the healing wounds from itching.

Slipping sideways off his buttocks, she lay down beside him. “Roll onto your side.”

He obeyed, rolling towards her, and she took his cock in her oiled hand and stroked it slowly. He closed his eyes and moved his hips. “That is so guid,” he said on a sigh that was half a groan.

Her hand slid up and down, twisting round the head exposed from his foreskin, her thumb rubbing along the sensitive rim of the crown. She leaned forward, her lips connecting with his, and he put out a hand to cup the back of her head and kissed her deeply. This, he thought muzzily, this is heaven. What have I done to deserve this?

He moved his other hand down to touch her between her legs, stroke her, give her pleasure. She lifted her leg over his hip to help him, and they lay face to face, pleasuring each other with their hands and kissing. Their hips moved in synchrony with the stroking of their fingers and the exchange of increasingly passionate kisses.

Finally, he moved to get her under him and slid inside her, and they both continued the movement of hips in a silent accord. A slowly building symphony, their eyes on each other, palm to palm. They had done this before, and it was intimate, but it felt even more intimate this time.

He kissed her again, pausing his movement to hold still inside her and savour the moment, the sensations, the being.

“Aihan,” he said softly.

“Hm,” she responded, her expression soft, almost dreamy.



He kissed her again, swallowing the words that wanted to burst forth. He knew what he was feeling, and he hadn't felt it in six years. But he couldn't, not when she was leaving. So, he kept the words inside, but he felt like they were leaking out his pores anyway and soaking into her. That she knew without him saying anything, because he could feel the same thing coming back to him from her.

It was a perfect bubble of love and contentment. A waking dream.

He rolled them onto their sides and began to move in her again. Slowly. She responded and they moved together, arms round each other, mouths locked, bodies joined, holding onto a blissful pleasure.

Gradually it built, moment by moment with each sensual sway and grind of hips, slide of flesh, grip of muscles, touch of lips, caress of tongues. It was all-consuming, the rising flame of passion, desire and need, a building conflagration about to consume them and burn them away to ashes.

Yet when the moment of absolute pleasure arrived, it held for long moments outside of time before sending them cascading down the slope of pulsing joy and into a pool of warm, boneless bliss. Bodies stilled and heartbeats and breathing slowed, but neither of them moved.

Col couldn't. He felt like he would shatter if he moved. Or shatter her. The sense of unity he had felt in that moment had removed the barrier between self and other, and he was no longer sure where he ended, and she began. And he didn't want to know. He just wanted to stay like this forever. He felt as if he had touched heaven or looked upon the face of God. Felt something akin to universal all-encompassing love. The sense of beatific love was so overpowering he wasn't even sure if he was breathing.

How long he drifted in this state, he wasn't sure, nor could he recall who moved first or how he came back to himself eventually. But something changed to bring him

slowly back to reality, and they settled to sleep. Her face tucked into his chest and their legs entwined, arms round each other. And he kissed her hair. The scent of it, spice and roses, sent him into slumber.

When Col woke in the morning, he was alone. The realisation sent a chill through him, causing his skin to prickle with alarm. He sat up and looked around. Her robe was gone. She had retreated to her own room.

A sharp pain stabbed him in the chest. Was I wrong? Was it only me that felt that communion of souls last night? Was it some form of dream, a mental aberration, brought on by my desperate desire for it? Did I imagine the whole thing?

A heavy lump in his stomach made him feel sick. He rose slowly, washed, and dressed and, calling the dogs, he headed downstairs and through the back to the courtyard, passing the kitchen. He poked his head in, but there was no sign of Aihan. S he must still be in her room?

He set off across the fields, letting the dogs roam while his thoughts chased themselves round in circles. He was glad he'd swallowed the words he'd wanted to utter last night in the throes of his delusion. What reaction would he have got if he had? Recoil?

His chest ached. His throat felt tight and his eyes stung. He was far too vulnerable. How had this happened? He'd been absolutely convinced there was no other woman in the world for him but Cat. That she had taken his heart with her to the grave.

Then Aihan exploded into his life and caused all sorts of chaos and got under his skin and inside his heart. But she didn't feel the same way he did. That was obvious. She enjoyed the sex, but that was all. He had thought—well, it didn't matter what he had thought, he was wrong. So wrong.

She had seduced him for her own purposes, her own reasons. Was it revenge for stopping her from going home? Surely not. She seemed to care, after all. She fussed over his wounds and took care of the boys . . . . He shook his head. None of it made any sense.

Well, he had taken some steps to perhaps find a way to send her home. If that was what she wanted, he would make sure she had the opportunity. Even if it broke his heart all over again. Because, he realised, her happiness meant more than his own.

With this noble resolve in mind, he called the dogs and headed back to the house, resolutely swallowing down the lump in his throat. Cat had been the only woman for him, because she had loved him. It was fairly obvious to him after last night that Aihan did not. Not in the way he understood love to be. Well, he would find a way to get her home and be grateful for the bit of happiness he'd had with her. It couldn't last much longer, but he'd take what he could get.

Aihan was baking bread, but nothing was going right this morning. The oven had gone out overnight and needed to be relit, a process that proved extremely difficult and resulted in her getting covered in soot and charcoal before she got the flames at last to take.

Then she mistook the sugar for salt and had to start over and discovered the milk was sour.

Fergus, finding her staring hopelessly at the curdled milk, sent Willy to milk the cow and get some fresh. With a nod at her grubby apron and face, he said, "Ye should ha' asked me to light it fer ye, lass. She's a stubborn old besom, that oven."

She shook her head. "It's alright, Fergus, I mastered it in the end."

"What ails ye, lassie? Ye look peaked."

“Nothing. I didn’t sleep well.”

“Aye, that’ll do it.”

Willy came back with fresh milk, and she started on her third batch of dough for the morning. Kneading the wretched stuff with ruthless efficiency, she gritted her teeth and tried to push down the feelings that were bubbling up and destroying her peace of mind. Last night.

She had never experienced anything like it. And it terrified her. She had to leave, and soon. Because if she didn’t, she feared she never would. She wouldn’t be strong enough to tear herself away from the man who eclipsed all others. Who had stolen her heart out of her chest and threatened to tear her in two between her loyalty to Liang and her desire for him.

She sighed, pounding the dough mercilessly. There would be no bread for breakfast this morning; it wouldn’t be cooked in time. Just parritch, eggs, and salted ham. She set the dough aside to rise and put the oats on to cook in the big pot with salt and sugar, and got out the ham to carve off slices to fry up with the eggs.

Fergus brought in the pot of parritch and jug of ale, followed by Willy with the mugs, bowls, plates, cutlery, and condiments. Then Aihan appeared with the plates of ham and eggs. Col was standing at the head of the table when she came in, and his heart did a kind of flip-flop at the sight of her. Her hair was dishevelled, and she had a smut of soot on one cheek. Her apron was smeared with grey patches, too.

She set the plates down on the table, but she didn’t look at him. Normally they would exchange a glance, a smile, even a word or two. This morning, she refused to meet his eyes, although he stared at her with hunger, willing her to raise her eyes and look at him, to smile. Her face was set, almost grim, her usual sunny smile completely absent. What the fook is the matter?

She sat beside him and ate, but he felt as if there was an invisible wall between them. She didn't look at him, not once, nor address him. Fortunately, the boys' chatter covered her unusual silence. But Fergus noticed and raised his eyebrows at him. His conclusion was, no doubt, that they'd had a row, but nothing could be further from the truth.

He ate some parritch and an egg and a slice of ham, but he wasn't hungry and barely tasted the food.

When Aihan rose to help Fergus and Willy clear away the remains of the meal, he said, "Boys, help clear the table." He snagged her arm to stop her leaving and waited until the others left the room.

"Aihan, what's wrong?"

Her hands clenched, her apron twisting the fabric. She glanced up at him and away, but not before he caught the glimmer of tears in her eyes. "I can't!" she said with such anguish, his heart contracted in sharp pain.

"Can't what, mo ghràdh?" My love.

She shook her head and turned away.

He pulled her back against him. "Ah, dinnae run from me, Hana!" Wrapping his arms round her, he held her close against him, his face buried in her hair.

But she was stiff in his embrace, none of the yielding warmth she usually displayed. Sensing that, he loosened his hold on her and stepped back. His heart felt cold with dread, and his breakfast roiled in his stomach.

She ran then.

“Aihan!” he called after her, but she ignored him and disappeared from his view. He wanted to go after her, but her stiff unresponsiveness in his arms stopped him. She didn’t want him. He was causing her distress. The anguish in her eyes was real. Whatever this was, it was causing her pain. He was causing her pain.

A restless ache possessed him, and he left the house, desperate for air. He started walking, not mindful of his direction, just the need to escape from whatever had just happened.

He walked into the village, past the Speckled Hen, and down to the beach. The tide was halfway out, revealing a generous strip of sand and rocks. He turned right and walked along the beachfront. The cold wind tugged at his jacket and blew his hair in his face. The smell of salt and seaweed filled his nostrils. The sky was studded with cloud, half-white, half-grey with the odd chink of blue. They’d have rain before the day was out.

What could be wrong? She did care, but not enough? She wanted to go home? They hadn’t spoken of her brother in a while. Was this to do with him? He would have to ask her. Get her to explain what was wrong so that he could set it right. He couldn’t bear to see her so upset. His thoughts chased themselves in circles for an age as he mulled and recalled, and his chest ached.

He looked up from the sand at his feet and realised he’d come further up the beach than he thought. Above him towered the headland, upon which the dark stone towers of Ravenscraig Castle stood. And to his right, cut into the rock, was a dark hollow. He smiled, remembering exploring the cave as a boy with his brother Merlow. The entrance was partially covered during high tide, but parts of it inside were above the high-water mark, and he and Merlow had taken shelter when the tide caught them, penning them into the cave. They had thought that great fun as lads, imagining they were pirates with their booty, sheltering from the excise officers. He wondered if Rory and Callum had found the cave. Had he ever told them about it? He couldn’t

remember.

He looked up at the cloudy sky. Rain was likely soon; he'd best turn back. He'd been out here close on three hours, he thought. It was a long way back.

As he turned, he caught a glimmer of red and green in the trees of the escarpment above his head. He frowned, scanning the area, and saw the slender form of a lass with red hair climbing the steep slope up the headland towards the Castle. With a shock, he realised it must be Isa, the Chief's daughter. She slipped behind a stand of trees on the thickly wooded slope and was lost to his sight. He shrugged and turned to walk back the way he had come. The tide had gone out much further now and was on the turn.

### Chapter Twenty-Four

To Aihan's shock, Col didn't appear for lunch, and she fretted about where he was and if he was alright. She needed to talk to him. She had upset him this morning. She needed to offer some plausible explanation for her own distress. She supposed she owed him the truth. That she needed to leave him and the boys and go in search of her brother.

Would he volunteer to come with her? She thought he might, but he needed to stay because of the boys. They needed him here, not off with her. England was a big place. Not as big as China, but big enough to make it difficult to find one man. It might take her quite a while. And when she found Liang, then what? Would she come back to Mac and the boys? Or leave with Liang, go home?

Liang is gone! The persistent voice in her head insisted that this was true. She pushed it away. She refused to believe that. But it made it more imperative that she go now, before any more time elapsed. She had delayed too long already.

The post had arrived that morning with two letters. She set them on his desk and returned to cleaning out the hearth, preparatory to laying a new fire. The dogs sprawled around her as she worked, refusing to move, so she was forced to work around somnolent doggy bodies. She smiled affectionately as they whuffled in their sleep. She would miss them too.

She sighed, sitting back on her heels. There was no way round the heartache she was facing and the heartache she was going to cause. To Mac and the boys and Fergus, but especially Mac. She couldn't mistake what had passed between them last night. It



had been magical, like something from a myth. So beautiful and fragile, she was afraid to name it for fear of making it evaporate like mist or a dream. He hadn't said the words, but they were there in his touch and his expression.

But could something with this intensity of feeling be real, or was it an illusion? A form of infatuation? Could she trust her own feelings and his? He had loved his wife deeply. Could he love another? Could he love her?

She sighed again and resumed her sweeping out of the hearth. Having removed the ashes, she laid the heavier logs at the bottom and began building the kindling and paper up on top. Then she set to work with the flint to light the paper and hopefully catch the kindling. The spark she sought eluded her, but then remembering her training, she centred herself, closed her eyes, breathed, and visualised the flame igniting. Opening them, she tried again, this time with calmness and certainty in her heart.

The tinder sparked and the paper caught, and a flame licked up and caught the kindling. She fed it some more and, in a few moments, she had a nice blaze going. It was a timely reminder to not lose sight of her training. It was easy to do, surrounded by people who were blind to the chi that lived in all things, objects, people, trees, rocks, animals. Even houses. She was surrounded by the living essence of life everywhere, yet because it was invisible it was easy to forget it.

Focus on your chi, Aihan, and you can do anything you set your mind to. Liang's voice reverberated in her head. He was right. Oh, Liang, I miss you!

A pang hit her chest, and that sliver of doubt that she would ever see him again widened. She clamped down on it ruthlessly. She would see him. She must, for how could she live in a world where he was no longer? He had been the sun and the moon to her for so long. Her mentor, her father, her brother, and her friend. She must see him; she must find him.

With renewed determination, she rose and, taking the ash can with her, she went to the kitchens and out to the midden to dump the ashes. Thus, she was crossing the courtyard to return to the house when Mac appeared. She stopped dead at the sight of him, relief washing through her that he was alright. Not that she had seriously thought anything had happened to him, but she hadn't been able to stifle a niggling worry.

“Mac, ye missed lunch.”

“Aye, I went further than I meant to.”

An awkward silence fell, and she moved towards the house. “Would ye like something to eat? I can make ye a sandwich.”

“Nae, I stopped at the Speckled Hen and had a bite. I also learned something ye might want to know.”

The note in his voice had her turning back to him, her heart rate lifting. “About Liang?” she burst out.

“Aye. Bobby Farrell's back. He was the fellow tracking the Chinese.”

“Aye,” she nodded, recalling what Angus had told her.

“Apparently your brother went south with the English government courier who was looking for my brother. He visited me to ask after Merlow, and I told him he had gone to London. I'm trying to recall his name. P-something—Percival! That was his name. Farrell said the pair of them tracked my brother south from Carlisle to Oxford.”

“Where?” she asked.

“I’ll show ye on a map,” he offered as they moved into the house and towards his study, where he drew out a map and showed her the route they had taken. She traced it with her finger, trying to visualise the journey. Which was impossible, of course, as she had no knowledge of the places on the map, or even the kind of terrain they were situated in.

“What is this Oxford?” she asked.

“It is a University town, a place where men study.”

She nodded slowly, adding this new word to her vocabulary. “How long to get there?”

“At least two weeks, if travelling quickly.”

Col noticed the letters she had left on his desk and pounced on one of them. “At last! I thought he would never reply!”

She looked up from the map.

He smiled. “From Merlow!” He broke the seal on the letter and spread out the pages. It was a long letter.

Dear Col,

Firstly, let me apologise for the very delayed nature of my reply. I have made numerous attempts to pen this letter and failed multiple times.

My second apology is for not telling you any of this when I was home, either the first or second time. I confess I didn’t think you would understand. I’m still not sure if you will, but given that you have this lass of Ming Liang’s on your hands I feel that I

must offer some explanation.

I mentioned, I believe, that I had stayed in China to study under a master of Chinese medicine after the man saved my life from a virulent fever. He was also a master of a Chinese fighting art called Tai Chi. You seem to have had a taste of this from the lass in your care. This martial art also forms part of a religious practice called the Bagua Dao or just Tao, which translates as “the Way”.

My master taught me not only Chinese medicine and Tai Chi, but inculcated me into the religion of the Tao. In the months preceding my leaving China, my master became embroiled in a plot to overthrow the Government. Yes, I know it sounds crazy! It was prompted by religious zeal; the Qing Government is opposed to the religion of the Tao and determined to stamp it out. Predictably the attempt failed, and my master, to my great sorrow, was killed.

In the event of this happening, he had extracted a promise from me. That I would protect the sacred text (it is called the Neidan, which means “the elixir;” I will explain more about this below) and sword of the Eight Trigrams Sect, to which my master belonged. These items are ancient. Few if any copies of the text are known to exist and the sword is purported to have magical capabilities. Before you throw my letter in the fire and declare I have taken leave of my senses, let me reassure you that I have detected no magical capabilities in the sword, even when using it. And I have been forced to use it to protect myself. But I’m getting ahead of my tale.

The text is purported to contain the secret to immortality. Yes, I know what you are thinking! It seems fantastical. I can tell you that if it does hold such a secret, I have not penetrated it, and indeed neither had my master. The text is written in very obscure terms in an ancient form of the Chinese language and constitutes a guide to achieving the level of enlightenment that can lead to a transmutation of the soul into eternal life.

And at this point you may have some comprehension of why it has taken me so long to pen this letter to you. I doubt if my words will make sense to you, but I have tried numerous ways to convey these ideas, and this is the best that I can do. I do not fully comprehend it myself.

To return to the rest of my tale. As you may have apprehended from the above, the promise I made to my master resolved itself in my bringing the text and the sword home with me when I fled China, in fear of my life. The Qing Government are determined, as I noted above, to stamp out the (to them), heretical religion of the Bagua Dao, and as I wear the symbol of my religion upon my person in the form of a tattoo, I was a target.

I believed that once I left China and returned home, I would be safe. I did not bargain on the persistence of the Qing. I was followed. General Ming Liang was a commander of the Imperial Guard in the Forbidden City. He pursued me with a small force of loyal soldiers and, as I have learned from you, this lass that you speak of.

When the soldiers attempted to attack me that afternoon in the Glen, returning to Sceacháin House, I realised that I had brought danger to your door. I made the decision to leave and draw that danger away from you and the boys.

The soldiers followed me as I hoped they would, but then I couldn't escape them. They dogged my trail all the way to Oxford. It was there on the road just outside of Oxford that the confrontation came. It pains me deeply to tell you this, but I was forced to protect myself from the attack of three men at once and used the sword. To good effect. I injured one man who fled, and of his fate I was, at the time, uncertain. The other two, having suffered defeat at my hands, to my deep sorrow, elected to expunge this humiliation by seeking to take their own lives by ingesting some form of poison. There was nothing I could do but watch them die.

I am a doctor; all my training is directed towards the preservation of life. To be the

cause, however indirectly, of the death of others, is deeply painful to me. I suffered great pangs of guilt over it, and in fact that was probably one of the reasons I chose not to tell you any of this. I was ashamed.

Believing that I had eliminated the threat to my person, I ended up accepting an offer to take up the post of physician in Pinner where, as you know, I met Hetty and was immediately smitten.

Caught up in the life of Pinner and my courtship of Hetty, I tried to forget the men who died in that ditch because of me and get on with the new life that beckoned to me. But when Ming Liang appeared, I realised my error. The General had followed the trail of his men, learned of their deaths, and sought to avenge them. The third fellow had returned to Dysart and informed him of my treachery, and died of his wounds. Thus, I had the deaths of three men on my conscience.

Ming Liang had tagged along with the fellow from the British Government whom you met, Durand Percival.

Which brings me to the most painful part of my confession. Ming Liang appeared and demanded that I hand over the text and the sword to him. He used Hetty as a means to coerce me, and the end of it was that we fought: I with a knife and he with the sword. He had me at his mercy with the sword, about to decapitate me, when Hetty threw the text at him. It was evident then that he understood the value of the text, for he clutched it to his chest with tears upon his cheeks.

But it seemed that the exertions of the past hours had taken their toll upon him, for he suffered an apoplexy and, despite all my attempts to revive him, he died.

Thus, I have in the end to atone for the deaths of four men.

That is the tale, in essence. My sincerest condolences to the lass, who is, I gather,

some kind of relative of Ming.

I remain, ever your affectionate brother

Merlow

### Chapter Twenty-Five

Col looked up from the letter to find Aihan's eyes fixed on him with painful intensity. "What letter say?" she asked, losing her grammar.

"Not good news, I'm afraid," he said, looking at her with compassion.

"What?"

"I'm sorry, Aihan. Ming Liang is dead."

She swallowed, staring at him hard, and shook her head. She spoke in her own language. Then, "Nae!" Tears brimmed in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

He pulled her into his arms, crushing the letter between them. "I'm so sorry, Hana!"

She remained stiff in his arms, her hands curled into fists on his chest, her face buried between them. "How?" Her voice was muffled. She pulled her head back. "How?"

"Liang attacked my brother, threatened Hetty, his wife. Merlow had no choice but to fight him?—"

"Your brother kill him!" She dragged herself free of his embrace, her expression ravaged. "Your brother kill him!"

"Nae lass—it wasn't like that?—"



She snatched the letter from his hand and scanned it, but of course she couldn't read it and flung it aside in frustration. "Your brother kill mine!" She screamed at him and fled the room. He followed; seeing her fly up the stairs, he went up after her, but she reached her room and slammed the door in his face. He heard the key turn in the lock.

"Hana, let me explain?—"

"Go away!" she screamed, and something heavy hit the door.

He backed away, torn in two by her distress. He considered breaking the door down, but decided against it. He would give her some time to calm down and then try again. She was out of her mind with grief. He understood that.

He returned to his study, straightened out the letter, and reread it. Then with the letter in hand, he went back up to her room and knocked. But there was no reply. He spoke through the door. "I'll read ye the letter, lass. Then ye'll understand." Still silence. He sighed and then cleared his throat and began to read the letter. When he had finished, he waited for some response, but there was none.

He left then. He would try again later.

Aiham still hadn't emerged by dinner time, so he went up and asked her if she wanted a meal. Predictably, he received no answer. He brought up a tray for her and left it, speaking through the door to let her know it was there.

He had told the boys and Fergus that Aiham wasn't feeling well to explain her absence. None of them had seemingly heard her screaming at him. Although he wondered if Rory had heard something, for he cast him a suspicious frown. But he said nothing, so Col didn't elaborate.

The tray was still outside her room untouched when he came upstairs to bed. He was

concerned, and knocked softly on her door. Perhaps she had fallen asleep? Worn out with crying? His heart clenched at the notion, and he longed to comfort her. But her shut door and silence was an unequivocal message that she wished to be left alone. He would give her until morning. He took the tray downstairs to the kitchen and retired to bed, but he couldn't sleep.

He tossed and turned and nearly got up to go to her room again several times. Only his own memories of his grief and how much he had wanted to be left alone stopped him. He fell asleep just before dawn and woke heavy-eyed at eight o'clock because Gussie was demanding to be let out. If not for that, he would probably have slept until ten. He took the dogs out, then returned to the house by way of the stable and noticed one of the horses was missing: Cat's grey mare, Morgana.

His stomach rolled in premonition. Rory might have taken her out, of course, but generally he stuck to his own mount, a black gelding he called Dub. Dub, and Callum's chestnut, Rohan, were both in their stalls, along with his own Callearch.

He quickened his pace and fairly ran into the house and up the stairs to Aihan's room. He knocked again, this time forcefully. Receiving no reply, he said, "I'm going to break the door down if ye don't open it!"

Receiving no response, he kicked the door in, the wood cracking round the latch and swinging inwards. He looked to the bed, which was neatly made up and empty. The casement window was open. He raced to it: a sheet dangled from the middle bar. Again! She's done it again! His heart clenched in pain.

"What did you do, Athair?" Rory stood in the broken doorway.

Col turned to face him as Callum appeared behind Rory.

"She's gone," he said in despair. He should have forced her to listen to him yesterday.

This was his fault; he blurted everything out wrongly. She thought it was Merlow's fault that her brother was dead and— Oh God, she was after him, wasn't she?

"Fook!" Col swore. "I'll have to go after her." He moved towards the door, but Rory blocked his path.

"I'm coming with ye," he said, crossing his arms and raising his chin.

"Nae, lad! I'll have to be riding fast to catch her, she's got a mite of a head start on us."

"I can ride fast, I'm nae a bairn," insisted Rory.

Col looked at him in frustration. And Rory added in a low, serious tone, "Aihan's important to me too, Athair."

"And me!" said Callum, ducking round Rory and tugging on Col's arm. "Please, Athair, let us come."

"Very well, pack a bag each, we may be away a few nights. Wear yer warmest clothing and saddle yer horses. I'll go tell Fergus and I'll see ye in the stable in half an hour. Don't be late or I'll go without ye."

The boy's faces lit up and they scarpered.

Half an hour later, Col found them ready and waiting for him, horses saddled and bridled, bags strapped to the back of the saddle and dressed as instructed in their warmest clothing. The clouds had come in heavy and dark, threatening rain, and the temperature had dropped several degrees in the last hour. A breeze was picking up. If he didn't miss his guess, they were in for a squall, the sort of nasty wind and rain that came in from the sea and played merry hell with the trees and could soak a man to the

skin in five minutes.

He was soon proved right. He glanced back at the boys, who rode to either side and just behind him. They were hunkered down in their saddles, broad-brimmed hats pulled down over their faces and their oiled cloaks wrapped round their shoulders. They had their plaids beneath, leather breeches and stout boots on their feet. They were as equipped as he to withstand the inclement weather. But thinking of the hard miles ahead, he wondered how well they would stand up under the strain.

Aihan had the best part of sixteen hours lead on them, if he was correct in surmising that she had left pretty much straight away from her room. He cursed himself for not breaking down her door earlier. If he had, he could perhaps have either prevented her flight, or been on her tail more swiftly. As it was, they would have to try to make up ground to catch her, and he wasn't sure that the lads, for all their brave talk, would be up to that. How hard could he, or should he, push them?

Rory's plea had touched him, though, and made it impossible to refuse. Aihan had woven her magic on all of them. He rather hoped, too, that if his own powers of persuasion were not sufficient, the boys would do the trick in getting her to come home with them. In any case, he had to catch up with her before she reached Pinner. While he didn't doubt Merlow's ability to protect himself and Hetty, he knew enough of Aihan's tactics to be afraid she could catch Merlow off guard and do him some damage before she learned the truth.

And the thought of her suffering, her grief, was tearing him apart. He wanted more than anything to hold her in his arms and comfort her. To tell her how much he loved her, to beg her to stay with them. Make her home permanently with them, and become, if she would have him, his second wife.

Even so, as painful as the notion was, if she truly wished to go home to China, he would do whatever he could to make that happen for her. He just fervently wished

and hoped that she would not want to do so. That she in fact returned his feelings and would welcome his proposal.

He swallowed the fear that churned in his stomach that he was wrong, and she did not feel as he did. All that was compounded by his worry over her current whereabouts and safety. Aye, she was a competent fighter, and would almost certainly bamboozle and defeat a single assailant, but what worried him was the thought of her facing multiple opponents at once. She could overcome one man in single combat, but not, he feared, two or more. She was deceptively strong for her size and weight, but she was slender and tiny and attractive. She would draw attention so easily.

A single Scottish or English lass travelling alone would draw unwanted male attention, but one that looked like Aihan? She would be a target for every unscrupulous male between here and London.

Thus, his thoughts tumbled over one another as his horse ate up the miles and the rain continued to fall in a steady stream, wetting his face, seeping down his neck and soaking through his leather gloves, boots, and breeches, and patches of his plaid where it wasn't protected by his oiled cloak.

### Chapter Twenty-Six

A ihan set the mare on the road south of Edinburgh with a heavy heart. The pain in her chest wracked her. Liang is dead! The reality of it battered at her. Rage and sorrow fought for the upper hand in her heart. She would avenge his death; she could do nothing less.

She was tired, but she pushed on in the dark, driven by her need for action, for revenge. But with every step that the horse took her away from Mac and the boys and the life she had begun to forge with them, a deep sorrow of a different kind took root in her soul. That Mac's brother should be the instrument of her brother's death broke her heart into a million pieces. For if she took her revenge, Mac would never forgive her.

With a tight ball of anger and pain in her chest, she moved ever forward. And she whispered into the dark, "I'm sorry, Mac! I'm so sorry!"

Tears slipped down her cheeks, mingling with the drizzling rain that that had begun to fall.

Col and the boys reached Edinburgh in just under three hours of hard riding. They stopped to eat and rest the horses, and Col took the opportunity to enquire if anyone had seen a Chinese lass. He couldn't ask at every hostelry in Edinburgh—there were too many of them—but he trusted to the power of gossip that if anyone had seen her, it would be known.

And sure enough, he discovered that a foreign-looking lass with long dark hair and a

strange accent had taken a meal last night at the White Hart Inn. She had not stayed the night, however.

Fed and watered, they pressed on. It was three days hard ride to Carlisle. She would need to rest her horse eventually, as would they. She couldn't keep riding without a break. He fretted at the notion of her riding alone at night on the road. Anything could happen to her.

When they reached Penicuik two hours later, he was relieved to learn that she had stopped for the night there and left in the early hours of the morning. They stopped for another meal and pushed onto Peebles, a further two hours ride. By this time, the horses were well and truly done in and the lads not much better. Worryingly, Col could glean no knowledge of her in Peebles, but both horses and the lads could go no further, and he elected to stay the night at the better of Peebles' two hostleries.

Aiham shifted in the bracken, trying to get comfortable. It had stopped raining, but the ground was still wet and there was a stiff breeze if she poked her head up to get a good look at the road below. She had tethered the mare in the stand of trees behind her hiding place and hoped she would not give away her position. The group of men had been tailing her since Teviothead, and she'd left the road in an effort to lose them.

Their leader, a big burly fellow with dark, wiry hair and beard, had accosted her in the yard of the inn where she was about to order a meal. When she pulled a dagger on him, he backed away with hands raised. But the whole time she sat and ate her meal in the tap, he kept looking at her, and there was much low talk among him and his compatriots. While she only caught a few words, she was not fooled into thinking the talk was anything but bawdy and all pointed in her direction.

When she had finished her meal, she slipped out the back to the privy and hid there until the men emerged, looking around for her. They paced about a bit and then

mounted their horses and left. She followed a little later, hoping she had lost them, only to discover about an hour later that they must have hidden somewhere and emerged when she went past them. She spurred the mare to a gallop to outrun them and, having crested a rise out of their sight, she plunged off the side of the road and up a slight incline to hide amongst the bracken and trees at the top of the rise.

The problem with her plan was that as soon as they topped the rise, they would see the road ahead was empty and realise she had gone off into the fields. It wouldn't take them long to find her hiding place if they were persistent enough to track her, and then she would be trapped. Her hope was that they would go a little further down the road before commencing to look, enabling her to remount and make a getaway.

It seemed, though, that her luck had run out this day. So far, her journey had been relatively uneventful, if tiring. She had attracted some attention and a bit of suspicion, as Mac had warned her she would, but none had refused to serve her when it became clear that she spoke English and had coin to pay her way.

As the pack of them topped the rise in the road and saw no sign of her ahead, the leader signalled to his men to spread out and look for her. He himself came off the road, heading straight in her direction. Cursing under her breath, she backed out of her hiding spot and ran to the mare. She unlooped her rein from the tree branch, mounted swiftly, and kicked her into a canter, heading deeper in the trees.

It was darker under the canopy, filtering out most of the meagre daylight from the cloudy sky, and heavy drops of water dripped from the leafy branches overhead. Soft tree mulch muffled the horses' hooves, and she urged the long-suffering mare forward, bending low to avoid tree branches getting in her face. Zigzagging through the trees, she soon lost her bearings and was alarmed to hear the crack of a tree branch behind her. Glancing back, she saw her pursuer bearing down on her like a black devil from Diyu—the prison below the earth where the souls of the dead go to atone for their sins.



They left at first light, and Col was impressed with his boys who, despite being tired and sore, did not complain. Their objective was Teviothead, but the fact that he had not been able to glean any word of her in Peebles had him concerned. He stopped briefly at each village they passed through to try to pick up her trail. Stopping so frequently slowed them down, and his worry mounted as he was unable to find any trace of her. He was torn by wondering if she had taken a different route or, more worryingly, that something had happened to her. But they pushed on and reached Teviothead by late afternoon.

He at last got news of her from the village's only inn. The landlady, Molly George, wiped her hands on her apron and nodded. "Aye, a lass of that description stopped here a few hours past. She ordered a meal and ate in the tap. I didn't see her leave, but she may have hid to avoid the attentions of a group of men who seemed mighty taken with her, if ye know what I mean. Quite rough looking they were, a deal of bawdy talk they made in her direction. If my husband had been here, he might have warned them off, but I'll admit I wasnae game to interfere."

"How many men?" he asked, his heart thudding with sick force in his chest.

"Half a dozen?" she guessed. "Their leader was a big swarthy fellow. They looked like soldiers to me, or perhaps mercenaries, as they wore nae uniform."

"Can I pay for two rooms for the night and a meal, please? I'll be leaving my lads here and going after the lass. She's my wife, ye ken."

"Oh, aye?" She looked at him suspiciously. "Then why might she be running away from ye?"

Col flushed. "It's nae what it looks like. She had bad news of her brother and took off when I was from home. As soon as I learned she'd gone, I followed, fearing exactly what seems to have occurred. Please believe me, I'm worried sick about her."

She nodded slowly; seemingly, his evident worry was convincing. As it should be, for it is the truth.

“Do ye have a horse I can hire? Mine is fair spent.”

Col explained what had happened to the boys, and that his intention was to return with Aihan, emphasising that they should remain here until he returned.

“Can I trust ye to be sensible and do as I say?” he asked.

“Aye, Athair, fetch Aihan and give her our love. We’ll await ye here,” said Rory firmly with a look at Callum, who nodded. Mrs George would keep an eye on the boys for him, she was a good woman.

“Aihan knows how to fight, Athair,” said Rory reassuringly.

“Aye, I know, lad, but I’d be hard-pressed to hold my own with a half-dozen men, and she’s a sight smaller and lighter than I am. Ye ken the danger she’s in. It’s a mite different from what any man would face from a bunch of thugs.”

Rory nodded. “Ye’ll find her and bring her back safe.”

Col wasn’t sure if that was a statement or a question, but took it for the former, wishing he had Rory’s confidence.

He hugged both boys and went to change his sodden clothing. With a fresh mount, some bread and cheese, and a skinful each of water and wine, he set off south. He had brought a pair of pistols and two knives with him and hoped that he wouldn’t need them.

Aihan urged the mare on, ducking and weaving through the trees, but the man behind

her had a larger, faster horse, and he was gaining on her. Her breath came in short pants and her heart beat a loud tattoo in her chest as she looked for a suitable place to take a stand and fight the wretch off. But there was little to recommend itself that she could see. Another glance over her shoulder showed him closer still, and she shuddered. She had no illusions about what he wanted with her.

She turned her head to face forward again, and her blood ran cold. A fallen tree lay across the path in front of her. There was nowhere to go to avoid it as other trees crowded in on either side and the mare was flying too fast to check. The animal gathered and bunched and went over the obstacle, but she landed awry and Aihan felt herself pitched forward out of the saddle and straight over the horse's head. She curled herself and rolled to minimise the impact and chance of injury; even so, she was winded and disoriented by the tumble, and jagged branches from the fallen tree tore at her clothing and flesh as she rolled. Coming to a bruising stop against the trunk of another tree, she lay winded a moment, trying to catch her breath and gather her wits.

It was a moment too long, as her pursuer loomed over her.

“Got ye!” he said with a broad toothy grin. Dropping to his knees, he grabbed her hands as she raised them to try to fend him off, wrenching at the ties of his breeches with his other hand. “I’ll have first taste, and the lads can have a go once I’ve sapped yer strength, lassie!”

Oh nae, ye won’t! Taking aim with her knee, she jerked it upwards between his legs and got him hard in the g?owán. He doubled up with an oath, his face going red.

“Ye fooking bitch!” he screamed and lunged at her, but she rolled away and scrambled to her feet. With a quick look around, she sank into a crouch and waited as he clambered to his feet clumsily and lumbered at her with a howl of fury. She grabbed his flailing arm and flipped him onto his back hard enough to wind him. As

he came down with a heavy thud, his head hit a large tree branch with a severe crack, and he lay still.

Breathing hard, she waited a moment and then approached him cautiously. His head lay at an odd angle and his eyes were open, staring sightless at the canopy overhead.

Her stomach turned over, and she backed away with a whimper.

The mare was standing a ways off, her withers shivering and her head down. Aihan caught her bridle, did her best to sooth the beast, and mounted, her limbs shaking with shock and reaction. It had become very dark under the canopy, and a loud crack of thunder overhead was the only warning she got before the roar of heavy rain hitting the trees shrouded her in a wall of sound.

The rain was so heavy it penetrated the canopy, and she was soaked in minutes. It was so dark she could barely see with the lack of light and the blinding rain. She had little idea in which direction the road lay, nor if more of the men might stumble across her as she tried to navigate her way through the maze of trees, and prayed to the Great Spirit that the mare would not sprain a leg in a hidden pothole or stumble over a fallen branch.

It felt like over an hour later that she finally emerged at the edge of the forest into open fields. The light was grey, and great heavy clouds loomed overhead, still disgorging rain, although the intensity had eased back a bit. It made no difference; she was soaked anyway and shivering with cold and shock. Her hands and feet were numb, and even her face, into which the rain pelted, felt numb with cold.

She pulled the mare up for a moment to try to get her bearings. She was on the crest of a ridge which dropped away to the right and left. Ahead the ground rose higher, and the trees were behind her. By her best guess, the road should be to her right. She turned the mare and began the descent down the slope, hoping to find the road and

not the remainder of her pursuers.

She found both. Emerging out of the rapidly worsening light, the shapes of two riders moving down the road brought her up short. There was nowhere to hide, and if she could see them, surely, they could see her if they turned their heads and looked. As she sat there, two more emerged from the gloom on the other side of the road, and one called out to the others something in Gaelic that she couldn't understand.

The two on the road paused for the other two to catch up. All four of them then continued on the road, talking among themselves, seemingly oblivious to her presence. She was just beginning to relax her tense muscles when a prickle down her spine alerted her to danger. She turned in the saddle as a fifth horseman loomed up out of the dark behind her and shouted to the other men. For a moment she thought it was the one she had done battle with under the trees come back to life, but then she registered that this one was of slimmer build and lacked the bushy beard of the group's leader.

She had little time to react, as his shout had alerted the others to her presence, and they swarmed up off the road to surround her with their horses. She was penned in by five men closing in on her.

She pulled the mare up into a rear. The beast kicked out with a loud whinny, then charged through the gap between two horsemen as Aihan urged her on with violent kicks, riding hard down the remaining slope for the road and disappearing—she hoped—into the gathering gloom as the men behind her shouted in confusion and gave chase.

Damn it, she couldn't outrun them, their horses were bigger. She dived off the road on the other side, plunging into a thicket of brambles that scratched both her and the mare, causing the mare to scream in pain. She winced, but forced the mare forward through the brambles and out the other side. The mare could break a leg in the dark

like this, but perhaps the men would hesitate to follow her for the same reason.

She heard their shouts behind her as they hit the brambles and, judging from their curses and the receding sounds, they had decided to pull back. With a sigh of relief, she slowed the mare to a walk and plodded forward for some distance, shivering in the saddle. The rain had eased, but it was full dark now, and she had little idea where the road was from here.

A sharp wind cut an icy swathe through her wet clothing, and she huddled over the mare for warmth. Reaction was setting in and fatigue sapped her strength. Her numb hands had trouble gripping the reins, and they slipped from her fingers. She tried to grasp the pommel, and she felt her body slipping in the saddle. The little burst of fear woke her up and she jerked upright in fright and stared into the gloom, trying to penetrate the darkness.

She looked up and saw a pale bit of cloud above, a thin wisp covering the moon; as she watched, it dissipated and the moon, round and majestic, peeked through the clouds and shed a silvery light over the rain-soaked landscape. Deep shadows thrown into strong contrast with the silvered highlights of glistening tree branches to her right and up ahead told her she was heading for another stand of trees.

She turned to the left, which was, she hoped, the direction of the road. Praying that the light would continue long enough for her to find it again, she pushed the poor mare forward. Clinging stubbornly to the pommel with her numb fingers and keeping her back straight, she peered ahead. When she hit the road again, she sagged in the saddle with a relief so strong it brought tears to her eyes. She kept moving forward, swaying in the saddle with fatigue, her only thought to keep moving until she found some form of civilisation. Out here in the cold and the dark in the soaked terrain, smelling strongly of earth and water, she felt as if she were the only person alive in the world.

She had been alone a lot in her life, but she had never felt so lonely as she did in that moment. The knowledge that Liang was dead bit deep, and the pall of grief that had receded while she fought for her life came creeping back, enveloping her in its dark embrace. A fierce longing for the warmth and strength of Mac's arms swamped her and her throat tightened, but she swallowed the ache, refusing to give into the tears that threatened. Thinking of him only underscored her loneliness out here in the dark and wet and cold. Lost and alone in a foreign land. She blinked, her vision blurring, her senses swimming.

The moon's cold light continued to illuminate her path forward, and she just held on, swaying in the saddle, her heart beating in time with the mare's steps.

A shout from behind her jerked her out of her daze, her heart jolting into a race, and she looked back over her shoulder to see a figure on horseback getting closer. Terror gripped her, and she urged the poor mare forward. But the animal was spent and could manage no more than a limping trot.

Then her ears caught the content of the shout: "Aihan!"

Mac! Had her longing conjured him? Or was she asleep and dreaming? Her heart clenched, and she scrabbled at the mare's reins and pulled her to a standstill. The animal gratefully stumbled to a stop and stood, her withers shivering and legs trembling, her head down, blowing through her nose. Aihan clung to the pommel, trying to fathom how he could be here in the dark and the cold and the wet miles from home. How has he found me? She swayed, tears of relief stinging her eyes and clogging her throat.

"Aihan!" He brought his horse alongside hers and then his arms were round her, and she collapsed against his solid warmth. She was shaking with cold, shock, and relief, shedding wracking sobs into his chest as he hauled her bodily from the mare's saddle into his lap.

“I have ye love, hush!” he soothed. “It’s alright, Hana, I have ye!” His lips pressed kisses to the wet hood of her cloak, and his hand ran down her back as his arms held her tight.



### Chapter Twenty-Seven

Col's relief at finding her alive was rapidly becoming displaced by alarm at the state she was in. She was soaked and shivering violently, wracked by sobs that tore his heart in two. He reached into his pocket for the flask of whisky he carried, removed the cap, and offered it to her. "Here, lass, take a sip of this, it'll warm ye."

She took the flask and drank. Coughing, she lowered the flask and gasped then drank again. Slightly shocked, he took the flask back and rubbed her back as she collapsed against his chest with a sort of moan. He took a quick swig himself for he was cold as well, though not soaked through as she was, his plaid kept dry by his oiled cloak. Then reaching round her, he recapped the flask and slipped it back into his pocket.

Rearranging her in his lap, he took the mare's reins and turned both horses back towards Teviothead. He had no very clear idea of how long he had been trailing her, but he thought it was at least three hours, maybe longer. The darkness had closed in early because of the appalling weather, forcing him to a slower pace than he wanted. His main priority now was to get her somewhere warm and dry. He thought he had spied a building just off the road a little way back when the moon had come out—perhaps a barn?

Watching the side of the road for a sight of the barn, he didn't see the group of riders up ahead until they were almost upon him. Five men on horseback, one leading another horse with a long object slung over its back. The moon chose that moment to emerge fully from the clouds and illuminate the scene in bright silver light. Six men on horseback—how many of them were roaming this road tonight? A cold prickle ran down his spine and his arm instinctively tightened round Aihan, making her raise her

head and look ahead.

She stiffened in his embrace and murmured, "It's them."

Col reached back behind the saddle for the holster containing one of his pistols as the man at the front of the pack said, "It's her!"

The men fanned out across the road, blocking it, and Col slowed his horse.

"What did ye do to Fraser? Foreign bitch!" shouted one of the men, waving his hand at the riderless horse. Col realised that the object was a body slung over the horse's back.

Col kept his pistol down by his leg out of sight and edged his horse closer.

"What do ye want?" he asked. "I've nae money to speak of."

"Give us the foreign witch! She killed our captain, Fraser McDonald."

Aihan jerked in Col's arm, and he tightened his hold on her reflexively.

"I cannae do that, lads, she's spoken for."

"Never fret, we're prepared to share, ye can have yer turn!" said one of the men. This was greeted by laughs and general agreement from the men.

His heart beating with rising fury, Col raised the pistol. "I told ye, she's spoken for!" he said, levelling the gun at the man in the lead. "Let us past or I'll blow yer head off!"

"I don't think so," replied the other man, producing a pistol of his own. "In case ye

can't count, there are five of us and one of ye! Now hand over the wench!"

Col took careful aim and shot the bastard straight between the eyes. The recoil caused him to loosen his hold on Aihan at the same time, and she slipped from the saddle to the ground. The man he had shot tumbled from his saddle to the road, and Col ducked low to his horse's back as four shots rang out, aimed in his direction. The other riders struggled to contain their mounts, alarmed by the shots and the smell of blood and gunpowder.

Aihan hauled herself onto the mare's saddle and kicked her into motion. Col shoved his first pistol inside his plaid and reached for his second pistol as he straightened and urged his horse after Aihan's. The two of them charged at the other men, who were in disarray, and passed them at speed, thundering down the road. Behind them, the sounds of chaos continued. Col expected pursuit, but a glance backward told him the men were more concerned with checking on their companion who lay dead on the road than with giving chase.

All the same, they kept up a rapid pace to carry them into the darkness and out of sight of the milling men. His heart thudding hard, he glanced left and right, more desperate to get off the road than ever. Aihan's mount was already flagging, the mare clearly spent. If the men decided belatedly to give chase, they would never outrun them. And with multiple pistols to his one, once they reloaded, the inevitable outcome would not be good.

Col spied the barn he had noticed earlier and called softly to Aihan. "This way!" He edged his horse off the road and into the scrub towards the black outline of the rectangular building. The door stood ajar, banging in the wind. Inside it was dark and smelled of musty hay.

He dismounted and went to Aihan, who was drooping in the saddle. Her mare, blown, stood shaking with her head down.

Col reached up and lifted her down into his arms. He carried her inside the barn and, in the light from the moon, found a pile of hay in one corner. He set her on her feet and was alarmed when she just crumpled to the ground, landing on her bottom. She sat there, blinking and dazed, but at least she couldn't fall any further. It seemed the last of her strength had been used in that desperate flight. He pushed the hay together into a kind of mattress, removed his cloak, and arranged it oiled-side-down over the hay.

He turned back to her and removed her soaked garments swiftly, then scooped up her shivering form, laid her down on the mattress, and spread his plaid over her. He then brought the horses inside the barn and pulled the door closed. A sliver of moonlight came through a small window high up in the pitched roof, which gave him enough light to see by. He found the horses' nosebags in each of their packs and hung them round their necks. They would need water, but he would have to attend to that when there was daylight.

Turning back to Aihan, he saw she had curled into a shaking ball beneath the plaid. He stripped off his own clothes rapidly, then fetched the water skin and dropped it with the loaded pistol by the makeshift bed. He crawled under the plaid with her and took her in his arms, rubbing his hands over her icy skin to prompt the circulation of her blood and warm her. Her feet were small ice-blocks on his legs.

The munching and shifting of the horses filled the barn with a comforting sound, and the sough of the wind outside made him glad of the shelter this barn offered. He was weary himself, having been in the saddle since first light. But so had she, and her ordeal had been far worse than his, he thought. He wanted to know what had happened, but she needed sleep first, so he kept his questions to himself, just murmuring words of comfort as she snuggled into him with a sigh. The main thing was, she was safe in his arms, and he had caught her before she reached his brother. He would explain everything in the morning.

He lay for a time listening for any approach of the men, but there was nothing.

### Chapter Twenty-Eight

Col slept until the sun's rays slanting through the high window woke him. He was spooning her body with his and, predictably, his cock was hard against her lovely bottom pressing back into his groin. Suppressing his libidinous inclinations, he slid out backwards and rose. Grabbing up a shirt to cover his nakedness, he pushed open the barn door and stepped outside to take a piss. The barn was several feet from the road and partially screened by bushes. He found a convenient bush to relieve himself against and then turned to survey the terrain and take in the day.

Judging by the position of the sun, it was about an hour past sunrise. And the clouds were of the white and fluffy persuasion this morning, with the very welcome warmth of the sun glinting off all the wet greenery and soaked earth. The world had that fresh-washed smell, and with only a light breeze, it bid fair to be a fine day. Taking a stroll round the barn, he found a water trough filled with fresh rainwater. Perfect for the horses. He grinned. He stripped off his shirt and plunged his hands in to give himself a quick wash.

He went back inside and checked on Aihan: she appeared to still be asleep. He removed the horses' nosebags and led them outside for a drink at the trough. He inspected the mare and found she had a few scratches that would need tending, but otherwise seemed unharmed. When they'd had their fill, he tethered them to a nearby tree and returned to the barn.

Aihan rolled over and blinked at him. He'd not bothered to redon his shirt, and she ran her eyes over his naked body. Just her gaze was enough to stir his cock to life.

He cleared his throat and said, “would you like something to eat? I have some bread and cheese in my saddlebag.”

She shook her head. “Later.” She held open the plaid in invitation. He grinned. Aihan was always direct about what she wanted. He came to the makeshift bed and slid in with her.

“Are ye better this morning?” he asked, sliding his hands over her body. She was warm from the plaid.

“Aye,” she murmured. “How did ye find me?”

“I just followed ye. Ye’re not hard to track, love. Ye’re the only Chinese lass in the whole of the United Kingdom, ye ken?”

“Am I?”

“Well, in this bit of it, anyway.” He stroked his hand down her spine. “I was worried sick about ye. How did those men find ye?”

She had been tracing a series of kisses over his chest, but that brought her head up. She shuddered to his alarm. “They followed me from Teviothead. I tried to lose them by going off the road, but the leader followed me into the trees. There was a fallen trunk, and I tumbled from the mare’s back when she leaped over it. He came for me then but—” She stopped and took a breath. “I flipped him, and he broke his neck on a tree branch.”

“Ah, love!” He held her tight. “That must have been terrible,” he murmured.

“It was.” She clung to him, little tremors shaking her body. “I’ve never killed anyone before, but he was going to rape me and share me with his friends. I was desperate to

stop him.”

“And ye did.” He knew a moment’s pride for her resourcefulness, and relief that she had not had to face them all at once. “Where were the others?”

“Looking for me. They split up to search. It was just bad luck that he found me.” She took a breath and let it out. “It took me an age to find my way out of the forest and back to the road. And when I did, I found the rest of them.”

He tightened his hold on her, his heart rate picking up in alarm.

“They surrounded me with their horses, so I forced the mare to rear and kick out and I charged out of the circle and back to the road and off the other side. I pushed through some brambles. I think the mare was hurt; we will have to look.”

“I checked. She’s alright, but ye, were ye hurt?”

“Some scratches.” She dismissed it with a wave of her hand. “The thing was, I got away and ye found me.” She hugged him. “I’ve never been so glad of anything in my life. Ye were right. It’s nae safe for a woman alone in Scotland. It would have been much worse if I didn’t know how to fight. And I’m grateful ye were there when they came back, or I don’t know what would have happened.”

“Aye.” He hugged her tight, shuddering at the prospect of what they would have done to her in vengeance for their captain’s death. “I had to come after ye, lass. Not only isn’t it safe, ye had hold of the wrong end of the stick.”

“What?” she stared at him, obviously puzzled by this expression.

“Merlow didnae kill yer brother, Hana. Liang died of an apoplexy. Merlow tried his damndest to revive him, but couldnae do so. Merlow is a doctor, ye ken, a healer. He



wouldnae kill anyone if he could help it.” He watched her face, hoping she would believe him. “I tried to tell ye. But I’d done the damage with the first words I uttered about them fighting, and ye wouldnae listen. I’m so sorry for yer loss, lass, but it wasnae Merlow’s fault. Liang attacked him and his wife Hetty. Merlow was forced to defend himself and protect her. I’ll read ye the whole letter. Then ye’ll understand.”

He got up and found the letter in his pack, then returned to the bed and sat. He read the whole thing to her and she listened, her brow furrowed, sitting cross-legged next to him. When he spoke of the deaths of the other Chinese men, she uttered a small cry and covered her mouth.

He stopped. “Ye knew them, lass?”

She nodded. “They were Liang’s loyal followers.” She bowed her head. “So much death. What happened to the third man?”

“I’m getting to that.” He resumed reading, and she wiped a tear off her cheek hearing the fate of the third Chinese soldier.

When he finished reading the final part about Liang’s death, she sat silently, staring down at her hands clasped in her lap.

A sob escaped her, and she murmured, “His dreams came to nothing. To have the Neidan in his grasp and lose it like that—” She gulped, her eyes awash with tears.

A great, aching sob wracked her, and he dropped the letter and drew her into his arms and rocked her. “I’m so sorry, Aihan!” He felt helpless in the face of her sorrow, and empathy brought tears to his own eyes.

He eased her down under the plaid and held her while she cried. When she had sobbed herself to a standstill, he found her a handkerchief and rubbed her back in

slow circles as she lay on his chest, sniffing.

He stroked her and kissed her hair, trying to comfort her. She raised her face, and he kissed her, just for comfort. But the kiss rapidly became more than comfort, and he rolled her back into the rustling hay as she squirmed beneath him, her hands running over his body and demanding he make her feel better. At least that was what he thought she was doing.

He raised his head, panting. “Ye want this, lass?”

“Aye,” she growled, pulling him down into another kiss. Surrendering to the inevitable, he stroked his fingers between her legs. She was wet and his cock jumped eagerly. He rubbed her quickly until she was panting and squirming. Then, sensing her impatience, he rolled into position and entered her body with a swift hard thrust. She groaned with him as their bodies aligned, and she surged up into him, twisting under him, panting and making little grunting noises that he found deeply erotic.

“Fook!” he groaned, the lightning igniting in his spine. She bit his shoulder, her hands clamping tightly on his biceps as she drove herself higher. His balls pulled tight as pleasure built and built, and he thrust deep, hard, and frenziedly fast.

Abruptly they both came, hard . She clamped him tight as she cried out and his seed released with a sudden and violent spasm. The wave of sharp bliss forced an incoherent shout from his throat as his body convulsed with pleasure. Collapsing in a panting heap of tangled limbs, he closed his eyes, getting his breath back and feeling the tingles of waning pleasure subside slowly, leaving him boneless and drifting on a tide of happiness.

“Fook, that was quick,” he murmured.

“Aye,” she said, sounding muzzy and breathless. “Good, though.”

“Aye,” he agreed with a smile. “Very good.”

After a bit he moved, flopping onto his back. “Lass, I have to ask ye this.”

“Aye?” She turned her head to look at him with a sated smile.

He rolled towards her and took her hand. “D’ye want to go home, lass? I made some enquires about ships to China?—”

She stiffened. “Do ye want me to go?”

“Fook, nae!” He gripped her hand tighter. “But if it’s what ye want—? I cannae bear ye to be unhappy, lass. Even if it breaks my heart.”

She swallowed and rolled towards him. “Nae, Mac, I dinnae want to go back to China. There is nothing for me there.”

He pulled her close and hugged her, his heart eased.

“Would ye like that food now?”

“Aye.”

They shared the bread, cheese, and wine, still wrapped in the plaid. He was conscious they should be making their way back to Teviothead and the boys, but when they had finished eating, the temptation to slide back under the covers and hold her for just a little longer was too much.

Some kisses and strokes became more, and before he knew it, he was between her legs, licking and suckling her to orgasm.

Then she was riding him, and he lay looking up at her, squeezing a breast and rubbing her to another orgasm with his fingers, delighting in the sight and sounds of her pleasure and the delicious sensation of her cunny squeezing his rigid cock. He was shocked by his own rapid recovery, but too enthralled to question it. Rolling her under him again, he thrust slowly, wanting to savour and take his time this round. Building them both up gradually. Easing off and then building again. With caresses and kisses and strokes deep inside her.

He pulled out, flipped her onto her belly and, positioning a fold of the plaid under her hips, he entered her and pressed her slowly downward until she was sandwiched between him and their straw bedding. Flexing his hips, he drove into her with hard, slow strokes, and she moaned, pushing back. The sheer eroticism of the moment threatened to overwhelm him. She pushed back under him, and he pressed her down with a hard snap of his hips, thrusting deeper, harder. A taking, a possessive owning. She was his and wouldn't escape him again.

He bit her neck, and she arched it forward for him, submitting to his possession with every sigh of deep pleasure.

“Fook, Aihan, I love ye,” he whispered, pushing deeper again.

“Ah!” she moaned. “I love ye too,” she whispered back, and he smiled. The fire ran down his spine and ignited his balls as he thrust one final time and came with a slowly unravelling joy. As he subsided onto her body, he lay breathing in her scent and absorbing her heat. Contentment in every bone and pore of his body.

As Col rolled off her and drew her into his arms, she sighed with happiness. Burrowing into his embrace, she wrapped her arms round him, realising she never wanted to be anywhere else but here.

He had said he loved her. Did he mean it, or was it the sex talking? She rather thought

he meant it. She had meant it. As if reading her thoughts, he stroked her hair and said, “I love ye, Aihan, never doubt it. Ye’ve stolen the heart right out of my chest when I didnae think I had one to be taken. Ye scared the living daylights out of me, running like that. Please don’t do it again. I don’t think my heart can take it.”

She met his deep blue gaze and got lost in that sea of love. This man. This man had so much love to give. She was blessed.

She touched his cheek and pressed her lips to his in a tender kiss. “I love ye, Mac. I’ll not run from ye again, I promise.”

“Good.” He squeezed her tight. “We’d best be going, love; I left the boys at Teviothead.”

“What!” She sat up shocked.

“They insisted on coming too, I coudnae deny them. They love ye, lass.”

Her eyes filled with sudden tears again, and she swallowed. “I love them too.”

He smiled. “I’m glad of that. Then ye’ll nae mind being their mother? They’re in sore need, as ye might have noticed.”

“Aye, I’ve noticed.” She smiled shyly at him, and he pulled her down to kiss her.

A little while later he said. “We really must get out of this bed.”

“Aye.”

“Come.” He sat up with determination. “There’s a water trough to wash in, it’s a mite cold, but it’ll get the job done.”

They washed, dressed in damp clothes, packed up their belongings and mounted their horses, nosing them back to the road.

They rode for some way in silence. The weather was such a contrast to yesterday's misery, she could almost think herself in a different country. Her thoughts roamed back over everything he had told her, and she said, "I want to see it."

"See what, love?" He turned his head to look at her; they were riding abreast.

"The Neidan. I want to see what he gave his life for!"

"Aye, love. I'll take ye to Merlow, then, once we collect the boys. I'd like them to visit their uncle as well. I'd better send a note to Fergus, let him know ye're well and we will be away a mite longer than anticipated."

She smiled, very pleased.

Two hours later they reached Teviothead, to be greeted with great enthusiasm by the boys.

"Ye'll stay with us, Aihan?" asked Rory seriously.

"Aye, I've already given ye father my word I'll nae run again."

He nodded decisively, as if satisfied.

"I hope ye've no objections, lads, but I was planning on marrying her," said Col, his arm cinched tightly round her waist.

"Really Athair?" said Callum. He grinned. "That's splendid!"

Col raised an eyebrow at Rory, who flushed and said gruffly, “I’d like that—Mama.”

Aihan hugged both boys and looked at Col over their heads. She mouthed, Thank ye .

“Well, that’s settled, then,” said Col. “We’ll call past Gretna on the way and tie the knot there. Boys, we’re going to visit yer Uncle Merlow, how do ye like that?”

This news also met with their approval, and after lunch they bad farewell to Mrs George and set off for Gretna Green, where Col was handfasted to his second wife over a blacksmith’s anvil, witnessed by his two sons.

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 12:24 pm*

They spent the night in Gretna and arrived in the village of Pinner twelve days later. Stopping at the Bull's Head Tavern, Col entered the taproom, trailed by Aihan and his sons to find a big dark-haired man behind the bar, polishing tankards.

“Good afternoon, d’ye have two rooms we can hire?”

“I do,” the man rumbled. “How long will you be staying?”

“I’m nae sure, at least a week,” said Col. “Can ye tell me where yer Doctor resides?”

“Dr Thornton’s surgery is in the main street, ten doors down from the vicarage. I hope none of your party are ill?”

“Nae. He’s my brother, we’ve come for a visit.”

The publican broke out in a wide grin and held his hand out, “Pleased to meet you, Mr Thornton. Sebastian Rooke at your service, and welcome to Pinner.”

Col shook his hand, and the man turned towards the curtained doorway behind him and poked his head through. “Beth, I’ve got Merlow’s brother and his family here.”

He turned back as a diminutive blonde woman appeared, wiping her hands on her apron. “How wonderful!”

Col offered his hand to Mrs Rooke and introduced Aihan and the boys.

Mrs Rooke promised them food and took them upstairs to show them their rooms.



“I’ll send Betty up with hot water for you to wash the dust off. We are so delighted to meet you. Merlow is somewhat of a local hero, you know,” said Mrs Rooke. “And of course he is married to Seb’s sister Hetty, so he’s family to us, which makes you family too!”

“Aye, I’ve met Hetty; Merlow brought her to up to stay with us a few months back.”

“Yes, that is right, I remember them going!” She looked around. “Now, do you have everything you need? Soap, towels . . . ” She counted things off on her fingers. She turned to Aihan and said with a sunny smile, “Please let me know if there is anything I can do to make your stay more comfortable, we are so delighted to have you here!”

Aihan smiled back and gave her a little Chinese bow with her hands between her breasts. “We are honoured to stay with you, thank you.”

Mrs Rooke took this with a slight blink and another smile. “You are very welcome.”

By the time they had washed and returned downstairs for the promised meal, it seemed the village network had sent news of their arrival, for the taproom contained a number of additional people, and into their midst burst Merlow at a trot with Hetty in his wake.

“Col!” he said, his face creasing in a smile as he clapped his brother on the back in a hug. “Why did ye not tell us ye were coming?”

“It was a spur of the moment decision. Let me introduce my wife, Aihan.” He put an arm round her waist and brought her forward for Merlow’s inspection.

Merlow smiled at her and bowed Chinese fashion, addressing her in her own language.

Aihan bowed in response and felt tears sting her eyes as she heard her own language

spoken for the first time in so long. It brought a wave of homesickness and grief in its wake.

“Hu?nyíng lái dào píng nà. W? duì n? dìdì de qùshì bì?oshì zuì chéngzh de ?idào.”  
His welcome and condolences hit her hard.

She bowed again. “Xièxiè.” Thank you.

A tall blonde-haired woman stepped forward then and enveloped her in a hug. “I am so delighted to meet you and so sorry for your loss,” she murmured softly in Aihan’s ear.

She concluded this was Hetty, Merlow’s wife, and the hulking publican’s sister. She could see no resemblance between the two of them, but then she and Liang had not shared any striking resemblance either. These people were so welcoming it was almost overwhelming.

More introductions were made, but Aihan had trouble keeping up with them. She was still tired from her ordeal of twelve days ago, and travelling had not allowed her much respite to recover.

They were herded to a table, joined by Merlow and Hetty, where Mrs Rooke served them an excellent meal. Aihan made a note of the dishes and which ones the boys seemed to like the most. She would ask Mrs Rooke for the receipts.

After the meal, they were urged to come to the vicarage, whatever that was, and meet Hetty and Mr Rooke’s father, who was, it seemed, some kind of religious leader for the village. A priest in the strange religion of Christianity . She had caught fleeting references to it in Col’s household, but since he didn’t seem to attend Church —the word for temple, she gathered—there had not been a lot of discussion around it.

Things were clearly different here. The vicarage, it turned out, was Hetty’s father’s

home, and so called because his title was that of vicar, a type of priest. Hetty's resemblance to her father was strong, and he was as welcoming as everyone else had been, ushering them all into his small parlour and offering drinks of some sweet liquor in small glasses. Aihan took one, sniffed and sipped. It was alcoholic and very sweet.

After that, they were escorted down the street a bit to Merlow's residence, which contained also his place of medical practice. Aihan was nodding in her chair when Col nudged her awake gently. "Come, lass, ye're tired, we will continue this tomorrow when ye're rested."

Two days later, Col watched his wife conversing with his brother in her native tongue. She took every opportunity to do so, and Merlow was glad to humour her; as he said, he needed the practice. It was obvious to Col that it gave her great pleasure, and his heart contracted at the notion that she might regret her decision not to go home. She was sacrificing so much to stay with him.

He was so grateful to have her. She had saved him from eternal misery. He wasn't sure what he had done to deserve two such wonderful women as Cat and Aihan. Distinctly different, yet so precious to him.

As he watched, Merlow rose and left the room. In a few moments he returned with two objects: a book and a sword. Ah! Col approached to listen as Merlow laid both in Aihan's lap. The sword was encased in a lacquered scabbard. She put it aside for the moment. "For practice later?" she said to Merlow, who nodded.

She and Merlow had trained together with the boys that morning, much to the lads' delight. The boys were not here at the moment, which was probably a good thing. That sword would be too much temptation for Rory, he was sure. They were off with some of the village lads, fishing from the bridge over the river Pin.

She sat a moment looking at the leather-bound book in her lap before she opened it

and began to scan the pages with a finger. After a few minutes, she looked up at Merlow and wiped her eyes. Col caught her brother's name among the sounds she made. Her language was still completely impenetrable to him. Merlow nodded and said something in return, then he laid a hand over hers and said something else that made her jerk her head up.

A quick conversation back and forth ensued, and Col was about to ask what they were talking about, because the suspense was killing him, when Merlow turned to him and said quietly, "I have offered the text to Aihan, to care for. It seems more fitting that she have it than I."

Col looked at her. "Aihan? Is this what ye want?"

She nodded, wiping her eyes. "It was Liang's life goal to find the Neidan. He believed in it utterly."

Merlow nodded and smiled, slightly sadly. "I thought Liang and his men were sent by the Qing Government, but that wasn't the case. Liang's quest was personal. Five men died in pursuit of this text; it seems only right that the only survivor of their ill-fated journey be gifted with the prize."

"Five?" queried Col.

"Aye," said Aihan. "My brother's student Caishen was lost overboard in a storm the night before I came ashore. One of my objectives was to try to find his body, but I never found it. He was six years younger than me, but Liang raised us together. He was also like a brother to me."

"Ah, lass. I'm so sorry!" Col put an arm round her. "I didnae know that. No wonder ye were so distraught when we first met. I dinnae know how ye can have forgiven me for trapping ye so when ye had such pressing need to return to the ship."

She smiled sadly at him and shook her head. “I’m glad ye did, or I’d never be here with ye now.”

Merlow discreetly left the room at this point, and Col pulled her close to kiss her. She put the text carefully on the table and came into his arms. Several kisses later, he murmured, “Have I told ye how much I love ye?”

“A few times, but I never tire of hearing it,” she said. “Tell me in Gaelic again?”

“Tha gaol agam ort le m’ uile chridhe, mo ghràidh,” he obliged. I love ye with all my heart, dearest.

“W? ài n? dào y?ngyu?n w? q?n’ài de,” she said softly. I love ye to eternity, my darling.