



Time of the Warlord (Stones of Scotland #5)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: A woman on a mission. A medieval warlord with a secret. A time travel mystery that spans centuries

Sadie is determined to find the truth about her missing twin sister and all the evidence points to a stone circle on the island of Arran. One touch of the stone, and Sadie finds herself flung back through time, straight into the arms of powerful warlord Ciaran. She needs to get away, needs to find the truth about her sister but what if Ciaran knows more than hes willing to reveal?

After years of service to his king, Ciaran just wants to enjoy his new role as lord of his own lands. Loyalty is a hard habit to break, though, and Ciaran still has a lot of secrets to keep. The last thing he needs is a beautiful, seductive woman working to undermine everything hes worked for but Sadie is hard to resist

Book 5 in the Stones of Scotland series, this time travel romance is set in Celtic Scotland. Read as a standalone romance, or as part of the bigger mystery that makes up the Stones of Scotland series.

Total Pages (Source): 41

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In this part of Scotland, the Atlantic Ocean met the land so gently that Sadie could hardly see the coastline - it was just an endless wavering line of sea and sand. On a day like today, when clear blue skies set the water sparkling a rich shade of purple, there could not be anywhere on earth more beautiful. If only Sadie had time to admire the beauty.

“This is the most exciting assignment I’ve ever been on,” said the young woman beside her, gripping the railing of the ferry as they came into the harbor. “Do you think we really will learn all about time travel?”

Sadie only just refrained from rolling her eyes. She had argued very strenuously with her boss when he insisted on sending a full team of reporters out to the island. Why send three people when Sadie was more than capable of handling this alone? She had pointed out the waste of money and resources, the hole it would leave in their in-office reporting team. But her boss had waved away her concerns as if they were nothing. And, of course, she could not tell him the real reason she wanted to take this trip alone.

If only he had not sent colleagues who were quite so frustrating. Mara, the younger woman, was a talented enough writer, but she didn’t have the common sense to set a foot outside the office. And Ian was a grumpy old curmudgeon who refused to acknowledge Sadie as an equal. What a fun few days this would be.

“You know as well as I do that this is just a routine assignment,” she told Mara. “We aren’t looking for time travel secrets, just any hints about what the bosses are up to.”

That wasn’t true, of course. But Mara did not need to know anything else. No one

did.

Once the ferry had moored, the three of them made their way ashore, overnight bags in hand. Ian had still barely spoken to the two women, and Sadie wasn't sure whether to be insulted or relieved. He really was insufferable. Still, she would be rid of him soon. He was not necessary for this investigation.

Their boss had booked three rooms at a small bed-and-breakfast. Or so he'd said. When they arrived at the front desk, manned by a cheery white-haired housekeeper, Sadie found to her dismay that she was assigned to a twin room with Mara. That would add an extra complication to her plan.

"I'm afraid we're completely full," the housekeeper said. "Will it be a problem?"

"Of course not," Sadie and Mara both assured her. Mara's insinuations even sounded genuine. They accepted the matching room keys without any fuss.

"We need to visit Mr Marshall this afternoon," Ian said. "Can you ladies be ready in half an hour? It's best if we all arrive together."

"Sounds perfect," Sadie said, flashing him her brightest smile. Ian did not return it, but that was hardly a surprise. He'd always been grumpy.

Mara trailed behind as they made their way upstairs to the bright but cramped twin room. A large gray cat lay dozing on the bed, and Sadie chased it away with a reluctant smile. She'd always had a fondness for cats, but this one was clearly not supposed to be in the room.

"Why don't you use the bathroom first?" she asked Mara. "I can start unpacking."

Of course, she had no intention of doing any such thing. The second that the

bathroom door closed, Sadie seized her bag and slipped back out of the room and down the stairs. She winced at every creak, but no one saw her. At this time of the day, most other guests were probably out enjoying the sunshine. Now, the trick would be avoiding Ian. He should be in his room, but nothing was certain.

Sadie paused at the bottom of the stairs, trying to decide where to go next. The main door was too risky - Ian might have dropped his bag and come straight back downstairs to ask the staff a few questions. She could hear the housekeeper's voice in the front hallway, chattering away to some holidaymakers. Good. That meant the kitchen must be empty - a place this small would surely not have kitchen staff in the middle of the day. Sadie slipped through the most likely-looking doorway and took a second to glance around the big, whitewashed room. Anything useful? Carrying a butcher's knife seemed a little excessive. At least she could enjoy the smug satisfaction of having chosen the right door. It wasn't often that she made a wrong guess.

Sadie let herself out through the back door and emerged into a small walled garden. It looked like the housekeeper grew vegetables here, perhaps for the guests. But if everything went well, Sadie would not be here to enjoy a delicious home-grown dinner. Too late to back out now, she told herself. The only way was forwards. And there, leaning against the wall, was the perfect item to help her - a shovel. Sadie snatched it up before making her way through the garden gate, which was thankfully not padlocked.

Much as it hurt to admit it, Sadie knew that digging might be her only hope of finding the truth. She needed to know where the bodies were buried.

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Hefting her shovel in her hands, Sadie stared out over the stone circle. This was the place - she felt it in her bones. It was an outrage that the police hadn't examined the place more closely. After all, this was the last place Norah had been seen alive. The CCTV camera in the car park had captured her taking the path up to the stone circle, but she had never returned. An unsolved case, the police called it. But Sadie was pretty sure she knew what had happened, and she was going to prove it. She might never be able to bring her sister back, but at least she could give her justice.

But where to start? The stone circle was bigger than it had looked in the pictures. If Sadie tried to dig all of it up, she'd be here for days - and someone would almost definitely catch her. The long summer twilight gave her a few hours, but no more.

Sadie paced the full width of the circle, eying the ground for anything different.

This is stupid, a little voice whispered at the back of her mind. Norah had been gone for over a year. What would be left to see? Any evidence would have been long ago washed away by Scotland's rains and snow. As Sadie scanned the grass, already growing darker with evening shadows, her heart sank.

No giving up now.

All her research had brought her here. Every sign pointed to this ancient circle of stones, high in the hills of this remote western island of Arran. It had been a long drive from Glasgow, not to mention that ferry trip and the hike from the bed and breakfast. There was no way Sadie would turn around and go home now.

There. The grass was a little shorter, a little different in color. Perhaps someone had

dug it up recently. Sadie stepped closer to it, her heart pounding. This might be it. The moment she finally learned the truth. She just needed to muster up the courage to dig. Her fingers trembled.

“Where the hell have you been, Norah?”

The voice cut through the still air and Sadie froze.

Norah ?

The two of them were identical, and often confused for each other. But Norah was missing, presumed dead. Her disappearance had been all over the news.

Slowly, Sadie turned.

A huge, burly man stood between two stones on the opposite side of the stone circle, glaring at her.

“What are you doing in this time at all?” he growled. “And with a shovel? Bloody hell, Norah. You’ve got a job to do.”

Sadie opened her mouth to ask what was going on, but he cut her off.

“And dressed like that? You better have a clothing stash waiting on the other side. Do you even have a language chip?”

Sadie shook her head mutely. What was going on? She’d never seen or heard the man approach. He was just suddenly... there.

He strode towards her, thrusting a hand out. Sadie shrank away, but he didn’t touch her. Instead, he held out some sort of small metal object. Bemused, Sadie took it.

“Don’t you dare lose that,” he warned her. “We can’t spare you a third. They’re damn expensive. Now, follow me.”

He turned away, as if he was going to cross the circle again. Sadie took another step backwards, clutching the strange lump of metal in one hand, and the shovel in the other. Could she sneak away before he noticed her? Make a run for it and reach the car in time?

He paused and turned to look at her. Dusk had almost fallen, and Sadie could barely make out his face.

“Come on, then - wait, no! Don’t move!” he shouted.

Too late. Sadie had taken one more step backwards, and stumbled on a patch of uneven ground. The weight of her backpack tugged her backwards, and her ankle twisted under her weight. She fell against one of the tall stones, fighting for balance with her hands full.

“Norah!” the man shouted, but his voice sounded a long way away.

Sadie tried to look up, but she couldn’t move. The grass beneath her feet pulsed with waves of light and began to spin, whirling faster and faster. Sadie squeezed her eyes shut, but the feeling did not stop. What was happening to her? Strange screaming noises rushed around her, like speeding cars. When she dared peel her eyes open, streaks of light darted in every direction, along with - were those ghostly figures, transparent people? Sadie closed her eyes again, the handle of the shovel digging into her palm.

Then it all stopped, as suddenly as it had begun. Sadie dropped the shovel and collapsed onto her hands and knees, retching onto the grass. Her head still felt like it was spinning.

When she finally looked up, the man was gone. Not even his footprints marred the damp grass.

Sadie frowned. Damp? The grass had been dry just a moment ago. Had she been slumped unconscious against the stone? She shivered. The sky still looked like the final glow of evening, but the twilights were long and drawn-out this far north. Any length of time could have passed.

Whatever was going on, she was clearly in no fit state to dig anything up. She would have to come back tomorrow. For now, it was time to go home. She'd been stupid to attempt this on her own. The bed and breakfast wasn't far away. If she explained everything to Ian and Mara, perhaps they would help her. Mara might, at least.

That was the thought that got Sadie straightening up and testing her weight on unsteady feet. Her ankle almost buckled again and she swore under her breath. She must have sprained it or something. At least the road wasn't too far away. She could make it, even with a bad ankle. There had been plenty of cars about - someone would find her soon.

That strange little metal object was still in her hand, but she didn't have any time to examine it now. She shoved it in her pocket - a mystery to return to later, once she was warm and dry. Pushing away from the stone, Sadie took one careful step into the center of the circle, then another. It was foggy, she realized. How had a fog this thick come on so quickly? She shook her head furiously, trying to clear her thoughts.

Come on, Sadie. Just get back to the road.

One more step. Another step. Her ankle burned, but she kept going.

Someone shouted, the unintelligible words cutting through the mist.

Sadie froze. Had the man come back? She peered ahead into the thickening fog, trying to see who was there. But the voice had come from behind her. She spun around, cursing as the sudden movement jolted her ankle.

And then she screamed.

A man stood just a few feet away, staring down at her. This was most definitely not the man from before. He was tall, yes, but wiry rather than broad, and his hair was a muddy auburn instead of close-cropped.

What caught Sadie's attention most, though, was the sword in his hand. The sharp, silvery sword that he pointed straight at her.

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The man said something else, but Sadie couldn't understand a word. It sounded almost like Gaelic, but nothing that Sadie quite recognized - although, admittedly, she hadn't paid much attention in her Gaelic lessons at school in Glasgow.

"I don't understand you," she said, as clearly and calmly as her trembling body would allow. No reason to panic. This was all a misunderstanding.

But the man frowned and said something else, equally unintelligible.

Now Sadie did begin to panic. How could he not understand English ?

"Please put down the sword," she said in her most authoritative voice. He said nothing, just stood there, his eyes fixed on hers. The sword did not waver.

Sadie's mind raced through a hundred possible scenarios. Unfortunately, it seemed that, under the circumstances, there was only one explanation.

Time travel .

She'd come out here hunting for time travelers, and it seemed like she'd found them. She just hadn't expected this to happen. But now it all made sense. That man hadn't appeared from nowhere - he'd traveled through time. And whatever mysterious energy made that possible must have still been rushing through the standing stone when Sadie touched it.

Hesitantly, she reached to the side and brushed her fingers against the stone again. Nothing. Well, that would have been too easy. She would have to find another way

home.

But first, there was the problem of the man with the sword.

Another deep breath, in and out. The man was still staring at her, but the tip of the sword gradually drifted downwards. Sadie was hardly threatening, after all. He must be a foot taller than her, his shoulders twice the breadth of hers.

Concentrate, Sadie .

She had it. Sadie slid the strange metal object out of her pocket and slipped it straight into her ear. She winced slightly at the strange feeling, like static right inside her ear, but it passed in a heartbeat. A pulse of pride rushed through her. She'd guessed correctly - this was a language chip. Why that strange man had given her one, she still didn't know, but at least one part of the mystery was solved.

"Hello," she said to the man with the sword. "I am very sorry if I'm trespassing."

His eyes went wide. The sword lifted again.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Sadie," she said, hoping that her best interview smile would work here - or, more accurately, now.

The man lowered the sword at long last, although his eyes were still narrowed. Sadie couldn't even imagine the effort it must have taken to hold the weapon aloft for so long.

"How did you get here?" he asked.

Sadie hesitated. For perhaps the first time in her career, she didn't have a story ready. She had never expected this to happen. She was looking for evidence - either the bodies of the missing women, or some clues about where to look next. Traveling through time was not part of the plan.

The man seemed to sense her hesitation. He stalked around her in a broad circle, his footsteps slow and measured. Sadie turned to follow him, unwilling to let him out of her sight.

"I'm lost," she said at last. "Could you tell me where I am?"

"You're not lost," he said dismissively. "You could not have reached this place without my permission. Who are you, and why are you here, on my land?"

Sadie glanced at the stones without even meaning to. What could she say? What story might make sense?

And then the strangest thing happened. Understanding dawned in the man's eyes.

"You're one of them," he breathed. "You came here from the future."

The shock was so powerful that Sadie could barely keep her knees from buckling.

"What do you know about the future?" she asked in a whisper.

The man shrugged.

"You are not the first time traveler I've met," he told her. Sadie could not quite read the inflection in his voice, or the look in his eyes. He certainly did not sound overjoyed.

Sadie straightened her shoulders.

“I am here entirely by mistake,” she assured him. “If you know anything that can help me to return home, I would greatly appreciate that information.”

He didn’t raise the sword again - but he didn’t sheathe it, either.

“Give me one reason why I should trust you,” he said.

Sadie’s heart pounded. She’d never found herself in a situation like this before. Whoever this man was, he was armed and clearly dangerous. What could she say? What evidence might make him trust her? Her mind had gone entirely blank. She could do nothing but gape at him, feeling more lost and afraid than ever before.

I should have stayed at home .

“Yes, you should have done,” the man said, and Sadie realized she had spoken aloud.

“Please believe me,” she croaked. “I did not mean to end up here, and I just want to go home.”

Her mind was already whirling, though. What if Norah was here? What if this time held the answers she’d come for? And this man knew about time travel. He might be exactly what she needed.

Sadie widened her eyes, looking as afraid and unhappy as she knew how.

“Please help me,” she whispered. “I’m afraid.”

At last, the man cracked. He slipped his sword into its sheath and took a step closer to her.

“I can help you,” he said. “But not here, and not now. You will have to come home with me.”

Sadie swallowed hard. Great. Going home with a huge, armed man. Definitely not a sensible plan - but it was the best she had if she was going to find out the truth about Norah.

“Thank you for your help,” she said softly, fluttering her eyelashes at the man. He didn’t smile, but she could already feel him softening. Thank goodness that men were more or less the same, regardless of time period.

“Follow me,” he said. With that, he turned and strode away as if nothing else needed to be said.

Sadie ran after him, still clutching the shovel and desperately trying to keep her footing on the rough ground.

“Wait!” she called. “What’s your name?”

“My name is Ciaran,” he called back over his shoulder, not slowing down in the slightest. “And I am the lord of this island.”

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How much of a fool did this woman take him for? Her clumsy attempts at flirtation were downright embarrassing. She was a beautiful woman - that much was obvious - but it would take a lot more than a pretty face to blind Ciaran to the truth. That she was from the future, he did not doubt. That she was not exactly where she wanted to be, he could also believe. But she was keeping some important truth from him. He would need to learn her secrets.

The rough mountain road led them back down to his own home, perched on cliffs above the sea. From here, the rising moon illuminated the sparkling black of flat water, stretching out as far as the eye could see. This island was Ciaran's home, and he had never seen a place more wondrous.

"Is it far?" the woman asked in that silly little squeak of a voice. Ciaran rolled his eyes, knowing she could not see in the growing darkness.

"Only a few moments," he assured her. "Look, you can see the firelights burning just ahead."

The woman followed him meekly, trotting along the gravel behind him. Ciaran was willing to bet she could stride out as confidently as him - she was wearing some sturdy-looking boots - but this was no doubt part of her act. Perhaps the men of her time preferred weak women.

"You disturbed my peaceful evening walk," he told her as the road flattened out and they approached the final stretch leading to his home.

"I'm so sorry," she said, sounding utterly insincere. "I hate to be an inconvenience."

“I’m sure you do,” he said dryly. If she was as smart as she looked, then she would have heard the same insincerity in his own voice. After all, what would a man like him be doing, taking a peaceful evening stroll up in the hills?

The guards outside the palisade gate snapped to attention as soon as they saw Ciaran approaching. Huge flaming torches cast enough light to illuminate his face and identify him to his men. He nodded and they swung the great gates open, casting curious glances at the strange red-haired woman. And she was worth staring at - Ciaran could admit that. Her outfit was rather incredibly form-fitting, revealing long legs and a tightly curved waist.

Perhaps one of his men would fall for her charms. That might be a useful way to learn more about her. But Ciaran dismissed the idea almost straight away. Whatever secrets she held, he would uncover them himself.

The gate swung shut behind them with an almighty crash, but Ciaran kept on striding.

“Where are we going?” the woman asked. This time, the wavering tone in her voice sounded genuine. There was a much smaller gate to the side of the main portal, designed for foot travelers, but Ciaran had thought the main gate might intimidate her a little. He’d clearly made the correct decision.

“I will find you a place to sleep in my hall,” he told her. “In the morning, I can send word for the help you will need.”

“No one can help me tonight?”

That definitely was real fear in her voice. Ciaran smoothed down his smile as he turned to regard her in the torchlight.

“It will be a few days before help can arrive, I’m afraid. You will have to remain here

until then, as my guest.”

Also not true - at least, not strictly - but he would not trust her with any of his secrets until she gave up a few of her own.

More guards leaped into action and swung open the hall doors. Ciaran strode inside, once again leaving the woman to scramble after him. The room was still bustling, despite the late hour. Some corners were filled with sleeping people, but some tables were still occupied with eating and drinking. Ciaran’s people kept different hours, depending on their responsibilities, and the hall was always open to all.

“Niamh,” he called out, spotting his sister on the other side of the hall, helping to clear the main table. She turned to look at him, smoothing her expression of surprise into one of welcome as soon as she spotted the stranger.

“A guest! What a delight,” she said as she crossed the hall towards them.

“This is...” Ciaran fumbled for her name. He really must be slipping. “Sadie,” he said after a second too long. “She will be staying with her for a few days. She is an honored guest, so please put her in the room where the queen would stay.”

Niamh’s eyes widened just a fraction, and he knew she had understood his meaning. His sister had always been quick.

“Of course, brother,” she murmured, then turned to Sadie with a brilliant smile. “Do you have any possessions? I would be happy to lend you everything you need.”

Sadie murmured something unintelligible. Ciaran smothered a smile. Her helpless act would not last long in the face of his sister’s determination. Still, better safe than sorry. He gestured subtly to a couple of guards, who nodded in acknowledgment. They would not give their ‘guest’ a chance to wander.

“I will see you both in the morning,” he said, inclining his head to the ladies. “Niamh, I will retire to my chamber. Sadie, I hope that you will be comfortable here. Welcome to Dunn Morvid.”

He strode away, back out into the darkness beyond the light of the hall. There, he hovered in the shadows, waiting. Niamh appeared a moment later, Sadie trailing behind her. The guards were a little further back again, hopefully far enough away that Sadie would not notice them. Niamh was chattering away in a friendly voice, although Ciaran noticed with amusement that she kept her choice of topic so superficial as to be meaningless. He suspected Sadie had no interest in what kind of shoes were currently fashionable at court. Niamh seemed to have everything well in hand.

Ciaran returned to his own chamber. He debated calling for a bath, but that would eat up precious time he could little afford.

Sure enough, it was only a few moments before Niamh burst in through the door.

“You could knock first,” Ciaran pointed out mildly.

“She’s one of them , isn’t she?” Niamh asked.

“And how did you come to that conclusion?” Ciaran asked.

“You told me the queen’s room,” Niamh pointed out. “Queen Bethany has never been here, and you know that very well. You were trying to tell me that she’s from the future, like the queen.”

“Well deduced,” Ciaran said, smiling at her.

“Not to mention the ridiculous outfit she was wearing,” Niamh added with a grimace.

Then her expression abruptly grew serious again. “But I’m more interested in who didn’t come back with you, Ciaran. Is he truly gone?”

Ciaran frowned.

“There was no evidence of him at the stone circle,” he said. “Just that woman, whoever she is and whatever she has to do with this all. No, I think he’s still on the island. We just have to find him.”

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Sadie barely slept. How could she? The bed she had was warm and comfortable enough, if a little itchy, and her gracious hostess had even left her a plate of oatcakes and a pitcher of what tasted like beer. With her thirst quenched and her stomach full, Sadie could usually drift off to sleep anywhere.

She'd never tried sleeping in the ancient past, though, and it affected her more than she could have imagined. So, when the first light of dawn crept in between the window shutters of her bedroom, Sadie was still awake. She groaned and covered her eyes against the light, but it was too late. There was no chance that she'd get any sleep now. She would just have to wake up and face the day, whatever it might bring.

Her bedroom door opened onto a large room, lined with what looked like weaving looms. This place was far smaller than the great hall they had visited the night before, although it was similar in shape. Perhaps this was a women's version of the hall, or something like that.

Sadie half-expected to see guards outside her door, but the place was surprisingly empty. And light, as well. As Sadie turned to look around, she saw that one wall was completely open to the elements, allowing the bright morning sunshine to spill in. Presumably, such good light was required for weaving.

Something about that open wall seemed familiar from the night before, although it had been difficult to see anything in the darkness. Sadie headed that way, hoping it would lead her in the right direction. Indeed, it brought her to a narrow street between small, shed-like buildings. At the far end was the imposing silhouette of the hall, impossible to miss. With a sigh of relief, Sadie set off in that direction.

There were a few more people around here, milling around in the open space outside the hall. A few faces reappeared more than once, and Sadie frowned to herself. Were these men watching her? Following her? Perhaps she was just being paranoid. Ciaran and his sister seemed welcoming enough.

That same sister came bustling up to Sadie as soon as she entered the hall.

“Good morning, Sadie,” she said, loudly enough that other heads turned to stare at them. “I wasn’t expecting to see you up so early. I do hope you slept well.”

“It’s a lovely guest room,” Sadie said, smiling her most charming smile. “I can’t thank you enough for your hospitality.”

“Any guest of my brother’s is always welcome,” Niamh said. “And we rarely receive visitors from so far away.”

Far away? What had Ciaran told her? Sadie didn’t like to ask. Instead, she just smiled politely.

“But where are my manners?” Niamh went on. “You must be desperately hungry. Here, sit beside me at the table.”

Sadie found herself half-pushed into a large wooden chair at what seemed to be the top table. Niamh sat down beside her and waved a hand at a nearby woman. Before Sadie even realized what was happening, bowls and plates of food began to appear on the table in front of them.

“So, my brother said you would be here for a few days,” Niamh said. “Do you have a long journey home?”

“Long enough,” Sadie said, thinking of the ferry, and the drive back to Glasgow. “I

would love to set off as soon as possible, but your brother thinks I need to wait.”

Niamh made a gentle tutting sound. “He’s often far too cautious,” he said. “I’m sure you would be fine to leave whenever you want. We still have a few weeks before the winters storms begin.”

Storms? Sadie didn’t like the sound of that. And she also did not know if she could trust this smiling, generous hostess. Something strange was going on.

“It’s lucky that your brother found me, really,” she said.

Bingo. Something flickered behind Niamh’s eyes before she smoothed her expression again.

“Oh, I’m sure,” she said easily. “It can get terribly cold at night, now that summer’s behind us.”

These siblings were hiding something. Sadie’s pulse skipped a beat.

“Where is your brother this morning?” she asked. “I was wondering if he might have time to show me around a little. I’m sure he’s very proud of his home.”

Niamh frowned a little, one line marring her smooth forehead.

“Unfortunately he is already occupied this morning,” she said. “Perhaps I could be your guide instead.”

“I don’t want to be any trouble,” Sadie said hurriedly. Niamh seemed like the kind of person who would not let her attention waver for a second.

“No, I insist,” Niamh said brightly. “Take whatever food you wish, and we’ll set off.”

Suddenly feeling less than hungry, Sadie grabbed a juicy-looking apple and reluctantly followed Niamh from the hall.

She had to admit, receiving a tour of what seemed to be an early medieval fortress was a rather fascinating experience. This was no great hillfort, but the hall and cluster of surrounding buildings stood securely behind a huge wooden palisade. The gates that Sadie remembered from the night before now stood open in the daylight, allowing glimpses of the dirt road and rolling hills beyond. Sadie shivered. If Ciaran hadn't found her, she might have spent the whole night wandering those hills, alone and afraid. But what had he been doing up there, all alone?

Niamh hadn't yet stopped talking, keeping up a steady stream of commentary on every single building. Sadie just let it all wash over her. She wasn't here for a history lesson - she was here on an investigation.

"Could I perhaps spend a moment or two outside the walls?" she asked Niamh. "It's all rather bustling and overwhelming in here. I seem to have a headache coming on."

Niamh smiled politely.

"Of course," she said. "Just for a moment, though. I have errands to return to."

Sadie smiled just as politely in return. Inside, though, she was bubbling with frustration. How could she even begin to discover the secrets of this place? She had no idea where to start, no clue what might look unusual. The stone circle seemed like a logical place to start, but she could hardly ask to return there - not without revealing to Ciaran that she wanted something more than a quick trip home. She stood in the road and stared up at the hills, wondering what on earth she should do next.

Something rustled in the bushes on the other side of the road. Niamh jumped backwards, noticing the movement at the same time as Sadie did. The guards leaped

to stand beside them, spears lowered at the foliage. Everyone waited, holding their breath.

Then a face appeared through the leaves, followed by a body, until a boy, perhaps only ten years old, stood there on the side of the road. Niamh gasped in relief.

“Matthew!” she said. “Goodness, but you gave us a fright. Wherever have you been?”

The boy did not answer her. His eyes were fixed on Sadie. With a sudden jolt of recognition, she realized she’d seen his face before. It appeared in photo after photo in her research file - one of the many unsolvable puzzles linked to Norah’s disappearance. He was a few years older now, but Sadie skimmed that file every single day, looking for clues she might have missed.

“I know you,” she said. “You’re Matthew Edmondson.”

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“This is the absolute last bloody thing I need right now,” Ciaran said, pacing from one end of his chamber to another. “You let her meet Matthew?”

“I could hardly do anything about it!” Niamh protested. “Honestly, Ciaran, we thought the boy was missing! Two full days with no sight of him - and then he turns up in the road right beside her? How on earth was I supposed to anticipate that?”

Ciaran sighed heavily. He knew it wasn’t Niamh’s fault, but he was angry all the same. Sadie should never have laid eyes on Matthew. It was too dangerous.

“And you say she knew his name?”

“She called him Matthew Edmondson,” Niamh said, pronouncing the foreign sounds as best she could.

Ciaran’s frown only deepened. So, Sadie knew Matthew from his other life, before he’d come to the kingdom of Dal Riada. Before his mother had married the king and become Queen Bethany. This was not welcome news - but not entirely a surprise.

“It can’t be coincidence that she’s here,” he told Niamh. “We have to watch her even more closely. There have been plots to kidnap Matthew before, given what he’s capable of. I won’t have the boy coming to any harm. Not while he’s my responsibility.”

Niamh sighed and flopped down to sit on top of a huge storage chest.

“Couldn’t Comgall have sent you a less difficult ward?” she asked.

“Looking after the king’s stepson is a great honor,” Ciaran pointed out.

He’d occasionally wondered the same, though. Matthew was a good-natured boy most of the time, but there was something strange about him. Something almost wild. The exchange of foster children was an important part of their culture, here in Dal Riada, but Ciaran had never had his own children, and he didn’t quite know what to do with someone else’s son as his responsibility. Matthew had been on the island almost a year now, and Ciaran still felt as if he barely knew him.

“Is the boy back in his room?” he asked.

Niamh shrugged. “That’s where I told him to go, but there’s no guarantee he’s still there.”

Ciaran swore softly. Things needed to change. He had hired a tutor for Matthew, but the man had been useless. Perhaps he needed to find a new one - someone stern and learned who could teach the boy more about literature and philosophy. He would write to the monks of Iona and request such a man. And perhaps more riding lessons, and weapons training. Maybe Matthew could learn to play the harp...

“Brother, you cannot solve everything alone,” Niamh said softly, breaking through his stream of thoughts.

He managed a tired smile. “That’s what I have you for,” he said, in the most light-hearted tone he could manage.

“You should go and talk to him,” Niamh advised. “Let him follow you around and observe how you manage your lands. He’ll need the experience.”

Ciaran sighed. “You’re probably right. And I’ll need to give him a stern talking-to for worrying us all so much.”

“Be gentle on him,” Niamh called as Ciaran left the room.

He headed towards Matthew’s room, which was tucked into the far corner of the hall, and reached from the outside. As he got closer, though, a familiar voice caught his attention. Ciaran rounded the corner and sank into the shadows. Sadie . She was just leaving Matthew’s room, which was worrying. The frown on her face as she called a farewell, however, suggested that she hadn’t found whatever she was looking for. That made Ciaran smile.

“Good day to you, Sadie,” he called, striding out into the sunlight. Sadie jumped and turned to face him, plastering that ridiculous smile onto her face just in time.

“Ciaran, what a surprise to see you here,” she said in a rush.

“A surprise to see me visiting my foster son?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Sadie’s eyes flickered from side to side as if she hoped for rescue. She didn’t say anything.

Ciaran took a step closer, enjoying the way her eyes widened and her nostrils flared. Another step closer. He could smell the strange perfume of her hair now, drifting up to him. She did have incredible hair, so thick and red.

“Can I help you with something?” Sadie finally said, the words coming out in a breathless squeak as she stared up at his face. He hadn’t realized how small she was, her head barely past his shoulders. She seemed taller, somehow, as if all that confidence added an extra inch or two.

“You can tell me the truth,” he breathed. “About who you are and why you’re here.”

For a second longer, she stood frozen. He stared into those dark eyes, and smiled.

That seemed to crack through the ice of her panic.

“I’ve already told you that I’m here by mistake,” she snapped. “I just want to go home.”

She went to push past him, but Ciaran reached out and grabbed her wrist, jerking her to a halt.

“Stay away from my foster son,” he warned her in a low voice. “In my home, there are rules that even a guest must follow.”

He let her go again. She glared at him, and he thought for a second that she might argue. But she turned and stormed off without saying another word, long skirts flapping around her legs.

Skirts. Funny that he hadn’t noticed earlier. Niamh must have loaned her a dress. Ciaran couldn’t help but admire Sadie’s shapely form as she marched around the corner of the hall, anger evident in every line of her body. He would have to congratulate his sister on finding a dress that fitted their guest so well.

No, he would not . What was he thinking? The woman’s clothing was entirely irrelevant. So was her hair. And so were her beautiful eyes. The only thing he needed from Sadie was the truth. He would find out her secrets - and then he would send her back to wherever she came from.

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Sadie could not remember ever being so angry. With Ciaran, with Matthew, with herself. She was so close to solving the mystery of Norah's disappearance - she just knew it. The people in this place were hiding something important, and the mysterious lord and his equally mysterious foster son were at the heart of it. But if neither of them would talk to her, what more could she do?

Matthew had refused to tell her anything. He wouldn't talk about his early childhood or how he came to be in Dal Riada, and he certainly wouldn't talk about his father, the man Sadie knew as Professor Lucan Edmondson. The man most likely responsible for Norah's disappearance and probable death. Sadie had assumed that the man's missing wife and son were dead, along with the group of vanished women, but Matthew's existence gave her new hope. If he wouldn't talk to her, though, what could she do next?

Well, she certainly did not need to do whatever Ciaran told her. As if he had the right to keep her away from Matthew, the only other person here who came from her time period! Admittedly, Sadie did not know what else she could ask Matthew, but she resented Ciaran feeling as if he'd won. She was not going to sit meekly in her room and wait for him to send her home - however he planned on doing that.

Buoyed by this new resolution, Sadie began making plans. She sat through an interminably long dinner beside Niamh, whose friendly act had evaporated entirely. The siblings talked only to each other, acting almost as if Sadie did not exist. It only made her resentment burn brighter.

No one commented when she left the hall early. She returned to her room and changed back into her own clothes, delighted to be out of the ridiculous dress. Then

she waited.

Darkness gradually fell. Peering out of a small gap between her shutters, Sadie watched as men lit the torches one by one, illuminating the alleyways that led from building to building. Despite the brightness of the flames, the shadows were still deep and rich. Plenty of space to hide.

Sadie waited until the alleyway outside was empty. She couldn't go back through the women's weaving room, not when the soft chatter of voices still drifted through her door, but the window was large enough, and low to the ground. She managed to squeeze through, landing lightly on the ground on the other side. The night air was cool and crisp, although a little tinged with the smells of livestock and manure.

Keeping to the shadows, Sadie made her way back towards the main hall building. The hall itself could not possibly contain the kind of clues she needed - it was far too busy, with people coming and going at all hours. No place for secrets. And there was no point in returning to Matthew's room - he had made it clear that he had no interest in talking to her.

No, Sadie was sure of her destination: Ciaran's room.

This would be difficult, she knew. He was clearly an experienced warrior - a warlord, perhaps, judging by all the armed men who lounged around the hall during the day. If Sadie was to creep in and out of his rooms undetected, she would have to be very fast, and very secretive.

She drifted closer to his door. Thankfully, although his room was beside the hall, it was reached from the outside. She could never have stayed out of sight in the bustling main room. If only she knew the layout of the room beyond. Did he have a suite, or just a bedroom? How was the furniture laid out? She would just have to hope for the best.

Sinking down into the shadows opposite, Sadie once again waited.

She had no idea how much time passed before the door opened and Ciaran finally appeared. He was frowning, the expression drawing deep lines on his shadowed face. Sadie waited as he walked towards the main door of the hall. Then she darted forwards, pressing herself flat against the wall beside his door. She felt ridiculous, like a character in a bad spy movie, but she didn't know what else to do.

The door opened easily and Sadie slipped inside. She was in luck - candles still burned on the tabletop, giving her just enough light to work with. The room was larger than she'd expected, with a bed in one corner, and a variety of tables and chests scattered around the rest of the space. Where to start?

Sadie bit her lip as she realized she had absolutely no idea what she was searching for. Scouring the room of a medieval warlord was a little different from interviewing witnesses or scouring the Internet. She wasn't exactly trained for this sort of investigation. Journalists were not supposed to break and enter.

Still, she was here now. She opened the nearest chest, straining a little at the weight of the wood. It looked mostly full of blankets, but Sadie rifled through anyway, feeling for anything out of place.

There . Something thin, almost like paper, tucked between the woolen folds. Sadie yanked it out - a piece of parchment with some words scratched across it in black ink.

She pulled it up to the candle light to read, and then immediately felt like an idiot. Of course it was in a language she couldn't read. The language chip was no help with this. Frustrated, she turned the parchment over. On the other side, written in messy handwriting, like that of a child, were two words she could read: CAUGHT YOU.

She gasped and dropped the parchment.

A slow clap came from the other side of the room. Sadie whirled around. Ciaran stood in the doorway, smiling sardonically. Matthew stood beside him, clutching a lighted torch. Sadie couldn't believe she hadn't heard them.

“You know, Sadie, you're a rather predictable woman,” Ciaran said. “Why don't we all sit down and have a little chat about what you were looking for?”

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C iaran had poured her a glass of wine and offered her a seat, but Sadie still couldn't relax. How had he known that she'd come here? Had he really seen through all her attempts at subterfuge?

"You might as well talk," Ciaran said, lounging back in his own chair and crossing his legs at the ankle. "You're not going anywhere until you do."

Sadie swallowed hard. She had no doubt that the guards had reappeared outside the door. How foolish of her, believing this warlord would leave his private space unguarded. She'd walked straight into a trap.

"Hurry up and talk," Ciaran prompted her. "I've not got all night."

Sadie glanced at Matthew, sat on the bed, but he didn't meet her eyes. What was his role in all this? He'd clearly written the English part of the note, but Sadie didn't know why.

She squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. Ciaran seemed determined. She had to tell him something .

"It really is true that I'm here by accident," she said. "But I'm looking for something - someone - and I think it's more than coincidence that I ended up here."

Matthew's head shot up. "Are you looking for me?" he asked, his voice high and tight. "Did my father send you?"

Despite herself, Sadie's heart twinged a little at the fear in his voice.

“No,” she said gently. “I’ve never met your father, and I had no idea you would be here.”

Was it just her imagination, or did the tension in the room lessen considerably at that? Even Ciaran looked slightly more relaxed. Interesting. She already knew Matthew was from the future - but were they keeping some other secret?

“Who were you looking for?” Ciaran demanded, bracing his elbows on his knees as he leaned forwards to stare intently at her.

Sadie took a deep breath. She didn’t want to trust him. If he was involved in Norah’s disappearance, this could be the end of everything. Secrets were her only strength here.

“Some women went missing, in my time,” she said at last. “They disappeared at the stone circle. It’s my job to find them.”

Ciaran raised an eyebrow slightly, in that expression Sadie was already coming to know well.

“Thank you for telling me the truth, Sadie,” he said. “Some of the truth, at least. So, you followed them to the stone circle. Then what happened?”

“I touched the stone by mistake, and somehow it threw me back here,” Sadie explained. “I didn’t expect it to happen. To be honest, I didn’t really know it could happen.”

Ciaran nodded. He seemed to believe her.

“I can assure you that these women you seek are not here,” he told her. “No one else has come through that circle. If you hoped to find them here, you were mistaken. And

besides,” he continued, a touch of humor lighting his face. “Did you expect to find these missing women hidden in my blankets chest?”

Sadie felt her cheeks heat up. “I didn’t know what I might find,” she mumbled. “I have no idea how to find them. No idea where to start.”

Ciaran sighed heavily. “Perhaps you must simply wait until you can return to your own time, and begin your search again from there,” he said. “I certainly know of no way to help you.”

“What happened when you traveled through time?” Matthew asked abruptly.

His question took Sadie so much by surprise that she struggled to answer for a second.

“Well, I touched the stone by accident,” she said. “And then I felt as if I was falling. And I was very dizzy and... unwell. Then I was here.”

Matthew nodded as if that confirmed something, although Sadie could not imagine what.

“Next question,” Ciaran said. “Why did you think clues regarding these missing women might be hidden in my room?”

“I had to start somewhere,” Sadie said.

Ciaran sighed. “This is not productive questioning. I need you to tell me something, Sadie. I’ve let you into my home. Please understand that I cannot have you remain here if you are a threat to anyone under my protection.”

“I’m not a threat,” Sadie insisted. “I just want the truth.”

Ciaran nodded slowly. "I see. Matthew, it's past time for you to be in bed. Thank you for your help, and good night."

Matthew stood and bowed slightly, his gaze sliding to Sadie for just a fraction of a second. Then he left the room.

Ciaran sighed even more heavily. "Matthew is a strange boy," he admitted. "Sometimes I do not know what I will do with him."

"You were looking for him at the stone circle," Sadie guessed. "That's why you found me."

"Well deduced," Ciaran said, not sounding the slightest bit surprised. "I was worried the boy might have tried to slip away. But he doesn't seem to have much interest in returning to the time of his birth. I suppose he just wanted to get away from this place for a while."

Ciaran looked so dejected that Sadie almost felt sorry for him, as well. But everything he'd done so far had been designed to get information out of her. There was no reason to assume this was any different.

"What are you hiding?" she asked him.

His gaze flew to hers, but there was no surprise there. He smiled slightly, although the expression was cold. "You tell me, and I'll tell you," he said.

"I've told you the truth," Sadie insisted.

"And so have I."

But not quite all the truth. They were both keeping secrets of some kind.

Tell him , part of Sadie's mind whispered. Tell him about Norah . It was a foolish detail to keep secret. Why should Ciaran care if she was looking for her sister, rather than some other woman? But it was not his business to know. Sadie wanted to keep that information to herself.

"I can make some inquiries about these women," Ciaran said. "But I promise you that no group of lost women has come through that stone circle. I doubt there is much I can do to help you."

"Thank you," Sadie said stiffly. "Your help would be appreciated. And I really am sorry for violating your privacy like this."

Ciaran stood up abruptly, leaning over her with his hands braced on the arms of the chair. Sadie shrank back a little, overwhelmed by his closeness.

"Don't let me catch you in here again," he said, his voice a little husky. "It would be a bad idea for both of us."

He lingered there a second, his gaze burning into hers. Then he stepped backwards again.

"Go back to bed, Sadie," he said. "And please resist the urge to investigate anywhere else on the way."

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C iaran was snappish and short-tempered all the way through the next morning. That damn woman was hiding something else, he was sure of it. Distrust of her host, he could understand. She had no reason to trust him, and she was vulnerable here. But understanding was irrelevant. With Matthew here, he could not afford to take any risks with strangers - especially time-traveling strangers. It was too much of a coincidence.

His temper finally snapped during his morning training session with Matthew.

“For God’s sake, keep that damn sword point up,” he snapped. “Any Irishman could run you through in a second, boy.”

Matthew threw the sword down. “And what does any of it matter?” he snapped back. “I’m no warrior, and you know it. You’re only doing this to make my mother feel better, to let her pretend I have a place here.”

“Don’t speak of you mother like that, boy,” Ciaran warned, raising his own sword threateningly. “She is your queen and you owe her respect.”

Matthew sucked in a deep breath. Ciaran could almost see the fury about to erupt. This had been building for weeks - months, even.

“Good morning,” a cheery voice said. “This does look exciting.”

Ciaran and Matthew met each other’s gazes with expressions of equal horror. Sadie .

“What are you doing here?” Ciaran asked, turning to glare at her.

She shrugged. “What else do I have to do, until you get me back home?”

That was a fair point, Ciaran had to concede. She didn’t exactly have work to do, unlike everyone else here who knew their role and their purpose. What he hadn’t told her, though, was that he had no plans to send her home. After all, there were only two people who could activate the stone circle and send her through time: Matthew, and his mother, Bethany. Ciaran had sworn to keep their secrets, and he could hardly reveal the truth to a woman he didn’t trust. Until he knew what Sadie was hiding, he would not be sending her anywhere.

“I can show you around,” Matthew said, unexpectedly. “I know the land around here better than anyone.”

That was true enough. Matthew had been on the island less than a year, but his habit of running wild meant that he knew the rocky hills and the half-hidden sheep tracks as well as men who’d grown up here.

“I don’t think the two of you should wander off alone,” Ciaran said, stifling a burst of panic at the thought. What if she talked Matthew into taking her back through time?

“Well, I’m not practicing with that sword for another damn minute,” Matthew said.

“Watch your language,” Sadie and Ciaran chimed in unsettling unison. Ciaran eyed her suspiciously, but she looked just as uncomfortable as he did.

“I don’t want you wandering off on your own, Matthew,” Ciaran said. “Not after last time.”

Matthew drew a deep, angry breath. He might only be ten years old, but he had the temper of a grown man.

“Then I want to go home,” he announced. “I hate it here. I hate being cooped up behind these walls, and hitting things with a sword, and pretending that I’m going to be a lord someday.”

“Matthew-” Ciaran tried, but the boy barely paused for breath.

“We all know that I have no family here, and the next king will probably want me gone. I’ll never command warriors in battle, or have my own hall, or be anything like you. I’ll have to be a monk, or a trader, and you can’t teach me anything about that. This is a waste of time. I want to go home.”

“Your parents haven’t summoned you,” Ciaran pointed out. He hated having this conversation where Sadie could hear. Couldn’t Matthew have waited another few days before this explosion.

“I don’t care,” Matthew said. “My mother loves me, and I know she didn’t want me to leave. We’re going home tomorrow, and that’s final.”

“Be reasonable,” Ciaran said, trying to rein in his temper. It was hardly appropriate to argue with a boy. “I am the lord here. I can’t just pack up and leave at a moment’s notice.”

Matthew’s eyes narrowed. “You can, and you will,” he said, sounding every bit as imperious as his stepfather, the king.

Ciaran drew breath, ready to argue. Yes, Niamh could manage the day-to-day running of the place, and the captain of Ciaran’s guard was more than capable of handling security. But this island was Ciaran’s responsibility, his gift from the king for years of good service. He’d worked for a decade to earn the honor of a place as a warlord, and he’d be damned if a ten-year-old ran all over him.

His thoughts must have showed on his face. Matthew lifted his chin and faced Ciaran head-on.

“We’re going home tomorrow,” he said firmly. “And Sadie’s coming with us.”

With a sudden sinking feeling, Ciaran knew what Matthew was about to say. Don’t do it , he silently willed him, but triumph was written all over the boy’s face.

“Sadie has to come with us,” he said. “Because my mother is the person who can send her back to her own time. Isn’t that right, Ciaran?”

If he’d been a few feet taller - and a few years older - Ciaran would have punched him for that. Instead, he stood there, sword in one hand, other fist clenched, and glared down at his prince and foster-son.

“Aye, Matthew, that’s right,” he said through gritted teeth. “It will have to be your mother who sends Sadie home.”

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Sadie was an excited and emotional mess by the time the boat left the harbor. She was going to go home. She was going to meet Bethany Edmondson. It was hard to grasp which one was most important. What if Bethany could tell her the truth about the missing women? She'd been married to the ringleader, after all.

There was a delicious excitement in knowing that Ciaran had finally spilled his secrets, albeit reluctantly. Bethany Edmondson was here in Celtic Scotland - and married to the king. Even more importantly, she was a time traveler in her own right, able to move between periods without requiring any of the expensive equipment that her ex-husband used. Sadie fizzed with excitement at the thought. Surely Bethany would be able to help her.

Leaving the island felt oddly bittersweet. It was a beautiful place, with its wide sandy beaches and high hills. Sadie had arrived here full of so much hope. Things had taken a path she could never have imagined, but she was sure that this boat would lead her in the right direction. The truth could not be far from her grasp.

"It will be a day or two before we reach Dunadd," Ciaran said softly, coming to stand beside her at the boat's railing. "We need to sail the whole way around the headland from here, but it's still quicker and safer than traveling by land."

Sadie nodded. From what she remembered of the geography around here, that sounded about right. It would be a long time before modern tarmac roads criss-crossed Scotland. She hated having to wait the extra time, but there was nothing to be done. This was the middle ages, after all, and travel was a time-consuming endeavor.

"Will we stay on the boat overnight?" she asked.

Ciaran nodded. “We’ve enough sailors to alternate shifts,” he said. “And this boat is big enough to hang hammocks belowdecks. You’ll have to sleep alongside the rest of us, I’m afraid, but it won’t be for long.”

Sadie nodded. She hadn’t expected any special treatment, even if she was the only woman aboard ship.

“Norah?” someone asked behind her. Sadie whirled around, scanning the faces of the soldiers and sailors, but no one looked familiar. Who had spoken?

“What is it?” Ciaran asked. Sadie shook her head distractedly, still scanning the crowd. Had she imagined it? No one else spoke, and no one seemed interested in her. She must have imagined it.

“I’ll make sure the soldiers are in order,” Ciaran said. He gave her an odd look, and strode off. Sadie turned her attention back to the beautiful view of sea and islands, trying to forget the strange voice as she clung to the railing and stared out across the choppy water.

They passed the southern tip of the island and drifted out into more open water. The maze of islands and peninsulas that made up Scotland’s west coast protected them from the worst of the Atlantic waves, but Sadie could still feel a difference in the way the boat leaped and fell in the water. She clung to the railing more tightly. Did Ciaran really expect her to sleep like this? Perhaps for two nights? It didn’t seem possible.

“What are you doing here, Norah?” a voice asked.

Sadie spun around with a gasp. One of the sailors stood beside her, clutching the railing and frowning. His eyes flickered from side to side nervously. It seemed that he did not want anyone to see them together.

“I’m not Norah,” Sadie said, taking a wary step away from him.

“I don’t have time for this,” he growled. “You need to get the hell off this boat, and get out of this time before we reach Dunadd. I don’t even know how you got here so fast.”

Sadie’s pounding heart left her light-headed. This man thought she was Norah. Norah had been here .

“Why can’t I go to Dunadd?” she asked cautiously.

The man’s eyes widened in what looked like horror. “Are you mad?” he hissed. “They’ll be pulling the whole place apart by now, looking for you. Even if you did mess up the mission, the king will want your head. You need to get off this boat right now .”

Mission? The king wanting her head? Sadie’s heart pounded even louder.

“I can’t get off the boat,” she said. “We’re not stopping.”

“I’m not having you captured,” the man said viciously. “If you talk to save yourself, we’re all doomed.”

Sadie stared at him, trying to pull together a picture of what was happening. Who was this man? He looked slightly familiar, but she couldn’t place him. What was going on?

The deck lurched beneath her feet as the boat hit an especially large wave, then another. The man lunged forwards. Before Sadie realized what was happening, something heavy slammed into her side. She hit the railing - and kept falling. She screamed, but the impact of the water knocked the air from her lungs. In what felt like

a fraction of a second, she had gone from standing on deck to desperately treading water.

She splashed towards the boat, but a huge wave buffeted her aside. Saltwater filled her mouth and nose, leaving her coughing. She was a strong swimmer, but the waves here were powerful and she could already feel a current tugging her away from the boat.

“Help!” she screamed, waving up at the deck of the boat, but it was already far away enough that no one would hear.

That man had pushed her. He wanted her dead rather than in Dunadd.

Sadie struck out for the boat once more, but it was hopeless. There was no way she could reach it. Paddling to stay afloat, she twisted around in the water, and saw with horror that the shore was also too far away. No . She was not going to die out here. She set off for the shore with determined strokes, trying to move with the waves, rather than against them.

Behind her, someone shouted, the noise faint. Sadie paused and twisted around again. Had someone on the boat seen her? Something splashed in the water, but from here she couldn't tell what it was. No point waiting for rescue - she had to save herself. Setting her face grimly, she headed for shore again. Every stroke was harder than the last as her arms rapidly weakened. She hadn't swum in years, and it was starting to show.

“Wait!”

That was definitely a voice. Sadie tried to tread water for a second, but a large wave knocked her off balance, sending her tipping sideways. She fought to return upright - which way was air? Panic caught her for the first time, and she kicked out

desperately. Something gripped her by the arms, tugging her upwards. She emerged above the waves, spluttering - and found herself face to face with Ciaran.

“What the hell are you doing?” he shouted.

“Get off me!” Sadie shouted back, but his grip on her arms was like iron. He maneuvered her into place and set off for the shore, his powerful kicks propelling her floating body through the water. Sadie wanted to argue, but he was clearly an experienced swimmer, and in much better practice.

Sure enough, he had her on the beach in just a few moments. The two of them coughed up the last of the sea water, then collapsed on the sand and turned to glare at each other.

“You bloody idiot,” Ciaran said, reaching out to grasp her by the shoulders and shake her hard. “You could have died! And now we’re stuck here, because the boat can’t return against the tide.”

“You didn’t have to come after me,” Sadie shouted at him, wrenching his hands from her shoulders so that she gripped his wrists. “You could have stayed on the boat.”

“What, and watch you drown?” Ciaran retorted. “What the hell do you take me for?”

He stared down at her, his furious gaze fiery hot. And then, just as Sadie opened her mouth for another angry retort, he swooped down and kissed her.

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Ciaran couldn't control his anger as it burned red-hot through his body - but neither could he stop kissing her. He slid his arms around her waist, pulling her towards him until they kneeled close beside each other in the sand, their dripping wet bodies pressed together.

He broke away from her lips for a second.

"Don't ever do that to me again," he whispered against her cheek, and then he was kissing her again, lost in the salty sweetness of her lips, and her soft gasps against his mouth.

He didn't break away again until he was short of breath. Gasping for air, he stared at her. She looked just as shocked as he felt.

"Well," he said, needing to break the silence somehow. "There's no point staying here. It will be hours before anyone can fetch us, and we'll have frozen to death by then. We might as well head to Dunadd on foot."

Sadie hissed in a sharp breath, as if that surprised her.

"But won't they expect to find us here?" she said. "Dunadd's a long way to walk."

Ciaran shrugged. "We could have landed in a worse place. I'll light a signal fire when we stop for the night. If any boat sets out to look for us, they'll find us easily enough. But I suspect they'll sail straight on to Dunadd and send a smaller boat out tomorrow."

“Tomorrow?” Sadie seemed to be struggling to understand what was happening.
“You mean we might be out here all night?”

“You should have thought of that before you jumped in,” Ciaran said, pushing up to his feet. It seemed safer to keep a distance from her, after what had just happened.

“I didn’t jump,” she muttered, but she didn’t add anything else.

“There’s plenty of caves along this coastline,” he said. “We’ll find shelter, and hopefully some fresh water. Come on.”

He set off across the sand, his boots sinking into its softness. When he turned around, he found to his annoyance that she was staring after him but not moving an inch. With a growl of frustration, he turned and marched back to her.

“Come on ,” he said. “There’s no point staying here. We might as well start moving.”

She still hesitated, looking strangely reluctant. Did she really think they could just stay here and wait for the boat to come back?

“If you don’t move now , I’ll throw you over my shoulder and carry you to a cave,” he threatened.

That seemed to do the trick. Her eyes widened and she took a step forwards. To Ciaran’s relief, she followed him along the beach without further protest.

He found one cave quickly enough, but it looked as if the high tide might catch it. Too risky.

“Let’s head inland,” he said. “There must be a farm or something nearby. I’m not lord of these lands, but people will still offer us hospitality.”

“We should turn back,” Sadie said, her voice wavering slightly. “Surely a passing fisherman will find us and take us back to the island. There’s no need to walk all the way up to Dunadd.”

Ciaran stopped and looked at her properly for the first time. In his determination to avoid meeting her eyes after that kiss, he hadn’t really stopped to ask what was going on.

“Why do you suddenly not want to go to Dunadd?” he asked. “And what the hell happened to land you in the sea?”

She bit her lip and he knew he’d hit on something. For all her determination on keeping secrets, Sadie was not very good at hiding her thoughts. Something was bothering her.

“I’m just not sure,” she said at last. “Maybe I’m not ready to go back yet.”

Ciaran felt a strange warmth spread through his chest at her words. Maybe I’m not ready to go back yet . Could that have anything to do with him? With the searing kiss they’d shared on the beach? He took a step towards her, his fingers itching to grasp her waist and pull her tight against him. But some dark flicker in her eyes held him back. There was more to this story, he was sure of it. Something important that she wasn’t telling him. He looked away.

“We need to go to Dunadd, and that’s final,” he said gruffly. “Matthew will be worried sick about us.”

Sadie sighed heavily. He sensed that she wouldn’t argue any further - at least, not now. No doubt she’d find something else to debate in due time.

And then she surprised him.

She took a step forwards and clutched at his arm. He froze, unable to tear his gaze away from her beautiful face.

“Do you trust me, Ciaran?” she asked softly.

He wanted to say yes . He wanted to lean forward and kiss those full, rosy lips.

“No, I don’t trust you,” he said with a croak.

Sadie smiled, swaying a little closer to him.

“I don’t trust you either,” she told him, her voice a little husky. “But if we’re walking all the way to Dunadd together, we need some kind of arrangement. We need to trust each other at least a little.”

Ciaran nodded. She was definitely speaking sense. At least as much sense as he could understand, with her lips so close to his, and that maddening perfume swirling through the air around him.

Wait .

He stepped back again, placing a safe distance between the two of them. Her hand fell away from his arm.

“I’d thank you not to try charming me like that again,” he said stiffly. “Remember this: I am the one who knows how to reach Dunadd. You can do whatever the hell you want, but I bet you wouldn’t last five minutes out here alone. So I suggest that you follow behind me and do what you’re told.”

Fists clenched, he turned away and set off towards solid land. He would not let himself be manipulated like that again.

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Sadie didn't know what hurt the most - the sting of Ciaran's rejection, or the tiny stones that had built up in her shoes. No, perhaps it was the bite of her parched throat.

She had laid in on a bit thick, she had to admit. She might have even fluttered her eyelashes at Ciaran. Too far. But hadn't he felt the heat in their kiss? This wasn't all an act. Now, though, he seemed to think she was some evil temptress. The blasted man hadn't spoken a single word to her since they left the beach, although he cast her sidelong glares every few moments.

"How long until we find shelter?" she called to him. Once again, he completely ignored her, acting as if he couldn't hear. The man was acting like a spoiled child.

"You have to speak to me at some point," she called, unable to resist a taunting lilt to her words.

He whirled around to glare at her, mouth open as if to speak, but he caught himself at the last second and turned back around again. Sadie sighed. Wonderful. Days of silent walking lay ahead, with some kind of chaos at the other end.

What had that man meant? Had Norah really ended up in Dunadd, then found herself in some kind of trouble? Just thinking about it filled Sadie with hope - but also with fear. She wanted to find her sister, of course - more than anything. But, after so long believing Norah to be dead, this all seemed too unlikely. And if Norah was in trouble, Sadie most certainly didn't want to blunder in and make it worse.

She shivered, freezing cold in her sea-soaked clothes. Had that man wanted her off the boat? Or had he wanted her dead? If she made it to Dunadd, he might try a more

drastic way of getting rid of her.

“Ciaran, I need to stop,” she called out as a wave of shivers wracked her body.

He ignored her, trudging onwards.

Sadie gritted her teeth and marched after him, trying to lengthen her strides enough that she could catch up. But her legs felt like jelly after the exertion and panic of the swim.

“Ciaran, please,” she called again, her voice starting to wobble. “I’m cold, and tired, and I need to stop.”

At last, that seemed to get his attention. He turned to look at her, irritation clearly written across his face.

“Well, you should have thought of that before you jumped into the sea,” he snapped.

“I didn’t jump,” Sadie insisted, on the edge of screaming in frustration.

“Then you’re an idiot for standing so close to the railing,” he snapped. But something of her fear and exhaustion must have shown on her face, because his expression softened a little.

“We can stop soon,” he said. “I know you’re wet and tired. But we need to find shelter, or we’ll both just get colder. It won’t be long until we can stop, I promise.”

Sadie reluctantly nodded and he turned to walk on. His reasoning made sense, but that didn’t stop her from pulling a face at the back of his head.

He was right. In only a few moments, Sadie spotted a narrow plume of smoke rising

above the trees. Smoke meant habitation, and that meant shelter.

“There’s a village this way,” Ciaran explained, actually deigning to turn and talk to her. “It’s not a big place, but there will be food and shelter for us. Just a few minutes more and we’ll be there.”

Sadie nodded and stumbled after him. Her throat was too dry now to do much talking, and she thought longingly of a nice hot drink to warm her all the way through.

Like Ciaran had said, the village was small. As they emerged through the trees, Sadie saw a cluster of buildings, each set some distance from each other and marked off with rough-and-ready fences. A few animals grazed in small fields between the houses, and narrow columns of smoke curled up from holes in the cottage roofs. The general air was one of peace and serenity. Sadie felt some of the tension ebb from her body.

“We’ll try the village elder’s house,” Ciaran said. “Someone there will point us in the direction of the best place to stay.”

Sadie nodded, too tired to argue or complain. At least Ciaran seemed to know what he was doing.

And then he paused, looking at the road ahead of them, where a cluster of men in scarlet tunics had just spilled out of a door onto the street.

“Royal guardsmen,” he said, sounding confused. “Strange to see them this far south. But a welcome sight indeed! Perhaps they will escort us to Dunadd.”

He bounded forwards, shouting out a greeting. The men in crimson turned to look at them. Sadie followed along behind Ciaran, feeling very awkward.

“That’s her!” one of the men shouted.

Sadie paused in the middle of the street and looked around in confusion. Who were they talking about? She didn’t see anyone.

The guardsmen came rushing down the street, almost pushing Ciaran out of the way. They seized Sadie, pulling her hands behind her back before she knew what was going on.

“Ciaran!” she screamed as rough hands bound her wrists.

He was there in a moment, shoving two men aside until he stood in front of her.

“What’s going on?” he demanded.

“Apologies my lord, but we did not see you there,” one of the guards said, inclining his head politely to Ciaran. “We have been chasing this woman all the way from Dunadd. I am only glad we caught her before she did you any harm.”

Sadie felt like she might faint. That man had warned her.

“Did me any harm?” Ciaran asked, confusion all over his face. “Chasing her? What are you talking about?”

The guard stood up a little straighter.

“This woman is wanted in Dunadd,” he said. “She tried to kill the king.”

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C iaran paced up and down in the village elder's house as he tried to reason things out with the guardsmen.

“Look, she's been with me for the past week,” he said. “There's absolutely no way she could have traveled to Dunadd, attempted to hurt the king, and then made it all the way back.”

All of the guardsmen shook their heads stubbornly.

“It's definitely her, alright,” one said. “And we knew there was some dark magic tied up in the attempt on the king's life. This is just more of it.”

The attempt on the king's life. Just the thought of such a thing gave Ciaran shivers up his spine. He and Comgall had been close friends since childhood, growing up together as they had. Ciaran's father had once been bodyguard to Comgall's father, and the boys were as close as could be. When Comgall became a great lord in his own right, and then king, it was only natural that Ciaran serve as his bodyguard. Who could he trust more?

In time, though, things had changed. Comgall insisted that Ciaran accept some sort of reward for his years of service. Ciaran had resisted for a long time, but he finally had to accept that he was not as young as he once was, and the king needed only the very best men around him. A new life, as lord of his own island, had not seemed a terrible way to spend his time.

He should never have left. He should have been there .

Who else could be trusted to take a knife for Comgall? From what the guardsmen said, it was pure luck that this woman had missed Comgall's throat when she stabbed wildly at him during dinner. Attempting to murder a king in his own hall? It was an unthinkable crime.

But it had not been Sadie.

She could have traveled through time, a little voice whispered. You can't account for her every moment.

Surely she could not have done this. Why would she go to such lengths to construct an alibi when she could simply vanish through time and escape capture forever? It made no sense.

No, he believed that Sadie really was trapped here. But how, then, could he explain the guardsmen's firm belief that she was the woman they sought?

"I need to speak to her," he said.

The men exchanged nervous looks, and Ciaran could almost read their thoughts. They did not want him to see the prisoner, not when he was so clearly sympathetic towards her. But they feared questioning such a powerful lord - especially one who was still something of a legend amongst the king's guard. No one would dare question his loyalty to Comgall.

"Very well, my lord," one said at last. "You know which room she is in. We will wait here."

Ciaran nodded politely, making a concerted effort to maintain his temper. These men were only doing their job, as best they could. He would just have to get to the bottom of this mess.

Sadie looked up as he entered the small room. She sat curled in one corner of a dusty storeroom, surrounded by crates and barrels. The guardsmen had judged this the most secure place to hold a prisoner, but Ciaran wished they could have found somewhere a little more pleasant.

“Sadie, you have to tell me what’s going on,” he said, keeping his voice gentle.

She met his eyes defiantly.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” she insisted. “It’s all a mistake. Those men clearly think I’m someone else.”

Ciaran raised an eyebrow.

“So it’s just coincidence that they all remember that woman looking exactly like you?”

Sadie shrugged.

“It’s the hair. People don’t tend to see past it.”

She certainly did have distinctive hair, thick and red, but Ciaran sensed there was still something missing in her words - something she was not telling him.

“You’re still hiding something,” he said. “Tell me, Sadie. If I don’t know the truth, I can’t help you. Do you want to be dragged back to Dunadd to face a trial? Are you so sure they’ll find you innocent?”

Sadie had looked away while he was speaking, but now her eyes flickered back to his. For the first time, he saw a hint of fear amidst all the defiance, and it tugged at some half-hidden corner of his heart.

“Just tell me the truth,” he said as gently as he could manage.

“I don’t know anything for certain,” she said hesitantly. “I’ve been trying to figure it all out. But I think... I think I know the woman who tried to kill the king.”

Ciaran crouched down beside her, his nerves jumping into life. Could he solve this? Could he keep Comgall safe?

“Tell me,” he said urgently.

“I started to realize something was wrong even before I came through the stone circle,” Sadie said. “There was a man there and he... mistook me for someone else. Then again, on the boat. There was a sailor who warned me not to go to Dunadd.”

“That’s why you jumped,” Ciaran said, understanding dawning.

But Sadie shook her head vigorously.

“I keep telling you, I didn’t jump,” she said. “That man pushed me. He said I was too much of a risk. But it’s not me who tried to kill the king, I swear! I was on your island the whole time. You know that.”

“I believe you,” Ciaran said, trying to push down his frustration and speak calmly. “But if it wasn’t you, then who was it? Who almost killed my king?”

Sadie took a deep breath and looked away from him again, but not before he saw some dark, powerful fear in her eyes. She sat still on the floor, her entire body motionless, as if she was afraid even to breathe.

“Tell me,” Ciaran said again. He could barely breathe himself, trapped in the suspense of her answer. He reached forwards and grabbed Sadie’s hands so abruptly

that she looked up at him in surprise. She took one more deep breath and he saw her fear turn to resolve.

“I think the woman was Norah,” she said. “My twin sister.”

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Sadie had never felt so much like she'd betrayed someone she loved. But what could she have done but tell the truth? Ciaran would not believe any story she might invent - and the truth was already unbelievable enough.

"We need to get this news to the king," Ciaran said, hustling Sadie straight out of the storeroom. The guardsmen rushed forwards, but Ciaran waved them off with one hand.

"I know what's happened now," he said. "This woman was not guilty, but she knows who was. We need to reach Dunadd as soon as possible."

"You have to promise not to hurt her," Sadie said urgently. "Whatever has happened to her, I know she would never hurt someone of her own free will. They must have forced her. We already know that they were prepared for me to drown."

Ciaran nodded grimly.

"From everything you've said, I assume she is in danger," he said. "And so are you. We have to find her before she gets hurt - or hurts anyone else."

Sadie nodded. She could understand that Ciaran must put his king first. But this Comgall was no king of hers. Her loyalty would always lie with her sister, no matter what.

"Did you come by boat or horseback?" Ciaran asked the guardsmen.

"Horseback," one man replied. "We were assigned to check the inland villages."

Another team is traveling along the coast by boat.”

“We’ll need to take two of your horses, then,” Ciaran said. “More will be sent back for you, but it’s imperative that we reach Dunadd as soon as possible.”

The guardsmen did not look happy at that, but they agreed. Ciaran was clearly not a man to be argued with. More and more, Sadie saw that he was a powerful leader, used to having his orders obeyed without question. What had he been like as the king’s bodyguard? It was hard to imagine him fading into the background.

They were on the road in only a few minutes. Sadie’s dress was not made for riding, so Ciaran had found her a pair of men’s breeches to wear underneath her tucked-up skirt. They were far too large, and very baggy, but at least they gave her some modesty - and stopped the flat leather saddle from chafing too much.

“I should have asked if you could ride,” Ciaran said as they left the village. He was watching the road ahead, but his eyes kept slipping back to Sadie. She clung onto the reins with all her strength, clamping her thighs against the horse’s side to keep herself stable.

“I can ride,” she insisted. “Although it’s been a long time. It’s just that we have very different riding equipment in the future. These things called stirrups , for example. They make it much easier to balance.”

Ciaran seemed intrigued, so Sadie launched into an explanation of the ways riding equipment had changed over the centuries. She was no expert, but she knew enough to keep him interested as they rode. At least this conversation topic kept them away from any discussion of Norah.

They stopped riding when it began to grow dark.

“Are we going to find a place to stay for the night?” Sadie asked.

Ciaran shook his head.

“No point,” he said. “There’s no settlement near here and I don’t want to waste time getting off route. We’ll camp here instead.”

Camp? Sadie shivered a little at the thought. The autumn air was chill, and she didn’t much fancy spending a night outdoors. At least the storeroom had been dry, and warm enough. She was still damp from her dip in the sea.

“I found you some warm clothing to sleep in,” Ciaran said, apparently reading her mind. “Some for me, as well.”

“Thank you,” Sadie said, slightly surprised. When had he found time to do that?

They made camp a little way off the road, sheltered by some thorn trees. Ciaran pulled all kinds of supplies from his saddle bags, and built them a shelter in no time. Waxed canvas stretched above their heads, tied to the branches of the trees, and a bundle of dry wood gave them a brisk fire. Sadie stretched her hands out close to the flames, luxuriating in even this small spark of warmth.

“Here you go,” Ciaran said, thrusting a bundle of fabric at her. “I’ll give you a moment to get changed.”

He vanished behind the thorn bushes, and Sadie realized she was holding a dry dress. With a sigh of relief, she scrambled out of her wet clothing and laid it out on a nearby branch. Pulling on the fresh dress, scratchy though the wool was on her bare skin, came as an incredible relief.

“I’m done,” she called. For a moment, she heard only silence, and wondered if Ciaran

had heard her. Then he reappeared, clad in the bold crimson of the guardsmen. Sadie blinked a little, surprised at how well the color suited him. Then she tore her eyes away, blushing slightly.

“We’ve enough supplies for a basic meal,” Ciaran said, busying himself by the fire. With any luck, it was too dark for him to see her blush.

“Good,” Sadie managed to say as she settled down on the opposite side of the fire. He seemed to be a competent field cook, and it wasn’t long before a bowl of steaming oatmeal sat on Sadie’s lap. She ate it hungrily - breakfast felt like far too long ago, given everything that had happened in the hours since. Finishing off the final mouthful, she gave a contented sigh and set the bowl down.

Ciaran grinned at her over the fire.

“Enjoy that?” he asked.

Sadie couldn’t help but return the unexpected smile.

“It was delicious,” she told him. “You’re a talented cook.”

To her surprise, he actually winked.

“I’m an even more talented thief,” he said. “Take a swig of this. Liberated it from another guardsman’s saddlebags.”

He passed Sadie some kind of skin bottle. She sniffed at it cautiously, then tilted it back and let a few drops tip into her mouth. Even that tiny taste left her throat burning.

“Is that whiskey?” she asked with a gasp.

Ciaran shrugged.

“Something like that. Homemade, probably. But it will keep the cold off well enough. Help yourself to some more.”

Sadie knew she shouldn't. She knew that it was a terrible idea to drink spirits, all alone with this man, in the middle of nowhere. But really, what was the worst that could happen? So she smiled at him and took another sip before handing the skin over.

Ciaran came to sit beside her, so close that his leg brushed hers when he reached out to take the skin bottle. He took a healthy swig of his own and sighed as he gazed into the flames.

“Will we reach Dunadd tomorrow?” Sadie asked.

He shook his head.

“The day after, I'd say. Unless we find a boat to take us up the coast tomorrow morning. You might be stuck with me for a bit longer.”

Sadie surprised herself by laughing.

“I don't mind too much,” she said.

He turned to look at her, his dark eyes reflecting the flicker of firelight.

“No?” he asked, a little huskily.

“No,” she said. “You rescued me from those guardsmen. And you believed me. I guess you're not so bad after all.”

Ciaran smiled at her, the expression surprisingly bright and sweet. He reached out one hand, strong fingers stroking her cheek. Sadie tried to keep her breathing steady, tried to focus on his eyes. But she couldn't help herself. Her gaze dropped down to his lips. And he sucked in a deep breath, then lunged in close and kissed her.

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If their first kiss had left Sadie reeling, this one left her burning. Ciaran's touch swept through her like fire, as hot as the flames just a few feet away. He must have put the bottle down, because it felt as if his hands were everywhere, touching her all over. The whiskey burn still lingered in her throat, but it was nothing compared to the heat that swept through her veins. She moaned into his mouth and leaned further into the kiss.

"Touch me," Ciaran whispered against the side of her face, before he swooped back in for another kiss.

How could Sadie resist? She clutched the strong muscles of his arms, traced the line of his broad shoulders, pressed herself against the solid wall of his chest. He moaned into her mouth with every touch of her fingers, as his own hands grew firmer on her hips.

Without any warning, he tilted her backwards, so she lay flat on the ground beside the fire. He lowered himself on top of her, still kissing and touching like he was starved for her.

"Sadie," he whispered in her ear. "Sadie, you're so beautiful."

She had nothing to say to him - no words could capture the incredible feeling of his lips and his hands.

His fingers skated up beneath the hem of her dress, brushing her knee. Suddenly, all the fire in her veins had a new place to focus. His hand moved higher and higher, and Sadie's body burned hotter and hotter. It was her turn to moan his name against his

lips as his strong fingers brushed the skin of her inner thigh.

Ciaran paused, lifting his head just enough to stare into her eyes.

“Do you want me as much as I want you?” he whispered.

Sadie nodded, unable to find any words. All she knew was that she wanted him more than anything else on earth. He kissed her again and she gripped his shoulders, wrapped her legs around his hips, welcomed him in to meet her. He felt like perfection and her moans grew louder and louder until she called out his name, the sound filling their thorn bush shelter. He shouted her name as well, his hands roaming her body and spreading the fire until every inch of her burned beneath the skin.

At last, Ciaran collapsed on the ground beside her and tugged her against her. Sadie relaxed into the warmth of his body, so powerful and strong. She felt safe here, in a way she hadn't since she first stumbled through that circle of stones.

“Perhaps this was a bad idea,” Ciaran's voice rumbled after a few silent moments.

For a second, Sadie froze in hurt. His words had cut straight through her warm contentment. But she had to acknowledge he was right. It probably was a bad idea to add this complication to an already complicated relationship. Here they were, headed to Dunadd so that he could hunt down her sister, and she could - what, exactly? What did she even intend to do once they reached Dunadd?

Sadie sighed.

“It probably was a bad idea,” she said. “But let's worry about that in the morning.”

She snuggled a little closer, seeking out Ciaran's warmth. He laughed softly and wrapped one strong arm around her waist, pulling her more snugly against him. He

even smelt warm and safe, somehow, his own musky scent mixed with the woodsmoke and the clear night air. Sadie knew she should have been cold, lying here in only a dress, but Ciaran kept her warm.

“I didn’t mean that I regret this,” Ciaran said after a few more moments of silence. His hand stroked her back in a gentle rhythm.

Sadie levered herself upright so she could gaze into his face, highlighted in bold lines by the light of the fire.

“I think I know what you mean,” she said slowly. “In a practical sense, this is a very bad idea. Yet it somehow seems like the best idea I’ve ever had.”

Ciaran’s laugh rumbled right through her body.

“I couldn’t have put it better myself,” he said.

They lay there for a few moments more, as Sadie gradually grew drowsy. She could barely keep her eyes open any more - hardly surprising, after all the day’s excitement and exhaustion.

“Do we need to stay awake and keep watch?” she asked drowsily.

“Don’t worry about it,” Ciaran said, sweeping a strand of hair out of her face. “Just sleep, Sadie.”

And so she did, slipping off into sweet slumber with her head resting on his chest. She’d never slept so well in her life.

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C iaran didn't wake Sadie until dawn broke and soft golden light filtered through the jagged lines of the thorn bushes. He couldn't help but brush a kiss against her flaming hair, lit up in a thousand shades of bright gold by the dawn light. Never in his life had he seen such incredible hair.

"Time to ride on," he murmured as she groaned and wrinkled her nose. It had been occurring to him more and more over the past few days that it really was an adorable nose.

"Do we have to go already?" Sadie mumbled. She shifted a little closer, burrowing into his side. Sometime during the night, she'd thrown one leg over his, so that they were all tangled together, his legs half-trapped in her skirts. Despite the hard ground and the need to sleep lightly, Ciaran found himself equally reluctant to leave. It had been a magical night.

But a terrible idea. He had to remind himself of that. This woman was a mystery at best, and an accomplice to the king's attempted murder at worst. Getting involved with her like this was absolute madness. So, he firmly removed her arms and legs from his body, and shifted her off him. She grumbled a little more, but it seemed to have worked. Slowly, she sat upright and brushed her tangled hair from her face.

"No breakfast?" she asked.

He shrugged.

"There's not enough food in the saddlebags to last two people. I'm going to save the last of it. With any luck, we'll find a farmer willing to share his morning meal. For

now, we need to get riding.”

Sadie climbed to her feet, moving slowly and stiffly. Ciaran felt a pulse of guilt. He’d pushed her hard yesterday, riding cross-country at high speed when she was still wet and tired from being pushed overboard. Their after-dark activities couldn’t have helped, either. She must be stiff and sore this morning. Still, there was nothing to be done for it. They needed to push on and reach Dunadd as soon as possible.

He helped Sadie up onto her horse, trying not to let his hands linger on the curve of her waist or the elegant line of her thigh. Today was about speed, not seduction. Some madness must have come over him the night before. He must not let it happen again.

They set off again with barely a dozen words spoken. It was not far to the road, which allowed them to ride a little faster. Ciaran did not set as rapid a pace as the day before, but he still did not want to waste time.

“You mentioned last night that we might be able to find a boat,” Sadie said at last, her voice a little hoarse. “Would that mean a quicker trip to Dunadd?”

“It certainly would,” Ciaran said. “We’d reach Dunadd tonight, or maybe tomorrow morning, depending on the tides.”

“A boat sounds nice,” Sadie said, a touch of longing in her voice. “Anything that’s not a horse sounds nice.”

Ciaran laughed, despite his earlier resolve to keep his distance from her.

“Well, we must keep an eye on the coast,” he said. “If we see a boat near the shore, we may just get lucky.”

“A boat like that one?” Sadie asked hopefully. Ciaran squinted out at the horizon. They were not far from the sea - you could never be far from the sea in this part of Scotland - but there was no fishing village along this stretch of coast. He hadn’t expected to see a boat for a few hours at least. But Sadie was right - the distinctive red sails of a royal ship hovered just a little way offshore.

“A boat exactly like that one,” he said, feeling a powerful mix of relief and excitement - tempered with a little regret. He’d expected to have one more night on the road, alone with Sadie. Still, this was not an opportunity to ignore. What was a royal ship doing this far south?

He turned off the road and rode hard for the coast, leaving Sadie to trail along behind him. Riding across the rough fields was harder than the dirt track of the road, but soon the fields gave way to sand dunes and then the beach. By the time Ciaran’s horse splashed into the shallow waves, a small rowing boat lay on the golden sand, two familiar faces peering up at Ciaran.

With a laugh of surprised delight, he jumped down from his horse and waded over to them.

“Iaian! Seumas! What are you doing here?”

They looked just as surprised to see him.

“We were sent down with the king’s guard. We’re looking for-”

Ciaran knew the moment they spotted Sadie, riding towards him with her red hair flaming. He sighed.

“Don’t worry, boys,” he said. “She’s not who you think she is.”

Just who was this woman, Sadie's twin, who'd sent everyone into such an uproar? Ciaran couldn't get back to Dunadd soon enough.

"I'm afraid I need to commandeer your boat," he said. "You can always come back to fetch the other guardsmen later, or they can make your own way back. It's vitally important that Sadie and I reach Dunadd as soon as possible."

Iain and Seumas looked uncertain, but they'd known Ciaran a long time. Amongst the king's guards, Ciaran's word was very nearly law.

"We'll prepare to cast off, then," one said. "You're lucky that the tide's with us."

Ciaran nodded, feeling suddenly cheerful. After a difficult few days, it seemed that luck was finally on his side.

"We're getting a boat?" Sadie asked, splashing down into the shallows beside him. He nodded, and her smile of relief made his day just that little bit better.

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This time, Sadie was taking no chances. She went straight down into the hold of the boat, in the small space below decks, and refused to leave. That seemed to suit the sailors and guardsmen well enough - their discomfort at her presence was more than obvious. It gave Sadie chills. What had Norah done? She had to find her soon. They needed to get out of this place and return home, where it was safe.

Even Ciaran hadn't objected when Sadie chose to vanish down the ladder and close the trapdoor above her head. She thought she'd seen a slight smile quirk the corner of his lips, but it might have been her imagination. He was hardly a man given to frequent smiling.

She would have liked to watch the shoreline slip past, but one dip in the sea had been more than enough. No, she would stay down here, safe and reasonably dry. They might reach Dunadd tonight, Ciaran had said. She could only hope that was the case. The business of traveling without cars or trains really was a long and painful one.

Sadie was so lost in her thoughts of home that she almost didn't notice when the trapdoor opened. She only snapped back to attention when Ciaran landed heavily on the curved planks that made up the floor of the small hold. He made his way over to where Sadie huddled awkwardly between a few crates.

"I'm sorry it's not more comfortable down here," he said, frowning a little. "The men have been sleeping up on deck, so they didn't think to outfit the hold for anything other than basic supplies."

"I'll be fine," Sadie said, managing a smile. "At least it won't be for long."

Ciaran nodded. Then he surprised himself by lowering down to the floor beside her, stretching out his long legs across the curved planks.

“I might as well wait down here as well,” he said. “I’m only in the way up top. Besides, I wanted to ask you about Norah.”

Sadie froze.

“I don’t want to talk about her,” she said, avoiding eye contact. “Especially not to you.”

Ciaran was silent. For a second, Sadie feared she might have hurt his feelings. But that was nonsense. They were nothing to each other - if anything, they were enemies, on opposite sides. Ciaran would stop at nothing to protect his king, and Sadie would stop at nothing to protect Norah.

“I want to help you, Sadie,” Ciaran said at last. “If someone is forcing Norah to act, then we need to find them. That’s a goal we have in common, isn’t it? We need to work together.”

Sadie nodded reluctantly.

“Unless you think your sister is acting of her own free will,” Ciaran said.

That startled an angry gasp out of her.

“Never! Norah would never hurt anyone. She’s in trouble, and she needs my help.”

Ciaran grabbed her hands, holding them still. She hadn’t realized how much she was trembling.

“Then don’t be afraid for her,” he whispered. “We’ll help her. Together.”

His thumbs moved across the back of her hands, stroking her skin gently but firmly. Sadie relaxed into his touch, letting her breathing steady and slow. What was it about this man that she found so comforting, so safe? For all she knew that he would always put his king first, Sadie found herself drawn to trust him. If Ciaran could help, she was certain he would.

“Thank you,” she whispered, clinging to his hands as if they were her last lifeline in this entire long-ago century. She stared up into his face, already so familiar.

“We said this was a bad idea,” Ciaran breathed.

Sadie’s brow wrinkled a little. She couldn’t quite put all the parts of this conversation into a logical order.

“We said what was a bad idea?” she asked.

“This,” Ciaran said, and kissed her. This time, it was sweet and soft. His hands still held hers, and their lips brushed lightly against each other, almost reverent in their gentleness. They parted for a second, only a hairs-breadth between the two of them.

Sadie could not stay away. She leaned forwards again, sliding her hands up Ciaran’s arms, encircling his wrists, then his biceps, as her lips met his and opened for him. He kissed her back with a groan, his mouth still gentle but increasingly demanding.

Abruptly, Sadie found herself flying through the air as Ciaran wrenched his arms from hers and whirled her to lie beneath him. He kissed her again, harder and harder, his body pressing lower and lower until every inch was matched to hers. Sadie strained up against him, desperate to feel the touch of his body everywhere. He was so warm, so hot, so full of life, and she couldn’t get enough. His hands slipped up

below her skirt as smoothly and easily as if they belonged there, until the fabric was bunched up around her waist and her legs were bare on the rough planking.

Sadie knew they'd said this was a bad idea. She knew she should push his hands away from her skin, tear her kips away from his, push him away from her.

One more time she whispered to herself, and lost all her objections in the heat of his kiss. There would be time enough to regret this later. For now, she arched against him as he pulled her skirts up and the bodice of her dress down, and she let go of all her worries. There was nothing but Ciaran and the feel of his skin against hers, nothing but the rhythm of their bodies, in perfect time with the rocking of the waves.

For now, she could forget.

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Sadie clung nervously to the boat's railings as they approached their final destination - the port of Dunadd. She'd never visited this place in the twenty-first century, but she vaguely remembered that it was now inland. Something to do with the sea receding. For now, though, Dunadd was a bustling seaside village, perched high on the rocky hill, and protected by rings of high walls. Looking up at those walls, Sadie shivered a little. If they caught Norah, would they lock her up behind there.

"Don't worry," Ciaran said, his voice a low rumble in her ear. "I won't let you fall this time."

He'd completely misunderstood the reason for her nervous expression. Still, Sadie forced herself to smile at him. He meant well. It wasn't his fault he would always have to choose his king over Sadie.

Ciaran helped her off the boat the minute it docked. No fancy landing equipment here - she just had to swing her legs over the side and jump down onto a rough wooden jetty. Ciaran gave her a moment to steady herself, letting her cling to his arm for a few sweet seconds. Then they were off, heading up the hill towards the great gates of the fortress.

Sadie had never been somewhere so utterly foreign - and to think she hadn't even left her own home country. This long street was a mud-splattered mess, filled with noise and chatter, children and animals. People wore bright checkered cloths, or the heavy brown habits of monks. The air was heavy with sea salt and the cries of gulls, with the smell of fish catching at Sadie's nostrils. She could hardly stop from turning her head every which way, her attention constantly caught by the glint of sunlight on heavy gold jewelry or gleaming spear points.

“Dunadd can be a bit overwhelming, at first,” Ciaran said. Sadie nodded, unable to find words to answer.

The lower part of the hill fort was just as busy and exhausting. Stall keepers sold their wares, crimson-robed guards strode to and fro, and there seemed to be a constant stream of people. Dogs and livestock were mixed in, adding to the colorful chaos.

Ciaran didn't stop to look at anything. He marched them onwards and upwards, heading inexorably towards the topmost part of the hill fort.

The next section was much calmer and quieter. There were fewer people here - no crowds at all - and the noise seemed somehow subdued, although the gulls still called overhead. Sadie at least felt as if she could take a deep breath without drowning on color and chaos and chatter.

“Almost there,” Ciaran said. His face was firm and determined now. With every step, he had shed a little more of the soft, tender man he'd been on the boat. Here, in the fortress of his king, he was every inch the ruthless warlord, and it sent shivers down Sadie's spine.

She could feel the other guards watching them as they went. Did they all recognize her? Did they think Ciaran had brought Norah back as a prisoner? Thankfully, no one made any attempt to stop them. Sadie did not want to explain the whole story any more than she had to.

Two guards sprang aside to let them enter a nondescript wooden building. They nodded respectfully to Ciaran, both murmuring a greeting. He acknowledged them with a nod of his own, but did not speak. The two men looked at Sadie uncertainly, but made no move to bar her entry. She followed Ciaran through the door and into what seemed to be a small sitting room.

A pretty, dark-haired woman sat by the fire but jumped up with a gasp when she saw them, her eyes fixed on Sadie.

“Don’t worry, Bethany,” Ciaran said quickly. “It’s not who you think.”

So, this was Bethany. Matthew’s mother - and a woman from Sadie’s own time.

At that moment, Matthew himself came bursting through another small door.

“Ciaran! Sadie!” he said cheerfully. “I’m so glad you made it. I was very sad to hear what happened to you.”

“Thank you,” Sadie said weakly. “I’m glad to see you, too.”

She could feel the confusion and uncertainty radiating from Bethany.

“Why don’t we all sit down?” Ciaran suggested. “I can explain everything. Where’s Comgall?”

“Here,” a deep voice said, and another man strode into the room through the door Matthew had just used. Although he was not especially tall, his broad shoulders and the heavy sword at his hip gave him an air of power and command, tempered only slightly by the small girl who clung to his hand. Even if Ciaran had not dropped to one knee, Sadie would have instantly recognized this man as Comgall. The king.

“Get up, old friend,” he said affectionately to Ciaran. Then his eyes focused on Sadie. “But you certainly do have a lot of explaining to do.”

They all sat down on the cluster of chairs beside the fire. Sadie noticed that she was positioned at one end, with Ciaran in between her and the royal family. She could not blame them for that, not after everything that had happened.

Ciaran hastily explained the links between Sadie and Norah, and the possibility that Norah was working under duress. Bethany gasped in horror at the idea, her eyes wide and her hand flying to her mouth.

“You think that Lucan might be behind this?” she asked.

“You mean my old father?” Matthew asked.

Bethany’s attention switched immediately to him.

“I don’t think that you and Maeve should be listening to this,” she said firmly.

Matthew scowled, but Bethany ignored it. “Take your sister to her nurse,” she said.

For a second, Sadie thought Matthew might disobey his mother, but he sighed heavily and did as he was told.

“This is difficult information to process,” Comgall said, turning to Sadie with a serious face as Matthew left the room. “It was bad enough, believing that this assassin had been sent by a political opponent. But if Lucan is here again, then we are truly in trouble.”

“No one has heard from Lucan Edmondson in a long time,” Sadie said slowly. “I believe he was behind my sister’s disappearance, but I cannot be sure that he’s still involved.”

Bethany’s frown deepened.

“This feels a little too sloppy to be Lucan’s handiwork,” she said. “But I cannot be sure.”

“We can discuss this further,” Comgall said. “But you two have traveled a long way, and I’m sure you need some rest.”

Sadie nodded in gratified relief. It had been a long journey indeed.

A servant appeared at the door as if by magic, ready to whisk them off. Sadie found herself separated from Ciaran, who waved briefly before striding away.

Stay calm , Sadie reminded herself. She didn’t need Ciaran. Shouldn’t depend on him. She would be fine on her own.

And then she saw it. A flash of red, vanishing behind one of the buildings, gone so quickly that no one else would have recognized it. But Sadie knew what she’d seen. Her heart soared - and broke as well, all at once. Norah was still here.

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C iaran found that his old room, barely more than a cubbyhole off the main hall, was still unoccupied. He stowed his few belongings under the bed and sat down for a second. How things had changed. The man who'd once lived in this room had never expected to become lord of his own island. But Ciaran's loyalty had paid off, and now he was far more than a guard.

But old instincts could not quite be abandoned. Something was still wrong here, Ciaran knew it for sure. Comgall was not safe.

“She's very pretty.”

Comgall himself was standing in Ciaran's doorway, leaning on the door frame. Ciaran jumped a little. When had he become so sloppy as to let someone creep up on him.

“Who's pretty?” he asked, as if he didn't know.

Comgall rolled his eyes and came to sit beside him on the bed.

“Sadie. You turned to look at her every few seconds, man.”

Ciaran stiffened a little.

“It's not my job to consider her pretty,” he told his king. “It's my job to keep you safe.”

Comgall sighed.

“You’re not my bodyguard any more, Ciaran. You’re a warlord in your own right, and your decisions are yours to make.”

“I will do whatever is necessary to keep you safe,” Ciaran said stubbornly.

“Then I can only hope that this Sadie is no threat to me,” Comgall said, a little sadly. “I don’t want you finding yourself forced to choose. That can only ever result in pain.”

Ciaran’s eyes widened.

“You know I would always choose you,” he said. “I owe you my unwavering loyalty.”

Comgall shrugged slightly.

“I’ve never doubted your loyalty. But you’ve never been in love before, either. I want you to be happy, old friend.”

“I’m not in love,” Ciaran said automatically. He couldn’t even think those words. In love? In love with a mysterious, untrustworthy stranger, whose sister had tried to kill the king? Who might be part of a complex plot to tear apart everything Ciaran held dear? Impossible.

“If you say so,” Comgall said, and there was a ghost of a smile on his face. “I seem to once remember having a similar conversation with you about Bethany.”

“That was different,” Ciaran insisted, but he remembered all too well that his king had been confused and overwhelmed when it came to accepting his feelings for Bethany.

It had been different, though. Bethany had also been suspected of involvement in a plot against Comgall, but she'd clearly been innocent. With Sadie, Ciaran couldn't be so sure. He couldn't let himself trust her.

"We'll find her sister and uncover the truth," Comgall said softly. "You'll have your answers."

Ciaran couldn't stop the tiny bubble of hope that began to grow somewhere deep in his chest. What if Sadie was innocent? What if he could prove that for sure, and ask her to stay with him? But no.

"It doesn't matter," he said, his voice and heart heavy. "Whatever happens, she'd never want to stay with me."

"You might be surprised," Comgall said. "Love can do some incredible things."

"She doesn't love me," Ciaran said quickly. "I'm not even sure if she likes me."

"And what about you?" Comgall asked, his voice calm and steady. "Be honest with me. Do you love her?"

Ciaran didn't want to say it. He didn't want it to be real. But he thought of the dawn light on Sadie's hair, the soft curve of her smile, the anger and passion in her kiss, the fear in his heart when he'd seen her splashing in the waves, all that distance away.

"Yes, I do," he said, hearing the words as if someone else spoke them. "I love her."

"Then I will do everything I can to help the both of you," Comgall said solemnly. "Justice must be done, but I swear I will do everything in my power to help you."

"Thank you," Ciaran said, his mind still reeling from the magnitude of what he'd

declared. “But what do I do now?”

“Start with the most important thing,” Comgall advised gravely. “Go to your lady, and tell her how you feel.”

“She’ll laugh at me,” Ciaran protested.

Comgall just raised an eyebrow, and Ciaran sighed. No, of course Sadie wouldn’t laugh at him. She wasn’t that cruel - and besides, they’d already shared enough that his words couldn’t be entirely unexpected. Could they? What if he’d imagined that tenderness in her kisses?

“Bethany seems to like her,” Comgall said unexpectedly.

That came as a shock.

“Even when she looks so much like the woman who tried to kill you?”

Comgall shrugged.

“My wife does not judge people by the actions of their families. You should know that.”

Ciaran nodded. Bethany and Comgall both had enough dark history in their families. No wonder Bethany would choose not to judge Sadie for her sister’s actions.

Still, though. Even if Bethany could learn to trust Sadie, could Ciaran do the same? Would this new, delicate feeling of love prove to be strong enough?

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C iaran slept for a few hours, back in that familiar, narrow bed. It was hardly a deep, restful sleep, not when his mind was so full and busy, but his exhausted body much appreciated the chance to rest. He wasn't young enough to keep up this kind of pace - dives into the sea, hard rides cross country, sleeping on the bare ground. As he awoke from his sleep, he felt aches and pains all over his body, and almost groaned aloud. Thank goodness Comgall had found an honorable retirement for him.

As Ciaran stood up and stretched, all the whirl of emotions rushed back to him.

Sadie. Comgall's words of advice.

And he knew that his king was right. He had to tell her the truth about his feelings. Even if she rejected him, even if she laughed in his face or told him that she wanted to leave, he had to tell her the truth.

With that thought in mind, he threw his heavy cloak around his shoulders and headed off to dinner.

He was still a little early, and the great hall was full of people milling about, not yet seated. This was the main social event of the day for those important enough to warrant a place here in the hall, and many used the socializing possibilities to their full advantage. Ciaran drifted around the hall, politely greeting a few old acquaintances. Old habits died hard, and it was almost impossible for him to relax in a gathering like this. He kept one eye on Comgall, up on the dais, but the other eye constantly roamed the room, looking for Sadie. Where was she? Surely one of the servants would bring her here.

People drifted in through the door in small groups, but still there was no sign of Sadie. Ciaran began to wonder if he should go and look for her.

And there she was. Standing in the doorway, dressed in a gown of softest violet wool, her hair catching the last light of the evening like some goddess of the sunset. Ciaran could barely stop his jaw from dropping. The dress fit her to perfection, outlining every inch of her body as if it had been made for her. He strode forwards, extending a hand to her, and his heart leaped with joy when she smiled to see him. She let him take her hand and lead her into the room, towards the top table where Comgall's most powerful lords sat.

"Hello," she whispered shyly, and Ciaran's heart jumped again.

"Hello," he whispered in reply, pulling her a little closer against him, and ignoring all the glances thrown their way. "You look beautiful."

Sadie blushed a little, her cheeks flushing the perfect shade of rose.

"I feel a bit ridiculous in this dress, but the maid said it was a gift from the queen, so I could hardly refuse."

Ciaran would have to thank Bethany later.

"It's perfect," he told her. You're perfect .

The words didn't quite come out, but that didn't matter. He still had time.

With a flourish from a hunting horn, dinner was announced, and everyone headed for their seats. Ciaran helped Sadie up the steps to the dais, and seated her at the end of the table. Not all Comgall's lords were currently at Dunadd, so there would be plenty of space. The royal couple themselves were some distance away, in the center of the

table, but Bethany raised a hand in greeting, and Matthew waved enthusiastically. Ciaran saw a few people noting the exchange with interest. And no wonder, when so many people must recognize the flaming red hair of the woman who'd tried to kill Comgall.

Sadie remained quiet all through dinner. Ciaran reminded herself that she must be very tired, and that this must be all very overwhelming for her, but he could not help feeling a little dispirited. Perhaps Comgall was wrong, and he should not push forwards with this. But his heart sang with such hope at even the thought of her love, that he knew he could not back down now.

"Sadie, can I speak to you for a moment?" he asked, as the final plates were cleared away.

She looked startled.

"Of course. Please, speak."

He realized he had not made himself clear.

"No, can I speak to you alone?" he asked. "Outside, perhaps."

The hall was stuffy and loud - hardly the place for a romantic conversation. His mind raced through all the places they could go. Up on the topmost rocks, perhaps, with a view out over the sea. Yes, that would be perfect.

"You want us both to go outside? Now?" Sadie asked.

Ciaran hesitated. He really had rushed into this, with no time for thought. Shouldn't he have brought her a gift? Some kind of small love token? Well, too late to worry now. He must simply push ahead. But, wait. He did have something.

“I just need to fetch something from my room,” he said. “Can you meet me outside in just a few moments? Head up to the top of the hill fort, where the rocks are. I’ll find you there.”

Sadie bit her lip, looking nervous, but she still nodded. Ciaran narrowly resisted the urge to plant a kiss on her beautiful mouth. Instead, he squeezed her hand beneath the table, then rushed off.

Even in the chaos of his unexpected dip in the sea, Ciaran had not left all his possessions behind. On the inside of his shirt, close to his heart, he always wore a tiny golden brooch, cast in the outline of a horse. It had been his mother’s brooch, once upon a time, and it was the last thing he had left of her. If Sadie accepted his love, this would be the perfect token to give her. He slipped it out of his old shirt and gripped it in his hand, the metal warming from the heat of his skin.

It was time.

He slipped back out of his room and made his way back up past the hall, towards the rocky summit. He was almost there when something caught his eye in the glow of a torchlight. Sadie, a black cloak around her shoulders, and her hair glowing brightly, stood almost-hidden between two buildings.

“Sadie,” he called, striding towards her with his hands outstretched. She flinched back into the shadows.

“It’s alright,” he said, alarmed at her reaction. If she acted like this at even a hint of his touch, was she really ready to hear the truth of his heart?

“Sadie, I’m so glad you agreed to meet me out here,” he whispered, stepping closer to her. All thoughts of sea views and breathtaking romance were swept from his mind as he stared down at the shadowy outline of her beautiful face. She said nothing, just

stared up at him. His heart skipped a beat. Did she already know?

“I have to tell you the truth,” he said, gathering all his courage for something more terrifying than any battle he had ever fought. “Sadie, I want you to know that, no matter what, despite everything that’s happened, and everything that might happen - I love you.”

She said nothing, although her eyes widened.

The silence stretched out between them as he clung to her hands.

Why wouldn’t she say anything? He let her hands drop and took a step backwards, trying to clear his thoughts.

And then he noticed. Under her heavy black cloak, this woman wore a dress of dark green wool. This was not Sadie.

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The shouts reached Sadie from where she waited amid the rocks that topped the summit of the hill fort. This was a strange, eerie place, like some leftover of an even older time, when this hill had been as much temple as fortress. Loud shouts from below echoed strangely around the stones, and it took Sadie a second to realize what she was hearing. The familiar bellow of Ciaran's deep, loud voice. Then a higher-pitched scream - a woman. Sadie suddenly knew what had happened.

She began to run, cursing the long skirts of the stupid dress. She scrambled down off the rocks and down the dirt path that cut through the center of the hill fort.

And there was Norah, her face tear-stained and afraid in the flickering torchlight. Her arms were bound behind her back, and a guard gripped her on either side. Ciaran stood there, looking on. One look at his cold, hard face, and Sadie's heart froze.

"Norah!" she shouted, rushing forwards. But Ciaran whirled around in an instant, grabbing Sadie and holding her back so that she couldn't touch her sister. She tried to fight him off, but it was like wrestling against iron.

"Did you know?" he murmured in her ear. "Did you know she was here?"

Sadie knew she could lie. Knew she should lie, to preserve any advantage she had. But after everything that had happened between her and Ciaran, she at least owed him the truth.

"Yes," she whispered. "I knew."

He thrust her away from him with such force that she almost fell, her feet skidding

for purchase on the slick ground. He did not turn to look at her again.

“This woman needs to be locked up,” he said, gesturing at Norah. “The king will deal with her in the morning. I will inform him straight away.”

He strode away without so much as glancing at Sadie.

“Norah!” she shouted again, but there were more guards now, and none of them would let her near her sister. They seemed reluctant to touch a guest of the king, but they would not back down. Norah looked back over her shoulder, eyes wide and fearful, and Sadie could do nothing but watch as her sister was led away.

Sadie rushed back to her room, full of nervous energy. She could not let this happen. The king might have been kind to her, but that kindness would surely not extend to an attempted assassination attempt. Sadie knew how harsh the laws of this time were - Norah would surely die for her crimes, no matter why she had acted as she did. That could not happen. Sadie needed to get her out of here before dawn came.

But how? She didn’t even know where Norah was, let alone how to get her out. And Ciaran, her one ally, had clearly turned against her.

Unless... Ciaran might not be her only ally. Sadie paused in her anxious pacing. There was someone else she could ask for help, if she dared. But if she misjudged, everything would fall apart.

She had to try. And so, a few moments later, she found herself skulking in the shadows, not far from the door to the hall. As far as she could tell, the royal family had not yet left after dinner. Ciaran must have publicly announced the news of Norah’s capture. The very thought of it made her sick.

It was not long before Matthew and his little sister, Maeve, appeared. Sadie watched

them go. A nursemaid carried Maeve towards the royal chamber that Sadie had visited before, but Matthew turned off and walked through another door. Good. He had his own private room.

Sadie waited a little longer, as guards came and went and the hall slowly emptied. Comgall and Bethany exited the hall, hand in hand, and walked back towards their rooms. Ciaran came behind them, and for a terrifying moment, Sadie thought he might see her in the shadows. But he never even glanced her way, and walked on by like the rest. Sadie forced herself not to watch him pass.

At last, she judged it safe to make her move. She slipped up to Matthew's door and knocked as loudly as she dared. When he didn't reply, she tried again, a little louder. This time, the door opened and he stood there, looking smug.

"I thought I'd see you here," he said. "I suppose you want my help."

Sadie blinked at him in surprise. He rolled his eyes and opened the door a little wider.

"Come on in and I'll explain," he said.

Sadie found herself perched on a small bench by the fire as the young prince paced the room.

"I can get you out of here," he said. "You and your sister. But I have one condition. You take me with you."

Sadie's jaw dropped open. After all the effort he'd made to get back here, to Dunadd, this was the last thing she'd expected.

"You want to come with us?" she asked.

He nodded, his jaw set.

“I need to find my father,” he said. “I need to know the truth of all this. Why else do you think there were no guards outside my door? I want to work with you.”

Sadie almost groaned. Of course. No guards. Had she not learned her lesson after her little foray into Ciaran’s room? It seemed that everyone here was always a step ahead of her.

“I can’t take you with me,” she told Matthew. “I don’t know how to travel through time. I’m trapped here.”

Matthew’s smile was distinctly smug.

“Don’t worry about that,” he said. “I can travel through time. I just need your help to find my father. Probably your sister’s help, really.”

Sadie gaped at him.

“You can... but no one told me!”

“My parents and Ciaran try to keep it very secret,” Matthew said grimly. “But I’m done with secrets and hiding. I want the truth, whatever my mother tells me to do. Will you accept my offer - and my help?”

Sadie swallowed hard. If she accepted his offer, she would essentially be kidnapping this young prince. Ciaran would never forgive her - not to mention the boy’s mother, Bethany. And what if things went wrong, and Matthew was trapped in the future?

But what other choices did she have? She could not leave Norah to face her fate. It seemed unlikely she would receive a better offer of help.

“I accept,” she told Matthew. “Let’s get my sister out of here.”

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Matthew turned out to be an invaluable ally. No one questioned him when he went in to visit the prisoner, taking Sadie along with him.

“They’ll already have run to fetch my mother,” he warned her from the corner of his mouth. “We don’t have long. Now, go back and talk to them for a moment. Then wander outside as if nothing’s wrong.”

Sadie did as he ordered, her heart pounding. Norah was being held in a small stone room, built against the rock of the hill fort. The place seemed impregnable, but Matthew was confident to the point of cockiness.

And no wonder. A few moments later, he came strolling out, Norah by his side.

“How did you do that?” Sadie asked with a gasp as she rushed to hug her sister tightly. Norah was stiff and unyielding, and made no effort to hug Sadie in return. She just stood awkwardly beside Matthew.

He shrugged.

“No one really pays attention to me. And I guess they forgot you’d already walked past them. Now, let’s get moving.”

He hustled them to the stables, where a frightened-looking stable boy had three mounts ready and waiting. The boy gasped with horror when he saw the two women flanking Matthew.

“Matty, you didn’t say this was why you wanted the horses! I can’t let you escape

with prisoners!”

Matthew shrugged.

“Warn the guard if you like. But get out of the way. I’m leaving on this horse right now .”

Something strange flashed in his eyes, a burst of bright blue. Before Sadie could even guess what was going on, Matthew was pushing her towards a mounting block. The stable boy stood motionless, his jaw hanging slightly open.

“Get on the horse and go,” Matthew ordered. He was already mounted and kicking his horse towards the door. Sadie and Norah scrambled onto their own mounts and hastened after him. They bolted for the main gate, Matthew in the lead and moving fast.

“Open the gates!” he ordered, his voice almost a scream. “By order of Prince Matthew, open the gate!”

The guards rushed to obey, pulling the huge gates open. Matthew didn’t even slow his horse, just pelted onwards. Sadie and Norah raced behind him, clinging on. Sadie could see her own fear reflected in her sister’s white face.

They had almost made it to the gate when one of the guards shouted out a warning. He must have recognized the two women and grasped what was going on. The guards made to close the gate again, but the three riders were moving too fast. They were through the gate and out onto the road almost before the guards had a chance to react.

“Don’t slow down,” Matthew yelled over his shoulder. “We don’t have far to go.”

Sadie clung grimly onto her reins, gripping her mount hard with her thighs. The

strange, flat saddle was comfortable enough but offered almost no grip - and, worst of all, there were still no stirrups. At least she was a passable rider - and knew Norah was, too. In fact, when she looked over at Norah, her sister looked completely relaxed in the saddle, as if she'd done this a hundred times. Perhaps she had, in the year since she'd gone missing.

They rode straight on down the road for a few moments, their horses' hooves kicking up dirt and pounding hard on the dirt. Sadie could barely see a thing in the darkness, but her mount seemed confident enough. The horses must know this road well.

"We need to turn off here," Matthew said, slowing his horse a little. Sadie and Norah followed suit, riding close to hover just behind him.

He raised one hand and clicked his fingers. Sudden light, an unnaturally bright blue, flared in his hand. Sadie gasped in shock, then reprimanded herself silently. He was from the twenty-first century, after all. He probably just had some kind of strange flashlight. That was certainly not magic lighting up his hand like that. Such things were impossible.

With the strange blue light illuminating their path, the three of them rode slowly off the road and into the undergrowth that lined it.

"Where are we going?" Sadie asked, her voice a little wobbly. "There's nothing out here."

"We only need one thing," Matthew said. "And we're almost there."

The blue glow from his hands spread more widely, covering a large enough area that Sadie could see what lay ahead of them, where the dense bushes opened up to long grass. They were riding straight for a stone circle - smaller than the one she had traveled through before, but still unmistakable.

“You’re sure you can get us home?” Norah asked, speaking for the first time.

“As long as you promise to help me find my father on the other side,” Matthew said.

“Time travel isn’t hard. It’s only on the other side that I’ll need your help.”

Sadie and Norah exchanged glances. Time travel isn’t hard ? Something about this boy made her uncomfortable, although he’d never been anything but good-natured. The eerie blue light certainly wasn’t helping.

“Now, I need both of you to lay your hands flat on one of the stones,” Matthew said, swinging down from his horse. “It’s probably best if you’re touching each other as well.”

“What shall we do with the horses?” Sadie asked, wincing as she landed on the ground with a thud.

“Just leave them,” Matthew said. “They’ll find their way home. Now, the stone.”

Sadie and Norah picked their way across the damp grass to place their hands on the stone. Matthew was still hunting for something in his saddlebag.

“We need to hurry up,” Sadie called nervously.

“I’m coming,” Matthew called back. He appeared around the side of his horse, striding towards them.

“Hello, there.”

Sadie whirled around, Norah right beside her. On the far side of the stone circle, two men stood staring at them - and she recognized them both. One was the man from the first stone circle, the man who’d given her the language chip. The other was the sailor

who'd pushed her into the ocean.

“Matthew, we have to go!” Norah screamed, throwing herself at the stone. Matthew ran towards them, his feet slapping on the ground, but he was just a little too slow. One man grabbed Sadie and the other grabbed Norah. Matthew slid to a halt, wide-eyed and clearly unsure what to do.

“Fetch Ciaran!” Sadie shouted. “We need his help!”

Matthew stood there, as still and poised as a frightened deer. Then he ran - but not in the direction Sadie had expected. He bolted for the stones, moving so fast that his legs were almost a blur. He hit the stone and, in a flash of bright light, he was gone.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:13 am

C iaran awoke abruptly at the first sound of hammering on his door. He yanked it open before the second blow could land, and found a rumpled-looking royal guardsman.

“What’s happened?”

“The prisoner’s gone, my lord,” the guardsman blurted. “Along with her sister.”

Ciaran cursed. He should never have let Sadie out of his sight. He knew how devoted she was to her twin sister. Of course she’d done something like this. Of course she wouldn’t trust him to protect Norah.

“That’s not all, my lord,” the guardsman said nervously. “They took the prince with them.”

Oh no. This just got worse and worse.

Ciaran dressed as quickly as he could and rushed out into the chaos and upheaval. Guards were being questioned, witnesses were calling out what they’d seen, people were panicking. In the center of the hall sat Comgall and Bethany, hand in hand. Bethany’s red-rimmed eyes suggested she had been weeping, but both King and Queen kept their faces calm and impassive.

Ciaran dropped to his knees in front of his king.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I’ve failed you. I had no idea they would take the young prince-”

Comgall sighed heavily, cutting him off.

“Don’t blame yourself, Ciaran,” he said. “Besides, judging by the various accounts we’ve heard, it seems Matthew was a willing part of this escape. We might even say that he took them.”

“Then forgive me for not guessing how he would act,” Ciaran said, hanging his head. “I knew he wasn’t happy with me - and he’s run away before - but I never expected this.”

“We do not blame you for anything,” Bethany said gently. “You have been a good foster-father to my son.”

When Ciaran looked up, she met his eyes with a soft smile.

“We do need you to find him, though,” Ciaran said. “This news has spread too far, too fast. Everyone knows that he is out there, alone and vulnerable. He must be brought back to Dunadd. The prisoners too, if you can find them, although I imagine they are long gone by now.”

Ciaran nodded and rose to his feet.

“I will do everything I can to track them down.”

If they are still in this time . He left the words unsaid. Comgall and Bethany already understood.

He chose a few men, hand-picked for loyalty, and rode out of Dunadd as quickly as they could prepare. Dawn was still only just breaking, and the low light meant Ciaran could not ride with the speed he would have liked. Without the bright light of day, it would be too easy to miss things, and a single clue could prove vital.

And there it was - the one clue he needed. Horses had turned off the road at this point. There was no reason for honest travelers to leave the road here, miles from any settlement. He turned his reluctant mount into the bushes, signaling for the men to follow along behind him.

All too soon, he reached the stone circle, and his stomach dropped. What if he was too late? What if all three of them had already traveled through the stones? This was a road that he could not travel, even with all the will in the road.

“Dismount,” he ordered the men. “See what you can find.”

They all ranged out around the circle, searching for any evidence. Ciaran couldn’t believe he was back here, at another stone circle. Life contained so many strange, cruel loops.

“It looks like there was some kind of struggle over here,” one of the men called out. Ciaran marched over and instantly saw the same signs on the ruffled grass. Matthew? Or Sadie?

“Some red hair stuck to this stone,” another man called. Ciaran stiffened. Her hair...

The single strand was still bright.

“See if you can find any more,” Ciaran told his men. “Spread out.”

He was the one who found the next strand - wrapped around one of the ferns that grew a little way away from the stone circle.

“They came this way,” he called to the men. “Mount up and we’ll try to follow them. One of you must lead my horse so I can track.”

Now that he knew where to look, he could detect signs of footprints. Someone had tried to sweep them away as they went, so he could not tell the size of the group, but he would wager that a few people had passed through here - and not that long ago. He walked on, his men trooping behind him, and as the sun rose higher in the sky, the footsteps grew fresher and fresher. They were gaining on them.

The bracken and grass gave way to trees. Ciaran moved more slowly now, wary of what might be lurking in the shadows. It was reassuring to have three well-trained warriors at his back.

He knew the second they reached their destination. The trees faded away again as they approached the edge of a village. The blurred trail of wiped-out footprints led straight to the back of a rundown old cottage, so tatty that Ciaran could see the holes in the roof even from here.

“That’s the place we need,” he murmured to his men. “Spread out and surround it. We attack on my command.”

The men dismounted one by one and tied their horses to nearby trees. They spread out, half in one direction and half in another. Ciaran himself crept closer and closer to the back door of the cottage. He had no idea what awaited them inside, but there was no one in Dunadd who posed a risk to the king’s guardsmen. They were the best of the best. He crept a little closer, raising his hand to give the signal. The men nearest him would convey it to the man on the other side of the building.

But, just before Ciaran could give the signal, he heard an almighty bang. Everything around him vanished in a haze of white smoke. Coughing and choking, he ran forwards, desperately trying to reach the cottage. A woman screamed, and he tried to make his legs run faster. But he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t see. He reached out in front of him, but the white smoke covered everything.

“Sadie!” he shouted.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:13 am

Sadie could not remember ever having been so scared, even after everything that had happened. These two men terrified her - and worse, they clearly terrified Norah. They had tied the two women up without much effort. Sadie hadn't put up a fight - how could she, with a gun pointed at her head? She had to do whatever these men told her. After a long, painful trek across the countryside, she and Norah now sat bound and gagged in a corner of a ramshackle old cottage.

"I told you we should never have got the woman involved," the first man was saying.

Sadie recognized him now. His name was Jack Alderton, and he had once worked for Professor Edmondson. The employment records suggested he had left his job years ago - but his presence here suggested something very different. The other man was Henry Waters, who was supposed to be working at Edmondson's lab as an engineer. In the darkness of the cottage, with his unwashed hair and unshaven beard, dressed in a shapeless tunic and baggy trousers, he didn't look much like an engineer to Sadie.

"We needed her, and you know it," Henry snapped back. "We should simply have been quicker at disposing of her afterwards."

Just like he'd tried to on the boat, Sadie thought with a shiver.

"You know I can't risk going anywhere near Dunadd," Jack retorted. "Mrs Edmondson is still there, and if she lays eyes on me I'm done for."

"Well, what do you propose we do now?" Henry demanded. "We've enough trouble with these missing person cases as it is. A second sister missing? There's no way we'll escape investigation."

“We could get her back to Arran,” Jack suggested. “I’m positive she was the one I saw over there. We could dump her body somewhere below a cliff around there. Make it look like a suicide.”

“Good idea,” Henry said, a little too eagerly. “This whole mess might finally be over.”

“With nothing gained at all,” Jack growled. “The boy’s still missing.”

“He’ll turn up,” Henry said, sounding confident. “He’s still a child. He’s hardly going to wander around a different time period forever, all alone.”

Sadie thought they might have underestimated Matthew, but she could hardly say anything, not with this rancid old piece of cloth stuffed in her mouth. Was that what all of this had been about? Kidnapping Matthew? After seeing the ease with which he could travel through time, she was not entirely surprised.

“Still, Norah’s not the worse employee we’ve ever had,” Jack said. He turned to glance at the two women out of the corner of his eye. To Sadie’s utter astonishment, he winked at them before turning back to Henry. “And identical twins would be handy. We could play a lot of tricks with those two on the team.”

“We won’t be playing any tricks at all without the boy,” Henry snapped. “We barely have enough power to get us both home. And you know what happens once we’re out of power. No more gold, no more money. You can forget that oil deal. And once the Professor catches up with us, we’ll have nowhere to run.”

Gold? Oil? Sadie could barely believe what she was hearing. Were they exploiting the past for its resources? Seizing control of natural resources, centuries before other people had a chance? It was a big, bold goal. No wonder they needed Matthew’s power.

“The Professor is not going to catch up with us,” Jack said, his voice suddenly icy. “And even if he did, he would be more angry with some people than others.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Henry demanded. “You don’t know anything more than I do.”

But Jack cut him off, one hand raised as he listened.

“There’s people outside,” he said. “I doubt they’ve come for a chat.”

Ciaran . Sadie couldn’t say how she knew, but she was suddenly very, very sure that it was Ciaran outside the cottage. Had he come for her? Or was he chasing Matthew?

“Get rid of them,” Henry said. “We don’t need any witnesses.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Jack said, reaching into one pocket and producing a small, round object.

Was that a grenade ?

Sadie screamed through her gag, the noise loud and sharp despite the muffling fabric. Once again, Jack winked at her, the expression completely at odds with his touch exterior. Then he ran to the window and wrenched the shutters open, throwing the strange object as he did so. It erupted into clouds of white smoke, billowing in through the window. A smoke grenade!

Hands reached for her bound wrists as the smoke thickened, blocking everything from sight. Sadie’s hands and feet were free, then the gag was pulled from her mouth.

“Get out of here,” Jack murmured in her ear. A familiar hand fumbled for hers - Norah was free as well.

Sadie took a step in the direction of the door. At least, she thought that was the direction of the door. In all this thick smoke, it was almost impossible to tell.

And then a gunshot ran out, loud and unmistakable. Someone screamed. Sadie clung harder to Norah's hand and ran for the door. They had to get out of there! But her hand met blank stone. She fumbled to either side, desperately reaching for a way out.

"You're surrounded!" a voice called from outside. "No more tricks!"

It was Ciaran! Sadie could have wept with joy and relief. She reached a little more to the side, and there it was at last - the door. But then Norah froze, her hand gripping Sadie's so hard that it might bruise. Sadie was pulled to a halt.

"I advise you not to take another step," Henry's disembodied voice said through the smoke. "You see, I have my gun pressed to the back of your sister's head, and I won't hesitate to shoot."

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:13 am

Waiting there, staring at the cottage door, was the most agonizing few moments of Ciaran's life. The smoke had already begun to clear - wherever the hell it had come from - as the wind and the damp dissipated it. Ciaran could now see well enough to make out all the windows of the cottage, as well as the figures of his men, all looking blessedly unharmed.

No one had spoken in response to his warning call. But he had heard noises coming from inside the cottage. Something was happening in there, and it killed him that he had no idea if Sadie was safe.

"Come out, or I'm coming in!" he called again.

Still no response.

He swallowed hard. Storming straight into the cottage would be a terrible idea, much as it appealed to him. He had no idea what other strange, futuristic weapons they might have in there.

Futuristic... that was a thought. Were these kidnappers from the future? His heart beat a little faster. It might explain why they'd been at the stone circle, and why they'd targeted Matthew, Sadie, and Norah. Of course, they might just be opportunistic kidnappers after a ransom, but that smoke was like nothing he'd ever seen before. It all seemed too much to be coincidence.

He gestured to his men to hang back as he tried to decide what to do. If these men were from the future, he had no idea what else they were capable of, what other tricks were up their sleeves. Realistically, he should fetch more men and mount a proper,

well-organized attack on the cottage. But how could he walk away and leave Sadie to her fate, whatever it might be? He had not imagined that scream. He could not leave her.

Drawing a deep breath, Ciaran decided he was finished with being a cautious bodyguard. It was time to embrace his role as a wild warrior. Hefting his sword, he screamed aloud and ran at the cottage door.

He burst through on his first attempt, the rotten wood crumbling under the force of his attack. His sword swung - and froze, poised in the air, as Ciaran stared at two terrified pairs of eyes.

“Put down the sword,” a man’s voice said from behind the two women. “Because, believe me, I can kill them both in an instant.”

The fear in Sadie’s eyes told Ciaran to believe the man’s threat. He lowered his sword and stepped further into the cottage, trying to circle around and view the man head-on. The damned coward kept shifting, keeping the twins between him and Ciaran. Another man lay on the floor, in a pool of what looked like blood. Ciaran was about to write him off as dead, but a low moan informed him that the fallen man was still alive - barely.

“What do you want with these women?” Ciaran asked. “Why have you taken them?”

“They work for me,” the man said in his strange, cracked voice. “And I’m going to be taking them with me.”

“I don’t believe that the ladies wish to go with you,” Ciaran said, keeping his voice level and polite. In fact, I am almost certain that they do not.”

“As if I care,” the man spat.

Something whizzed past Ciaran's face, but he had no time to wonder about it. He reached for Sadie as her hands stretched towards him.

"Stupid woman!" the man shouted. Something flashed in the smoke-filled air of the cottage, and Sadie fell. Ciaran lunged forwards to catch her before she hit the ground, her warm body tumbling into his arms.

"Sadie!" he said desperately. "Sadie, can you hear me?"

Her eyes did not open, but she moaned slightly. She was alive, thank goodness. But, when Ciaran looked up, Norah and the man were gone. He heard a shout outside, but he could not abandon Sadie.

"I need help in here!" he shouted.

One of his men appeared in the doorway in an instant, his eyes widening as he took in the scene.

"My lord? What happened? A man and a woman just ran past us."

Ciaran cursed, but he couldn't worry about Norah right now. He had to get Sadie to safety.

"I need two of you to make some kind of stretcher," he ordered. "And commandeer a horse and cart. This man and this woman need to reach Dunadd as quickly as possible."

Thankfully, the guards were efficient men. They had the man loaded onto a cart in a matter of moments, and even managed to bind his bleeding leg. Ciaran had no idea what had caused the wound, but he hoped Dunadd's healers would cope with it.

Releasing Sadie to lie on the cart was far more difficult. Every instinct told him to keep her close to him, but carrying an unconscious woman on his horse would not be easy. Reluctantly, he allowed the men to build a nest of blankets on the cart, into which he lowered Sadie as carefully as he could.

“Get moving,” he said. “We need to reach Dunadd. Now .”

They set off as quickly as the lumbering horse and cart could travel. Every step was torture to Ciaran. Why weren't they going faster? Why were they so far from home? At last, he could take it no longer.

“Ride ahead,” he snapped at the nearest guardsman. “I want healers ready and waiting at the gates the moment we arrive.”

White-faced, the man nodded his agreement. He nudged his horse into action and disappeared up the road ahead of them, leaving a cloud of dust in his wake.

Ciaran and his party trudged on.

What would he do if Sadie died? He had been so ready to declare his love for her - and then so ready to turn on her. She'd known her sister was in Dunadd, yet she hadn't told him. How could he overlook that? But how could he blame her? Ciaran knew that he would do almost anything to keep Niamh safe. He could only imagine how strong the bond must be between these sisters.

His thoughts tumbled round and round in his head as they made their achingly slow progress along the road. In the end, though, it was the frantic beating of his heart that told him the truth. No matter what she'd done, no matter what she'd said, he still loved Sadie.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:13 am

Sadie awoke to a pounding in her head that was like nothing she'd ever felt before. She almost screamed, but her lungs burned as well, and her throat was too dry to make any noise. She tried to sit up, but something heavy weighed her down. She thrashed against it - and then a cool hand pressed against her bare shoulder.

"Shh," a soothing voice said. Soft. Female. "Stay calm, my dear. You're safe and well."

Sadie blinked hard, trying to make out the scene around her. A soft blanket of undyed wool rested across her legs. Plain wooden walls. A small window. And, as she looked to her side, a serene woman in a robe of dark wool. A nun?

"Where am I?" Sadie croaked.

"You're in Dunadd, my dear," the lady said, pushing her to lie back down. "This is the healers' quarters, and I am Sister Sorcha. You've been rather unwell."

Rather unwell? Sadie struggled to remember what had happened. Norah, and the stone circle, and the cottage, and the smoke, and -

"Norah!" she gasped. "Where's my sister?"

The tiniest of frowns marred the woman's smooth face.

"Now is not the time to speak of such things," she said, her voice smooth and rich as fine wine. "You must concentrate on recovering, dear, or you will be no good to anyone."

Sadie wanted to argue with the woman, but she struggled to muster up any kind of energy.

“Ciaran?” she asked plaintively. Surely he at least would tell her the truth.

The woman sighed.

“Very well,” she said. “We’ve had enough trouble keeping him out.”

She tugged the blanket all the way up to Sadie’s chin, then opened the door.

“You can come in now,” she called to someone in the room beyond. “She’s awake.”

Ciaran burst through the door so quickly that he almost knocked the healer out of the way.

“How are you?” he asked anxiously, rushing to the side of the bed, where he loomed over Sadie. “How are you feeling?”

“I think I’m fine,” Sadie said. Her voice came out as a harsh croak, but the words were true enough. She was certainly tired, and a little limp, but her body felt healthy enough. “What happened? Where’s Norah?”

Ciaran’s face darkened.

“That man hit you over the head with something hard,” he said. “You collapsed, and I rushed to catch you. By the time I knew you were safe, he’d gone - and taken Norah with him.”

“No,” Sadie breathed. That couldn’t be true. He couldn’t have Norah. Not when she’d heard all the terrible things he could be capable of.

“The other man from the cottage was injured as well,” Ciaran said. “We brought him back here and the healers are doing their best. He should survive, but there’s no way of knowing if the wound will go bad.”

“How long?” Sadie asked desperately. “How long was I unconscious?” She sat up straight, clutching the blanket to her.

“It’s morning now,” Ciaran said, his voice soft and gentle. “You slept all day and all night.”

“He took Norah a whole day ago?” Sadie asked, horrified.

Ciaran nodded in response.

“We have to find her!”

Sadie swung her legs out of bed, ignoring the healer’s horrified gasp as the blanket fell away.

“Sadie, you can’t go anywhere,” Ciaran said, moving to push her back into the bed. “You’re not well! And I swear I have men out looking for them. There’s nowhere that man can hide.”

“He can hide in the future!” Sadie shouted. “Can’t you see? He had enough power to take two people back! He and Norah will be a thousand years away by now.”

And then it finally happened. She couldn’t hold it in any longer, after everything that had happened. She burst into tears. Not subtle teardrops, but huge, screaming gasps that sent liquid pouring down her face. Ciaran wrapped her in his arms, cradling her against him.

“We’ll find her,” he murmured over and over again. We’ll find her, I swear it.”

“She’s gone ,” Sadie howled between sobs, unable to breathe properly. Her twin sister was gone, almost certainly dead. Sadie thought she had grieved for her a year ago, but she saw now that she had always been in denial, always believing that she would see Norah again. But now? The pain was so immense that she could barely hear Ciaran’s voice, right beside her ear.

He let her cry for a moment. And then he gripped her shoulder and shook her, hard.

“Sadie, stop this!” he said. “Norah is not dead. Why would that man take her back through time just to kill her? He could have dumped her body right there in the cottage and made a quicker escape.”

Sadie managed to control her breath long enough to stop crying. His words made a strange kind of sense. Why would Henry have taken Norah and killed her in the future? She was best left as an unexplained disappearance. It was Sadie they had planned to kill and dump.

“Maybe you’re right,” she whispered. “But if you are, I have to go after her. I have to find her.”

“I know you do,” Ciaran said, smoothing her sweaty, tear-damp hair out of her face. She felt a rush of shame that she’d ever doubted this man. If she’d trusted him, instead of running away with Matthew, things would be very different.

Oh, no. She hadn’t told him.

“Ciaran... Matthew vanished through the stones,” she said. “He escaped when Norah and I were captured. I’ve got no idea where he is now. Or when.”

Ciaran swore, quietly but viciously.

“Bethany won’t be happy to hear that,” he said. “But it’s what we suspected. The boy’s determined to test his powers and learn more about his heritage. I can’t blame him, but I wish he’d found a safer way to do it.”

Sadie shivered. Matthew must be about fourteen years old - not so young that he couldn’t cope, but still too young to be alone. She didn’t like the idea of him wandering twenty-first century streets on his own.

“Then I need to find both of them,” she said.

“You do,” Ciaran replied grimly. “And I’m coming with you.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 8:13 am

Sadie could barely meet Bethany's eyes when she had a meeting with the royal couple. What a fool she'd been, letting Matthew talk her into running away in the middle of the night. She'd let her fear and mistrust overrule her, and as a result she had made the worst possible decision.

To her surprise, Bethany seemed remarkably calm about the whole situation.

"He was determined to find his father," she said sadly. "Even without you as his guide, I'm sure he will manage. And he did live in the twenty-first century for the first seven years of his life. It is not entirely foreign to him. Still, we need to find him."

"You'll help?" Sadie asked tentatively.

Bethany smiled, the expression strangely wild and feral on a woman who was always so calm and composed.

"Oh, yes," she said. "If my ex-husband is behind any of this mess, I intend to make him regret it."

Comgall just grinned. Sadie looked at the king's heavy sword, then back at the queen's vicious smile. Suddenly, she was not sure which of them to be most afraid of.

"So, we'll need a few more guardsmen, and some supplies," Bethany said, turning to her husband. "You can escort us as far as the stone circle."

Sadie expected Comgall to object, but he just inclined his head in agreement. He

didn't even look worried.

They rode out less than an hour later - Bethany, Sadie, Ciaran, and five crimson-clad guardsmen, each armed with sword, spear, and shield. Ciaran was just as heavily armed, and even more imposing, with a heavy fur cloak hanging from his shoulders.

"I don't really know what to expect," Sadie said nervously as they rode the final distance towards the stone circle.

"I think I can track Matthew," Bethany said thoughtfully. "If he wants to be found, that is. And then we'll just have to see where we end up."

Sadie shivered. That did not sound like much of a plan to her, but neither Bethany nor Ciaran looked worried.

They all dismounted at the stone circle and left the horses tied up a short distance away. The group of them formed a line, all holding hands, while Bethany reached towards the nearest stone, her face screwed up in concentration. Sadie braced herself for the nausea, the sensation of falling - but nothing happened.

"I can't feel him," Bethany said, the first hint of fear in her voice. "I can't tell if he's blocking me, or if... he's just gone."

"I'm sure we'll find him," Sadie said encouragingly. "Keep trying."

But Bethany shook her head decisively and stepped back from the stone.

"No. We're going to find your sister, Sadie. Step up here so you can hold my hand."

They reshuffled the line so that Sadie held Bethany's cool hand - a sharp contrast to Ciaran's warmth on the other side.

“Now, think of your sister,” Bethany said. “Not just what she looks like, but who she is. Everything that makes her unique, makes her special. Everything that would leave a trace on the universe as she moves through it.”

Sadie closed her eyes and obeyed. She thought hard of little Norah, dancing out in the rain. Norah as she grew older, and the two of them huddled together in bed late at night, swapping ghost stories. She thought of Norah here in Dal Riada, riding as if she had no fear.

“I’ve got her,” Bethany said smugly. “Now, let’s go.”

She touched the stone so suddenly that Sadie had no time to prepare. It was as if the ground flew out from under her, sending her whirling through an expanse of rainbow-colored nothingness. Mysterious shapes twisted and flew past as Sadie fought to keep upright, fought to keep her balance.

They all hit the ground hard in a long white corridor. Sadie and Bethany clung to each other, just about still standing. The guardsmen all collapsed on the floor, retching.

“Pull yourselves together,” Ciaran hissed, and the shame-faced men scrambled to their feet, all still a little pale. Ciaran himself seemed surprisingly unaffected by the journey, although Sadie detected a little tightness around his mouth.

“Where are we?” she whispered to Bethany, whose own face was set and pale.

“Lucan’s laboratory,” Bethany whispered in reply. “No surprise there.”

“Our mission is to find Norah and get out of here,” Ciaran instructed. “And potentially to take revenge on Lucanus Edmondson,” he amended, after glancing at Bethany’s face. The queen nodded approvingly.

They all crept forwards together, Ciaran in the lead. Sadie peered at each door they passed along the length of the corridor, but each was completely solid, with no hint of what lay behind it. There was no sound except the soft scuff of their feet.

“Something’s not right,” Bethany said quietly. “There should be more people here.”

Even Sadie could agree that the place felt uncannily empty. Where were all the employees? She’d never been able to get inside this place, not even when she was investigating Norah’s disappearance, so she had no idea what it was usually like. Surely it was not normally this quiet, though.

“In here,” Bethany said, gesturing to a door just ahead of them. Ciaran yanked it open and preceded them all into a large, dark room. Blinking lights in the darkness suggested that it housed some sort of scientific equipment. As Bethany flicked the lights on, one switch at a time, Sadie saw that the entire far wall was occupied by a huge, hulking machine, covered in mysterious lights. A doorway-sized hole sat in the center.

“Is that-” Sadie began, glancing at Bethany.

“It’s a time machine,” Bethany confirmed. “But it doesn’t look right. I’ve got a nasty feeling that we’re stuck here, unless there’s a handy stone circle nearby.

“Correct, my dear,” a voice said from behind them. They all whirled around to see Henry standing in the open doorway, his gun held casually in his hand. “What a surprise to see you here, Bethany. We might have mislaid your son, but I suppose you’ll do for now. Get that machine working, and I might just let you live.”

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Ciaran couldn't understand a damn word the man said, and it was driving him mad. One thing was clear, though - this man was threatening Queen Bethany, and that could not be permitted. Unfortunately, the ladies' attitudes also suggested that the object in the man's hand was some kind of weapon, and a dangerous one at that. Ciaran remembered the pool of blood, back in the old cottage. He must not do anything foolish.

"What's he saying?" he asked Sadie.

The man rolled his eyes and reached into his pocket, then fumbled with his ear for a second.

"I'll repeat it again, for the barbarians," he said, in accented but fluent Gaelic. "I am willing to make a deal with you all. If Bethany gets this machine working again, I'll hand over the red-head and you can all go home unharmed. Frankly, it will save me the trouble of disposing of her body."

Sadie flinched.

Ciaran clenched his fists. Every inch of his body screamed at him not to trust this man. Whatever he was offering them, there must be a catch. There was some hidden secret here, something that he was not telling them. There was no way he would let them all go free.

"If I am the one powering the machine, then I will be unable to travel," Bethany said calmly.

Trust her to see straight to the heart of the matter.

“There is no way that I will leave my queen behind,” Ciaran growled, calculating the distance between him and this man. He could definitely take him. And he had five guardsmen at his back. Surely this unpleasant little man could not kill them all.

“Ciaran, don’t,” Bethany snapped, clearly reading his mind. “It’s a good offer. I can take care of myself.”

Ciaran shook his head stubbornly.

“The king would have my head if I left you here alone.”

Bethany squared her shoulders and glared at the man.

“Where is Lucan, Henry? I demand to speak to him.”

The man - Henry - just shrugged.

“I’ve no idea. He took off about a year ago and never came back. Jack dropped a few hints about knowing where he was, but it was all talk. Jack doesn’t know anything important.”

Jack must be the man who lay injured in Dunadd - and perhaps he knew another layer of this mysterious tale. Ciaran filed that away as information to act on later. For now, he had to deal with the scenario right in front of him.

“Bring Norah in here,” Bethany demanded. “I won’t agree to anything until I know she’s alive and well.”

The man shrugged.

“Very well,” he said. “It’s a reasonable request. But I won’t have you wandering about while I’m gone.”

He stepped out into the corridor and closed the door behind him. Something clicked loudly. Ciaran rushed forwards to test the door - which, of course, did not budge. They were locked in.

“Bethany, you can’t possibly accept his offer,” he said, panic rising. “That man can’t be trusted.”

“Don’t worry,” Bethany said with a grin. “I don’t believe a single word he says. But I also think I have a way to get us out of here. I just need to make sure that Norah is with us first.”

Ciaran wanted to ask her more, but he was distracted when Sadie slipped her hand into his. He squeezed her fingers tightly. No matter what happened, at least he was here with her. If only he’d had the chance to tell her how he really felt. They both had to get through this, just so he could have that opportunity. She had to know.

“Now, you must all be ready to seize Norah as soon as you can,” Bethany instructed the guardsmen. “But beware the weapon he carries in his hand - it may look small, but it can cause a lot of damage. And at a distance, as well. Think of it almost like a bow that does not need to be drawn.”

The men’s eyes widened, and no wonder. Ciaran did not like to even imagine the potential of such a weapon.

“What then?” he asked Bethany. “How are we all going to get out of here?”

“I will start the time machine, just like he wanted,” Bethany said. “The men will get Norah through and back to safety.”

“I am not going to leave you here,” Ciaran insisted.

Bethany’s smile actually widened.

“Oh, I wouldn’t dream of leaving you out of the fun,” she said. “I want you and Sadie to stay here. We’ll be traveling back by a very different route. Sadie, I assume you can drive?”

Sadie nodded, although Ciaran didn’t quite understand the question. What on earth was Bethany planning?

“Ciaran, be ready to get Henry out of the way as soon as the machine is operational,” Bethany instructed. “But, like I said, beware of his weapon. It can kill in an instant.”

Ciaran’s eyes widened. That little piece of metal? It hardly looked capable of anything. But Bethany’s face was deadly serious. He did not question her.

After what felt like hours, but was probably only a few moments, the door scraped open again. Henry appeared in the doorway - and, to Ciaran’s relief, the man was dragging Norah along with him.

“Here you are,” he said, thrusting Norah towards Sadie. He raised his weapon again to point it at Bethany. “Now, hurry up and get the machine running. And no tricks.”

Bethany nodded humbly. Ciaran hoped that Henry had not seen the flash of fire in her eyes. Sadie was already shifting Norah over towards the guards, who grasped her arms firmly. The air in the room was thick with tension.

Gently, Bethany lay her hands on the machine.

“I’ve never worked with this before,” she said to Henry over her shoulder. “It may

take some time.”

“Just get on with it,” he growled, the hand that held the weapon beginning to shake slightly.

Ciaran took a small step to the side, then another. It would only take one blow to disarm the man, he was sure of it. He just needed to wait until Bethany gave the signal.

The lights on the machine flared into life.

“There we are,” Bethany said, satisfaction evident in her voice. “Guards, Norah, you go first.”

Norah looked at Sadie, a panicked expression in her eyes, but she did not object as the guards led her towards the huge, humming machine. Ciaran saw the first man flinch, but the king’s guards were chosen for their bravery. One by one, they all stepped into the machine and vanished. Ciaran could only hope they had reached their destination.

“Now the rest of you,” Henry said impatiently. His hand really was shaking now.

“Very well,” Bethany said calmly. “Ciaran, it’s your turn.”

Ciaran lunged. A deafening noise split the air.

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Sadie screamed as the gun fired, but it had missed Ciaran by a long way. He slammed into Henry before the smaller man had a chance to fire a second time, and the gun went skittering across the floor. Sadie seized it with shaking hands. She didn't really know how to use it, but surely it couldn't be that hard. Besides, it didn't look as if she would need it. With one punch, Ciaran sent Henry flying halfway across the room. The engineer crashed into the machine with a sickening thud.

"Let's get out of here," Bethany said, not even turning to look at him. "I'm sure there's some kind of security in this place, and we don't want to be around when they turn up."

Sadie thoroughly agreed with that statement.

Bethany led the way, navigating unhesitatingly through long corridors and half a dozen doors. Everything looked identical to Sadie, but Bethany seemed confident of the way.

"I made a map of the place while I was planning to leave Lucan," she explained. "You can never have too much information. Of course, I had to burn the thing to stop him finding it, but I memorized everything first."

Sadie was impressed. If she'd still been investigating Lucan Edmondson, Bethany would have been an invaluable ally. The woman seemed to know everything.

"And here we are," Bethany said triumphantly, throwing open a nondescript door at the bottom of a narrow staircase. "I knew he wouldn't have told the others about them."

Sadie's jaw dropped. She was looking at an entire garage of sports cars. She didn't know anything about cars, didn't know a BMW from a Jaguar, but even she could tell that these were expensive .

"Do these belong to Professor Edmondson?" she squeaked.

"They certainly do," Bethany said brightly. "His secret vice. He wouldn't have told any of his staff, in case they took them for a ride. Choose which one you like."

"You want me to drive?" Sadie squeaked, her voice even higher.

"We're going to take a car each," Bethany explained. "Make it harder for them to follow us. But I don't imagine Ciaran can drive, so he'll have to go as your passenger."

"What are these things?" Ciaran asked, poking at one shiny door. "Are you saying that they move?"

"You're in for quite an experience," Bethany said with a grin. "Choose a car, Sadie."

Feeling even more panicked and overwhelmed than when faced with a gun, Sadie picked a car at random. Bethany reached over and programmed a destination into the GPS.

"See you there," she said, her grin broadening even further. "I always wanted to drive one of these."

Bethany's chosen car roared to life with a snarl like a big cat. Ciaran jumped backwards with a gasp, and Sadie couldn't help but laugh.

"Sorry, Ciaran, but this might be a little bit terrifying."

Bethany zoomed off, the automatic garage door lifting to let her through. Ciaran's jaw dropped as he watched her go.

"No time to gawp," Sadie said, hustling him towards the passenger seat. "Get in and buckle up."

"Buckle?"

It took a moment to get Ciaran strapped in - and another moment for Sadie to gather her courage. She could do this. She was a perfectly decent driver. They could take it easy.

"Hey! Stop there!"

Of course. A group of men in fluorescent vests burst into the garage. Bethany had been right about security.

"No more time to wait," Sadie muttered, and they were off.

The car accelerated so fast that the garage door barely had time to open. Ciaran screamed out loud as they flew out into the street and careened around the corner. The GPS shouted frantic instructions, but Sadie was too busy trying to figure out this car. Someone honked their horn at her, then someone else.

"Calm down!" she shouted, half to Ciaran and half to herself. The GPS kept on chattering and Sadie tried to focus on the instructions. No one was chasing her yet. They'd left the security guards far behind.

She calmed down enough to pause at the next traffic lights. She had to turn left here. She glanced in the wing mirror idly - and saw the fluorescent-garbed security men, all piled into a fancy vehicle just a few cars back.

Sadie swore. No time to worry about traffic regulations. She flew forwards, straight through the red light, and whirled around the corner. Then another left, and a right. And then, suddenly, she was outside the town, the busy roads fading away into country lanes. She slowed down a little, concentrating on navigating her way around the winding roads.

“Are we still alive?” Ciaran asked cautiously, as if he doubted the fact.

“For now,” Sadie said. “And I think we lost them. We can only hope that Bethany was just as lucky.”

She finally took a second to check the destination on the GPS. Castlerigg Stone Circle, Cumbria. They were going all the way to Cumbria? At least the security guards were unlikely to follow them that far. Surely they were not paid enough for cross-country chases. They could turn this one over to the police.

With their journey now a little less urgent, Sadie found she could actually relax. She wouldn't quite say she enjoyed herself, but there was something oddly pleasurable about driving such a powerful car. The permanent expression of shock and wonder on Ciaran's face was even better.

“How is it possible to move so fast?” he asked, his head whipping backwards and forwards as he stared at things outside the window.

“Modern technology,” Sadie said with a shrug. “You get used to it.”

“Oh, no,” Ciaran said, shaking his head. “I could never get used to this.”

Sadie just laughed and found the button for heating the seats. Perhaps she could get used to driving a car like this.

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It was late by the time they reached their destination. Sadie took the last few miles slowly, nervous at driving these winding roads in the dark. Thankfully, they met with no mishap, and managed to park in the small muddy space near the stone circle.

Even better, Bethany was already waiting for them beside the stones, and smiled with relief when she saw them.

“I spotted those security men in my mirror!” she told them. “I was worried you might not make it.”

“It was close,” Sadie admitted. “But here we are.”

“Then it’s time to leave,” Bethany said. “Are you ready?”

“More than ready,” Ciaran said firmly. “Let’s go.”

He turned and stretched out his hand to Sadie. But she could not take it. She stood there, rooted to the spot, and stared at him.

“Come on,” he said impatiently. “Sadie, we have to go.”

“I can’t” she whispered. “This is my home, Ciaran. I belong here.”

“It’s not safe,” he insisted. “Sadie, take my hand and come with me. Your sister’s already there.”

“I need to stay here,” Sadie said, shaking her head. She could almost feel her heart

breaking, but everything she said was true. This was her time, for all its faults.

“Sadie, no,” Ciaran said. “You have to come with me. I need you to come with me.”

I love you , she almost said, but what good would that do now? She’d helped him to get away safely. But now that the excitement of the chase was over, Sadie saw the truth. She and Ciaran did not belong together. And in a few weeks, he would probably forget her and move on with his life. There must be ladies lining up to marry such a strong, handsome warlord. So she turned around and walked back towards the car.

Ciaran screamed her name, but he did not come after her. A brief pulse of light told Sadie they were gone, and she kept her gaze fixed firmly ahead. She did not need to see the empty stone circle.

She left the car parked in a side street in the nearest town. By some miracle, she still had her money and ID tucked in the hidden pocket of her dress, so she was able to book a room to stay in a local bed and breakfast. The woman there eyed her a little oddly, but made no objection. Sadie supposed she must look rather odd, in a medieval gown and with no luggage. She was too tired to care.

Being back in a modern bed was a delight. Sadie slept deeply, undisturbed by dreams or strange noises. She did wake early, though, and lay there listening to the rain on the roof. Had Ciaran and Bethany made it home safely? Would they send Norah back to the twenty-first century?

Sadie still struggled to believe that she’d let Ciaran go. All through the chaos of their escape, and the crazy drive, she hadn’t even paused to think. It just seemed natural that she would return with him. As if they belonged together. But at the last second, she couldn’t do it. How could she give up her life for a man who’d never even said he cared for her? Sadie squeezed her eyes tightly shut as a single tear leaked out. No,

she'd made the right decision. And no doubt Norah would be home soon.

After a quick breakfast, Sadie ordered a taxi to get her to the train station, then bought a ticket for the next train back to Glasgow. It was tempting to take the fancy car, but it was far too noticeable. It wouldn't do to be caught with stolen property - even if the owner was a kidnapper.

The train journey gave her plenty of time to think. How long had she been gone? She checked the date on her train ticket and gasped. Two days? How was that possible? Time must have passed very differently while she was in the past. Still, that was long enough. Her colleagues would have noticed her missing in a matter of hours. She bit her lip guiltily. Her parents must be beside themselves. They'd already lost one daughter.

Sure enough, the two of them almost collapsed onto her when she appeared at their front door. Sadie found herself crying and hugging them back.

"Where have you been?" her mother asked. "No word, no call. We've been frantic."

"I'm so sorry," Sadie sobbed. "I had to - I couldn't-"

She paused and took a deep breath.

"I found Norah," she said. "But you're not going to believe my story."

"Tell us anyway," her mother insisted. "We need to know."

So Sadie sat them down at the kitchen table and told them everywhere she'd been and everything she'd done. Well, not quite everything. She didn't mention any of her interludes with Ciaran, although she suspected she blushed a little every time she said his name.

“And you expect Norah to come home soon?” her mother pressed.

Sadie bit her lip.

“Well, to be honest, I’m not exactly sure,” she said. “She seemed happy there, in a way. Like it suited her.”

Her mother sighed heavily.

“Well, then we will just have to wait. Norah always did do whatever she wanted.”

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The return trip through time was even harder than the first. Ciaran came very close to casting up the contents of his stomach, and he was forced to clutch at a nearby stone to keep him upright.

“Sorry about that,” Bethany said, sounding far too cheerful. “I think I was a bit too rushed.”

Ciaran looked up at her, and her expression immediately fell.

“I’m sorry, Ciaran,” she said softly. “I know how much she meant to you.”

“I never got to tell her,” Ciaran said, his throat feeling wooden and clumsy. “I never told her that I loved her.”

Bethany laid a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Let’s go home.”

Ciaran looked around and realized, to his surprise, that they were no longer in the place they’d been just a moment ago. Instead, they were back at the stone circle near Dunadd. He looked at Bethany with even greater respect. She seemed rather talented at this time-travel business.

Still, the walk back to Dunadd was long enough. The two of them trudged heavily through the undergrowth, each step a little harder than the one before. There was no sign of Norah and the guards, and Ciaran mentioned that to Bethany. She seemed unconcerned.

“Time passes differently here,” she told him. “They might have arrived back hours ago, or even days.”

They reached the road at last, and set off up the hill to Dunadd. Ciaran had never wished so much that he had a horse - or a powerful beast like the one Sadie had driven. He tried to push away all thoughts of Sadie, but it was no good. He couldn't possibly forget her.

Dust rose up from the road ahead of them as a group of horsemen crested the hill. Ciaran tensed and reached for his sword, but Bethany laughed.

“I think it's Comgall,” she said.

As the riders drew closer, Ciaran saw that she was right. The king himself sat atop the leading horse, his gaze focused on his wife. Without a single word, he jumped down from his horse and ran the last distance towards them until he could sweep Bethany into his arms. Ciaran looked awkwardly away as the king and queen greeted each other.

“The guardsmen returned last night,” Comgall explained. “I've been frantic with worry, wondering when you'd reappear.”

“Did Norah return as well?” Ciaran asked.

Ominously, Comgall frowned.

“We have to discuss that,” he said grimly. “Something rather strange has happened.”

Bethany took the king's horse, while Ciaran and Comgall walked alongside her.

“No doubt you'll want to interview them yourselves,” Comgall said. “But the guards

claim that Norah simply never made it back with them. They all landed in the stone circle, and she was nowhere to be found.”

Bethany gasped.

“But they all left together!” she insisted. “There were two guardsmen in front of her, and two behind. How could she have gone missing?”

“I don’t know,” Comgall said. “But I don’t like it.” He hesitated.

Bethany sighed and reached to stroke his hair.

“Matthew is still missing, isn’t he,” she said.

Comgall nodded, and Ciaran felt his own heart break a little. He’d failed his king - and, perhaps even worse, he’d failed Matthew. He hadn’t seen how unhappy and afraid the boy was.

“In truth, I hoped we would find him at Edmondson’s lab,” Bethany said, her voice wobbling slightly. “But there was no trace of him. I really don’t know where he’s gone.”

“Do you think those time travelers have him?” Ciaran asked, afraid to even say such things.

Bethany shook her head slowly.

“No, I think he’s smart enough to evade them. I just wish I knew where he was! He’s too young to run off on his own like this.”

Ciaran could only agree. Matthew was a smart boy, but he was still just a boy. Who

would take care of him?

At Dunadd's gates, they were greeted like returning heroes, with cheers and handfuls of flower petals. Bethany smiled and greeted her people, but Ciaran kept his face stern. He couldn't really see much to be happy about. Norah and Matthew were missing somewhere in the mists of time, Sadie had rejected him, and he'd failed his king. Very little to cheer about, all in all.

"Ciaran, there's something else," Comgall said quietly. "That man, the prisoner from the cottage? He's conscious again, and I think you'll want to talk to him."

Of course! The injured man from the cottage. Ciaran had almost completely forgotten about him.

"Has he said anything?"

Comgall shook his head.

"Not yet. But I'm sure he will."

Ciaran nodded. He was just as sure.

"Where's Norah?" he growled, bursting into the small, quiet room in the healer's quarter. To his credit, the man barely flinched.

"I've no idea," he said. "I've been here the whole time."

"That doesn't mean you know nothing," Ciaran pointed out. "What was the plan?"

The man hesitated. Ciaran stalked nearer, feeling a flash of triumph.

“There was a plan,” he said. “Tell me.”

“I was planning to help her,” the man admitted, his words stunning Ciaran into silence. “I’ve had enough of this game. I tried to get out once before, and found myself dragged straight back into everything. But enough is enough. I won’t hurt innocent people any more.”

“You were planning to betray your colleagues?” Ciaran asked, not sure whether to feel impressed or horrified.

The man raised his chin proudly.

“I was indeed,” he said. “Henry used to be a decent enough man, but he’s changed. All he wants is money and power.”

Ciaran shook his head. Too many men were like that. A hint of greed could quickly spiral out of control.

“But you don’t know where Norah is?”

The man looked genuine as he shook his head.

“It makes no sense to me, either. I don’t see how anyone could be snatched away like that.”

Ciaran cursed softly and left the man to his rest. If he was telling the truth - and it seemed like he was - then there was no knowing where Norah might be. Had she somehow returned to her own time? Ciaran wanted to believe that, wanted to think the two sisters were reunited and safe. But he could not quite shake the feeling that something was very, very wrong.

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Sadie had been fired from her job, of course. She went to collect her belongings from the office, and found herself faced with a glaring Iain.

“Good riddance,” he muttered as she left. She just glared at him in return.

She’d worked so hard to get this job, but walking out of the newspaper office for the last time felt surprisingly uplifting. Perhaps she should have done this a long time ago. If only she’d been able to look past her obsession with Norah’s disappearance. Still, that had all worked out for the best, hadn’t it? She’d managed to find Norah and rescue her from the clutches of those time travelers. Everything was coming to a satisfying happy ending.

Except Norah did not come back.

Sadie tried to convince herself that Norah liked it in the past. That was what she’d told her mother, after all. But as each day passed with no sign of Norah, Sadie became more and more anxious. Surely Bethany would at least have sent word to them, somehow. Norah wouldn’t leave her family to suffer like this.

There was no point in worrying, Sadie told herself. She couldn’t do anything to find Norah if her sister didn’t want to be found. So, she threw herself into finding a new job. She went out for the evening with a few old schoolfriends, and even let them set her up on a blind date.

“You’ll love him,” Katie insisted, and Sadie smiled wanly. She doubted this man would be anywhere near as impressive as Ciaran.

She was tempted to return to Edmondson's laboratory and demand answers. But what would that achieve?

She went on the date. The man turned out to be called Sam, and he was charming enough. Conversation flowed easily, and Sadie even found herself admiring his handsome good looks. But he seemed too small in comparison to Ciaran, and Sadie couldn't stop thinking of tangled hair and fierce eyes. She said a cheerful farewell to Sam at the end of the night, and knew she would never see him again.

Trudging the last of the way home, Sadie finally admitted it to herself. She'd fallen head over heels in love with Ciaran, despite all the ways they didn't trust each other. What an idiot she'd been. This should never have happened.

"How was the date?" her housemate asked as Sadie slipped past the living room.

Sadie could only shrug.

"It was alright," she said, and climbed the stairs up to her bedroom.

She'd only spent the first night back at her parents' house. Since then, she'd been back home in the house she rented with two other women. It wasn't the nicest of places, but the rent was cheap, and it felt like home. Usually, at least. These days, it just felt empty. Against her will, Sadie thought of rough woolen blankets and the smell of peat fires. Had she made the wrong decision? Should she have gone with him?

No use second-guessing yourself, she thought firmly. This was the time she'd chosen, and she would have to live with that decision.

Her phone rang. She scowled down at the screen. Why would her mother be calling at this time of night? It was nearly midnight.

Suddenly nervous, Sadie answered the phone.

“Sadie, you have to come home at once,” her mother said, panicked words rattling into Sadie’s ear. “We’ve had a letter.”

“A letter? I don’t understand. What’s the emergency?”

“You have to come home,” her mother insisted, and hung up.

Sadie groaned. It was at times like this she wished she owned a car, although she hardly needed one in the center of Glasgow. She had no choice but to call for a taxi and wait the agonizing few moments for it to arrive. She gave the driver her parents’ address and clambered in, trying to figure out what on earth was going on. What kind of letter could disturb her mother so much?

Her parents answered the door before she could even ring the bell, and tugged her straight through to the living room.

“Look,” her mother said in a panic, thrusting a letter into Sadie’s hands. “I know it’s addressed to you, but when we saw it, we just had to open it. Sadie, what’s going on?”

Sadie looked down at the letter. The very envelope made her blood run cold.

Edmondson Laboratories it said in the top right-hand corner.

She should have paid them a visit after all. How had they found her parents’ address?

Hands shaking slightly, Sadie pulled the small scrap of paper out and scanned it.

We have the woman and the boy. Come to the laboratory if you wish to see them

freed.

There was no other information. No signature, no time limit, no further details. All in all, it was a very odd note. And a very sinister one.

“Do they mean Norah?” Sadie’s mother said, clutching her husband’s hand.

“It seems likely,” Sadie said. “I have to go.”

“No!” her mother burst out. “We’re going to call the police and trust them to figure this out.”

“As if they won’t jump through time the second they see the police coming!”

“Sadie, promise me you won’t go there,” her mother said stubbornly. “It’s too dangerous. We can’t lose you as well.”

“The police can’t stop this,” Sadie insisted. “If they could, they would have arrested these people years ago. They’ve already got away with murder. I can’t let anything happen to Norah. Or Matthew.”

This still made no sense - how could Henry have seized Norah and Matthew? Then again, Sadie was no expert in time travel. She had no idea how it worked. Perhaps Henry was an expert at snatching people as they traveled through time. Sadie would just have to do as he told her, and pray he was feeling merciful.

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C iaran knew that he should get back to ordinary life. He had his island to return to - Niamh was capable, but even she could use some help. Besides, it was his responsibility. His duty.

But he lingered in Dunadd, finding himself constantly drawn towards the gates.

“Ciaran, she’s not about to ride in through there,” Comgall said softly when he caught him there one day. “If you’re that worried, you need to do something.”

What could Ciaran do, though? He knew everything there was to know about battles and fighting, but he knew very little about time travel, and perhaps even less about women. Sadie was lost to him.

After three days of moping, he finally accepted that Sadie was not about to reappear in Dunadd. She was no doubt already settled back into her old life. Things must be very different there, based on what little Ciaran had seen. She would be enjoying her fancy futuristic machines, and spending time with her family. There was no place for Ciaran in her life, and he needed to accept that. After all, they’d never even really liked each other.

So, he loaded his things onto a boat and prepared to leave. All his people came with him, although they were rather more subdued than when they’d set out from Arran. After all, Prince Matthew was still missing. What a disaster of a journey this had been, from start to finish.

Thankfully, the return sailing passed without incident. No one jumped - or was pushed - into the sea, there was no fighting, and there was no Matthew to argue

whenever he was given an order. Ciaran found it all rather sadly quiet. They spent the night aboard the ship, with the sailors working in shifts, and then Ciaran's home port finally appeared up ahead of them.

Word of their arrival must have spread; Niamh was already waiting to greet them by the dock. And there beside her was... Matthew?

Ciaran almost threw himself from the ship in his haste to find out what was going on. It was indeed Matthew standing beside Niamh, although the boy was a good few inches taller than Ciaran remembered, and looked a lot older than he should. What on earth was happening?

"Matthew, where have you been?" he demanded.

Matthew laughed, the sound oddly hollow.

"The question, perhaps, is where haven't I been. Suffice to say, time has not passed in the same way for me as it has for you. I hope I am not too late."

"Too late for what?" Ciaran asked, confused. Had Matthew somehow been away for years ?

"To save Norah and Sadie," Matthew said impatiently. "They are in terrible danger, and I believe you are the man needed to rescue them."

"But they went home," Ciaran said, feeling as if his brain had turned to quicksand. "They're safe."

"They are certainly not safe," Matthew snapped. "I would have come back sooner if I could, but I had other missions to complete. Come with me. Now. "

When Ciaran hesitated, Matthew reached out to grasp him by the arm. There was a new iron in his grip, and Ciaran realized with a jolt that this was most certainly not the same boy who had set sail for Dunadd. Matthew had changed in more than his appearance.

“Very well,” he said. “To the stone circle?”

Matthew nodded.

“You will need to remain here a little longer,” Ciaran said to Niamh, who looked wide-eyed but determined. She nodded. “And with any luck,” he continued. “I will be bringing back a wife as well.”

He rushed past her before he could see the change in her expression. He was not ready to deal with his sister just yet.

“Hurry,” Matthew urged him. “We don’t have long.”

Ciaran wanted to ask more questions, but he focused on speed, pushing his sea-weary body into a run, even though his lungs burned at the steepness of the hill. Matthew loped along beside him without visibly expending any effort. What had happened to him?

At last, they reached the stone circle - the place where it had all begun. This was where Ciaran had come in search of the missing Matthew, and instead found Sadie. He hadn’t known it at the time, but that was the moment when his whole life changed.

“I’m afraid we’re going back to the laboratory,” Matthew said. “Are you ready?”

He didn’t even give Ciaran time to nod. He reached out and grasped his arm, and the

ground flew out from beneath Ciaran's feet.

To his surprise, he landed again in just a second, his feet steady on a smooth, white floor. He didn't even feel dizzy or nauseous, and he looked at Matthew with even more respect.

But Matthew was not looking at him. Instead, he was frowning up at a round object on the wall. Two long lines ticked their way around it in a steady motion.

"We've only got ten minutes," he said. "We're cutting this far too close."

"What do you mean?" Ciaran asked. Did that object tell the time? "Ten minutes until what?"

"Ten minutes until they kill Norah and Sadie," Matthew said impatiently. "Try to keep up. Now, follow me. I don't yet know why I need you, but I know that I do. Stay close."

Without providing any more useful information, he marched out into the corridor beyond, leaving Ciaran to trail behind him.

The soulless white corridors of the laboratory were as empty as when Ciaran had last seen them. It felt strange to be back so soon, returned to this sterile landscape of gleaming smoothness.

Matthew stopped abruptly and pulled open a door. Ciaran almost walked straight into it, and stopped only just in time.

"Here we are," Matthew announced loudly. "Hello, Sadie and Norah. And hello, Father."

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Too often in her life, Sadie had been forced to admit that her mother was right. Unfortunately, this had quickly turned out to be another one of those occasions.

Sadie had left her parents' house with no intention of calling the police, despite her promises. There was no guarantee that her mother had not already made that call, so Sadie would have to act fast. She desperately wished that she had that sports car back again, but it was miles away. And probably in police custody by now. Instead, she called a taxi.

"You want to go how far?" the driver asked incredulously. When Sadie showed him she had the money for such a long journey, he just shrugged. "Well, I've got nowhere else to be today. Hop in."

A few hours later, Sadie found herself standing outside the reception of Edmondson Laboratories.

The place looked completely closed. As she peered in through the glass door, she saw no receptionist behind that huge desk. There weren't even any lights on. But when she finally gathered the courage to push at the door, it opened effortlessly. Sadie swallowed hard and stepped inside.

"Hello?" she called. No answer.

There were a few different doors. Sadie chose the one marked Staff Only and stepped through into an eerily familiar corridor. Her footsteps echoed heavily as she wandered along it. At least the lights were on here, although she still neither saw nor heard any signs of life. Where was everyone?

“Norah,” she called, hoping against hope that her sister would answer. Nothing.

This door looked familiar. Hadn’t Bethany led them through here, to the time machine? Sadie gritted her teeth and turned the handle.

“Good afternoon,” a familiar voice said.

Sadie met Henry’s eyes for a second before her glance slid to Norah, who sat bound to a chair in the corner of the room.

“Norah!” she gasped, but the gun in Henry’s hand stopped her from taking another step forwards. Sadie thought regretfully of his other gun, the one she’d left in his stolen car. Really, she’d never expected her life to become this exciting.

She didn’t want to tear her eyes away from her sister, but she gradually became aware there was another man in the room. Tall and slender, he leaned heavily on a cane and stared hard at Sadie.

“You two really are identical,” he said, his voice surprisingly rich and mellow. “What a delight.”

Sadie stared at him. There was something familiar about this man. She knew his face. He shifted slightly and his blue eyes flashed in the fluorescent lighting.

Suddenly, it all fell into place.

“Professor Edmondson,” Sadie gasped. She’d investigated this man as thoroughly as she could, and examined dozens of photographs of him. But he looked much older than even the most recent pictures suggested, with deep lines carved into this face.

“Well done,” he said, with a crooked little smile. “A journalist, aren’t you? I hear you

tried to meet with me on a number of occasions. I apologize that I was... otherwise occupied.”

“Let my sister go,” Sadie demanded. “You can’t possibly have any reason to keep her here.”

Something else occurred to her.

“And where’s Matthew?”

The Professor’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Matthew is not here. I have every hope that he will soon arrive, but one can never be sure when it comes to Matthew. I mentioned his name simply as an... additional incentive.”

Sadie clenched her fists and tried not to lose her temper. It would do her no good, not when these two men were the ones with all the power.

“Well, I did what you wanted. Now, let Norah go.”

The Professor smiled glacially.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible, my dear.”

He clicked his fingers and the door slammed shut. Sadie heard the lock click into place. How was that possible?

“What do you want?” she asked him, her voice shaking a little. Her gaze met Norah’s. Her sister looked every bit as terrified as Sadie felt.

“I’m sorry that we could not come to a more mutually satisfactory agreement,” the Professor said, sounding genuinely regretful. “I hear that Norah was one of our best employees. But I need to take some radical action.”

“Radical action?” Sadie asked, suddenly afraid to hear his answer.

“Yes. You see, I have run out of power for this time machine. All my attempts have failed. All my power sources are gone. All that is left is raw life power itself.”

Sadie’s jaw dropped. All those missing women. He couldn’t possibly mean-

“The two of you need to die,” Henry growled. “It doesn’t hurt that you know too much. And twins are powerful in the old magic, so the Professor says.”

“Indeed,” the Professor said graciously. “You will fuel my magic beautifully. I just need your blood. All of it.”

“Not a chance!” Sadie shouted, and lunged for him. She found herself suddenly frozen in the middle of the air, her entire body immobile.

“Now, let’s not do anything rash,” Professor Edmondson said, almost kindly. “Henry, would you put down that gun and tie our guest up?”

Henry tucked the gun into his belt, although he looked reluctant to do so, and set about tying Sadie’s wrists. She still could not move, but he seemed to have no problem manipulating her arms into place. What had Edmondson done to her?

“Good,” he said, once Henry was finished. “Now, please draw up another chair for her. I believe that we are expecting more company.”

Sure enough, Sadie could hear footsteps in the corridor, quiet at first, but growing

gradually louder.

“Hand me the gun, Henry,” the Professor ordered.

Sadie could see the hesitation in the engineer’s face - and was that fear? So, he didn’t trust his employer and master. Interesting. Still, he handed over the gun. Sadie did not exactly feel any safer with the weapon in the hands of Lucan Edmondson. She could barely breathe. What was going to happen next?

The door swung open and Sadie gasped. Matthew stood there, with Ciaran peering over his shoulder.

“Here we are,” Matthew announced loudly. “Hello, Sadie and Norah. And hello, Father.”

Professor Edmondson’s lips stretched in a narrow smile.

“You’re late, boy,” he said, and shot Henry through the chest.

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Sadie screamed, but Professor Edmondson ignored her. Instead, he laid the gun down on his chair and peered dispassionately at Henry.

“Definitely dead,” he said. “I really can’t thank you enough, Matthew, for bringing his activities to my attention. What a despicable little man.”

Sadie couldn’t figure out what was going on. Was Professor Edmondson on their side? None of this made any sense.

Behind her, the time travel machine flared into life with a loud whirr and a flash of light.

“Good,” the Professor said. “That should be enough power to get me where I need to go.”

“Somebody needs to explain,” Sadie croaked.

The Professor smiled slightly. It was not a comforting expression.

“Henry here betrayed me,” he said. “He thought I was dead, and took charge of my company. I could not let such a betrayal go unpunished.”

Ah. Not because Henry was a terrible person, then. Sadie really did not feel any better.

“Does that mean we can go, then?” she asked in a small voice.

“Yes, of course,” the Professor said, waving one hand in a careless way that suggested he barely noticed her existence. “Matthew, untie them. Norah I expect you back at work on Monday.”

“You what ?” Sadie asked as her hands were untied. She whirled on her sister, who did not meet her eyes. “You’ve been in on this the whole time,” Sadie accused her. “You already knew what was going on!”

“I had an idea,” Norah admitted. “I was working with Jack to undermine Henry. I’m so sorry I didn’t tell you, Sadie, but I couldn’t risk having it all fall apart.”

Tears built in Sadie’s eyes.

“I thought you were dead,” she whispered. “Do you have any idea what that was like?”

“Sadie, I’m sorry,” Norah said.

Sadie didn’t want to listen to her. She didn’t want to hear any more of this. Ciaran still hovered in the doorway, his eyes wide and confused. Of course - they’d been speaking in English. He wouldn’t have understood a word.

“Ciaran, I need to get out of here,” Sadie said in Gaelic. “Will you come with me?”

He hesitated, his eyes flickering to the giant time travel machine. Sadie’s heart sank.

“Of course,” she said. “You need to go home. How silly of me.”

“He can stay for the weekend,” Matthew put in. “I can send him home on Monday.”

They all turned to look at the boy. He spoke of time travel so casually, as if it was

nothing.

“That’s my boy,” Professor Edmondson said proudly. “I suppose we’d have time for that before we leave on our own mission.”

His glance included Norah in that statement. Sadie bit her tongue. She didn’t want to know where her sister was going, or what she would be doing. She was done with all of this nonsense. No more time travel.

“I can stay for a few days?” Ciaran asked, clearly still catching up with the conversation.

“Yes, I suppose so,” Professor Edmondson said. “Norah, call for the cleaners. We need to get this body tidied up. I have no further use for it.”

Sadie thought she might be sick. Were Norah and Matthew really working with this psychotic madman? She met her sister’s gaze, and something she saw in there told her not to speak. Wait , her sister seemed to say. So, wait she would.

“Come on Ciaran,” she muttered. “Let’s get out of here.”

To her surprise, he took her hand as they made their way down the long corridor.

“Matthew brought you here?” she asked.

He nodded.

“He said he needed my help, before it was too late for you and Norah. But I don’t really understand what he meant. I wasn’t needed at all.”

Sadie sighed.

“I don’t understand either. I don’t understand any of this. I suspect that we are just a tiny part of something far bigger.”

“You may be right.”

The reception area was still dark and empty. Sadie wondered absently where these cleaners were, then shivered. Cleaning up dead bodies was surely not the job of an average janitor. She didn’t want to know what else Professor Edmondson’s ‘cleaners’ were used to doing. Judging by all her prior research, though, Professor Edmondson would get away with this. Despite all the disappearances, he had never faced more than a casual investigation.

But where had he been , this past year? What had left him looking old and worn, and leaning on that cane? It seemed that Matthew and Norah knew the answer, even if they would not share it. Sadie would just have to trust them.

The noise and traffic of the city came as an abrupt shock. Ciaran winced away from the passing cars, brandishing his sword. Sadie took one look at him and burst out laughing.

“Oh, dear,” she said. “There’s no way we’ll be able to hail a cab like this.”

“I do not understand you,” Ciaran said through gritted teeth. They were starting to attract a bit of attention now, passers-by gaping and pointing.

“Screw this,” Sadie said, turning around and opening the door again. “We’re taking another one of the Professor’s cars.”

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As they traveled back to Sadie's home, Ciaran struggled to understand anything he saw. It did not help that it all flew past so quickly. Was Sadie truly controlling this thing? It did not seem possible. Even the swiftest horse in the king's stable only moved at a fraction of this speed. And the music it produced! Thudding and screeching like Ciaran had never heard before. Thankfully, Sadie pressed some buttons until it made the soothing noise of a harp. Strangely, though, as much as Ciaran poked about, he could see no sign of the harp itself. And he had no idea why Sadie kept laughing at him.

All in all, it was rather a relief when the music stopped and the conveyance came to a halt.

"We're here," Sadie said. "My parents' house. I have to tell them what happened, and where Norah is."

Ciaran almost choked. Her parents ? He was about to meet her parents?

"No, we can't go in yet!" he said in a panic. "I have no gifts! And I haven't - I need to -"

He realized that Sadie was laughing at him again.

"Are you, Ciaran, Lord of Arran, and a terrifying warlord, afraid of meeting my parents?" she asked.

Ciaran swallowed hard and attempted to find his dignity.

“This is no small thing,” he said firmly. “I would like them to think well of me.”

Sadie’s smile softened, although he detected a hint of sadness.

“After I tell them everything that’s happened, they’ll have no choice but to think well of you,” she said. “Now, come on.”

Sadie’s parents turned out to live in one house amidst a whole row of other house. Ciaran had never seen dwellings so similar to each other, and he tried not to gape. He would not want Sadie’s parents to think him simple-minded. Only then did it occur to him that he would be unable to understand them. Oh, well. Too late to turn back now.

Sadie opened the door using the most delicate key he had ever seen, then called out a greeting. Ciaran was still gazing around the hallway in amazement when he heard a woman’s voice reply and he snapped to attention.

He would have recognized this woman anywhere. She had the same thick red hair as Sadie and Norah, although hers was streaked with white. Her face was older, certainly, but still very much like her daughters. Ciaran smiled at her before he realized what he was doing, already feeling more relaxed. Sadie introduced him and said a few more words. He could not understand them, but they must have been flattering, for her mother rushed forwards and wrapped Ciaran in a hug. He patted her back a little awkwardly, not sure what to do with this smaller, older version of Sadie.

When the lady at last let go of him, she ushered him through into another room, chattering the whole time. There, Ciaran shook the hand of a tall, slender man who had Sadie’s nose. He couldn’t understand anything that anyone said, but he tried to nod enthusiastically whenever seemed appropriate. Sadie’s mother pressed a warm cup into his hands and he thanked her graciously. She giggled, reminding him even more of Sadie.

He took a sip of the liquid in the cup. It seemed to be some kind of tea with milk, although it was no leaf he knew, and it was an odd brown color. Still, it was nice enough, so he sipped a little more. The conversation still flew over his head, so he focused on the tea, sipping it until it was gone. His sword still hung at his hip, which he suspected was rude - after all, Sadie's father was not armed. So, he unbuckled it and laid it on the table.

That attracted more attention than he'd expected. Sadie's parents seemed fascinated by the object, and Ciaran found himself explaining a little about it while Sadie translated. Did people here not have swords? What a strange place this was.

He felt a little more at home when Sadie's father produced a bottle of what turned out to be mead. They all toasted and drank enthusiastically. Ciaran was relieved to see that some traditions did not change. In fact, despite the language difficulties, he found himself having rather a good time. Eventually, though, he realized that Sadie's parents were yawning and stretching. When they got up and waved to him, he guessed that they were bidding him a good night.

"What now?" he asked Sadie. "Is there some kind of guest chamber for me?"

Sadie bit her lip and stepped a little closer to him, placing her mead glass down on the table.

"I thought you might want to sleep in my room," she said. Her eyes were seductive, but he detected a little uncertainty in her tone. She was afraid he would refuse her.

Ciaran groaned.

"Sadie, I would love to," he said. "But I can't! Not here, in your father's house!"

Sadie laughed.

“This is the twenty-first century, Ciaran, and I’m a little too old to worry about my father’s approval.”

But Ciaran shook his head stubbornly.

“I have certain standards,” he insisted, trying not to think of nights beneath the stars, or hasty stolen moments in the bowels of a ship.

Sadie shrugged casually, although he thought he saw a little disappointment.

“Fine, then. You can sleep here. There are some blankets on the-” She screwed up her nose as she fumbled for the right word, and in the end she just gestured at the bed-like thing where her parents had been sitting.

“It looks perfect,” Ciaran said. In truth, it looked softer than any bed he’d ever slept on. “Good night, Sadie.”

“Good night, Ciaran,” she whispered, staring up at him. “I love you.”

She scampered from the room so quickly that Ciaran couldn’t be sure he’d heard her correctly. Should he go after her? He warred with himself.

No, let her go. There would be time enough for conversation in the morning.

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Sadie woke with a start. Oh, goodness. There was a medieval warrior downstairs, asleep on her parents' sofa. How had she landed herself in such a ridiculous situation?

She rushed down the stairs, but it quickly became apparent that Ciaran was no longer asleep. Her parents were in the room, the radio on and the kettle bubbling. Ciaran stood by the gas stove, using two toasting forks to hold sausages over the grill.

"What a marvelous device this is," he called to Sadie. "I do not understand why the flames are blue, but it cooks wonderfully well. And so fast to light!"

"He wanted to be helpful," Sadie's mother said with a shrug. Sadie did not know whether to laugh or cry at the sight of this huge warlord helping to make breakfast.

"He's a good man," her mother said softly. "I could see that just by looking at him, even without the story you told us."

Sadie's heart twinged.

"He is a good man," she said, equally softly. "But he has to go home the day after tomorrow. Back to his own time."

She turned away from the pity in her mother's eyes and instead concentrated on filling the teapot.

They ate a cheerful breakfast, the four of them all together. Sadie had to translate a little more, now that Ciaran seemed more comfortable and keen to make

conversation. The meal was almost over when the doorbell rang.

“I wonder who that could be,” her mother said, getting to her feet with a frown. She disappeared into the hallway. Sadie heard the door opening - and then a scream of delight.

Everyone in the room jumped to their feet as Norah appeared in the doorway.

Sadie stared at her.

“I didn’t expect to see you here. I thought you would stay at the lab.”

“I have to leave again tomorrow,” Norah explained. “How could I miss the chance to see everyone, though? Hi, Dad!”

It was time for another tearful reunion as their parents embraced the daughter they hadn’t seen in over a year - the daughter they’d once assumed dead. Ciaran stood awkwardly at the side of the room, keeping out of their way. Sadie went to stand beside him. And then, although she knew she shouldn’t, although she knew he would soon leave for good, she slipped her hand into his.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Norah said. “Here, I have this for you, Ciaran. It should make life a lot easier.”

She held something out on her palm, and Sadie gasped. Another language chip!

“Did Professor Edmondson give you that?” she demanded.

Norah looked faintly amused.

“Of course not,” she said. “I doubt he remembers that either of you exist. Help him

put it in.”

Sadie directed Ciaran to slot the little chip into his ear. He winced a little as it dug into the skin.

“Do you understand us now?” Norah asked in English. Ciaran’s eyes widened.

“What a device!” he said. “I am speaking words I do not know, and yet somehow I do know them.”

He launched into a stream of nonsense words, which left everyone in the room clutching their stomachs with laughter. Sadie was almost in tears by the time he finished. How could this be the same man who’d pointed his sword at her by the stone circle, who’d dragged her out of the sea, who’d commanded an entire king’s guard? There were so many beautiful facets to him. She could easily spend a lifetime discovering them.

But no. She would not have a lifetime. He was leaving, and she must not forget that.

Ciaran cleared his throat.

“Well, then,” he said. “Now that I can use the correct language, there is something I wish to say. I apologize if my words are wrong, or if I do the wrong things. I do not understand the customs here.”

He turned to Sadie and grasped her hands. Everyone else had fallen totally silent.

“Sadie,” he said. “We’ve been through everything together. Through time, through danger, even through the sea.” He paused and shook his head a little. “I think these words do not make the same sense in your language. But what I mean to say is, I love you. I love you more than anything else on this earth, no matter what time I am in.”

He took a deep breath and dropped down onto both his knees in front of her. “Sadie, will you marry me?”

Sadie heard her mother gasp, but there was no other noise except the pounding of her own heart. She stared down into Ciaran’s hopeful eyes.

“But where will we live?” she asked. “I mean, when?”

Ciaran shrugged.

“I will leave that in your hands,” he said. “You would make a wonderful Lady of Arran, but if you choose to remain here, then I will remain with you. We will find a way, Sadie. If you love me even half as much as I love you, then we will find a way.”

A tear spilled out onto Sadie’s cheek. She hadn’t even noticed it building.

“Then my answer is yes,” she told him. He jumped to his feet and swept her into a kiss as the room around them erupted with cheers.

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Of course, there was no way that they could legally marry in the twenty-first century. Ciaran had no papers to prove his existence - and they had no time. Still, Ciaran was adamant that they should have some kind of celebration with Sadie's parents and sister in attendance. So, they all piled into the car and drove out of the city until they found a quiet spot on the shores of Loch Lomond. As a child, this had been one of Sadie's favorite places. It felt a million miles away from noisy, bustling Glasgow. Even here, she could see bright lights and hear the faintest hum of traffic, but if she stared up at Ciaran's face, she could forget all of that. She could imagine that she was back in the past, in Ciaran's home time.

It was already growing dark, but that didn't seem to dampen Ciaran's enthusiasm in the slightest. The two of them pulled off their shoes and waded calf-deep into the lake, shivering at the cold.

"What do we do now?" she asked Ciaran.

"We make our vows, here in front of witnesses," he said. "What are the words you would use in your marriage ceremonies?"

Sadie had never paid a great deal of attention at weddings, but she fumbled her way through the standard vows. Ciaran copied her patiently, his accent adding a delicious lilt to the words. Then they paused, uncertain what to do next. They should have brought someone to be a minister, Sadie realized. This ceremony just didn't work without one.

"I now pronounce you man and wife," her father declared, splashing into the water and winking at Sadie. "You may now kiss the bride."

And Ciaran certainly took him at his word. He gripped Sadie around her waist and kissed her as if his life depended on it. She drank in all his tenderness, all his sweetness - and he dipped her back so low that her hair brushed the surface of the water. She came back upright with a laugh and could not help but press another kiss to his lips.

“I love you, Ciaran,” she whispered, and he whispered the words back. With the last of the sunset reflected on the dark water, and her family’s laughter all around her, how could she possibly have been happier?

Damp and shivering but full of laughter and love, they all piled back into the car.

“Let’s get home,” Sadie’s father said. “I think I’ve still got another bottle of that mead left.”

They all cheered, even Norah. Sadie snuggled against Ciaran, his arm around her waist, and finally let herself believe that this was happening. Ciaran really did love her.

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Leaving on Sunday evening was a tearful experience for everyone. Norah was vanishing back into the past - where, she would not say.

“It’s a confidential mission,” were the only words Sadie could wring from her.

But Norah wasn’t the only one leaving. Sadie and Ciaran had sat up late into the night, talking over their options, and Sadie had come to see that her decision was clear. She would be returning to the past with Ciaran, to rule as the lady to his warlord.

“I won’t be cut off completely,” she assured her parents. “I’m sure Bethany will help me visit.”

She had no idea when that would be, however, so she packed herself a small bag - just the essentials.

“Sadie, are you seriously taking a shovel with you?” Norah asked, peering wide-eyed around Sadie’s door frame.

Sadie shrugged defensively.

“It might come in useful,” she said.

“I still have your other shovel,” Ciaran said. “If that’s the word for it.”

Norah’s eyes widened even further. Shaking her head, she walked away and left them to it.

Before long, it was time to leave. Sadie's parents offered to come with them, but it seemed best to keep them well away from the lab. The three of them piled into Professor Edmondson's 'borrowed' car and set off again.

Sadie didn't really know how to feel. She was happy, of course, to be starting a new life with Ciaran. She could hardly have hoped for a better man. But saying goodbye to her parents had been hard - and saying goodbye to Norah would be even harder. Would she ever see her sister again?

The journey was all too short. Sadie left the car outside the front of the laboratory building - if Edmondson wanted it, he could fetch it himself - and they all trooped inside in silence.

"Good, you're prompt," Edmondson said as they walked into the lab that held the time travel machine. Sadie avoided looking at the space where Henry's body had been. "Get into the wardrobe room, Norah. We leave in ten minutes."

Norah nodded.

"Goodbye, Sadie," she whispered. "I hope I'll see you again."

The two sisters embraced for a brief, beautiful second, squeezing each other tightly. Norah pulled back first, tears in her eyes. She gave Sadie a quick peck on the cheek, then rushed from the room.

Sadie struggled to breathe normally as she turned to Ciaran and reached for his hand. He squeezed her fingers tightly, his eyes kind and understanding.

"Matthew, get these two out of here," Edmondson snapped.

Sadie jumped a little. Had Matthew always been standing in that corner? He seemed

to have appeared out of thin air.

“Hello,” he said, greeting them all politely. Sadie looked at him more closely. He looked... different from the boy she’d seen in the past. Older.

“Get on with it,” Edmondson grumbled.

Matthew reached out to touch the machine with one finger. It flared into life instantly.

“Ready?” he asked. Sadie nodded and stepped towards the doorway in the machine. She clung onto Ciaran’s hand tightly as he squeezed in behind them.

“Here you go,” Matthew said cheerfully. “Oh, and Father? I won’t be coming back. Ever.”

The last thing Sadie heard was Edmondson’s scream of rage. She tried to turn around, but it was too late. Colors swirled around her, and she felt herself thrown through time.

She and Ciaran landed hard on the damp grass. They were at the stone circle again, back on Arran, where it had all begun. Ciaran slumped against one of the stones with a loud groan.

“Too many times,” he said. “I’m never coming to this bloody stone circle ever again.”

Sadie met his eyes and they both burst into laughter. And then she realized something.

“Oh, no,” she said, her face falling.

Ciaran was at her side in an instant, reaching for her hands.

“I left my shovel in the car!” Sadie said, and collapsed into laughter again.

They made their way back down the hill. Sadie couldn’t help but marvel at how different the walk was, this time. Ciaran’s arm was wrapped around her waist, holding her body snug against his. The guards snapped to attention when they saw the two of them strolling down the road.

“Welcome home, my lord,” one said, and Ciaran nodded in acknowledgment.

They didn’t even make it as far as the hall before Niamh came running out. Her eyes widened for a second when she saw Ciaran’s arm wrapped around Sadie, and then she laughed.

“Well, then,” she said. “I won’t pretend this is entirely a surprise.”

Ciaran dropped a kiss on Sadie’s head and squeezed her even closer.

“I hope you’re happy to acquire a sister,” Sadie said, her voice slightly muffled by Ciaran’s tunic. “How quickly can you organize a wedding?”

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In the end, it took Niamh almost two months to organize the wedding - because she refused to accept anything less than the best for her brother. Besides, it took a while for the king and queen to arrive - and even longer for Niamh to arrange accommodation that she thought would be suitable. Ciaran rolled his eyes at all her fussing, but Sadie insisted he leave his sister alone.

“I need to marry her off,” he grumbled, but Sadie knew he didn’t mean it. He wanted his sister to find love, just as he had.

And Sadie was happy enough to wait for the ceremony. As far as she was concerned, they’d been married since that beautiful evening on the shores of the loch. They didn’t need any other ceremony. She slept in Ciaran’s bed every night and woke up wrapped in his arms. They were husband and wife in every way necessary.

Still, that didn’t stop Sadie from feeling excited as the big day approached. Niamh had spared no expense - the small church was to be draped in silk and filled with autumn flowers, while Sadie had a wedding necklace made with so many precious stones that she could barely lift her neck. There was going to be dancing, and drinking, and enough food for twice as many guests.

“Everything will be perfect ,” Niamh beamed. Ciaran rolled his eyes, but Sadie knew he was excited really.

Bethany and Comgall arrived the day before the wedding, accompanied by a rather huge entourage. Princess Maeve was with them, clinging to her father’s hand.

“No sign of Matthew?” Sadie quietly asked Bethany. She and Ciaran had sent word

when they first arrived back, of course, but they'd had no reply from Dunadd.

Bethany shook her head.

"Not a word," she said, sadness in her eyes. "I don't think he's coming back. But... I know he hasn't forgotten us."

There was something strange in her words, almost as if she knew where Matthew had gone. Sadie decided not to pry any further.

At Niamh's assistance, she spent the night before the wedding back in her old guest room. She dressed there in the morning, as well, with an excited group of ladies milling about her. Niamh was the one who placed the necklace around her throat and draped the veil over Sadie's fiery hair, tears in her eyes.

"You look beautiful, Sadie," she said, her voice catching in her throat. Sadie reached out and hugged her. She might miss her own sister on a day like this, but Niamh was family now, as well.

They walked to the fort's church side by side, with the other ladies trailing along behind them. Sadie could hardly swallow through the lump in her throat, but she managed to keep a bright smile on her face as she stepped through the door.

Niamh truly had worked miracles on the tiny building. It glowed with color and life - and, most of all, with the warmth of Ciaran's smile. Sadie's steps picked up pace as she made her way towards him, suddenly ridiculously grateful that it was such a small church. She could not wait a second longer to place her hands in his.

The ceremony flew past. Sadie said the necessary Gaelic words, even when they felt a little heavy on her tongue. Thanks to weeks of lessons, she'd managed to say it all without the help of the language chip. She'd be fluent in no time, Ciaran assured her.

And then it was done. They were married in the eyes of the Church - as well as the eyes of both their families, and Ciaran's closest friends. Sadie closed her eyes as her new husband bent to press a kiss to her lips and the congregation roared their approval.

She'd set out on a quest for the truth. And she'd found it - but along the way, she'd found even more. Love. So Sadie clutched her husband close and kissed him again, even harder.

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“A letter?” Sadie asked, confused. She reached out for the piece of parchment in the man’s hands. Dal Riada was a surprisingly literate society, for its time, but using parchment to send a private letter was an unheard-of extravagance.

“Yes, my lady,” the man said, handing it over. “Sent with speed from Dunadd.”

“I hope it’s not bad news,” Sadie said, casting a nervous glance at her husband.

After nearly four years here in Dal Riada, completely immersed in its culture, she spoke Gaelic fairly well. And that was a good thing - her language chip had recently stopped working. She could only guess they weren’t meant to last that long.

“What is it, mama?” a little voice asked. Their twin boys, Oisín and Niall, toddled over to her. The boys had recently embraced talking, and it was now very difficult to make them stop. The boys knew that something was strange about their Mama - and they’d even once traveled through time, to meet their doting grandparents - but they had no idea of the true story.

“I don’t know what it is yet,” Sadie said. “I have to read it.”

She glanced at Ciarán once again. His brow was creased in a frown that matched her own.

Opening the letter, she scanned the first few lines. It was in English, a language she barely even spoke these days, let alone read.

“It’s from Bethany,” she said, looking up at Ciarán with wide eyes. “She says... she

says they've found Norah and Matthew."