



Wendy Meets the Highlander Hamish (Scottish Highlander I Never Knew #5)

Author: *Rebecca Preston*

Category: Historical

Description: When Wendy Carson wakes up on the shores of a misty Scottish loch, she quickly realizes she's no longer in the present day—or in the ordinary world she once knew

As a folklorist fascinated by supernatural creatures, Wendy thought she'd only ever meet them in legends.

But after being transported to 17th-century Scotland by the mysterious Fae archer Dub Sith, she finds herself face-to-face with the deadly Kelpie haunting the locals of Islay.

When a failed hunt brings her into the path of Hamish MacDonald, the Sept's burly farrier, Wendy's life takes an unexpected turn.

Hamish's gentle strength and earthy charm draw her in, but he's determined to keep her away from the dangerous creature.

As the two grow closer, Wendy discovers the Kelpie's rampage is driven by a dark secret: Malcolm, a fugitive from the clan, has captured the creature's sister with cruel magic.

To stop the Kelpie's wrath and save the Sept from further tragedy, Wendy and Hamish must join forces to confront both the supernatural and the human threats.

Their journey tests their growing bond, as well as Wendy's courage and the limits of her knowledge.

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Page 1

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Standing on the deck of the ferry that would take her to Vashon Island, Wendy Carson stared out into the waters of the Puget Sound. She'd gotten on early this morning with plans to visit a friend and go over the notes she had for the book she was writing on some ancient Scottish legends.

Wendy had driven down to Normandy Park from Seattle to catch the ferry and couldn't wait to meet up with her friend Lauren who shared her passion for ancient legends, the Fae, and all kinds of mystical beings. They'd both been doing their research and were meeting up to compare their findings.

Brushing her dark curls from her face, Wendy sighed.

It wasn't a very pretty day, but then again it was pretty typical weather for northwestern Washington.

The Sound was fairly busy with boating traffic and more than once as she looked out into the water, she thought it amazing that there hadn't been any accidents.

The way some of these boaters drove, it was a wonder that anyone chanced taking the ferry at all.

Leaving the deck, Wendy ventured inside and found a table in a small interior room.

She pulled her laptop and notebook out of her bag and started going over what she had so far on her book.

As she began to work on the chapter she'd left off with, one about kelpies, a dark

skinned man poked his head in the door.

Wendy looked up and frowned. “Um, hi?” she said in a questioning tone.

The little man smiled, and she noticed the scar on his face. “Ah lass, would you much mind if’n I settled my wee bones in the chair here with you for a moment?”

Wendy was completely taken with the Scottish accent that fell from the man’s lips. “Not at all, please, sit.” She gestured toward the chair across from her.

“What’s that you be workin’ on, lass?” he asked, eyeing her notebook.

Wendy glanced down at the paper and realized there was an image of a kelpie she’d drawn on the page. She blushed. “I’m writing a book on the myths, legends, and folklore of Scotland. Something I’m going to bet you know quite a lot about.” She laughed.

“Oh aye, I do know quite a bit o’ such things.” He nodded wisely as he touched the side of his nose. “One o’ the Fae I am.”

Wendy was amused that he was claiming to be Fae. He was rather short, and he did seem to have a mischievous sense of humor, so she decided to play along. “I’ve always known they were real. Can you tell me about the Fae? I’m always looking to learn more.”

“Aye, that I can, lass. I’m Dub Sith, an’ you are?” he asked, offering his hand.

Wendy took his hand and shook it. “Wendy Carson.”

“Tis my pleasure to meet you, Wendy Carson.” He winked.

“Now, the Fae as you probably can imagine are a curious bunch, they are. A bit of a rogue, a bit of magic, and a whole lot of mischief we are. Some say we dance in the moonlight and charm the very stones themselves an’ they would nae be wrong.

But we're not to be trifled with, for we can turn a man's fortune in the blink of an eye.
"

A shiver went down Wendy’s back at his warning. “I shall keep that in mind. I’ve read that the Fae can’t lie, is that true?”

A grin spread across the man’s face. “Aye, tis true, we will always tell you the truth, or avoid tellin’ you anythin’.”

Wendy frowned. “Isn’t that the same as lying?”

“Tis nae, lass. Tis avoiding and misdirecting, but tis nae a lie. We’re very particular about that.”

“Have you encountered other Fae?”

Dub Sith chuckled. "Aye, I’ve had a few encounters with other Fae here and there. Mind you, they're nae always as friendly as one might hope. Sometimes they've a peculiar way of showin' their favor, and other times, well, let's just say you'd best avoid the circles they leave in the grass."

“You mean the Faerie circles? The ones that will allow a human to cross over to the Fae world?”

“Aye, those would be the ones, best not to venture into them, most are traps,” he answered.

“That is fascinating. And what of kelpies? I’ve always thought they were beautiful and misunderstood creatures.”

“I’ve not had the pleasure, lass, but they are nae to be trusted.

” He gave her a thoughtful look. “I wonder if perhaps you might be willing to assist me?” he began.

“You see, some friends of mine back in Islay are having a wee bit of trouble with some Fae and I’ve been unable to help them.

You seem to have quite a bit of knowledge, do you think perhaps you’d be interested?
”

Wendy's heart quickened, and the prospect of a new adventure filled her with curiosity. She considered Dub Sith's proposition carefully. "Friends with a problem on Islay, as in Scotland?"

“Aye, lass, that would be where I mean.” He nodded.

“Well, I'm always up for a bit of mystery and folklore and if I can help, I would love to.” Wendy reached into her bag and pulled out a notecard and then wrote her information on it. “Here's my contact information.” She handed him the neatly written card with her details.

“Ah, thank you, lass.” He pocketed the card. “Now, I think I should be on my way and leave you to your work. I’ll be in touch.”

Wendy watched him go with a smile. It had been an unusual encounter, and she wasn’t sure why, but she actually believed that he thought he was one of the Fae.

He'd certainly seemed mysterious enough to be one, but she couldn't help but wonder what kind.

From her studies she'd have to guess either a dwarf, or perhaps an elf of some sort, though he was taller than she imagined for one of them. If he actually was what he said he was.

Looking at her open laptop, Wendy started working again, but after a few minutes she decided to find the concession area because she was suddenly ravenous.

Packing her things up, she left the small room and went down a set of stairs.

She wandered down the hallway toward a line of people where she could purchase a snack and some coffee.

As she waited for her coffee, she looked around the belly of the ferry where she was now. She could hear the engines down here, as they were much louder than they were on the deck or even in the small room she'd made use of to work.

Suddenly, a tremendous jolt shook the ferry, and it began to list to one side.

Chaos erupted. People screamed as they began to run from the concessions area toward the stairs, but the ferry shifted again, tipping even more and nearly everyone lost their balance.

Objects clattered to the ground and more screams rent the air.

Wendy, fully panicked now, knew she wouldn't make the stairs, she looked for another way to get out of the belly of the ferry, but was thrown off her feet, a sharp pain shooting through her head as she hit the corner of a table. Darkness overcame her.

When Wendy regained consciousness, the sensation of frigid water against her skin shocked her into alertness.

She realized with mounting horror that the ferry was on its side, and water was rapidly filling the space around her.

It was dark, all the lights had shorted out and only the glow of an emergency light on what used to be the ceiling shone.

More panic set in as she struggled to find her footing on the wall of the ferry so she could look for a way out.

Everything seemed disorienting, and she feared that she would drown before finding her way to the exit.

Desperation spurred her to action as she pushed against the rising water, seeking any way out of the small hallway.

Her heart raced, and every second counted as she moved toward where the stairs should be.

She couldn't see any other people down here, and she wondered if in their panic to get out, they'd simply left her behind or if they hadn't seen her fall.

Suddenly a voice called out from in front of her.

"Lass, are you there?"

It was Dub Sith, the little man she'd met earlier. His form was outlined by an eerie, otherworldly light in the darkness. "Here! I'm here," she called out.

He extended a hand to Wendy, his dark eyes locking onto hers. "I can save you, lass, but there is a consequence to accepting my help."

Wendy shuddered. Did he mean because he was Fae? She knew she shouldn't ask favors of the Fae, they never turned out well. "What do you mean by consequence?" she asked, knowing he couldn't lie to her, he'd told her that himself earlier.

"I asked you before if you could come to Islay to help my friends. I can take you there, but you can never return here to this time and place."

The way he worded it sounded off to Wendy, so she asked, "Clarify that for me. What do you mean I can't return to this time, what time would I be going to?"

"To the past. The seventeenth century."

"And if I chose not to go?" she asked, warily.

"I am afraid you will nae survive. I could be wrong, but I will nae lie. The ferry is submerged and the way out of this area is blocked."

In this dire moment, Wendy felt she had little choice. It was either die here today, or go with him and live, but in the seventeenth century. With a nod, she took his hand and accepted his proposal. "All right, I'll go," Wendy said, a feeling of trepidation filling her heart.

Dub Sith's strong grip enveloped hers, and, in a swirl of energy, they vanished from the rapidly flooding hallway of the ferry. Wendy's last vision was of the dark waters closing in around her as she left it all behind.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

As Wendy stirred awake, her senses gradually returned to her.

Sunlight streamed down upon her, warming her face and skin.

She blinked and surveyed her surroundings, a sense of bewilderment washing over her.

She found herself lying on the verdant grass, the shore of a picturesque lake mere feet away and on the other side of her were stone ruins of what looked like a former castle or fort of some kind.

The lake, glistening under the brilliant sun, stretched out as far as the eye could see.

Its crystal-clear waters mirrored the pristine blue of the sky and cradled the distant hills that loomed majestically.

The beauty of the scene struck her, its serene tranquility a stark contrast to the chaos of the ferry.

Turning her gaze behind, Wendy's eyes fell once again upon the aged remnants of a stone structure. Time-worn and overrun with nature, the ruins held the echoes of ages long past. Lichen and ivy clung to its walls, telling tales of forgotten lives and stories lost to time.

Dub Sith had told her that he was taking her into the past, to the seventeenth century to be exact, but looking at the ruins, she had to wonder if that was actually where she ended up. Maybe something had happened, and he'd miscalculated?

A soft sound broke her reverie, and she turned to discover a striking sight.

A coal-black horse, ethereal in its beauty, stood silently at the lake's edge.

Its ebony coat shimmered in the sunlight, and its eyes held a mysterious depth that captured her attention.

With a graceful turn of its head, the horse regarded her with an almost knowing expression, and Wendy couldn't help but feel there was more to this place than met the eye.

But she was alone, and Dub Sith was nowhere in sight.

It was just her and the beautiful horse.

As Wendy sat upon the grassy shore, still bewildered by the sudden turn of events, a group of three men emerged from the trees to the left of her about a hundred yards away.

The men were unlike any she had ever encountered before, dressed in a mix of plaids, kilts, and rough woolen cloaks.

It dawned on her that Dub Sith had at least gotten the place right.

She had to be in Scotland and the shore she was sitting on was that of a loch, as they called it here.

She watched the men and noticed that they weren't just dressed in Scottish attire, they also wore swords, and rode horses, and seemed straight out of a Highlander romance novel.

They were big and brawny, muscular. She was shocked as it hit her that perhaps her initial assessment of it still being the twenty-first century was wrong.

She'd never seen men who looked like them except on the covers of romance novels.

The Guardsmen, for she could think of no other name for them, approached, looks of curiosity upon their faces. They seemed very skilled as they rode toward her, moving as though they and their horses were of one mind.

As she watched the three guards, a movement near the water caught her eye.

The beautiful coal-black horse, which had watched her so intently only moments before, now galloped toward the loch with an incredible grace.

Its powerful form plunged into the waters, creating a cascade of shimmering ripples in its wake.

In a surreal and almost mystical display, the horse did something that defied the very laws of nature. It dove beneath the water's surface, vanishing from sight. Wendy gasped in awe, unsure if she had truly witnessed such a phenomenon. Had she just seen a kelpie? Was that even possible?

As the group of men fanned out to guard the loch's shore, Wendy found herself feeling more and more like an interloper in a time and place not her own.

She wondered why Dub Sith had brought her here.

She looked back at the splendor of the loch, with its still waters reflecting the vibrant greens and blues of the surrounding landscape.

It seemed overshadowed by the enigmatic presence of these kilted men who appeared

to have stepped out of history in her mind, though she knew it was she who was the one out of place.

Amidst the group of men, who looked fairly similar, one particularly striking figure caught Wendy's eye.

Tall and imposing, he exuded an air of rugged masculinity.

His burly physique had Wendy comparing him to Adonis or Hercules from Greek myths, though he was clearly Scottish.

His thick, reddish-blond hair cascaded loosely down to his shoulders, and his piercing gray eyes held a gaze that was both commanding and compassionate.

Summoning her courage, Wendy decided to voice the bewildering queries that swirled like storm clouds in her mind.

“Hi, um, excuse me, but could you tell me where exactly I am?” she questioned.

Dub Sith had said Islay, but she wasn't sure she could trust that.

He'd told her not to trust the Fae after all.

“Aye, lass. You are upon the Isle of Islay, in Scotland. I fear you've traveled quite far,” the stunning man with the piercing gray eyes said.

Wendy nodded. She knew that to be true. “You're right about that.” She smiled and looked back to the loch. “Was that a kelpie?” she asked, directing her gaze to the once again still waters.

“Aye. Dangerous creatures they are, the kelpie.

You should nae engage with them by any means.

They are malevolent water spirits, often taking on the guise of a magnificent horse.

Tis a maleficent trick to beckon folk to the water's edge, luring them closer before dragging them to a watery grave. Tis a creature of cunning and terror that one should count themselves lucky to survive as you did, lass.”

His description sent shivers coursing down Wendy's spine, and the intrigue it kindled within her seemed boundless.

“What tis your name, lass?” he asked, watching her with curiosity.

Wendy smiled as she finally stood up and dusted off her jeans, which thankfully had dried during the trip she'd taken with Dub Sith. “Wendy Carson. As you've probably guessed, I'm not from around here,” she said with a laugh.

“Nae, I expected as much, lass. I'm Hamish MacDonald and these are my brothers, Artair and Crisdean.” He indicated each and they gave her a welcoming smile and a nod. “We're from Clan Donald. Do you know how you got here to Islay?”

"Hello," she greeted them. "I was aboard a ferry," Wendy explained, her voice tinged with disbelief, "that's a boat, back in the Puget Sound, which you of course have never heard of. Um, I come from a place far from here. Anyway, a man, well, I'm not sure if I can call him a man, he said he was Fae — pretty sure I believe him since he brought me here —" Wendy began, her thoughts all jumbled as she looked back up at Hamish who was grinning at her and lost her train of thought.

“A Fae? T'would nae be Dub Sith you speak of, would it?” he asked. “Did he have pale eyes, jet-black hair, and a scarred visage?”

“Yes, that’s who it was, and he did look like that.

Anyway, he asked me if I could help some friends of his in Islay when I met him, and I gave him my information, but a little while later there was some kind of accident with the ferry and I ended up underwater with no way out.

He offered me the chance to come here, and I took it. ”

“He asked for your help?” Hamish inquired, looking slightly confused.

"Initially yes. Though at the time I wasn’t aware he meant friends here in...

this particular place.” She shook her head.

She’d almost said in the past, which might not be a good idea, considering they might think she was a witch or something.

She tried to watch what she said as she wrapped her head around everything that had happened.

“Anyway, I agreed to come and help with some kind of problem with some Fae creatures, and now I wonder if the kelpie was the creature in question.”

"Aye, you could have the right of it, lass. The kelpie is at the heart of the turmoil we face. Tis a creature as treacherous as the depths of the loch it inhabits." Hamish sighed.

“Then you must be the friends Dub Sith spoke of,” Wendy said with a smile. “If I can be of help, I’ll do what I can, but you’ll need to tell me more of what the problem is.”

“Aye, we’d much appreciate your help, if you are able. That can wait though. You

must be tired from your journey here. Traveling into the distant past must be wearing on a body.” Hamish offered his hand to her.

Wendy gave him a startled look and he dropped his hand. “You know about that?”

“Aye, lass. You are nae the first to have been brought here by Dub Sith from the future. He seems to enjoy picking you lasses up from a place far from here and dropping you into the heart of our troubles.”

“There are other women from the future here?” Wendy was shocked. “Where are they?”

"At the Fort. Fort Donald, the home of our clan. Would you like to ride with me?"

Wendy looked from him to the other men and the horses. Could she trust him? She bit her lip as she contemplated what she should do. She was out in the middle of nowhere, dressed in twenty-first century attire, and she didn't know her way from here to literally anywhere at the moment.

With a deep breath, she accepted Hamish's outstretched hand. “All right, I suppose since I trusted Dub Sith enough to travel back in time to seventeenth century Scotland, I can trust you to get me to this Fort Donald on horseback.”

Hamish laughed. “That’s the spirit, lass.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

Hamish walked with Wendy back to his horse and mounted, then said, “Jest put your wee foot in the stirrup and take my hand, then swing your leg over Thunder’s hind end, lass.”

Wendy did as he said, rather gracefully she thought and then slid forward, wrapping her arms around Hamish’s middle so she wouldn’t fall off. She’d ridden before but usually on her own, never with anyone.

“Hold tight, lass, wouldnae want you ta fall off and get hurt,” Hamish said, patting her hands at his waist.

As Hamish nudged Thunder into motion, Wendy took in the view.

The very idea of being here, amidst the wilds of seventeenth century Scotland, seemed surreal.

Her heart was aflutter with anticipation and curiosity, and she wondered if she would truly discover the secrets she so ardently sought in this mystical realm.

She was already well on her way considering how she’d gotten here in the first place, and she truly hoped for more.

Wendy couldn't deny the curiosity that lingered in her thoughts about Hamish. He was exactly how she had pictured Highlanders from this era. Rugged and handsome, muscular and brawny. And charming, which Hamish clearly was. Her fingers were itching to explore him, but she kept them still. For all she knew he could be married, and she didn't want to be poaching on someone else's man.

A surge of questions and speculation surged within her. She wondered how willing he'd be to answer them. As they rode, she studied him. He certainly knew his way around a horse. The beast listened to every cue he gave it, and they were practically flying over the moors.

And then there was the instant attraction she felt the moment she laid eyes upon him, but that was nothing compared to how being pressed against his back was setting her body on fire.

It was a good thing he couldn't see how turned on she was, he'd probably think she was some sex starved nymphomaniac, the way her face was currently flaming at being so close to him.

"Have you ever been to Scotland afore in your time, lass?" Hamish asked, startling her out of her thoughts.

"I haven't but I've always dreamt of coming here. Well not here -here, since I didn't know that was possible, but here in my time here. Sorry I'm not trying to be confusing," she said with a laugh.

"I understand, lass, tis a lot to take in and you're doing well." Hamish chuckled. "Do you know much about Scotland? About Islay?"

Wendy nodded. "Not as much as I'd like. I know that Islay is the southern most island of Scotland on the west coast, that it sits in the Sea of Hebrides and that it's actually nicknamed the Queen of the Hebrides."

"Aye all of that tis true," Hamish replied. "Tis also where many of the Fae like to spend their time when in our world."

"Is it really? That's amazing," Wendy answered. "What part of Islay are we in? Are

we near the west coast or the east or somewhere in the middle?”

Hamish chuckled. “Fort Donald is situated nearest to a town called Ballygrant, which is up head, though, tis still a good ride from there to Fort Donald. Where Dub Sith brought you tis near Loch Finlaggan.”

Wendy listened with rapt attention, her heart swelling with an appreciation for the gorgeous landscape around them. “Can you tell me about Fort Donald? How many people live there? You said there were other women from the future. How many are here?” she peppered him with questions.

“Slow down, lass,” he said, chuckling. “We are at low numbers of the moment, having had some past issues with another clan, so we’ve barely a hundred people residing at the fort itself and a handful more in the wee village around it.”

“Past issues? You mean clan wars? Are you currently warring with another clan? Should I be concerned that we might be ambushed while out riding?” Wendy asked, her mind racing a mile a minute.

“Aye, tis a long and dark history we have, lass, though at the moment, nae, we are nae at war with any clans, though tensions are always high between us and the Campbells. So nae, you donnae have to worry about another clan attacking us, but there are bandits who will, so always be on your guard.”

“Bandits?” That word gave her pause. She hadn’t considered them. “Do we have to worry about them very often?”

“Nae normally, nae. But the past year has been troublesome. A group o’ Campbells were murdered nae too long past, end o’ last summer in fact, by a group of bandits. We put a stop to ‘em, but their leader escaped. We’re still on the hunt for him.”

Wendy shuddered, thinking about some random guy out there murdering people with none of the modern kind of policing or equipment to track him down. Looking around, she could see anyone who was resourceful could probably live out here in the wilds forever without being discovered.

As Wendy thought about what he'd just said, she asked, "You said the ones murdered were Campbells, but you also said there was tension between you and the Campbells, so why would you, the Donalds, put a stop to the bandits and hunt for the leader?"

"T'was the right thing to do, but also the Laird, Colin Campbell, owns the Donald land and threatened to raze our fort if we didnae find them."

"That's not normal, is it? For one clan to own the land of another?"

Did you get into some financial trouble or something?

" she asked as they entered a town that looked straight out of a history book.

She half wanted to ask him to stop, but he and his brothers kept riding straight through the town without halting.

Hamish's chest rumbled with his growl. "Nae, tis not normal, lass. But tis a long story best saved for another time."

"Okay," Wendy accepted that. "Can you tell me about some of the Fae that are here?"

"Aye, that I can do. The Fae and the Donalds are allies. We seek wisdom and sometimes healing from Aine, who is a wise woman and half-Fae. She lives on a small isle in the middle of Loch Ballygrant. Then there is Dub Sith, who you've met.

He's a black elf who once joined my ancestor in battle against the Macleans.

Then after a particular incident with the Campbells where they murdered many of our clan, most o' the women included, he vowed to restore us," he said hesitantly, as though he was holding something back.

Wendy was curious to know what that was, but she didn't push. Instead she asked, "And then there's the kelpie, but are there any other Fae creatures here?"

"Oh, aye, we've had our fair share of run ins with sprites, brownies, and elves and various others. Mischievous, they are, for the most part. They visit from time to time, cause a wee bit o' trouble, then return to their world."

Wendy had always felt that the legends and myths she'd researched were true, so being here and hearing firsthand accounts was thrilling.

She was beyond excited to get to be in a place where she might get the chance to encounter more of the creatures and supernatural beings she'd studied for so long.

"Can you tell me about some of the trouble this kelpie has caused?" Wendy asked.

"Well, I mentioned before that we're hunting the leader o' the bandits, aye?"

"You did yes, but what does he have to do with the kelpie?"

"You see, mysterious lights were seen at the ruins, and we had word that Malcolm had been seen in the area, so a group went out to investigate."

"Are those the ruins near where Dub Sith left me?"

"Aye, lass. Tis the ruins of the old Donald Castle." He nodded. "We've heard rumors that the bandits are staying there, and that the leader was ridin' a stunningly beautiful white horse that will nae let anyone touch it besides the leader. Tis nae normal that."

Wendy frowned. “Do you think it’s a kelpie?” she asked.

“We cannae be sure, but I can tell you that since its appearance, the kelpies in Loch Finlaggan have been acting up. There’s been numerous attacks an’ their behavior has been more frenzied o’ late.” Hamish sounded frustrated and at his wit’s end.

“So do you normally go out trying to fix things with the Fae creatures?” Wendy asked.

He gauffed at that. “Nae. Cam, our Chief, thought I might be able to help because I have a way with horses, which kelpie certainly are, o’ sorts, but this one... tis only a horse sometimes. Tis disturbing.”

“So are you the stablemaster then?” she asked.

“Nae. I do help in the stables, but I am nae the stablemaster. I am actually the blacksmith. Artair and Crisdean are guardsmen.”

“I see,” Wendy murmured, as they reached the edge of another loch. “What loch is that?” she pointed out to the left.

“Loch Ballygrant. We’re nearly home. If’n you look up yonder,” he pointed ahead and slightly upward, “you’ll see Fort Donald at the top o’ the hill.”

Wendy leaned around his large form and then up the way he pointed and nearly gasped.

Up head of them lay a smaller village with stone and thatch roofed cottages, a small chapel and what looked like barns with livestock.

Beyond that was a huge hill with a winding road that led up to a huge wood and stone

wall with a gate, but above that she could see the top of what looked like a castle.

“I can’t believe it,” she said with wonder.

“Tis a brilliant sight, tis it nae, lass?” Hamish said, his voice full of pride.

“It is.” She was in complete awe of the sight. She couldn’t wait to get up there and take it all in.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

As Wendy, Hamish, and his brothers passed through the gate leading to the courtyard of Fort Donald, her jaw dropped. The place was huge and should have looked ancient, but somehow, it wasn't.

"Hamish, why don't you take the lass inside and introduce her to the Chief and the others, we'll see to the horses," Artair said as they dismounted outside of the stables.

"Aye, good thought," Hamish replied.

Wendy's eyes were wide as she gaped at everything going on in the courtyard.

There were guardsmen doing training, but it looked slightly odd, more like they were doing some sort of martial arts, which was completely out of place.

There was the stables, full of horses and people cleaning out stables and brushing down the horses.

In another section sat what could only be a blacksmith area with a huge forge where a man in a kilt that matched Hamish's was hammering out a sword.

"I thought you were the blacksmith?" she said to him as he helped her down.

He chuckled. "Aye, I am, that's our youngest brother Ewan. He's my apprentice."

"Oh," Wendy replied, still stunned at everything going on here. Looking up she noticed there were guards on the walls, they were carrying quivers filled with arrows and had bows slung over their shoulders. "This place is incredible," she murmured.

Hamish chuckled. “Come, lass. Let me introduce you to the Chief.”

He put his hand on her lower back and guided her to the stone steps that led up to some giant wooden doors.

He pulled the door opened and they stepped into the castle.

Wendy stood in the huge stone hallway, letting her eyes adjust to the dimmer light.

There were scones with flaming torches on the walls, adding more light as the sunlight coming in the windows wasn't enough to make it all the way down the hall.

There was a stone staircase that led up and around to the next floor, and then rooms off to both the left and right of them.

Hamish guided her along as she attempted to take it all in. He paused at a door and knocked, then opened it at the shout from inside.

“Chief? We've another visitor.”

The man behind the desk looked up. He had wavy auburn hair, that looked tousled. It fell in thick waves around his shoulders, giving him an air of ruggedness and allure. His bright blue eyes were deep and mesmerizing. He looked intelligent and had the bearing of a leader.

Standing, a smile crossed his face, making him seem friendlier. “Welcome to Fort Donald. I'm Chief Cam MacDonald and my wife is going to be thrilled to meet you.”

Wendy took his offered hand. “I'm Wendy Carson. Are you and Hamish related?” she looked between them.

“Aye, cousins.” Cam nodded. “Hamish, would you send for my wife?” he asked.

“O’course.” Hamish’s hand dropped from her back, and he turned toward the door again, stepping into that great hall for a moment.

“Why do you think your wife will want to meet me?” Wendy asked with curiosity.

Cam’s smile widened. “Because she’s like you. From the future.”

“Oh. Hamish did say there were others here. Where is she from?”

“A place called America. She traveled a lot, but she was in Memphis when she was brought here,” he said, but there was a slight hesitation in his words, like he was holding something back.

Before Wendy could ask the million questions that popped into her head, the door opened again, and Hamish returned with an athletic looking brunette with hazel eyes.

She was slightly shorter than Wendy and was dressed in a pair of wide pants with a top that wrapped crossways at her waist. It wasn’t typical attire for a woman, or for anyone in this time period she thought, but somehow suited her.

As soon as the woman’s gaze met Wendy’s her entire face lit up.

“Jen, this is Wendy Carson. Wendy, my wife, Lady Jen MacDonald.”

“Hi, welcome to Fort Donald. I bet you’ve got a million questions,” she said as she pulled Wendy into a hug.

Wendy laughed. “Maybe only a half million. I can’t believe I’m here, let alone someone else from the US. Your husband said you were in Memphis when Dub Sith

brought you here. He gets around, doesn't he?" She shook her head. "I was on a ferry in the Puget Sound."

"Isn't that near Seattle?" Jen asked. "I spent some time there, great city."

Wendy nodded. "It is. I lived in Seattle. I was on my way to Vashan Island when something happened to the ferry, and I was going to end up drowning."

"Well that sucks. Did you chose to come here?" she asked.

Wendy hesitated. "Sort of? I mean he did tell me he was bringing me to Islay, and it would be the seventeenth century, but it was more of a he could save my life by bringing me here or I could drown. Wasn't much of a choice, you know?"

But I think he must have intended to ask me to come and was just working up to it. "

"What do you mean?" Cam asked.

"Oh, well he saw my notes, I'm writing a book—" she stopped and frowned.

"I was writing a book on the supernatural, the Fae and all that. You know, myths and legends, that sort of thing. I had drawn a picture of a kelpie, and he commented on it. Told me he had friends that needed help and thought maybe I was the one who could. After talking to Hamish I'm pretty sure he meant all of you. "

"Yeah, I'd say that's a safe bet," Jen agreed.

"So what's your story? How come he brought you and how'd you end up married to him?" Wendy pointed to Cam who chuckled.

Jen told her how she'd been at her dad's funeral when Dub Sith approached her and

offered her what she thought was a martial arts fight. He'd brought her here, she met Cam, fell in love and now got to live with him in this amazing place.

"So I did see those guards doing martial arts!" Wendy pointed toward the courtyard.

Jen laughed. "You did. When I got here, I was attacked by some bandits, used my skills, and impressed Cam." She winked at him. "I've been teaching them all I know ever since."

"That's crazy." Wendy giggled and then stopped short. "Wait, won't that mess with the time continuum or something? Won't we? I mean just by being here we're changing history, aren't we?"

"Maybe?" Jen replied. "However, maybe we were always meant to come back here and the future that happens, takes place because we came back, at least that's how we've looked at it. You're the fifth one to show up, so I don't think us being here is going to change too much." She shrugged.

"And Dub Sith was right. If you've got knowledge of these kelpie creatures that could help us, we'd appreciate it, lass," Cam said.

Jen looked at him and frowned. "How about we get her some food and let her rest before we toss her into the loch to deal with those creatures?"

Cam chuckled. "Right you are, love. Why donnae you see to her, get her a room, some food and proper attire, while I talk with Hamish about what he discovered today?"

Jen nodded. "Perfect." She moved into his arms and kissed him. "I'll see you later."

"What is it you say?" Cam gave her a teasing look. "Tis a date."

Jen laughed and turned back to Wendy. “Let’s go, I’ll give you a quick tour for now, and we’ll do a more thorough one later.”

Wendy nodded but before she followed Jen out of the room she turned to Hamish.

“Thanks for bringing me here. You might have even saved me from that kelpie, now that I think about it. I might have tried to pet it if you hadn’t shown up.

And thanks for telling me all about this place and what’s been going on. ”

Hamish’s piercing gray eyes met hers and he smiled. “Twas my pleasure, lass. My duty after all.”

Wendy’s brow furrowed. She’d thought there might be something between them.

She’d felt an instant attraction to him and had thought he’d felt the same, but with him saying it was his duty, now she wondered if maybe he wasn’t as attracted to her as she’d thought.

She arched her brow and said, “Was it merely duty, Hamish, or is there something more? Because I kinda thought there was. You’re not involved with someone are you? Married?”

Hamish met her gaze, a hint of intrigue dancing in his eyes.

He leaned forward slightly, as if to share a private confidence.

"Wendy, lass, I won't deny that I find you quite intriguing. But as a member of the Donald Clan, tis my duty to assist anyone in need, especially those who find themselves in such a perplexing situation. An’ nae, I am nae married, nor am I involved with anyone.”

Wendy studied him a moment and then gave him a nod as she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. “Good to know. I’ll see you later, I hope.”

He smiled and there was a distinct twinkle in his gray eyes. “I hope you settle in well, lass.”

Jen was waiting for her in the hall and when she joined her, Jen said, “I saw Sally a moment ago and told her you’d arrived.

She’s preparing a bedchamber for you and I’m having her bring up a meal as well.

You’re probably not going to want to eat in the dining hall tonight, it might be a bit overwhelming. ”

“Okay, does everyone here know about us? I mean is it just taken for granted that time travel is real or what?”

“Nearly everyone at Fort Donald is aware. We’re all family and the Donald Clan is allies with the Fae. There are those outside of the family though that don’t know, and we can’t let them in on it. So we tell them we’ve come from a small town in the south of England.”

“That makes sense, but why England? We don’t sound English to them, do we?”

Jen shrugged. “We just tell them everyone from our area talks like us.” She laughed. “People here don’t travel beyond Scotland’s borders, let alone Islay, and we rarely get visitors from anywhere outside of Scotland, so it’s not really a problem.”

“So who might I need to be aware of that I can’t tell?” Wendy asked as they walked.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

“Generally, anyone who comes here from the Campbells. And if you go outside of the Fort, travel to one of the other towns, or even into Ballygrant, just stick with the idea that we’re all from England.”

“I can do that. So where are we going?” Wendy asked as Jen led her up the stone stairs.

“First, I’m taking you to see Bridie, she’s our seamstress. She’ll have something for you to wear immediately, but she’ll also make you a new wardrobe.”

“How am I supposed to pay for it? I didn’t exactly come here with seventeenth century money. Heck, I don’t even have any twenty-first century money on me.”

Jen shook her head. “You’re now family, so there’s no cost. From now on, consider Fort Donald your home.

What we have is now yours as well. We’re pretty communal here.

We grow our own food, we’ve got a staff that takes care of the day to day stuff, they’re all members of the Donald Clan as well, and we all chip in where we’re needed, or wherever our skillset lies.

You’re free to do what you’d like for the most part. ”

“You said you teach the guards martial arts?”

“Yep. But I also help out Mira in the kitchen sometimes, and Bridie is teaching me to

embroider, but I'm not very good at it." She laughed.

"What about the others? You said there were three others like us?"

"Yes, Mae, Catherine, and Annabelle. I came here first, Mae was second, she's a therapist, so if you need to talk about this, if you get overwhelmed, she's your girl.

Catherine was next, and she was a scholar, still is honestly.

You can often find her in the library or traveling with her husband, Eamon. "

"Wait, she's married too?" Wendy's eyes grew wide.

"Yes, all of us are now. Annabelle married Cam's brother Jamie just before winter set in last year. And Mae is married to Niall, he's a guardsman, but he also plays a mean fiddle." Jen smiled.

Wendy couldn't wrap her head around the fact that a four of the women who'd arrived previous to her had gotten married. But then, thinking about Hamish... if their husbands were as handsome as him, she could understand it. Cam certainly was, she thought. "How long have you been here?" she asked.

"About two years now."

Jen led her into a room where there was fabric in rolls stacked on tables, and a group of women sat at others sewing.

There was also a man in there working on what looked like a kilt.

She introduced them all to Wendy and then Bridie measured her and found her several items of clothing to take with her.

“Thank you so much, Bridie,” Wendy said, her arms now full.

“My pleasure, lass. I’ll have more to you soon.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll help you figure out the dress tomorrow. The nightgown should be simple enough, and I promise you’ll get used to the undergarments,” Jen said with a grin as they walked out the door.

“I hope so.” Wendy laughed.

Jen led Wendy through the labyrinthine corridors of Fort Donald once again until they reached a bedchamber door. “This is the room we’ve all stayed in when we first arrived. We’ve all decided it was good luck for us, so we’re putting you here.” She opened the door.

Wendy glanced inside and thought the room was cozy and charming.

A window framed a view of the bustling courtyard below, where everyone went about their daily tasks.

An inviting hearth nestled in the stone wall, was crackling with a fire that put out warmth and comfort.

A sturdy table and chairs stood to one side, where the flickering glow of a candle in a lantern provided soft illumination.

The centerpiece of the room was a comfortable and inviting bed, neatly made with fine linens and plump pillows.

There was also a wardrobe where she could hang her new clothes and a stand that held a bowl and pitcher, and a pot stood at the bottom.

"Thanks, Jen," she said, her voice carrying genuine appreciation. "This bedroom is lovely, and I can hardly believe I'm here in this ancient castle."

Jen smiled. "You're welcome. I know how overwhelming it all is, so take your time getting used to things here."

Wendy set down her bundles on the bed. "You're not lying. I think I'm still a bit in shock. I mean it's a lot to take in."

"Just know you've got friends here. We'll help you."

Wendy's stomach rumbled and she was just about to ask about food when there was a knock on the door. "Who's that?" she wondered.

Jen walked over and opened it. Wendy moved to see three other women all looking excited. "Come in you three, and meet Wendy. I know you're dying to meet her." Jen turned back to Wendy. "Wendy, meet, Mae, Catherine and Annabelle." She gestured to each of them.

Mae who was a petite raven-headed woman was the first to greet her. "Hi Wendy, we're so glad you're here. If you ever feel like this is all too much, you can come and talk to me. I'm happy to help you work through it."

Wendy grinned. "Jen said you were a therapist of some sort?"

"Yep, well, I never actually got to be one back home. Ended up here before I could start my practice, but I did get my degree." She smiled.

"And you're married to..." Wendy closed her eyes and thought back over what Jen had told her, "Niall? The mean fiddle player."

“That’s the one.” Mae hugged her. “Welcome home.”

The next to come toward her was the one Jen had introduced as Annabelle. She had long dark hair that was braided and it fell over her shoulder almost to her waist. Her skin was a flawless olive tone, which reminded Wendy of her friend Rosalina who was from Puerto Rico.

“Hi, I’m Annabelle, welcome to Fort Donald. I’m married to Jamie, in case Jen didn’t mention it.”

“She did, but she didn’t tell me what you do here. She mentioned Mae being a therapist and Catherine,” Wendy looked to the woman who was waiting patiently to give her a proper welcome, “is a scholar, but she never said what you do.”

“I was a cop. A homicide detective, in San Francisco.”

“Wow, that’s wow. And you chose to come here?” Wendy looked at her like she might be a little crazy.

Annabelle smiled. “It’s a long story, we’ll talk about it some other time. For now, welcome.”

Wendy nodded. She was intrigued to know more and vowed to get that story out of her at some point. She looked at Catherine who had stepped forward. Catherine wore her long auburn hair straight, and had a slim build. “Hi,” Wendy greeted her.

“Hey, welcome to the family.” Catherine smiled. “I bet you’re starving. I know I was. Something about traveling into the past left me ravenous.”

“Now that you mention it, I really am.” Wendy smiled. “I think Jen said something about Sally bringing me a meal?”

“Jen, why don’t we all eat together? We could go to yours or Mae’s room. You’ve both got bigger tables.”

“That’s a good idea. I should have thought of that,” Jen agreed. “Is that okay with you, Wendy or would you rather decompress and be on your own for a bit?”

“Actually, I’d rather have the company, if you all don’t mind?”

“We were hoping you’d say that.” Mae grinned. “Come on, we can go to mine, Niall is on duty tonight, so he won’t bug us. Not that he would, but you know, men.” She giggled.

“I’ll go track down Sally and tell her we’ve had a change of plans,” Jen said, opening the door.

“Come with us, Wendy. We’re actually one floor up.”

Shortly after entering Mae’s rooms which were like a small apartment, not just a bedroom, Sally and a few other maids entered carrying platters laden with a hearty meal for all of them to share.

The aroma of the food filled the air, making Wendy's mouth water.

The meal consisted of hearty dishes: roasted meats, mashed neeps and tatties, bannocks, and rich gravy that clung to the meat and potatoes.

Their tankards were filled with a deep, amber Scottish ale that Jen cautioned could be potent.

The food was simple yet incredibly satisfying.

As the women enjoyed their meal, Wendy listened raptly to the tales and adventures each of them shared.

Their stories were riveting and filled with magic and wonder, which made Wendy's heart beat a little faster.

“So you met the wise woman that Hamish told me about? The one who lives on the loch?” Wendy asked Jen.

“I did, yes. I was hoping she could help me find a way back home. Being the first, Dub Sith more or less tricked me to get me here and at the time, I wasn't happy about it.

Turned out there was no way back, so it was pretty much pointless, but she's an interesting character.

She can actually divine certain aspects of the future, which is helpful. ”

“Hamish said she was part Fae, is that true?”

“As far as I'm aware, it is. Makes sense considering everything that happened while I was at her place.” Jen nodded.

“Have any of you all encountered any supernatural creatures or Fae other than Dub Sith?”

Mae, Annabelle, and Catherine all shook their head no.

“Just Dub Sith, but I do think I saw some sprites on the moors once when I was traveling with Eamon. He says I was imagining things, but I don't know,” Catherine replied.

“Jamie’s told me tales of seeing sprites on the moors. That they like to lure people to the Faerie circles to get them to cross into their world. Could be that’s why Eamon said they weren’t,” Annabelle shared with a smile. “He’s just got you, probably doesn’t want to lose you to the Fae.”

Catherine laughed. “You could be right. That man is super possessive.” She grinned as though she was happy about it.

Wendy couldn't help but notice a recurring theme among the women gathered around her.

Each of them had not only been transported through time but had also found and married the man of their dreams. As she looked around at their contented expressions, she couldn't help but wonder if that same fate was in store for her. She certainly hoped so, she thought as Hamish’s face flashed in her mind.

She was really grateful for the companionship and happy that she wasn’t the only one from the twenty-first century here, but a part of her really desired the kind of deep connection they seemed to have discovered with their husbands.

Wendy had dated on occasion but none of the men she’d ever seen had really been all that interested in the same things she was.

They had often failed to see past her passion for the mystical, branding her as eccentric and unrelatable, or living in the past instead of wanting to do more “normal” things.

And none of them had set her heart and body a flame with a touch either, like Hamish had.

Being here and having met Hamish, she now had a glimmer of hope sparking in her

heart. She wondered if she'd find her own true love, be it Hamish or someone else in this exciting and mystical place.

The next day, after a good night, and morning's sleep, Wendy rose and with Jen's help, put on the dress Bridie had provided her with.

She'd joined her and the other women for a late breakfast in the massive dining hall, and then she and Jen had gone on the promised tour, ending in the courtyard where Jen left her to go teach her martial arts lesson for the day.

Just as Wendy was beginning to take in the rich history of her surroundings, a voice pulled her back to the present. Hamish's voice resonated through the courtyard as he approached her. "How are you findin' this new world, lass?" he inquired, his gaze meeting her's.

"It's beyond anything I could have imagined. The Fae, the magic, actually being here, it's all so enchanting. I almost can't believe it. I keep thinking that either A: I died on that ferry, and this is heaven. Or B: I fell asleep on the ferry, and this is all a dream and I'm going to wake up and be so disappointed. "

Hamish chuckled. "I can assure you, lass, that you've not died, but you could be right that this is heaven, I've always thought so. And I doubt you're dreaming, as the other women are here too and how would your mind have conjured them?"

Wendy nodded. "That's a good point." She laughed.

"Either way I'm excited to be here and to get to see the creatures I've always believed were real up close and personal.

I mean in our time, everyone thinks they're just a myth, a legend, or a tall tale to tell kids.

But I've always thought they either did or do exist, but are just in hiding; and then to have met Dub Sith, and been brought here, and seeing that kelpie...

it was so close. I could have touched it. Just wow."

Hamish's face fell. "Lass, these creatures are nae friendly for the most part. They're very dangerous.

Please, donnae go out lookin' for them on your own.

Even the ones that seem nice are nae to be trusted.

They are tricksters and mischief makers.

If you wish to leave the fort, take me or one of my brothers with you to keep you safe. "

Wendy bit her lower lip, grappling with the sense of adventure that had brought her here and the realization of the perils that lay ahead.

She'd studied the legends and myths, she knew that about the Fae and even Dub Sith had told her not to trust them.

Now though, she felt like Hamish was treating her like a na?ve child, and it pricked at her independent spirit.

She looked directly into Hamish's eyes and replied, "I understand the risks, Hamish, I really do. But I can't just stay cooped up here in the fort. I'm a grown woman. I've studied them my entire life, so of course I know they aren't to be trusted, but I need to be able to explore, to understand this world I'm now in, and to continue my research.

I might not be able to write the book I was planning back home, but that doesn't mean I can't write one here.

And I don't need you treating me like a child, no matter how new to your world I am.
"

Hamish sighed, his features softening. "Lass, I know you're nae a child, an' I didnae mean to imply otherwise.

" He gave her an accessing look that held just a touch of heat.

"I just need you to be aware that this land tis nothing like where you came from. Tis dangerous, nae just from the Fae, but from the bandits and highwaymen who care nae but for themselves. A woman alone tis a challenge to them an' no good can come from it. "

Wendy nodded. She was still a little ticked off and irritated by his words of caution because it went against everything in her being and made her feel as though she wasn't good enough or strong enough to take care of herself. Still, she said, "I'll keep that in mind then."

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

Over the next several days, Wendy learned her way around the fort.

She often ran into Hamish, and they would spend whatever free time he had — which was more than she'd thought he'd have available considering he was the blacksmith and was supposed to be working on the kelpie problem — talking about the Fae in a manner that often led them to debates that sometimes ended with Wendy feeling frustrated and out of sorts with him.

She hated that part because she actually really liked him, but she couldn't tell if he liked her in the same way as she liked him, or if he was just amusing himself with the “new girl”.

One bright and brisk morning, about a week after she'd arrived, Hamish extended an invitation for Wendy to accompany him to the castle stables. “I thought we could continue talking while I take care of the horses' hooves. Tis a task I've put off for too long,” he said.

“What are you doing to their hooves?” Wendy asked, curious.

“I've got to clean their hooves out and reshoe a few of them. Tis laborious work and would go much faster if I had your pleasant company.” He smiled.

Wendy liked his smile and the way his entire face brightened when he did it. “Alright, anything I can do to help?” she asked.

“Hold the horse's head, or pet them as I clean and shoe them. T'will keep them calm.”

Wendy did as he asked and they spent the next several hours talking about everything under the sun to the sounds of the horses' whinnies, the hammering of hooves, and the creaking of leather as he worked.

About halfway through the day, Wendy decided to bring up the kelpies, especially the magnificent beast she'd seen on the shore. "Hamish, tell me more about the kelpies at Loch Finlaggan. Did you recognize the one who was on the shore when I woke up?"

Hamish narrowed his eyes as he looked up at her from his bent position, the horse's back hoof between his legs to hold it steady. "Lass, I've warned you those creatures are unpredictable, and you should nae be chasin' after 'em. They'll drown you without a second thought."

Wendy raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms, undeterred. "I'm not reckless, Hamish. I just want to study them, not let them take me underwater. Being here is like an adventure to me and I want to go learn things, see things."

Hamish chuckled, the tension between them easing. "Aye, lass, it might be an adventure you'd not soon forget."

She grinned, emboldened by his response.

"Exactly! Can't you see that I might be able to help you with this problem that's plaguing the people here?"

I know a lot about the Fae, I've been studying them my whole life practically and yeah maybe they are just myth and legend in my time, but they aren't here.

I need to actually see them, learn about them firsthand, so I can help. Please, Hamish."

Hamish shook his head, the corners of his lips curling upwards into a smile that reached his eyes. "You're a stubborn one, you are, lass. The kelpie are sly, and I won't have you in any danger."

"I swear I won't do anything foolish. I think if I can just study these kelpie and figure out what's making them go crazy, I'll be able to help you solve this. I know there has to be some things about them that haven't been written about before and I want to discover what they are."

"You never give up, do you, lass?"

Wendy grinned. "Not when it's important, or when it's something I'm passionate about."

"Very well, lass, we shall see. I make nae promises, but I will talk with Cam and see what he says about it."

Wendy felt as though she was making headway with him. "Thank you, Hamish." She clapped her hands with glee and the horse she was standing next to nudged her shoulder until she went back to stroking its broad neck.

"Seems you've made a friend there, lass," Hamish said with a nod toward the horse. "This is Rune."

"He's a beauty," Wendy replied as she continued to stroke the very dark brown coat. She loved the thick black mane and tail and wondered if she could brush it. "Does he like to be groomed?" she asked.

"He'd probably love that, lass," Hamish said with a nod. "Would you like to ride him?"

Wendy's eyes widened. "Could I? Right now? I mean, aren't you still working? And you've said I can't go out alone, so how am I supposed to ride him? I can ride by the way. I've been on horses before, so I know how."

Hamish chuckled. "I'm nearly finished, one more to go, but we could go for a short ride if'n you like?"

"Yes, I'd love that," she replied.

Wendy felt her heart swell with gratitude and affection for the man next to her.

She really truly liked him a lot, but she wasn't sure how he felt about her.

She'd tried to let him know her interest in him, had even been bold about it that first day, but now...

she wasn't sure. He'd made no moves on her, and she was starting to think maybe she'd been too forward before?

Maybe she needed to be more demure. Or maybe he just wasn't interested in her.

Wouldn't that be sad? To come all this way, fall for a guy like him and then him have no interest in her.

Wendy had never been very good at flirting.

Whenever she tried in the past it seemed to backfire or go over the guy's head, so she rarely did it.

Then there was the times when she'd just been nice to some guy and he'd taken it as her flirting and she'd not been interested at all, which had left her having to let the

guy down. That never ended well.

That evening, as they sat in the dining hall for supper, Wendy's gaze wandered to Hamish's profile, his rugged features softened by the firelight. She couldn't help but be charmed by his affable demeanor and the way his eyes sparkled when they shared a laugh. Wendy could feel the unspoken connection between them, but why couldn't he? she wondered. He seemed to keep her at a distance, and she didn't understand why.

Was it only one sided? Was she wrong about the electricity between them?

Did he not feel the flames beneath his skin when they touched? The thought was pretty depressing.

They'd had a good time riding, even if they hadn't gone very far. Wendy loved being on Rune's back, flying over the moors. It had been an exhilarating feeling and one she hoped to repeat sometime soon. "Thanks for going riding with me today," she said as they were finishing their meal.

"T'was my pleasure, lass. Rune took to you like no one else. I think if'n you'd like, you could consider him now yours. I like to think the horses chose their riders, and he's definitely chosen you."

"Mine? You're giving Rune to me?" she asked, her eyes widened. Was he actually gifting her a horse? What did that mean?

"Aye, if'n you want him as your horse to ride. We've plenty in the stables, and more born quite often. If you'd like to ride others or didn't like the way he rode?—"

"No, I did like the way he rode, he's a real sweetheart and I felt like I was flying while I was on his back. He's great, but when you say he's mine, do you mean mine

as in I own him or mine to just ride when I want to go riding?”

“You’re family now, lass. All the horses belong to the family.

Rune is or could be yours as Thunder is mine.

You’ll be charged with his grooming and care for the most part, after rides, an’ making sure he’s nae injured.

Food and shelter are taken care of by the stablemaster an’ the lads who work the stables, so you’ll nae have to clean the stall. ”

“So sort of mine, but he’s owned by the family, okay got it.” Wendy nodded. “Yes, I’d like Rune to be mine. Oh, wait, I’m not taking him from someone else, am I?”

Hamish shook his head. “Nae, Rune is one o’ the horses we use when ours have been ridden hard, but we still need to go on patrol.

With you laying claim to him, he’ll nae be used for patrol any longer, but will be in your charge.

You’ll probably have to ride him daily, if’n you cannae ride, let the stable lads know and they will see to his exercise. ”

Wendy smiled. “I will. Thanks, Hamish.” She yawned and her eyes started to droop.

“You should get some sleep, lass. I’ve some things to take care of in my shop, so I shall see you on the morrow.”

“Good night, Hamish,” Wendy replied with a sigh as she watched him leave.

She decided to do as he suggested and head to her room.

It was strange, being here, she often went to bed early.

She wondered if it was because there was no electricity or digital anything to watch, or a radio to listen to.

Back home she'd have been up for a few hours yet, watching a show, playing on her computer, listening to a podcast. But here, once it got dark, there just wasn't a whole lot to do.

She'd certainly been doing a lot more sleeping than she'd normal have done back home and she kind of liked it. It was peaceful. Relaxing. Like this was how a person was actually supposed to live. Rise with the sun and sleep with the moon. The thought made her smile as she got ready for bed.

Before she could actually get between the sheets of her cozy little bed, there was a knock on the door. "Come in!" she called, not thinking about who it might be, or the fact she was in her nightgown.

The door opened and Jen's head popped in. "Oh, sorry, didn't realize you were getting into bed, I can come back later?—"

"You're fine," Wendy interrupted her. "What's up?"

Jen walked in and shut the door behind her. "I wanted to check on you. See how you're settling in here. If you had any questions or anything."

Wendy smiled. "Actually, I was just thinking about that in a way. Like how peaceful and relaxing it is here. How I feel like my body is actually going into natural rhythms and following what I should have been doing all along. Do you know what I mean?"

Like back home I'd keep myself up and occupied until late at night, barely get any sleep, get up, and work, and just try to fit in, you know?

But here, it's like... I don't know. I feel like I'm meant to be here.

Like I studied all the ancient myths and legends and all about the Fae my whole life and now I get to live here among them, and I feel like I'm home. Does that make sense?"

Jennifer nodded as she sat down in the wooden chair under the window. "It does. I think your background in not just myths and legends, but ancient cultures, is really helping you acclimate faster than any of us did."

"I'm really grateful that Dub Sith brought me here," Wendy replied, plopping down on the bed.

"So how are things going with Hamish? I've noticed you've spent quite a bit of time with him lately.

Rumor is you spent the whole afternoon in the stables helping him shoe the horses and then he took you riding? "

Wendy felt her cheeks flush. "I really like him, and yeah, I did. He well, he sort of gave me a horse? But I don't know."

Jen gave her a curious look. "What don't you know?"

Wendy recalled some of her frustration at the fact he sometimes treated her like a naive little girl.

"Okay, so real talk. I love spending time with him, getting to know him and for the

most part, I'm liking everything about him except his tendency to treat me like a kid.

I mean I feel like he's trying to shelter me and keep me from running head-long into trouble like a little girl would, which I'd never do, but for some reason he can't see that about me.

And I can't even tell if he actually likes me in the same way I like him.

It's so damned frustrating." Wendy sighed.

"I've never been really good at flirting so maybe I'm missing cues or something, but it just seems like he's treating me like a little sister or some kid who's tagging along and he's just putting up with me. "

"Trust me, I get it. You have to remember what era we're in. These Highlander men are very protective of women and while they do look at women as very capable of somethings, other things they struggle with letting go of the reins, so to speak."

"But Cam lets you teach his men martial arts. You're literally fighting bandits and stuff. I'm just asking to go look at kelpies and study them!" Wendy huffed.

"You're not wrong exactly, Cam does let me do that, but I had to prove myself to him.

I had to prove my capabilities. These men are the essence of masculinity.

You have to earn their acceptance as far as those things go.

Look they all have hearts of gold, they love and respect women — for the most part — you'll need to give Hamish time to see that you are fully capable of doing things responsibly.

Until then he's going to be protective of you.

Not because he doesn't think you aren't capable, but because it's ingrained in him to do so until you've proven yourself. ”

“That still doesn't tell me how he's feeling about me. I mean does he even like me? Or is he just humoring the new girl?”

“I can't answer for him on that. I can tell you that men here are not like the guys back home.

They're more subtle. They're a helluva lot more respectful.

They take their time and court you. From what I've seen, that's what Hamish is doing.

He's courting you. He's getting to know you, he's respectful of you, and he's protective of you. ”

Wendy's brow furrowed in thought. "So, what should I do?"

"Be patient. Let things develop naturally. The connection between the two of you is evident to everyone around here. We've all seen how he gentles himself around you. And just remember, you're not the only one trying to figure this out. Hamish is too."

“Okay, that's good advice. I'll try to be patient, but do you know how damned hard that is?” Wendy asked, making a face.

Jen laughed. “I seriously do.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

Wendy woke the next morning, dressed and went down to the dining hall only to find that Hamish and his brothers were gone.

There had been another kelpie attack and Cam had sent him and his brothers out to do what they could.

Of course, nobody could tell her what that was and she was very disappointed that she hadn't been invited to go along.

Hamish had promised her he'd ask Cam, but it seemed as though he hadn't and now, she was left to her own devices, wondering if or when he'd be back and if she'd ever get to go out with him to help.

The thought was a depressing one and she soon found herself wandering the castle looking for something to do.

She ended up in the library where she browsed some of the books.

"Wendy, what brings you up here?"

Wendy turned to see Catherine coming out from one of the aisles of books with her arms loaded down with tomes. "Hi Catherine. Boredom, I guess? Hamish is out chasing the kelpies and left me behind."

"And you want to go out there and help, I get it." She nodded. "Well, since you're here, maybe you want to read some of the books we've got on the Fae?"

Wendy paused and looked over at her. “Wait, you’ve got books on the Fae? Are they in English?”

“For the most part. There’s a couple in Gaelic, but the ones I’m thinking of are in English. Let me grab them for you.” Catherine moved to a shelf and began selecting books and stacking them in Wendy’s arms.

“This is amazing, thanks, Catherine,” Wendy beamed as she crossed the room toward the table Catherine had left her own books at. “Mind if I join you here?”

“Not at all, have a seat. It’s not often I get to have company while I work.” She smiled.

Wendy sat down and began to dive into the first book.

It was all about the Donald Clan and their intertwined history with the Fae.

For Wendy it was fascinating to read and she had to wonder why she’d never come across anything like it before.

Frowning, she looked up at Catherine. “Hey, so how come these books exist here, but I never came across them back home? I mean, I’ve studied the Fae and Scottish myths and legends since I was about eleven, and I’ve never read anything like this.” She pointed to the book in her hands.

Catherine nodded. “I know what you mean, and I’ve discussed this with Eamon.

Not directly about the Fae, but about other things.

My guess is that at some point in the future, all of this will be lost.” She indicated the room.

“I never specifically studied the Donald Clan either, so I can’t say for sure, but I know from my work, that many castles were razed or destroyed in different clan wars.

It possible that will happen at some point in the future.

It’s one of the reasons I’m working on translating several of these, writing new accounts and compiling information from all of this and I plan to get it somewhere safe like the University of Edinburgh.

It’s not called that at the moment, but it will be. ”

“That’s amazing. I wonder...” Wendy trailed off as she thought about the fact, she had been planning to write a book on the supernatural.

“You wonder what?”

“Well, I told you what I was working on before Dub Sith brought me here. I was thinking, maybe I can write it after all. I may not have all the reference books I had before, but I’ve got these...” She indicated the books on the table. “And I’m going to bet there’s more on the shelves, right?”

“Right, but you’ll need to learn Gaelic to read them.”

“I can do that.” Wendy nodded, her mind going a mile a minute. “Do you have some more paper I can use? And a pen and ink?”

Catherine was more than happy to provide Wendy with what she needed and together they each worked on the projects they’d set for themselves.

The following morning, as the Highland sun bathed the castle courtyard in a warm,

golden glow, Wendy ventured out to soak in the sights of daily life.

Her steps carried her across the well-trodden stones, worn smooth by centuries of bustling activity.

There, in the courtyard, she spotted Hamish, standing at a distance, his rugged form a striking silhouette against the backdrop of the fort's towering walls. He'd returned and she wondered when.

He turned and saw her, a vibrant smile lighting his face as he noticed her and gave her a wave. Yet Wendy hesitated to approach him, her steps slowing as she realized he wasn't returning but preparing to leave once again. He was going to go out beyond the fort's walls without her again.

Hamish readied his saddlebags and checked the weapons at his side, and Wendy couldn't help but marvel at his rugged handsomeness.

His hair, tousled by the Highland breeze, cascaded to his shoulders in wavy locks.

The way his gray eyes took everything in as he focused on his task.

He was just so appealing to her. Wendy watched the way he moved, her heart racing as he deftly fastened the leather straps of his gear.

"Where are you off to this time, Hamish?" she asked, as she took in the fact he was once again wearing a sword. Did they all just walk around with a sword at their side at all times? she wondered. She didn't think she'd ever seen him without it.

"We're off to track down the kelpies once more," he informed her. "We didnae find them yesterday, so we'll try again today. Though I am still unsure of what we shall do once we find them."

“Then let me go with you. I know you’re trying to protect me from myself, but I can help.” Wendy pleaded.

“Lass, I know tis your wish to go, but Cam agrees tis much to perilous for you to be chasing down these creatures with me an’ my brothers. We’ve a task to do, lives we’re sworn to protect, an’ I cannae go against his wishes.”

“But—” she started to argue.

“Lass, we’re going ta be gone for days, living rough, tis nae place for a lady such as yourself,” he said, his tone firm.

As Hamish mounted his horse and prepared to depart with his brothers, Wendy couldn't help but feel a surge of frustration and disappointment. She clenched her fists, her brows furrowing in irritation as she watched him ride away. It stung to be denied the opportunity to prove herself.

With an exasperated huff, Wendy turned on her heel and stomped back into the castle. Her vexation was palpable as she muttered, “Blasted men and their blasted antiquated idea that women can’t take care of themselves.”

During Hamish's absence, Wendy delved further into her work, capitalizing on the unique opportunity of living in a world steeped in legends and folklore.

She soon found herself in the castle's library, immersed in research for her book.

The musty scent of ancient tomes surrounded her as she pored over the texts, transcribing tales of magic and mysticism.

While Hamish was gone, her days revolved around working in the library with Catherine, each of them on their separate projects, meals with the other women or on

her own in her room, and dreaming at night of Hamish.

Sometimes in the dreams she would be out with him exploring the Scottish countryside, others they were arguing about the Fae, but for the most part they were pleasant dreams. Despite her being upset with him, she couldn't deny the fact she was very attracted to him.

As the evening sun dipped below the horizon, casting a warm amber glow across the rolling Scottish landscape on the fourth day of Hamish's absence, Wendy found herself heading into the dining hall alone.

She had long left the library, having needed some time outside where she could smell the salty breeze and the wild flowers growing on the moors.

She'd told Catherine that she'd meet her for dinner, but as she entered the dining hall, she didn't see her.

She walked forward, passing by tables full of other members of the Donald clan, the tables laden with numerous platters of food.

Looking around she couldn't decide where to sit.

"Wendy, hey, sorry," Catherine called, rushing up to her. "I got caught up in one of the books and lost track of time. You haven't eaten yet, have you?"

Shaking her head, Wendy replied, "Not yet, no. I was just looking for a place to sit, but there's no empty tables."

Catherine smiled. "Yeah, typically there aren't very often. Come on, we can sit over here. I don't see the others, and Jen will probably eat with Cam. Eamon's on duty, I hate when he's working night shift, but they all have to take their turns." She

shrugged.

“It does seem they do,” Wendy murmured.

While they talked, Cam and Jen entered the dining hall and headed for the high table on the dias.

A couple of time over the last few days, Wendy had eaten up there with them, but she always felt as though she was on display when she did, so she tried not to pretty often.

She was glad Catherine had led her to a table more in the center of the room.

As she and Catherine ate, there was a slight commotion near the doors to the dining hall and then Wendy’s heart stuttered in her chest. Hamish and his brothers had returned. Her gaze tracked him as he, Crisdean, and Artair strode toward the dias and then stood in front of Cam at the high table.

She wondered what he was reporting as he stood there looking confident and smart.

Had he and his brothers found the kelpies?

Was the problem solved? Had they found a way to stop them from attacking?

She couldn’t hear any of what was said over the noise in the room from the various conversations taking place.

Once he finished speaking with Cam, he and his brothers moved to a nearby table and sat down. They began filling their plates and Wendy felt just the slightest bit of disappointment that he hadn’t come over here to join her.

“Damn, you’ve got it bad, don’t you,” Catherine murmured.

Wendy turned her startled gaze to her. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She could feel the heat creeping up her neck though, because she knew exactly what Catherine was saying.

“Sweetie, denial is a river in Africa. You can’t fool me.” She grinned.

“Trust you to make a geography joke,” Wendy teased back.

“Go talk to him. I know you want to.”

“But he didn’t even acknowledge me,” Wendy fretted.

“Trust me, he wants to see you. Go talk to him. Maybe even flirt a little,” Catherine suggested.

“You think? I’m not all that great at it,” Wendy admitted with a twist of her lips.

“Just be yourself, you’ll be fine,” Catherine tilted her chin toward Hamish, “go.”

Wendy took a deep breath, gave her a nod and then stood and smoothed down her skirt. She walked over to him and when he looked up, she smiled. “Hamish, I’m so glad you’re back, I’ve missed your company.”

“Have you, lass?” he asked, his eyes twinkling as he grinned up at her. “I’d have thought you were a wee bit angry at me after our last encounter.”

Wendy winced. “Not gonna lie, for a little bit there I wanted to push you off your horse, but I’m pretty sure that wouldn’t have gone the way I imagined because you’re big and strong and I’m...well...I’m just tiny little me.” She snickered as she gestured

toward herself.

“I find tiny little you quite fascinating, lass, an’ you’re probably right about it nae going as you imagined were you to do such a thing,” Hamish replied, and there was a heat in his eyes as he gave her what only could be described as a roguish grin.

It made Wendy’s insides melt at the sight of it and she had to gulp and wonder what exactly had she gotten herself into. “Um, well, would you mind if I join you?”

“I’d like that, lass, though I must admit I’ve trouble focusing when you’re around.”

The look in his eyes was just this side of vulnerable, but held quite a lot of heat too and it had Wendy feeling giddy with excitement. She hoped this was his way of telling her that he was just as interested in her as she was in him.

Wendy awoke from a night of passionate dreams, her heart still racing from the sensual fantasies that all centered around the enigmatic Hamish.

The dreams had been so vivid that when she’d woken, she actually looked next to her in the bed, half expecting to find him next to her.

She flopped back against the pillow and sighed.

She wanted that connection with him more than she wanted anything with anyone in her life ever.

It was like her body craved his, craved him and she wouldn’t be satisfied until they’d finally gotten together.

With that in mind, she got up and dressed, planning to go in search of him and see if they could further the little bit of progress they’d made last night in their flirtation.

However, as she reached the grand hall, she discovered that he had departed once more without so much as a goodbye.

Her emotions were a tumultuous mix of desire and confusion, intensified by the hot-and-cold nature of their interactions.

He hadn't mentioned last night that he'd be leaving again so soon, and she was now filled with disappointment.

Sitting in her room alone, she longed for the day when Hamish would finally reveal the depth of his feelings, and she could do the same. Until then, she was left to grapple with her own desires and the mysteries of this enchanting place.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

Wendy sat by the window, her eyes scanning the courtyard below.

She'd found herself sitting here watching for Hamish to return on almost a daily basis.

He'd been gone for a little more than a week this time and she was worried.

She knew she shouldn't be though, because Annabelle and Catherine had both assured her this wasn't unusual.

The guards were often gone, traveling around Islay seeing to various things in different towns who were aligned with the Donalds.

It turned out that though the Campbells were the owners of the land, the people rarely turned to them for their needs, and instead trusted the Donalds to act in their favor.

And while it was great for them to put their trust in the Donalds and therefore Hamish, it also meant they were often away from the fort.

It also meant that Catherine and Annabelle were gone at times too, because sometimes they'd each go out with their husbands when they were going somewhere on clan business.

On this particular day, Wendy had dined in the dining hall for breakfast, spent the rest of the morning in the library and then came to her room with a platter of meats and cheeses and some tea for lunch.

She'd finished eating and was now sitting a vigil at the window, wishing Hamish would return as she daydreamed.

Her day dreaming was disturbed a little while later as urgent shouts rang through the air, echoing with a sense of alarm. "Hurry! Get him to the healer," a voice called.

Jumping to her feet, Wendy leaned out of the window to get a better look.

Anxiety filled her as she noticed Artair and Crisdean ride in with Hamish a top his horse between them.

However something was wrong. He wasn't seated as he normally was, proudly in the saddle.

Instead he was slightly hunched over Thunder's neck.

As Artair and Crisdean dismounted, they each held onto Hamish, keeping him on his horse, it was painfully obvious that he was hurt. They moved to assist him down and other guards rushed over to help. It was then Wendy noticed that both Artair and Crisdean were injured as well.

Acting on impulse, she swiftly left her bedchamber behind, her feet propelling her through the castle's corridors.

She had to reach him, to understand the extent of their injuries, and to offer any help she could.

The ache in her chest at the sight of him in pain was unbearable, and she needed desperately to be by his side.

Wendy bolted from the castle door, her footsteps echoing in the courtyard.

Her heart pounded in her chest as she made her way directly to Hamish, who was leaning his weight on a couple of other guards.

“Hamish!” she cried out as she moved to him, wanting to pull him into her, but also not wanting to injure him further. “What happened? How bad are you hurt?”

Wincing as her hands landed on his chest, Hamish gasped in pain.

“Was kicked, lass. We attempted to capture one o’ the kelpie and it put up a fight.

It chased us and knocked me from Thunder with a powerful kick, nipped at us too.

Barely got away before it turned back toward the loch,” he grunted out.

Wendy's eyes scanned him, feeling distressed about how to help him. “What can I do to help, I don’t want to hurt you further,” she said, frantically.

With a faint smile, Hamish said, "Ah, lass, you do care then.”

Wendy looked up at him with a severe frown. "Of course, I do, Hamish. I don't want to see you hurt like this. I’ve been really worried about you. You’ve been gone more than a week."

“I was jest fine until this morn. My armor is pretty sturdy, or it t’was until this encounter. Now I jest need ta lie myself down in my bed and pray for the pain to ebb.”

“What about the healer? What was her name? Aine? Can we call her and get her to help you?” Wendy asked, her nerves shattered at seeing him ready to collapse from the pain.

As she looked into his eyes, Wendy's feelings for Hamish deepened, and she found herself caring for him more than she had ever imagined was possible.

Before they could fully make it into the castle, Cam MacDonald came striding directly toward Hamish. "What happened, Hamish?" he asked before anyone could answer Wendy's questions about the healer.

With a hint of weariness in his voice, Hamish proceeded to recount the day's events, detailing their encounter with the kelpie.

"Cam, he's injured, he needs to lie down," Wendy said, firmly.

"Aye, I can see that, lass." He smiled. "Go get some rest, Hamish, see to your injuries. If you need me to send for Aine, let me know."

"I'll stay with him, make sure he does rest and he's healing. And I'll let you know if he needs this Aine woman."

Cam smiled. "I am sure with you tending to him, lass, he'll recover in nae time." He turned back to Hamish and added, "Listen to your nurse, Hamish and be quick with your healing. I'm goin' ta need you fit for duty again soon."

"Aye, Chief. Will do my very best," Hamish grunted.

"What about your brothers? Are they injured as well?" Cam asked before they could move off.

"Aye, but merely bruised, neither were kicked as I was."

"That's good to hear. Go get some rest."

Wendy had no idea where Hamish's rooms were, so she followed as the two guards who were holding him up helped him up the stairs.

She would have rather it been her, but she didn't want him further injured.

When they reached his room, she said, "I can take it from here. Thanks for helping to get him here."

"Of course, lass."

"Thanks, Shaw, you too Marc," Hamish grunted as Wendy let him lean on her.

They entered the room, and she noticed that it was nearly as large as Mae's and Niall's rooms. There was a sitting room with a settee and a couple of chairs in front of a massive hearth.

There was a four person wooden table and chairs to one side, and a desk with another chair to the other.

On the back wall were two doors, one was open and led to a bedchamber, which she moved toward, her arm around his middle to help steady him.

"Sit on the bed and take off that armor and your shirt so I can see how bad you're hurt," Wendy said firmly.

Hamish moved to do as she asked, but in the end, she had to help him because he couldn't lift his arms very high. He was sweating by the time they got it all off of him and groaning in pain.

Tears filled Wendy's eyes as she stared at the bleeding hoof prints on his chest. He could have been killed.

They weren't too deep, but the skin was broken and bruised.

She blinked the tears away, knowing now was not the time for it.

She moved to the wash bowl and poured some water into it.

"I'm going to clean them, and then while you're resting, I'll see about getting some bandages and wrapping your chest. I think you may have some cracked ribs. "

"Aye, you could be right, lass." Hamish scooted back on the bed, laying down with his legs still hanging off the edge. His eyes were closed, and he looked very uncomfortable.

Moving back to him, she couldn't help but take in his muscular chest. He was very drool worthy, but she needed to focus on her task.

She cleaned up the wounds from the kelpie's hooves and then bent down to remove his boots so he could lay more fully on the bed.

"Are you okay for now? I'm going to go find those bandages. "

"Aye lass, I'll be fine. Jest donnae be too long."

"I won't I promise." Wendy hurried from the room and was halfway down the stairs when she ran into Jen. "Sorry, Hamish was hurt, I need to go track down some bandages," she said, starting to rush past her.

"Wendy, stop, I've got them right here. Along with a poultice that Aine sent. Apparently, she knew and showed up here as you and Hamish were heading upstairs."

Wendy stopped and turned back. “The half-Fae woman? Where is she?”

“Sorry, she’s gone already. She doesn’t like crowds, so she dropped this at the gate, said it was for the injured and then was on her way back to her isle.”

Feeling slightly disappointed, Wendy nodded. “How does it work?”

“Put this on his wounds, bind them with the bandages, repeat for the next few days.”

“Okay, got it. Thanks, Jen.”

“Go take care of him. I’ll have Sally bring up dinner for you both.”

Wendy nodded and returned to Hamish’s rooms. With gentleness and precision, Wendy applied the poultice and carefully bandaged his chest. She took her time, ensuring that the binding was secure.

As she worked with gentle fingers, she noticed Hamish watching her with a twinkle in his gaze. He still seemed to be in pain, but he was taking it in stride and not complaining. She couldn’t figure out if he was actually happy to have her here nursing him or if he was just happy that someone was.

Wendy dedicated two whole days and nights to the meticulous care of Hamish's wounds.

Her ministrations ranged from cleaning his injuries to replacing the poultice and bandages with tender precision.

With each passing day, their connection deepened, and the castle kitchens provided nourishing foods that Wendy brought to his side.

As the third day dawned, Wendy woke and went to check on Hamish. She'd taken to spending the nights on the settee where she could hear Hamish if he called out to her. Part of her wished she could just share his bed, but that would be way too formal, she thought, so she'd settled for the settee.

Hamish smiled upon seeing her. "Lass, you've taken such good care of me, I cannae thank you enough."

Wendy felt a blush creeping up her neck and heating her cheeks. "Of course I have. I've been so worried about you, but this poultice Aine sent is amazing and you seem almost completely healed." She ran her hands over where the wounds were just about gone.

Hamish caught her hands to her chest and held them there as he leaned forward slightly.

He was a hair's breadth away from her as he met her eyes.

A moment later, his lips pressed against hers in the softest and gentlest kiss she could ever have imagined.

Especially since the moment his lips touched hers an entire wildfire was set aflame inside of her.

That kiss left no doubt about the fact that Hamish had feelings for her that matched her feelings for him. He'd left her breathless and glowing as he'd risen from his bed and said they should go down to the dining hall for breakfast.

Wendy wasn't sure what that kiss had meant.

Had he merely been thanking her for her nursing job or was there something more?

Were they now moving forward in their relationship?

Were they going to start actually dating?

Or was it courting? She didn't know, but she certainly hoped so.

She could see herself falling in love with him and she really hoped that meant he was too.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

The library was bathed in the soft, warm glow of candlelight from the various lanterns on the tables and torches on the walls, casting flickering shadows on the ancient tomes that lined the shelves.

The scent of old parchment and leather-bound books filled the air.

Seated at the sturdy oak table, Wendy was engrossed in her work, diligently penning the pages of her folklore book.

As the evening wore on, the door to the library creaked open, and Hamish, now back to health, entered with a quiet, confident step.

The tall, burly blacksmith made quite a striking figure in the library's dim light.

His muscular shoulders and well-defined physique called out to Wendy and his gray eyes held a gentle glimmer that melted her heart.

Wendy looked up from her work, a soft smile gracing her lips. "Hamish," she greeted warmly. "How are you feeling?" She knew he'd returned to work that morning, though he'd kept to the fort, working on some of his blacksmithing projects.

He returned her smile and walked over, taking a seat across from her. "Much better, lass. Thanks to your care, I'm back in fighting shape," he said with a playful wink. Then he leaned forward, genuine curiosity in his eyes. "So, what has been keeping you busy in this cozy corner of the castle?"

"I've been working on my book. I don't have all the resources I had back home, but

you've got a ton of them here. So I've been documenting the tales and legends from your family that I've come across in these books. It's fascinating, really."

"Tis that so? Have you come across anything about the kelpies? Anything that might help us deal with them?"

Wendy smiled, excitement filling her voice as she said, "I have read up on a few things. Not gonna lie, I've actually been looking specifically for kelpie stories in these books since you've been dealing mostly with them."

"Aye, and what have you found?" he asked, sounding intrigued.

"Well, one story spoke of being able to lull the kelpies into a sort of trance by playing a peaceful tune upon a harp."

"That sounds intriguing. Better than being chased and kicked in the chest. What happened after they stopped playing?"

"While they played the harp, they led the kelpies back to the loch and they returned home." She shrugged.

"Did they come back?" he asked.

"The story didn't say. Maybe they just kept doing that every time the kelpies showed up?"

"Hmmm, I suppose that tis an option, lass. Though I'm nae sure tis one that t'll work for us." He chuckled. "Did you find any others?"

Wendy nodded. "Yes, loads. A couple of the books spoke of tales of kelpies forming bonds with humans, especially those with kind hearts."

The people offered the kelpies a place to rest or spoke kindly to them and won their trust. That might work in our case since these kelpies live in Loch Finlaggan.

If we can find a way to coexist peacefully, it might spare both our people and the kelpies from harm. "

Hamish nodded. "You have a good heart, lass," he murmured, smiling at her intently. "It would be worth a try I suppose, but after what has already occurred it may be too late to try for peace between us. Were there any other stories?"

"Yes, let me find it." Wendy shifted the stack of books and flipped through one of them until she came across a particular passage.

"Look here, Hamish," she said, "This legend speaks of a kelpie that once terrorized a nearby village until it was driven away with the aid of a fairy bull raised by a local farmer." This was the first she'd ever read about a fairy bull before and had been amazed by it. "You see, the bull saved the young woman's life by engaging with the kelpie. Of course both were lost to the loch, but maybe there's another fairy bull somewhere in Islay?"

Hamish leaned in, his curiosity piqued, but as he studied the page, a faint smile curled on his lips. "Ah, I know this tale," he replied, his voice warm and tinged with nostalgia. "My grandda told it to me when I was but a wee bairn."

"You've heard of it before? That's wonderful, do you know if the story is true? I've never heard of a fairy bull before."

"Oh, aye, tis true, lass, but I'm afraid tis nae possible to do again."

Frowning Wendy sighed. "Why not? Are there not any more of them? The bulls I mean. Or do you think the kelpies have wised up to them and won't fall for it again?"

“Nae lass, will nae work because the fairy bull you speak of was borne on Campbell lands. An’ if’n there were ta be another, t’would be theirs and the Campbells will nae help us with this. Especially the Campbells on that particular land.”

Wendy was surprised. She couldn't fathom that the Campbells, in the face of such a dire and universal menace, couldn't be swayed to set aside their longstanding feuds and grievances for the greater good. “I don't get it. Why wouldn't they want to stop the kelpies from harming people?”

“The Campbells hate the Donalds with such passion that they drove nearly all of our women off a cliff into the Hebrides, lass, about sixty years ago. Tis a wonder that any of us are even here now. They take every chance they get ta destroy us Donalds. So nae, they wouldnae care if the kelpies were to drown every last one o' us.

A course, they would have to believe in the creatures to even hope for that an' the Campbells donnae believe in the Fae. ”

Wendy felt her hopes sink with the weight of this revelation, realizing the gravity of the predicament they faced. “Well that sucks.” She leaned back in her chair, deep in thought. She wondered what she could do to help fix that situation.

Hamish chuckled. “Aye, lass, it does.” He yawned and stretched then said, “I am going to find my bed, lass. Tis been a long day. Donnae stay too late.”

“I won't,” Wendy agreed. “If I come across any other ways to stop them, I'll let you know.”

“I'd appreciate that, lass. Sweet dreams,” he said and then he left.

Sweet dreams were the very last thing on Wendy's mind though.

Instead, her thoughts were on how to convince the Campbells to behave reasonably in regard to the kelpies.

But how do you convince someone the supernatural existed when they insisted on not believing?

It was a question that kept her up much of the night.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

The next morning, Wendy awoke late in the morning with a renewed determination.

The golden sunlight streaming through the windows of her chamber, cast a warm glow that seemed to promise a day filled with possibility.

The prospect of a fresh start spurred her into action, and she resolved to take particular care with her appearance as she readied herself for the day and then headed down to the dining hall for breakfast.

She was hoping to see Hamish there, but so far, he'd not put in an appearance.

She decided that after she ate, she'd head out to the courtyard and see if he were in his blacksmith shop.

By the time she'd finished her food, the dining hall was just about empty.

She took her dirty plate, bowl and utensils to the kitchens and dropped them off for the staff before heading outside.

Emerging into the courtyard, she inhaled the crisp Highland air. She started toward the blacksmith shop as the sun beamed down upon her, and she savored the vibrant life of the world around her.

However, before she could call out to Hamish, she noticed he and Cam were in a heated discussion.

Wendy hesitated, unsure whether to approach or withdraw.

Her sense of curiosity warred with the respect she held for their privacy.

Just as she was about to turn away and head off to the stable, Cam left the shop.

He gave her a nod as he passed her and said, “Good morning, lass, hope you have a pleasant day,” and continued on toward the castle doors.

Wendy tracked him with her gaze before looking back at the blacksmith shop to see what Hamish was doing.

He looked frustrated and not very happy as he shifted things around.

She decided to go on and talk to him, and maybe see what that conversation had been about because it didn’t look like it had put Hamish in a good mood.

Walking into the shop, which was more like an open-aired hut, with a huge forge in the center, and piles of metal off to the side, she said, "May I join you, Hamish?"

The burly Highlander turned to her and a warm smile spread across his face; his gray eyes lit with joy. "Aye, lass. You are always welcome."

"Everything all right? With Cam... I mean? It looked like an intense conversation, and I didn’t know if I should even come in, but then he left, so... is everything okay?"

“Aye, tis fine. Jest he wants me ta make an iron bridle for the kelpie. The one who attacked me. He thinks it may be the one that tis causing all the trouble.”

“An iron bridle?” Wendy frowned. “Won’t that hurt the kelpie? I mean I know iron is very harmful to the Fae. Wouldn’t that be cruel?”

“Aye lass. It tis, but we’ve no other choice.” Hamish began to hammer out the iron he’d had heating in the forge.

"Is there really no other way to deter the creature? I know I’ve read that if bound in iron for too long, it will kill the Fae, won’t that just bring retaliation from its mates?"

Hamish, with a sense of weariness in his eyes, replied with a hint of regret, "I wish there was another way, lass. I donnae want ta hurt it, but it tis wreaking havoc upon the village of Finlaggan. Already three people have gone missing, and several others have been attacked. As to retaliation, that tis always a possibility.”

The heavy atmosphere in the forge obviously weighed heavily on Hamish's broad shoulders.

Cam's orders had put a noticeable strain on him, and Wendy observed the distress in his expression as he furrowed his brow and let out a sigh.

She couldn't help but wonder what other turmoil brewed within him as he worked upon the bridle.

She watched him work the metal, creating the bridle that would go on the kelpie’s head. She frowned as she tried to figure out a different way to deal with the kelpie. She didn’t want to see it killed or even hurt badly, which would happen with that thing.

As he finished the piece for the bridle he was working on, Hamish broke the silence that hung between them. "Lass, I need a bit o’ fresh air. Perhaps a walk to clear my mind. Would you care to join me?"

Wendy didn't hesitate; she sensed his need for her company. "I would love to," she responded warmly.

Hamish smiled and said, “Give me one moment to tell Ewan what still needs to be done.”

Wendy nodded. She’d met Ewan several times now and she knew he was always eager to work on the blacksmithing projects Hamish set him to do.

It seemed he really loved working with metals, just like Hamish.

His other two brothers, Artair and Crisdean, had no interest and much preferred the duties of being guards.

“Hi, Ewan,” she said, when he came around the corner with Hamish.

“Wendy, tis good to see you, are you going walking with Hamish then?”

“That’s the plan.” She nodded.

“Enjoy yourself, Hamish you should take Wendy down to Loch Ballygrant for a picnic,” Ewan suggested.

“Tis a fine idea, Ewan, I think I shall.” Hamish smiled. “Do you mind a detour to the kitchens?”

“Not at all.” Wendy felt a thrill of excitement at the thought.

Together, they left the forge and headed into the castle. They found Mira in the kitchens, and she was more than happy to set them up with a small picnic in a woven basket. She even provided a tartan cloth for them to sit upon once they reached the shores of the loch.

As they left the courtyard, Wendy walked beside Hamish. She decided to be slightly

bold, and let her hand brush against his, and when he didn't pull away, she slipped her hand into his and smiled at him. Her heart soared as he smiled back and tightened his hold on her hand.

As they strolled along, the crisp Scottish air swirled around them, invigorating, and calming at once.

They followed the path down the picturesque hillside, carpeted with heather and wildflowers, as it led past the small village at the bottom of the hill and off to the tranquil shores of Loch Ballygrant.

When they reached the loch, Wendy noticed that the water glistened like a mirror, reflecting the deep blues of the sky above, and it was fringed with lush, emerald-green reeds that rustled in the gentle breeze.

As they stood by the water's edge, Wendy cast a longing gaze across the loch. "It's so beautiful here." She sighed; her eyes still locked on the breathtaking scenery.

Hamish nodded in agreement, his eyes never leaving her. "Aye, it tis a bonnie spot," he said with a smile. "But not nearly as beautiful as you, lass."

Wendy felt a blush creep up her neck to her cheeks. "Flattery will get you everywhere," she teased, and they both shared a hearty laugh.

"Come let us see what goodies Mira prepared for us," he suggested and led her to a flat area next to the lake that was perfect for their picnic.

He spread out the cloth and put the basket in the middle, then helped Wendy to take a seat before joining her. He pulled a plate of meat and cheese from the basket, chunks of bread, and then another cloth wrapped package that he set off to the side, as well as a bottle with a cork stopper in it.

“We’ll have to share the bottle, Mira didnae include cups I’m afraid.”

“That’s fine, I don’t mind.” Wendy smiled as he handed her some of the bread and she ate.

They spent the next while talking and sharing more stories of their childhood, and Wendy told him about going to school and how she’d become interested in the Fae in the first place.

“You mam made a what for you?” Hamish’s brow furrowed.

“A leprechaun trap. So we have this day we celebrate, called St. Patrick’s Day, it’s actually an Irish holiday, as he’s the patron saint of Ireland, but there are a lot of Irish in America, or there will be anyway and so we celebrate.”

“Aye, but what does the saint have to do with leprechauns, lass?”

Wendy laughed. “Nothing really, just that they became the symbol of Ireland and being Irish, which so many American’s are proud of being, even if it’s just for one day.

I think we may even celebrate it more than the actual Irish do.

” She grinned. “Anyway, back to the trap. So I had done a report on Ireland for my second grade class and my mom had been looking for stuff online—” she stopped and realized he’d have no idea what that meant, “—put a pin in that and I’ll come back and try to explain that after,” she continued.

“Very well, lass,” Hamish chuckled.

“So she was researching, and she came across this neat crafting idea to do with kids

for the holiday and so we did it. We took a box, painted it green, and made a trap about this big,” she held her hands to show him the size of a shoe box, “and then we put in some bait, which was these gold wrapped chocolate candies that looked like coins, because leprechauns love gold, right? And we set it out so we could trap the leprechaun. I hadn’t believed it would work, but the next morning my mom, her eyes bright and twinkling, she was so giddy, I remember, brought me to see that we’d almost caught him, but he’d gotten away and left behind his tiny little green coat and a note that I had to use a magnifying glass to read. ”

Hamish looked startled. “So you actually almost caught one?”

Laughing, Wendy shook her head. “No, but I believed we did for a good while. Turned out my mom had stayed up half the night making the coat and penning the note. She always believed in the Fae and wanted to bring that to life for me.”

“She sounds like a good mam. You must miss her.”

Her face grew solemn as she nodded. “I do. Every day. She died when I was fourteen.”

“I’m sorry, lass. What of your da?”

“I was close with my dad too, even more after Mom was gone. It was just the two of us and then he died my first year of college and it was just me. Neither of my parents had much family, just their parents and they died when I was a baby.”

“Well, you’ve got a big family now, lass. We’ll be your family.” Hamish smiled, taking her hand.

“I’d like that, Hamish.” Wendy smiled and wished he’d kiss her again. She couldn’t help but notice the desire that flickered in Hamish’s eyes, a magnetic force that drew

them closer, but he didn't act on it.

Instead they sat and watched the sun set around them, making the water's surface shine with reds, pinks, and oranges as they ate the shortbread treat that Mira had put in the cloth bundle as a surprise.

Once it was fully dusk, Hamish helped her to her feet, and they cleaned up their picnic, then headed back up the hill to the castle.

Hamish walked her to her room, lingered for a few moments, as though he was considering kissing her, but again he didn't, before saying good night.

Wendy went inside and got ready for bed.

As soon as her head hit the pillow, she was asleep, and dreams swept over Wendy's slumbering mind. In the depths of her subconscious, the kelpie she'd been chasing after morphed into an alluring vision of Hamish.

He stopped running from her and turned on her, a fire in his eyes as he gazed at her.

Wendy approached him and without a second thought, threw herself into his arms where he wrapped himself around her and kissed her so passionately it made her toes curl.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

As Wendy woke and started to go about her day, two particular worries weighed on her mind like heavy stones.

The first was her growing infatuation with Hamish.

His rugged charm and captivating smile had ensnared her heart, leaving her distracted and consumed by his presence.

That wasn't really a worry, the worry was that he didn't exactly feel the same way she did.

He had kissed her, yes, and he'd held her hand and walked with her.

Even seemed interested in her life prior to coming here, but was his fascination with her simply because she came from another time, or was it because he actually liked her as much as she liked him?

The second concern gnawed at her even more profoundly than the first. She felt a deep objection to the plan to capture the kelpie with iron.

It was more than just a practical strategy; it struck her as morally wrong to imprison such a magnificent creature.

The idea of restricting its freedom with cold, unyielding iron filled her with unease.

Especially knowing that that metal would, if left on them long enough, kill the creature.

As Wendy paced the library, Catherine came in and stopped short at seeing her pacing. "What's up?" she asked.

Wendy stopped and turned toward her. "I'm frustrated.

Cam had Hamish make this iron bridle to put on the kelpie, you know the one that they think has been causing all the trouble?

And I'm upset about it because being a Fae creature, I know the iron will hurt it very badly or might even kill it and I don't want that to happen.

I told Hamish it would do that, and he's aware, but he says he's got no choice. "

"Okay, so is there any other solution? What are the pros and cons of using it?" she asked, sounding logical.

Wendy frowned. "It will stop the kelpie, I suppose that's a pro, and no humans will die, that would be a pro, but I keep thinking that if the bridle is used and it kills the kelpie, then the Donalds are making a mortal enemy of the kelpies, and they will retaliate in kind."

"If that's how you feel about the outcome to all of this, then don't hide it.

I know that Cam seems like a hard man to talk to sometimes, but he is usually open to hearing ideas at least. You might be on to something that they can't see," Catherine said.

"Though you might want to start thinking up some solutions too, that could help your case."

Nodding, Wendy said, "Thanks Catherine. I'll see what I can do."

Leaving the cozy library, Wendy went to find Hamish. She checked in his blacksmith shop, but Ewan said he was off practicing with the guards, so she left and went that direction.

Wendy found Hamish in the midst of a rowdy practice.

His strong, bare chest glistened with a sheen of perspiration, and the muscles in his arms rippled with each strike and parry.

Her heart skipped a beat as she watched him, struck by the raw intensity of his athleticism and the allure of his rugged masculinity.

Suddenly she forgot why she had sought him out in the first place.

Her mouth watered and her heart raced as she watched the sheer magnitude of his power with that weapon.

He was every fantasy she'd ever had come to life.

As the practice came to an end, someone directed Hamish's attention toward her and Wendy did her best to keep the drool to a minimum as he turned and smiled at her.

Picking up his tunic, he pulled it on and crossed the practice field toward her. "Lass, what brings you out here this fine day?" he asked, smiling at her. "Nae that I donnae wish to see you. Tis a most pleasant treat."

Wendy felt a blush start in her toes move rapidly up her body, heating her all over.

"I came to see you. I've been thinking about this plan of Cam's to trap the kelpie with the iron bridle," she started, gathering her courage. "I keep thinking that it's the wrong way to go. Killing the kelpie with iron is going to harm the Donald clans

alliance with the Fae. You're going to make them a mortal enemy and the fact that they live a bazillion times longer than we do, and the fact that they are known to hold grudges, means that you could potentially be looking at a war between the Donalds and the Fae for a very long time."

Hamish, who had been nodding along as she spoke, now looked deeply troubled. He seemed to contemplate the weight of her words. After a thoughtful pause, he replied, "You make a good point, lass. We can't risk such a vendetta. It's a matter that needs to be brought to Cam's attention."

Wendy felt a sense of relief that he finally shared her concerns. His support buoyed her spirits. "Can we go together and talk to him?"

"Aye, lass, we can do that." Hamish gestured for her to start walking and they headed back to the castle together.

They walked side by side into the building and down the stone hall to Cam's office. Hamish knocked on the door and waited until Cam called out for them to enter before opening the door.

"Here we are, lass," he murmured as he allowed her to go in first.

Cam looked up as Hamish and Wendy entered, his piercing blue eyes settling on them.

He gestured for them to sit, and they took their places at the large table, Wendy feeling somewhat overwhelmed by the gravity of the setting.

Cam leaned forward, his voice firm but tinged with curiosity.

"What brings you both here today, Hamish? "

Hamish cleared his throat and began, “T’was a thought that Wendy had. I think she should be the one to bring it to your attention because I think she could be right.”

Cam’s brow furrowed. “Is this about the kelpie problem? I know you have an interest in these creatures, but?—”

“I do, you’re right, but I also consider you all now my family,” Wendy, taking a deep breath, looked over at Hamish for assurance.

As he nodded, she continued, “I know you’ve had Hamish make that iron bridle and you want him to use it to capture and control the kelpie that’s attacking people.

I understand the need to get it to stop doing what it’s doing, but I don’t think this is the right way to go about it.

Cam furrowed his brows but remained composed. "Aye, the kelpie is a dangerous creature. It has claimed the lives of three of our kin. We must deal with it before more lives are lost."

“I get that, I really do. But the iron will hurt and could possibly kill the kelpie, and I don’t think you’ve thought out the repercussions of doing such a thing,” Wendy argued.

Cam's expression hardened. "This is nae a matter to be taken lightly. It has taken too many lives, and we cannae wait for it to strike again. We must end the threat now."

Hamish sighed, “Cam, you need to listen to her. She has a good point.”

“You could be making an enemy of the Fae if you do this, one that will last generations because the Fae are immortal, unless killed with iron.”

Cam gave a heavy sigh. “I’m nae ignorin’ your warning, Wendy.

I know this could lead to a dire situation between us and the Fae, but we’ve no choice.

We’ve tried everythin’ else to drive the kelpie back into the loch and tis nae working.

If you have a better solution, then please share it. Otherwise, this is all we’ve got left.”

Wendy felt a sense of frustration and helplessness wash over her. She didn’t have any other solution right now. She was still looking. “If I could have a little more time…”

Cam shook his head. “I cannae risk more people’s lives lass. When that bridle is ready, I need you to head out there, Hamish.”

“Aye, Cam. I understand,” Hamish replied with reluctance in his tone.

“I know tis not ideal, but I can see no other way.”

As they walked out of Cam’s office, Wendy knew she had to find a way to deal with the kelpie as quickly as possible, before Hamish finished it and left with that bridle.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

“Hamish,” Wendy said, her voice resolute, “how long before you finish that bridle?”

“I can give you a week, lass, but nae more. Cam will nae have it.”

Wendy nodded. “Even if I don’t come up with something, I want to go with you to hunt it down. There has to be a better way to handle it. I think that might be why Dub Sith brought me here. He asked me for help, this has to be why, don’t you think?”

Hamish turned to her, frustration in his eyes. “That may be lass, but tis much too dangerous to have you out with us. You saw what it did to me, and I was wearin’ armor. You’ve got nothin’ but your dress. It could kill you and I will nae see that happen.”

“I don’t want it to kill me either, Hamish,” Wendy said archly.

“That’s not the point. Yes it hurt you, but you were trying to hurt it first. I’m not going to do that.

I promise I will wear whatever you want, I’ll put on an entire suit of armor if that’s what it takes, but I want to go and see if I can figure this out.

For the sake of both the clan and the Fae.

I don’t want to see there be a war between us. ”

Hamish sighed, his expression conflicted. "You truly are stubborn, lass. Fine, you can come along, but only if you agree to have Jen or myself train you, and if you wear

some armor beneath your dress. I will nae have you at risk.”

A triumphant smile crossed Wendy's face. "I agree, Hamish. I'll wear whatever you want and I'm a quick learner so whatever you want to teach me, I'll learn it.”

Hamish nodded, a touch of admiration in his gaze. "Very well, then. We'll start training tomorrow morning at sun rise. Sort out your attire with Jen, she'll have something suitable for going into battle.”

Wendy's eyes sparkled with determination. "I'll do whatever it takes to help, and I'll follow your lead."

The next morning, as the sun rose and painted the practice grounds with a warm, golden hue, Wendy arrived to meet Hamish. He was already waiting, his tall and powerful form an imposing figure against the backdrop of the training area.

After leaving Hamish yesterday afternoon she'd gone looking for Jen who had fitted her out with one of her own outfits for training and fighting.

It was a dark colored quilted top with metal plates sewn between the layers of fabric.

It fit like one of the martial arts tops from the twenty-first century, crossing over and tying at the sides.

There was a belt as well, that a sword's sheath could be added to.

Instead of a skirt she now wore wide legged, dark pants and a pair of sturdy boots.

In a way, she felt like a ninja without the hood.

Wendy kind of liked it and hoped she could have a set of her own made by Bridie.

As Wendy approached, her eyes fell on the two gleaming daggers he held out to her.

The first was a small iron dagger, finely crafted and so sharp she could probably cut a coconut with it easily.

The other was a steel dagger, gleaming like a river in the sunlight.

She accepted them with a sense of awe, their weight feeling strange yet oddly comforting in her grasp.

"Thank you, Hamish, these are really nice," she said as she studied them.

Hamish smiled, a rare warmth in his eyes. "You're welcome, lass. I forged them myself just for you."

"You made them especially for me? When?"

"Aye, I started them shortly after you arrived here, an' planned to gift them to you at some point. But seeing as you want to go hunting with me an' my brothers, I felt you should have them now and we can train with them."

"Hamish, that is so sweet, I don't know what to say," Wendy replied feeling at a loss for words, which was rare for her.

"Say you will use them well, lass." Hamish grinned. "Come, let us get started."

Hamish began by showing her how to properly hold the weapons and how to wield them.

At first, she fumbled, her movements awkward and uncertain, but Hamish's patient and firm hand steadied her.

He showed her the proper grips, the stance, and the fluid motions required to defend herself against a foe.

Under Hamish's watchful eye, Wendy's determination pushed her forward. With each pass, her movements grew more confident and graceful. She could feel the daggers becoming an extension of herself, an extra limb meant for protection.

The hours passed in a blur, the warm sun climbing higher in the sky. Wendy, now perspiring and breathless, felt a sense of accomplishment. She could see the satisfaction in Hamish's eyes, a spark of pride for his diligent student.

As the day drew to a close, Hamish clapped her on the back. "You've done well today, lass. You've got potential."

Wendy beamed, feeling a new sense of confidence and readiness to face whatever challenges lay ahead. Her training had only just begun, but she was determined to become a force to be reckoned with, for her own protection and for the task of dealing with the elusive and dangerous kelpies.

The morning of their departure finally arrived with a soft, misty light, and the world still shrouded in the calm of the early hours.

In the castle's courtyard, Hamish, his brothers, and Wendy busied themselves with preparations for the journey.

Provisions were meticulously sorted and packed into saddlebags, ensuring that they would have what they needed for their venture.

"Are you ready, lass?" Hamish asked as they each mounted their horses.

Wendy nodded. "Where should I ride? I mean what order are we going in?"

“Stay behind Hamish, and I’ll watch your back,” Artair replied. “Crisdean will take up the rear.”

“Aye, that’ll do,” Hamish said as he headed out of the gate.

Wendy pulled her horse into line behind him, with Artair following her and Crisdean just behind him.

They rode down the hill and past the small village.

The horses' hooves clattered on the dirt road as they ventured into the rolling hills that led past Loch Ballygrant, toward the town of the same name. As they rode, she couldn’t help but marvel at the landscape.

The wild lush beauty of Scotland was one to behold.

The surroundings were unlike anything she had ever experienced, a world apart from the modernity of her previous life.

The sights, sounds, and scents of this ancient land washed over her, and she felt a deep connection to the landscape she was now a part of.

The journey was an adventure into the unknown, a path that would lead her closer to confronting the elusive and dangerous kelpies.

They reached Ballygrant and Hamish suggested they take a break to eat and have a drink.

With everyone in agreement, they headed for the tavern.

As they dismounted and went inside, Wendy noticed it was a haven of warmth and

laughter.

She was struck by the lively atmosphere.

Wooden beams overhead, adorned with dried herbs and colorful flowers, gave the room a rustic charm.

The hearth blazed with a comforting fire, casting a flickering glow that danced upon the stone walls.

A jumble of mismatched tables and chairs filled the space, and a collection of patrons, their voices filled with laughter and songs, populated each nook and cranny as they ate their morning meal.

They found a table by the roaring hearth, and soon a young woman who said her name was Katy, arrived to take their orders.

She had a flirtatious nature, which was evident in the twinkle of her eyes and the sultry lilt in her voice.

As she took their orders, she engaged in a playful banter with Hamish, her smile mischievous and her glances laden with innuendo.

Wendy sat there, her heart heavy, unable to hide the pangs of jealousy that swelled within her.

It seemed irrational, considering the limited connection she and Hamish had shared—a single stolen kiss and some hand holding.

However, seeing him respond to Katy's teasing advances stirred something within her.

She was caught in a whirlwind of longing, confusion, and straight up envy.

The tavern served hearty dishes, and their table was soon laden with a feast that would sate even the heartiest of appetites.

Plates of seafood stew, steaming with the rich aroma of herbs and spices, were set before them.

Freshly baked bread, still warm from the oven, was accompanied by creamy butter.

The roasted potatoes glistened with butter and herbs, and a platter of cheese and fruit added a touch of sweetness to the meal.

As the four of them dug into their respective dishes, Wendy said, "I've been doing some more reading in the evenings and I found out more about kelpies in one of the books in your library."

Hamish looked up, curiosity flickering in his eyes. "Aye, lass, did you now? T'was there anythin' that might help us to send them back to the Fae world?"

"Well, I don't know if we can do that, but I did find that kelpies are shape-shifters of great intelligence and well, unfortunately cruelty. They have a penchant for mischief, though that mischief often turns deadly when they seek their favorite prey—humans."

"Aye, we've heard that as well, lass, tis nothing new I'm afraid," Artair said from across the table.

"An' I'm not so sure that will be of help to us," Crisdean added.

"Go on, lass, I'm sure you've got a point," Hamish encouraged.

"I do, and yes I know you probably know all of this having grown up around the Fae, but some of it is new to me. Kelpies weren't my main topic for my book, so I didn't do a lot of research into them before coming here, which was why I was glad to have found this book in your library.

Anyway, it said they can take on many forms, often a magnificent horse," Wendy explained. "Which again, we're already aware of since it attacked you in that form, but some tales speak of them assuming a human guise as well."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

Artair stopped, his fork halfway to his mouth. "Wait, did you say they can appear human?"

Wendy nodded. "I did. But what I found most intriguing in the book I was reading, was that they can be captured, albeit with great difficulty."

Hamish's brow furrowed. "Is that nae what we're doing with the bridle, lass?"

"It doesnae seem very helpful information, except that we may now be looking for a human," Crisdean added.

"That's true, but from what I read of the ones who have been captured in the past, they were forced to act as beasts of burden for their captors, unable to shift or change forms for a long period of time.

Eventually though, in every story of them being captured they always found a way to escape.

And when they do, they take a particularly malicious form of revenge. "

"So what are we to do, lass? I doubt the kelpie will be able to free itself from the bridle, and we donnae wish to put it to work, merely send it back to the Fae realm and stop it from harming any more of our people," Hamish replied.

"I suppose if we found it in its human form, we could ask it nicely to stop, but I donnae believe that it will do what we ask, so I am open to suggestions if'n you've got one. "

Wendy sighed. "I don't know. I'm still working on that."

As they returned to their meal, their conversation turned to strategy and preparations for their encounter with the kelpies. As they chatted Wendy's mind caught on something Hamish had said about asking the kelpie to stop. Was it possible to talk to them? Could she try?

"Hamish, has anyone tried to communicate with the kelpie? To understand why it has become aggressive after so many years of peaceful coexistence in the ruins?" she asked. Maybe there was some reason that they'd yet to see for it attacking humans after so long.

Hamish scratched his chin, his eyes narrowing in concentration. "Nay, lass, not that I'm aware of. Folk here tend to steer clear of the kelpies, not engage in conversation with them."

Undeterred, Wendy continued, "What if we could find a way to communicate with it? To understand its grievances, if there are any, and maybe find a peaceful resolution to all of this?"

Hamish raised an eyebrow, amusement and skepticism playing on his features. "You want to talk to the kelpie? That's a bold idea, lass. But how do you propose we do that?"

An idea was forming in Wendy's head about that. "We could try to summon it, make an offering to it or something. If we can communicate with the kelpies, we might find a way to appease them without resorting to capturing the main one in iron."

Hamish and his brothers chuckled, clearly entertained by Wendy's audacity. "Summoning a kelpie, now that's a notion I've nae heard before. You have a daring spirit, lass. But you should know, dealing with Fae creatures is unpredictable and

risky," Hamish said.

The more Wendy thought about it, the more determined she was to at least try. "Sometimes, risk is necessary, especially when faced with the unknown. We won't know unless we try, Hamish."

"We shall see, lass. If it tis possible, then we'll try it, but I donnae think it t'will work."

"All I ask is that we try," Wendy said with a smile as they finished their meal.

Thirty minutes later they were back on their horses and headed toward Loch Finlaggan and the old Donald Castle ruins.

Hamish rode at the forefront, leading the way.

Wendy followed; her senses heightened by the ideas flowing through her mind.

Artair and Crisdean were close behind, the clippity-clop of their horses' hooves sounded like a chorus surrounding her.

Finally they arrived at the ruins on the shore of Loch Finlaggan. They set up camp within the somewhat protective embrace of the crumbling walls, though Wendy voiced her fear that they might all come tumbling down upon their heads at some point.

"We'll be fine, lass," Hamish assured her. "These walls will nae be comin' down anytime soon and will help protect us at night from the Highland winds that bring a mighty chill."

"Are we going to go looking for the kelpie today?" Wendy asked as she noticed the

sun was getting lower in the sky. It had to have gone well past three or four in the afternoon. The sun normally set a little before eight these days as spring moved into summer.

“We’ll keep watch, but nae, I think we’ll stay around our camp for now, give you a chance to think on your strategy for speaking with the kelpie,” Hamish replied.

“I’ll keep an eye upon the loch for any movement,” Crisdean said, striding toward the opening in the wall.

“And I’ll gather some wood for a fire. Hamish, why donnae you an’ Wendy prepare a meal for us?”

“Tis a fine idea, Artair,” he agreed.

Wendy and Hamish worked together pulling things from saddlebags and getting not only a meal ready to cook over the open campfire, but also laying out bedrolls and setting out lanterns they’d need to light once the sun went down.

Wendy noticed that Hamish had laid his bedroll out directly next to hers, while Artair had spread his on the other side of the fire and Crisdean’s was close to his, but not as close as Hamish’s was to Wendy’s.

She hoped it was because Hamish wanted to have her close to him.

Later that night, in the quiet moments before sleep claimed her, Wendy's heart echoed with the enchantment of the Highland night. The ruins held secrets, and the loch whispered tales of things she’d only dreamed of knowing in her time.

As she succumbed to the embrace of slumber, visions of the kelpie and the mysteries that awaited them danced in her dreams, entwined with the presence of Hamish, her

silent guardian in the velvety tapestry of the Highland night.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

The group spent the entirety of the next day searching for a sign of the kelpie, but none came.

It wasn't until well after they'd eaten their evening meal that Hamish had the idea to watch for the creature to come out of hiding in the moonlight.

So they were sitting vigil among the bushes and various shrubs in the chill of the evening air, waiting.

Wendy was cold and about ready to call it a night when suddenly, from the depths of the loch, emerged the large kelpie she'd seen before in its equine form.

It was a creature of ethereal beauty, its coat as dark as the midnight sky, it moved with a grace that belied its deadly nature.

Its eyes gleamed like phosphorescent orbs, capturing the essence of the moonlight.

With a swift motion, Hamish and his brothers lunged forward, attempting to capture the elusive creature. The air crackled with anticipation as they closed in, their weapons glinting in the ghostly radiance.

The kelpie, however, proved to be a master of evasion. It danced on the edge of the loch, slipping through their grasp like a wisp of smoke. Each attempt to ensnare it became a desperate chase, shadows playing a game of tag with moonlit reflections.

In the chaos, Crisdean, a silhouette against the shimmering waters, found himself ensnared by the kelpie's mystical grip. The night took a sinister turn as the creature

plunged beneath the surface, dragging Crisdean into the inky depths.

Wendy's breath caught in her throat as the waters swallowed his form. Panic surged through her as she screamed, "No! Crisdean!" There was a desperation in her voice that she'd never heard before.

She couldn't allow that kelpie to take Hamish's brother.

It would break him and Artair to lose him in such a way, but she didn't know what to do.

Wendy's cries pierced the air, a desperate plea for respite. And as she cried out, the kelpie stopped. Pausing its descent into the water, it turned its head toward Wendy as if it was curious about her cries and her pleading. She moved to the water's edge, still pleading with the kelpie.

"Please, please let Crisdean go," she wailed keeping her distress high in her voice so that Hamish and Artair could mount a rescue mission for their younger brother.

With a sleek and sinuous motion, the kelpie forgot about Crisdean and glided toward her, eyes ablaze with an otherworldly intelligence.

Fear gripped Wendy's heart, and she fumbled for a defense.

In her hand, she clutched the small iron knife, a glimmering sliver of protection against the spectral menace approaching her.

She brandished it, unsure if such a weapon could deter a creature of magic, but she hoped it would see she was merely planning to protect herself, not harm it.

The kelpie watched her and instead of aggression as it came toward her, it halted its

advance and fixed its gaze upon her.

“Lass, donnae move,” Hamish said.

Wendy kept her gaze on the kelpie. It was as though it was trying to communicate with her.

She could feel it. It was as though she could feel its thoughts against her skin, prickling along it, raising the hair on her arms. It was curious about her, as though it knew she wasn't from this time and place and recognized that she meant it no harm.

Wendy decided to try talking, voicing her question to the creature in hopes it might be able to reply in some way she'd understand.

"Why have you been on this rampage? Why are you hunting these humans?"

What can be done to satisfy your anger?" she implored; her words seemed to be carried by the night wind that rippled the surface of Loch Finlaggan as she spoke.

They almost felt alive with magic, transformed as she spoke them into a message the kelpie could understand.

The kelpie, a vision of dark majesty, responded in enigmatic silence. Its form, a charcoal black horse of ethereal and powerful beauty, seemed to absorb the moonlight, rendering it an otherworldly attractiveness that both captivated and unnerved its beholder.

Despite the protective barrier of iron she held in her hand, the creature advanced, slowly, each step deliberate and laden with an otherworldly grace.

Wendy, her senses heightened, tensed as the Kelpie closed the distance, but she

remained still, not raising the iron in a threatening manner.

Tension hung in the air, the uncertainty of the creature's intentions played up and down Wendy's spine.

The kelpie turned its head slightly meeting Wendy's gaze and she saw ancient sorrow in its gaze. It could not speak but what it conveyed was sadness and pain.

"I want to understand, please, let me help fix this for you. For all of us," Wendy murmured to it.

As the kelpie, its eyes pools of liquid darkness, regarded her, Wendy held her breath, caught in the liminal space between fear and fascination.

She could feel that the kelpie was looking for a way to communicate, a way to answer her questions, she just needed to be patient, but suddenly as there was movement to the right of her, the kelpie caught sight of Hamish and his brothers, their iron swords gleaming malevolently in the moonlight as they ran toward her.

It shattered the delicate rapport that had begun to form between her and creature.

With a wild and mournful neigh, the kelpie recoiled, its ethereal form quivering.

Like shadows dispersing before the dawn, the creature retreated with a grace that defied the mortal realm.

Its swift gallop carried it back into the water, and with a haunting farewell, the kelpie vanished into the depths, leaving only ripples on the moonlit water as evidence of its ephemeral presence.

Wendy felt the connection between them severed, and her opportunity lost. Hamish,

his face etched with determination, surveyed the scene with guarded eyes.

Wendy's heart held a wistful ache. The kelpie, with its inscrutable motives, had slipped away, leaving Wendy with unanswered questions and a sense of longing for the connection to reappear. "Damn it," she muttered.

The moon cast a silvery glow over the ruins as Hamish, his face etched with concern, approached Wendy. "Are you hurt, lass?" he asked, his voice full of worry.

Wendy replied curtly, "Not a scratch, Hamish. But you did interrupt something crucial." Her obvious frustration at him could be heard in her tone.

"Should've never brought a woman along," Crisdean grumbled.

Hamish shot him a stern look, a glint of annoyance in his eyes. "Mind your words, Crisdean," he admonished. "It twas Wendy who provided the distraction that allowed us to rescue you from drowning. Be more grateful for the hand that aided you."

"Aye, sorry, Wendy, just frustrated I was nearly drown and we didnae capture the creature."

"I was close to learning something, Hamish. The kelpie seemed to respond to me. I could feel its sorrow and pain. Something happened to make him start attacking people. Now, who knows when we'll have another chance like that?"

"I'm sorry, lass, but after what it did to Crisdean, I afear'd you were in its trance as you didnae respond when I called out to you." Hamish dragged a hand through his hair.

Wendy's brow furrowed. She hadn't heard him calling out to her. It was almost as if she had been in a bubble of magic at the time, but she didn't know how to explain it.

"Enough for today. Let's go back to camp, see to dinner, and rest. We'll try again if it appears tomorrow," he declared.

His brothers agreed and the three of them started back toward the ruins.

However, Wendy remained at the edge of the loch, her gaze fixed on the dark waters.

The moonlight played on the ripples, creating an ethereal dance.

As the others faded into the shadows, she stood alone, wrapped in the cloak of contemplation.

In the stillness, Wendy experienced a moment of inner reflection.

A quiet certainty settled within her; a sense that she was right in her approach.

There was something amiss with the kelpie, and the way it had responded to her hinted at a deeper connection between them.

A connection that begged further exploration, a mystery waiting to be unraveled in the moonlit tapestry of Highland magic.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

The campfire flickered, casting a warm glow upon the faces of the brothers as they sat savoring the fruits of their labor.

Freshly caught fish from the loch were skewered on makeshift spits, the delicate aroma mingling with the scent of roasted potatoes.

The sizzle and crackle of the cooking meal echoed in the night.

Animated by the adrenaline of the day's events, Crisdean leaned in as he spoke of being captured by the kelpie and what it felt like.

Artair and Hamish teased him, telling him of their heroic feat of trying to rescue him from becoming kelpie food.

It felt almost surreal to Wendy who sat quietly, watching them as they ate their meal.

She didn't take part in the conversation, merely sat and observed, her anger at them eating at the edges of her mind.

She could have put an end to the kelpie's attacks if they'd just let her be.

If they hadn't brandished their stupid iron weapons at the creature and scared him.

Now she would have to work even harder to earn its trust.

The flames flickered, casting shadows on Hamish's rugged features as he handed Wendy a plate. His eyes held a silent understanding, acknowledging her frustration.

The crackling of the campfire provided a fiery backdrop to the tension between Wendy and Hamish. As she sat there staring up at him, defiant and angry, his gaze turned stormy, and locked onto her with frustration and concern.

She put the plate to the side and looked back at him. "You shouldn't have stopped me with the kelpie," Wendy reiterated.

Hamish growled, "Wendy, you cannae just go talkin' to Fae creatures like that! It's dangerous. You donnae know what it's capable of."

Wendy, her own eyes flashing with defiance, retorted, "I knew exactly what I was doing. If you hadn't charged in like a bull, we could have learned why it's attacking people."

Hamish, his voice low and stern, countered, "You're playin' with fire, lass. That creature is nae a friend. It's a beast. A danger to us all. The loch is full of tales and bones that attest to that."

Wendy, crossing her arms with a huff, snapped back, "I'm not some helpless maiden from your world. I can handle myself. And maybe, just maybe, if you would have let me finish speaking with it instead of trying to play hero rescuing a damsel in distress, we could have learned why it's been behaving badly! "

Hamish, frustration etched in every line of his form, shook his head. "You're too stubborn, lass. We cannae reason with it. It's a wild thing, and wild things must be handled with caution."

Wendy, undeterred, leaned forward, her eyes locked onto his. "I came here to understand the creature, Hamish. To learn from it. Not just to accept things without question. If we're going to defeat it and figure out what's going on, we need more than brute force."

“You’re bein’ ridiculous, lass!” Hamish practically shouted at her. “You cannae reason with a Fae creature! It would have eaten you if I hadnae stepped in!”

"Stop lecturin' me like a child, Hamish. I know what I'm doin', and maybe if you'd listen instead of chargin' in, we'd have answers, not just more questions." Wendy stomped her foot.

Hamish seemed just as angry as she was and his size seemed to double, but she didn't feel unsafe as she stood defiant before him.

"Wendy, this tis nae time for experimenting.

We're dealin' with a creature that couldnae care less about reason.

It tis a menace, and we have to handle it with force. Today proved that."

Wendy, defensive and a touch sarcastic, retorted, "Oh, yes, force.

That's workin' out just grand, isn't it?

You attacked it and in retaliation the kelpie went for Crisdean!

He was nearly killed Hamish! You were no closer to stoppin' it, and each time you try to stop it with force, someone either ends up battered and bruised or almost ends up drowned!" She was steaming mad now. She'd actually had a chance to deal with it peacefully and he'd ruined it.

Hamish remained stubborn and mulish. "You cannae treat it like a friendly neighbor, lass. It's nae somethin' to reason with. It tis somethin' ta be stopped."

Wendy, frustration boiling over, replied, "Well, your way is gettin' us nowhere. It

keeps coming back to shore looking for something or someone to attack. How many more people will have to get hurt before you realize that?"

Hamish maintained his stance. "We have to catch it. That's the only way to end this."

Wendy, her gaze fiery, stomped away. She couldn't keep beating at him to see reason.

Their argument left her hurt and angry, and she didn't know how to deal with him anymore.

She wondered if maybe they'd never see eye to eye and their relationship might be over before it ever really even began.

The thought made her sad. She had really liked Hamish, but his stubbornness and obvious overprotectiveness were a hindrance to a lasting relationship with her.

He called to her, telling her to come back near the fire, out of trouble, but she ignored him.

She wasn't in any danger. When he tried to call her again, she merely shouted back, "Leave me alone, Hamish. I don't want to talk to you right now."

I'm fine where I am and Artair is less than three feet away if I get in trouble. So just back off."

Wendy stood, staring into the darkness until well after Crisdean and Hamish got into their bedrolls and went to sleep.

Artair kept silent as he stared into the darkness, watching for something, probably the kelpie, but she supposed it could have been for any sort of trouble.

She remained where she was, leaning on the wall, looking out toward the loch, hoping the kelpie did make an appearance but it never did.

Eventually, when Crisdean awoke to trade places with Artair, she moved toward her bedroll, but she moved it further from Hamish.

She didn't want to be so close to him when she was this mad at him.

She settled into the embrace of her blanket, but her sleep was restless.

She soon found herself tossed into a realm where dreams intermingled with the echoes of Highland legends.

The moon cast a silvery glow over the landscape, lending an otherworldly aura to the ruins and the loch beyond.

Shadows danced like phantoms, playing games with the moonbeams that filtered through the ancient stones.

As she stood on the shore, the kelpie emerged from the loch, its ebony mane glistening in the moonlight.

The creature, ethereal and mysterious, spoke to Wendy in a language she couldn't understand, but she could feel what it was trying to tell her.

The air around her crackled with magic as the kelpie shared its story of ancient curses, of bonds with the loch, and of a desperate yearning for freedom.

It wanted her to understand, but as it spoke, the hours passed and the sun began to rise, causing the mystical world around them to fall apart and with a sorrowful wail, the kelpie returned to the waters and disappeared beneath the surface.

Wendy woke with a sense of unease, a puzzle of emotions and cryptic messages from the otherworldly realm haunted her thoughts.

As the sun rose higher, Crisdean and Artair stirred, waking to the quiet symphony of Highland birdsong and the soft rustle of wind through the loch-side foliage.

She realized that Hamish must have taken over guard duty from Crisdean at some point.

The campfire had been rekindled, and it was sending tendrils of smoke up to meet the morning mist, and the smell of breakfast wafted through the air.

While she was grateful that Hamish had gotten things started, she couldn't help but still feel angry at him for how he'd treated both her and the kelpie.

She got up and wandered out of the ruins so she could take care of her morning needs.

Hamish didn't say anything to her, but she'd felt his eyes on her back as she'd walked by him.

"This is going to make for an uneasy day," she muttered.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

The brothers, ever vigilant and wary, took on the duty of warning any passersby who strayed too close to the loch that there had been kelpie attacks, and they needed to keep their distance.

She supposed that was as good of an idea as any, but she still wished there was a way to actually communicate with the kelpie and find out what it was really trying to do.

As the day unfolded, a new chapter of the eerie dance with the kelpie began.

The creature, true to its elusive nature, surfaced near a farmer's wagon as the path took it close to the shore of the loch.

The brothers, sensing the impending danger, swiftly intervened, ensuring the wagon made a hasty retreat from the area.

The kelpie seemed almost amused by the commotion it caused from what Wendy observed.

It was almost as though she could feel its amusement as though it was something tangible.

She didn't quite understand what was going on, but she thought that, whenever the creature made an appearance, there was a thread of a connection to her, but again she couldn't even begin to explain what she was experiencing to anyone, let alone Hamish who remained just as stubborn as he had been before.

He still wanted to try and capture the kelpie.

“Crisdean, we can use you as bait, he went for you before, maybe it t’will work again and Artair and I will be ready for it with the bridle,” Hamish suggested.

This audacious plan didn't sit well with Wendy. Anger flickered in her eyes, and she couldn't contain her frustration. She voiced her objections loudly, expressing her concern for the safety of his brother. “Are you insane?” she yelled at him. “Why would you put your brother at risk like that?”

“We cannae keep doin’ this lass, we have to go after it. This tis the best course of action,” Hamish argued. He looked to his brothers, and said, “Are we in agreement, lads?”

“Aye, we cannae stand guard on the loch forever warnin’ away the passersby. We’ll run out o’ provisions before too much longer,” Artair agreed.

Crisdean was a little more hesitant, but even he agreed in the end.

Wendy was beyond frustrated with them. She stood at the edge of the ruins watching as they put Hamish’s plan into motion. Hamish and Artair had the bridle and hid in the shrubbery, while Crisdean walked along the loch’s shore.

After about an hour, the kelpie came to the surface and started toward Crisdean who had his back to the loch. Wendy knew he was aware of the creature coming toward him, but he didn’t move and pretended to be ignorant of the creature’s approach.

In an explosive surge, Hamish and Artair lunged forward, attempting to ensnare the kelpie with the iron bridle.

However, the creature, swift and elusive, slipped through their grasp like water flowing through a sieve.

Hamish's frustration was palpable, their efforts thwarted by the supernatural agility of the not so mythical beast.

In the chaos of the failed attempt, Crisdean bore the brunt of the misfortune once again.

As he stumbled over the uneven ground, dodging the bridle as his brothers had attempted their capture of the beast, he'd fallen, and a sharp crack had echoed through the air.

Crisdean clutched his arm in pain, his face contorted with agony.

Realizing the severity of the injury, Hamish quickly assessed the situation. "Crisdean, what have you done?" he said, rushing to his brother's side.

Wendy moved toward him as well and said, "It's broken. He needs to see a doctor, Hamish."

Hamish shook his head. "We cannae leave now, Crisdean can you ride?"

"Are you insane," Wendy huffed. "He can't ride like that!"

"Aye, I can," Crisdean replied, pain lacing his words, "I've done it afore, lass, I'll be okay once I get back to the fort. Cam will send for Aine, she'll see to me."

"Do you want me to ride with you?" Artair asked, worry threading his words.

"Nae, stay with Hamish, catch that troublesome creature," Crisdean replied as he got up and started toward the ruins where their horses waited.

"See if Cam can spare me more men, Cris," Hamish said as his brother mounted his

horse.

“Aye, Hamish, I will.” With a nod, he nudged his horse into a walk but before he reached the edge of the loch, he’d set the horse into a gallop.

Later that evening, perched on a low wall of the ruins, Wendy gazed toward the loch, her thoughts lingering in the misty realm between reality and folklore.

In the stillness, she felt the weight of Hamish's gaze upon her.

His eyes, like orbs of flickering firelight, held a silent invitation, drawing her into their warm embrace.

"Come eat, Wendy," he said, his voice breaking her reverie.

She felt the pull, both magnetic and comforting, as she joined him and his brother around the fire.

As the two brothers chatted, Wendy stayed silent.

She was still considering what to do about the kelpie.

Hamish’s mad plans weren’t working, and he’d only seen his younger brother injured.

She didn’t want there to be any more injuries or death because of this kelpie, but what to do about it?

As the campers nestled into the embrace of the ancient ruins, and gradually succumbed to the gentle lull of sleep, the night unfolded its velvety cloak. Under the vast canopy of stars, Wendy surrendered to the weariness she felt and drifted off to

sleep.

Soon, Wendy found herself caught in the tangled threads of another dream, a continuation of her nocturnal communion with the elusive kelpie.

In this ethereal realm, the creature spoke to her again, its words a mysterious whisper that eluded comprehension.

But like before she could feel what the creature was conveying in the words she didn't understand.

The conversation left Wendy both intrigued and unsettled.

Abruptly, Wendy surfaced from the dream, finding herself in the cocoon of her bedroll.

The camp lay shrouded in a gentle darkness, the only illumination provided by the distant twinkle of stars.

The fire, now a bed of smoldering embers, cast a faint glow over the sleeping figure of Hamish.

Artair stood guard, but he looked as though he would fall asleep at any moment.

Wendy, caught between the realm of dreams and wakefulness, felt a strange resonance with the world around her.

The night held secrets, and in the stillness, she sensed the ancient whispers of the Highlands, where dreams intertwined with reality and the boundaries between the mystical and the mundane blurred into a seamless tapestry.

In the quiet hours before dawn, Wendy lingered on the threshold of two worlds, her thoughts entangled with the enigmatic presence of the kelpie and the mysteries that awaited beneath the surface of Loch Finlaggan.

Wendy, stirred by the enigmatic dreams of the kelpie, left the refuge of her bedroll.

As Wendy approached the low wall, her eyes were drawn toward the loch, its surface shimmering. And there, just beyond the shallows, stood the Kelpie. She felt as though it was calling to her, begging for her to come forward.

Yet, prudence held Wendy in check. She yearned to approach, to unravel the secrets the creature harbored, but a subtle voice of caution whispered in her mind.

She knew the awareness of the potential peril that awaited her if she walked out to the creature.

The kelpie seemed to observed Wendy with eyes that held the wisdom of centuries.

In that moment of contemplation, Hamish materialized at her side, a silent sentinel.

His presence, a grounding force, tethered Wendy to the realm of the tangible.

His eyes, like pools reflecting the Highland sky, mirrored the uncertainty and curiosity that played in Wendy's own gaze.

The air crackled with the tension of unspoken questions.

Hamish, his gaze fixed on the elusive kelpie in the loch, grumbled under his breath, "That creature is taunting me, I can feel it."

Wendy, her eyes still drawn to the mystical being, responded with a measured tone, "I

suspect it's watching me, Hamish, not you."

Hamish, turning to her with a furrowed brow, questioned, "Watching you? Why would it be doing that?"

Wendy's gaze lingered on the shadowy figure in the water, and she shook her head slightly.

"It's just a feeling, an intuition. Like it's aware of my presence.

I think there's some connection between us.

Something that was forged the other day before you scared him and ran him back into the loch. I felt it then too."

Wendy's words hung in the air, dancing on the breeze that whispered through the heather. Hamish remained silent for a moment before exhaling a sigh of frustration. Wendy almost regretted telling him what she felt.

"Intuition or not, Wendy, we need to be cautious. The kelpie is not to be trifled with," Hamish cautioned, his eyes flickering back to the loch.

The two of them watched as the ethereal creature submerged back into the mysterious depths of Loch Finlaggan. Wendy was both relieved and disappointed. The loch's surface, now undisturbed, mirrored the blanket of stars above.

Wendy, her heart still fluttering from the encounter, withdrew from the loch's view and retreated to her bedroll.

The night settled around the camp once again into a quiet hum of breaths and whispers.

The Highland air held the crispness of the approaching dawn, carrying with it the scent of damp earth and the subtle fragrance of heather.

Laying on her bedroll, Wendy's thoughts were a swirl of emotions. The mysterious connection she felt with the kelpie lingered in her mind like the haunting melody of a Scottish ballad.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

The next morning unfolded with the arrival of six guardsmen, which woke Wendy from her slumber. She sat up in the bedroll to see them clattering about, setting up their own provisions for their extended stay. They were talking and going about their business without a concern for her.

In the midst of everything going on, Hamish approached Wendy with a rare vulnerability in his eyes. "Lass, may we speak?" he asked quietly.

Wendy looked at him for a moment and then nodded. "Where?"

He looked around, seeing the others were too close for them to have a private conversation, so he put his hand on the small of her back and guided her through the opening in the walls and away from the ruins, in the opposite direction of the loch.

She supposed he didn't want to be distracted should the kelpie make an appearance.

Eventually, he stopped and said, "I'm sorry for being stubborn. I know you are trying to help, and I know you donnae want the kelpie hurt, but I was worried about you, and I feared the kelpie would take you from me. I took that fear out on you and I'm sorry, lass. I didnae mean to."

Wendy smiled. As far as apologies went, it was a pretty respectable one.

"Thank you. I don't think I was in any danger, at least not at that moment.

I had my dagger out, and the kelpie was aware of it, but I wasn't brandishing it in a threatening manner.

I really think it was trying to answer my questions. ”

“Be that as it may, tis still dangerous, lass. I donnae want to lose you to the depths of the loch.” Hamish pulled her into an embrace and held her close.

Wendy felt the warmth of his body against hers and relaxed into his arms, returning his hug. It went a long way to repair the rift between them and she wished he’d go further and kiss her, but as they stood there wrapped in each other’s embrace, voices approached, and Hamish quickly let her go.

“You know it was never my intention to worry you, right?” Wendy said, meeting his gaze.

“I know, lass. I understand that you’re keen on speaking with the creature and I can admit that using the iron is probably not the right path to take. The question is how do we find a way to move forward and stop the kelpie from doing any more harm.”

That was something that she’d been concerned with herself. There was only one way that she could think of, but it meant admitting she wasn’t as knowledgeable as she wanted to be on the topic of formerly mythical creatures. Swallowing her pride, Wendy said, "There might be someone who can guide us.”

“Who?” Hamish’s brow furrowed. “Aine?”

Wendy hadn’t met her yet, but she knew someone else who might be better than the half-Fae woman. “Dub Sith, he's a Fae, and he might have insights into dealing with the kelpie. He brought me here for a reason, so we should seek his counsel."

Hamish seemed receptive to the idea, and asked, “How do we find Dub Sith?”

"He comes and goes as he pleases, but he's been seen at Fort Donald before. At least,

that's what Catherine told me when I asked about him. We could go back to the fort and see if we can find a way to get him to visit."

Agreeing with a nod, Hamish replied, "Aye, let's go back home then. If anyone knows about dealing with creatures like the kelpie, it t'will be him or Aine."

The morning unfolded and as breakfast concluded, the camp prepared to embark on their mission of keeping the area safe for the passersby.

"Artair, Wendy and I are going to return to the fort. She's had an idea that may help us with the beast. I'm leaving you in charge here.

Keep the area safe for the passersby, but donnae try and capture the kelpie.

Keep your distance from it, all of you," Hamish said as Wendy rolled up her bedroll and began packing up her saddlebags.

"Aye, Hamish, when will you return?" Artair asked.

Hamish shared a look with Wendy. "In a day or two at most, I hope. It depends on if we can speak with the person we want or if we have to make another journey," he said cryptically.

"Very well. If'n you donnae return in three days' time, I will send one o' the men to the fort for an update."

Hamish agreed that was a good plan and as he and Wendy set off, the two of them waved to the men they were leaving behind to watch the area around loch.

As they rode, the heather-clad hills stretched endlessly, interrupted only by the occasional babbling brook or a copse of ancient trees. It was a beautiful sight to be

hold, and one Wendy would never get used to.

“I can see why the kelpies chose this place. It's both enchanting and mysterious.”

Hamish nodded in agreement. "Aye, these lands hold more than meets the eye. Islay is a place of legends and mysteries.”

After a while, Wendy, her eyes alive with curiosity, asked, "Do you think Dub Sith will have the answers we're after? About the kelpie, I mean."

Hamish's gaze turned thoughtful. "Dub Sith is a creature of the Fae, and they know things we can only dream of. But dealing with them is like dancing with the wind—uncertain and unpredictable."

She smiled, captivated by both the landscape and the enigmatic man riding beside her. "Well, I'm ready for the dance. Let's see what the Fae have to say."

Page 18

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

As they reached the fort, Hamish guided their horses through the entrance, Shaw's call announcing their return to the courtyard.

Dismounting gracefully near the stables, Hamish offered a lift down to Wendy, who accepted it with a grateful smile. After speaking with the stablemaster, they made their way through the bustling courtyard, toward the castle doors.

"I suggest we speak with Cam first, see if he knows of a way to contact Dub Sith," Hamish said as they entered the great hall.

"Okay, I'm happy to do that, especially if he can help." Wendy nodded.

They headed for Cam's door and Hamish knocked. A moment later, Cam told them to enter, but upon seeing them, he looked very cross.

"Hamish, what are you doing here? You're supposed to be out at Loch Finlaggan sorting this kelpie mess.

I just sent you eight men to help and here you are, galivanting about with your lass, as though I sent you to water the garden!

I thought you were more responsible than that!

I figured with that kelpie injuring your brother, you'd be the first to want the kelpie caught and dealt with!

"Cam seethed as he pushed himself away from the massive table and irately read

Hamish and Wendy the riot act.

“Sir—” Hamish started.

“No! I willnae have it! You have a duty to the clan, and you need to see it through?—”

“But if you’ll just listen to him,” Wendy said, stepping in.

Cam turned his steely gaze on her and Wendy gulped.

“What is going on in here?” Jen said, coming into the room. Her gaze landed on Wendy and Hamish, and she smiled. “Oh, hi Wendy, when did you two get back?”

Wendy’s startled gaze went from her to Jen’s husband Cam, but she held her tongue.

“Wendy had an idea,” Hamish started to explain.

“I donnae care what mad idea the lass had! I want that kelpie captured before it kills or hurts anyone else!” Cam slammed his fist down on the table.

“Cam MacDonald, you calm your ass down right now!” Jen demanded. “You and I both know that Wendy was brought here for a reason!”

Cam gave her a pointed look. “I know the reason.”

“Not that reason !” Jen said heatedly. “The other reason. It’s been the same with each of us. You know it as well as I do. Hear them out.”

Cam stared at his wife for a moment and then seemed to deflate and some of the tension left his shoulders. “Very well. Sit down and explain.”

Feeling a little intimidated, Wendy took her seat next to Hamish while Jen sat next to Cam. She looked at Hamish and waiting for him to explain. Hamish gave her a reassuring smile.

“We’ve tried to capture the kelpie with the bridle, but tis nae working. The creature is fast and easily escapes us. Twice Crisdean was injured. The first he was nearly drown, but Wendy was able to get the kelpie to let him go.”

Cam’s brow furrowed and he looked at Wendy. “How did you do that?”

Wendy licked her lips and then said, “Honestly, I’m not sure.

I cried out to it, pleaded with it and it let Crisdean go and came toward me.

It didn’t try to hurt me. I asked it some questions and it was trying to communicate with me, but before I could understand what it was trying to tell me, it got frightened by Hamish and his brothers with their iron and it raced back into the water. ”

Cam frowned and looked skeptical. “How could it even try to answer you? It is not a creature capable of speaking.”

Wendy huffed in frustration. “I know. It was more like feelings and images that I picked up on. I can’t really explain, you’d have to experience it.”

Jen put a hand on Cam’s forearm, halting his next comment. “Perhaps it’s some sort of magical connection? The creature is Fae after all.”

“Exactly,” Hamish said with a nod. “Which brings us to why we’re here.

Wendy thinks that Dub Sith may be able to help us with the kelpie, or help us figure out how to speak to it and find out why it’s attacking people when for hundreds of

years it's lived peacefully in that loch without harming anyone. ”

Cam sat silent for a moment and then shared a look with Jen. “All right, I take your point. Perhaps speaking with Dub Sith is what needs to be done. The question is how are you to go about doing such a thing?”

“We were hoping you'd have an idea about that. You're the leader of the clan and it was your ancestor who made the pact with him,” Wendy said.

“Aye that tis true, but I've met the wee man once. Jen and then other ladies have had more interaction with him than I.”

Jen looked thoughtful. “Well, we know that he keeps tabs on us. I don't know how he does it though. So maybe we could walk through the castle and call out for him?”

“Do you think he'll show up?” Wendy asked.

“Maybe,” Jen said with a shrug. “It won't hurt to try it. I'll get the other ladies to help too.”

An hour later, all of them were walking through the castle, each of the couples took a different floor and called out to the Fae man.

Wendy could hear their shouts, which sounded bizarre even to her.

She nearly giggled as she called, “Dub Sith, are you here? We need your help with the kelpies please!”

Unfortunately, there was no sign that the little elf man was paying them any mind. Their calls echoed down corridors and down stairs, bounced off stone walls and reverberated throughout the castle. Yet their pleas for his assistance went

unanswered.

Hours wore on, each minute passing with a heaviness that echoed the weight of unfulfilled expectations. Wendy, her spirits dampened by the futile search, felt the corridors closing in on her. The flickering torches cast shadows that seemed to dance in mockery of her earnest calls.

Hamish leaned wearily against the wall and sighed. "Lass, I donnae think he's here to listen to us calling for him."

Wendy moved to stand next to him and nodded. "I think you may be right, but I don't know what else to do."

"Dub Sith may be elusive, but Aine, she's a different sort. Let's seek her counsel. She may have insights that will help us with the kelpies. She is, after all, half-Fae."

Wendy, willing to try any avenue that might lead to a solution, nodded in agreement. "All right, let's find the others and let them know."

Wearily, the two tracked down all the others and told them their new plan, seeing as Dub Sith was nowhere to be found. Mae joked that he was probably in the twenty-first century hunting down the next woman to bring back in time.

"Do you think that might actually be where he is?" Wendy asked, slightly shocked.

"You never know with him, do you?" Mae replied, smiling. "But I do think going to speak with Aine is a good alternative. If anyone around here can help, it's sure to be her."

As Wendy slipped beneath the covers of her bed later that night, the castle embraced her in a timeless cocoon.

The flickering candle in her lantern cast gentle shadows on the walls, and the fire burning in the hearth warmed her room to a nice toasty temperature.

Wendy closed her eyes, hoping that the dreamscape would offer insights that eluded the waking world.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

In the crisp light of the Highland morning, the courtyard of the castle bustled with the activities of the day. Wendy and Hamish made their way to the stables and went to work readying their horses.

“Tis not far to the area of the loch we’ll need to go to find the boat that will take us to Aine’s home, lass,” Hamish said as they mounted their horses.

“I’m glad about that. That’s one thing I actually do miss. Traveling in a car was quite a bit faster than riding a horse, and a lot more comfortable.” Wendy giggled.

Hamish laughed as well. “You’ll get used to it after a while, lass, I promise you.”

They headed down the hill and onto the dirt road that headed north toward Ballygrant.

They were on it for a short while but as they were just about to turn off, to take the path that would lead to where the boat was docked on the loch, a figure appeared on the road—a tall, dark-haired man whose silhouette hinted at an air of enigma.

For a moment, anticipation hung in the air.

Wendy wondered, “Is that Dub Sith?” She couldn’t quite tell until they got closer, and she realized it wasn’t.

“Good morning,” Wendy called out.

Hamish kept quiet at her side, but Wendy noticed he nodded a greeting to the man.

“Good morn. What business brings you here to this path?” he questioned.

Wendy looked toward Hamish, who shrugged.

“We’re headed to see Aine on the isle in Loch Ballygrant.

We’ve been struggling with this kelpie at Loch Finlaggan that has been attacking and killing people.

I just want to figure out why and see if we can find a way to stop it hurting anyone else or the creature.

We thought Aine might have some answers for us,” Wendy explained.

The stranger's eyes widened in surprise as Wendy mentioned their quest involving the Kelpie. His curiosity seemed piqued. “You want to find a way to stop it without hurting the creature? But it’s killed humans. Are you sure that is wise?”

Wendy remained adamant. “There must be a way to resolve this situation without resorting to harm. I know trying to capture it with iron will hurt the kelpie and I don’t want to do that.

Plus I think doing so could bring curses down on the Donald Clan that will have longstanding repercussions.

That’s why we want to try and resolve this in a more peaceful way.

The creature is angry about something. Angry and sad,” she added, recalling the feeling she got from it. “I need to understand why and fix it.”

Hamish moved in his saddle and glanced from Wendy to the man. “Wendy is right.

We have a need for a solution that will nae inadvertently unleash malevolence upon our own people.”

In response, the stranger nodded thoughtfully, acknowledging the gravity of their quest. “There is a delicate balance between the mystical and mortal realms. I will just caution you about the unpredictability of dealing with otherworldly beings. Many cannae be trusted.”

“I have heard that from another Fae,” Wendy said with a nod, “but in this case, seeing as we’re looking to help the Fae, perhaps trust can be forged between us. I’d rather that than try to put an iron bridle on it. That would be torture for the poor creature.”

"Long-term torture, aye. A cruel fate for such a creature," the stranger murmured, his voice carrying a hint of ancient wisdom.

"I cannae bring myself to see it as a just solution either. I donnae wish suffering for the beast. We need another way to handle the kelpie, one that doesnae involve condemning it to an eternity of suffering or death."

The stranger's gaze moved between Wendy and Hamish, as if measuring the sincerity in their voices. "The ways of the Fae are intricate, and their spirits are nae easily subdued. Iron may bind and kill, but it can also break the delicate threads that hold the balance between the two realms."

"That's why we're seeking answers from Aine, the wise woman. I'm told she's half-Fae. She might know of a solution that aligns with both our worlds, one that doesn't lead to a cycle of vengeance."

The stranger nodded appreciatively, acknowledging the significance of their quest. "Aine's knowledge is deep-rooted, but be cautious. The Fae tread lightly, and bargains with them often come with unforeseen consequences."

Wendy understood what he was saying. Even Aine might be touchy when it came to asking a favor.

"I'd advise you to return to Loch Finlaggan.

Wait patiently for the kelpie to appear to you.

Do not engage with it. Keep your distance, but follow it.

Something is driving the kelpie to these attacks, and if you can put a stop to why it's behaving in such a way, you can end the kelpie's rampage," he imparted, his voice carrying the weight of ages.

Wendy exchanged a glance with Hamish, the gravity of the stranger's words settling upon them. Loch Finlaggan, the very place where the kelpie had eluded their grasp, now beckoned them back for a second confrontation.

As the stranger turned to walk away, his figure slowly disappearing down the winding road, Wendy was filled with uncertainty. "What do you make of that?" she asked, staring after the man.

"There's wisdom in his words. Perhaps the kelpie's actions are driven by something deeper than mere malice, you've said as much before, haven't you, lass. We must be patient and observant when we return to the loch."

As she sat there pondering that encounter, Wendy couldn't help but feel there was something odd about the man.

Something more than just being odd. There was something niggling in the back of her mind about his appearance, and she just couldn't think of what it was.

Not until she looked over at Hamish again and then it struck her as the sun glinted off his hair.

Unable to contain her musings, Wendy shared her unusual thought with Hamish.

"I have a strange notion," she began, her voice tinged with uncertainty.

Hamish replied, "We're in a land filled with strange notions, lass. What's on your mind?"

"I think that man was the kelpie. His hair was dripping wet, yet the rest of him was dry," Wendy voiced her suspicion. "After all, they are shapeshifters, are they not? And their hair is always wet, no matter what form they take, that's how you know they're kelpies."

Hamish, usually unflappable, looked at her, his features frozen in stunned disbelief.

Wendy knew the idea seemed preposterous, but in a land where legends lived and mysteries unfolded, nothing could be dismissed outright, could it?

Without uttering a word, Hamish spurred his horse into action, bolting in the direction the stranger had walked.

Wendy, her heart pounding, followed suit, urging her horse into a gallop.

The Scottish landscape blurred around them as they chased after the enigmatic figure, seeking answers that danced just out of reach.

"See him?" Wendy inquired when Hamish reined in his horse.

"No, lass. He's vanished," Hamish replied, his brow furrowed in consternation.

The mysterious stranger had slipped away like a wisp of Highland mist.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

“Did Aine give you the answers you were seeking?” Cam asked when Hamish and Wendy returned.

“We didnae actually make it to Aine’s. Before we reached the path to take us to the boat, we encountered a stranger on the road. Wendy thought he might be Dub Sith at first, but it t’was nae him. The man didnae give his name, but asked why we were going to see Aine.”

“Was he Fae? Perhaps Aine has taken a sentinel to guard her isle?” Cam suggested.

Wendy shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“Wendy’s right, the man had nothing to do with Aine. Though we didnae know that at the time. Wendy told him of the kelpie, and he gave us advice. Detailed advice on how to handle the creature.”

Wendy added, her voice steady, “We believe the man may have been the kelpie himself.”

Cam froze, his gaze meeting theirs. “Why do you believe that?”

“His hair was dripping wet, and I know from the stories that kelpie can shift into the form of a human. The one way to tell is that their hair always remains wet, no matter what form they take.”

Nodding slowly, Cam said, “What advice did he give you?”

Hamish answered, "He told us to return to Loch Finlaggan, and wait patiently for the kelpie to appear, and then follow it. He said something is driving the kelpie to attack, and if we can discover what, we might be able to end its rampage."

Cam leaned back, fingers tapping rhythmically on the table. "We must proceed carefully. If the kelpie can shift into a human form, we'll need to be vigilant. We'll not be caught unawares should he choose to attack us again."

"So should we do as he asked, do you think?" Hamish questioned.

"I think that may be a wise decision, but stay watchful. These Fae can be tricksters and I willnae have either of you, nor any of our men falling prey to this one."

"Aye, then we'll leave at first light and return to Loch Finlaggan."

Cam nodded. "Get an early night."

Later in the evening, as Wendy sat wide awake in her bed, there was a firm knock on her door. She grabbed up her robe, which Bridie had called a dressing gown, and put it on. Her fingers lingered on the fabric, and she took a deep breath before opening the door.

To her pleasant surprise, Hamish stood on the other side, his silhouette outlined by the soft glow of the corridor torches. Wendy's eyes met his, and for a fleeting moment, time seemed to pause.

"Hamish," she greeted with a subtle smile, and warmth in her eyes. The castle corridor echoed with the muted sounds of castle life, and Wendy gestured for him to enter.

Hamish held up a bottle of whisky, the rich aroma of the Highland spirit wafting

through the air. "Cannae sleep. Join me for a drink, lass?" he invited.

A smile played on Wendy's lips, and she replied, "I would love to.

" She felt nervous having him here like this, but also slightly naughty and mischievous. Was this even allowed in this era? Did unwed women allow men into their bedchambers for a night cap? And if they did, would they then be thought of as loose women? Was Hamish even actually interested in her in that way? He'd only kissed her the once, maybe all he was thinking of was sharing a drink with a friend.

That thought sent her spirits crashing to the floor.

Hamish settled into a sturdy wooden chair at the small table, and then looked at her with curiosity. "Everything well with you, lass?" he asked as he poured them each a cup of the whisky.

"Yes, I'm fine." Wendy smiled and took a seat in the other chair.

"To new beginnings," Hamish toasted, and Wendy raised her glass in agreement.

The whisky, like a comforting embrace, warmed her from within.

Wendy sighed. "So why can't you sleep? Is it the man we encountered on the road?

Cause that's what's keeping me up, I can tell you.

I just don't get it. If it was the kelpie, why didn't he just tell us what's going on?

" She looked over at Hamish, her eyes wide as she took another gulp of the whisky.

"It tis, lass. I keep wondering if this is a trap. Or perhaps the creature is actually being

forced or goaded into attacking our people. If that is so, who is responsible for that?"

Their questions hung in the air, echoing the uncertainty that enveloped them.

"I think the man's suggestion is our best course of action though." Wendy met Hamish's gaze.

"Aye, you could be right, lass. An' it cannae hurt to learn what is driving the kelpie to act."

As the weight of the Kelpie's mystery lingered in the air, Hamish stood and pulled Wendy up from her chair and into his arms, drawing her into a warm embrace that spoke of unspoken emotions.

Their lips met in a kiss filled with passion and longing. Time seemed to suspend as the kiss went on and on, making Wendy's toes curl and setting her skin ablaze.

The happiness that surged through Wendy was an acknowledgment of the strength of her feelings for Hamish, feelings that had quietly woven themselves into the fabric of her being.

"You are a vision of beauty that even the most radiant sunrise could nae rival, Wendy.

The stars themselves envy the sparkle in your eyes," Hamish said, his voice husky as their kiss ended.

He traced the contours of her face with his fingertips, each touch an affirmation of the connection they shared.

"I cannae help but think about you, lass.

In the forge, in the quiet of the night, your image dances in my mind like a cherished melody. "

"I love hearing you say that," she whispered between kisses. "I hoped you felt the same way I've been feeling toward you. I'm so glad you do."

A smile played on his lips as he continued, "When the moonlight spills over the loch, I'm reminded of the soft glow that surrounds you. It's as if the very heavens conspired to create a reflection of your grace and beauty."

"Hamish," she murmured, loving the words that were falling from his lips.

"I've ne'er known a woman like you, Wendy. You've become the heartbeat of my days and the whispered prayer of my nights."

"And you mine as well," Wendy shared, her voice barely a whisper as she gazed up at him lovingly.

Hamish, with a gentleness that matched the Highland mist, continued to express his admiration as he kissed her neck. "Your spirit, lass, tis a force that guides my steps. I find myself lost in sound of your laughter, and in the quiet moments, it's the echo of your name that fills my soul."

Wendy moaned in response to his kisses and words.

In a moment of unrestrained passion, Hamish swept Wendy off her feet. His powerful arms cradled her, and with a fervent kiss, he conveyed feelings that words alone could not express.

As they shared this tender moment, Wendy, nestled in Hamish's embrace, felt the beating of her heart synchronize with the rhythm of his. The world around them

seemed to fade, leaving only the echo of their mutual longing.

Breaking the silence, Wendy, with eyes that spoke volumes, uttered words that hung in the air like a sweet melody. "Hamish, I'm falling in love with you," she confessed, her voice a gentle whisper that carried the weight of her emotions.

Hamish, his gaze reflecting the sincerity of his feelings, tightened his embrace, as if seeking to protect this fragile yet powerful bond between them. "And I with you, lass."

Their lips met in a dance of passion, a symphony of longing that echoed through the room. Hamish's hands, strong and knowing, traced the contours of Wendy's body, igniting a flame that burned with an intensity that Wendy had never experienced before.

As their kisses deepened, Wendy's fingers traced the rugged terrain of Hamish's shoulders. Hamish laid her down upon the bed, and gazed into her eyes. "Are you sure, lass?" he murmured.

"Yes, Hamish, please, I want you," she replied, sitting up to remove her night dress.

Hamish slowly moved down Wendy's body. She moaned with every amount of him lowering his body between her legs.

"Mm, lass. You are a beauty," he moaned as he plunged his face between her milky thighs. His skilled lips and tongue moved in a way that made Wendy arch her back up off the mattress.

"Oh Hamish, oh that feels so good," she cried.

Her fingers entwined his hair as he pleased her. Wendy felt like a wanton woman as

he brought her to ecstasy. She had yearned for this moment and now that it was happening the feeling of joy and elation was too much to handle.

"Oh, Hamish," she whispered. The words barely left her lips before a tremor rocked through her body. She felt the pulse of her body quicken beneath his skilled tongue.

Hamish stood up from the bed and smiled at her, pleased with himself of course, as he removed his plaid, tunic, kilt, and undergarments. The sight of him naked before her made her mouth water.

"You are incredibly handsome," she said.

"Not nearly the vision you are, lass," he said. He rejoined her on the bed. "I want you, lass. Do you want me? All of me?" he asked as he kissed her neck, down her chest, and took her nipple into his mouth.

"I do, Hamish. I want you inside me," she replied breathless as she laid back onto the bed.

Wendy wrapped her legs and arms around his strong body, holding on as he moved slowly, making passionate love to each other. His mouth found hers and engaged in a deep kiss that seemed to last hours.

His strong hand fondled her breast while the other held him up hovering over her.

Wendy felt like she was in a dream. The sensations that moved through her hit on every inch of her skin.

She did not care who heard her in the moment of bliss she shared with him.

Once their lovemaking was finished, they fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

The next morning, Wendy awoke with a radiant glow, the echoes of the night's passion lingering in her heart.

She reveled in the blissful afterglow, the tender traces of Hamish's kisses etched into her memory.

Hamish stirred beside her. He awoke with a gentle kiss, a silent affirmation of the connection they shared.

Wendy welcomed the morning with a contented sigh.

After dressing for the day and making a stop at Hamish's room to gather his kit for their trip back to Loch Finlaggan, Wendy and Hamish emerged into the morning, hand in hand.

They joined everyone in the dining hall for breakfast before heading to the castle courtyard.

They had a few hours ride ahead of them and they were both anxious to get started.

Wendy felt a renewed sense of purpose coursing through her veins, as they set off on their journey.

The intimacy shared with Hamish had not only deepened their connection but also infused her with a newfound confidence.

The warmth of their bonding lingered, a gentle reminder that they were more than

mere individuals – they were a team.

Wendy took a moment to appreciate the harmony that had blossomed between them.

As Wendy and Hamish readied their horses, her thoughts danced with the excitement of their shared mission. The prospect of confronting the kelpie with a plan that didn't involve harm sparked a joy in her heart.

Cam and Jen came out to the courtyard to bid them farewell and wish them luck on their new plan to handle the kelpie. “Good luck,” Jen called with a smile. “You’ve got this.”

“Fingers crossed!” Wendy held up her crossed fingers and grinned. “See you when we get back.”

“God speed,” Cam added with a wave.

Hamish gave a half wave back and then led them through the gate and down the path on the hill.

Once they were at the bottom, Wendy urged her horse to move up next to Hamish so they could ride side by side.

They were both eager to get to the loch, so they didn’t make a stop at Ballygrant along the way, but did give the horses a chance to rest for a moment and have a drink at the stream.

As they waited for the horses to have their fill, Hamish pulled something from his saddlebag. He opened the bundle and held it out to her, a smile on his lips. “Would you like some, love?”

Wendy looked at him with surprise. “Shortbread? When did you get that?” she asked as she took a piece with glee.

“While you returned to your room for your bag. Mira added it to the provisions, and I thought I’d save it for us.” He chuckled.

“Sneaky, sneaky,” Wendy said with a giggle. “I’m betting she meant for us to share it with the others.”

There was a twinkle in his eye when he replied, “More’n likely, but tis shortbread and I couldnae resist.”

Laughing harder, Wendy said, “Me either. It’s so good.”

With their treat finished, they turned their horses from the stream and continued the trip to Loch Finlaggan. It did not take too long, and the day was a pleasant one, as the sun was shining brightly and warming the air around them.

As they rode, Wendy asked, “I know it’s spring, but I never did ask what month we’re in and what are summers like here?

Do they get hot? Does it rain a lot? I’ve heard the UK gets a lot of rain, Seattle is pretty rainy too, so I’m used to it, but I wondered if you get as much rain as England up here. ”

Hamish chuckled. “Aye love, I enjoy your curiosity very much, tis one o’ the things I adore about you. Tis nearly the end of April. It doesnae rain very much in the summer months, mostly in the fall and winter, but even when it does, the sun returns shortly after.”

“Does it snow here?” she asked.

“We may get a few flurries, love, but mostly tis jest cold.”

“Huh. I don’t know why I thought you all would get a lot of snow here,” Wendy said with a frown.

Hamish gave her a curious look. “What would make you think that?”

Wendy shrugged and then thought about it.

“Well, the northern states in America, especially in New England area, do tend to get a good amount of snow and I guess I thought Scotland, being just as north as those states, would get the same. Maybe it has to do with having the ocean on the west coast instead of the east?”

Hamish chuckled and shook his head. “I wouldnae know anythin’ about that, love.”

Laughing, Wendy smiled. “Yeah, I don’t really expect you to. We tend to follow the weather a lot back home. There’s always some weather event going on.”

“Weather event?” He gave her a curious look.

She nodded. “Well, Seattle has a lot of rain, but we don’t get a lot of crazy stuff like the rest of the country.

Like in the south there are hurricanes, and across the central part of the country there’s tornadoes in the spring, summer and fall, and blizzards in the winter.

New England, which is the east coast, gets a lot of storms, both rain and snow. ”

Hamish’s brow furrowed. “All of that across one land?”

Wendy smiled. “It’s a really big country. More than three thousand miles from one coast to the other.”

Hamish reined in his horse and stared at her. “Three thousand miles?” he repeated, a look of astonishment on his face.

Wendy stopped next to him and grinned. “Yes. Why?”

“Lass, Islay is nae more than twenty miles from west to east, and nae more than twenty-five from north to south. We could ride over the entirety of the island in a day or two. It would take months of travel to cross your country.” His voice held amazement. “Have you seen all of your land?”

Shaking her head, Wendy said, “Nope. I’ve seen parts of it, but nowhere near all of it. Guess I never will now, but that’s okay. I like it here.” She gave him a shy smile.

As they started riding again, Hamish asked her questions about the places she had visited and Wendy told him about New Orleans, New York City, Southern California, and the Florida Keys.

She explained the distances and how she was able to travel to them in a few hours via a plane which seemed to blow his mind.

As they finally reached the ruins, Hamish said, “I donnae know how you donnae miss all of that, love.”

Wendy shrugged. “Honestly, there is so much here to see, so much adventure, and then there’s you,” she murmured, a blush creeping into her cheeks. “How could I miss something like that when I have all of this?”

Hamish moved Thunder up alongside her horse and leaned over to press a quick kiss

to her lips. "I am glad of that, love."

Upon hearing their approach, Artair came toward them, a look of relief on his face. "Welcome back."

"Have you had any trouble with the kelpies since we've been gone?" Hamish asked as he dismounted and then he turned to help Wendy down too.

"Nae. The kelpie has nae made an appearance. Tis very strange indeed."

"That's probably because the kelpie followed us back to the fort," Wendy replied.

Some of the other guards joined them and one said, "The kelpie followed you? Is everyone at the fort well?"

Hamish quickly assured them, "All is well at Fort Donald. The kelpie didnae attack anyone. An' we cannae be sure that it t'was the kelpie."

"Chances are that it was though," Wendy replied. "It basically told us as much. Albeit his words were slightly cryptic."

"Tell us what you mean," Artair said.

Wendy told them of meeting a man on the road on their way to see Aine and the advice he gave and why she believed him to have been the kelpie. Her statement elicited laughter from the guards.

"What a fanciful notion, lass," one of them said.

Undeterred, Wendy glared at him. "It's not a fanciful notion. Kelpie are known to shapeshift, and they can appear as human. The way to know is that their hair is

always dripping wet.”

“Any man can have wet hair, lass, doesnae make him a kelpie.”

“I didn’t say it did. It was the fact that it stayed soaked even though the sun was high and warm. His clothing was dry, all the rest of him was dry, but his hair was like he’d dunked it in a bucket of water every two seconds, which he didn’t.”

The guards, though initially amused, exchanged uncertain glances, contemplating the possibility that Wendy's belief held a kernel of truth.

“So what tis it you propose to do, lass?” Artair asked, looking between her and Hamish.

“Exactly what he told us to do. Follow him at a distance and see why he’s so angry.”

“Hamish, you cannae allow her to do such a thing, tis dangerous,” Artair argued.

Her proposed course of action sparked a debate among the men. Skepticism lingered in their eyes, and mutterings of caution rippled through their ranks.

“Tis obviously a trap,” one of the guards said.

“You are nae going to listen to her, are you? She is nae from here. The kelpie is just makin’ mischief and tryin’ to lure her in,” another added.

Hamish, his voice firm and resolute, declared, “The matter tis nae up for debate, lads. Tis the course of action we will pursue for now. We’ll need you to stand guard here and at the loch, ready to intervene should we need you, but we will nae bring harm to the kelpie.”

“Nae bring harm to the kelpie? But the kelpie has harmed us!” one of the guards argued back.

“Aye, but I believe there tis a reason the kelpie has been attacking and I aim to find out what it tis. Now are you with me?”

Reluctantly, the guards nodded and said, “Aye, Hamish, we’ll do as you say.”

“When do you plan to enact this course of action?” Artair asked.

“We’ll rest today and hope the kelpie will show on the morrow,” Hamish replied.

“Then we’ll go back to keeping vigil and making preparations for the evening meal,” Artair suggested before turning to the guards and setting them to their tasks.

As the camp settled into an uneasy calm after the evening meal, Wendy laid down on her bedroll, but found no solace in the embrace of sleep.

Restlessness plagued her, her mind a whirlwind of thoughts and uncertainties.

In the darkness, she felt the weight of the mystical forces surrounding Loch Finlaggan, their secrets echoing through the ruins.

She tossed and turned on her bedroll, trying to get comfortable, but it was no use it seemed to her.

Just as Wendy was about to give up on sleep, she felt Hamish tug on her bedroll, pulling her closer to him. He wrapped Wendy in the warmth of his arms. “Sleep, love. T’will be a long day on the morrow, and you need rest,” he murmured in her ear before kissing her temple.

With a sigh, Wendy found peace in the shelter of his arms and closed her eyes. It didn't take her long after that for sleep to find her.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

In the liminal space between night and day, Wendy woke to the early morning twilight tiptoeing across the ancient ruins that adorned the edge of Loch Finlaggan.

The sky, a canvas of ethereal hues, painted itself in soft strokes of lavender, pink, and azure, signaling the pending sunrise.

It was a beautiful and magical sight, one she would never get used to as it was always an amazing sight to behold.

The looming stones of the ruins, cloaked in moss and history, stood as silent witnesses to the beginnings of the day.

As the sun's first light embraced them, shadows danced, casting intricate patterns on the weathered surfaces.

A gentle breeze, laden with the scents of loch and heather, stirred the air, whispering through the camp like a lullaby.

Birds heralded the impending day, each note they sang resonating with the promise of a new beginning.

A soft nicker carried on the breeze called to her and she shifted in Hamish's arms. There was something about it that drew her attention.

It wasn't the normal nicker she was used to from their horses, there was something off about it.

When she heard the sound again, she sat up, waking Hamish as she did.

“What tis it, love?” he murmured.

“I think it’s the kelpie,” she whispered.

More fully awake, Hamish sat up too and listened. When the sound came again, he nodded. “You could be right, love, let us ready ourselves and have a look.”

Moving out of his arms and standing from her bedroll, Wendy reached for the comfortable wide-legged pants she’d had Bridie make for her.

She slipped them on under the night dress she wore.

Pulling her arms from the night dress, she picked up the top and slipped her arms into it, tying it into place under the gown, then pulled the night dress from her head.

Once she and Hamish were fully dressed for the day, they crept between the walls of the ruins and looked out toward the loch. Hamish glanced at the guard on duty. “How long has it been there?” he asked.

“Nae long, you were already up and dressing, so I figured you’d heard him.”

Nodding, Hamish said, “I’ll wake Artair to get the others up. Keep watch.”

“Aye, I will.”

Wendy and Hamish left the safety of the ruins and moved closer, but not close enough for the kelpie to attack them. The equine creature, mane aglow in the early morning light, nickered softly.

Wendy, caught in the silent exchange, declared, "We'll follow you."

Hamish and Wendy turned back toward the ruins for their horses so they could keep up with the kelpie. They mounted their horses and returned to the area near the loch. They saw the kelpie waiting for them and though they didn't get too close, they moved in its direction.

"I hope we're nae walking into a trap," Hamish murmured as they watched it walking along the edge of the loch.

"I don't think we are. The kelpie hasn't tried to come at us, it's leading us somewhere. See how it looks back to make sure we're following?"

"Aye, the question is, love, where is it leading us to."

They passed the ruins where they were camping, and the kelpie kept going for another half a mile. It paused and looked back toward them then off to the west away from the loch.

"What is that?" Wendy asked, pointing toward where the kelpie was looking.

From what she could see, there was another set of ruins. Not as large as the ones they were camping in, but it had stone walls that were crumbling, and the roof was mostly gone.

"Tis the ruins of Castle Finlaggan."

"Who are those people in there?" Wendy asked as she saw movement beyond the walls. "They look..." she trailed off because she didn't want to say poor, exactly, but their clothing wasn't in the best shape, and they looked pretty rough. "Are there homeless people around here?"

“Nae, love, nae person here is without a home, unless they chose it. This looks like a bandit encampment, but—” Hamish stopped short and sucked in a breath.

At that moment, a man led a magnificent pure white horse from inside the walls out to the grounds surrounding the ruined castle. There was an ethereal beauty to the creature, and Wendy noticed that the horse’s mane glistened as though it was wet. “Is that...?” she gasped.

“Aye, lass. Tis wearing an iron bridle.” Hamish’s tone was harsh.

“They’ve taken the kelpie’s mate, that’s his mate,” Wendy said suddenly understanding exactly why the black coated kelpie had been attacking people.

His mate had been stolen from him and was in agonizing pain.

“We’ve got to save her, Hamish, we have to.

They can’t—” Wendy’s heart ached as she watched.

“Aye, lass, we must rescue the kelpie from these ruffians. The question is how to do so without harmin’ the creature.”

Wendy looked to their kelpie and nodded. “We’ll help, I don’t know how yet, but we’ll get her free,” she swore.

The kelpie stood, gazing at them, ancient wisdom in its eyes. It tipped its head down in acknowledgement before it turned toward the water of the loch and ran into the water.

Wendy looked back at Hamish. “How are going to free her, Hamish?”

Hamish's eyes widened as he watched the scene. He seemed astonished and in disbelief as the group of bandits came into clearer view. "By God's bones," he muttered.

"What is it?" Wendy murmured, keeping her voice as low as his.

"Tis my cousin Malcolm."

"Your cousin is a bandit?"

Hamish glanced at her. "Aye, he has been banished from the family, from the clan an' has been a thorn in our side for more'n a year. If you will recall, we'd had reports of him in the area. The Laird, Colin Campbell wants him for the death of several Campbells."

Wendy did recall him saying something about that when she first arrived. "I'd forgotten. And that's him? The one with the kelpie now?"

"Aye, tis no mistaking him. Tis Malcolm, the miscreant." Hamish's tone was harsh.

Wendy watched the man in question from where they were hidden in the copse of trees next to the loch. She was glad they were out of the view of the bandits, because she feared the two of them were unprepared if those men chose to come after them.

"So what do we do? How do we free the kelpie and capture this man who has caused your clan so much trouble?"

"Let us return to our encampment, we'll figure a plan there." Hamish gave the group of bandits one last look and then turned his horse back the way they came.

Following his lead, Wendy turned her horse too, hoping that by the time they reached

their camp, they'd have a plan.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

The sun was high in the sky, and they were standing on the edge of the loch, just on the other side of the copse of trees debating what they should do.

Wendy was of a mind that one of them needed to stay and watch the bandits while the other went to get the rest of the guards and then ride in like gang busters and decimate the bad guys and free the beautiful white kelpie.

"We cannae just charge down there, love. Too many risks. Our guards are good, aye, but that lot down there is no ordinary band of brigands."

"I get that, but we can't let them keep harming the kelpie. We need to get that iron bridle off of her as soon as possible. She's not going to survive if it stays on her much longer, I can feel it."

Hamish scratched his beard in contemplation, his mind working through the intricate web of possibilities. "We need a diversion, something to draw their attention away from the captive kelpie. Then, we strike."

Wendy nodded. "Okay, a diversion. But what kind? We don't want to risk the lives of your men." She frowned. "I don't care what happens to those bandits, but I don't want to see any of our men killed or injured even."

Wendy's attention was drawn to a shadow moving along the shrubbery further down the shore of the loch, making its way toward them.

As the sun moved from behind the clouds, the shadow became more clear, and Wendy realized that it was a man.

And not just any man, but the man who had greeted them on the road to Aine's home.

"Hamish," she murmured, drawing his attention to what she was seeing.

Hamish turned and then put a cautioning hand on Wendy's back. He watched the man approaching them warily.

The man, his long black hair still dripping wet, stepped forward, acknowledging their presence. He stood in silence a few feet from them.

Wendy gave him a gentle smile. "Hello. You're the kelpie, aren't you?" she said, keeping her voice low so as not to draw the attention of anyone who might be wandering around the area. The man seemed skittish enough and she didn't want him more frightened.

The man responded with a nod, acknowledging the truth of her words. "Aye, I am. I appreciate you following me here and to the other camp. I am called Kier." His tone was melodic, almost mesmerizing.

"We want to help you, but I need your word you will not harm us," Hamish said, his grip on the hilt of his sword unwavering as he held onto Wendy at the waist as if trying to keep her from leaving his side.

Kier, with an otherworldly calm, met Hamish's gaze. "You have my word." The solemnity in his voice held a weighted promise in the mystical atmosphere surrounding them.

"I appreciate you finding a way to speak with us, Kier." Wendy knew from her studies that she should never ever thank a Fae, because they then would take that to mean you owed them something in return, so she'd chosen her words carefully.

I've been trying to understand why you would do what you've done, and now we know. "

He nodded, but said nothing.

"The white kelpie, is she your mate?" Wendy asked.

"Nae. Tis my beloved sister, Fionnuala. She has a gentle nature. But her gentle nature left her vulnerable to those human men, and while I was hunting deer for us one day, she was captured and dragged away."

Wendy, touched by the sorrow in Kier's tale, offered her sympathy. "That's awful, and we will do whatever we can to help get her free."

"We are trying to make a plan. The leader of those bandits who captured your sister is known to us. We've been hunting for him for many months. He's caused much strife among both our clan and the Campbells, and the Laird is keen on his capture."

Kier's eyes narrowed as he listened, a flicker of curiosity dancing in his gaze.

"His name is Malcolm MacDonald, and though he shares the name of our kin, he's been banished from our clan for his treacherous activities.

We are allies of all the Fae, and Malcolm covets power, which is why we removed him from our clan.

As you've discovered, he is still trying to gain that power we've denied him. "

"I have seen his cruelty in his treatment of my sister, and others," Kier acknowledged. "Though he is nae the only malicious and cruel one. Those I attacked; they were of the same ilk. I admit I thought you more of the same when first we met."

The weight of the revelation hung in the air.

Kier's gaze bore straight into Wendy's. "T'was only this lass who spared you and yours from my wrath.

I could see from the moment I caught sight of her that she was different.

As I communed with her, I understood from her feelings for you and yours that you were attacking me because you did not understand my wrath.

My attacking you in such a way would make me no better than you or those who took my sister. "

Wendy glanced from Kier to Hamish who had wherewithal to look slightly ashamed.

Hamish cleared his throat and said, "I admit we didnae handle our encounters with you well, Kier. We should have realized sooner that something was wrong and not immediately jumped to conclusions."

Kier gave a nod of acceptance. "I tried to help my sister on my own, which was why I was attacking where I could. However, it seems I cannae rescue Fionnuala alone. The bandits now wear iron armor, and it tis my weakness, as you well know."

"Aye, we are well aware, and I promise I will destroy the bridle, if'n you will stop these attacks against us."

Kier's brow furrowed. "As I said, I attacked those who attacked my sister or ally themselves with those who hold her captive."

Wendy injected, "So the men you killed, they were working with the bandits?"

“Aye, I saw them together. Trading goods, or taking part in their activities.”

“Did you know that?” Wendy asked with a frown, looking at Hamish.

“Nae, lass. We suspected that Malcolm has had help, but we were nae aware of who or where that help was coming from. It seems Kier has seen what we have nae.” Hamish sighed.

“I’ll inform our Chief of what you’ve said and explain everything once this is finished, and I will destroy both the bridle I made and the one on your sister once we free her. ”

“Then I will do what I can to help you free her and once this is over, I promise that we shall return to the loch and cause no more trouble here.”

Hamish nodded. “I know that you want vengeance for what’s happened to your sister, but Malcolm must be brought before the Laird and face the charges that are against him.”

Kier kept quiet for a moment and Wendy held her breath wondering if he was about to disagree, but eventually he nodded and said, “Very well. He faces justice with your Laird.” He turned to leave, but Wendy stopped him.

“Wait, Kier, how will we let you know when we’re ready to act?”

Kier looked over his shoulder at her. “I’ll know. I’ll be nearby.”

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

Hamish and Wendy rode back toward the edge of the copse of trees to watch the bandits and make sure they weren't preparing to leave. Wendy was still trying to convince Hamish that he should go and gather his men, while she kept watch, but he was reluctant to do that.

"Lass, did you nae hear Annabelle regale you with the story of what happened to her when Jamie left her to do the same?" Hamish said with a frown.

"It was because her horse was recognized by Malcolm's. I'll tie Rune to a tree deeper in the copse so that won't happen," Wendy suggested. "Look, you're the one in charge, the guards will listen to you. Just go get them Hamish. It's not that far, and I've got Kier nearby if I need help."

Hamish hesitated.

"The faster you go, the faster you can return," Wendy urged.

"Very well, love," Hamish said, but as he turned his horse, he spoke to the kelpie who was hidden from view in the loch.

"Kier, you best mind your manners with my ladylove. Because if you donnae behave kindly toward her an' try to harm her, an' she doesnae put an iron blade in you, I will put several. "

"Hamish," Wendy gasped, and tried to shush him.

Hamish just maneuvered his horse toward her and pulled her half out of her saddle

into a passionate kiss. "I will return swiftly with the men," he assured her before settling her back down and riding away, the sound of hoofbeats gradually fading into the distance.

Left alone among the ancient stones, Wendy pondered the significance of Hamish calling her his ladylove. It made her feel giddy and she couldn't help the giggle that slipped from her lips as she dismounted and stood next to Rune, rubbing his neck.

As Wendy tied Rune's reins to a tree, Kier returned. "Hamish must be madly in love with you to be so daring," he remarked, his eyes glinting with curiosity and admiration.

A wistful smile played on Wendy's lips as she replied, "I've had three miracles in the last month: escaping a watery grave thanks to Dub Sith, discovering the legends and myths I've always believed in are actually real, and meeting Hamish.

" Her words echoed with the realization of the fantastical journey she had embarked upon.

Intrigued by her tale, Kier, he asked, "I suspected you were nae from here, you bear the heart of one from another world. Will you tell me how you came to be here?"

As they walked back to their post at the edge of the copse to watch the bandits, Wendy explained her journey to seventeenth century Scotland.

"Tis a wonderous tale, lass, you are indeed blessed to have been brought here by Dub Sith." He smiled.

"You know my story now, so will you tell me of yours and your sisters?" Wendy asked, curious to know if there was anything significant that she wasn't aware of about kelpies.

Kier inclined his head. “You wish insight into my kind?” he questioned.

“I wish to understand you better.”

“I see. Kelpies tend to keep to their own kind. We’re playful in nature, with our own kind. Like other Fae, we can be very dangerous to those who do not respect us as carnivorous creatures.”

Wendy gulped. “Are humans often in your diet?” she asked, moving slightly away from him, feeling just a little uncomfortable.

Kier snorted. “Not normally. I’m not saying we willnae devour a human, but tis nae because we have a craving for them.

We’re typically partial to deer, boar, and sheep.

We are nae evil, as many like to think. We simply wish to exist and be left alone.

We do nae feed daily upon game, as we supplement our feeding with the plentiful fish.

The only humans who find themselves on our menu are those who try to capture and ride us without permission. ”

As he spoke, Wendy was struck by the simplicity of it. “It’s about respect. If they asked, you might be inclined to say yes, but in not asking, they show their disrespect for your magnificence and therefore aren’t worth more than a meal.”

“As you say,” he acknowledged.

“You know, in my time there are men who’ve raised wild cats, large ones, that are

very dangerous and will sooner eat a human than look at him funny, but these men, they respect the tigers and because of that the cats show them affection. From what you've described, it sounds similar."

"We are wild creatures at heart, lass. I would imagine any creature who is wild would feel the same. Show us respect and we will do the same for you, though there are some more wild than we and you may nae want to approach them less you find yourself in peril." He gave her a rare wry smile.

"That is good advice. I can say I would never get in an enclosure with a tiger, so it should be the same with any other wild creature."

"Nae all Fae appear dangerous, lass, though they are the most wild creatures you will ever encounter. Do nae be fooled by a gentle appearance."

"I will take your words to heart, Kier."

He looked wistfully toward the bandits. In a moment of candid revelation, Kier admitted, "I do feel a sense of disappointment at not being able to eat Malcolm. He is the one responsible for my sister's captivity and torture. Tis too bad I agree to hand him over."

Wendy sighed. "I think, for what he's done not only to your sister, but to everyone and everything he's harmed, a quick death by kelpie might be too good for him. He deserves to feel what he's put out into the world."

"Hamish mentioned he's killed many men." Kier nodded. "I suppose allowing him to pay the price for those deaths trumps the pain and suffering my sister is enduring."

"Not trumps, Kier. Never. He deserves to experience that same pain and suffering threefold, and in addition to that, pay the price for the deaths he dealt."

Another slight smile crossed Kier's lips. "As you say, lass. I hope that comes to pass. And should your laird wish to make him pay a harsh sentence, I am sure I can call upon some other Fae to provide the pain and suffering he deserves."

A shiver went down Wendy's spine at his words.

She knew there were some extremely vicious Fae in the myths and legends and if they were as real as Kier, then she was fully aware of what kind of pain and torture Kier was speaking of.

"I will be sure to share that with the Laird, should I get the chance to meet him."

The atmosphere crackled with a sense of impending resolution—a reckoning that resonated with the copse of trees and the mystical waters of the loch.

Wendy, caught in the ebb and flow of supernatural revelations and human retribution, marveled at the convergence of their worlds.

She would have to remember this conversation and make a note of it for her book.

"That is enough darkness for now," Kier murmured, and then with a glance toward her, he added, "tell me more of where you come from."

"What would you like to know?" Wendy asked.

Kier paused, and then said, "What is different in the future from this time?"

Wendy giggled. "There is so much, but then again, much is the same." She hadn't meant to be cryptic, but it was true.

She told him about the advances the humans made in travel, and building and how

connected they all were via the internet, but then how disconnected they were with the people around them.

How it seemed that even though the world was much smaller in her time it felt like the people were more distant than ever.

“And what of the Fae. Do they interact with these humans of your time?” he asked.

Wendy shook her head and frowned. “No. I don’t think the Fae want to interact with the humans of my time much.

I think most have retreated from our world and into their own, keeping the veil between the two worlds locked.

Most humans of my time don’t believe the Fae ever existed.

They call them children’s stories. Or tall tales to entertain or scare others.

There are a few of us who believe, and I was working on book about the Fae and other creatures of a supernatural nature before Dub Sith brought me here. ”

“Are you glad he did? Would you have chosen to come were you not about to die?” he asked.

A smile crossed Wendy’s face. “I am glad and yes, I would have. I may not have trusted him immediately, skepticism is pretty strong in my world, but I think I would have taken the chance that he was telling me the truth.”

Kier nodded and he turned his gaze back toward the trees behind them. “Your mate will be here soon,” he murmured.

“How do you know?” Wendy asked, looking into the dim light of the forested area behind them. She couldn’t see anything really beyond her horse. The trees were too thick and the sunlight too dim in the copse of trees.

“I can hear them.”

Page 25

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

It took several minutes before Wendy could see Hamish and the guards heading toward them. Her heart swelled with relief at the sight of their familiar faces.

However, the return of Hamish and his men was not as stealthy as they had hoped.

The rhythmic cadence of hoofbeats, a symphony of hooves against the rugged terrain, echoed through the morning air.

It was a herald of impending conflict, a discordant melody that stirred the bandits from their encampment.

In response to the approaching threat, the bandits, mounted their horses with swift efficiency. The air crackled with tension as the clatter of armor and the snorts of agitated horses signaled the readiness of the ruffians.

Wendy watched as Malcolm pressed an iron riding crop into the beautiful white kelpie's side. She cried out at the pain as he mounted her with a cruel laugh.

"Hamish, they know you're here," she called out, warning him as she rushed toward her own horse.

"Stay out of it, love, I donnae wish to see you hurt, let me and the men deal with these bandits," Hamish said, his voice firm.

As the guardsmen rode in to battle the brigands, a clash commenced.

Wendy noticed that Kier's eyes were locked onto his beloved sister, Fionnuala, her

mouth emitting smoking tendrils of blood from the cruel iron bridle that bound her. Horror etched itself across Wendy's heart, mirroring the despair reflected in Kier's eyes. They had to save her.

It seemed that the visceral sight of Fionnuala's suffering was the catalyst for Kier's fury.

In a surge of otherworldly wrath, he lunged at Malcolm, his form distorting into a monstrous visage—a massive, black centaur-like being.

His weapon of choice was a colossal club, a manifestation of his supernatural might.

A sticky black net, wrought from some dark magic, coiled in his grip, ready to ensnare any who dared oppose him.

As Kier descended upon Malcolm, the battlefield erupted into a maelstrom of clashing blades and shouts. Hamish, leading his men with a strategic prowess born of countless skirmishes, orchestrated the defense against the bandits..

In the midst of the tumult, Wendy watched from the edge of the tree line.

She was amazed at Kier's transformation, which continued, each movement a dance of shadows and raw power.

The giant club swung with a force that seemed to defy the laws of nature, and the sticky black net became an instrument of entrapment, ensnaring Malcolm and dragging him unceremoniously from Fionnuala's back.

The scene unfolded like a fantastical tableau, a collision of worlds where ancient magic met the harsh realities of medieval warfare.

The air vibrated with an otherworldly energy, and the clash of iron, the cries of battle, and the unearthly roars of Kier blended into a symphony of chaos that resonated through the loch shore.

Despite the chaos, Hamish, it seemed, managed to keep his nerve, and his strategic acumen guiding his men in the relentless pursuit to rout the bandits from their stronghold.

Malcolm, though, was cunning and desperate, Wendy watched as he burned free of the sticky black net that had ensnared him.

It seemed the iron he wore was no match for the Fae net.

Falling free from the net to the ground, Malcolm attempted to flee the battleground, with Kier hot on his heels.

Unfortunately, Malcolm caught hold of another horse, and was able to mount it and ride off before Kier could get his teeth into him.

He continued the chase, but it was now much faster, and they quickly disappeared from Wendy's sight.

Amidst the tumult, Wendy, fueled by a determination born of the ethereal chaos, hastened to put Rune into motion and free Fionnuala from the cruel bridle and chains.

As soon as she reached her, she dismounted and walked toward her with her hands out in a placating manner.

"It's okay. I'm a friend. I want to help you," Wendy said as she cautiously approached the beautiful white kelpie.

Her hands worked with urgency, the cold iron yielding to her determined efforts. As the last shackle fell away, Fionnuala was freed from her torment. With a wild, liberated spirit, she raced toward the inviting waters of the loch, her hooves kicking up droplets of freedom.

The loch, shimmering like liquid silver, embraced Fionnuala with its cool caress as she galloped into its depths.

The waters seemed to part for the mystical creature, creating a path to freedom amidst the tumultuous battleground.

It was a moment of ethereal beauty amid the chaos, where the supernatural and the natural converged in a dance as ancient as the Highlands themselves.

Wendy, witnessing the liberation of Fionnuala, felt a profound connection to the mystical forces that had shaped her journey on this enchanting island of Islay.

As Wendy stood watching the gorgeous creature making her escape, one of the bandits came for her, but he'd underestimated Wendy's nimbleness and anger toward them.

He lunged forward with a reckless fervor.

Wendy, with swift, evasive movements, danced around the bandit, using her small frame to her advantage.

The bandit's blows met only air as Wendy's quick feet eluded his every strike.

She slipped through the bandit's grasp with an almost ethereal grace.

In a pivotal moment, she seized the opportunity, using a combination of agility and

intuition to disarm her assailant.

A well-placed kick to his family jewels, and a deft maneuver later, Wendy had turned the tables for the moment, leaving the bandit disarmed, on his knees, and struggling to gain his feet.

Hamish charged toward her aid, his sword drawn with a determination matching the fierce Highland wind. His presence, a beacon of reassurance, calmed Wendy's racing heart. With a few swift strokes, Hamish dispatched the remaining threat from the bandit, ensuring Wendy's safety.

The surviving bandits, sensing the shift in fortune, chose the path of retreat.

They scattered, realizing that Malcolm had left them with no purpose.

Victory belonged to Hamish and his guardsmen, and the air resonated with a triumphant energy.

The wounded bandits on the ground would now become prisoners.

With the battle behind them, the area became a scene of jubilation and relief. Hamish and his guardsmen, though bearing light wounds, celebrated their triumph.

"What of Malcolm?" Artair asked, looking around at the wounded. "Should we give chase?"

"He took off on a horse and Kier gave chase," Wendy called out. "They went that way." She pointed toward the north.

"Kier?" Artair questioned.

“The kelpie,” Hamish shared. “His name is Kier. And nae. We’ll give the kelpie a chance to keep his word.

” He moved toward Wendy and pulled her into his arms. As the sun set cast a gentle golden glow upon the battlefield, Hamish's voice, low and filled with a quiet intensity, broke the stillness.

"You fought bravely, lass. Are you hurt? "

Wendy, cradled in Hamish's protective embrace, looked up at him with gratitude and affection. "I'm fine, thanks to you. But are you okay? You faced those bandits head-on."

Hamish's roughened hands traced a soothing path along Wendy's arm. "A few scratches, nothing more. Seeing you in danger... tis what worried me most."

Wendy met Hamish's gaze, her eyes reflecting the flickering torchlight. "Hamish, I... I don't know how to thank you. Your bravery, it means everything to me."

A soft smile played on Hamish's lips. "You donnae need to thank me, lass. I'd cross oceans for you." In the quietude of the night, Hamish hesitated for a moment, then gently confessed, "Wendy, I've been meaning to tell you. I love you, truly."

Wendy, moved by the sincerity in Hamish's eyes, whispered, "I love you too, Hamish."

In that moment, amidst the battle strewn field and the echoes of the fight, Hamish leaned down, capturing Wendy's lips in a sweet and lingering kiss. The taste of victory mingled with the sweetness of their love, sealing a bond that had weathered the storm of uncertainty.

“What do we do with these,” Artair asked, gesturing toward the now bound bandits on the ground with his sword.

“We’ll bring them back to our camp, and in the morning you and a few others can deliver them to the Laird. The horses we’ll take back to the fort.”

Artair nodded and then called out to some of the other guardsmen, “Get them on their feet and round up the horses.”

The guardsmen, their weapons now sheathed, did as they were told, and they all trod back to the camp at the old Donald Castle ruins. Once there, one of them rekindled the fire and another set about taking care of all the wounded.

The campfire flickered, casting dancing shadows upon the stone walls of the ruins as Wendy cuddled into Hamish’s side. The men drank, enjoying the camaraderie as they told tales of their adventures.

In all her life, Wendy would never have imagined it being possible to be here in this place with a man like Hamish celebrating a battle won with bandits and the rescue of a mystical creature. It was a dream come true and she never wanted to wake up from it.

Looking at the man next to her, she smiled. She could not believe her luck in finding him. Hamish was one of a kind and she would fight for him, for their love, with everything in her heart.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

The campfire crackled in the stillness of the late Highland night.

Many of the guard had taken themselves off to bed, while a few guarded the prisoners, but Wendy and Hamish were enjoying just sitting together in the quietness before the fire.

In the outskirts of the flickering firelight, something moved, drawing Wendy's attention.

A moment later, Kier and Fionnuala, both in human form moved closer, hesitant to enter the ruins. Wendy nudged Hamish, and directed his attention toward the two kelpies. He sat up straighter, his arm tightening around her waist.

"Welcome, Fionnuala, Kier, please come join us," Wendy greeted, her voice a whisper in the tranquil night.

Hamish, sitting beside her, nodded in acknowledgment, his gaze shifting between the siblings who had ventured into the camp. "Aye, you are welcome here."

Fionnuala, still bearing the marks of her ordeal, her mouth carrying the scars of the iron bridle, spoke with a softness. "Thank you," she uttered.

Kier moved forward toward Wendy. "We owe you a debt we can never fully repay," he admitted, his words carrying the weight of a promise.

Wendy shook her head. She was touched by the sincerity in their expressions, but did not want the Fae indebted to her or even the clan. Still she responded with a warm

smile. "You don't owe us anything, Kier. We're glad we could help free your sister from the bandits."

Kier met Wendy's gaze, a profound understanding passing between them. "Still, we make this vow," he declared, "we shall not harm humans unless they seek to capture or ride us against our will."

"We appreciate you doing so, Kier," Hamish replied. "If I might ask, I know you gave chase when Malcolm escaped your net. Did you capture him? What happened to him?" he inquired.

Kier's response held a note of regret. "Malcolm managed to catch hold of a powerful horse, riding it hard in his escape. Neither I nor your clan have had the satisfaction of true justice," he admitted, his gaze lingering on the distant horizon where justice eluded them.

Hamish sighed, a tinge of disappointment in his eyes. "Aye, Malcolm is a slippery one, a thorn we cannae quite pluck from our sides," he conceded, acknowledging the evasive nature of their elusive foe.

"I and my brethren shall keep an eye out for him, and should we catch sight, we shall endeavor to bring him to you for justice."

"We'd appreciate that, Kier," Wendy replied.

"We shall take our leave now and return to the loch. Should you ever find yourselves near Loch Finlaggan, we will greet you as friends." With that, the two melded seamlessly into the shadows, disappearing into the nocturnal embrace of the Scottish wilderness.

Hamish, holding Wendy's hand, led her to their bedrolls which were spread out next

to each other. "Come morn, we'll make our way back to the fort."

As the first rays of dawn painted the Scottish sky, the camp stirred to life.

Breakfast was cooked and eaten, horses were saddled, and the air buzzed with the anticipation of the journeys ahead.

Wendy and Hamish exchanged glances, their silent communication reflecting the shared weariness from the night's events.

The two parties set out, one on a long ride to see the Laird with the prisoners in tow, and the rest to Fort Donald, the rhythmic clip-clop of hooves against the gravel road merging with the soft whispers of the wind.

Within a couple of hours they were back at the fort, greeted with a hero's welcome from Shaw and the others on the wall. Once they'd returned their horses to the stables and seen to their needs, Wendy and Hamish went into the castle to see Cam.

Approaching his office door, Hamish knocked and swiftly opened it as soon as Cam bid them to enter. He looked up from the table expectantly with a hopeful expression.

"I take it the kelpie problem has been solved?" he questioned.

"Aye, though tis a tale in itself," Hamish replied.

"Oh?" Cam arched a brow. "Tell me."

Hamish and Wendy took seats at the table and told Cam what happened when they followed the kelpie. He was shocked to hear that Malcolm had captured another kelpie, but was not surprised that he was the one to have caused the issue with the kelpie in the first place.

“Aye tis a bastard, he is. Did you nae capture him then?”

“Nae, unfortunately, he managed to slip out of Kier’s net, get hold of a horse and beyond our and even Kier’s reach.”

Cam shook his head in frustration. “Aine warned as much,” he replied. “What of the others? Did you bring them here or take them to the Laird?”

“Artair and a couple of the others have taken them to the Laird for judgement.”

“Good. You’ve done well, Hamish. And kept our bond with the Fae safe, despite my encouragement not to.” Cam smiled. “And Wendy, you’ve shown you’re a brave lass, and stubborn too.” He chuckled. “You women from the future are a force of your own that we are lucky to count on our side.”

A subtle thrill of satisfaction coursed through Wendy as Cam's words hung in the air. “I’ll take that as a compliment.” She grinned.

"As you should, lass, as you should. Tonight, we will hold a feast in honor of your return, you might take this afternoon to rest," Cam said.

Taking him at his word, Hamish and Wendy left the Chief’s office and made their way to her bedchamber, hand in hand.

She opened the door, and they passed through setting both of their bags down near the wall.

Wendy couldn’t help but think the bed looked very inviting after spending so much time camping.

“Let me get a fire started,” Hamish said, moving from her side.

As Hamish set to work coaxing life into the hearth, Wendy moved to light the two lanterns in the room. Once that was done, she began to remove the quilted top she was wearing, and then the pants. She was anxious to get comfortable.

The hearth, ablaze with a comforting warmth made the room even brighter. Hamish, turning away from the fire, glanced at Wendy. His eyes spoke volumes—pride, tenderness, and love. They took turns washing at the wash basin and then sank down on the bed together and nestled close.

The flickering flames painted patterns of light and shadow on the walls as Hamish leaned in to plant a gentle kiss on Wendy's lips. "I'm grateful you came into my life, Wendy. I cannae imagine facing the future with anyone else by my side."

Wendy's heart swelled with emotion. "I can't imagine a life without you now either. These last several days have been harrowing, but facing it with you made it bearable and even dare I say, fun."

Their hands, entwined, Hamish whispered, "You've become a part of this land, a part of me and I cannae imagine my life without you."

With a soft sigh, Wendy nestled into Hamish's embrace, the flames of the hearth casting a warm glow upon their intertwined figures. Her mind swirled with thoughts, and a tender longing nestled within her heart. She wanted to spend the rest of her life with Hamish. She wanted to marry him. She wanted to be his wife, bear his children, love him forever and ever. She couldn't imagine a better life than that for herself.

Wendy's love for Hamish was an undeniable force, a powerful connection that had blossomed amidst trials and tribulations.

Yet, a lingering question remained — did he see their connection as something timeless, something that extended beyond the present?

Did he see an actual future with her as she did with him?

With a languid stretch, Hamish reached for Wendy, drawing her into his embrace.

The soft fabric of the bed linens whispered against their entwined bodies, and Wendy reveled in the sensation of his warm skin against hers.

The distant chatter of servants and the clinking of armor were distant echoes, for in this moment, Hamish and Wendy were cocooned in their own world.

His fingers traced lazy patterns on her skin, a silent declaration of affection that needed no words.

His kiss set her skin ablaze and his tender touch as he made love to her had Wendy believing that the love she felt for him was indeed reciprocated. So much so that she felt sure that he would one day ask her to marry him. She just hoped it would be soon.

In the aftermath of their lovemaking, Hamish cuddled her close and the two of them fell into a deep slumber, worn out from the past several days, the battle they'd endured and their bedroom activities.

At the knock upon the door several hours later, Hamish reluctantly untangled himself from Wendy, promising to steal moments like these whenever time allowed, he wrapped a blanket around his middle and answered it.

"Aye," he said, cracking open the door.

Wendy heard the soft murmur of a voice in the corridor, but couldn't hear what was being said.

"All right, we'll be down shortly," Hamish agreed and shut the door. He turned back

to Wendy with a smile. “The feast awaits us, love. We should dress.”

Wendy stretched languidly in the bed and looked at him with a sultry smile on her lips. “Do we have to?”

Hamish chuckled. “Aye, but donnae worry, love, we donnae have to stay late.”

As they dressed, Hamish in his tunic, plaid and kilt and Wendy in one of the dresses from her wardrobe, the air was filled with the unspoken understanding that this night had woven a new chapter into their lives.

Hamish and Wendy emerged from their chamber, hand in hand, ready to face whatever the night held, their hearts still echoing the sweet cadence of their shared passion.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

Fort Donald had been transformed into a realm of jubilation, alive with the vibrant energy of a victorious celebration.

The long wooden tables in the dining hall groaned under the weight of platters piled high with culinary delights.

Succulent roasted meats, tender fowl, and an array of vegetables adorned the feast tables, their rich aromas intermingling and tempting the taste buds of all who entered.

Tankards of frothy ale and flagons of deep red wine were passed among the revellers, the clinking of goblets accompanied by hearty toasts that echoed through the hall.

Musicians played lively tunes on fiddles and pipes, their melodies creating an infectious rhythm that beckoned couples to the dance floor.

The sound of laughter and joyous chatter blended with the music, filling the air with a sense of camaraderie.

As the night unfolded, the dancing became more spirited, with couples twirling and spinning to the lively tunes.

The strains of a love ballad prompted more intimate embraces, and the dining hall seemed to pulsate with the heartbeat of celebration.

The faces of the guards, once stern and resolute, were now lit with the joy of shared victory, their bonds strengthened by the trials they had faced together.

In a corner, Hamish and Wendy found themselves caught up in the revelry. When Cam tapped on his tankard of ale, calling for attention, the musicians quieted as did the clan. All eyes turned to him as he stood, a wide grin on his face. Jen sat to his right, smiling up at him.

"Tonight, we gather nae only to feast on the bounty before us but to honor those whose courage knows nae bounds. Hamish, you have proven time and again that you are the shield that guards our people when trouble strikes us. And Wendy, your wisdom and tenacity have made you one of our own."

The gathered clan applauded, and tankards were raised in their honor.

Cam raised his tankard high to match the assembled clan members.

"To the guards who banded together at Loch Finlaggan, fought the bandits and freed the kelpie from its bondage, your bravery lights our way.

Malcolm may still lurk in the shadows, but I say to him and all who would threaten our kin: we are vigilant, and justice will find its mark in the coming months. "

The words resonated like a battle cry, and the hall erupted into a joyous uproar.

Tankards clashed, and cheers filled the air as the celebration resumed with renewed vigor.

The musicians struck up another lively tune, and couples took to the dance floor once more, their movements a testament to the infectious spirit that now permeated the hall.

Amidst the revelry, Hamish and Wendy shared a glance, a silent acknowledgment of the trials they had faced and the triumph they now celebrated.

The bustling dining hall echoed with mirth and revelry as Catherine slid gracefully onto the bench next to Wendy.

A conspiratorial gleam sparkled in Catherine's eyes as she leaned in, her voice a low murmur of excitement amidst the lively chatter.

“Okay, I’ve heard the rumors, now I want to know what really happened.

Did you really talk to the kelpie? Both of them?

Did they offer to let you ride them? You know that’s what they’re saying right?

That the male kelpie was so taken with you he offered to marry you and let you ride him whenever you please with the promise of not drowning you.

” Her eyes twinkled as she shared the rumor.

Wendy laughed and shook her head while Hamish looked less than pleased. “No, that’s not what occurred.”

“That kelpie better nae have made such an offer, I’ve still got my iron blade, I’ve half a mind to track him down,” Hamish grumbled.

Giggling even more, Wendy told Catherine what actually took place.

“I’ve got of things to add to my notes too, about the kelpie.

Kier explained quite a lot about his species to me while we waited for Hamish and the guards to return.

I’ll probably need your help sorting it all before I put it into a book. ”

“Of course, I’m looking forward to seeing what all you learned.” Catherine raised her tankard high, the amber liquid catching the warm glow of the torches that lined the hall. "To the Kier the kelpie," she declared.

Wendy clinked her cup to Catherine’s and said, “To Kier,” before taking a sip.

As they sipped their drinks, others began to ask questions about the kelpies.

Wendy launched into her narrative, describing the sleek, otherworldly creature that had enchanted her. Catherine and the others listened with rapt attention, occasionally interjecting with exclamations of awe or gasps of suspense.

The night wore on, and as the firelight danced upon the stone walls, Wendy and Hamish shared stories and laughter with everyone until the wee hours of the morning when they once again made their way back to Wendy’s bedchamber.

Two weeks passed in the wake of the tumultuous events that unfolded at the edge of Loch Finlaggan.

The reports of drownings that had plagued the tranquil waters of the loch had ceased, bringing a tentative calm to the shores.

Kier, true to his word, had steered clear of any violent encounters, and he and his sister, Fionnuala, gracefully retreated to the solitude of the castle ruin overlooking the loch.

In the heart of Fort Donald, a sense of relief mingled with lingering tension.

Malcolm, the elusive instigator of chaos, had managed to elude the grasp of justice once again.

A handful of his surviving men, however, were not as fortunate, finding themselves locked in the Laird's dungeon or driven from Scotland completely by Laird Colin Campbell's guardsmen.

As peace settled around the fort, Hamish took Wendy for another picnic on the shores of Loch Ballygrant. The sun was bright in the sky and the air full of the scent of wildflowers. It was a perfect day.

"As beautiful as I believe our Islay to be, it doesnae hold a candle to you, love," Hamish said, lifting Wendy's hand to his lips.

"Oh Hamish." Wendy blushed.

"I've been meaning to ask, but I've nae found an easy way to say it, so I'm jest goin' ta ask," Hamish began.

Wendy looked at him and noticed his face was slightly flushed and he seemed nervous. "What is it, Hamish?"

He took a breath and then blew it out noisily.

"Will you marry me, love? I want to spend my future with you and have a family with you and hear all your crazy ideas about the Fae and about what bizarre things took place in your world before you came here. You're loving and kind and a beautiful soul and I cannae live without you, Wendy, love, so please say you'll marry me. "

Tears of joy filled Wendy's eyes as she nodded.

She'd never heard Hamish ramble so much in her life.

That was usually her thing, and it made her want to giggle that he'd done it in his proposal to her, but she didn't want to upset him so instead she threw her arms around him and said, "Yes, Hamish, yes I'll marry you and give you tons and tons of babies.

And tell you wonderful stories about America and share everything I learn about the Fae.

And I can't live without you either and I love you forever and ever, so yes, I'll marry you. "

Gathering her close, Hamish laughed. He picked her up and swirled her around in his arms, causing Wendy to break out in joyful laughter too. Finally she was going to get her wish. She was going to be Hamish's wife.

He set her on her feet and kissed her breathless. "A month from now, you'll be Mrs. Hamish MacDonald."

"I love the sound of that," Wendy said with a grin.

And then stunned disbelief set in. "Wait a month? There's so much to do, I have to go tell the girls, there's so much to plan...

" She spun out of his arms and started running toward her horse, but Hamish, still laughing, caught her and carried her back to their picnic.

"All that can wait, lass, I promise t'will be easy to plan, let's enjoy the moment together, just the two of us." He smiled down at her and kissed her silly.

In that moment, Wendy couldn't help be grateful for having him in her life. She loved him with her whole heart, and she'd marry him any time and any place. She didn't

need a bunch of planning, all she needed was him.

A month later, the morning of their wedding dawned with a gentle breeze that carried the scent of heather and the promise of a Highland celebration.

Wendy stood in front of the mirror dressed in a traditional Donald plaid gown.

Bridie had made it especially for her. The skirt was full and had several underskirts while the bodice was fitted and showed off her cleavage.

She was proud to be wearing the clan colors as she'd come to consider everyone in the clan her family.

"Let me braid your hair," Jen said, taking the brush from the small table and running it through Wendy's hair.

She started weaving strands together, as Catherine adorned each twined section with a wild flower. Mae was busy tying a ribbon around a bouquet of wild flowers for her to carry in the ceremony.

"You look fabulous," Catherine said once they finished.

"Like a proper Highland bride," Annabelle added with a smile.

"Do you think so?" Wendy questioned.

"Absolutely," Mae said with a nod.

"Hamish is going to weep at the sight of you," Jen teased.

They all giggled.

“Come on, we better get you out there,” Catherine declared, guiding her toward the door.

Under the sprawling canopy of ancient trees near the shore of Loch Ballygrant, Hamish and Wendy exchanged vows.

A rustic altar adorned with wildflowers and heather framed the couple, while the sounds of nature provided a harmonious backdrop to the sacred promises they uttered.

As Hamish slipped the ring he’d made for her onto her finger, the clan shouted out well wishes and applauded.

Following the ceremony, the celebration continued in the meadow where she and Hamish often picnicked.

Tables had been brought down the hill and adorned with tartan runners.

They were laden with an abundance of delicacies – roasted meats, savory pies, and an array of desserts.

Barrels of whisky and ale stood ready to quench the thirst of the merry celebrants.

Amidst the revelry, Jen hugged her. “Welcome to the family, officially, Wendy.” She smiled.

Wendy’s heart was so filled with joy she nearly burst into tears. “I am so glad Dub Sith brought me here. He gave me a second chance at life, and I could not imagine a better place, a better way to live it than here with you all.”

The festivities continued into the night, the flames of torches casting a warm glow on

the jubilant faces.

Traditional Scottish dances echoed through the air, with Wendy and Hamish joining in on the celebratory reel that symbolized their union.

She'd never danced so much in her life, and to do so barefoot in the highland grass with the man she loved more than life itself was a dream beyond any dream she could imagine.

A little while later, as Wendy took a moment to catch her breath, she looked toward the shores of Loch Ballygrant and was stunned. She curled her fingers around Hamish's strong arm guiding his attention toward the shore. "Come look. You won't believe it."

Standing on the shore in the moonlight— two magnificent horses, one as black as the midnight sky, the other a radiant white, stood watching the festivities. Their eyes, gleaming with an otherworldly intelligence, held a depth of understanding that transcended mere equine comprehension.

Hamish, his gaze fixed upon the horses, shook his head with wonder. "How did they know?" he asked.

"They're magic," she said as she raised her hand in greeting and gave them a wide smile.

There was a recognition, an unspoken acknowledgment that stretched across realms – a connection between the mortal and the mystical that only those who had walked the threshold of the extraordinary could comprehend.

As Wendy and Hamish stood together, hand in hand, a quiet understanding passed between them.

With a bounce of their heads, the kelpies turned and splashed back into the loch and Wendy felt a sense of peace and blessings wash over her and Hamish.

The fact that they'd shown up to wish them well meant the world to her and she knew without a doubt that they'd have a bright future together.

Wendy and Hamish returned to their family, hand in hand, hearts entwined.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

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At midnight, Audrina James finally laid her head down, gratefully onto her pillow.

It had been another grueling day in Trauma One, it was always the worst when the nursing staff and doctors of the trauma ward lost a child.

Audrina looked at the ceiling where she had taped pictures of stars, lush green fields, exotic ancient castles and the forests of her ancestral homeland, vowing to herself that she would visit Claran Castle in Scotland someday.

Audrina had put the pictures up so that she could clear her mind of the gruesome scenes that she faced in the E.R.

day after day, night after night. They'd worked hard to save the boy from the ravages of a car crash, but Donald Nightingale, of sunny northern California, flatlined at eleven-thirty, after half a day's worth of surgeries, blood transfusions and plasma bags.

Audrina didn't cry much anymore after working in the trauma center.

But there were a few patients who tugged at her heartstrings. Donald would be one of them.

"Look at the pictures. Look at the pictures," Audrina chanted to herself.

She used them as a platform to spring her mind into more pleasant thoughts before

she drifted off to sleep.

Audrina had been fascinated with the stories and lore of her ancestry when her grandfather used to sit her on his knee and recount tales of his youth, roaming the Highlands of Scotland.

That was before a potato famine reached his homeland and forced his family to immigrate to the United States.

Audrina would spend hours, daydreaming as she roamed the redwoods behind the house, pretending the tall trees were the ancient forests of Scotland.

She knew now that Scotland was much greener, and the forests were made of tall oaks, and rowan trees, beech and pine and ash.

But she had promised herself she would visit and discover it for herself someday.

That was all a couple of decades ago, when Audrina had been just seven.

After high school, she had gone on to nursing school, and now was faced with the ever-increasing violence of the San Francisco Community Hospital that came through the doors.

The timing had just never felt right. There was always one more case to oversee, or one more patient to look after and successfully care for until they walked out the door of their own volition, and not in a body bag or stretcher.

Audrina certainly had the money saved for the trip, but she always felt there was something holding her back.

Some small fear she had that there was something Grandfather neglected to tell her

about the ancient folklore.

Audrina never quite made the jump to buy the plane ticket or book the hotels.

She'd never really been sure why, but as she laid there, thinking about all of the never did's that young Donald was never going to experience, she thought, "Why am I holding back? I have no solid reason, no proof that there is anything in Scotland I should be afraid of."

"I'm going to request the time off tomorrow and start booking tickets after my trip to the museum," she vowed out loud.

There was no one to hear her proclamation, she realized.

There wasn't anyone in her life that she could tell really.

"I guess that makes it kind of sad, maybe even a little pathetic. Sure, I have my co-workers, but they would all say, "Finally, you are taking a vacation," when I tell them," Audrina thought.

Audrina had become a trauma nurse after Mom had suffered the same fate as little Donald.

She winced as the memories of that day entered her mind.

It had been much like Donald's parents rushing into the hospital.

The only difference between her grandfather being informed, and Mrs. Nightingale's heart-wrenching screams, had been significantly different, but as equally as devastating.

That's when Grandfather had taken her in.

She didn't know who her dad was, and it never occurred to her to go looking for him.

She knew that she was loved when Grandfather took her, a scared little girl, home that night.

He had cared for her and she didn't need anyone else.

Anyone, that was, except her mom, but she wasn't coming back.

When Grandfather had passed away she was twenty-one, she was left with no one.

She hadn't even bothered getting a pet. Audrina was never home because she worked so much.

She'd always felt like it was her duty to save people because, well, she couldn't save her mom back then.

Audrina tried to roll over onto her side.

She was disgusted with herself that she was caught up in her own head and wallowing in self-pity.

Her vow was just that and she was sticking to it.

She realized, as she flipped back onto her back, that she had never been able to fall asleep unless she was looking up at her pictures.

Grandfather had printed them for her the week that Mom had passed.

He wanted her to have something to think about, other than the sadness of losing her mom.

As Audrina's eyes began to flutter closed, and she emptied her mind save for thoughts of faraway lands and lost familial ties, something, perhaps the moonlight, sparkled in the pictures above her.

A small light that glowed in the tower of the castle, appeared to be brighter in the picture.

But she squinted at it, and then chalked it up to fatigue and weary eyes.

Her lashes batted against her cheeks one last time, and she fell into a deep, sound sleep.

Candles surrounded her in a circle, haloing the circular room with an ethereal glow. Long thin tapers of white sheep's fat burned low and lit the gloom of the dark tower. She'd been locked in there for so long, she had lost track of time.

There was a straw mattress, in a splintered bed of Ashwood.

The thin blanket cast across it, was worn and frayed at the edges.

A small wooden chair, equally as uncomfortable, sat at the base of the bed.

It wobbled on three legs, having relinquished one of the legs long ago, for the usage of a handle for a torch.

The torch, had long ago burnt to ash, and was scattered and lost amongst the dust and dirt that caked the cold stone floor.

She rocked back on her heels and murmured a soft prayer to the Gods, the Spirits, anyone who would listen.

The tower was a prison, a tortuous place that seeped into the soul like the smoky blackness of a demon, coming from the bowels of hell to inhabit and ingest the goodness of the person's humanity.

There were bones in the ashes and they cried out to her.

Begging her to release them of their captivity.

She couldn't help them that night. They would remain tethered there until the angels came for them on the day of reckoning.

Thunder clapped outside the castle and lit up the tiny room in an intense light that threw the stark furnishings of the room into harsh contrast. The candles flickered, and she feared they would blow out.

Cotswold Castle had many frivolities, protection from the elements in the prison tower, was not one of them.

Rain lashed against the stone tower and sprayed into the room in droves of unending dampness.

It rained often in Scotland. She hadn't been dry since she was thrown into that room.

The water collected in puddles at the base of the windows.

She sat in the middle of the room in an attempt to keep herself and her activities dry.

She knelt over a carnelian kilt pin. It glowed in the candlelight like fire.

She reached out her hand and touched it as she murmured.

The contact sent a spiral of heat through her fingertips, and she jerked her hand back.

How could the stone set in silver be warm to the touch?

There was no fire there. The brooch had not been warmed against constant contact with her skin, as she had been shivering since she arrived there.

The cold was such that it seeped not only into her bones, but into her very soul.

There was no possible way the stone could be warm.

Her eyes fixated on the glowing center of the gem as she continued to murmur, “Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, through spans of time, I cannot rest. Seek thee my kin, and pardon my sin, that I may reincarnate, and new life begin. And with this pin I shall be returned to my love, cast through the ages, by touch of mine blood, and light from sun up above.”

The kilt pin glowed ever-brighter in a hue of burnt orange that lit up not only the room, but blazed like the dawning of the early morning’s sun, sending spirals of light from the tower window.

She heard shouts from below and quickly loosened the stone nearest the door, about halfway up the wall.

She hid the pin behind the stone, where someone had hollowed out the stone behind that, and replace the stone so that it looked seamless.

She prayed that someone would find it someday, and that she might rise up, released from the ashes of the debris of bodies from that hellish place.

She heard footsteps on the stairs and boots clunked up the stone steps.

She hurriedly pushed the stone back in place and managed to take one step back, as the door was thrown open and she screamed in terror as... ”

Audrina woke, sitting bolt upright in bed.

“What the hell?” she muttered as she glanced up at the pictures.

“What the heck was that?” she wondered to herself as she let her tired body fall back against the pillows.

She stared at her pictures and then pushed herself back up to a sitting position.

She used her hands and pushed to stand up, so that her upturned face was almost nose to nose with the picture of the castle.

Audrina stared at the tiny light in the tower.

It had faded over the years, but she could have sworn last night it glowed brightly. So brightly it almost lit up the room.

And then...and then, that dream. What a strange dream.

Who was that woman in the dream? What happened to her?

She must have died there. Audrina could feel the drive of her trauma nurse training kick in.

She had to save her. But how? That’s silly.

The woman...me...that was centuries ago when she cast the spell.

And what kind of a spell was that anyway?

Audrina's mind began to fog over, the dream becoming misty around the edges, as reality and the present day slowly seeped back into her mind.

She looked around the modern-day bedroom and laughed at the absurdity of her mind's vehemence that the dream was somehow a reality way back when.

She climbed off the bed and hit the shower, enjoying the feel of the warm jets hitting her body as the ache from the previous day's strenuous shift was washed away.

She combed out her dark red hair and swiftly braided it down her back as she stared into her own brown eyes in the reflection of the foggy mirror.

She wiped away the condensation and flashes entered her mind.

The reflection of a woman in the puddles on the floor as the lightening lit up the room.

Did she have brown eyes like my own? Audrina wondered.

She shrugged and finished her braid and then donned her typical casual wear of jeans, an oversized tee-shirt and a ball cap.

The ensemble fit well on her athletic frame, and it was just what she needed to walk down to San Francisco's Museum of Natural History.

Audrina enjoyed the casual wear on a rare day off, and she was equally as pleased that the museum was hosting an exhibit on loan from Scotland.

She figured she could kill two birds with one stone.

She could get her walk in and surround herself in ancient artifacts that made her yearn for a time and place that she had not yet discovered.

She pulled her ballcap low over her eyes as she walked out the front door, not minding in the least that she had been accused on more than one occasion of being a tomboy.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 8:29 am

When Audrina reached the museum, she purchased her ticket and queued to get in line to be let into the exhibits.

She was about ten minutes early and so she began to read the pamphlet that was handed out at the ticket booth.

She had been to the museum so many times, she was only interested in the exhibit on loan from the Scottish Museum of Ancient History, but she figured she might peruse a few more on her way out.

She read about the various artifacts that were on display, quite impressed with the vast array of items that have been amassed.

As she flipped the cover open, she paused, staring down at the pamphlet stupidly and didn't really register what she was seeing and reading on the pamphlet.

As she stared down at the glossy photo, the memory of the dream from last night was a bit hazy, but there was no mistaking the kilt pin from the dream.

The one that the woman, that she, had cursed.

Or maybe the woman in the dream, she, had placed a spell on it.

But there it was, shining back up at her from the brochure.

Audrina blinked rapidly in the sun, thinking that maybe she was mistaken, and this was another pin that was excavated from some site in Scotland, and it just looked

similar.

But as she continued to read, the weighted feeling in her stomach became heavier and heavier.

“The Cotswold Pin, a rare and expensive carnelian-gem set pin, was discovered last year in the ruins of Cotswold Castle’s eastern most tower.

Archeologists and Historians know very little about the pin, except that it was discovered hidden behind a loose stone near the doorway to the tower, where a mason was reinforcing the towers infrastructure.

Cotswold Castle is host of a long and bloody history in the Scottish culture and it is well known that Lord Cotswold, imprisoned many native Scotsmen, in his long and cruel English reign over the Scottish people.

It is speculated that the pin was hidden by one of the prisoners.

Most likely in the event of their impending death and the desire for such a rare gem to not fall into the hands of the English.

It is known that Lord Cotswold’s reign was filled with such terrors and atrocities against the Scottish people, such as imprisonment, torture, and rape.

He often invoked the First Rights, also known as Prima, against many young Scottish Brides.

It was well known that many of the ones he impregnated he had accused of, tried, and found guilty of witchcraft and subsequently sentenced to death.

It is no wonder that whoever was bequeathed such a rare treasure as this gem-inlayed kilt pin, would have wanted it hidden from such an atrocious and vindictive lord and

ruler.”

Audrina’s hands trembled, and the pamphlet shook as she read and re-read the description under the brooch.

“ How can this possibly be? How is it that I dreamt of this very kilt pin, only last night? I have no memory of such a pin, even from the countless hours spent with Grandfather pouring over history and ancestry books,” she wondered.

She only realized that the line had started to move, and people were entering the museum, when someone shouted, “Are you going to stand there all day?”

She jumped and shouted, “Sorry!” over her shoulder as she hastened to the door.

She followed the map of the museum to the new acquisitions and the new exhibit that was on display and it took her a full ten minutes to push through the throngs of people who were gathered around the ancient claymores and thread-bare tartans.

She looked for a case, a glass case, figuring, if the museum was going to display rare and beautiful jewelry and gems, they would have it resting on a bed of velvet and enclosed in a high-security, alarm activated case such as the ones she had seen countless other relics, and objet d’art displayed in before.

She found the very case she was looking for and made a beeline for it.

She waited at the back of the line and tapped her foot restlessly, as she waited for the older couple who were fawning over the brooches and tartans and listing off their family tree and origins, dating themselves back to the days of yore and their own ancestors.

Just when her patience couldn’t possibly take any more waiting, the line moved ahead, and she was able to press in, face to face with the kilt pin.

Audrina found it extraordinary that, even after centuries sitting behind a stone, even though it was unexposed to the elements, it was still in pristine condition, as if it had never survived centuries of time passing by.

She was sure that it was probably dusty when the mason found it, possibly even the gem was scratched or worn and thus had to be restored, but the pin was pristine.

The burnt orange gem sat at the apex of a silver hill.

The silver had been bent and molded onto a swirling pattern to resemble the crest of the hill, so the gem was the representation of the sun.

From what Audrina knew of Celtic mythology, the sun symbol was more widely used in the sun cross symbols, which were indicative of Christianity's introduction to the Celtic peoples.

But this sun was a literal representation of the sun, suggesting that whoever designed and forged the pin, was still a practicing pagan, possibly giving the pin druidic or witchcraft origins.

On the outset of the circular pin, the silver swirled into a Celtic knot which was wavy around the edges, like a river.

Audrina knew this because as Grandfather and she had investigated the Claran, or MacClaran name, it was discovered that the Claran's were one of the older tribes of Scotland, but those particular tribes were ancient, nomadic druids who traveled the waters from the Isle of Eire, also known as Ireland.

The modern day Claran's were to be found inhabiting the areas on the River Clare and the name Claran literally meant, "One who lives near the River Clare." So, Audrina knew her ancestors had been an ancient people of magics and mystery, and the warring tribes had caused them to take root in Scotland as one of the founding

tribes, and they had taken their name and origins with them.

The evidence was right there in the pin that resembled the pagan magics and the river beds from whence her people came.

The tribes, like the rivers on the pin, were split between Ireland and Scotland.

Audrina felt her excitement at having found such a connection to her ancestors, begin to grow.

She stared with her face almost pressed to the glass, willing the pin to do something, anything to give her a sign that she belonged there, with it.

She felt like, somewhere deep in her soul, that the pin belonged to her, but she knew this was silly, because it belonged to the museum in Scotland.

It didn't change the connection she imagined she could feel through the glass.

As she stood there, she again realized the grumblings of the crowd around her as she had allowed herself to be lost in her thoughts.

She was about to exit the line and circle back around, when the crowd was jostled and parted by the streak of a black clothed and masked figure, who shoved them aside.

When the intruder got to Audrina, he shoved her so hard, she knocked into the glass and it smashed as the sirens from the museum began to wail.

Audrina cut the back of her hand on the glass as she tried to stop her fall, but with the rest of the crowd, she tumbled to the floor.

Audrina looked up, just in time to see the masked figure reach into the case and grab something.

A flash of orange and silver registered in her mind, and she clawed her way back up and ran after the thief, as he dashed outside the museum with what she could only proclaim as “her” kilt pin.

Audrina chased after him as the wail of sirens from the museum’s security, and the automatically notified police screeched in her ear.

As athletic as she was, it didn’t take her long to catch up to the thief, and she tackled him, expertly maneuvering him into a judo hold from her years of training with Mr. Tanaka at his Japanese dojo.

Audrina had needed an outlet for her rage and frustration for losing everyone she had ever loved.

And she had miraculously stumbled upon it in the classes offered at the dojo and Mr. Tanaka’s ever-patient and serene temperament.

The thief was quickly apprehended at Audrina’s capable hands, just as the police showed up and began to cross the sunny court-yard.

“Hey lady, are you nuts?” one of the officer called. “You don’t chase after a criminal! What were you thinking!” he shouted.

Audrina didn’t answer him, but reached out her shaking hand toward the pin that had fallen to the ground in the take-down of the thief, and as her bloodied fingers from the cut on the glass closed around the pin, the sun shone brightly through a cloud cover, landing directly on the pin, the blood and her hand, and then suddenly, there was a black and gray mist, and Audrina was falling, falling, falling.

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