



# Gonnal

IMMORTAL HIGHLANDER † CLAN MACMAR BOOK 1

HAZEL HUNTER

CONNAL

Immortal Highlander Clan  
MacMar Book I



**HAZEL HUNTER**

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# HH ONLINE



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# Chapter One



“Hey, Mrs. Baker,” the teenager at the drive-through window said, flashing a cheeky grin at Valerie. “What are you doing out this late? It’s a school night.”

“I’m addicted to the little marshmallows in your hot chocolate.” It took her a moment to place him in the former student catalogue in her head: *Peter Tate, class of '21, back row, good grades, easy-going. Future motorcycle mechanic, dating Susan Paulsen.* “Don’t you have to tinker on a Harley in the morning, Pete?”

“ATV motors in the afternoon. I’ve switched to rec vehicle repair. Better money around here.” He rolled his eyes. “How do you remember everyone you’ve taught so perfectly?”

Valerie tapped her temple. “You guys brand yourselves on my brain.”

After exchanging her cash for a small cardboard-sleeved cup, she drove off before he could give her the change, and smiled as he yelled a thank-you after her. Peter and Susan both came from solid families, had reasonable ambitions and worked part-time jobs while they attended nursing and trade school respectively. They’d probably never leave Lakeville, but because all their people lived here they’d settle into their own place in the small town, maybe have a couple of kids and hopefully stay together through the best and worst.

*Why do you believe love has to last forever? Don’t you realize how irrational and childish your expectations are?*

Valerie burned her bottom lip taking a sip of the watery hot chocolate before she put it in the cup holder. Her hand shook as she returned it to the wheel, but gripping it tightly for a few minutes steadied her. Hearing echoes of her dead husband's voice had plagued her ever since his funeral, as if her brain were trying to redo all the arguments they'd had. At the same time her heart dropped in her chest, a stone that never cracked.

Back then Valerie had said *I believe in you, Dale*. Now she would have countered with *Is having an affair with a student what you consider rational and mature?*

Dying before she'd discovered his infidelity had been the best and worst thing Dale Baker had done to her. Best because she'd believed he'd loved her right up until the funeral. Worst because she'd found out the truth in a cemetery. Then the echoes of all the things their friends had said afterward started.

*At least the girl wasn't a minor.*

*Were you having, you know, problems in the bedroom?*

*He didn't deserve you, the cheating jerk.*

What those friends had said didn't match the looks they'd given her. Once they knew Dale had been in love with someone else, the blame for what had happened began to shift from him to the widow he'd left to deal with his mess. She'd already overheard a few nasty remarks from people she had liked that had shaken her badly.

*I guess she's not as nice as she seems.*

*Maybe he wanted kids but she wanted a career.*

*She should have realized all the stress she was putting on him.*

Parking her car on the old bridge outside town allowed Valerie to stare at Moon Lake. It formed a perfect oval looking glass for the sky, and at night appeared as if filled with stars. Over the years she and Dale had come here dozens of times to have picnics and bird watch. Even from the bridge she could smell the bright freshness of the evergreen forest surrounding the lake, and imagined once more hiking through the trees and

grinning with Dale over little discoveries. They'd both loved nature walks.

*Is that why you came here, honey? Because it was our favorite place, and you had to ruin that for me, too?*

Pushing back the bitterness, Valerie sipped the now-lukewarm hot chocolate while she considered her list of regrets. It started with the usual litany of should-haves. She should have asked Dale where he was going that night, or followed him when he stormed out of the house. She should have insisted they attend couple counseling when he'd talked about divorce. She definitely should have agreed to the separation he'd wanted, instead of telling him she planned to stay at his side and fight for their marriage.

Because she hadn't done any of those things, Dale had come here exactly one year ago tonight, hung her locket on the railing, jumped off the bridge, and drowned in this lovely, quiet place. Her fingers grazed the smooth surface of the fine silver case, as they had every day since the police had returned it to her.

Valerie often envied her husband now, because his suicide had finished everything: his affair, their marriage, his depression, and all the responsibilities that came with life. He would never again have to worry about her, the house, their finances, his students or the girl with whom he'd had the affair. He would never have to explain himself to Valerie, or anyone else. At the time of his suicide, his parents had each lost their brief battles with cancer. The community college where he had taught English Literature had easily replaced him. Even his young lover had packed up and left town after making that hideous scene at the funeral.

*You killed him. He wanted to be with me, you selfish bitch. You'll pay for this. I swear it.*

Closing her eyes didn't erase the image of Candace Wilcox, Dale's teaching assistant and lover. Ten years younger than Valerie, the college senior had been friendly, charming, and had even come to their house for dinner several times. She'd actually had liked Candy, and enjoyed the easy way her



husband had joked with the girl about their work, his students and the books they had both loved. Valerie had never once suspected they were also sleeping together whenever Dale could sneak away from her.

*He never loved you. He loved me. Me.*

Thinking about Dale's funeral still made Valerie's stomach turn. After screaming the truth about the affair, Candy had thrown a handful of the soil from the grave in Valerie's face. As the funeral home attendants had hustled the weeping girl out of the cemetery, horrified friends had quickly come to Valerie's aid, brushing her off and trying to reassure her. All she could remember of the remainder of the service was standing there frozen, tasting dirt in her mouth while everyone had whispered around her.

*That must be why he always worked so late, one of Valerie's co-workers had said later while delivering a sympathy stroganoff. Didn't you ever suspect he was unfaithful?*

Valerie had blamed herself for the better part of a year, but gradually the guilt, grief and shame that Dale's death had inflicted had eased a little. She'd gone to see a therapist, and then joined an online group for survivors of suicide loss. Gradually she'd cut ties with all of their friends, which had been easy once everyone had started blaming her for her husband's death. She knew the time had come to leave upstate New York and find another place to start over with her life. The sadness and emptiness she suffered seem to be permanent, however. What Dale had done didn't change the fact that he had been the love of her life.

*Only I wasn't his.*

There had been signs over the last year that Valerie had missed or dismissed. Always patient and understanding, even when they disagreed, Dale began showing flashes of temper over the oddest things. She'd brought up going to Paris for vacation over the summer, something they'd always wanted to do, and he'd told her to stop being idiotic before he'd walked out of the room. One night she'd picked up his phone to

answer it while he was in the bathroom and he'd run out with his pants unfastened, yelling for her not to touch it. When she noticed he'd made a large cash withdrawal from their joint checking account and asked him why, he'd blown up at her, claiming she didn't trust him.

*I shouldn't have trusted him.*

Dale had been twelve years older than her, so it was natural for Valerie to blame his erratic behavior on a mid-life crisis. It seemed to begin when he'd started losing his hair, so much so that he'd abruptly shaved his head. Fortunately with his big brown eyes and Adonis good looks he'd seemed even more handsome bald, like a Greek statue. He'd always worked out and jogged, but suddenly he was exercising twice as much as before. On weekends he began disappearing for hours, sometimes all day, and yet when she asked him where he'd gone he'd claimed he'd just been out driving around town.

Things went from puzzling to frustrating for her, but Dale kept insisting nothing was wrong.

Their sex life had dwindled away from regular to infrequent, and then six months before his death her husband had started sleeping in their spare room. Valerie had always gone to bed early, and Dale had claimed it was so he wouldn't disturb her when he came home late from work, which at the time was basically every night. Now she suspected he had been too tired to make love with her while he was sleeping with Candy.

*He was probably planning to buy a sports car, get hair transplants and set up a bachelor pad, too.*

The hardest revelation to deal with had been two days after the suicide, when Valerie had stopped by the bank to transfer funds from her own savings account to pay for the funeral. For years she had been saving her own money so she could take a year off once they had a baby. Dale had never contributed anything to it, but he had been a co-signer. Two months before he died he'd withdrawn all the money and closed her account.

Valerie never found any trace of the forty thousand dollars he'd taken.

Now looking out at the lake where Dale had died, Valerie still wrestled with confusion. She had never once cheated on him, threatened to divorce him or even imagined her future without him. She knew their romance had cooled off considerably, but most everyone's did over time. She had invested all of her adult life in her relationship, and until the last six months before his suicide, had considered it successful.

*How could I have been so wrong about us?*

Glancing down at the single flower she had brought with her made a deeper pang of sorrow well up inside her. White roses had been Dale's first gift to her, and she'd carried a bouquet of them at their simple, elegant wedding. It seemed fitting to end things the same way they'd started, and her therapist had recommended performing this ritual for closure. She picked up the bloom, holding it to her nose to breathe in its delicate fragrance. Climbing out of the car, she walked over to the guard rail.

February's chill seeped through the thin fabric of her blouse, and a tendril of wind teased the hem of her skirt. Every step she took made her steadier, which seemed odd, for she'd never before had the courage to do this. Standing in the same spot where Dale had jumped into the lake, she looked up at the stars, and then closed her eyes for a moment.

*Tell him the truth.*

"I love you," Valerie said, and then looked down at the water. "I still don't understand why you did this, but I've finally accepted the fact that I'll never know. I can't stay here and bury myself in the remains of our life together. I'm going to sell the house and resign from my job as soon as the school year ends. I think I'll go south and look for someplace warm and bright where I can start over." She smiled a little. "Maybe even Florida."

Moving to Florida had been a long-running inside joke between them; a way to end arguments with a laugh. That, too, seemed to be the right thing to say now.

The wind plucked the rose from her loose hold, and Valerie watched it fall into the water. It didn't sink but floated on the

shimmering surface and drifted away. Taking a deep breath, she went back to the car and got in. Nothing would change until she let go of the man she'd loved, and this seemed like she'd said a real goodbye. From here she simply had to build a new life and learn to like herself again.

*I never wanted him dead. Even if I'd known about the affair, I would never want that—and he had to know. This was his choice, not mine.*

As Valerie put on her seatbelt and started the engine, a sudden glare of high-beam headlights blinded her. The vehicle seemed to be in her lane, on the wrong side of the bridge. She squinted in the direction of the oncoming car, and saw it was a huge red pick-up truck coming toward her. The sound of its powerful engine revved as the driver increased their speed.

Just before the truck slammed into her car, Valerie saw the driver's face. The pale smear of Candace Wilcox's features appeared twisted with rage.

The collision seemed as if a train had plowed into her little compact. Metal buckled and screamed, and glass exploded over her a split second before the airbag hit her face. At the same time something wrenched her up into the air, and then the car smashed through the guardrail and plummeted over the side of the bridge.

Everything seemed to slow down as Valerie and the car dropped, and then came the second, slamming impact. The water that had looked so lovely and peaceful fountained and churned, flooding in through the shattered windshield and shocking her with its cold, wet force. Bubbles burst from her mouth and nose as she brought up her arms, trying to push the airbag out of her face so she could release her seatbelt. Her hands shook and she couldn't breathe at all.

*Don't panic. Get out of the car. Swim to shore.*

Water quickly filled the car, but when Valerie finally got hold of her seatbelt clip she couldn't release it. Belatedly she remembered if the belt jerked too hard the clip became jammed, and she'd meant to have it replaced. As lake water covered her face she pressed the clip frantically, her fingers

growing numb and clumsy. Her lungs burned, and from the increasing pressure in her ears the car had to be sinking to the bottom of the lake now. She knew she would soon lose consciousness from lack of oxygen, and then a few minutes later her lungs would fill and her heart would stop. Candy's revenge would be complete.

*She got even by making me die the way Dale did.*

Valerie stopped struggling with the clip, and pushed the deflating airbag away from her. Her purse bobbed against the ceiling liner, and she tugged it down and looped the strap over her head; her wallet would make it easy for the responders to identify her.

*Why am I being so calm about this? I'm going to die.*

Inexplicably the white rose floated in through the shattered window and hung in front of her face. Something shiny glittered at the bottom of the stem, and when she took hold of it she realized it was an old silver ring with a strange pale stone that flashed with blue and green glints. More of the colorful sparkles spread out in front of her face as she removed the ring from the stem, and pushed it onto her finger. It fit as if it belonged to her.

*Do you wish live?* a soft, soothing female voice whispered in her ears.

*I'm hallucinating,* she told herself, even as she looked around the car. *There's no one here. I'm drowning.*

*You are,* the voice agreed, and now it sounded deeper, like a man's voice. *Do you wish live?*

Everything in Valerie answered that with a fierce, emphatic *Yes.*

Instead of darkening or graying her vision brightened, and the water inside the car churned as it became filled with the tiny green and blue lights. They began spinning around her as if she'd been trapped in a whirlpool, growing so intense Valerie closed her eyes. The dank taste of the lake water became salty, and sunlight filtered down through the darkness to envelop her. No longer trapped by the seatbelt or inside the

car, she kicked her legs furiously and swam toward that golden orb shimmering above her.

Bursting into bright sunlight, all Valerie could do at first was choke, cough, and gulp air. A soft wave buffeted her from behind as she rubbed the water from her now-stinging eyes. Night had changed to day. In front of her lay a pristine, white-sanded beach she'd never before seen. Beyond it rose wind-sculpted dunes and verdant hills, flanked by soaring rocky cliffs. On the horizon lay the shadowy waves of mountains unlike anything in her corner of New York.

*Where am I? Am I dead? Is this death?*

She turned, making her purse bounce against her hip, and stared at an ocean stretching out to a distant wall of white mist, hemmed by several small islands. The water seemed warm, yet the air had a frosty bite to it. She saw no boats or people, and when she faced the beach again she didn't spot anyone or anything. It was as if something had plucked her out of Moon Lake and dropped her in a sea on the other side of the world.

*Do you wish live?*

Swimming toward shore, Valerie reached the shallows, and stopped as soon as she could stand. Atop one cliff stood what at first appeared to be an enormous medieval-style sandcastle, complete with towers and battlements and tall, narrow window openings. Two high walls surrounded the base, and she saw silhouettes of people standing atop those twin barriers. It seemed so surreal she almost giggled.

A shout from the beach made her head turn, and she saw a huge dark-haired man wearing strange clothes plunge into the surf. He waded through the water furiously, as if she were in some kind of danger.

*Am I?*

Valerie looked around and saw a dark shape in the water speeding toward her. Unwilling to wait to see what it was, she began hurrying toward the man from the beach. She slipped and fell underwater on the way, and then two big hands dragged her to her feet. She propped her hand against his chest

as she wiped the dripping hair back from her face, and looked up into furious, cold eyes so vividly green they looked like emerald cabochons. He was staring at the hand she had on his chest as if he'd never seen one.

“Hold onto me,” the man said as he lifted her off her feet.

Putting her arms around his neck, Valerie clung to him as he carried her out of the water. When she glanced over her shoulder she saw another man surface in the center of a wave, which fell away from his tall, tanned body. He wore a skin-tight dark gray wet suit with a scale pattern that flashed iridescent blue in the sun, and outlined his sleek muscles as if it had been painted on him. His long white-blond hair flowed over his shoulders and arms like liquid silk, and reached his waist. He started wading toward them, his expression fierce with anger.

Fear spiked inside her as she saw he had three parallel slits on either side of his neck that opened and closed like gills.

*They are gills. He's not human. At the same time a deep voice said inside her head I cannae permit Merrick take her. She wears Joana's ring.*

As soon as the man reached the white sand of the beach he put her on her feet, and Valerie let go of him. As dark as the other being was fair, her rescuer had his black hair tied back from his stern face, and wore dark trousers and an almost transparent white shirt. His deep tan appeared so perfect as to be painted on him. Aside from his beautiful eyes, everything about him looked menacing—his strong jaw and heavy brows, the thick muscles padding every inch of his broad, towering body. At five-ten Valerie was used to being at or above most men's eye level; this guy had to be six-five or more.

“She's ours,” the blond man-shaped thing said in a strangely melodic voice. “Give her to me.”

Startled, Valerie shifted closer to her rescuer, and touched his arm. “What is he talking about?”

*How like Merrick to make his first words to me in a year a demand,* the deep voice murmured. *Sometime I reckon he*

*wishes us war.*

“You cannae take her, Merrick,” the dark man said in a distinct accent that matched the voice in Valerie’s head. “She’s reached the shore.”

“Aye, Connal, for you dragged her from our waters.” The thing he’d called Merrick regarded Valerie with his eyes, which were sky blue with impossibly metallic gold rims, and held out a hand with webbed fingers. “Come to me, woman, and I shall give you the life of your dreams.”

She became mesmerized for a moment, and then looked up at Connal. “Hi. I don’t have to go with him, do I?” As she said that she put a hand on his arm to get his attention, and a snarl of wordless anger filled her mind.

“No, Mistress.” The man’s expression remained fierce and unflinching. “You neednae.”

Valerie experienced what she thought was a surge of relief. “I’ll stay with you.” She squinted at him. “Ah, who are you, exactly?”

In that moment everything about him flooded into her mind: Connal, laird of the Clan MacMar, son of a Fae prince and a mortal woman. He had lived for more than a thousand years with his brothers on this island, which the prince had created to protect them from some terrible enemy among the Fae. He loved someone named Joana, who had...

Before she could learn what had happened to Joana, the stream of thoughts cut off abruptly, making her stagger and fall against him.

“My lady.” Connal bent his head just as she tried to clutch but missed his shoulders and jerked up her chin, and their mouths touched.

It wasn’t a kiss, exactly, and then it was. He kissed her as if he’d meant to do that, and only that, since first laying eyes on her. Valerie finally found his shoulders, and tried to push him away, but her arms weren’t cooperating. The very last thing they wanted was for the first kiss she’d had in ages to end. She hated that, mainly because she agreed.



*So now I'm being unfaithful, with a strange man I've known for exactly two minutes.*

Furious emotions rammed through her and cut off any hope of support from her legs. The world tilted, but just before she hit the sand strong arms lifted her against the hard vault of Connal's chest. She pressed her cheek against him, his slow, heavy heartbeat reassuring her despite her self-disgust and fear. For the first time since Dale had killed himself she took comfort from being touched, as somehow she knew this man would keep her safe.

*It's okay to pass out now, Valerie thought as she closed her eyes. You're going to live.*

## Chapter Two



Sea winds whipped around Laird Connal MacMar as he stood on the bay shore of Caladh. Holding the pale, limp woman against him as Merrick waded closer to shore forced him to remain where he was. He wanted to yank off the ring she wore, for it looked exactly like the very same ring he'd thrown off a cliff a year ago after the death of his beloved wife. Had she found the cursed thing? Why had she come to the island? How could she kiss him?

For now, he had to keep her from being taken against her will, or his questions would never be answered.

“She wishes stay with the clan,” he told the Finfolk king.

“I’m no’ deaf, MacMar. She spoke naught of the clan.” Merrick halted, the foam rushing around his webbed feet. As the subtle scales that covered his flesh smoothed into his land skin, his gaze shifted to the woman. “You’ve no’ the belly for dealing with her. I shall take her, and she’ll trouble you no more.”

Connal glanced down at the woman’s golden hair, which even now had begun to curl as it dried. Her delicate features made her appear no older than a girl just reaching maidenhood, and wrought an unwelcome protectiveness from him. He knew the Finfolk prized young, healthy females like her, and especially coveted those with fair coloring close to their own. If he handed her to Merrick he likely would never again see her. The king would give her as a gift to one of his favored men, who would transform her to become his wife and live in their underwater settlement in the bay. As they could

only sire males, the Finfolk claimed all females found in the water as their property.

*I'll stay with you,* she'd said just before swooning, gratitude and relief in her flowery blue eyes.

“You cannae claim the lady.” Lifting her hand to show Merrick seemed the quickest way to settle the dispute. “She wears Joana’s ring.”

Connal had not spoken his wife’s name since he had watched her kill herself. After returning to Caladh from the mainland, he’d cast her ring into the sea and cursed her and himself a year ago to this very day. Merrick looked for a moment as if he meant to snatch the woman out of his arms, and then shook his head as if disappointed.

“Walk with me on this at dusk,” the Finfolk king said, and before Connal could refuse turned and dove into a wave.

Connal waited until Merrick’s dark shape vanished before he turned and carried the woman toward the cliff steps. It took hardly any effort, for her long, slender body weighed little, and even unconscious she clung to him. As soon as he reached Dun Ard he would hand her off to Fletcher, who would happily tend to her and keep her occupied until the clan could decide what to do with the wench. Then all he had to do was show up at the labyrinth at sunset, and hash out a final agreement to keep her on land.

Yet with each step he took up the steep stairway to the stronghold on the cliff top, Connal’s heart grew heavier. He couldn’t stop staring at the ring she wore, the ring to which she had no right, the ring he had fashioned with his own hands in the clan’s forge for the woman he loved. As the daughter of a rich merchant Joana Arasgain should have expected something grander, made of precious gold and set with a large gem from the mortal realm. Instead she had exclaimed with delight as he had placed it on her finger, the adoration plain in her eyes as she kissed him.

*'Tis perfect, my love.*

Not even two years later Joana had jumped to her death from the highest cliff at Aberdeen on the mainland, shattering her body on the rocks below before the sea swept her away. Connal had stood helpless at the railing of the ferry boat he'd taken to meet her, shouting her name, for her to stop, and then falling silent as she plummeted to her death. He'd known he could never have reached her in time to stop her, and yet still since endlessly thought of ways with which he might have saved her. Being unaware of how much his wife had come to despise him provided no excuse.

At the top of the steps Nyall and a group of sentinels rushed to intercept him. His captain's dark eyes shifted over the woman's face before he reached for her.

"No," Connal told him, unwilling to give her to his fiercest warrior, who had little patience with females. "I took her from the water. Bring Fletcher."

Nyall glanced at one of his men, who nodded and ran off into the stronghold. To Connal he said, "She came from the water, my lord? 'Tis more mortals in the bay?"

"Only her." He grew annoyed that he yet did not know her name, and angry with himself for being curious. "Merrick attempted intervene, and wouldnae settle with me. We walk at dusk."

The captain's brows drew together. "Why should you wish keep the woman, my lord?"

Nyall had always been infamous for his utter lack of emotion, but Connal still bristled. "She asked for sanctuary."

"Fack me." Shaw, his senior chieftain and younger brother, joined them and glared at the woman, disbelief obvious on his handsome face. The Pritani skinwork on his arm bulged into stranger patterns as he bunched his big hands into fists. "'Tis another wreck?"

Before he could answer Fletcher appeared beside him, nudging the sentinels aside to reach Connal. His sun-streaked mane, standing on end from his nervous habit of dragging his hands through it, flopped down in his golden-brown eyes.

“Give us room, lads. Och, the poor lady’s drenched.” To the maids that followed him he said, “We’ll want her wrapped and by the hearth, lassies. One of you fetch some warming brew.”

As his seneschal reached for the woman Connal had to force himself to release her. “Summon Duncan to attend her. She may have wounds.”

“Aye, lad.” Fletcher cradled her in his arms and tucked his chin over her pale curls as he strode off toward the great hall.

Connal knew the rest of the men were trying not to gape at him and failing. His annoyance deepened as he said to Nyall, “’Tis naught more to do. Go back to your drills, Captain.”

“As you command, my lord.” The tall man’s dark red hair blazed in the sunlight as he bowed and walked away toward the lists, his sentinels following with a few glances back at their laird.

Shaw kept pace with him as Connal entered the stronghold. “I heard what you told that heartless bastart. Why should Merrick wish walk on a woman? Did you snatch her from him? Want you the clan war with the Ffolk?”

As his brother continued to pester him with questions he wasn’t inclined to answer, Connal walked past the arches leading into the hall and mounted the watch tower stairs. Here the torches remained unlit for his benefit, but already his gut knotted tighter with every step he took. If the female had been cast into the sea during a shipwreck he had to know now, but it would cost him.

Walking out to the battlements, Connal stopped short of the edge and peered out at the sea. As long as he didn’t look down his mortal weakness would not immediately paralyze him and render him senseless. Well aware of what it cost him to do such, the guards on duty turned their backs and pretended not to notice him.

Then, as ever when he came to the edge of a high place, the world slowly began to spin.

“Enough.” Shaw gripped his shoulder and swung him around to face the tower. “I shall look for you.”

“’Tis naught inside the mist.” Connal had seen that much, and now staggered back toward the entry, stopping long enough to allow Shaw to circle his shoulders with his arm. The chieftain always made the move appear friendly and even affectionate while helping to keep him steady and on his feet.

“You carried her up the cliff steps?” Shaw asked as they slowly descended the tower stairs.

Connal rubbed the sweat from his eyes and took in an easier breath. “Aye.”

“In daylight?” his brother persisted. “Without once stumbling or dropping the wench?”

Connal nearly snapped at him before he realized why Shaw had asked that. The dizziness that plagued him in high places compelled him only to use the cliff ascent after sunset, when he wouldn’t be able to see how far he had climbed when he looked down.

“I needed move her from Merrick’s reach swiftly.” At the base of the stairs he shifted away from his brother and headed toward the ward. “Go and aid Fletcher.”

“I shall stand your second at dusk,” Shaw called after him.

The guards on duty bowed their heads as Connal passed, and one unlocked and opened the doors to the ward as he approached. The open-air space contained the largest of Dun Ard’s many fountains, an immense tower of golden stone with dozens of clear crystal spouts. A fine mist hung in the air over the broad stretches of speckled black and gold-veined white stones that paved the ground in undulating shapes. Some of his vassals had planted ferns and small trees from the glens in barrels set along the painted walls, which now shaded the weathered driftwood benches where the first laird would sit and watch the clouds sail overhead.

Even now he could imagine his sire’s presence, like the tiny rainbows created by the fountain’s spray and the sun.

The ward had always been a place of calm and peace for Connal, as Joana had loved it and spent much of her free time here in spring and summer. He often came here to find her in a corner, her dark head bowed and her pretty lips curved as she mended one of his leines or embroidered on fine linen. Her delight in doing such needlework when they had more than enough maids to attend to such tasks puzzled him, but he would sometimes deliberately tear a cuff or sleeve to give her more to sew.

*I ken you wish me do naught more than sit on a silk cushion and dine on berries and cream all the day, his wife had once chided. Only I'd soon grow as fat and lazy as one of the keepe's old cats.*

After Joana killed herself Connal had never stepped foot in the ward if he could help it. Indeed, he'd spent the first days after her death tearing apart their bed chamber, looking for the letter he was sure she had hidden there. She would not have abandoned him without a word; only a few hours before she died she had kissed him and waved him off from the dock. He still remembered her laughing as he trotted along the side of the cargo boat to keep her in his sight.

The truth had been hidden from him, but it turned out to be something he'd never suspected.

He'd picked up a small trunk he'd found shoved in the very back of her armoire, and in a fury had smashed it onto the floor, scattering its contents everywhere. Dozens of embroidered blankets, delicately-stitched tiny smocks, and even some wee caps and stockings lay around his boots. Joana had made them herself; he'd recognized her elegant, fine stitching with one glance. All had been so small they could only fit a newborn infant, and must have taken months for her to fashion in secret.

His wife had been sewing for a bairn that she knew Connal could never give her—or perhaps someone else had. During her time on Caladh she had grown close to many of the MacMar's vassals.

Connal stood in the ward until the sun dropped below the towers, and then forced himself to walk to the back passage that led to the forest gate. His men quickly raised the portcullis before bowing as he strode out to find Shaw waiting for him. He glanced over his brother's fine garments and pinned tartan, noting the number of weapons he carried along with his sword.

"I'm to walk, no' war with Merrick," he reminded him.

The chieftain smiled broadly. "Aye, and as your second, I'm to face the fishy bastart if he ends you. For which I live in hope." He lifted his chin toward the gate. "Duncan desires a word."

Connal rubbed his tired eyes before he regarded the lanky figure approaching them. The descending rays of sunlight glittered in the wide silver strands veiling the healer's dark hair, and made his twilight eyes look black. "Cannae you wait?"

The clan's healer stopped in front of him. "Your castaway wench, she's some bruises, but no wounds or broken bones." As he started to turn away he added, "She says her name's Valerie Baker. She claims she's a teacher who came here from the twenty-first century."

"She's muddled from a near-drowning." Connal made a dismissive gesture. "Give her time and sleep, and she shall come to her senses."

"She's no' muddled." Duncan held up a small rectangle with tiny writing. "Mistress Baker gave me her license of driving, whatever that may be, and bid me summon the police. From what she told me, 'twould seem they're like the mainland magistrate's men."

Connal snatched the thing, and then went still as he saw the twin perfect, impossibly tiny portraits of the woman. He knew enough of Roman lettering to make out the words at the top. "Where 'tis New York State?"

"The fack if I ken." The healer nodded at the strange object. "She claims she teaches at the school of high learning there, and fell into the water after having what she called a car



accident on a bridge.” He frowned. “Mayhap she meant cart. I cannae make out half of what she speaks with that odd accent she possesses.”

“A baker who teaches high learning driving a cart over sea bridges. Aye, right.” Shaw chuckled. “She’s wholly muddled.”

“She guessed the same of me when I told her she’d landed off the coast of Scotland.” Duncan glanced back at the stronghold. “She wishes speak with you, my lord...and she wears Lady Joana’s ring.”

Shaw closed his eyes and groaned.

“I must walk.” Connal handed the object back to him, and started toward the forest.

The chieftain paced him as they made their way through the trees, but aside from a few sharp looks kept silent. Although quick-tempered and easily agitated, when matters grew dire no one, not even Nyall, had more self-control or focus than Shaw. Connal had already decided to put him before the clan as their next laird when he stepped down. Once he settled the matter of the woman with Merrick, he would call for a gathering.

“I shallnae serve,” his brother said as they reached the broad meadow which the clan and the Finfolk had cleared centuries past. “If you choose me I shall decline at once. Nyall’s ever coveted your power over the clan. Name him your successor.”

That Shaw knew what he was thinking aggravated Connal, but didn’t surprise him. “Shut your mouth and stand my second.”

Once the chieftain took position on the side overlooking both walks Connal moved to the opening in the notched stones that fashioned the clan’s side. Halting there and closing his eyes, he pushed all thoughts from his mind, and then stepped onto the path.

The two circular structures spread over the length of the meadow, and had been carefully tended by the labyrinth keeper to remain free of weeds and overgrowth. On the side

built by the MacMar, carved rocks rife with Fae crystals formed the winding paths to be walked by their laird, and their raw, untapped power danced around him with every step he took. Often he had come to make his way through the clan's labyrinth alone after his sire had died, for nothing but this place could give him solace.

He had not walked the stones but once in the last year, and then he had come alone. Even this sacred place had failed to heal his pain over losing Joana.

Vaguely Connal became aware of movement, and smelled a particular salt in the air, which told him Merrick had begun his walk on the other side of the enormous entwined circles. The Finfolk had ferried tons of shells across the island while building their labyrinth, and their sun-bleached walls gleamed with pearly colors.

To walk on a matter required disciplined thought, which Prince Mar had taught him as soon as Connal had grown to manhood.

*Set aside your troubles and concerns. Draw power from the stones. Become as water. Find the flow.*

By the time Connal reached the overlapping center of the two labyrinths he had regained most of his composure. The truce between the clan and the Finfolk, while often tested, had never once been broken. Yet again a thousand years of peace rested on the decisions he would make here while settling with Merrick the fate of the woman he'd pulled from the sea. The woman who had chosen him over a king. The woman who had kissed him.

*I can still taste her on my lips.*

“Laird MacMar,” the Finfolk king said as he met him in the overlap, and inclined his head. He had donned his crown, which his people had fashioned from the powerful violet and gold alloy through which they channeled their otherworldly powers. Beyond him stood the tall, imposing figure of Jamaran, his garrison commander, whose long, snowy hair blazed in the last moments of sunset like white fire.

Although his garments remained damp, and spikes of his hair hung in his face, Connal followed suit as if sporting his ceremonial tartan and honor blades. “King Merrick.”

“You removed a young, living female from the bay,” Merrick said, getting straight to the heart of the matter. “We agreed that all such outsiders of bearing years found in our waters belong to the Finfolk.”

“Once found by your kind, aye,” he countered. “When saw you the lady?”

A flicker of impatience passed over the king’s features. “When you seized and dragged her ashore, of course.”

“She came to me first, then. By the terms of the truce once an outsider reaches the island, they’re permitted choose their fate,” Connal reminded him. “I’m the island. When you proposed taking her, she instead clung to me. By such she chooses live with the clan.”

Beyond them Jamaran winced, and he heard Shaw clear his throat.

Merrick’s lips thinned. “She doesnae yet ken I offer eternal life, a worthy mate, and the hope of bairns to love. You cannae say the same.”

Truth could not be considered an insult, even when used in such brutal fashion. “Aye. Only you cannae promise her the bairns.”

“Give her to me,” the king said flatly.

Connal knew the reason Merrick wished to take the female. Over the centuries the Finfolk had transformed many mortal women into mates for their kind. The immortals could only sire male bairns, however, and rarely more than one. That created a perpetual imbalance of too many males and not enough females. Left unattended, Merrick’s men would soon revolt and return to their ancient practice of abducting mortal females to transform them against their will. Many had ended themselves by hiding on the death islet from their unwanted mates until being so long out of the sea killed them.

To protect the women who served the clan, Connal would have to admit something he didn't wish to believe.

"The female wears the ring I cast into the sea after my lady died," he finally said.

The king frowned. "Lady Joana's ring? 'Tis impossible."

"I dinnae lie. You've long claimed my sire's magic yet lingers in these waters," Connal said. "I believe the same now. After I discarded the ring, it somehow found and brought the lady here to Caladh. 'Twould oblige me keep the vow I made on that day."

Shaw made an incredulous sound. Merrick stared at him as if he'd sprouted fins and gills. Beyond him Jamaran shifted slightly, his hand tightening on the toothed lance he held.

Connal could not bring himself to offer an arm to the Ffolk king to end the walk, so he bowed and left.

## Chapter Three



**H**igh atop a sea cliff in Aberdeen, the setting sun glared in through the large windows of Magnus Haig's bedchamber, waking Fiacail from her afternoon nap. Anyone who looked upon her would see only the rich burgess's wife, Rona Haig, whom she had murdered in order to take her place. As a Cait Sith shapeshifter Fiacail could assume the identity and absorb the memories of any mortal, as long as she drank their blood before killing them.

The real Rona would doubtless have been sickened by the stink in the air, but the rich scent of new death made the shapeshifter's mouth water.

Fiacail sat up, yawning and stretching before she rose from the comfort of the feather bed. She stopped when she saw her chambermaid draped over a footstool, her head at an odd angle. On the floor beside her sprawled Magnus himself, making her sigh with real regret. The silly mortal had frequently vowed to adore her forever, which she personally hated, but had also showered her with luxuries, which she didn't mind at all. The ornamental dagger he liked to wear lay buried in his gut, explaining the dark pool of blood under his fat arse.

She leaned over to assure the burgess no longer breathed. "Huh. I didnae end you, did I? No, you'd have your throat torn out. Who gutted you, then? Surely no' that wee maid. She quailed at a sharp look."

"*Mistress.*" Their cook burst into the bed chamber, her apron, hands and face spattered with flour and blood. "Save

me, I beg you—” the rest became a liquid gurgle as she fell forward onto her face, revealing her killer.

Fiacail’s jaw would have dropped, had she not been paralyzed with astonishment.

“I see you’ve finally crawled out of bed. I thought I might be forced to set fire to this shanty.” A tall, dark-cloaked figure shook blood from her hands before she stepped over the cook’s twitching body. “The wife of a fish merchant? That was the best you could manage for yourself?”

The resonant voice made Fiacail drop to her knees and bow until her brow touched the floor.

“How did you escape Elphyne?” Fiacail gritted her teeth as a boot slammed into her ribs. “Forgive me, my princess. I didnae ken you’d returned to the mortal realm.”

“Of course you did not. Rise before I rip that ridiculous face off your skull.” Derdruí removed her cloak, using it to wipe clean her hands before dropping it to the floor. “Where are the others?”

Seeing her sovereign set free from the Fae king’s enchanted dungeons, the most inviolate of prisons in existence, did not shock Fiacail as much as her question.

“They’ve scattered, my princess. When last you came you bid us live as ordinary mortals.” That had been over a thousand years ago, just before Derdruí had been imprisoned for a transgression so dreadful no immortal would speak of it. Time, however, did not move in Elphyne as it did in the mortal realm.

“So I did.” Tall and imposing, with the perfectly lovely features of a woodland princess, Derdruí stared at her with eyes like jewels of a dozen colors. She sat in Magnus’s favorite chair by the fire as if it served as her throne, and made a languid gesture. “Summon them. Now.”

Fiacail closed her eyes for a moment, sending out a frantic message through her thoughts to her many sisters across the city and the north lands. *Our sovereign lady has finally come for us. Gather at my dwelling in Aberdeen at once.* She then

pulled on a dressing gown and cautiously approached the Fae enchantress.

“Shall I make brew, then, my princess?” she asked. As Derdruí’s upper lip curled she quickly added, “Or bring you a living mortal? Ah, do any of my household yet breathe?”

“I did not come here to endlessly drink mortal swill.” She dropped her glamour, which made her somewhat mortal appearance grow darker. Long white teeth stretched out from her red lips, and the glittering gems of her eyes became too vivid to behold. “I sensed Prince Mar’s magic come alive. A spell he cast before dying rippled through Elphyne like a tidal wave, and smashed through all the wardings. That allowed me to at last escape my imprisonment.”

That meant Derdruí would likely not return to the Fae otherworld, at least until after she placated the king. Which, Fiacaíl was fairly certain, would take eons.

“We shall provide you with whatever you need or wish, my princess,” she said quickly.

Derdruí’s lips peeled back from her gleaming fangs. “You know well what I need. What I wish. What you and your cursed sisters have never bothered to deliver to me. Why I bother with you idiot halflings, I shall never understand.” She studied the blood drying on her long fingers. “Do I become maudlin? Or is it too much trouble to slay all of you wretched abominations?”

Fiacaíl dropped down on the floor again, quivering now. “We shall find the MacMar Clan, my princess.”

A large, panting fishwife hurried into the room, her rosy round face turning white as she beheld Derdruí. She dropped on all fours. “My lady—I mean, my princess. You yet live.”

“Of course I yet live, Speal. I am immortal.” The Fae regarded her for a long moment. “Your girth is quite remarkable. Tell me, do you now devour mortals whole, and digest them slowly?”

“Ah, no, my princess.” Speal quickly shifted into her birth form, which turned her eyes, hair and flesh black except for a

white patch just beneath her throat.

Fiacail did the same, although she hated how awkward and spindly she appeared without her fur, which she grew and shed only on the night of the full moon.

“You halflings shall always be unsightly creatures.” Uttering a disgusted sound, Derdruí averted her gaze. “I require a large vessel worthy of the sea to set sail at dawn. Do you possess such? Astonish me and say yes or aye or whatever passes as an affirmation by you bald little skinks.”

Fiacail glanced at Speal, who shook her head a little. “We shall obtain one for you by nightfall. We can hire sailors at the docks. To where wish you sail, my sovereign?”

“I shall find the source of Prince Mar’s magic, and use it to locate his brats. You and your sisters will serve as my crew.” She rose to her feet, waving a long hand in front of her nose. “I cannot abide this stench. Dispose of the bodies before I return.” She took the finest cloak from Magnus’s armoire as she shifted into his short, corpulent form, covered her new body, and swept out of the room.

Speal sat down on the floor, shifting back into her fishwife form, and stared at the scales stuck to her well-worn boots. “I shall puke.”

“Dinnae act the bairn.” Fiacail retrieved the chamber pot, dropping it in her lap before she went to watch through the windows as Derdruí left the house. “You know our lady doesnae trust mortals. ’Tis prudent to bid us crew the boat.”

“Prudent.” Speal said that as if she’d never heard the word. “We’ve one weakness, sister, and ’tis water. We cannae swim. It took me months before I could stand on the docks without showing fear flesh.”

“Gooseflesh,” she corrected. “Find your spine, or she shall.” As two herbalists who dwelled in Aberdeen came into the room she shifted back into Rona’s form and went to fetch a gown suitable to wear for her errand. “I shall leave you in charge here. See to the bodies before the princess returns, or she will add yours to the pile.”



“Derdruí’s returned to the mortal realm?” Teine screeched, and then ducked to avoid her twin sister Mace’s fist. “I mean, the princess, she’s come back?”

“Aye, and she desires us sail her about on a boat.” Speal lumbered to her feet, and hefted the dead maid’s body before tossing Magnus’s corpse to the sisters. “Come. We’ll make use of the empty kegs in the cellar, and put them on my cart. I ken a bog where they’ll sink in an hour.”

Trusting her sisters to attend to the dead, Fiacail retrieved a large purse from her husband’s hidden cache of coin, left the house and made her way to the boat yard. There she walked slowly along the row of builder’s shacks before stopping at the largest and grandest, where a pair of old men sat watching the fishers coming in with their daily hauls.

“*Maisters.*” Fiacail neither knew nor cared what their names were, but made her curtsy deep and respectful. “My husband’s in need of a large vessel. He must take a noblewoman in mourning to the northern isles.”

One of the old builders squinted at her. “Magnus Haig sends his bride do his hiring? The fat bastart grows lazier by the day.”

“As you say.” Fiacail moved closer. “Mayhap you should charge my dear husband twice the going price, for I should ken none the better.” She winked. “And shall say naught to him.”

Both men grinned widely as they got to their feet, and escorted her down to the dock to show her the four boats currently for hire. Fiacail chose the largest, and handed over all of the coin she’d brought with her.

“He sets sail tonight, *maisters,*” she told the pair, struggling to hide her queasiness as she watched the vessel bob. “To return within sevenday.” She had no idea when Derdruí meant to return the boat, but she had no intention of returning to Aberdeen to be drowned as a murderess.

“You’re near as green as a thorn apple, Mistress,” one of the builders chided. “Good that Magnus doesnae drag you along on his journey.”



SWADDLED IN PLAIDS AND HOLDING A POTTERY MUG OF strange-looking tea, Valerie tried not to stare at the deranged people coming in and out of the castle's huge hall. The place appeared to be built entirely of the pretty golden stone she'd seen from the beach, on a scale that rivaled the pyramids. It had been here a while, too, judging by the scarred floor stones and blackness inside the fireplaces. It even smelled nice, thanks to the white and green ivy that spilled inside from the slits in the walls, in which fresh flowers had been tucked.

*This isn't upstate New York. It probably isn't even near America.*

Everyone sounded Scottish, and in keeping with the castle setting had dressed up as medieval warriors and servants. Their costumes appeared completely authentic, right down to the rough-woven fabrics and hand stitching. Most of the women wore long linen scarves over their neatly-braided hair. The men, all of whom appeared to be built like titans, had even longer, shaggy manes and ponytails that hung to the waist. Everyone had on heavy, fur-lined leather boots that vaguely reminded her of the ugly sheepskin variety that had been briefly trendy when she'd been in grade school.

*At least none of them have gills and scales.* Remembering the huge fair-haired being who had tried to grab her in the water still made Valerie shudder.

A very tall teenage girl with blazing red hair came and stood with folded arms as she inspected her with a frown.

"Hi," Valerie said, trying to look friendly. "What's your name?"

"Meg." The woman's sharp dark eyes shifted to the locket she wore. "You're no' Scottish."

"I'm an American." She watched Meg stalk off. "And you only like Scottish people, okay."

Valerie had acquired a little information about her present whereabouts, although none of them made any sense, either. She had been stranded on an island called Caladh, which like

the castle belonged to the Clan MacMar. The large, dark man who had rescued her apparently was the clan's laird, Connal MacMar. She hadn't seen him since waking up in the hall, wrapped in tartans, and being urged to drink something that smelled like hot honey and herbs. Right after that the clan's healer, a guy named Duncan, had checked her for injuries while asking for her name and how she had reached the island.

Hoping he really worked as a medical professional, she'd told him everything.

The more details Valerie had given Duncan, the less convinced he'd looked. Handing him her license had probably been stupid, but it was the only proof of who she was and where she lived. He'd taken it and disappeared, leaving her to wonder if she should just get up and run until she found something that resembled civilization.

"Your color, 'tis better, lass." A man with sun-streaked brown hair crouched down in front of her. "I'm Fletcher MacMar, the laird's seneschal." He nodded at the tea. "You should drink that. 'Twill warm and calm you."

Great, they were trying to feed her drugs.

"No, thank you." She shoved the mug at him and stood up, pulling away plaids until she freed herself. She hated being rude to people who might be trying to help her, but she wasn't an idiot. "I need to use a telephone, Mr. MacMar. Right now."

"I fear we dinnae possess such." He handed the mug to one of the maids. "You've kin on the mainland, mayhap?"

"I'm an American citizen," Valerie said as loudly as she could without shouting the words. "I'm sure there's an embassy somewhere. Do you have a ferry boat?"

Fletcher grimaced. "Aye, but 'tisnae the time it sails. None shall take you from Caladh."

"Are you saying I have to stay on this island?" When he nodded Valerie turned her back on him and marched toward the nearest arch, where two men crossed the long spears they held to block her exit. "And in this room, evidently."

She moved as if she meant to go back to Fletcher, then darted under the crossed spears and ran.

Several things became apparent to Valerie as she fled past several startled-looking people. Made from the same golden stone as the hall, the castle's passages never seemed to end but curved around and joined with others. When her legs began to ache she wondered if the place could be bigger than the pyramids. Torches stuck in wall brackets provided the only light, and here and there very functional-looking swords, spears and bows had been mounted between them. Every room she passed had been staged to look like actual medieval chambers, complete with fireplaces and clunky furnishings and tall, narrow slits in the thick stone walls that served as windows.

Science had always been her main preoccupation, and for the first time Valerie regretted that. *Why didn't I pay more attention in European History?*

When she reached an empty hall she stopped to catch her breath, and heard the shouts of men and running footsteps behind her. Quickly she yanked open the nearest wooden door and ducked inside, closing it before leaning her forehead against it.

At once she sensed she wasn't alone, and slowly turned to face the room's occupant.

Connal MacMar stood like a statue of himself, a dripping rag in his hand, and water streaming down his bare chest. In front of him stood a small table with a basin and jug, which explained why he was wet. His trousers—the only garment he wore—had been loosened and hung low on his hips. His expression appeared as shocked as she was.

*Maybe I should have stayed where I was.*

“Hello again.” Valerie reached behind her, only to discover the door didn't have a knob. “Sorry to bother you, but this gentleman...ah, Mr. Fletcher. He said I can't leave this island. Also, I think he's trying to drug me.” She waited for him to explain that away, but he simply stared as if he couldn't

believe she was standing there. “Do you have a telephone? I only need to make one call, and I’ll get out of your hair.”

Connal dropped the rag in his hand into the basin, splashing himself, but instead of giving her a phone or speaking he pulled on a linen shirt, sat down in a huge chair by the fire, and gestured at the empty one across from it.

She could keep running around this cavernous place, or she could sit and talk to the man who had rescued her from that thing in the water. Now that he had put on a shirt she wouldn’t have to avoid staring at that magnificent chest of his, either. Only the shirt was turning transparent in a few places, and clinging to his muscles, and making him look like a body builder turned poet.

*Stop that and just talk to the man.*

As soon as Valerie sat down Connal’s head turned, and he watched the fire burning for a few moments. Then, very reluctantly, he met her gaze.

*How can such beautiful eyes be so chilly?* she wondered. Glaciers didn’t look that cold. Then she realized his eyes matched the color of the stone in the silver ring she’d found in the lake. *While I was drowning. I should be dead. How did I even get here?*

“Duncan claims you came from the twenty-first century, Mistress Baker. ’Tis truth?” When she nodded his jaw tightened. “You’ve journeyed back through time, then. Our era, ’tis the twelfth century.”

She almost laughed out loud, but obviously he wasn’t joking. It also made sense of everything she had seen. “Mr. MacMar, for one thing, time travel isn’t possible. Also, the past doesn’t exist anymore outside memories, which obviously I couldn’t have of this place.” And realizing that spooked her all over again. “I’m completely confused.”

“I cannae explain such, for ’twasnae my doing. ’Twas Fae magic.” He gestured at her hand. “The ring you wear belonged to my lady wife, Joana. A year ago she died.”

Nothing in this place had stunned Valerie as much as hearing that. She almost told him about Dale, but decided it was merely an unhappy coincidence. “This is a bad day for you, then.”

“Aye.” Connal propped his elbows on his knees and folded his hands as he leaned forward. “Caladh, ’tis a place of sanctuary. ’Twould seem Joana’s ring brought you here. For that, the clan shall protect you.”

All this nonsense about the ring made Valerie reach to tug it off, but for some reason it wouldn’t budge. “I don’t need your protection, Laird.”

His brows arched. “You said different when I brought you to shore.”

“That was because that thing—that aquatic being that looked like a man—tried to grab me. Is he part of your clan, too?” When he shook his head she sighed with relief. “He really had gills on his neck, didn’t he? I wasn’t hallucinating?”

“Merrick’s no’ human. He and his kind, they’re called the Finfolk, and live beneath the sea.” Connal hesitated before he added, “He wishes offer you sanctuary as well, if you’re willing to join his people. Only ken once you do, you cannae change your mind.”

“Ah, no, that’s okay. Salt water wrecks my hair.” What a stupid thing to say, Valerie thought, the beginnings of a tension headache tapping at her temples. “Can’t I just go back to my time in New York?”

“We’ve no’ the power to return you.” His gaze shifted to her hand. “Where did you find Joana’s ring?”

She didn’t want to tell him about Dale’s lover trying to kill her, so she gave him a carefully edited version of the truth.

“I was in an accident by a lake near where I live. My car fell off a bridge and filled with water. I couldn’t free myself or escape, so I was drowning. A rose I tossed into the water before the accident floated in front of me, and your wife’s ring was hooked on the end.” She didn’t want to ask the question that kept bounding around her brain, but if there was even a

remote possibility... “I’m not dead, am I? If I am, I’d really like to know now.”

A little sympathy warmed Connal’s cold eyes. “You yet live, Mistress.”

“Since I still think I’m alive, I’ll believe you.” She rubbed her thumb over the pale green stone in the ring. “I don’t know why I put this on my hand. Things got a bit blurry at that point. Maybe I hoped someone would find it when they recovered...when they found me, and they’d return it to the original owner, or something like that.”

He looked back at the fireplace again. “So you did. You returned it to me.”

“I guess.” Technically she hadn’t yet, and she tried discreetly tugging on the ring again, but it seemed glued in place. “Mr. MacMar—ah, Laird MacMar—I really can’t stay on this island. I don’t belong in this time, and I could create problems if I stay.”

Connal eyed her. “What manner of problems?”

“If this really is the twelfth century, then I know too much about your future,” Valerie said. “I could say the wrong thing to the wrong person and alter history. Also, being removed from my time will alter my own future. Everything I was supposed to do now won’t be done.”

“You were drowning before you came, aye?” When she reluctantly nodded he sat back in his chair. “’Tis likely that you wouldnae live to do more in your time. As for what you ken of the future...I trust you to say naught to anyone.”

“Why would you trust me?” she countered. “I could be a terrible person. A criminal. Someone who wants to wreck history.”

He thought about that for a moment, and then nodded. “Very well. I shall cut out your tongue.”

Horried, Valerie clapped a hand over her mouth, but then saw something like a ghost of a smile on his lips. She scowled at him. “That’s not funny.”

“Truth. Permit me time to seek a better solution.” As a knock sounded on the door Connal rose to his feet. “My seneschal Fletcher shallnae drug nor harm you. Permit him attend to your needs. He shall provide you with food and a chamber where you may bathe and rest.”

Valerie remembered her own emotions whenever someone had reminded her of Dale’s suicide; the laird had the same look on his face. She suddenly became aware of the stickiness of the sea water residue on her skin, wet sand inside her shoes, and an intense exhaustion that dragged at her arms and legs.

She hadn’t mentioned being able to read his mind, if that’s what that had been, while standing with him on the shore. Maybe it had been an audial hallucination, because she couldn’t do it now.

“All right. Thank you,” she said as Fletcher and Meg came into the room. “I’m sorry about all this.”

“’Twasnae your fault, Mistress.” Connal gave his seneschal a strange look, and then said to Meg, “See the lady to a guest chamber.”



## Chapter Four



**A**s soon as twilight descended Nyall dismissed the men from the training yard, and glanced at the garrison tower before turning toward the back gates. While Fletcher had been cosseting the female that the laird had brought from the bay, he'd looked in on her from one of the arches. Everything about her appeared wrong, from the thin flimsiness of her strange gown to the finely-made slippers on her feet. She had pierced her ears to wear tiny pearl baubles, something that would inflame any Finfock male. Her fine blonde hair curled wildly around her face, like that of an infant bairn. She even smelled like a bright spring morning.

The wench might be a noble lady, a courtesan, or an innocent, but all three?

Nyall followed the forest trail to a hidden cove near the water's edge, and there stopped on one of the flat stones he'd used to cover most of the sandy embankment. Shedding his tunic, boots and all weapons but his dagger, he then waded into the cool water across the pebbled floor of the cove, and swam out to the edge of the willows, where a dark shape moved back and forth under the waves. For two hundred years he had known the Finfock garrison commander, and still the strange connection they shared surprised him.

*Ever he senses when we must meet.*

Diving down under the waves being brought in by the tide, Nyall saw Jamaran's grim face, and gestured for him to join him.

Although like the rest of the clan, Nyall could remain submerged indefinitely without drowning, he did not speak until after they both climbed out of the water. The currents carried voices, and all Finfolk had extremely sensitive ears. When he wanted to have a private conversation with his friend, it had to take place on land.

Over the centuries they had settled on this cove as the most private place to talk.

Nearly as tall as Nyall, Jamaran had the same lean build and tightly-compacted muscles, although his feline features and pale coloring looked foreign even among the Finfolk. A former Norse-enslaved warrior taken from Francia, as a mortal the commander had saved Merrick's life, nearly at the cost of his own. That the king had saved him by transforming him into an aquatic had puzzled everyone, especially the Finfolk, who almost never changed mortal males into their own kind unless they desired a man as mate.

Merrick had long ago settled the matter by declaring Jamaran to be like a brother born to him. To this day he trusted no one as much as his garrison commander.

"You seconded the king?" Nyall asked as they leaned against the trunks of facing trees, taking care to brace his feet against the thick roots. "Did they settle?"

"Aye, and no." Jamaran's violet eyes shifted. "The laird refused to give up the wench. 'Twas something about Lady Joana's ring, and a vow he made on her dying day. When he said that, the king looked as if your laird had punched him in the gut."

"Merrick agreed to such?" As he shook his head Nyall crouched down, cradling the back of his neck with his hands. While there had never been a war between the MacMar and the Finfolk, neither side trusted the other. Over the last year the laird's melancholy had created a rift between him and the king. Fighting over one female would only make matters worse. "Shall he walk again?"

"I cannae say. He hasnae spoken since we returned to the palace. I left him swimming the deep caves where he goes

when he wishes solitude. ” Jamaran nudged him with one foot. “He wouldnae do such if he meant break the truce. Nor should he war with the clan over a mortal, lovely or no’.”

“The laird hasnae spoken or walked with your king since Lady Joana died,” Nyall reminded him. “Now when at last he does, he refuses him. I well ken Merrick’s easily-bruised pride. He shallnae permit such go unanswered.”

“My king, he’s no’ the most patient, nor possesses much compassion.” The Finfolk commander reached down and tugged him to his feet. “Yet I ken Merrick’s aware of how Connal suffers. He asks after him whenever I return from the island. I reckon he shall avoid prodding him, at least for now.” He bumped shoulders with him. “Go, find a pretty maid, and spend the night ruining her bed.”

“If only you’d been born female,” Nyall muttered.

Jamaran grinned, transforming his forbidding features with almost blinding beauty. “Ever I say the same of you, Captain.”

Nyall watched his friend dive into the water and swim off toward the Finfolk settlement, wishing not for the first time that he could do the same. Over the centuries he and Jamaran had grown as close as blood-kin brothers, and as such they had both pledged to keep the peace between the Finfolk and the MacMar. Yet as much as they shared in common, they both knew the day might come when the truce would be irrevocably broken. If that ever happened, they would face each other in battle.

Instead of following Jamaran’s advice when he returned to the stronghold, Nyall instead learned where Fletcher had placed the woman, and went to the guest chamber to look in on her. At first he knocked, but when no answer came he slipped inside.

The lady sat curled up by the hearth, Fletcher’s tartan wrapped around her, and appeared to be sleeping. Soundlessly he approached her, inspecting her closely. The seneschal had given her a clean maid’s gown to wear, and her own strange garments now lay draped on a drying rack by the fire. Her

small, bare feet protruded from the plaid, and reminded him again of a very young, innocent maiden.

The gleam of Lady Joana's ring on her finger stopped him in his tracks.

Everyone had loved Connal's wife. While he generally paid no attention to females, Nyall had at first appreciated the happiness Joana had brought to their laird. No one could doubt Connal's devotion to her, either, for he had brightened and smiled each time he beheld his lady wife. Indeed, when Shaw had told him Connal had watched from afar as Joana had ended herself, Nyall had been so sickened by her callousness he'd run out of the hall and puked.

This woman came wearing that fucking woman's ring on her finger—the same bauble he and Shaw and Nyall had watched Connal throw into the sea a year past. How could she have the thing? Why would she come to Caladh? Did Merrick find the ring, and place it on the woman after abducting her? Was this some bizarre Finfolk scheme to force the laird out of his melancholy?

Nyall crouched down to peer into her face. Now he could see the faint shadows of sleeplessness under her eyes, and a small wound on her bottom lip. Crescent marks from her nails scored the palms of her hands, and she had faint but darkening abrasions and bruises on her chin, jaw and throat. Hollows beneath her cheekbones and the very slenderness of her body suggested she had been starved or neglected proper meals. Her wrists seemed thin enough to snap between two of his fingers.

Her fairness did not stir him, but the obvious signs of her fragility added to his concerns.

The woman suddenly stirred, and her golden lashes parted as she squinted at him. A shaft of sunlight from the window slit gilded her face as if to erase the marks of harm done to her, and turn her innocent prettiness into majestic beauty. Nyall could see now how easily the laird had become enthralled by her.

“Please don't cut out my tongue,” she murmured.

Of everything she might have said, that completely disarmed him. For the first time since he'd seen her he imagined what this ordeal must be like for her, a woman from a distant future time who had no knowledge of where she was or the people around her. That notion stirred something in him, an old and almost forgotten protectiveness.

"Never shall I harm you, Mistress." He hoped rather than knew that to be truth.

"Good boy." She reached out and patted his shoulder, and then shifted away from him and went back to sleep.

Nyall slowly rose and back away from her. The woman could only be considered an intruder, and interloper, he reminded himself, and yet that didn't matter anymore. He had a sudden, fierce desire to stand guard over her. Since his unhappy boyhood he'd stopped coddling females, more so since Joana MacMar had so selfishly ended her life. They caused nothing but trouble, and yet still this strange creature had touched something inside him. Something that reminded him of his own *màthair*. She even looked a little like Tìree.

*How may I love a thing like you?* his mother's crazed voice shrieked from a distant corner of his memory. *You're as much a horror as your sire.*

As Nyall left the chamber he remained so befuddled by the encounter that he nearly walked into Fletcher, who eyed him as if he'd caught him beating the woman.

"I didnae touch her," he assured the seneschal.

"Then I shallnae end you, lad," Fletcher said, his expression darkening until his gaze shifted to the red Fae crystals studding Nyall's sword hilt, and he sighed. "Apologies, Captain. 'Tis been a trying day."

Everyone at Dun Ard knew of the seneschal's rare mortal weakness, which blinded him to the faces of others. Fletcher had no choice but to address everyone from the laird to the lowest scullery as "lad" or "lass" unless he recognized something that he knew only they possessed, such as Nyall's blade.

“I came but to assure she’s well.” A half-lie seemed better than the truth. “Shall I send guards to stand watch?”

The seneschal grimaced. “I reckoned I’d ask Meg sit with her until the evening meal. She was Lady Joana’s maid, and lassies tend to trust and confide in each other more so than men.”

Nyall had once thought Fletcher too soft-hearted to be an effective warrior, but over time he realized his ways were simply different—and sometimes far more effective than brute force. “Mayhap choose another maid. Meg’s too sharp with other females.”

“Aye, you’re right. You’ve a moment to spare?” When he nodded the seneschal gestured for him to follow.

Fletcher led him down to the room off the great hall where he kept his scrolls and tallies. Once they were inside he closed the door, and lit a few candles before placing a small, black case with a long strap on his work table.

“Mistress Baker left her satchel in the hall earlier,” the seneschal said. “I cannae figure how to open the thing.”

Nyall picked up the case, which had been fashioned from gleaming hide somehow polished to a glassy finish. Although damp and sporting some salt stains, it appeared as finely-made as the lady’s slippers. He turned it over as he looked on all sides before finding and tugging up the edge of a flap, which revealed a long row of tiny, gritted teeth set in black cloth along the top.

“Watch out.” Fletcher quickly knocked it out of his hands. “’Twill bite you.”

“’Tisnae alive, Seneschal.” Nyall picked up the case, and studied the teeth, which appeared to be forged from metal. He saw a peculiar miniature latch on one end and tugged on it, and the teeth parted with a tinny, slithering sound. That revealed a pouch filled with several slim books and small, inexplicable items, which he began removing and placing on the table.

“A vial of jam,” Fletcher said, holding up a finger-size bottle filled with yellow preserves. As he fiddled with the top a tiny flap popped, and the strong smell of spirits and flowers spread in the air. “Or no’.”

Once he’d emptied the case Nyall surveyed the contents, none of which he recognized. A flat, thin rectangle of black glass without any bubbles had some tiny inlaid buttons, as if it were a garment. A capped tube revolved to produce a pink stick with a slanted end. Wood-encased sticks of charcoal and smoother, glassy sticks with inner mechanisms he guessed to be ritual wands of some sort. Two of the slim books contained something like Roman lettering in such fine, perfectly-rendered script it seem impossible anyone could pen such. The third book held equally neat hand script in a glorious blue ink.

“She carries no weapons, at least.” Fletcher picked up a small, long case and cautiously opened the toothy top, and extracted a white tube wrapped in very fine labelled paper. “What ’tis a t-a-m-p-o-n? Something Roman?”

“I’ve no fucking clue.” Nyall surveyed the confusing collection. “Leave everything to dry, and then return the case to Mistress Baker.” Something fell out of the hand-written book, and he picked up a miniature portrait on glassy paper. It had not been painted, he guessed, as he saw no brush strokes. The man depicted had a bald head, large eyes and a knowing smirk. “The lady wore a second ring, didnae she?”

“Aye. A plain gold band on her left hand,” the seneschal said, and peered at the portrait. “You reckon ’tis her sire?”

The man looked nothing like Valerie, and something about him set Nyall’s nerves on edge. “No.”



THE SKY HAD TURNED BLACK BY THE TIME MERRICK ATTENDED to his last duty of the day. He held the thin, trembling hand of the venerable Ysal as he waded through the shallows with him onto the only islet in the bay that he hated. He could not look upon the ancient Selseus’s visage without launching into another tirade at the elder net-maker, who had decided this day to part ways with life.

“I see you’re yet angry with me, my king,” Ysal said, gulping the dry, cold air before he added, “Only accept ’tis time to release me.”

“You’re the last of the first of us.” Merrick stopped and faced him. Why the old one had chosen this day to die set a slow-burning anger in his heart, and yet custom forbid ordering him to stop or even wait. “You dinnae only abandon me and our kind. What of Ysala and Freja? Your mate and son shall mourn you forever.”

“While hiding their ease, no doubt. My sadness and longing for the end makes me a burden to them.” The net maker’s eternally young, winsome features lost their melancholy for a moment. “You’re but still a lad, and possess no memories of the first world. No land, only endless seas with crystal reefs and shell forests and wonders beyond words. ’Twas so glorious this realm seems more a mud puddle.”

“’Tis cinders now. Fack Selse.” Because he was the king he could utter such blasphemy, and still half-expected the elder to slap him for it. “If you’re weary of the work, you can teach.”

“I’ve taught. I’ve mated, spawned, and watched our kind flourish. I’ve raised my son to live as a good fellow, and serve you well. For centuries uncounted I’ve run the currents, defended our waters, and danced with the landwalkers. I’ve even protected you as best I could.” Ysal sighed. “When you come to my age—and even you shall someday, my fair king—you long for stillness and silence.” He surveyed the greenery beyond the shore. “I’ve dreamed of death, and such doesnae frighten me. ’Tis as making a swim to join an old and patient friend. Mayhap, if I’m blessed, the many who went before me as well. My good friends. My king.”

A ripple in the waters made Merrick glance back to see the entire garrison surrounding the islet. He had not summoned them; they had come to show their respect to a mentor. It reminded him of just how old Ysal had grown. He had taught them all.



The net maker saw them as well, and touched his chest in a gesture of fond farewell before he made his way on shore.

The islet, where the Selseus had come to die since the Great Journey, had dazzling white and gold sands, thanks to time and weather wearing away at the bones of those who stranded themselves here. Ferns, shrubs and small trees shaded the many spots where Merrick's sire and every elder but the net maker had gasped the final breath. Here and there some rotted stakes remained in the ground, mute testimony to the very few who had been brought to the place for execution.

Ysal finally eased down by the trunk of a young willow, and reached for the fine silver chain around his neck. The violet-gold pendant, through which he had channeled his power for millennia, glittered as brightly as if it had been water-forged only yesterday. He pressed it in Merrick's hands, smiling a little.

"I take my leave of you, my king, and return to the sands. Should we meet beyond, I shall greet your sire and bearer with much joy." The net-maker's eyes closed. "Beware the dark one of legend. 'Twas ever truth that she shall someday come for the landwalkers, and cut through the Selseus so she may butcher them."

"I shall keep careful watch." Merrick's gut clenched as he crouched down to place a kiss on Ysal's brow, ritually releasing him from his life pledge. "Find your silent darkness, old friend, and ken there peace."

He did not linger at the net maker's side, but returned to the waters. Beneath the waves the garrison parted to permit him pass, and Jamaran joined him to swim back to the settlement. There Merrick ignored the sorrowful looks from the females and young as he made his way into the palace, and took refuge in his evening chamber.

Jamaran stood guard at the door, and watched without a flicker of emotion as Merrick rammed his fists into the tall columns of oysters grown there for his pleasure. Shells fragmented and drifted down to the coral floor, scattering their

pearls. Only when his violet blood stained the water did the garrison commander dare to catch his arm.

*'Twillnae take long, Jamaran thought to him. By dawn Ysal shall join your ancestors. Release him in truth.*

Merrick had always been grateful for the mind link they shared, as it allowed him to issue orders to his most trusted subject without any overhearing them. It also permitted him to know every thought in Jamaran's mind, which had insured his trust. Now he wished he had never transformed the former enslaved warrior, for the lad could hear everything inside his head as well.

*Hit me if you wish.* The commander lifted his chin in invitation. *My face, 'twillnae make mince of your hands.*

Merrick scowled. *Why didnae I permit you drown?*

*I've oft wondered.* Jamaran fluttered the lashes of his pretty eyes like some flirtatious maid. *If 'tis your wish now to make me more than brother, I'm ever willing. Only ken I cannae spawn you a son.*

Laughing seemed obscene, and yet it poured out of him endlessly. The commander's arm came around him, supporting him as his mirth turned to grief. Merrick howled and wept, just as he had a year before, when news of Lady Joana's death reached them. Unlike his sire, the former king, he had never been skilled with hiding his emotions. He told himself it made him a better ruler, for his people knew him to be as they were, but in truth it was merely another of his faults. At last he regained control of himself, and drew back to look into his friend's eyes.

*I want his bones brought back to me,* he told him. *He shallnae become dust on that facking mound of death. You must attend to his mate as well. See that she wants for naught.*

Jamaran bowed his head. *Aye, my king.*

Merrick swam out of the settlement, uncaring where the currents took him. The scant light from the smiling moon did not reach far into the dark seas, but the taste of the water and the sounds rippling around him told him where he was. At last

he walked up onto the white sands of the bay shore, where he stood and looked up at the monstrosity that housed the MacMar.

He'd visited the inside of the place only once, and thought the landwalkers mad for wishing to entomb themselves in the enormous stone crypt. He doubted the new female would find great comfort within its cold, hard walls. Connal likely had handed off the castaway female to his mortal vassals before retreating to the solitude he preferred to rule. It had been a year since that wretched mate of his had cast herself from a cliff, and if anything the laird had grown even more morose.

At one of the windows a tall red-haired wench appeared, making Merrick scowl as soon as he realized who it was. As soon as Meg saw him she made a flinging gesture and disappeared.

"Fair evening, King." A dark silhouette emerged from the shadows by the base of the cliff to bow before approaching him. "How may I serve?"

Merrick didn't have to glance at him to know it was Shaw, Connal's younger brother. Long ago the chieftain had been captured on the mainland by Pritani raiders, and had spent years first as an enslaved drudge, and then as something unnamed but far more deadly, until the MacMar laird had finally found and rescued him. Since returning to Caladh the chieftain had been strange, always everywhere and nowhere. He'd also grown recklessly insolent, as if the savage skinwork the Pritani had inked on his arm had emboldened him.

Merrick remembered the once happy, harmless lad Shaw had been before his time among the renegades. He'd been very fond of the boy, but enslavement had changed the man who returned to the island. The chieftain made a reputation for himself as a merciless warrior with finely-honed senses, lightning speed, and an eerie ability to accurately predict what others would do. He also carried a darkness within him that most of his brothers could not sense, one that deeply troubled Merrick.

Trading empty niceties with the most dangerous man on the island didn't interest him at this hour, however. "How fares your laird?"

"As he fared yesterday, today, and shall again on the morrow." Shaw's gaze remained wholly guileless. "He's keeping the woman. What more want you? Or do you over-indulge in pearls tonight?"

First Meg shooing him away, and now this insult. Striding up to loom over Shaw, Merrick saw nothing but cool contempt in the landwalker's moonlight-silvered eyes. "I'm king of my kind. You shall keep a civil tongue with me, Chieftain."

Shaw covered a yawn with his hand. "What more want you, oh grand Finfolk King?"

"Naught from you." If he attacked the disrespectful bastart, Merrick thought, he might kill him. He also suspected that he stood a fair chance of dying at his hands. Either way, such a reckless act would break the truce and set the MacMar and the Selseus on the path to war. "Someday soon, I think, you and I shall dance, Renegade."

"Oh, aye." The chieftain smiled so widely he showed every one of his teeth. "Please."

As soon as Merrick returned to the water Shaw retreated back into the shadows, where he likely would stand watch for the remainder of the night. He surfaced once to glance back at the chieftain, and saw something like black ink flowing up the cliff to pour onto a shelf. It moved in the same patterns that had been permanently inked into the flesh of the chieftain's arm.

Whatever the Pritani had done to Shaw, Merrick decided, no one should ever know.

## Chapter Five



Over the next several days Valerie adjusted as best she could to living on a twelfth century Scottish island, helped by some rather immediate wrestling bouts with her new reality. She had never once lived in a place without running water, central heating or bathrooms. Water on Caladh had to be hauled by bucket, basin or jug, and warmth came strictly from fireplaces or layering on heavy clothing. What functioned as a bathroom in the castle, she quickly discovered, was basically an indoor version of an outhouse. Since she was a guest Valerie couldn't really complain, but she often grumbled to herself whenever she was alone in her chamber and failing yet again to build a fire.

"Mayhap you should use a torch from the passage, my lady," one of the maids suggested after watching her fumble with the firesteel Fletcher had given her. "'Twould surely catch then. Or ask Chieftain Shaw for his aid."

That seemed like an odd suggestion. "You make Shaw light fires?"

"We neednae." The maid held up her fingers and wiggled them. "He possesses the touch."

Maybe she meant skill. "Okay."

Unhappily Valerie had already made one enemy out of one particular tall redhead teenager, who seemed to appear out of nowhere to stand and glare at her while she struggled with something. Instead of offering to help, however, Meg merely criticized her.

When she caught Valerie hand-washing her lingerie: “The basin’s for your face and hands, no’ your fripperies. We’ve a laundress.” When she asked for a brush: “Dinnae you ken how to comb that mop?” When she got lost one day after taking the wrong turn in the passages: “Doesnae your tongue work? Ask the way.”

Each time they clashed Valerie tried to be cheerful about it, but Meg would only sniff and walk away while she was in mid-apology.

While Valerie dealt with her shortcomings as a medieval era occupant, she also came to some rather unscientific conclusions about her predicament. She first posited and then discarded all the logical explanations, such as hallucinating while in a comatose state, experiencing a very extended and detailed nightmare, and (admittedly the most far-fetched) falling through a tear in reality and landing in a parallel world where civilization had not yet advanced beyond the dark ages.

“If I’m in a coma, that would explain a lot,” she mentioned to Fletcher as they walked from her guest room down to the great hall for the morning meal. “Given that I was drowning in very cold lake water, I might have lasted long enough for a rescue and resuscitation.”

Fletcher nodded as if he understood, which Valerie knew he didn’t, and appreciated nonetheless. The seneschal had a true knack for making everyone comfortable around him, even the crazy lady from the twenty-first century who used too many big words.

“The problem with that is in a coma my brain function would be significantly impaired, making stimuli responses unlikely.” She made a quick gesture, startling one of the guards they passed. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

The guard smiled and inclined his head as he relaxed his spear arm.

“Meg said I shouldn’t talk with my hands. Where was I? Oh, then there’s the lengthy nightmare scenario, which also seems plausible. This could be a subconscious reenactment of some historic series or movie I watched that I can’t

consciously remember.” She smiled at a wide-eyed scullery boy carrying a bucket of ash in the opposite direction. “Only I hardly ever watch television, and my imagination is not this good.” She glanced at Fletcher. “Should I explain television to you?”

“Please, dinnae trouble yourself, Mistress,” the seneschal said.

“Okay. So that leaves the alternate reality theory. I’m all for a good multiverse SF rationale, but honestly quantum theory always seemed more like wishful thinking to me. It would be great if in another bubble of existence I don’t have this annoying curly hair, but why would I stay the same and end up on a twelfth century Scottish island?” Valerie nearly tossed up her hands before she saw Meg carrying two platters from the kitchens, and remembered her jarring warning not to make any sudden moves around the guards. “It just doesn’t pan out.”

As they walked through the arch to the hall she became again startled by the sheer number of MacMar warriors sitting around the long trestle tables. As soon as the men noticed her and Fletcher, they stared back for a moment, as they always did, and then returned to eating. Today two hundred or more had gathered for the first meal, which the clan ate in several shifts. Breakfast was usually made up of mountains of meat, fruit and round loaves of dark breads. Maids came and went carrying more to the tables, while others made rounds with steaming kettles. Sometimes there were caldrons of soup set up on low tables as well.

Valerie appreciated the abundance, but by the third morning she thought she might kill for some yoghurt and a granola bar.

“You should dine at the laird’s table this morn, Mistress,” Fletcher said, and guided her through the maze of highland warriors to the elevated platform at the end of the room, where three other men sat together speaking in low voices. To them he said, “Make yourselves known to the lady, lads.” He bowed to her before leaving.

Valerie decided against sitting in the empty chair at the head of the table and instead perched between Duncan and a very handsome, tattooed man, which left her facing the grim-faced Nyall. She had a vague memory of asking him not to cut out her tongue, but decided that had to be from a dream.

“Good morning.” To the one she didn’t know by name she said, “I’m Valerie Baker, the crazy lady from the twenty-first century whom your laird keeps avoiding. I guess Fletcher is tired of me, too.”

As the tattooed man grinned, Nyall’s expression turned even colder. The healer placed a clean wooden plate in front of her.

“The man on your right, ’tis our senior chieftain, Shaw,” Duncan said as he began heaping food on her plate as if she were a child. “Across from you, Nyall, Captain of the Guard. You already ken I’m the clan’s healer.”

Valerie nodded and glanced around the hall. “Doesn’t your laird like having meals with the clan?”

“My brother prefers dine alone in his chamber,” Shaw said, turning the full wattage of his gorgeous face toward her. “How fare you, Mistress?”

*Oh, my. Handle with care, Valerie.*

“I’m a bit confused about how I got here, but I’ve been sleeping better than I have in months. I think it’s the food.” She studied the enormous meal Duncan had assembled for her. “Dr. MacMar, do I look like an elephant to you?”

“I dinnae ken what ’tis elephant,” the healer admitted.

“You’re eligible for membership in my What the Heck club, then.” Valerie began transferring the excess back to the platters. “Anyway, I believe I caused a problem for your laird by landing here, so I would like to do whatever I can to settle that. Should I apologize to that, ah, being who tried to grab me in the water when I arrived?” When all three gave her blank looks, she added, “You know, the tall blonde man-shaped thing with the scales and the attitude problem?”



Nyall choked on tea he was sipping. Shaw laughed heartily. Duncan sighed.

“I didn’t intend to start a diplomatic incident between immortal whatever-you-ares.” She tested an unfamiliar round, flat cake that she’d never before seen, which tasted just like an apple oatmeal cookie. “My goodness. These are wonderful. I should mention that I also hate to apologize for things that aren’t my fault.”

“You neednae ask Merrick’s forgiveness, Mistress,” Shaw finally said. “We’ve a truce with the Finfolk. The laird shall sort out the disagreement with their king.”

Meg thumped a bowl of fruit on the table, looked at all the men, made a contemptuous sound, and stalked off.

“Looks like I’m not the only one she hates,” Valerie said to no one in particular.

“She’s Ériemann, Mistress Baker,” the captain said, as if that explained everything. His gaze shifted to her hand. “Until ’tis settled, I’d ask you avoid the bay, the shores, and any of the sea lochs near the stronghold.”

Valerie glanced down at Joana’s ring. “I’ve tried using just about everything to remove it, including that slimy brown stuff you call soap, but it’s stuck. As soon as I can pry it off I’ll return it to the laird.”

“No,” Shaw said instantly, his smile vanishing. “Give the ring to me, lass.”

“Okay.” She wanted to ask about the original owner, but decided to wait until she could speak with Connal again. As she reached for the cup of brew Duncan had poured for her, her arm brushed Shaw’s.

*She’s a pretty, kind lady. Mayhap she may bring my brother some pleasure if no’ peace.*

Valerie regarded him. “I appreciate the compliments, but I don’t think I can entertain your laird the way you want me to.”

The chieftain’s gray eyes narrowed. “How can you ken such?”

“I can’t explain it, but since I got here I know what people are thinking when I touch them.” She grew amused when Duncan drew away from her side, and across the table Nyall visibly recoiled. “That’s how I learned about your father, the Fae Prince, and that you’re all half-human immortals, and Caladh is an enchanted island that he created to protect your clan from some terrible enemy. What was the name of that being... Demented? Dunderhead?”

“Derdrui,” the three of them said at the same time.

“That’s the one.” Valerie sniffed the brew before she sampled it. “Hmmm. Lavender, apple, honey, and something like allspice. I like this better than that licorice-tasting stuff we had yesterday. Is Derdrui like King Merrick, or worse?”

Nyall looked away, Duncan propped his head on his hand, and Shaw muttered, “Worse.”

The chieftain held out his hand to her, making Valerie smile before she took hold of it. For a moment an image of a much younger Shaw wailing alone at the top of a cliff flashed through her mind, and then his thoughts flooded into hers.

*In ancient times a dark princess became obsessed with Prince Mar, a Fae water elemental. She was a powerful enchantress, and used her magic to murder his beloved wife, which forced the prince to flee from Elphyne and hide himself. Over the centuries here he married mortal wives, who bore his halfling sons. Those immortal lads became the Clan MacMar.*

*Derdrui didnae end her pursuit of the prince. No matter where he went, she chased after him, and threatened kill everyone he loved. He protected us by creating Caladh, which he enchanted to hide the clan and our vassals from the enchantress. He also made a truce with the Finfolk so he could conceal the island in their waters. Finally he returned to his beloved sea, and there died after casting his final enchantment, to ever protect the island and us.*

The emotion that accompanied Shaw’s final thought made Valerie experience a few moments of unsteadiness. She ignored her own reaction to clasp his hand between both of

hers, because now she knew why she had seen him crying as a boy. He'd watched his father die.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Chieftain," she said. "I shouldn't have spoken so lightly about the prince."

Shaw's easy smile didn't chase the sadness from his eyes. "'Twas a long time ago, Mistress. We've safely dwelled a thousand years here on Caladh." He took the cloak from the back of his chair and draped it over her lap. "Wear this when you walk outside. 'Tis growing cold." He rose and walked quickly out of the hall.

Valerie noticed Nyall was watching her as if he were a cop and she'd just shoplifted something. "I didn't force him to do that. You saw. He volunteered the hand."

The captain muttered something under his breath, got up and left.

"Pay them no heed, Mistress Baker," Duncan said. "We never easily entrust mortals with our secrets, and, truly, we're but worried about the laird. Over the last season his melancholy, 'tis only grown darker and deeper. Shaw would never truly expect you to, ah, entertain our lord. "

Her gaze shifted up to the gallery that led to Connal's chamber. "Maybe I can find another way to pry him out of that room."



CONNAL IGNORED THE FOOD MEG BROUGHT TO HIM AT DAWN, and instead took out his knives to inspect the hilts and sharpen the blades. He doubted he had slept more than an hour since Valerie Baker had arrived on the island. Now exhaustion dragged at his limbs, making him clumsy. Every time he thought of her heavenly eyes and smiling lips he wanted to go and find her. Each impulse to do so made the weight of his guilt grind that much harder. The sadness and self-disgust now seemed to sink into his very bones.

*I must step down, soon. I shall name Shaw my successor before the clan. He cannae refuse me while all his brothers look on.*

A knock on the door made his blade stutter off the whetstone and slice across his palm. Reflexively he dropped it and stood to look for a rag.

“Don’t panic, it’s just me.” Valerie slipped into the room, her smile vanishing as soon as she saw the bloody cut. The cloak she carried dropped to the floor. “What happened?”

“Go fetch the healer,” Connal said, intending to turn away from her, and then she was holding his wrist and pulling him over to his wash stand. “’Tis naught but a nick.”

“Nicks don’t drip a puddle of blood on the floor.” She poured some clean water from the jug onto the wound and then bent to inspect it closely. “Were you planning to cut your wrist? Did I spoil your aim?”

Looking down at her curly blonde head and breathing in her soft, warm scent made Connal dizzy. “I’m sharpening my knives.”

“You’re not very good at it. Get someone else to do the job.” She took a clean linen, wrapped it over the cut, and then tugged him over to his bed. “Sit before you fall.”

He would have argued, but his legs chose that moment to give out, and he dropped down. Valerie sat beside him, pressing her thumb over the linen where it covered the wound. She had paled, and gripped him slightly tighter than seemed necessary. Over and again she worried at her bottom lip with the edge of her teeth.

“Leave me,” Connal said, wondering if he would be able to stay upright much longer.

“You’re not *my* laird, so stop telling me what to do.” She pushed his shoulder until he lay back, and then placed his wounded hand in her lap and peeked under the linen at it. “It doesn’t look like it needs stitches, which is good, because I have only a little first aid training and you people probably haven’t discovered suturing yet. Was it on your morning agenda to pass out and bleed to death?”

He stared up at the blue canopy that Joana had loved. He wanted to tear it down; he wanted to wrap it around him like a

shroud. “We half-Fae cannae die from small wounds nor blood loss.”

“Then when I want to kill you I’ll be sure to stab you in the heart.” When he looked at her she made a comical face. “That’s a joke. A jest.”

A sense of ease came over Connal as he watched her fuss over his hand, and his eyelids grew heavy. “Fetch Duncan, then. He shall attend me.”

“You’re still not my laird. I guess ordering people around comes naturally to you.” Her cool, slim hand settled on his brow. “You look like you haven’t slept for days.”

“I’ve searched all the scrolls my sire left the clan,” he admitted. “Tisnae any method we may use to return you to your time.”

“Don’t tell that to Captain Dee-Nyall. He’ll have a meltdown.” As he frowned Valerie sighed. “I don’t know why, but that man doesn’t like me very much. Maybe he and that girl Meg are good friends. Duncan has a great poker face, and he’s not a touchy person, so I can’t tell what he thinks. And then there’s Shaw, who looks and acts like the island’s biggest heartbreaker, but I’m pretty sure that’s a front.”

“The Pritani stole him as a lad from us.” Remembering the years of searching the mainland for his younger brother made Connal even more wretched. “When I found Shaw again he’d grown to manhood, and had their marks inked all over him. He’s ever refused to speak of what he endured.”

“A lot, I’m guessing.” She stroked his hair back from his brow. “Close your eyes and sleep now.”

“You’re no’ my lady,” he muttered, even as he obeyed her. “You cannae command me.”

Valerie said something, but her voice had dropped to a whisper, and then sleep came over Connal like death. Spiraling down into the endless blackness, he wondered if he had actually died, and experienced a terrible longing to go back to her. At last he understood that he was merely asleep. No

nightmares came for him, however, and his thoughts settled into a harmless muddle. Finally, finally he could rest.

Oblivion, he decided, could be as tempting as a beautiful woman.

From the position of the sun when he next opened his eyes it seemed to be mid-afternoon. Valerie lay curled up beside him, her hand on his belly. The cool, sweet scent of her filled his every breath as if she'd just come from swimming in a fairy pool—or did she simply bathe in spring air in her time? Some delicate color had returned to her face, which now glowed in the pale light from the window slits. The gleaming tangle of her soft golden curls made his fingers itch to touch them. So did the rosy curves of her lips.

*'Tis but lust for her.*

For a moment Connal allowed himself to imagine waking every day with this beautiful creature in his arms. Joana had never liked being held in her sleep, and would grow restless and wake whenever he tried to pull her close. He'd been contented with simply knowing his wife's face would be the first thing he saw every morning, and the last thing he saw each night.

Valerie's hand moved from his belly down to his thigh, brushing over the growing bulge of his cock. He imagined her palm lingering there a moment, perhaps even pressing against him, but no, she simply moved closer and murmured something.

Connal heard the door to his chamber ease open, and looked past her shoulder at Fletcher, who grimaced at the sight of them on the bed together before withdrawing. At least the seneschal would say naught of what he had seen.

“Of course he won't say anything.” Valerie didn't open her eyes. “Fletcher is more discreet than a Swiss bank manager. With his face blindness he can't even tell who you're sleeping with anyway.”

“You shouldnae lay with me.” He wanted to sound disapproving, but failed.

“I didn’t do it on purpose.” She stretched her legs, bumping the side of his. “I keep falling asleep in the strangest places since I came here. The other night I nearly took a nap while we were having dinner. If Fletcher hadn’t noticed I might have face-planted right in my pottage.”

“’Tis unseemly to sleep with a man unwed to you,” Connal told her.

“Unseemly, huh? Like you having your hand on my chest?” she countered, smiling a little.

Connal looked down to see he had put his hand over her left cheb, and would have snatched it away, but for the soft, steady rhythm pulsing against his palm. The little peak of her mound pebbled under his touch, and her heart quickened. He would stop doing such to her now. He would order her from his chamber. He would tell Shaw to take her to the mainland at once, and find some sanctuary for her among the druids or some other kindly folk.

“If you want to get rid of me that badly, I’ll go,” Valerie said, looking sad now as she pushed herself up on her elbow, dislodging his hand. A cascade of curls fell around her face, framing her pretty features.

“No.” He meant to say aye. He meant to order her go. He should never have taken her from the sea, or Merrick. Yet resisting the chance to caress her curls seemed beyond him. So did pushing her away instead of guiding her head down until he could touch her lips to his.

Kissing Valerie vanquished all the dark thoughts in Connal’s head, rendering them into dust beneath a rush of desire so intense he groaned into her mouth. She came atop him, her slight weight pressing her ripe curves against his chest, belly and hips, and he stroked his hand down the long line of her back. It had been a year since he’d touched anyone, and now he could not keep his hands from her. The taste and smell of her suffused him, sending hot blood into his stiff shaft.

She lifted her head to end the kiss and rolled onto her side, scrambling off the bed. Connal would have yanked her back,

but she'd fisted her hands, and her entire body trembled.

Now came the time to order her leave him at once. "Come back to bed, Valerie."

"I can't do that." She refused to look at him as she moved away. "You're absolutely right, this is unseemly and wrong and I should never have..."

He smelled the salt of her tears before he heard the first sob from her lips. Everything inside him wanted to comfort her, this strange woman who had brought back Joana's ring, this lovely, soft, warm creature who saw a man bleeding and rushed to help him. Yet her sadness baffled him.

How could it be wrong for her to kiss him, to offer him comfort?

Connal saw her thumb rubbing against the plain gold ring she wore on the third finger of her left hand. Some of the Romans had done the same, and Duncan explained that the invaders believed that a vein ran from that finger directly to the heart. Any Roman wearing a ring on that finger had taken a wife.

"You've a husband?" he asked, aghast now.

"I'm a widow." Valerie turned to regard him, her lashes and cheeks wet with tears. "My husband killed himself a year ago to the day I came here. He drowned himself in the same lake where I nearly died. Do you want to know why?"

Connal got up from the bed and went to her, almost reaching for her before he thought better of that. "Only if you wish tell me."

She ducked her head. "He was in love with another woman, and wanted me to divorce him. But I wouldn't let him go." She went and picked up the cloak she had dropped. "I couldn't. I loved him too much. I suppose he hated me so much he couldn't live with that."

Connal thought of the trunk of wee garments that Joana had hidden from him. "He wronged you twice, then, lass."



Valerie met his gaze, her face flushed now. “Does that make this okay, then? Because he cheated on me and then threw away his life, I should just get even? After I sleep with you, do I jump off a cliff? Will that settle it once and for all?”

“My lady wife jumped off a cliff a year to the day you came,” he told her flatly. “Her body shattered on the rocks below before the sea swept her away. I watched her die. I shall never forget that day. If you wish end yourself, I beg you, choose another method.”

Horror filled her expression. “Both of us?”

Without another word she ran out of the chamber.

## Chapter Six



Just after dawn Merrick saw Fletcher walking the shore at the far end of the bay, and considered swimming in the opposite direction. Connal's youngest brother annoyed him almost as much as Shaw, and possessed an even hotter temper when it came to anything about the laird. He looked worried now, more so than usual. Despite walking Merrick and Connal had not yet officially settled the matter of the woman, and until they did the discord would make both the clan and the Selseus uneasy. Nervous men made for uneven tempers and over-reactions that often caused scuffles and skirmishes.

Merrick then realized that in such could be a rare opportunity to achieve what he had been unable to accomplish for the last year. Glancing around first to assure the seneschal wandered alone, he trudged through the shallows and put himself in the other man's path.

Fletcher nearly walked into him before he halted, and his gaze shifted to the old pendant he wore. "You're too tall for Ysal."

"'Tis Merrick. I took the net maker to the islet." Merrick touched the ancient metal, and a surge of power swept through him. "Ysal wished end himself."

The seneschal's expression grew sad as he glanced out at the place of death. "I'm certain you did your best to persuade him live, King. Why didnae you summon the laird so he might bid the elder farewell?"

“I didnae wish trouble Connal, for reminding him of that person.” He would never willingly speak Joana’s name again for what she had done to his friend. “How fares the woman stolen from us?”

“My lord’s searching the prince’s archives for a method to return her to her rightful place.” Fletcher’s jaw tightened. “And he didnae steal her.”

“She’s a fetching thing with those pretty curls and that winsome face. Mayhap he wished bed her.” Goading the seneschal was risky, but Merrick needed to know more before he decided what to do. He also noticed the slight flinch the clansman made at his suggestion. “Ah. So he’s bedded her already. So much for his forever mourning that selfish –”

Fletcher’s fist clipped his jaw, knocking him off balance. Merrick righted himself in time to catch his arm before he landed a second blow.

“I’m king,” he reminded him, rather startled that even in a temper the man would actually dare strike him.

“Aye, and a greedy, oblivious dolt.” The seneschal jerked his arm free. “You’d use one poor lass to needle my brother, who barely leaves his chamber now. Mistress Baker, she’s an innocent who doesnae wish your boons nor promises.”

Merrick shoved him. “I’d hear such from her lips, you blind fool.”

“Need I put guards on the shore?” a deep voice asked.

They both looked over at Connal, who came striding across the sand with Shaw. Behind them, looking frustrated, stood Nyall on the rocks beneath the cliff. Merrick saw a dangerous glint in Shaw’s eyes that matched the same in the glare from the seneschal.

*So now he comes and the others would fight, all for the sake of one female. I wonder why.*

“Forgive me, my lord,” Fletcher said through his teeth. “The king needed an itch scratched, and my fist, ’twas all I brought with me.”

The laird stopped a short distance away and regarded Merrick with the long-suffering expression of an exasperated parent. “You’re a king. Shouldnae you behave as such, and cease taunting my men?”

Oddly that hurt him more than Fletcher’s heavy fist. “Ysal’s dead, so I’m in a mood.”

“Apologies. I didnae ken you’d just lost a friend.” The laird inclined his head. “You’re still a king.”

“Aye, and you’re a laird. We should speak as leaders, no’ friends.” He walked up to Connal, and got within an inch of him. “Give the female to me, and restore the peace between us and ours. If she doesnae wish join the Selseus, then I shall see her safely to the mainland. I give you my word.”

“No.” The laird’s eyes narrowed. “Fletcher.”

“Permit me beg your forgiveness for my younger brother’s temper, King Merrick,” Shaw said before the seneschal could offer an apology. “’Tis rarely tested, and now you ken why.”

“Fack, Shaw.” The seneschal added a few more curses to that under his breath.

Merrick waved his hand, and decided to push Connal a little harder. “You’ve no use for that woman. She’s fair and sensible. She cannae leave the island, nor return to her home. She’s naught to you, but she can ensure our future and maintain the truce.”

“When I threw Joana’s ring into the sea last year, I vowed I should never again love nor marry until ’twas returned.” As his men stared at him Connal smiled a little. “Valerie brought the ring back to me, so I shall keep my pledge. I shall make the lady my wife.”

The claim sounded so bizarre it might even be true, which gave Merrick pause. “The MacMar dinnae wed mortals.”

“’Tis my clan, and my word, ’tis law on the island. You cannae take her.” The laird leaned so close he nearly bumped Merrick’s nose with his own. “She’s mine.”

He was bluffing, in the way only Connal could, Merrick thought, so he would do the same. “Shall you make me welcome at the feast, then?”

“Ever we welcome the King of the Finfolk join us. I shall send word when ’tis arranged.” With that the laird turned and walked back to the cliff stair, Nyall following after him.

Fletcher and Shaw both frowned as they watched the pair ascend.

“He’d marry that female to keep her from me. An interesting turn.” Merrick became aware of Jamaran’s presence in the waters behind him, and sent a quick thought to tell him to remain out of sight. “Shaw, I accept your apologies on behalf of your dolt brother. Dolt, do send word what gifts I may bring for the wedding feast. From what I remember, she seems to favor pearls.” As the seneschal made a rude sound he smiled. “Unless he lies to me.”

Shaw stepped between them. “Connal wouldnae make such a vow in jest.”

“You look gut-punched, Chieftain.” Merrick cuffed his shoulder. “Take your ease. That woman, she’s exactly what Connal needs now: a distraction from his misery. That he’d wed her, ’tis even better than I’d hoped.”

Shaw’s upper lip curled. “’Tis why you’ve pressed the matter, then. You’re a devious bastart.”

“I’m King.” He met Fletcher’s furious gaze. “Never forget that, or I shall carve it across your hides.”

Merrick turned and waded back into the water, aware that both men still watched him long after he submerged. Having the last word pleased him, as did the opportunities provided by Connal’s proposal. He swam around the edge of the island, heading to a secluded spot where he could think without distraction. There he waded to a stretch of rocky sand where a group of boulders clustered around a small sea lochan.

When he walked up to a gap in the rocks, however, he saw the back of a female bathing.

Meg wore only a shift made transparent by the water. Everything about her, from her flame-colored hair to the pale skin covering her too-long, thin body, made her ugly in the eyes of the Selseus. Merrick had never liked her, either; the lady's maid had always looked upon him with a faint wrinkle to her nose, as if some part of him were rotting. Yet seeing her like this, defenseless and almost naked, made him smirk with pleasure.

"Ah, a catch I neednae fight to take," he said as he sat down on the edge of the lochan. He frowned when he saw the rope she had around her waist, which she had tied around a large stone on the edge of the lochan. "I must toss you back, however."

Her shoulders stiffened. "Touch me and I'll geld you."

Merrick imagined she was jesting, until he saw the dagger in her hand. "We dinnae desire females of your, ah, temper."

"For which I shall kneel before the Gods nightly in gratitude." She used the rope to pull herself to the edge, and reached for a cloak she'd left on the rocks and wrapped it around her before climbing out. Only after she put her bare feet in her boots did she look at him. "You've no' left yet?"

"Why do you bathe here?" he countered. "And why do you tie yourself to the rocks?"

Meg picked up her gown and draped it over her arm before she made her way to him, but instead of explaining she shoved him into the lochan.

"Go you mad?" Merrick demanded as soon as he surfaced. At that moment hot jets of water streaming up from the bottom of the lochan enveloped him. Although the cold of the sea never bothered him, he loved the heat. "Och, that's good."

"'Tis why I bathe here." The maid gestured at the water. "'Tis one of the prince's fairy pools."

He swam to the edge, his mood mellowing as he gazed up at her. "Why do you hate me? 'Tis because I'm no' dark and brooding like your lord?"

Her full lips curved. “I’ve never liked proud, pig-headed arses who regard females as property and possess no manners. Also, you smell.”

“Never.” Now he grew genuinely offended. “How do I smell, then? No’ like a fish.”

Meg crouched down, putting her face only an inch from his. “Why should you care what I think, King of Fish?”

In that moment Merrick nearly did something unthinkable. Nearly. “I dinnae.”

“And you’re a liar.” With that the maid stood, bobbed and left.



DUXOR WAITED UNTIL HE SAW MERRICK LEAVE THE PALACE before he entered through the rotting hull of a landcrawler vessel that had sunk during a violent storm. All that the creatures of the bay had left unscathed were some chained bones and chests of hammered gold and silver disks. He knew the king liked to gift such useless treasures to the young ones for their seeking games but kept all the pearls for himself. That Merrick never seemed to indulge in his own endless supply of bliss made Duxor hate him just that much more, but he’d heard a disturbing rumor that the king had just sent an outrageous gift to the MacMar.

*He wouldnae send a single pearl to those bastards without reason.*

Duxor had to wait just outside the storage chamber until the king’s steward left, and only then slipped in through a concealed hatch. He could smell the pearls Merrick had hoarded, their tangy fragrance spilling out of the caches lining the walls. The king had been so distracted lately he knew a few handfuls would never be missed. One large cache had been completely emptied, however, and when he swam closer he saw the king had removed all of the rare dawn pearls Duxor’s uncle had paid in tribute after the failed rebellion.

As a young one he remembered his sire’s wails of terror as Merrick had dragged him from the sea and staked him out on

the Islet of Death. His uncle had forced Duxor to join the silent vigil.

*Watch and learn*, the stern old fool had insisted. 'Tis *the price of such treachery*.

Once his traitorous brother had gasped his last, his uncle had cleaned out his vaults and presented the king with every pearl he had stolen from loyalists, some of whom he had murdered for their wealth. Duxor's uncle had then left the settlement, never to return.

Merrick had feigned kindness toward him, for they were cousins, but Duxor knew the proud brute despised him as much as his sire. In turn he pretended indifference when Jamaran was chosen as the garrison commander, which had ruined his plan to turn their warriors against the king. Without an army Duxor had no hope of seizing the throne, taking his rightful place and ending the ridiculous truce with the MacMar.

With his uncle's pearls he might have bribed a few of the surliest Selseus to murder Jamaran. He would then play the hero by capturing and slaying his own assassins.

Duxor left the storage room, and boldly swam into the king's quarters, where two of his attendants busily scoured algae from the viewers. Making a rude gesture for them to go, he swam over to look out at the settlement, which now stretched beyond the bay. In a few years dozens of young males would reach maturity and experience their first spawning rush. Since the king had forbidden forcing landcrawlers to serve as their mates they would have to wait on Merrick to give them a willing female. Yet even now dozens of potential breeders lived on Caladh, ripe for the taking.

Unlike older males the wait would make the young so agitated it would be easy to sway them to Duxor's cause. The thought of waiting for the next generation to mature infuriated him, but it seemed to be the only course now.

*Lord Duxor.*



One of Jamaran's patrollers hovered outside the chamber, and from the smell of him he'd been hunting. *I wished speak with the king*, he told him as he came out into the passage. That was when he identified the type of blood clinging to the other male. *Why do you stink of landcrawler?*

*A vessel capsized just outside the bay, my lord. We're still searching for survivors.*

Duxor told him to try the island for Merrick before he rushed out of the palace and tracked the blood that had spilled into the bay. Large sharks had begun to swarm for the same reason, and he increased his speed. If the boat had been carrying treasure, he might find enough pearls in the sunken wreckage to carry out the assassination plan.

He saw Jamaran's bleached hair from a distance and changed direction, dropping down and skirting along the sea floor to avoid the commander's notice. There he found the bodies of several landcrawlers who had drowned, but they wore the garb of simple fishermen. All their vessel had carried was fish, which made him wonder if the kind had ordered the outsider to deliberately sink the boat. He reached a broken section, from which bubbles of air still rose. One of them burst, emitting the sound of a landcrawler's voice.

*Help me. Help.*

Duxor swam around the broken hull, listening until he found the pocket of air where the mortal now thrashed and choked. He pulled aside some planks until he saw kicking legs, and grabbed one to pull the male through the gap. Half-drowned already, the skinny fisherman stared at him with wide eyes. He seized him by his scrawny throat, and then shot up with him to the surface

"Mercy, *maister*," the mortal said as soon as he coughed the water out of his lungs. "I shall serve you all my life, only spare me."

Killing such strays gave Duxor much sport, but the unusual proposition gave him pause. Merrick had transformed Jamaran from a mortal for saving his life, and the garrison commander remained utterly faithful to the king. This idiot

fisherman could do the same, and if he found and transformed more of his kind...

Duxor clamped the mortal against him and swam for one of the islets half-inside the mist boundary, where he could escape the patrollers and their nosy commander. He dragged the half-dead man into the shallows, and then pulled him up and clamped a hand around his throat.

“Should I spare you, you swear to serve me faithfully for the remainder of your life,” he told the landcrawler, who nodded frantically.

The pendant Duxor wore had belonged to his sire, and grew hot as he curled his fingers tightly around it. The spiked edges pierced his hide, causing his purple-hued blood to stream down his forearm. He then smeared it over one of the mortal’s open wounds. The man screamed and writhed, and then something jerked him out of Duxor’s grasp and into the water.

A dark fin cut through the surface of the water just behind the thrashing arms of the landcrawler.

Cursing, Duxor went after them, and saw that a giant white-mouth had sheared off the fisherman’s hand, and now grabbed him by the legs. He stopped pursuing them to watch the shark devour the mortal, as transformation would not restore his ruined appendages. The violet stain of his own blood spread through the currents around the dying fisherman and the fish, growing almost black as it engulfed them.

Duxor saw bursts of golden power arc through the inky cloud like lightning. *How can he transform like that?* He would have to drag the mortal’s remains onto the sands so whatever was left would quickly die.

The white-mouth emerged from the transformation cloud, but it no longer held the fisherman by his legs. It had somehow become part of the mortal, sprouting blue and white arms and legs from its body, with its tail elongated and attached to the fisherman’s lower spine. One of the arms no longer ended in a hand but a stump. White underbelly hide now covered the man’s chest, and bulged with human and unhuman muscle. Its

cold black eyes had changed in color and shape to more resemble the fisherman's, and while it still had the features of a shark, its bald head had shrunk down and turned unto a wedge atop the mortal's neck.

The transformed creature stared back at him and began gnashing its spiky teeth. At the same time a strangely garbled sound came from it, forming mortal speech that Duxor heard inside his mind. *What did you to me?*

Using his pendant to harness a nearby current and funnel it between his hands, Duxor formed a water blade. *I attempted to save your worthless life, but a shark took you in mid-change. Now I shall end you.*

*Please, let me live, Maister.* The monster sank down until its feet touched the silt, and then bowed as landcrawlers did. *I shall serve you faithfully as I swore.*

As the weapon grew as hard as steel in his hands, Duxor regarded the thing he had created. No Selseus had ever transformed a creature of the sea, for even if it were female it could not spawn with them. None had ever attempted to cross a mortal with an animal in transformation. Yet this ghastly thing seemed to still think like a man despite being fused with the shark.

A small fish swam between them, and the monster snatched it from the water, swallowing it whole. Its soft brown eyes locked with Duxor's as if ashamed.

*Forgive me, Maister. I dinnae ken why, but I'm so hungry.*

He placed his webbed hand on the blunt head, and the contact allowed him to delve the thoughts of the bizarre creature. It did think of itself as a mortal, and yet possessed the wordless, primitive instincts of the white-mouth. Hunger consumed it as much as the man's terror over what had happened to him. It now seemed to view Duxor as some sort of sire.

He nearly ended the monster for daring to regard him thus, and then realized he had, in fact, gifted him with this rebirth.

*You shall address me as Lord Duxor, he told the creature. Do not venture into the bay, but stay close to this islet and hunt in the waters here. If any of my people come near enough to see you, hide yourself in the caves at the bottom. Come to me when I call you.*

*Aye, my lord.* The monster swam off.

For a long moment he watched his peculiar creation before he swam back to the settlement. No one waited in his shabby, unkempt dwelling, for Merrick had always denied him a mate. Duxor wondered what the king would think of his monster. Doubtless he would slay the creature and order him staked out in the same spot where his sire had suffocated in the hot, inescapable sun.

Jamaran suddenly entered his dwelling without warning. He stank of the mortal blood and the island. *What did you with that drowning man you found?*

He gave him a toothy smile. *A white-mouth attacked him before I could bring him to shore. The poor mortal is gone.*

*And before, in the palace?* The commander backed him up against a wall of crumbling rock. *Did you steal from our king?*

*Why should I? I serve him loyally, just as you do.* Duxor spread his hands. *Search the place if you doubt me.*

Jamaran insulted him by doing just that, going through every room thoroughly. He found nothing but Duxor's land weapons and his stores of kelp, which he was obliged to harvest himself, as if he were a female. As he watched the commander it occurred to him that the former mortal shared his misfortune of being unable to secure a mate. Because his body remained partly human he could not spawn a Selseus son. For a moment he was tempted to try to use that to sway Jamaran to his cause, but after a moment he discarded the notion. Because the king had transformed him the commander shared all of his thoughts with Merrick whether he wished to or not.

*Mayhap the arrogant prick means to gift him that female the landcrawlers stole anyway, so she may coddle the*

*conceited bastart like a young one.*

Jamaran rejoined him in the front chamber. *You spoke truth.*

*Even that you make sound like an accusation, Commander.* Duxor inclined his head. *Still, I regret giving you any reason to doubt my word, or my loyalty to the throne.*

The arrogance in the former mortal's pale eyes darkened to anger. *Should you show your true heart, ken in the next moment my water shall skewer it.* He swam out, leaving a burst of bubbles in his wake.

Jamaran, Duxor decided, would not die along with the king. He would live and suffer until his every thought became wanting death.

## Chapter Seven



Something had happened, Valerie decided, judging by how everyone had been staring at and tiptoeing around her all day. Meg had seen her in the hall, spun on her heel and went the other way to avoid her. When she came down for the morning meal every clansman in the hall had actually stopped eating and speaking to watch her. The silence continued at the laird's table when she sat down beside Shaw, smiling at him, Duncan and Nyall. Fletcher took the chair beside her and began filling her plate while Shaw placed a steaming mug by her hand.

"Well, this is nice," she said, smiling. "I'm usually in such a rush to get to school in the morning I eat breakfast on the way." No one replied or even looked at her. "Is this no-talking-at-the-table day, or did I do something to make every person in the castle mad at me?"

Another stillness fell over the hall as Connal entered through an archway and walked up to the dais. No one watched him until after he passed them.

"'Twas naught but a small mishap, and didnae involve you, Mistress." Fletcher said quickly. "I shall be going out this morn to fetch some fruit from the orcharders beyond the hills. Would you care to ride along? I shall be glad to show you more of Caladh."

"Now you're trying to get rid of me. That's not going to work." Valerie took a sip of the brew, which tasted of mint and blueberries, before looking up at Connal. "Good morning, Laird MacMar. Would you like me to have my morning meal

somewhere else so you can talk to your men and discuss whatever it is that I did and they won't tell me?"

"Please stay, Mistress." He sat down at the head of the table and shook his head as a maid hurried over to serve him. He accepted only a mug of brew from Shaw before regarding Fletcher. "Seneschal, I forbid you go anywhere near the bay until the next moon."

"My lord, I didnae intend—ah, disobey you." Fletcher cringed a little and darted a guilty look at her before he added, "Happily shall I do as you command. In all matters."

"I taught teenagers, you know," Valerie told the laird. "They're almost as bad at this as you guys. What's the matter? Why is Fletcher in trouble?"

"'Twas a tussle with Merrick," Connal said.

She regarded the seneschal. "You argued with the king of bad attitudes?"

"He punched him in the head. 'Twas grand to watch." Shaw rubbed his fist, and then gave the other men an innocent look. "Why glare at me? 'Tis truth. We've all wished do the same thing time and again."

Valerie had gathered enough details about the Finfolk and the truce that kept the clan at peace with them to grow a little alarmed now.

"This really is about me again, isn't it?" When no one replied she turned to Connal. "Do I need to apologize to the king? I'll be happy to. Maybe I can explain that women are people, not possessions, and I don't want to be transformed into a wife for one of his guys."

The laird smiled a little. "Dinnae fret. 'Tis settled now."

No one said anything else for the rest of the meal, except for Fletcher, who repeated his offer to take her out to the orchards. Valerie politely refused and then got up and walked beside the laird as he left the hall.

"Shaw hardly ate anything for his breakfast, Nyall looks like he's got a fish bone permanently stuck in his throat, and

Fletcher was definitely trying to hustle me out of here in a hurry,” she told him as they reached the hall that led to his chamber. “Are you going to tell me what really happened, and why? Or do I have to start touching everyone until I find out?”

He gave her a narrow look. “You wouldnae.”

“I can start with you.” She reached out to him.

Connal took a quick step back, and then sighed. “We cannae speak here. Come.”

The laird changed direction and led her out of the stronghold, through a maze of newly-sprouted plants in huge beds, and out through a narrow gate and another, wider one. Once outside the walls he removed his tartan and draped it over her shoulders. Valerie didn’t understand why until they passed some men chopping wood outside a large barn. All of the men ogled her half-bare legs, which reminded her that modern clothing showed a lot more skin than medieval guys ever got to see outside the bedroom.

“I guess while I’m here I should learn how to make some gowns for myself,” she said as they walked along a trail that led into a sprawling forest of oaks and evergreens. “Is it terrible, what happened? Is Fletcher in big trouble for punching out Merrick?”

Connal stopped at a dappled pool of water surrounded by sparkling gray stones, and gestured at one flat-topped rock. “You should first sit, Mistress.”

“Okay.” This was going to be very bad, Valerie decided, because the laird looked as if he was about to be sick. “Tell me.”

He told her about the confrontation between the seneschal and the king, and then nodded at her hand. “I made a vow when I threw my wife’s ring in the sea. I swore I should never love nor marry again until ’twas brought back to me. That you came with the ring means I must hold to my word.”

“That’s understandable, but I don’t...oh. I brought it back to you.” Again she tried to pull it off, but lately it seemed welded onto her finger. “Well, that’s good, that’s healthy,



right? You can start to move on with your life now. I hope you do meet someone—”

Connal shook his head. “I told Merrick I shall wed you.”

“I beg your pardon?” Surely she had misheard him, or he was joking, but no, she could see he was being serious. “Why on earth would you say something like that? You don’t even know me.”

“He saw you first in the water,” he said softly. “I ken thus, and so does the king. By the laws that bind us we cannae keep you from him. You must agree to join the Finfolk and mate with one of Merrick’s men, or he shall take all your memories and leave you on the mainland. But for the ring ’twould already be done. I beg you agree wed me.”

Valerie took a moment to stare at the beautiful stone in his wife’s ring. Although it should have looked as hard and cold as Connal’s eyes did now, it seemed to glow softly in the diffused sunlight. It made her wonder something outrageous: Was Joana somehow sending her approval from beyond her watery grave?

*Why am I even considering saying yes? Am I a masochist? One husband was more than enough.*

“You don’t want to marry me.” She got to her feet. “I need to talk to King Merrick. How do I flag him down? Or do I just go in the water and wait until he comes to abduct me again? If that’s the case, can I borrow Shaw for a little while?”

“’Tis truth that I didnae say thus from any true desire to make you my wife,” Connal told her. “’Twas to protect you from the Finfolk. Or do you wish Merrick take away your memories of Caladh, the clan, his people and your life in the future? You’ll awake on the mainland, surrounded by strangers. You’ll forget all you now ken, even your own name.”

For a moment Valerie was very tempted to say yes to that. It was true that she knew very little about the medieval era in general, and almost nothing about Scotland in the twelfth century. If Merrick memory-wiped her she’d have no point of

reference at all; she'd just be there. Her accent would immediately brand her an outsider, and her unfamiliarity with how to do anything in this time might even get her into serious trouble. Being a woman without any family or support system didn't bode well for her chances to make a new life for herself anywhere, either. Still, the thought of having erased all the pain and guilt she has suffered over the last year seemed like the ultimate one-shot permanent anti-depressant.

*Do I want to forget Dale that badly?*

As she thought of all that, a deep, dull pain spread in her chest. Aside from the last year of their marriage she had only wonderful memories of her husband. Dale had proposed to her at his favorite fancy French restaurant, unexpectedly kneeling down in front of her to make a wildly romantic speech. Before presenting her with a white rose and a diamond solitaire engagement ring he'd assured her that she had become his reason for living. All the other diners had applauded when she'd accepted, and their server had brought out a beautiful cake and champagne. She had been young and thrilled and so much in love that Dale's proposal had kept her dreamy-eyed and smiling for days afterward.

*Ten years later I became his reason for dying.*

Valerie looked up at the laird. Connal needed a new wife as much as she needed a new husband, but he wanted to protect her, or he would never have told Merrick such a ridiculous lie. If there existed some method she could use to bail them both out of this, that had to be her new priority.

"Can we hold off on the wedding for a while?" she asked, grimacing. "We still might find a way for me to return to the twenty-first century."

"'Tis tradition for mortals to hold the wedding feast within a moon." His mouth hitched. "Merrick shallnae wait much beyond that."

"That gives us twenty-nine and a half days." Valerie glanced at Joana's ring. "Since this brought me here, maybe there's some way to reverse the process. I was trapped in my car in the lake...that's it." She stood up and peered down at the

silvery shimmering surface of the pool and she kicked off her shoes. “This is fresh water, isn’t it? Like the loch behind the castle?”

Now he looked uneasy. “Aye, but ’tisnae the same. *Valerie.*”

She had assumed a lot of things about the little pool as she stepped into it, such as it would be cold but only a few feet deep. As it closed over her head she nearly gulped in a lungful of the warm, bubble-frothed water. A second later strong arms seized her and pushed her up to the surface.

“Go you mad?” a dripping-wet Connal demanded.

“I can’t believe how deep this is.” Even when she stretched out her toes she couldn’t touch the bottom. “Is it a well? Shouldn’t you keep it covered? Kids might fall in and drown.”

“’Tis a fairy pool.” He tugged her closer, and pulled up her arms to wind them around his neck. “My sire created them as amusements. They’re all warded against bairns.”

Valerie sighed as the heat of his body and the water sank into her. “He thought it was fun to drown the grown-ups?”

Connal brushed the wet hair out of her face. “Fae enjoy trysts out of doors. The prince brought his mortal wives here at night so they might bathe together.”

“It’s a magical hot tub?” She could sense the tension relaxing from his muscles now, and hers had already turned into gelatin. At the same time a strange urgency suffused her from the waist down. “Okay. Now I understand. We should, ah, get out of here.”

“Wait,” he murmured, and took hold of her right hand, plunging it back into the water. “Make a wish to return to your time.”

Right this moment she didn’t want to go anywhere, and couldn’t stop herself from stroking the back of his neck. “Please take me back to the twenty-first century. Wait, there’s something happening. What...ow, ow, ow, too hot.”

He yanked her hand out of the pool. “Does the water burn you?”

“No, the ring did.” She checked her finger, which had turned a light pink, but at least the ring had gone cold again. “I don’t think this is going to work. Maybe we should try the loch, unless that’s enchanted, too.”

“Valerie.” When she looked into his eyes he pressed her against him. “Fae ever long for trysts with mortals. Male Fae especially crave beautiful females. This pool inflames such desires.”

“Well, you’re only half-Fae, so...oh.” The weight of his erection pressed against her belly. “You’re half-human, too, remember?”

“I cannae forget.” He bent his head, almost close enough to kiss her. A second before he did he put his mouth next to her ear and murmured, “Behind me.”

Valerie saw the man standing in the shadow of an oak tree. He didn’t have scales like Merrick, but he was bare-chested, and wore the same close-fitted trousers. Instead of a pendant he had on a wide bracelet made of gleaming, interwoven violet and gold links.

“What want you, Jamaran?” Connal asked in a louder voice.

The Finfolk man moved like a cat as he approached the pool, and placed what looked like a huge clamshell on the rocks at the edge. “Our king bid me bring his wedding gift for your lady, Lord MacMar.”

Looking into the man’s face made Valerie blink, for he had the stunning looks of a teen heart throb, and the eyes of a cold-blooded killer. He also appeared to be much younger than his king, probably still in his teens.

“Please tell King Merrick I appreciate the, ah, present,” she said.

Jamaran bowed his head, locked his gaze with Connal’s for a long moment, and then left as silently as he had arrived.

“Merrick gives food as gifts?” she said, easing out of the laird’s arms and paddling over to the side. To avoid another clinch she hoisted herself out of the pool, and bumped the edge of the clamshell, which opened and spilled a huge swath of pink beads onto the moss. She picked up one and held it up as she saw its soft, rosy glow. “Oh, my. They’re pearls. What a wicked gift.”

“’Tisnae evil,” Connal said, looking bewildered. “Ffolk covet pearls over every other gem.” He glanced down at the pile. “’Tis enough to pish their whole settlement.”

“But pished means drunk.” She’d learned that much of Scottish slang, and when he nodded she asked, “Do the Ffolk make some kind of liquor out of pearls?”

The laird scooped up a handful. “No. They eat them. Pearls bestow bliss of uncommon depth and duration on their kind.”

Valerie put down the pearl she was holding. “Okay, but I’m not going to eat them.”

“They pish only Ffolk males, and ’tis their coin as well. For payment of a single small pearl they’d toil a day.” He began scooping the gems back into the shell. “In truth, Merrick gifted you a fortune in the eyes of his men.”

“I’m still not sure what that means, if anything,” she admitted.

He closed the clamshell and placed it in her hands. “He’s made you rich in the eyes of his people. With your fair coloring and beauty, any Ffolk male would fight for the right to transform you and take you as mate. I reckon Merrick also shall make this gift known to everyone in the bay.”

“Why would he make me an heiress?” Suddenly she got it. “This is a warning.”

“Aye.” Connal’s cold eyes warmed with respect. “Should we choose no’ to wed, every Ffolk male without a mate shall come for you and your fortune.”

She imagined being dragged off into the water by a bunch of Merricks fighting over her. “How many Ffolk males are there out there?”

“Too many.” He cradled her hands with his. “If we cannae return you to your time, my lady, I think we must wed, and soon.”

Valerie had an image of Dale waiting for her at the altar. Her husband had been Episcopalian, so she had agreed to the church wedding he’d wanted. As she’d repeated the traditional vows, she’d cringed a little, because she didn’t share his religious beliefs. Yet they had actually remained married until death had parted them. He’d chosen to die rather than stay married to her. Now the laird was proposing.

*He’s handsome, and he tries to be kind, but we’re both still in love with dead people.*

She met his gaze. “We still have a couple of weeks. Let’s find a way to send me back.”



WAVES CRASHED AGAINST THE SIDES OF THE BOAT AS FIACAIL emerged from the deck cabin to see most of her sisters huddled under the stern’s upper deck. Most looked pale and wan from spending their first day at sea discreetly puking in the hold, which now stank. A few of the hardier Cait Sith attended to the work of sailing the large vessel, thanks to the sailors they had abducted, killed and taken on their shapes and memories. None of them looked happy, and when sea water sprayed them they hissed and swore.

Speal staggered over from the rail, wiping her mouth on her sleeve. “Our princess yet sleeps?”

“Aye. She bid me no’ rouse her until nightfall.” She inspected her sister’s rough garb. “You need a bathe and a change.”

“I need a cleaver and a bucket of fish to hack to pieces—or a mortal. Did you bring any mortals?” When Fiacail shook her head Speal’s gaunt mortal face twisted with displeasure. “Dearg refuses come on deck. You should kill her now.”

Suspecting she was right, Fiacail shook her head. “She’s the only one who’s lived on the northern isles. I’ll attend her.”

Opening the hatch, Fiacaíl climbed down the ladder into the top level of the hold. Clusters of Cait Sith too sickened to work lay moaning in the shadows, while one small, plump figure paced back and forth between them. She resembled a pretty young lass, her favorite type of mortal to murder, and wore silk skirts heavily flounced with lace that swirled with every step.

Stepping into her path, Fiacaíl folded her arms. “Must you?”

“Go away, Sister.” Dearg produced one of her namesakes, a dagger of uncommon beauty with a jeweled hilt. “Unless you wish me gut you where you stand. No, wait. Stay. I shall gut you. ’Twill improve my mood.”

“Do you reckon the princess should reward you for ending me?” She snatched the blade out of her small hands. “Stop making such a fuss. ’Tisnae as if any of the rest of us wish go sailing.”

Dearg sidled up to her. “Drop me at the next port. Truly. I need stab something a great many times.”

“Aye, and we need that.” Fiacaíl tapped the underside of her chin with the tip of the knife. “Our lady sovereign means to slay the MacMar Clan when we find them. You shall have all the big, strapping mortals to hack apart that you desire.”

“They’re half-mortal like us, and harder to end. ’Twill prove tiresome.” Dearg pouted for a moment. “Why doesnae our lady ken where the clan hides? She’s full blood Fae, and an enchantress. Cannae she cast a spell to find and kill them?”

“Her magic, ’tisnae the same in the mortal realm.” That much Fiacaíl knew, for she had already witnessed Derdruí’s frustration when she had attempted a seeking spell, only to watch her power spread in a thin mist before vanishing on the sea winds. “Whatever protective spell Mar cast, ’tis faded. You ken the islands, aye? On which would the MacMar seek refuge?”

The little Cait Sith held up a finger. “I dwelled on one isle. One. ’Twas when I favored hunting Pritani. I’ve no’ returned

since the last tribe died out.”

Fiacail knew her small sister liked to roam, but seldom did she stay long where she had no sport. “What killed them?”

“I did. ’Tis a facking cold place, and after I finished butchering their sheep and cattle I grew bored.” Dearg glanced at the weathered planks above them. “She wakes now. I can hear her claws splintering wood. You truly didnae bring any mortals?”

Fiacail grabbed Dearg by the nape and carried her up the ladder, ignoring her furious yowls as she marched into the deck cabin with her. In the shadows she saw the glowing red eyes of the enchantress, and dropped on her knees while forcing her smaller sister to do the same.

“You rise early, my princess,” Fiacail said, keeping her voice soft and low. “We’ve left the mainland and now make for Yetland, ah, the Island of Cats—”

“Insii Cait,” Dearg muttered.

“Insii Cait,” Fiacail echoed quickly. “We should reach the island on the morrow, and there we shall question the ferrymen and fishers.”

For a long time Derdruí said nothing, and simply watched them. Slowly the red glow of her eyes shifted slowly into the brilliant jewels of her mortal form. Only then did she step out of the darkness, her tall, voluptuous body wrapped in the linen from the captain’s bed. She walked over to loom over them both, and nudged Dearg with her bare toes.

“I remember this little beast,” the enchantress said. “Stand and behold your sovereign, Runt.”

Dearg shook off Fiacail’s hand and planted her feet before she straightened and glanced up at Derdruí. Her small bottom lip trembled, but she wisely made no sound.

“You look as if you wish to make a request of me.” The Fae made a languid gesture. “You may speak.”

“I wish kill something,” the small Cait Sith said.



“In your honor, of course, Princess,” Fiacail added quickly. “We should also secure a supply of live mortals for your pleasure before we reach Insii Cait.” She regarded her small sister. “’Tis another island closer to the mainland, aye?”

Dearg nodded. “Insii Orc, ’tis much closer.”

“The isle of pigs? You wish me stop for pigs?” Derdrui demanded. “Have you any notion in your thick half-mortal skull how repulsive it is for me to abide in this realm, even here, where the air is clean and free of the stench of mortals? Now you would land me in a pigsty?”

Before Fiacail could retract the suggestion the little Cait Sith laughed merrily.

“Oh, my princess, you havenae changed. The realm, ’tis one enormous sty, for all mortals, they’re pigs. ’Tis why they’re so skilled raising the four-legged kind.” Dearg gestured toward the porthole. “From here ’tis another day before we reach Insii Cait, yet we’re but a few hours from Insii Orc. Permit us dock and question their sailors.”

Derdrui frowned. “You said you wished to kill something.”

“There I shall, and bring some back to the boat as well. They’ll be yours to feast upon, or torment, or whatever may give you pleasure.” She drew her favorite weapon, and spun it through her clever little fingers. “Shall I hobble them for you, or do you want stretch your legs a bit?”

For a moment a flash of red passed through the enchantress’s eyes. Then her full lips curved into a sweet smile.

“I like the way you think, Runt. A pity you were not born full-blood Fae.” Derdrui regarded Fiacail. “Make for this island of pigs.”

## Chapter Eight



Valerie refused to keep Merrick's gift in her chamber, so Connal agreed to place the dawn pearls in the clan's treasury. That required him to seek out Fletcher, who had retreated to the prince's scroll room to make use of the instruments with which he kept the stronghold's ledgers.

"Aye, my lord, I'll lock away the gift," the seneschal said without looking up from the accounts he was writing.

Connal saw how stiffly he held his shoulders, and knew his youngest brother was deliberately ignoring him. He dropped the clamshell in front of him on the desk, scattering a few pearls that spilled out. "Do that now."

Fletcher lifted the edge of the shell, saw the hoard, and quickly stuffed the errant pearls back into it before regarding him with wide eyes. "'Tis a facking king's fortune."

"'Twas a facking king's gift." Connal watched him empty a box of parchment fragments before stowing the shell inside. "I need your help with another matter. Mistress Baker doesnae wish wed me."

Fletcher closed his eyes for a moment. "How may I serve?"

"You dinnae wish console me?" Connal asked, raising his brows. "The lady refused me. Without hesitation. I'm the laird and she refused me."

"May I speak as your brother, my lord?" When he nodded the seneschal's expression turned grim. "For love of our sire, pull your head out from your arse. Valerie Baker, she's lovely

and kind and so brilliant even speaking with her makes my head ache. Any man among the clan or the Finfolk should count his stars fortunate to snare her interest, much less her heart. Now tell me, why should she spare even a glance for a brooding, foul-tempered mute so drowned in melancholy he hardly emerges from his bedchamber once a moon? Even if he calls himself laird.”

He took a step back. “I’m no’ a mute.”

“Since she came, aye, you’ve found your tongue on occasion.” Fletcher folded his arms. “Yet what more do you to secure the lady’s affection? Do you seek her out? Listen to her worries? Do anything which brings her happiness? Do you even ken how Mistress Baker spends her time each day?”

“How, then?” Connal demanded.

Fletcher rose from his stool. “Come with me.”

He followed the seneschal to the west tower, which provided a view of the bay and the forest beyond it. Although his stomach clenched as they mounted the stairs, Connal refused to give in to his mortal weakness.

“Dinnae worry, I shallnae force you stand atop the battlements.” Fletcher stopped, pushed him back against a wall, and then lifted the window covering opposite him.

Through the narrow slit Connal could see the whole of the walking labyrinth, and Valerie, who was following the stone path with slow, thoughtful steps. Although they were too far away for him to make out her expression, the way she held herself appeared very different.

“Since I showed the walk to the lady and explained the labyrinth’s purpose, she goes there each afternoon,” Fletcher told him. “Indeed, she spends the better part of two hours or more walking and thinking. Much preys on her mind, I reckon. Sometimes Jamaran comes and watches her from the cove.”

Connal stiffened. “He wouldnae dare take her from the island against her will.”

“The lad’s no fool. Yet he watches, and I’ll wager soon he’ll speak with the lady. She’s beautiful and lonely, Brother,

while he's a strong, handsome warrior with rank and wealth—and no mate.” The seneschal sighed. “Jamaran may seem a cold, pitiless prick, but 'tis more to him he keeps hidden. Shaw watches the lady as well. As does Duncan, and most of our garrison. She's a rare beauty.”

“'Tis any man who doesnae desire Valerie?” Connal muttered.

“Aye. Nyall, of course, and me.” Fletcher uttered a sour laugh. “I dinnae desire a wife, nor possess the time to give that gentle lady the care she deserves. Although if someone doesnae soon claim her, I may hand my position over to Shaw.”

The thought of his senior chieftain running the stronghold made Connal wince. “Remain my seneschal, I beg you.”

“Then return the boon of my service and attend that woman before Merrick steals her or declares war against the clan.” He nodded as Connal stared at him. “'Tis coming, Brother, and 'twill end the truce. When that happens...”

He watched Fletcher shaking his head as he walked back down the stairs, but remained where he was to watch Valerie. She had made her way through half of the paths, but had stopped and crouched down to touch the carvings on one of the stones. With the sunlight streaming over her she resembled Eilonwy, his sire's long lost woodland princess wife, who legends claimed had been the gentlest and kindest of the Fae. Everything Fletcher had said, Connal realized, was truth.

*We still have a couple of weeks. Let's find a way to send me back.*

That Valerie had rejected his offer to wed had needled Connal, but now the thought of another claiming her made him angry. Had he not saved her from the sea, and Merrick? Made her welcome at Dun Ard? Surely becoming his wife would be a better life for her than what any other man could offer.

Connal managed to go down the stairs without growing dizzy, and then left the stronghold and made his way to the labyrinth. There he saw Valerie now sitting by the carved stone

in the path's center. Something moved in the trees near the cove beyond the Finfolk's shell path, which he imagined was Jamaran retreating. Then he saw shadows on a nearby rock cliff move like a black waterfall flowing in the wrong direction, and knew his brother had been there.

*Shaw watches the lady as well.*

For a moment he was tempted to step aside to permit his senior chieftain the chance to woo Valerie. Shaw's handsome face and charming ways never failed to steal the heart of any woman. Yet while he frequently bedded willing mortal females around the island, Shaw never allowed anyone into his heart. Then, too, his brother had been twisted in some dreadful fashion during his years with the Pritani bastards that had enslaved him. Something terrible, Connal sensed, had changed him into something more than merely a dangerous warrior. Wedding Valerie might heal Shaw at long last.

*He cannae take her from me.*

Connal didn't understand the sudden and ferocious rush of possessiveness, especially as his heart had remained frozen since Joana's death. Even now he could freely admit he had no love to offer the lady from the future. Yet some part of him could not bear the prospect of losing her to another.

*I neednae love her to wed her.*



STARING AT THE PICTOGRAPHS CHISELED IN THE STONES LINING the MacMar side of the labyrinth didn't help Valerie make sense of them. For the first time since puberty she hated her logical mind; if she had an ounce of creativity she might have figured out what falling stars, weirdly-shaped fish and a man covered from head to toe with wavy hair symbolized.

*Falling stars are just meteors. Blobfish probably exist somewhere here. Maybe the islanders in ancient times didn't like haircuts.*

Not knowing things annoyed her deeply. She knew Connal hadn't told her all of the story about Fletcher punching Merrick; he'd chosen his words too carefully. Something was

worrying the senior men and the rest of the clan—something worse than the Finfolk king grabbing her and dragging her off. She did understand where she sat on the medieval importance scale; the MacMar barely knew her, and she was a woman, which in medieval times meant lifelong child-bearer and unpaid drudge. Then she recalled how the men had stared at Connal from behind as he walked past them.

*This is about the laird and me, but why? Is it because they already knew about the marriage proposal? Do they resent me for forcing him into making one? Or am I endangering him somehow?*

Again, she didn't know, and it frustrated her. Not wanting to give herself another tension headache, she leaned against the stones and traced her fingertips over the etched shapes. Meteors had been falling to earth ever since the planet formed, and primitive people always saw them as omens of some kind. Maybe a few landed on the island, and caused the fish to mutate, and everyone stopped cutting their hair.

Drowsy now, Valerie pillowed her head on the arm she'd propped on the wall, and wondered not for the first time if she'd simply gone crazy.

In her mind's eye she saw the etching of the man covered in hair again, but this time he was a glowing blue and green figure made of waves of sea water standing beside her in the labyrinth. Day had changed to night, and she couldn't see the stones or the castle anymore. That was when she realized the labyrinth had vanished, too, and she was simply sitting on top of the ocean.

*It's only a dream.*

Very slowly a handsome face formed in the water-shaped man, one that reminded her of Shaw. Instead of sitting down beside her his body shape flowed from a standing position to a seated one. No fear came over her as he reached out to touch one of the curls by her cheek, and a trickle of water slid down her face.

“You're Prince Mar, aren't you?” she murmured, fascinated.

Instead of replying he lifted his arm and pointed at the ocean.

When Valerie looked out she saw bright lights streaming down from the sky. As they broke through the clouds they actually slowed, and then hovered before plunging into the sea. Huge fountains of displaced water and steam shot up from the different points of impact, and a strange silvery-green glow spread out beneath the surface. Before it disappeared she made out darker silhouettes shaped like the weird fish.

The water beneath her began to rock slightly, and turned from wet and cold to hard and warm.

Valerie couldn't see the prince or anything now, but the darkness gradually lightened from black to gray, and she knew she was being carried. She must have fallen asleep sitting in the labyrinth, and Fletcher or Shaw had found her. The strong arms cradling her gave her a sense of being safe, and she sighed and nestled closer to the muscular wall under her cheek. As soon as she woke up she would apologize to whoever it was, and go back to her chamber and take a real nap.

The scent of moss and leaves teased her nose, and the brightness on the other side of her eyelids dimmed.

"Sorry." She yawned and opened her eyes to see she was sitting under a huge willow tree with Connal, who was holding her on his lap. She couldn't see the labyrinth or the castle, and she didn't recognize the forest around them. "Where are we?"

"'Tis a quiet spot." He looked down at her. "Sleep."

With his big, bulgy thighs pressing against her bottom? Like that would happen.

"I'm wide awake now." When she tried to move his arms tightened around her. "Don't you have to get back to the castle, and do whatever it is lairds do all day?"

"Shaw and Nyall and Fletcher do the work of the laird. I remain in my bed chamber most days and nights. 'Tis easier than facing them and pretending I'm hale and well and 'tis

naught amiss with me.” His hand moved idly up and down her arm. “I’m no’ like you, my lady. I’m a coward.”

“You lost your wife. You’re allowed to grieve a little.” She wondered just how brave he thought she was. “After my husband killed himself, I couldn’t sleep. I’d lay there for hours, but instead of sleeping I sat in a front row seat to relive all my memories of him. It’s horrible.”

Connal closed his eyes. “Aye.”

Valerie should have been able to read his mind, and find out his intentions, but she realized that despite being on his lap she couldn’t access his thoughts. After puzzling over it for a few minutes she hit on what was different: his trousers and gloves were made of thin leather. That and the wool tunic and tartan he wore prevented any skin-to-skin contact. Carefully she reached up to touch his cheek, only to have her wrist grabbed halfway there.

The laird opened one eye. “’Tisnae polite to steal the thoughts of others without their leave, my lady.”

“I wouldn’t steal them. I thought I’d just take a peek.” She lowered her hand back into her lap. “But you’re right. Sorry.”

“I’m pondering if I shall walk you back to the stronghold, or take you round the island,” Connal said. “’Tis much beauty here you’ve yet to behold. Ken you how to ride?”

“On horseback?” When he nodded she made a face. “I never learned. Probably because horses are very big animals, and scare me.”

“Dinnae fret.” His mouth curved. “You’re a strong walker?”

“As a teacher I spend most of the day on my feet. I also hike a couple days a week.” She patted her thigh. “Even Dale couldn’t...keep up with me.” It seemed wrong to mention her husband so casually, and yet she didn’t experience a single pang of guilt.

“Nor Joana with me.” Connal stood, helping her to her feet at the same time. “Come, then. The Stone forest, ’tisnae far from the stronghold.”



“You have a forest made of stone?” Valerie couldn’t help asking as she followed him along a path different from the one that led to the castle.

“Oak trees that turned from wood to stone,” he told her. “Just after my sire died our woodsmen discovered the place. We’ve never reckoned what caused such change, but ’tis stood for better than a thousand years.”

Once they emerged from the forest the land began to gradually slope upwards. Wide, sweeping glens of beautifully tall, lush grasses hemmed both sides of the trail, and here and there Valerie spotted more small ponds lined with sparkling stones.

“Are those fairy pools, too?” she asked the laird, who nodded. “Your father must have really liked bathing.”

“’Tis hundreds scattered over the island. The prince couldnae abide staying long away from water,” Connal told her. “’Twas the source of his power, and the only ease the mortal realm provided him. When we lived on the mainland he’d swim the loch every day, and bid his vassals keep a tub filled in his chamber all night, so he might bathe whenever he wished. My brothers and I, we share his love of water, but no’ the same need.”

That reminded her of another question she had yet to ask. “I know that the Finfolk can breathe air as well as water, but how long can they stay on land?”

“If they’re accustomed to emerging, some hours,” the laird said. “The knack for them requires practice. Those who rarely leave the sea cannae long remain above.”

As soon as they reached the top of the grassy hills Valerie stopped to admire the wide plateau stretching toward the base of some mountain ridges. At one side stood a small, dark cluster of large trees that had pale leaves. None of them moved, but some birds slowly glided overhead before landing on their black branches. She also spotted what seemed to be an oval of tombstones in the center of the still trees.

She thought of Dale's grave, which she had marked with a bronze plaque engraved with only his full name and birth and death dates. "That's not a cemetery, I hope."

"No. A Pritani tribe served as my sire's first mortal vassals." He nodded at the circle. "They carved and set such stones for holding their Naming and Choosing rituals there."

The closer they walked to the stone forest, the more astonishing details Valerie saw. The trees themselves only vaguely resembled the living variety, and appeared as if they had been sculpted out of gleaming, angular obsidian. Their leaves turned out to be both white and transparent, like streaked ice that had been cut and polished like a gem. Nestled between some she saw tiny acorns the same color as Dun Ard's gold stones.

The mild temperature began to suddenly drop, until Valerie had to tuck her hands under her arms to keep them warm. When Connal stopped at the edge of the fossilized forest so did she, although she had a strange urge to keep going until she reached the ritual stones in the center. Then out of the corner of her eye she thought she saw a squirrel, but when she turned to look, she saw the animal, like the trees, appeared to be carved from black stone. From there she spotted other animals—an owl, several terns and even a little mouse sticking its head out of a hole in some roots—that had been made from stone.

*Not made*, Valerie thought, recalling what Connal had said. *Something turned them*. "What do you think happened to this place?"

"Fletcher believes 'twas a curse cast by a melia," he said. "They're woodland Fae who dwell inside trees, and my sire brought many to the island to protect them as well. Woodland and water elementals among the Fae often choose each other as mates."

"Like the prince and his first wife." She was beginning to understand now. "Didn't Derdruí murder her before your father came to our world?"

“Aye, but many melia greatly admired Prince Mar.” Connal’s gaze grew distant. “After Princess Eilonwy died they fled to the mortal realm with him, and ever looked after him. When he ended himself in the sea, I reckon all the melia on the island came to this forest to do the same.”

“So they’re in there? They turned to stone, too?” When he shrugged she took a step toward the nearest black tree. “Can I touch them?”

“Would you wish hear the thoughts of a melia trapped for a thousand years?” Connal countered.

“On second thought, maybe not.” She frowned. “Is that why you brought me here? So I could find out if these tree Fae are still alive?”

“No, my lady.” He gestured at the trees. “Melia, they’re kind and gentle creatures, so other Fae think them weak. I remember them from my boyhood, and they ever seemed to me fiercely loyal to the prince. My sire’s death didnae turn them to stone. Grief did. Yet it couldnae bring him back. It couldnae change what he did. You should think on such.”

“You think I’m like them? That I’ve turned myself to stone over my dead husband?” She nearly slapped him. “What have you done to yourself since your wife died, Laird MacMar? That bed chamber of yours is no different than these trees.”

“I’m old and half-Fae.” He sounded tired rather than angry like her. “You’re young and mortal. Your life, ’twill be brief.”

“I understand. Because your father was Fae you’re allowed to grieve until you die or turn to stone or the end of time, but I’m not. I’m just an idiot full mortal who should get on with her brief life. Okay, then. Maybe Merrick will still be willing to turn me into a big fish.” She turned on her heel and marched back to the trail.

Connal’s hand caught her wrist to stop her. “’Twasnae what I meant, Valerie.”

She yanked her arm free, and suddenly the truth came pouring out of her. “Before my husband drowned himself, he had an affair with a girl twenty-two years younger than him.

He also squandered most of the money we'd been saving up so we could afford to have a child together. I didn't know he just wanted to have good times and adulterous sex with a kid."

Connal reached out to her, and then seemed to think better of it. "I didnae ken. Forgive me."

"Dale's teenage lover blamed me for driving him to kill himself. She screamed at me at his funeral in front of all our friends." The headache she'd been trying to avoid began pounding at her temples. "A year later that child was still so upset she knocked my car into the lake where I nearly drowned. The only thing I did to deserve all that was being the wife of a depressed man who didn't love me. Sound familiar?"

The laird flinched. "I wouldnae cause you any suffering, my lady."

"And yet, you brought me here to lecture me on my grief." Valerie took in a deep breath. "I don't know the story with you and your wife, but I would never tell you how you should deal with her death. I'd never presume to tell you how to live. Don't you dare do this to me again."

She walked off before he could see the tears in her eyes.

## Chapter Nine



**D**uncan finished pouring the aromatic mixture he'd made into clean crocks, and began carving stoppers for them out of solid beeswax. The salve would provide ease for their older vassals during the next fall and winter, when the colder winds would cause their swollen joints to stiffen. Most of the remedies he made came from centuries of experience treating the mortals who served the clan, so he had complete faith in the salve. Knowing he could never take away all their pain, however, made him again wish he could hand his position and the work of healing over to another.

*'Tisnae enough.*

A knock sounded on the door, and when he bid the visitor enter, Valerie Baker came marching into his infirmary.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Healer, but do you have any aspirin?" At his blank look she pressed her fingertips to her temple. "Sorry, no, ah...some willow bark, maybe? Do you have to chew that?"

"Mayhap you should first tell me what ails you," he suggested.

"Your laird ails me. His gigantic ego really ails me. Being stuck on an island in the twelfth century with both of them completely ails me." Valerie moved restlessly around the chamber, stopping briefly in front of the cabinet he always kept locked. "Obviously all that put me in a very bad mood, and now I'm in pain."

Duncan gestured to a stool, and when she sat down he brought over a candle and looked into her eyes. "'Twas truly a mood? You didnae fall?"

"No, I'm simply very upset about things I'll never be able to change, and that makes my head hurt." She glanced at his hands. "If you put on gloves I won't be able to read your mind. I just discovered that my new superpower requires skin contact."

"An interesting boon." He pulled on the thin leather gloves he wore while handling hot crockery and tilted up her chin to survey her color. The flush of her cheeks matched her lips, which suggested her temper was not feigned. "Connal hasnae aggravated anyone in some time."

"Spend a few hours with him, and you'll have to revise that statement." As he went to his cabinet she sighed. "I really don't understand why I'm so upset with him. I hardly know the man, and he's certainly not interested in me."

Duncan wondered if either of them knew how their expressions changed the moment they saw each other. "Since you came to Caladh I've seen my brother more oft in the last week than I've done the past year. I cannae believe 'tis because Cook's pottage has improved."

"Shaw thinks I should go to bed with the laird." She uttered a helpless chuckle and shook her head. "That must be the answer to all of *his* problems."

"I cannae tell you. The chieftain, he's no' inclined to confide in anyone." He added some herbs and honey to a mug before filling it with some warm water, and stirred the mixture. "You shouldnae trifle with Shaw, Mistress. No' that I reckon you would," he added quickly when she glared at him.

"I don't want to trifle with anyone on the island," Valerie assured him, and when he brought the mug to her peered inside and sniffed. "What's this? Some kind of ale?"

"'Tis a cure for your aching head." He placed it in her hands. "Drink."

She took a sip, made a face, and then downed the remainder. "I'm not a huge fan of the taste or the grittiness, but the sweetness helps a little. Really, though, what did you put in this? It tastes like herbal holiday ale."

"'Tis an infusion of hops, chamomile, yarrow, honey, and some mint," Duncan told her. "'Twill calm and soothe away your pain. Resting in your chamber with the lights out and window coverings drawn should help as well."

"Good advice." She handed back the empty mug. "What's in the big cabinet over there?"

"A collection of sorts. Might I ask your aid in return, my lady?" When she nodded he picked up his medicine satchel. "We must go to the kitchens."

From the infirmary he led Valerie down to the scullery, where the sound of a bairn crying reached them in the passage. He stepped into the storage room, where Lachina walked trying to soothe her infant son.

"Och, Healer, I'm glad you've come." The kitchen maid's under-shadowed eyes and drooping shoulders provided testimony to her sleepless night. "Wee Clydie refuses feed, and hasnae slept now twoday." She saw Valerie and bobbed. "Forgive me, Mistress."

Duncan leaned close. "The lad cannae tell me or his mother what plagues him. He doesnae suffer the colicus. Mayhap you might read his thoughts."

"May I?" When she held out her arms Lachina handed her the squalling bairn, whom she cradled close. From the change in her expression, she knew at once what was wrong with the lad. "Hey, there, little one. Oh, yes, this is terrible, isn't it? I know."

Duncan watched closely as Valerie cooed to the bairn, and stroked his cheek gently with her fingertips. Gradually he quieted, and then stared up at her with drowsy eyes.

Valerie carried him over to the cradle where he slept while his mother worked, and unwrapped his soiled swaddling. That revealed a red, angry-looking rash between his legs. "Lachina,

do you have a clean one of these? Duncan, can you get some cool water and a soft cloth?"

He fetched a bowl and a clean rag from the kitchen, and when he brought it back Valerie used it to gently bathe the bairn while explaining to Lachina how often to change his swaddling.

"It's important to keep a baby's bottom clean and dry. Wipe him down every time you change him. You can remove his diaper while he naps and just keep it beneath him in the cradle. The air will help the rash to heal faster." Valerie glanced at him. "The healer should check on him, too."

As soon as she wrapped clean swaddling around him the lad closed his eyes and went to sleep.

The kitchen maid knuckled away some tears. "My thanks, my lady." She staggered over to the pallet next to the cradle, and lay down to watch her son. Valerie covered her with a blanket and then gestured for Duncan to follow her out, and led him into the great hall.

"You read the bairn's thoughts perfectly," he said, rather impressed by her ability.

"He has no language yet, so his thoughts are just images, which are blurry and confused," she told him. "I knew what bothered him by the smell of his swaddling."

A terrible thought occurred to him. "You've bairns of your own awaiting you in the future?"

"No, but as a teen I did a lot of babysitting. Is Clydie Lachina's first child?" When he nodded she tapped a finger against her chin. "It seems like she hasn't been changing or bathing him often enough. What she really needs is her mother to teach her how to take care of her son."

"Her *màthair* chose to leave Caladh a few days after Lachina's birth. She lives on the mainland, and doesnae remember her daughter." Duncan thought for a moment. "One of the older chambermaids with two daughters, she's fond of the lass. I shall ask her teach her proper care."



Valerie frowned. “Are there a lot of people who decide to go to the mainland?”

“Some wish to forget that which cast them here,” Duncan admitted. “A slaver ship that wrecked near Caladh brought Lachina’s *màthair* to us. She already carried her daughter, sired by one of her captors, and gave birth a day later. She didnae want Lachina, and so hated all men that Merrick wouldnae take her to join the Finfolk. The king showed her kindness by taking her memories and granting her wish to be returned to her family on the mainland.”

“As long as she agreed to that, maybe it was.” Her gaze strayed to one of the arches, where Duncan saw Nyall standing and watching them. “Why does that man always look like he wants to toss me off a cliff into the bay?”

Duncan thought the captain probably did. “’Tis his nature to suspect everyone outside the clan, Mistress.”

Valerie waved at Nyall. “I come in peace, Captain. Honestly, I mean you and the MacMar no harm. You can trust me not to steal the good silver. I hate polishing anything.”

The captain’s lips twisted, but he turned and walked away.

“He’s never going to join my fan club.” She gave Duncan a wry look. “So who’s next on your healing schedule?”



FROM THE GALLERY SHAW WATCHED THE HEALER LEAVE THE hall with Valerie. Doubtless Duncan would keep her busy helping him with his patients until the evening meal. That would give him time to track Connal, who had yet to return to the stronghold. Not since Joana’s death had his brother spent more than an hour outside, and yet today he had gone to the trysting pool and the Stone forest.

Even more interesting, the laird had taken Valerie with him—but only the lady had returned to the stronghold.

Shaw stopped at his chamber to don his protective armor, gloves and a heavy cloak before he headed for the petrified grove, where he found Connal’s boot prints and followed them

to the old Pritani ritual circle. He hated the sight of the stone ring, for the primitive carvings depicting the Gods and spirits reminded him too much of the years stolen from him by another, far more ferocious tribe. No one asked about his time enslaved anymore, probably because they now feared learning the truth.

The Pritani skinwork on his arm juddered slightly, reminding him to leash more tightly the darkness inside him.

Tracking Connal's path, Shaw ended up at the top of the ridge, where he could see the three valleys below. Two had been settled by crofters, and the third held bountiful apple, cherry, pear and plum orchards. How the laird had managed to climb so high without falling perplexed him, for his brother's mortal weakness made his brain tilt the moment he rose even a few steps above ground level. Then he glanced to one side and saw the fluttering corner of a tartan caught on some brambles below the ridge top.

Shaw swore as he hurried down to the thicket, in which lay the laird on his back, his hands folded on his chest as he stared up at the sky.

"I'm well," Connal told him without looking at him. "'Tis in truth a fine place to rest. I ken you'd come look for me."

"Aye, for the pig-headed arse I call my laird and brother needs a wet nurse of late." Glad he'd had the good sense to venture out well-protected, Shaw began yanking bramble canes aside. "You shallnae again leave the stronghold alone."

"I didnae yet make you laird," Connal reminded him as he tried to rise, winced, and lay back down. "I walked to the top of the ridge without aid."

"At least you possessed the good sense to fall down the sloped side, my lord," he told him, finally reaching the center of the patch and hoisting Connal out of the barbed trap. Once he'd carried him down the ridge, he set him on his feet and surveyed the damage. Hundreds of scratches covered the laird's body, and blood spotted every inch of his leine and trousers. "If you'd tumbled the other direction you might hold your head sideways now. What proved you by such?"

“I climbed the cliff stairs with Mistress Baker in my arms, and yet no’ a single wobble plagued me.” Connal wiped some blood trickling down his cheek. “’Twas reasonable try climbing a height again.”

“Your thinking and reason, they’ve yet made an acquaintance.” Shaw understood his desire, however, for he experienced the same every time he beheld forests, trees, and even wood rounds in need of chopping. “’Twas Mistress Baker put such a notion in your fool head?”

“I wish to show her the island. For that we must climb to the ridge pass.” He glanced back toward the stronghold. “She thinks me the same as the melia in the Stone forest.”

The similarity between his brother and the Tree Fae had never occurred to him, and yet in but a handful of days Valerie had seen it. “She’s shrewder than she looks, that lass. You should wed her.”

“I proposed such to her. She refused me.” As they walked toward the stronghold Connal remained silent, yet stopped in sight of the gates. “You ken much of the old Pritani magic. ’Tis a spell that may return Mistress Baker to her time?”

As he ever did when reminded of the NightRiver tribe, Shaw stiffened. “I’m no shaman.”

“Mayhap the druids, then.” The laird sighed. “They cannae come to Caladh, but you could sail to the mainland and make inquiries. ’Twas a settlement no’ far from Aberdeen.”

The moment any druid laid eyes on his skinwork, Shaw thought, they’d likely cast a spell to send him to oblivion. “I’m no leaving the island while you and Merrick remain at odds. Send Fletcher or Duncan.” He thought for a moment. “Couldnae the ferryman ken something?”

Mentioning the half-Fae hermit made Connal frown. The ferryman twice each year sailed for the mainland with a few clansmen and the goods the islanders wished to sell. He also brought them back after they purchased the few foods and goods, things the clan could not produce on Caladh, as well as new livestock for breeding purposes. Because the old hermit

disliked mortals as much as the clan, and refused to speak to anyone, no one knew his name or what he did the rest of the time. He lived on one of the tidal islets just large enough to accommodate his cottage and dock, and even the Finfolk avoided him.

“I shall visit him and ask,” the laird finally said. “At worst he will toss me into the bay.”

Shaw shook his head. “I shall accompany you. Bathe and change first.”

An hour later he went with Connal to the dock, and took a two-man skiff over to the tidal islet. Built along the lines of a birlinn, a small craft favored by Viking raiders, the lightweight wooden boat sliced through the shallow water between Caladh and the ferryman’s sanctuary. When they reached his short dock, Shaw eyed recent repairs made to the hull of the hermit’s much larger boat, which he rebuilt every century.

“Stay with the skiff,” the laird said. “’Tis best if I speak with him alone.”

Shaw jumped out onto the dock to tie off. “Shall I hide, then? He comes.”

The ferryman’s heavy, rotund body made the wood planks creak as he strode toward them. His halfling blood showed plainly in his pointed ears, clawed fingers and large black eyes, which Shaw saw burned with anger. At odds with his appearance, he smelled of a sea wind, crisp and clean. Beneath the dock the sea water began to churn.

“Forgive us for intruding, Ferryman,” Connal said, and bowed to him as if he were a prince instead of an oversize troll. “We’ve grave need of your wisdom.”

The halfling’s obsidian eyes narrowed, and he made a curt beckoning gesture before turning around and walking back to his cottage, into which he disappeared.

“We shouldnae plague the old fellow,” Shaw muttered.

The laird chuckled as he walked from the dock onto the tiny islet. “You yet believe those tales of the ferryman hanging

wee lads from his rafters to smoke them like hams? He eats fish and kelp.”

“How do you ken such?” Shaw demanded.

“’Tis how I pay him for ferrying,” Connal said, pausing to knock once on the cottage door before he opened it and stepped inside.

Shaw followed, but stopped in his tracks as soon as he saw the interior of the small dwelling. Shells of every size, shape and color paved the walls and floors, and large boxes of crystal held sea water and tiny reefs with live fish swimming about them. Clamshells as large as cart wheels had been perched atop driftwood legs and fitted with cushions of inky fabric. Other pieces, obviously salvaged from wrecked mortal vessels, had been remade and reused, like portholes set in the walls as windows and a large, dented iron caldron fashioned into a wash basin.

On a throne of still-discernable silver and gold coin, gems and weapons hammered into new shapes, the ferryman perched and regarded them as he might two diseased voles that had scuttled inside.

“Forgive us for disturbing you,” the laird said. “I ken how highly you value your solitude here. Yet we’ve a dilemma that, if no’ resolved, may lead to breaking the truce between the clan and the Finkfolk.”

The ferryman looked up at the ceiling, which he had paved with oyster shells.

“Can you speak, Ferryman?” Shaw demanded.

The ferryman closed his big eyes, rubbed them, and then said in a voice so deep and resonant it made the window coverings rattle, “Of course I can, lad. ’Tis the damage such causes I wish avoid. I can even kill with my voice, should someone annoy me enough.” He regarded the laird. “My name, ’tis MacLeir.”

Connal took a step back. “Your sire—”

“Returned to Elphyne long ago.” Some shells on the walls cracked, and the halfling’s lips curved. “My mortal weakness,

'tis my voice. Tell me your desire, quickly.”

“A lady came to the island from the far future,” Connal said without preamble. “She wishes return to her time, but we cannae aid her.”

“She the pretty one with the fair curls and odd garments?” MacLeir asked, and caught two oyster shells that fell from the now-shaking ceiling.

“Aye. Her name, 'tis Valerie Baker.” The laird related what had happened to her in the future and when she appeared in the bay before he added, “She’s refused to join the Finfolk, wed me, or live on the mainland. Ken you some spell or method to send her back through time?”

“I’ve no magic, curse my sire.” The ferryman sighed as plaster dust rained down on the three of them. “Follow me before the place collapses.”

Outside the cottage MacLeir led them to the edge of the dock before he asked Connal, “The woman, she yet wears the ring you forged?”

The weathered wood of the pier splintered in places.

“She cannae pry it from her finger,” the laird said, nodding.

“’Tis the spell,” the halfling told him, and caught a shard of wood that came flying off the dock. “The ring’s magic delivered her to you.”

“’Twasnae enchanted,” Shaw told him. “The MacMar cannae wield our sire’s spells.”

“The prince’s magic yet lingers in the waters here, lad, and words spoken even by half-Fae possess much power.” The sand rumbled under their feet with every word from MacLeir. “When you threw the ring into the sea, your sire granted your wish to love again.” A tree toppled over, and the ferryman grinned. “You neednae send away the pretty one, son of Mar. She’s meant to be yours.”



FIACAIL ENTERED THE DOCKSIDE TAVERN ON INSII ORC TO SEE if any of her sisters had yet awoken. The stench of death and burning flesh made her slightly wistful as she regarded the sprawled bodies of roughly-garbed sailors. Most made low thrumming sounds as they slumbered on, oblivious to the setting sun. Beyond them a pile of dead, naked bodies lay discarded in the back room. They, too, resembled the sleeping sailors as if their twins, but had been mauled, beheaded and chopped to pieces. Only Dearg remained in her small, feminine form, her gown so drenched with blood it still dripped. She sat perched by the big hearth as she idly plucked bits of gore from her bodice and flung them in the flames.

“Didnae you drink?” Fiacail asked her.

“Blood, aye. This wretched ale?” She kicked a bottle near her foot, sending it smashing into the far wall. “’Tis worse than horse piss.”

“Our sovereign shall soon awaken.” When that failed to coax a reaction from Dearg she went over and peered down into her eyes, noting the clean tracks in the scarlet spattering her face. “You’re weeping? What did you slay? A druid? A shaman?”

The smaller halfling sighed and pointed to a large barrel in the corner.

Fiacail went over and looked inside. What remained of several females who had been precisely butchered had been packed as neatly as if fish for brining. Then she saw the emaciated condition of their limbs, the yellow-brown splotches of old bruises, scabbed-over cuts and rings of raw flesh around the wrists and ankles. “You killed hoors?”

“Enslaved hoors.” Dearg joined her, and stared down at her handiwork. “The tavern keep had them chained in a shed, and starved them so they couldnae fight. For a ha’penny he let those sea-faring pigs do as they wished to them. I watched them until the others came.”

“And then you ended the pigs, aye?” Fiacail watched her slowly nod. “Sister, why should you weep over such...oh, no.”

“I drank from the enslaved,” the small woman screeched, her expression furious now. “Aye, and held them and stroked their hair and snapped their necks so ’twould be quick. Now they fill me with all their wretchedness.” She dragged in a breath and let it out slowly. “I need a beauty. High born. Adored. Pampered. I need her now.”

Unlike Fiacaíl, some of the Cait Sith like Dearg had the ability to lose the memories of the last mortal they slew and replace it by killing another.

“’Tis a large house at the end of town,” Fiacaíl told her quickly. “A rich merchant’s home, I reckon. They’ve barricaded themselves inside.” As Dearg brushed past her she almost followed, but then thought better of it.

The door to the tavern opened, slammed shut, and then fell off its hinges and crashed to the floor.

“I bid her leave them alone, but never shall she listen.” A tall sailor extracted himself from the pile of Cait Sith, shifted into the shorter, fatter Speal, and brought a lid over to cover the barrel. “You ken how she hates the taste of male mortals. Now her head’s filled with enslaved hoors’ memories.”

“She’ll find what she needs at the merchant’s house.” Fiacaíl glanced through the window. “Rouse these eejits and send them to the harbor master’s. I need hear what they learned before the enchantress awakes.” She glanced at the barrel. “Once they’re out, burn down the place.”

Outside the tavern a few stray mortals watched her from the spots where they’d hidden last night during the Cait Sith attack. The acrid odor of their fear tempted Fiacaíl to linger and dispatch them, but she knew she needed to glean her sisters’ collected memories in order to present something that would placate Derdruí. As she approached the squat stone tower from which the harbor master had ruled his tiny kingdom she wondered if she could lie to their sovereign lady.

*She shall smell the change in my sweat, or see the worry in my eyes, and take my head.*



Fiacail wondered, too, how the enchantress held such power over the Cait Sith. Since the first time they had gathered they'd all traded stories of how Derdruí had hunted and captured them, demonstrating her Fae power in terrifying ways before forcing them to swear an oath of loyalty to her. Those who had refused had vanished, never again to be seen.

In those days Fiacail had still lived with the mortal she had assumed to be her sire, a bad-tempered lowland blacksmith who had been far fonder of whiskey than her. He'd trained her to cook for him and look after his tumbledown cottage near the forge, and punished her harshly for the smallest mistake. Seeing the other girls in the village being well-treated by their sires had prompted her to one night ask her da why he hated her so much. He'd beaten her so badly with his fists Fiacail had thought she might die, only to wake up the next morning completely healed.

Her sire's reaction when he had crawled out of bed had been to beat her again, this time with a hammer. Those wounds had taken more than a week to vanish, but then Derdruí had found her, and taught her how to take proper vengeance.

Inside the tower Fiacail sniffed the air before going to the kitchens, where the harbor master's silver-haired wife sat at the table eating bannocks spread with jam. Across from her sat a plate of more and a steaming mug. As soon as she saw her she smiled.

"Come and break your fast, my lady," the mortal said, as if she were some honored guest instead of her husband's killer. "You didnae ask my name, but I'm called Agda."

Fiacail sat down with her and tried the bannocks, which were light and rather delicious. "You do ken I shall end you before we leave the island, Agda."

"Och, I expect so." The old woman fetched a kettle from the hearth and filled her mug with a fragrant brew. "Dinnae fret. Brodie never could give me a bairn to care for me in my old age, and all my sisters, they're gone, so 'tis likely for the best. I've lived twenty year more than my mam."

She grew fascinated by the old woman's calmness. "Doesnae death make you fearful?"

"'Twill be easier than life of late, I reckon." Agda added some honey to her brew. "I heard you last night with my husband. You seek the Clan MacMar, then?"

Fiacail reached out and caught her wrist, tugging her halfway across the table. "Tell me all, now, or I'll spit you."

The old woman chuckled as if she'd made a jest. "No' enough fat on me for proper roasting—unless you favor your meat charred." When she released her she rubbed her stomach and then sat down slowly, as if in pain. "Some captains come bribe Brodie to no' collect the dock fees, and split them so they may pocket half. They'd share a dram and speak of their journeys, and claim they found the clan and their enchanted island." She waved a hand. "'Twas all bluster and bragging, no' truth."

"How could you ken such?" Fiacail demanded.

"An old merchant came to see Brodie some time past," Agda said. "He asked the same as you, and claimed he'd married his daughter to the MacMar. She'd come to visit him and her mam on the mainland in spring and fall, and told him much of the place. He told my husband that none could see the enchanted island for the mist that surrounds the place. 'Tis hidden from the world by Fae magic."

Fiacail went still. "What 'twas the merchant's name?"

"Boec Arasgain." The old woman's mouth curved as she regarded her. "Seems his daughter came home one last time, only to jump from a cliff into the sea. The old merchant vowed to spend the rest of his days hunting the MacMar to seek vengeance. Later word came that his boat, 'twas caught in a terrible storm, and sank..."

Agda's voice faded away to a drone as Fiacail closed her eyes. Her greatest failure in service to the enchantress remained locked in her memory; nothing the old woman said would alter that. When she looked again across the table the

harbor master's wife had risen and stood by the hearth warming her gnarled hands.

"I shall permit you live," Fiacail told her.

"Dinnae lie, my beauty," Agda scolded as she walked over to the window overlooking her small, scraggly garden. "That dark and terrible one you brought here, she shall see all who yet breathe dead before you weigh anchor. 'Tis the way of your kind, eh?" She glanced over her shoulder. "I dinnae mind, I promise you. If you wish offer me a true boon, end me swiftly, and now, before the sun sets."

If only other mortals accepted their fate so easily, Fiacail thought as she rose from the table and went to stand behind the old woman. Resting her hands on her shoulders, she breathed in her scent, and caught a trace of something like rot. The sluggishness of Agda's pulse and the clamminess of her skin confirmed her suspicions.

"You're already dying," she murmured, surprised.

"The healer said before the next moon." Agda took hold of her hand and placed it against the soft mound of her belly, where a hard knot the size of an apple swelled just beneath the skin. "I watched my mam die of gut rot. She screamed for days and days. My thanks for sparing me the same."

Fiacail quickly bit her neck, drinking of her blood before she snapped her neck, and caught her before she hit the ballast stone floor. She knelt down and held her, watching her eyes until the last flicker of life died in them. As Agda's spirit emptied a rush of images poured into her, from the earliest, wordless memory of the old woman as a bairn in gentle arms to the conversation they'd just had. Among the many came the voices of the harbor master and Boec Arasgain, speaking about the MacMar. Those recollections joined all of those Fiacail kept in her head from the very first mortal she had slain.

"You shall ever live in me," she said, and kissed her brow.

## Chapter Ten



**A**fter spending the day assisting Duncan with his rounds Valerie had much more respect for medieval medical treatment. The healer had a surprising number of natural herbal remedies for a wide variety of common ailments, and demonstrated considerable experience in treating all types of wounds and injuries. Aside from some perplexing inexperience with young babies, Duncan seemed able to handle anything.

“You must be the equivalent of a naturopathic doctor in my time,” Valerie told him as they went back to the infirmary. “They prefer to treat patients with herbal medicines and homeopathy rather than conventional methods so the body can heal itself. My husband went to one for his indigestion and told me he’d never been better.”

“I cannae speak for other healers, but I learned much from a druid tribe we sheltered for a time long ago.” His steps slowed. “My thanks for your aid today, but you neednae return with me. You should go down for the evening meal.”

“I’m not in any hurry— Hey.” As Duncan suddenly staggered she caught his arm, and saw how pale he’d become. “What’s wrong? Are you sick?”

“We dinnae suffer sickness. I’m but weary.” He forced a smile. “I need only rest.”

“Duncan, you look like you’re ready to pass out.” She put her arm around him and helped him to the infirmary, where

she guided him to a stool. Without thinking she put her palm against his damp forehead.

A cacophony of cries and moans and weeping clamored inside her head as Duncan's pain-filled thoughts streamed through her. He cursed himself for being unable to hide his secret from her, and worried she would say something to the laird or one of the clan. He also needed to throw up, so she grabbed an empty bucket nearby and held it in front of him.

"What's wrong with you?" Valerie demanded once he'd emptied his stomach.

"'Tis my mortal weakness. When I touch someone ill or hurt, I endure their suffering for a time." His shoulders hunched. "Close the door, please, my lady."

By the time she came back to him she could think clearly again. The memory of the pain he carried inside him, however, left her sweaty and shivering, her stomach clenched in a tight knot. They had seen at least thirty people today, and while most had suffered only minor ailments, there had been a shepherd with a broken leg from a bad tumble, and a stable hand who had accidentally rammed a pitchfork tine through his foot while mucking out the stalls.

"You haven't told anyone about this?" When Duncan nodded she rubbed tears of reaction from her eyes. "Why keep it secret?"

"If the clan learned I suffer the same pain, sickness and fear of anyone whom I touch, they wouldnae permit me work as healer," Duncan admitted, rising and staggering over to the big mysterious black cabinet, which he opened by doing something to the complicated latch. From it he took out a small bottle, which shook in his trembling hand. "Someone must look after the hurt and sick."

She took the bottle from him and uncorked it, but she had to hold it to his lips so he could drink. "How long does it take before you recover?"

"'Twill end if I sleep the night." He started to sway on his feet. "Can you help me to the pallet?"

Valerie got him to the narrow rope bed, and used his tartan to cover him before finding a wool blanket. “What else can I do?”

“Dinnae tell anyone.” His dark blue eyes began to close. “Please, my lady.”

She stood by the pallet until he fell asleep, and then went over to pick up the bottle he’d drank from and sniffed it. It smelled like dirt-flavored alcohol, and she could see some kind of root stuffed inside the bottle. She replaced the cork and glanced at Duncan, who was breathing so slowly now his chest barely moved.

“I’ll just put this back, okay?” She waited for him to tell her not to, and then went over and tugged at the unlocked black doors.

Inside lay dozens of compartments in various sizes, like a giant curio cabinet. Some held bottles, small crocks, and crystals that glittered like jewels, while others had been fitted with little wood and iron doors. A few had small, bleached skulls and skeletons of animals she didn’t recognize, including one that looked like a baby mermaid. At the top ran a long, narrow shelf of cloth-covered objects bound with carved stones strung on some kind of dried vine with wrinkled golden berries. Valerie could smell herbs, salt, and something like rusting copper.

She peered at the neatly-lettered parchment labels Duncan had placed at the top of each compartment, but she couldn’t read the language in which he’d written them. “Is this Fae or something?”

One of the wood and iron doors creaked as it opened, and something inside glowed with a soft blue light that rippled as if reflecting off some water. She bent down to look inside, and the little door slammed shut in her face. A faint wisp of blue and green lights floated around her before winking out one by one.

Behind her the door to the infirmary opened, and as Valerie quickly closed the cabinet Fletcher stepped inside.

“Come with me, lass.” He gestured for her to follow him out into the hall, and once he closed the door he said, “Dinnae fret over him. ’Twill pass by morn.”

Valerie wondered if he’d seen her poking around the healer’s weird collection. “How do you know what happened to him?”

“I saw you holding Duncan and followed you here.” He sighed. “I ever come to check on him at day’s end and assure he’s taken his sleeping draught.”

As they went down to the great hall the seneschal explained that Connal and the senior chieftains all had known about Duncan’s problem since he’d become the clan’s healer. He refused to let another MacMar take his place, however, and to preserve his pride they had always pretended not to notice his suffering.

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” Valerie told him as they joined Shaw and Nyall at the dais table. “So everyone in the clan has some kind of weakness like that?”

“Aye, my lady. ’Tis a balance for the boons gifted by our Fae blood,” Fletcher said.

“Every gift has a price tag, I suppose.” She then noticed for the first time that the senior chieftain always wore gloves. “What happens when you touch something with your bare hands?”

“Naught, unless ’tis made of wood.” Shaw removed one glove and touched a fingertip to the edge of the table. A black spot appeared on the oak, and a small flame sprouted before he poured a little water to extinguish it. “I’m a living firesteel.”

“Goodness.” She then regarded Nyall, who calmly kept eating. “And you...on second thought, I don’t want to know. So Fletcher has face blindness, and Duncan is a pain sponge.” *With a very weird curio collection*, she added silently. “What’s the laird’s weakness?” As the men’s faces went stony she winced. “Not something we discuss. I’ll remember that.”

A bowl thumped down in front of Valerie, slopping a little pottage onto the table.

“Our lord’s refusing eat the meals I bring him.” Meg looked almost smug as she regarded the men. “I dinnae ken how long ’twill take the laundress soak the blood from his garments. Mayhap you should discuss what Mistress Baker’s done to him.”

“What blood?” Valerie dropped her spoon, but the maid just stalked off.

“Connal’s hurt?” Fletcher looked astounded.

Nyall was already on his feet. “I’ll wake Duncan.”

“He’s only scratched,” Shaw said, swatting at the air in a dismissive gesture. “He fell from the ridge into the brambles. By now he’s recovered.”

The captain sat back down. “Why didnae you fetch the healer?”

“Our brother wouldnae wish Duncan suffer on his behalf.” The chieftain gave Valerie a shrewd look. “He’d welcome a visit from you, I reckon, Mistress.”

“I’m not sleeping with the laird.” That came out louder than she had intended, and at a moment when almost everyone in the hall had already fallen silent. She cringed as she grabbed her spoon and sampled the vile-looking pottage, which tasted like sour fish overcooked in licorice. She glanced at Shaw’s bowl, which held a delectable-looking vegetable version, and that proved to be the last straw. “Where’s Meg? The kitchens?”

Without waiting for a reply she got up and headed in that direction.

Valerie had to dodge her way through a small army of kitchen maids and a giant, frowning bald clansman who seemed to be in charge as she searched for the redhead. At last she found her loading up a platter with meat being carved from a spitted roast. Without a word she took hold of Meg’s arm and yanked her away from the food, marching the teenager through the nearest door, which led into a store room filled with jars, sacks and hanging bunches of dried herbs.



Meg bared her teeth for a moment like an animal ready to lunge. “Didnae you care for the pottage, Mistress?”

“I liked it about as much as I like you. You’re both nauseating, offensive, and completely unnecessary.” That struck a nerve, Valerie decided, because the maid’s lips turned white. “Just what is your problem with me?”

“I dinnae answer to you,” Meg sneered back.

“Heaven help you if you did. Look, I’m sorry I came back in time and landed on this island. I’m sorry your laird has all these issues and problems. In my time I’m a teacher, and I’m used to juveniles treating me with unnecessary hostility. I can put up with every hateful, nasty thing you say to my face or behind my back.” She leaned closer. “But if you ever tamper with my food again, you vindictive little witch, I’ll teach you a lesson you’ll never forget. Now, what did you put in my soup?”

Someone cleared a throat behind her, but Valerie didn’t take her eyes off Meg’s face.

The maid started to say something, stopped, and then ducked her head. “Vetch and burnt fish and some pie plant. ’Twillnae poison you.”

“Good, then you’ll live to hate me for another day, because I was going to pour it down *your* throat. Now go and throw that disgusting slop in the nearest privy, and never, ever do anything like that again to anyone.” Valerie released her, and Meg hurried out of the room. When she turned around she saw Nyall standing inside the doorway. “What?”

Incredibly, he smiled, transforming his stern features with ungodly beauty. “Well done, my lady.”

“Did you help her with that nasty little trick?” she asked.

“I’d never toy with your meals,” the captain said, now looking huffy that she would even ask. “After you finish the meal, would you join me in the ward?”

“No.” She started to leave, halted and peered at him. “Why? What’s in the ward? A bottomless pit? Viking raiders? Merrick, waiting to turn me into a fish person?”

“’Tis a courtyard in the center of the keep with pretty flowers, quiet, and stepping stones. I reckoned you’d appreciate the peace there.” He gestured at his feet. “My weakness is soil, sand, or any sort of earth. If I stand too long on it, even in boots, I sink.”

“You sink into it? Like quicksand?” When he nodded she experienced a rush of sympathy. “So you literally can never stand still when you’re outside the stronghold.”

“Caladh, ’tis a rocky island. I cannae walk the shoreline, nor cross unpaved trails or bare fields, but I’m careful. I may ride anywhere on horseback.” Nyall glanced out into the kitchen. “You did well with Meg. She’ll no’ torment you again.”

“I hope you’re right, because that’s one lesson I don’t want to teach.” She walked back out to the hall with him, and found a new bowl of savory-looking vegetable pottage sitting at her place at the table. “This smells much better. Shaw, would you cut me a slice of that oat bread, please? Fletcher, is that giant bald man in the kitchens your cook?”



NYALL WATCHED VALERIE THROUGHOUT THE MEAL, AND SAW how deftly she disguised the remnants of her anger as she kept the conversation with the others flowing. She looked entirely cheerful and interested in what was said, but at the same time pushed around her food instead of eating it. Fletcher left first to take a tray up to the laird’s room, and then Shaw excused himself to make his rounds of the stronghold’s defenses.

“If you’re finished,” Nyall said, “I’ll show you the ward.”

Valerie didn’t say anything as she went with him, and only arched a brow when he produced the key to unlock the entry. She made a soft sound as soon as she saw the greenery, and then followed the circle of large slate stepping stones. As he went around to light the high braziers she wandered about, stopping here and there to admire the containers of flowers and ferns. She stopped at the center of the fountain to sit on the edge and trail her fingers through the bubbling water.

As the sky over her darkened and became thick with stars, the firelight added amber and orange to her golden curls, and made her skin glow.

Nyall had always preferred females with dark coloring, bountiful endowments, and strong allure, but seeing her like this made him appreciate for the first time her innocent beauty. Her spring-like scent, subtle and fresh, lingered in the air wherever she went.

*I could easily share my bed with Valerie.*

Most of the MacMar had taken mortals as lovers, but they never remained long involved with them. For Nyall the prospect of giving his heart to a woman, only to watch her age and die childless when he remained young and strong, seemed particularly cruel, especially after what he had witnessed what his own *màthair* endure. When the laird had fallen so much in love with his Joana it had troubled every clansman, and yet no one had spoken against their wedding. Even Nyall had done his best to pretend nothing was wrong with his eldest brother wedding a highborn female so pampered she couldn't even dress herself. Connal's happiness should have warned them of what was to come after his wife had died.

He had discussed the problem with his best friend, and Jamaran's advice had been simple: *This time you must act, for he cannae survive another woman who wishes abandon him.*

"This is a beautiful place," Valerie said when he went to join her. "Why do you keep the doors locked?"

"'Twas the place Lady Joana came each day to attend to her needlework." His gaze strayed to the one bench where she had always sat. "The vassals believe her spirit haunts the ward."

"That doesn't answer my question," she said.

"The laird wishes all to be preserved as 'twas when his wife yet lived. This place, 'tis a shrine to her." Talking about Connal would only distract him from his purpose. "Permit me show you the flowers, my lady."

“I’m fine where I am.” She looked at the hand he held out but didn’t take it. “Why don’t you tell me the real reason you brought me here?”

“You’re alone in a strange time and place.” He sat down beside her, keeping his voice gentle. “You hide your sadness and fear well, and do all you may to make yourself accepted by the clan. Yet even you ken ’twould go better, had you someone caring for you.”

“I do?” She drew back a little from him. “Caring for me how, exactly? By giving me scales and gills? By wiping my memory and dumping me on the mainland?”

Nyall took hold of her hand and raised it to his mouth. Her thin skin against his lips seemed like fine velvet, and added to his suspicion that this task he’d regarded as burdensome might be more pleasant than he’d expected.

He needed calm her first, so he decided to be direct. “Take me as your lover, my lady. I shall look after you for the rest of your days, and protect you from all harm.”

“Captain.” Valerie extricated her hand from his. “I’m flattered, but I’m not planning to stay on the island or look for love.”

Her modesty spoke for her, Nyall decided, liking her even more.

“Try me.” As she started to rise he stood and took her into his arms. For a moment he breathed in her scent, and found that as pleasing as the slender fragility of her body. “One night shall change your mind.”

Dismay flickered over her pretty face. “You can take no for an answer, right?”

“I’d prefer an aye.” He touched her cheek. “You dinnae regard me unsightly, surely.”

She tilted her head back to study him for a long moment. “You know precisely how handsome you are, and I’m sure it would be a night to remember. Only you don’t want me. You don’t even like me.”

“’Tisnae truth.” He ran his hand over her unruly curls. “You’re more resilient than I reckoned, and fight with your heart. Another lady would demand Meg beaten for what she did, or shame her before the other vassals. Even as you scolded her, you protected her. ’Twas very noble and kind. I admire such, particularly in a female.”

Valerie didn’t seem to be listening.

“Why would you do this? The laird,” she said before he could reply. “Everyone is really worried about him, aren’t they? Listen, you’re wasting your time. There isn’t going to be any wedding. I’m not marrying anyone.”

For a moment he saw the same sadness that had shrouded Connal every day since Joana’s death. “Then Merrick shall come for you, and you ken how that shall go. If you’re my woman, Jamaran shall convince the king to relinquish you.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, and he tipped up her chin to kiss her.

“That’s what your Finfolk friend promised when the two of you hatched this crazy idea earlier today.” She nodded as he instantly dropped his hands. “Did you really call me a cow-eyed twit? I think that’s a little harsh. I have a pretty high IQ, and my eyes are much nicer than my hair.”

“You dinnae fight fair,” he muttered, cursing himself for forgetting her boon.

“Then you really shouldn’t touch someone with the ability to read your mind.” She gave him a complacent look. “Ruins any attempt to hustle them into an affair.”

Nyall nodded. “If you see inside my head, you ken ’tis mostly truth.”

“I’m not blind or dead from the neck down. You are attracted to me, and I don’t find you entirely repulsive, either. I also know what happened between you and your mother, but only because you were just thinking about it.” As he stiffened Valerie sighed. “Captain, I really hope someday your heart melts and you meet someone you can love. Love turns your world upside down, and remakes it top to bottom, and is the

best and worst thing that will ever happen to you. But we both know I'm not the woman to do that."

Nyall watched her leave the ward, frustration and admiration tangling inside him. He'd never been so thoroughly routed by a female. He'd also never met one quite as wise. A sound made him look up, and he saw the laird watching him from the high walk. Connal's mouth hitched before he turned and left.

Since he could do nothing more to thwart the wedding, Nyall left the stronghold and made his way to the cove. Jamaran came out of the water as soon as he saw him, and perched on a rocky ledge to watch the tide rolling in.

"She refused me," he told his friend. "And somehow made me wish I could love her, curse the wench."

Jamaran nodded. "Do you reckon Shaw or Fletcher...?"

"Fletcher's honor wouldnae permit such. Shaw we might persuade, but he'd never remain faithful to her. She deserves better. I cannae believe these words leave my lips, but 'tis truth." He saw another shadowy shape swim into the cove. "You brought another with you?"

"'Tis Freja. Merrick bid me comfort her. She's taken to following me whenever I leave the settlement." Jamaran dove into the water from the rocks, and glided around the Finfolk female, who tried to tug him in the direction of the sea.

Nyall watched as his friend comforted the distraught female, but knew Jamaran had no affection for her. Transformation had made Freja immortal, but she had been at the end of her life when she'd joined the Finfolk. The change had not removed her silver hair and wrinkles, making her appear like a grandmother seducing a boy. His friend tried first to hold her, but when that didn't calm her he kissed her. Freja responded feverishly, dragging him beneath the water, where she rolled under him and twined her legs around his, a signal female Finfolk gave when they wished to mate. He brought her up to the surface, and swam over to the embankment, where he pushed her back against the moss and began stripping off their sleek garments.

Jamaran glanced at him as he put his mouth on Freja's small breasts and sucked her nipples, causing her to arch under him and reach for his cock. As he kept pleasuring the widow his shaft swelled and thickened, and at last he plunged into her, his buttocks pistoning as he thrust deep and hard.

Seeing his best friend fucking so vigorously made Nyall retreat, although what he really wished to do was stay and watch them while he stroked his own stiff cock. Perversely he wanted to give Jamaran a different woman, too. Not Valerie Baker, but the sort of female they both found arousing.

*Dark of hair and eye, his friend had told him once when they'd discuss their ideal mate. Soft lips, large breasts, round hips, long legs.*

He remembered agreeing and adding, *Her voice like a caress, her scent like the night.*

He imagined such a woman under Jamaran, her pretty lips parted as she gasped. That fancy expanded as his own desire swelled, and in his mind he saw the lovely dream woman wedged between him and his friend as they both caressed and filled her. He had never shared a female with Jamaran, but the notion sent such a hot surge into his groin he nearly spilled into his smalls. In that moment he heard Tiree again.

*How may I love a thing like you? You're as much a horror as your sire.*

## Chapter Eleven



Connal shadowed Valerie through the stronghold as she left the ward and returned to her guest chamber. The scent of her, subtle and delicious, kept him at his distance. So did witnessing her rejecting his captain's attentions. Seeing them together had at first put him on edge, at least until she had gently but firmly put Nyall in his place. Although Valerie appeared young and innocent, what she'd told the captain revealed some of her pain as well as her wisdom.

*Love turns your world upside down, and remakes it top to bottom, and is the best and worst thing that will ever happen to you.*

Once she went into the chamber Connal hovered at the opposite end of the hall. He told himself he merely wanted to assure Nyall had not genuinely upset her, but he knew that to be an excuse. Seeing her in the arms of another man had strangely shaken him, for he'd never once imagined her becoming involved with one of his brothers. As joyless and devoted to his duty as Nyall was, doubtless he would treat the lady well, and protect her with his life.

That Connal wished to beat him bloody for offering himself to Valerie was a quirk of pride, nothing more. Yet had she accepted him...

The next morning he rose early, eating the morning meal Meg brought him before emerging from his chamber. He went down to the great hall to look for Valerie, only to be told she had returned to the guest chamber. There he went, but at the



last moment decided to wait in the passage until she came out again.

Shaw appeared in front of him. “Play you passage guard these days, Brother? Or does the stronghold begin to crumble, and you imagine you may brace the place on your back?”

“Play you my *màthair*?” he said, pushing past him.

His brother tagged along, looking almost pleased as they passed the guest chamber. “I reckon you watched the lady last night, when she slapped down our captain. In that moment I wished cheer her good taste, but then Nyall would wish to end me. Again. Why do you stride so swiftly?”

Connal stopped and shoved Shaw into the nearest room. Once he kicked shut the door, he demanded, “What the fuck want you from me?”

The chieftain spread his hands. “That black mare you refuse let me breed with my chestnut stallion. Those sharkskin boots you never wear. A bout with Merrick on land, or Jamaran, while the king watched me end him.” He held up his marked hand. “One less arm.”

His anger evaporated. “Shaw, no. No, lad.”

Bitter humor filled his brother’s gray eyes. “You asked, I answered. ’Tis growing stronger now, Brother. That day you promised me, ’twill soon arrive, I reckon.”

No one knew about Shaw’s true affliction; they only saw his touch setting fire to wood and believed his mortal weakness the cause of his strangeness. For centuries the chieftain had struggled alone with whatever the Pritani had done to him. Whatever it was, it allowed him to somehow become like a liquid shadow, and flow as he moved, as if turned to black water. After indulging in whiskey too much one night, he had pressed Connal to vow he would end him if the affliction grew beyond his ability to control it.

“You’re stronger than you think,” he told Shaw. “Dinnae surrender.”

“Ken you me ever once yield?” The chieftain scrubbed his unmarked hand over the back of his head. “What the fuck want

you from that woman? You either lock yourself away from her, or stalk her like a starving hunter. You refuse give her to the Finfolk, but make no place for her among the clan. Decide, my lord, before you drive the rest of us mad.”

What the chieftain said gave Connal pause. He had meant to treat Valerie as an honored guest by assigning maids to look after her and requiring nothing from her in return. She wandered through each day without work or purpose, when he knew she had possessed both in her time. She seemed friendly to all, but had yet to settle on anyone as a friend.

*I could be such for her.*

The thought came from simple gratitude, of course. She had stirred him from his melancholy, something not even the clan had been able to accomplish. Indeed, his grief had filled every day since Joana’s death. Yet since the lady had arrived he had left his chamber more often than he had in the previous six moons. He no longer thought of his dead wife during every waking hour.

“Today I shall show her the island,” Connal said finally. When he saw Shaw’s expression turn skeptical he added, “The island’s lowlands.”

“A good notion.” His brother put a hand on his shoulder. “I shall accompany you.”

He shook his head. “We both cannae leave the stronghold while Merrick tests the truce. I shallnae go far with her. Perhaps only to the village beyond the willow forest.” As his brother scowled he sighed. “Do you wish me act, or do naught? Decide, Chieftain.”

Shaw sighed. “I never much liked your knack of throwing my own words in my face. Very well. At least carry a sword with you, in case the fish king stalks you both.”

Once his brother left Connal walked down to the guest chamber, and knocked on the door. Valerie opened it so quickly and had such a fierce expression that he stepped back.

“Oh, it’s you.” She rolled her eyes. “Sorry. I thought you were...never mind. What can I do for you, Laird?”

“We didnae finish our walk together,” he said. “I thought perhaps today we might try again.”

Valerie glanced over her shoulder. “Have you seen the sky? It looks like there’s a storm brewing on the horizon.”

“Aye, but ’twillnae reach the island until nightfall,” he said. “We shall return long before the rain begins.”

“Well, I could certainly use the exercise.” She retreated into the room for a moment, and then returned with boots on and a wool cloak draped over her arm. “Ready.”

A few minutes later Valerie eyed the satchel of bread, fruit, cheese and waterskins that he’d stopped by the kitchens to pack. “Just how far are we going to walk?”

“Only to the nearest village,” he assured her. “’Tis a lochan in a forest meadow where we might eat and rest before we return. You dinnae dine out of doors in your time?”

“We do. We call that a picnic.” She smiled. “Let’s go.”



IT TOOK SEVERAL DAYS FOR DUXOR TO ELUDE THE GUARDS Jamaran had ordered to watch him, but once he did he swam straight to the islet where he’d left his monstrous creation. At first he saw no sign of the transformed beast, and silently cursed it. Then a long, broad shadow fell over him as the monster appeared.

Shreds of flesh hung from the creature’s maw, and in its wake he left the stench of rotted mortal. *Lord Duxor, I reckoned you abandoned me.*

His creation’s thoughts had grown cold, as if it no longer had any mortal emotions. Acting on instinct, Duxor seized its thick neck and stared into its human eyes.

*I’m your master and your savior, you pathetic mistake. As such, you shall show me proper respect.*

The creature cringed, and at once its thoughts grew feverish. *Forgive me, maister, ’tis hard for me recall how ’twas before you saved me.*

The shark and the mortal's minds had melded during transformation, Duxor suspected, which had probably resulted in the dual nature it showed him. He knew the shark would only be interested in hunting, killing and eating, while the human would be fearful and wish to avoid its predatory half. Somehow he had to control the beastly half while using the mortal side to do his bidding.

*You wish a mate for yourself, aye? Duxor saw the creature's tail thrash in the water, but didn't release his grip. I shall make another of you, but I need first a female mortal. Fetch one for me from the island.*

The monster's features twisted. *I tried to leave the water yesterday, but I cannae breathe air as once I did.*

That eliminated any chance he could use the creature against the landcrawlers. *Then we must hunt for a wench on one of the boats that sail outside the mist barrier. Follow me.*

Duxor swam around the islet and headed north, swimming under the wall of mist that protected the settlement and the island. The monster followed just behind him, and when he stopped, hovered and watched his face. Its behavior reminded Duxor of the dogs the landcrawlers kept as pets.

*Use your senses, he told it. You shall smell the boat nearest us.*

The creature thrashed its tail as it slowly swam in a circle around him, taking in larger gulps of the sea water. Then it stopped and bobbed its head toward the west.

*There, Lord Duxor. A transport vessel with many on board.*

He hid his surprise. *Guide me to the boat, then.*

It took them only a few minutes to intercept the shoddy old boat, which lay low in the water. Duxor went up to the port hull, and put a hand on the barnacled wood as he listened to the groans inside. He smelled only a few landcrawlers, and something else that vaguely reminded him of the peculiar stink of the MacMar. He nearly rammed his fist through the side of the vessel, and then he made out two voices that stilled him.

*Improved your mood now, Sister?* a hard female voice asked.

*Aye, thanks to the merchant's only daughter,* another answered with a giggle. *You should have seen her. Och, permit me show you.*

A wave of power came through the wood and passed over Duxor, who grew stunned. He had not sensed such magic since the time when Prince Mar had come to bargain with Merrick.

*'Tis many females inside the boat, my lord.* The monster swam up beside him. *Shall I ram them?*

*Quiet. Remain here.* He climbed up a rope hanging over the side of the hull, stopping just beneath the top railing. On the deck he saw a few sailors, all of whom gave off the same stench as the half-Fae clan on Caladh. None of them appeared happy at their work, and one rushed over to heave up his belly at the railing opposite him. What came out of him looked like blood and raw flesh. As the sailor puked his body also changed, becoming that of a stout female.

The door to the deck cabin flung open, and the most darkly beautiful, regal-looking female he'd ever seen emerged. She had a sleek head of short hair so dark it seemed to absorb the sunlight, and eyes as lustrous as black pearls. Her lips, the color of fresh blood, thinned as she took in the sailors as if they were all diseased.

She was no more mortal than he, Duxor thought, spell-bound.

The living goddess then moved like water across the deck toward the body-changing sailor and took hold of his neck, first lifting him off his feet and then tossing him at her bare feet. He made no move to defend or protect himself as the beauty kicked him over and over, muttering in a language that sounded like the singing of whales.

"I shall claw out the belly of the next one who vomits," the dark one said in a voice that seemed to stab Duxor in the chest. "And feed it raw to the rest of you worthless sluts until you choke. Swallow your spew, or die—do you understand me?"

All of the sailors dropped to their knees, changed their forms from male to female, and uttered, “Aye, Princess” in terrified whispers.

*A princess.* He thought of Prince Mar, who had possessed the same flawless features and noble bearing. *Could she belong to the Fae?*

The dark one frowned. “What is that fish smell? How can you eat after devouring so many mortals on that pigsty island?”

“My princess, you’ve awakened.” A tall female with the same hard voice he’d heard through the hull emerged from a hatch, followed by a tiny redhead in an ornate gown. “How may I serve?”

“Bring me one of the captives. A large, strong one,” the princess told her, and then went back into the deck cabin and slammed the door.

When a high wave struck the side of the vessel Duxor dropped into it, hoping the sound of the water slamming against the hull would disguise the splash his body made. He watched through the foaming water at the surface, but saw no one look over the railing. The monster shadowed him as he swam away from the vessel, although it hesitated a few times and kept looking back.

*Lord Duxor, dinnae you wish a mortal female?*

He turned and punched the creature on the nose, sending it tumbling backward in the water. *How dare you question me?*

For a moment the monster looked as if it might strike back, but a moment later its distorted face twisted with shame. *Forgive me.*

*Those females, they’re no’ mortal. They’re more than mortal, much more.* Duxor saw the vessel turning away from Caladh to steer north. *We shall follow the vessel and discover to where they sail.*



WALKING WITH THE LAIRD PROVED TO BE A BIT QUIETER THAN Valerie had imagined, as Connal said almost nothing unless she asked him a question. His terse answers suggested he wasn't in the mood to talk, so she fell silent and simply let the fresh air and peaceful calm of the trees soak in.

As they made their way through the beautiful forest she saw a startling amount of biodiversity. Dozens of different birds and small mammals made their home among the willows, and seemed completely unafraid of her and Connal. A few small rabbits even hopped up to the edge of the trail to watch them pass by.

“The baby bunnies are adorable,” Valerie said, smiling down at a trio of brown and black kits so tiny they could fit on her palm.

Once they emerged from the trees they crossed a wide glen where a large herd of sheep grazed among the knee-high grasses. Near the hills to the north Valerie also spotted a smaller group of gray-faced deer, which seemed to hear them right away and bounded off into a pine grove. What she hadn't yet seen was the other side of the island.

“How large is Caladh?” she asked the laird as they crossed a small stone bridge built over a pretty creek running through the glen.

“The clan's never measured the shoreline, but should you walk round the edges, I reckon 'twould take a moon and a half from beginning to end,” Connal said.

“A healthy person can walk twenty miles a day.” She knew in clanspeak a moon was roughly a month, and did some quick calculations. “That works out to be about nine hundred square miles. A little smaller than Rhode Island.”

“You dwelled on an island in your time?” he asked.

“No, that's the name of a state in my country. It's not too far from New York.” She'd lost him, she saw. “At least that explains why I can't see the other side. Your island is huge.”

He nodded. “Upstate New York, 'tis large as well?”

“Much bigger.” She tried to think of how to describe it. “Where I live there are three mountain ranges nearby, and so much forest it blankets the land in green. Most of the towns are small, and the people who live there are close to each other, a bit like your clan—everyone knows everyone. During the fall, when the leaves turn colors, it’s as if someone repainted the country in gold, orange and scarlet.”

To Valerie’s surprise talking about home didn’t bother her. She missed her students, but not the house she’d shared with Dale and all the material things they’d accumulated over the years. He had always been a pack rat, while she had preferred to live without clutter. She reached up and touched her locket, dismayed by how little she actually cared about what she had left behind in the future.

*Maybe I’m more suited to living in the twelfth century.*

The trail rolled over a ridge in the glen, and on the other side she saw dozens of cottages nestled among a clearing filled with wildflowers.

“This is gorgeous,” she murmured as they stood and looked down. “How many of the clan live here?”

“None,” Connal said, staring at the horizon.

He looked a little pale, perhaps from sensory overload, so Valerie slipped her hand into his. “Would you rather go back to Dun Ard now?”

The laird looked down at her hand, the village, and then at her face. “’Tis gone. How?”

“I’m sure the castle is still standing.” Was he going to have a panic attack? Why did he look so astonished? “Or did you mean something else?”

Connal took in a deep breath, and let go of her. The moment he did he staggered a little, and then grabbed her hand again.

“Are you sick?” She looked around for a place where they could sit.



“The dizziness ends when you touch me.” He held up their clasped hands. “I cannae abide high places. I grow unsteady and tumble down.”

“Vertigo is a terrible thing, but I can’t make it go away,” Valerie assured him, a little bewildered by the flood of memories coming from him. In each one he suffered such terrible vertigo it made her queasy. “Is that your mortal weakness? Heights?”

The laird nodded. “I’ve trouble even with walking stairs. When I go atop the keepe, in but a few moments I swoon. Yet now, here, ’tis naught for me to look down at the village.” He frowned. “’Tis how I climbed the stairs to the stronghold the morning you came to the island. I carried you in my arms, and naught happened to my head.”

His wife jumped off a cliff while he watched, she recalled. Had his mortal weakness prevented him from reaching her in time to stop her? Was that why he blamed himself for her suicide?

“If I can help, then by all means, keep holding my hand,” Valerie said, curling her fingers around his. “Do you want to test the theory someplace higher?”

“Aye.” He turned his head and nodded at the hills rising beyond the village. “There, ’tisnae too far—unless you’re weary, my lady?”

She glanced at the long line of dark clouds on the horizon. The storm seemed to be growing larger, and closer. It would be safer to return to the stronghold and try this experiment there. Yet Connal looked so hopeful she didn’t want to disappoint him.

*I don’t want to go back to the castle yet, either.*

“If you’re sure you want to do this, then okay.” She tucked her fingers between his. “Let’s go climb a hill.”

## Chapter Twelve



Holding Valerie's hand as they walked should have proven uncomfortable, Connal thought as they crossed the sloped pasture at the base of the hills. She had refused to wed him, after all. Nor was he some young lad who needed to clutch at a woman. He didn't fear another bout with his mortal weakness. Indeed, he'd never tried to fight off the dizziness, for he knew he could never prevail over it.

The higher they walked, the more he tensed, expecting the worst to come at any moment. Yet nothing plagued him; his legs remained steady and his head clear.

Connal stopped as they reached the path winding up to the hilltops, and glanced back at how far they had come from the forest. They now stood perhaps fifty perches higher, or the same height as the outer curtain wall at Dun Ard. He had never been able to stand on that wall, even when he was a lad too small to see over the edge.

"Do you want to sit down?" Valerie asked him, looking worried now.

He regarded her and loosened his grip. "I wish you let go of me for a few moments."

"Really?" When he nodded she took her hand from his. "By the way, if you pass out, you're so big I don't think I can drag you back down to— *Connal*."

Staggering into her, he closed his eyes, so sickened he thought he might boak right there. The moment her hands touched his face the world ceased spinning and tilting.

“No, stay,” he said when she started to draw back. “’Tis you, my lady, truly. I grow sick when you dinnae touch me.”

“You still look terrible,” she said. “We should go back to Dun Ard now.”

“I’ve hardly left the stronghold this past year.” He nodded at the stony outcropping across from the hill where they stood. “Walk with me there, and then we may return.”

Valerie looked for a moment as if she might argue, and then she took a firm grip on his hand. “All right, but if this happens again, I’m taking you home.”

As they walked down the hill to a small valley with grazed grasses and bright clusters of red blooms, Connal’s head cleared entirely. The soft warmth of her hand in his didn’t just reassure him, it seemed to be bracing him in some fashion. He wondered if that had more to do with her than his weakness.

“The bairns you teach, do they favor you greatly?” he asked her.

“They’re not really bairns. They’d be grown men and women in this time,” Valerie said, smiling a little. “I don’t worry about being popular with my students, but only a few have complained about my methods.”

He could easily see her commanding the attention of a roomful of such youths. “’Tis some future manner in which you teach?”

“I have only three rules,” she said. “My students must sit and listen without talking while I teach, turn in their assignments on time, and be respectful to me and each other. If they can go through the entire semester without breaking my rules, they don’t have to take the final exam for my class. For many kids that’s a powerful incentive.”

“What do you when they break your rules?” Connal asked.

“Each time they do it’s a strike—a term from a game in my time that means a failure.” Valerie smiled. “They get a warning on the first strike, and classroom cleaning duty on the second strike. Anyone who gets a third strike serves special detention.”

He grew startled by that. “You imprison them?”

“No, but it’s almost as bad,” she admitted. “I send them to work with the school’s janitor for a week cleaning the entire school. That usually solves the problem, but they also know that they’re not allowed any more strikes after that.”

“’Tis much like Fletcher sending the men who err to scrub out the cisterns,” Connal said. “Yet what do you should they break your rules a fourth time?”

“I meet with their parents and have them transferred to another class.” She wrinkled her nose. “That didn’t made me very popular with the school administration, but I’ve only had to do it twice. To tolerate rule breakers would be disrespectful to the rest of my well-behaved students.”

She fell silent after that until they reached the stone outcropping.

“Still okay?” Valerie asked.

He shrugged. “As long as I hold your hand, I’m well. ’Twas no’ so bad before, only some dizziness.”

“Some dizziness?” She found a patch of grass near the stone shelf and tugged him down beside her. “I can read minds, remember? Your brain was hanging from a rollercoaster upside down while it hurtles off the tracks. I know, you don’t know what that is, but it’s a very bad thing,” she added when he frowned. “Just rest for a little while.”

“’Twould seem you’ve two boons.” A pleasant tiredness came over him, and he lay back and stared up at the sky. “And more wisdom than most. I wish I might see into your thoughts.”

“Here’s the gist: this was a really stupid idea, because we’re probably three miles from the castle, and no one knows where we are.” She stretched out beside him. “Are you really okay with just me holding your hand?”

Connal wondered if he’d ever experienced such contentment. “Aye.”

She turned onto her side. “I won’t peek at your thoughts if you’ll tell me the truth. Whose idea was it to take me on this walk? Fletcher doesn’t like you leaving. Duncan...I don’t know very well. Probably Shaw, then.”

“’Twas my notion,” he told her, and then, because he wanted her to know, he added, “I watched you with Nyall in the ward.”

“Ah.” Valerie made the sound stretch out. “That was awkward. I couldn’t tell before because I haven’t talked much to him, but he’s really intense. I know he doesn’t actually want to get involved with me, and I definitely don’t need a lover, so turning him down was easy. I only hope I didn’t hurt his pride.”

What she said came from her natural kindness; she even worried about harming a man she doubtless disliked. Yet Connal knew she wasn’t being entirely truthful.

“After I lost my wife, my men thought I needed a lover,” he said. “Fletcher took to sending willing young maids to my bed chamber. Shaw convinced our seamstress to offer herself to me when she brought some trews she’d mended. Even Nyall suggested a widow he said wished naught more than comfort me.”

She yawned, and then grimaced. “Excuse me. I know how that goes, too. Dale’s best friend kept calling and asking if I wanted him to stay the night. My co-workers all suddenly mentioned single brothers and cousins and nephews in desperate need of a date. Even my next-door neighbor, who had just gone through a terrible divorce, kept bringing sympathy food to me, and inviting me over for dinner.” Her lips curved, and she rolled onto her back. “I didn’t stop him from delivering, either. He was a great cook.”

He almost laughed. “My chamber, ’tis never been cleaner.”

Valerie closed her eyes and rubbed her thumb against the side of his finger. “They mean well, I know, but no one understands what it’s like to lose the person you love most in the world. A marriage, it becomes so much a part of your life, and then it’s gone. Maybe Dale thought killing himself was the

only way to escape our problems, but did he really want to hurt me this much? I tried to be a good wife and partner. Why would he do this to me? What did I do to deserve it? I think the worst part is that I'll never know."

Connal squeezed her hand. "'Twas my only thought after I lost Joana. I reckon 'twas that I couldnae give her bairns, nor permit her live near her kin. Yet if she'd even once told me how much she suffered, I ken I'd release her from her vows. So why didnae she tell me? Why wait until 'twas so wretched she reckoned ending herself the only answer?"

Valerie made no sound, and when he turned his head to look at her he discovered she'd fallen asleep again. Slumber smoothed away the faint line between her brows, and emptied her expression of all but calm. Like him, Valerie might never make peace with losing the one she had loved, but at least in sleep she could escape the constant grinding weight of the burdens her husband had left behind for her to carry.

He put a protective arm over her, and she shifted, rolling toward him until she lay partly on top of him. She moved her head until she found a spot between his neck and shoulder to her liking, and then relaxed again.

Savoring the softness of her against him seemed harmless, Connal thought. If he breathed in her scent deeply it was only because it warmed him like a spring morning. Everything about Valerie put him at ease, and made the world seem right again, even when he knew it never could be.

The sun glared in his eyes, so he closed them, and slowly he drifted off. He didn't dream of Joana, the tension with the Ffolk, or any of the other thousand matters that would never cease plaguing him. Instead he seemed cocooned, as if swaddled in soft wool on a cold winter night, and filled with an ease he had never known. If he could choose his fate, he thought he would never awake again.

A cold splash on Connal's face startled him awake, and he looked up at heavy, dark storm clouds. From the splinter of sunlight still visible he realized he had been sleeping for hours. When he looked down he saw Valerie frowning back at him.

As more fat raindrops fell she pushed herself upright and tilted her head to regard the sky.

“We’re in trouble.” She held onto him as they both stood and a rush of wind blew around them. “Do we run for the village?”

Connal shook his head, and recalled a shelter nearby that shepherds often used during storms. “This way. Hurry.”



ONCE THE DELUGE BEGAN FLETCHER SENT HIS STEWARD AND the available menservants to watch for leaks in the old roofs, and to cover any open windows. He stopped by the kitchens to assure all the hearths had been banked and the dampers closed. Cook had already secured the fires, and now had his maids and sculleries fetching breads, cheeses and smoked meats from the cold pantry to prepare for the evening meal.

“’Tis a miserable facking day, Seneschal,” Brochan MacMar said as he thumped a platter of spiced pears on his work table. “Jamma, ’tisnae enough, go and bring more loaves. Worth, I said slice that ham, no’ hack the thing to bits.”

Fletcher knew the storm had put the cook in a mood, as did anything that disrupted his work and staff, but the amount of rain and its potential to cause a flood would have him on edge. “Leave the work for your lassies and lads, and take a turn at watch in the high tower.”

The big bald man let out a sour laugh. “Ever the one fretting over my damned curse.” As he moved something splashed, and he glanced down and sighed. “Och, fack me.”

He glanced down to see a puddle had already collected around the cook’s boots, and more was trickling into the kitchen from the window corners and beneath the door to stream toward him. Brochan’s mortal weakness made bodies of water of any size near him flow in his direction, which was why he worked in the driest place in the stronghold.

“’Tisnae much,” Fletcher told him. “’Tis been at least ten year or more since you last flooded the stronghold.”

“I’m off, I’m off. Jamma, you’re in charge. Worth, tell Mingas slice the rest of the meats. And for the love of Mar dinnae light any fires until the storm’s passed.” He trudged out, his boots making squishing sounds as he went.

Fletcher told the head kitchen maid to summon him if she needed aid, and then went to the infirmary, where Duncan stood watching the storm rolling in over the bay.

“Connal and Mistress Baker havenae yet returned from their trek to the village,” he said to the healer. “I must take searchers to look for them.”

“In this weather?” Duncan made a scathing sound. “The laird shall seek shelter. Wait until the rain clears.” A bright flash and loud boom made him step back from the window, peer out, and then hurriedly grab his bag and tartan. “That struck the curtain wall. Come.”

Through the whipping wind and stinging rain they ran from the stronghold to the wall walk that stretched from the tower loft to the curtain wall, where four sentinels crouched around a fallen figure. As they drew close Fletcher saw the injured man’s tunic and trows had been shredded as if torn from within, revealing strange pink wounds on his flesh in the shape of ferns.

“Take him inside,” Duncan shouted to be heard above the howling winds, and with the other sentinels carried the injured man over the walk and inside the tower.

Once safely indoors Duncan went down on his knees and pulled back the tartan covering the injured man’s face. Nyall stared up at him, his expression one of exasperation.

“These dolts wouldnae lay down their weapons nor take shelter.” He sat up and tossed the blackened spear he held away from him before he dragged a hand over his head. Fragments of scorched hair scattered on the floor.

“You reckoned seizing that, ’twouldnae harm you?” Fletcher saw something crackling like miniature lightning in the captain’s dark eyes. “Duncan.”



“I’m only startled,” Nyall told the healer, and got to his feet. “Eejits.” He slapped the head of one dismayed-looking sentinel, and then stalked away.

“’Twas any other man hurt?” Duncan asked.

“No, Healer. Only our captain,” The chief sentinel glared at the other men, who suddenly didn’t want to look him in the eye. “I ordered both shifts on the walls come down as soon as the strikes began, but these three fools didnae. Nyall saw them and rushed over, and ’twas struck instead of them.”

“The laird, he’s no’ returned,” one of them muttered.

“You reckon that grants you leave ignore my orders?” The chief crowded him back against a wall. “We’re immortal, no’ indestructible. Lightning, ’tis hotter and more powerful than a hundred bonfires. Our captain came close to death saving your worthless arses.” As the other sentinels shuffled their feet and murmured their apologies, he made a disgusted sound. “To the garrison hall with you, now, fools. You’ll drill until I like you again, which may take a moon or four.”

“I shall go and examine Nyall,” Duncan said as the chief herded the others away. “At the very least he shall need those burns cleaned and salved.”

Fletcher had a dozen other things to do, including speaking to the watchers in the tallest tower to learn if they had spotted Connal or Valerie. At the same time he was unwilling to permit the healer suffer the pain of Nyall’s burns, and whatever more the lightning had done to him.

“He shallnae permit you touch him, as you saw. I order you leave him alone.” He seldom resorted to pulling rank, but most of the clan tended to forget that he was third in command after Connal and Shaw. “Go and assure all our vassals came safely into the stronghold, and treat anyone injured. I shall see to Nyall.”

Duncan gave him a frustrated look before he went to the stairs.

Fletcher waited to assure the healer wouldn’t backtrack before he hurried toward the captain’s quarters inside the

garrison hall. The door stood open, and when he looked inside he saw Nyall pulling on a dry pair of trews. Carefully he closed the door behind him and leaned against it. The fern-like burns on the captain's body had already darkened to red, and covered his right arm from wrist to shoulder before spilling across his chest.

"I dinnae want nor need your coddling, seneschal," Nyall said, sounding just as cold as ever.

"I ken you left so you wouldnae inflict your pain on Duncan." Fletcher went to walk around him, and saw the burn pattern covered half of his back. "Fack, Nyall. You look as if you've been inked in red. The pain?"

"'Tis like a bad scald, and I've bells yet ringing in my ears. The burns, they'll heal by morning." He turned to face him, his dark eyes now holding no trace of the strange crackling. "Wish you ken if I saw our sire after my heart stopped?"

Fletcher's nearly did the same when he heard that. "You died?"

"Aye, for a moment or two. Didnae you hear my chief? We're immortal, no' indestructible," he added in a mocking tone. He then pulled on a clean tunic and tugged on his boots. "We must track the laird and Mistress Baker before the storm washes away their trail."

The sound of rain pounding on the window coverings made Fletcher shake his head.

"'Tis too late for that, I reckon." He staggered to one side as Nyall pushed past him, and then hurried to follow him out. "You cannae go out in a storm. The lowlands flood, and you cannae see what 'tis rock or soil. 'Twill suck you below to suffocate you. Or wish you die buried alive?"

The captain stopped in his tracks, his hands fisting and his shoulders going rigid. "I didnae meet our sire, nor Tiree, nor anyone in the dark. 'Twas naught but naught, Fletch. 'Twas an endless abyss of black. That, 'tis what awaits us."

He knew what it cost Nyall to admit that to him, and what he had to do now to keep him from despair.

“Go to the high tower,” he said, moving to stand beside him but keeping his gaze averted. “Brochan’s there to keep from flooding the kitchens. Even with the rain, one of you may see sign of them from there. If you do, send for me, and we shall plan from there.”

“Aye.” The captain touched his shoulder briefly before heading toward the stairs.

Fletcher rubbed the sweat from his face before he made his way to the great hall. Many of the vassals who worked outdoors, most drenched, sat wrapped in blankets and tartans in front of the hearths. Duncan moved among them, stopping and examining those who sported minor injuries. Shaw appeared in an archway, took in the scene, and then caught Fletcher’s gaze and beckoned to him.

“Lightning struck Nyall on the wall, but left him with only some light burns. He’s gone to the high tower to keep watch for the laird and Mistress Baker,” he told the chieftain as soon as he joined him. “I sent Broch to the tower, too, so he shallnae flood the kitchens and hall again.”

“Connal’s no fool. He’d take her into one of the village barns to wait out the storm.” Shaw’s eyes narrowed. “The strike didnae addle our captain?”

He thought of the strange white crackling in Nyall’s dark eyes, and wondered now if it had been a reflection of the storm outside. “He seemed sound-headed, and spoke and moved as ever. What news of the patrols?”

“They’ll take refuge in the bay and ridge caves as I trained them do.” The chieftain nodded toward the kitchens. “Advise Meg we’ll need hot brews for the sheltered, and meals if the storm doesnae soon end.”

“I’ve no’ seen her for hours.” Fletcher glanced around the hall, scanning the face of every maid before calling over the nearest. “Where’s Meg gone?”

“She left this morn to collect some oysters for stew, my lord,” the girl said, looking as worried as he was. “She’s no’ yet come back.”

## Chapter Thirteen



The rain drenched both Connal and Valerie by the time they reached the shepherd's shelter, a small stone-walled shed with a thatched roof built atop a nearby hillside. He opened the weathered door to find it empty but for a small hearth, a large chair, a rope pallet with a straw ticking, and a few candle stubs. It smelled earthy and damp, but appeared reasonably clean.

"It doesn't look like the storm is going to stop any time soon," Valerie said, standing in the doorway and rubbing her hands over her arms. She turned and regarded him. "Can you build a fire? I'm freezing."

Connal surveyed the dismal amount of firewood sitting in a basket by the hearth, which would barely last an hour or two. Everything he could go out and collect nearby would be too wet to burn, and he'd have to take Valerie with him to keep his weakness from overwhelming him. On a shelf above the pallet he saw some blankets that had been left, and after taking one down and shaking it out he wrapped it around her.

"Sit on the bed," he told her. "I'll do what I can."

Valerie yawned and nodded, and went to sit with her back to the wall. "Your shepherds actually sleep in these shelters during the winter?"

"Aye, but they're used to the cold and snow." He stacked two splits over the kindling before using his firesteel to ignite it, and then blew on the tiny flames that appeared. "In my boyhood I chopped and brought wood for an old shepherd

named Duff. Stubborn old man refused stop roaming the hills with the flocks, so my sire bid me keep all of the shelters well-stocked. I once did the same with our woodmen. 'Tis yet one more task I've neglected."

"If you try hard," Valerie said, "you can blame yourself for everything that goes wrong on the island."

He sat back on his heels. "The laird rules over Caladh, so everything wrong, 'tis my fault. You being trapped here, 'tis another problem I've ignored."

"I'm not so sure it really is a problem. What if I go back to my time, and find myself still in my car at the bottom of that lake? No one knew I was there but Dale's lover, and she wanted me to die. I couldn't get out of the car. I would drown." When he glanced at her she made a helpless gesture. "I like being alive more than I like what was happening my time, that's all I'm saying."

He'd rather keep her here than risk that, Connal thought, his mood growing lighter.

Once he'd gotten the fire started he stood and turned to see Valerie asleep sitting up, her arms still hugging her knees under the blanket. Her boots lay where she had dropped them by the bed. He went over to ease her down onto her back, but as soon as he touched her she wrapped her arms around his neck and huddled against him. Knowing she would be warmer nearer the hearth, he lifted and carried her over to the big, crudely-made wooden chair and sat down with her. The slightness of her made him wonder if she would fall sick from becoming so chilled.

Her damp curls tickled the underside of his chin as she pressed herself to him and released a slow sigh.

Connal rubbed his hands over her narrow back as he watched her face. This close he could see the white tips of her golden eyelashes, which were much longer than he'd imagined. A tiny dark brown mole hid in the corner of her left eyelid, and another nestled on the side of her nose just beneath her eyebrow. Her top lip curved out from the bottom, almost as if she were preparing to kiss something. He'd never seen such

a lovely mouth, and remembering its softness against his made him bend his head so her breath touched his face.

A memory of Joana came then, one he had tried many times to forget. She had cowered on their wedding night, afraid of his nakedness and her own, as if being together were something that shamed her. It had taken many nights of holding her and countless gentle kisses and words for him to calm her and ease her into loving each other as husband and wife. His patience had wooed her, for every night after that she would open her arms to him willingly.

Valerie's breath warmed his lips as she murmured something.

He should wake her, Connal knew. Holding her and watching her sleep was only putting more nonsense in his head. She didn't want him or any man. He did not desire to force himself on her in any fashion. Yet he had missed this, having a woman in his arms, awash in her fragile scent as he beheld her beauty. It gave him a sense of satisfaction in being a man of considerable size and might, and that this delicate, lovely woman trusted him to protect her. Yet in that moment Shaw's words came back to thrash him.

*What the fuck want you from that woman? You either lock yourself away from her, or stalk her like a starving hunter. You refuse give her to the Finfolk, but make no place for her among the clan.*

Connal wanted her. Not as a wife, and not as a vassal, but as his lover. He wanted her skin against his, and to taste her lips as he caressed her. He wanted to pleasure her until all she could think of was him and what they did together in his bed. He wished to sleep with her in his arms like this, and wake her every morn with kisses and more loving.

In those unseemly thoughts desire began to fill him, hard and hot and demanding—and yet she did not want him in the same way.

As if she knew his thoughts in that moment Valerie's hand moved to the back of his neck, and she brought her lips to his. He did nothing as she kissed him in her sleep, her soft lips

caressing his mouth, the velvety edge of her tongue touching his. Her breasts rose and pressed against his chest as she turned her body toward his, making the blanket fall away. As her nipples puckered under the thin, damp linen of her leine he lost the battle with himself and brought his hand to her ribs. The weight of her cheb's soft mound pressed along the edge of his thumb and finger, and throbbed with the quickening of her heartbeat. She glided her lips from his mouth to the side of his neck, where she stroked his skin with her tongue.

*If 'twas any other female I'd fuck her the rest of the night.*

Connal tugged the hem of her shirt out from her trews, and slipped his hand under to touch her bare skin, soft and thin as silk velvet beneath his fingers and palm. She had not worn her strange undergarments, so a moment later he held her naked cheb in his hand. He would do no more than this, he decided. As soon as she woke he would put her to bed and spend the night in the chair. If he could take his hand from her. If he could cut off his own unruly cock.

"I'm awake," Valerie whispered, and lifted her head to regard him. "I have been since I kissed you. Please don't castrate yourself."

He didn't take away his hand, but used his thumb to stroke the tight peak. "Why didnae you speak nor stop me?"

"I like what you think when you touch me." She arched her back to press her cheb against his hand. "Is that wrong? Are the women in your time expected to hate it?"

"Some do." He could see the flush of desire on her face, and the heat of it from her breast. "We're no' wed. 'Tis wrong in the eyes of mortals. We MacMar cannae sire bairns, so 'tis different among the clan. 'Tis only for sharing such pleasures."

"So why wouldn't you want me all night?" Valerie countered.

Her boldness bemused him, but only for a moment.

"I've wanted you since the moment I first saw Merrick chasing you to shore. When I carried you into my stronghold. When I held your hand and walked these hills." He liked the

sound she made as he gently pinched her nipple. “’Tisnae come a moment when I didnae want you, *mo bòidhchead*.”

She repeated the endearment, and frowned at him.

“My beauty,” he translated for her as he drew up the shirt to bare her to his gaze. “And so you become. Look at how this lovely thing pouts and blushes for me.”

“I just happen to have two of them.” She drew the leine over her head, leaving her wearing only her trows now. “I’m not entirely convinced yet, although I will say that you do stare a lot at my body. I like that, too.”

“Then you should permit me a proper look.” He picked her up and set her on her feet so he could unlace her trows, and then worked them down her legs. Once she stood naked he shifted to stand behind her. She shivered but otherwise didn’t move as his hands came around her waist, and tugged her back until the soft curves of her buttocks pressed against the heavy fullness of his cock.

“You can’t see much from back there.” She rested her head on his shoulder to look up at him. “Never mind. I forgot how tall you are.”

Everything about her seemed graceful even in such a vulnerable state. Had she been born a highborn lady in his time never would she have stood thus naked before a man. Yet she did not try to cower or cover herself. The heat and lushness of her gaze only invited him to touch her more.

She even moved her hips so that she rubbed her little arse against his erection. “Have you made up your mind about wanting me? Because now would be the time to push me away.”

“’Tis the last thing I’d do.” Connal put his mouth next to her ear. “And you ken every thought in my head, wench.”

“I do. You should know that I’ve never done half the things you imagine doing with me.” She took hold of his hands and brought them up to her chebs, using his palms to caress the full, soft mounds. “I think I’d like to try.”



“’Tis what I wish as well, so dinnae think,” he warned her. “Be certain ’tis me you want.”



VALERIE HAD NEVER BEEN MORE EXCITED IN HER LIFE THAN she was in this moment. Every passionate carnal thought in Connal’s mind kept pouring into her, drugging her, seducing her. He wanted to kiss every inch of her body, and he wouldn’t skip any of even the most intimate places. He imagined her mouth on his body, too, and watching her as she kissed and licked and sucked him. As for the act itself, his need to come inside her and thrust hard and deep into every place she could accommodate him seemed so primitive and wholly male, suffused with his own needs but eager to satisfy hers.

*Be certain ’tis me you want.*

She understood why he’d said that, and thought of Dale, who had always been very tender and romantic in bed. He’d believed in treating a woman like a lady, and never asked anything of her but the most basic of love-making. Sex with her husband had been good, although she’d always had to restrain her own passions. As a lover Connal would be nothing like Dale, she suspected, slightly guilty for comparing the two men.

*I want that. I want him to do all those things with me.*

Slowly she turned around so that her naked body pressed against him. “I’m done thinking. I’m sure, Connal.”

Things suddenly went from slow to very fast. He pulled her off her feet, bringing her lips to his as he carried her over to the pallet. There he put her on her back, startling her a little as he came up over her at once, and pushed his trews down to free his long, thick penis. The rush of his thoughts became even hotter and chaotic.

“Put your legs round me,” he said, and when she did he reached between them, guiding the broad dome of his cockhead to her slick folds. “Dinnae close your eyes, *mo bòidhchead*. I cannae wait another moment, but I must see you. I must see the moment you take me.”

He couldn't wait, and his urgency thrilled her.

Connal came into her with one hard, powerful thrust, pressing his cock into her pussy until she couldn't take another inch of him. His hands came under her bottom, lifting her as he worked deeper, giving her his full length and filling her until she gasped and clutched his arms. A sound came out of him that seemed both comforting and ferocious, a wholly male sound of finally taking what he had wanted. For another moment she kept her mind opened to his, and found his thoughts so filled with lusty wanting that she shivered.

He went still, and something like panic spread through him as he recoiled from her, and something like a brick wall came up between her mind and his.

"No." She wasn't sure what had scared him, but she wouldn't let him leave her, not when he wanted her as much as she needed him. "It doesn't hurt me. I want you there."

Connal looked uncertain now. "You're no' afraid?"

"I'm afraid of what I'll do to you if you stop." She tightened around him. "I want you. Everything you have for me, it's mine. Give it to me."

He groaned as he bent his head and kissed her, his mouth demanding and hot, and then he surged back into her. His weight and need pressed her thighs wider as he fucked her, his hips pumping against hers with fierce urgency. In his mind a wordless emotion spread that Valerie had never before understood; a masculine need to penetrate and claim and seed, and all the deep, soul-shaking pleasure it gave him to be inside her doing that.

For once Valerie allowed herself to do as she pleased, too, and ran her hands over his back and down to grip his buttocks. Bracing her heels against the ticking, she lifted her hips to meet his next thrust, helping him get deeper, shaking with the delight of being so completely pervaded and occupied. Her body gushed with so much wetness she soon drenched him, and he shook as another, deeper groan came from his chest.

“I’m yours tonight,” Valerie murmured against his ear, nipping the curve. As he buried his face against her neck she raked her fingernails over the back of his thighs, the pleasure billowing up inside her as if he’d released some part of her she hadn’t even known had been locked away. “Don’t keep anything back. Do anything you want. I want this. I want you.”

She meant every word. The simplest act of man and woman loving and pleasing each other immediately became something more. It took over Valerie as much as Connal did, turning her away from the calm and joyful memories from the past and shoving her into a new and completely unfamiliar version of herself. She couldn’t stop touching him, her hands almost frantic as he pumped into her, wanting to torment him and please him and leave her mark on him. The sounds he made, the wildness he brought out in her, and the smell of their bodies tangled together, wondrous and terrifying.

Where was Connal taking her? Valerie had only ever been with one man, so she had no compass, no map to where she was going. How could he enthrall her so completely that she didn’t care?

*This is how it should be, and I never knew.*

He said something, threading his fingers through her curls, and when she looked at him he thrust so deeply into her core that it instantly triggered a mind-blowing explosion of bliss. As her body heaved and she writhed he gave her one final, hard stroke and then shook over her as he jetted into her pussy, his cream warm and thick as it bathed her heated softness.

Valerie clung to him, so destroyed by the climax she thought she might black out. His arms came around her as he rolled onto his back, and that plastered her on top of him. She should say something, she thought, so wrung-out from the experience her whole body had gone limp. She’d move and say something tomorrow. Or next week.

*Did I really say I was his for the whole night?* She focused on her breathing, but the aftershocks kept distracting her. He was still deep inside her, his cock almost as hard as when he’d

come into her. *He won't kill me. That will.* Her lips curved. *What a way to go.*

*'Twas too rough for her. I didnae think. Fack me for a brute.*

His thoughts astonished her, and she managed to lift her head to meet his worried gaze. “It was not too rough for me. I don’t want you to think anything like that. You’re not a brute.”

Connal pressed his hand to her cheek. “’Tis been a long time for you. I didnae remember. As soon as I touched you, all the thought went out of my head.”

“I’d say it’s like riding a bike, but you don’t know what a bike is.” She sighed and rubbed her cheek against his hand. “Yes, it’s been almost a year and a half since I made love.” She didn’t want to talk about Dale, because if she did then it would be like having two men in bed with her, and the guilt would set in. “You can’t hurt me like this. Or, you can, but I know you won’t.”

“You dinnae ken me so well to believe thus,” he chided.

“You were going to stop before because you thought I was afraid,” she told him. “You were inside me, and you wanted me so much, and still, you stopped yourself. That’s how I know.”

His mouth thinned, and he looked away from her. She could have pulled whatever bothered him from his thoughts, but she guessed he didn’t want her to know whatever was in his head right now.

*Give him something else to think about, then.*

“Since you can’t read my mind, I’ll tell you what I’m thinking.” She pushed herself up to straddle his belly, and took hold of his hands. “I like who I am with you when we’re naked. It’s so good I never want to get dressed again—and you, you have an amazing body. You’re so big and warm and strong I can’t stop touching you. All these muscles, all mine to play with.” She trailed her fingers over the vault of his chest. “You don’t mind that, do you?”

He gave her a wry look. "I'm a man. If I minded, I'd be insane."

"I like touching you with more than my hands. Although technically speaking, that's kissing you." She bent down to press her lips against one hard flat nipple, and licked it before she shifted back, moving her legs to the outside of his, and letting the damp pale curls between her legs tease his swelling erection. "If I remember right, you wanted to watch me put my mouth on you, too."

Connal's thighs tightened under her in reaction. "You've the prettiest lips."

Now she watched his eyes as she moved down his body, taking all the time she wanted to touch and kiss and lick him. His skin tasted salty from his sweat, and the dark curly hair around his navel tickled her nose. She let her cheek glance against the thick column of his hard shaft, and the pulse of his reaction trembled against her skin when she placed a kiss just to the right of the wide base. It bemused her to think just a short time ago all of this, all of him had been inside her.

*You don't have to do that for me,* Dale had said the one time she'd tried to please him this way. *I know women don't like it.*

Valerie lifted her head to see the intense expression on Connal's face. She had already captured his full attention, and she hadn't done anything yet. He wasn't going to tell her to stop. Knowing she had that much freedom with him made her toes curl with delight.

She'd better make sure he wanted this, however. "I'm not reading your mind now. If you want me to do anything, you have to tell me."

His hands took hold of the ticking cover. "You'd put those pretty lips on my cock?"

"Like this?" She brushed a soft kiss on the heavy plum-shaped dome of his cockhead. "Or like this?" She parted her lips, bathing him with her breath before she engulfed him with her mouth and sucked lightly.

“Aye, thus.” He pushed back the curls that had fallen against her cheek, and then gathered her hair and held it back from her face.

Valerie forgot to read his mind as she enjoyed his body. She couldn't take all of him in her mouth, but curled her fingers around his base as she sucked him as deeply as she could. Judging by his reactions he liked being rubbed by her tongue along the ridge of his glans, which made his shaft swell even thicker. She took her time, satisfying her own curiosity while pleasuring him, and when she finally found a rhythm which seemed to make him crazy she used it to give him the deepest strokes she could manage. At the same time her own sex pulsed with a wonderful ache between her thighs.

If she had been able to speak Valerie would have told him how much she loved sucking his cock. Not once did it seem wrong or dirty, and it gave her a sense of power she'd never before experienced in bed. She could drive him wild this way, slowing down to savor him while she watched his eyes darken and burn with need. His body told her everything she wanted to know. When he grew closer to his climax his hand tightened on her curls, and he began to guide her head into a quicker rhythm. When she tugged harder on his cockhead he groaned and his hips lifted. A few moments before he came his balls tightened, and his shaft twitched between her lips. When he began to jet she drank from him as if they'd done this a thousand times.

Once he'd given her all he had, he dragged her up and wrapped his arms around her, his chest still heaving. The kiss he placed on her swollen lips made her sigh into his mouth.

“You're a wanton lass,” Connal said as he slid his hand down to her folds, and parted them to rub his thumb against the throbbing knot of her clit. “I shall do the same to your soft little quim, if you'll permit me.”

She was so close to coming herself she shook with her own need, and couldn't wait. “Just do this. Oh, Connal, it's so good.” She gasped as he penetrated her with two long fingers. “Kiss me, please.”

He gave her his mouth and his tongue, and that shoved her over the brink. Her longing and satisfaction twined with the sensations he gave her with his hand and his kiss, and suddenly burst into a dazzling shower of ecstasy that cascaded through her again and again.

When Valerie drifted down from her own heights, she looked up to see Connal watching her through a strange blur. The moment she blinked tears spilled over her lower lashes, and he bent his head to kiss them away.

“I’m sorry.” Why was she crying? “I’m so happy, I promise. I just...I’ve never...”

“You’ve never had another man,” he said softly, and when she nodded he rubbed his cheek against her curls. “I shallnae tell you your husband would wish you happy with me. Sometimes I suspect Joana desired me dwell in misery the rest of my days.”

Valerie hated the thought, but it fit for both of them. “That’s probably what Dale wanted, too.” She tilted her head back. “I take that back. I’m not sorry.”

“Nor I, *mo bòidhchead.*” For the first time since she’d come to the island Connal laughed. “Nor I.”

## Chapter Fourteen



Meg moved her buckets from the floor of the cave to a higher niche in the walls, which kept the waves coming in from upending them. Filled to the brims with the fat, juicy oysters Brochan loved for his seafood stews, they might be the last work she ever did in this miserable life of hers. She hadn't spent all morning gathering them from the tide pools to give them back to the sea.

*You're a stubborn lass, Meggie,* Joana's sweet voice said from a morning long past, when she had found her trying to untangle what a cat had done while playing with the lady's skeins of embroidery threads. *I shall ask the laird buy new when we visit my kin on the mainland.*

*Save your coin, my lady,* she had replied, *and ask him kill that wretched beast.*

When Meg climbed back down the water swirled around her knees instead of her ankles, giving her a moment of dread. She couldn't swim, and if it got much higher she'd be trapped inside. Yet as she approached the mouth of the cave a blinding flash just outside, accompanied by thunder so loud it made her clap her hands over her ears.

*I drown in here, or I'm roasted out there. Either way I'm dead.*

Unable to decide which was the least painful end, she waded back to her buckets. Drowning might not be so bad. A year ago Joana Arasgain had killed herself by jumping into the sea, and the lady had been the finest, gentlest woman she'd



ever known. Meg wondered if she would see her again once the ocean finally choked the life from her. She hoped so, for she had never cared for anyone, even her mam, as much as she had loved Joana.

*You're so angry, Meggie. 'Tis the past, and done. Seek peace.*

Thanks to the spray hanging in the air Meg's eyes began to sting, and she used a dry spot on her sleeve to blot the tears of pain from her lashes. "I've no belly for peace, my lady. Why didnae you take me with you? I vowed always serve you. I'd follow you anywhere, even into death."

No answer came, even from her memories. Joana had never once spoken of planning to die, and would never again hear her whining.

A dark shape entered the cave, sending a splash of salt water in Meg's face. Sputtering she slogged backward, shocked to discover the water had risen to her waist, and one of the Ffolk surfacing just in front of her. The memories of being trapped on the sinking ship that had cast her on Caladh made her draw her dagger and hold it ready.

"Get out, merrow," she said in her loudest voice. "I'd cut my own throat before I'd mate with a fish beast."

Merrick flung back his long golden hair and peered at her as if she'd sprouted scales. "Why do you drown yourself in a sea cave?"

"I didnae trap myself here. 'Twas the tide and the storm. I cannae swim, so I must... 'tis naught of importance." Gathering what remnants remained of her dignity she lowered her blade. "Leave me die, then, King of Fish. 'Tisnae your concern."

"You're the angriest mortal I've ever met." Merrick waded toward her, removing the dagger from her hand so quickly it was in his fist before she could blink. "Put your arms round my neck, and hold your air."

Meg looked down at the webbed hands he'd clamped around her waist. "I dinnae wish you— *No.*"

The Ffolk king dragged her beneath the water. The world became a confusion of bubbles, roiling waters and his broad bare chest in her face. She screamed, but only a distant sound came out of her, accompanied by a torrent of more bubbles. Then Merrick clamped his mouth over hers, kissing her.

When he forced a breath into her lungs, the sea blurred around them. He wasn't kissing her, he was stopping her from drowning.

At least she'd had something like her first kiss before she drowned, Meg thought, suddenly and completely languid in the face of death rushing to seize her. The Ffolk king took her next exhale into his chest, and breathed his into her lungs. It grew oddly comforting for her, as if he were giving her consolation as well as air. Then his mouth moved on hers, his tongue gliding between her lips.

*I want him do that between my legs.* The notion shocked her.

That couldn't be right, of course. No one but Lady Joana had ever looked after Meg. Even her da had sold her into servitude after her mam had bled to death birthing her twentieth bairn.

*Sure and 'tis sad for me, Margret, but I need the coin more than five lassies to feed,* Da had told her before handing over her and four of her sisters to the slaver. *You dinnae wish your brothers and me starve, do you?*

Water cascaded around her as Merrick dragged her to the surface, and stood holding her against him as she sputtered and coughed. When Meg blinked the sea water from her eyes she saw she was standing near the white-sanded beach of one of the small islets beyond the bay. This one lay so close to the wall of mist that hid the island that most of it disappeared into the white fog. Only a covered skiff sat tethered to a stake on the shore, promising without words that she could return to Dun Ard.

*I dinnae wish to.* That thought startled Meg more than being rescued by the fish king.

“’Tis a cottage here where you may wait out the storm,” Merrick said, taking hold of her hand as he walked out of the water with her. “When ’tis clear, take the boat back to Caladh. I shall send word to the MacMar so they dinnae search for you.”

As soon as she planted her feet on solid sand Meg jerked free of his hold and marched up toward a narrow path. She stopped and turned around to find the Finfolk king following her. He looked as arrogant as ever, but when she took a step toward him he stopped and looked wary.

“I owe you my life,” Meg told him. “I shall sing your praises to the laird. Indeed, I shall never again speak ill of you and your kind.” The last was a lie, but he would never know. “Anything more, I cannae give you.”

“Ah.” His gold and blue eyes shifted as he looked over her. “No.”

“No, you dinnae expect more, or no, you want more?” she demanded. “Speak plainly, for I’m but a poor simpleton you and yours regard ugly and unworthy. I couldnae save my sisters from drowning when our ship wrecked. I couldnae stop my mistress from ending herself. I’m despised by all for failing her.” Her voice rose to a shout as she flung out her arms. “I’m an eejit who can’t even swim.”

Merrick then came at her, and lifted her off her feet with one arm as he strode down the trail and kicked open the door to a shabby cottage. Inside he took her across a dark room and dropped her onto a bench before he stepped back and stared down at her.

“Sit there and hold your tongue, or I vow, I shall give you the thrashing you ever wish,” he warned.

Drained of rage, Meg watched him crouch in front of the hearth to start a fire. Had she yelled at the King of Fish in hopes of being punished for such? Since her lady had died she’d spent every day in a useless fury, unaware of what she had done to turn Joana away from her, and unable to make amends. Losing the only person who had truly cared for her since her mam had died had rendered her unwilling to seek

any comfort. If she opened her heart again she would be crushed a second time, and that would surely end her.

Only here came Merrick, all tall and golden and glorious, his scales turned now to beautiful perfect flesh over sleek muscle, his odd Finfolk garment fitting him so closely she could behold every line of his body. His long arms and legs, his wide shoulders and broad, strong back seemed no different from any mortal man's. Although she had accused him of stinking, he had no smell beyond a slight saltiness from the sea. If not for the slits on the sides of his neck, and the webs of skin between his fingers and toes, he could easily pass as human.

*And he kissed me. Truly he did.*

Meg had heard whispers from the maids who thrilled to his every appearance on the island, and whispered about the sort of lover he'd prove. He'd vowed never to take a mate, and since he and his sort could live forever like the clan he hardly needed to. She doubted he would trifle with any female on Caladh, but he'd been spotted occasionally with wenches who might welcome him as a lover. She listened to gossip about the pretty widow's cottage he'd visited, and how he'd been seen speaking with a shepherdess near the loch, and imagined him with those women. She'd seen with her own eyes the king bringing a fresh catch to a farmer's wife whose husband had become bedridden.

The king had ignored every flirtatious look from the eejits who dared draw close to him. Indeed, he'd never shown any particular attention to anyone before Valerie Baker had come to Caladh.

Did Merrick desire that bubble-haired wench from the future? The idea unsettled Meg. In truth she wanted the woman from the future gone from Dun Ard, so that the laird might return to properly mourning Lady Joana. Yet thinking of the fish king with that bold harridan made her stomach clench in an unpleasant manner.

After a few moments Merrick had a blaze going, and stepped back as the heat radiated in the cold air of the cottage.

“’Tis why you tied yourself with rope at the fairy pool. How can you live on the island and no’ swim?”

Meg eyed him, her temper rising again. “I’m no’ a fucking witch.”

“You ken that’s nonsense,” he chided. “I shall teach you.”

Dimly she remembered him the day the slaver’s boat had sunk. Merrick and his fish men had pulled all the bairns from the flooding hull. At first Meg had thought them the merrow, who were known among the Éricann to lure sailors to jump into the water. Every mortal who chased after those creatures had been caught and drowned by them in the sea. Meg had been one of the last to be rescued from the boat, as she had clung in terror to her younger sisters. She had not understood that they had already died, and fought wildly when dragged away from them.

“Well?” Merrick said, drawing her attention back to him.

“A king, teach a lady’s maid to swim?” Meg uttered a bitter laugh. “Aye, right. I cannae wait to return to that vat of fish piss you call your kingdom and crawl through the waves while your men laugh at my skinny arms and legs. ’Twill give me delight to paddle about in my sisters’ grave. Mayhap I’ll learn so well you may guide me to where their bones rest in that fucking boat that sank.”

Merrick reached out to her, making her flinch, but all he did was push a wet lock out of her eyes. “We bring those that die in the wrecks to the clan. The MacMar buried your sisters in that place between the hills.”

She knew where the clan’s vassals were buried after they died, a vast valley pocked with slate stones carved with their names to mark their graves. She’d always wondered why so many of the markers had nothing chiseled on them. Under four of them lay her poor wee sisters.

“My thanks,” Meg said gruffly, meaning it this time. “For them and me.”

The king looked at her for a long time without speaking, and then he said, “I’ve no time to come and save you when

you're again foolish. Tomorrow go to the fairy pool at sunset, and dinnae bring rope."

With that he left, and Meg watched through the window as he made his way back to the sea. He stopped and glanced back at her before he dove into the waves and vanished.

"Sunset, when none shall see you with the ugly red-haired wench," she muttered under her breath, and yet again thought of his mouth on hers. "Aye, your majesty."



DAWN BROUGHT CLEAR SKIES AND COLD AIR THAT SMELLED SO fresh Valerie did nothing but watch and breathe in the lovely scent from the open doorway. The sound of a blanket falling told her when Connal awoke, and a few moments later his arms came around her. She leaned back against him, glad of his warmth. Nearly every part of her body seemed different today, as if he'd somehow reshaped her. Her lips wouldn't stop tingling, and her breasts had so many tender spots from his mouth and hands they still throbbed. She knew she needed to wash, but wearing his scent like some gossamer lingerie no one else could see, a secret only she knew, prolonged the delight of loving and being loved again.

She went still.

*Is that really what this is? Love?*

"You should come back to bed," Connal murmured against her hair.

She smiled a little. "Then you'd have to carry me to Dun Ard, I think." Her smile faded. "Do we need to talk about any of this before we go back?"

"'Tis a need for discussion?" He pressed a kiss to her shoulder. "We're lovers. You're beautiful, and generous, and all a man could dream. Come back to bed, and I'll carry you round the whole island before we wed."

*And there it is. We're lovers, but not in love.* They'd been intimate, so he had to put a ring on her. She glanced down at her hand. *He doesn't even have to do that.*

“’Tis growing cold,” Connal said as he tightened his arms around her. “Come and permit me warm you.”

She turned and looked up at him. “Last night was amazing, and I know I’ll never forget it, but I’m not marrying you.”

He looked as if she’d slapped him. “Why no’? You’ve done everything else with me.”

“We can have all the wild and wonderful sex you want, but it won’t change the fact that you’re still in love with your first wife,” she said, knowing it was cruel, but also sure it was necessary. “You’ve been grieving for a year because you can’t let Joana go.” When he would have replied she pressed her fingertips to his mouth. “I know because I’ve been doing the same for Dale.”

“Then that, ’tis why you willnae wed me,” he said flatly. “I’m willing and ready. You’re no’.”

“Just before I fell into the lake in my time, I finally said good-bye to my husband. I was ready to start my life over somewhere else.” She rubbed her thumb over the pretty green stone in the ring he’d made for another woman. “Maybe that’s why Joana’s ring brought me to Caladh.”

“So you’re free of him, but I’m yet trapped in my grief. I see.” He turned away, walking naked across the shelter to retrieve his trews and pull them on. “Shall I say thus to Merrick, and dare him invade Dun Ard to drag you to the bay? Shall the MacMar go to war with the Finfolk over you, Mistress?”

“The clan doesn’t have to die for me.” Valerie had expected this reaction, and knew only one solution to the problem. “You need to remove me from the equation. Take me to the mainland. Just don’t let Merrick erase my memories first.”

The leine Connal was holding fell out of his hand onto the floor. “What shall you do there, my lady? You’ve no coin, kin or home. Do you ken what can be done to a female with no protection in this time? At best you’d become enslaved. At worst—”

“You’ll take me to the druids,” Valerie said before he could start in on the worst possibilities. “Preferably the tribe you sheltered here on the island, because they owe you.”

“’Twas nine centuries past, when the Romans came hunting them.” He glared at her. “They dinnae remember the debt.”

“I think they might, actually. Duncan mentioned the other night how their souls reincarnate over and over through time. He also said they know more about magic than any other tribe.” She went over to gather her clothes and start dressing. “If they don’t have a spell to return me to the twenty-first century, then I’ll stay with them until I learn a trade that I can use to support myself. I’ve always been interested in weaving and knitting—”

Suddenly she was on her back on the pallet, and Connal was on top of her.

“I’m still a little sore from last night.” She kissed the tip of his nose. “So be gentle, okay?”

“I dinnae wish fack you,” he said flatly. “Beat you, aye, and lock you in my chamber, most fervently, and keep you there until your senses return, without qualms. Why should you wish leave Caladh?”

*Why do you want to leave me?* was what he meant, Valerie thought. “Aside from the fact that you’re immortal, and I’m not, and we can never have a family, and I hardly know anything about you, I don’t *want* to marry you. I didn’t even know I was sharing my husband with another woman until after he died. I’m not going through that again.”

“Joana’s gone,” he said roughly, as if it hurt him to admit it. “She cannae trouble you.”

“She doesn’t. You do.” She sighed. “Take me to the mainland, and then you can come back here and mourn your wife the way you want to.”

Connal got up off the bed, finished dressing and walked out of the shelter, leaving Valerie to lay and wonder if she should have instead asked Fletcher or Shaw to get her off the



island. The laird had lost his wife the last time he'd gone to the mainland, which she had forgotten until just now. She should have been more sensitive about the trauma he'd suffered, and yet as she thought that the old anger over Dale's suicide began burning inside her again.

*Here I go, blaming myself again for what my men do. Not that Connal is mine.*

She got up and dressed, wondering if the laird had left her to make her way back on her own. She wrapped herself in his tartan before she stepped outside, and then saw Connal sitting on a rock a short distance away, his head bowed.

Valerie marched over to him, determined to have her way in this. Going to the mainland was the sensible solution. The druids would either help her get back to the future, or help her start a new life in this time. She didn't belong on this island, or to Connal MacMar, and she had to make him understand that.

When she reached him she saw he had his hands covering his face, which startled her. "Goodness, you're not crying, are you?"

"No, my lady," he said, his voice sounding tight. "My head, 'tis spinning. If I look again at the hills I shall boak all over myself."

Valerie mentally kicked herself for forgetting his mortal weakness as she crouched down beside him and put her hand on the back of his neck. "Try now."

He peeked at her from between his fingers like a boy before he dropped his hands. "My thanks."

She took hold of his hand and helped him to his feet, unsure of what to say next. He simply twined his fingers through hers and began walking down the slope, giving her no choice but to follow him.

The skies had never looked brighter, and the warmth of the sun on Valerie's face made her regret her suggestion a little. She doubted life on the mainland would be as nice as staying on the island. The druids might be terrible people who would

sell her into slavery the moment Connal left her with them. Maybe she was making the wrong choice.

“You’re wrong about me, my lady,” Connal said as they reached the little valley between the hills. “I dinnae wish go on mourning Joana. Naught I do can bring her back. Nor do I love a wife who preferred death to being mine.”

Now he was lying to himself as well as her. “Then I think you need to make some serious changes in how you’re living your life.”

“Joana wanted children.” He stopped and regarded her. “She loved them, even more than I ever suspected. In her wardrobe I found a box with little garments she’d made for a bairn I couldnae give her. Mayhap she meant to run away with one of my vassals, but in the end feared what I might do as revenge. Mayhap my love for her became a trap, and death the only escape. I cannae tell you. She never spoke of such, and left behind only the box.”

Valerie thought of Candace screaming at her at Dale’s funeral, and trying to kill her on the bridge, all for an affair she’d never known had happened. “Oh, Connal.”

“Never shall I ken her reasons, and ’tis maddening.” He moved his shoulders. “Just after Joana died I remained in my chamber so I shouldnae seize every mortal male in my household and shake them until one confessed. I thought through every day I spent with her, and the times I didnae. If she dallied with another behind my back, she never showed a single sign she’d betrayed me. I decided in the end ’twas from her discontent with me and the empty life she led.”

“That’s nonsense,” she told him. “She kept secrets from you when she could have talked to you about her problem. There are always kids in every time who need a home. Killing herself because you couldn’t get her pregnant was vicious and cruel and really, a little ridiculous.”

“Would you say the same of a man who ends himself because his loving and devoted wife willnae divorce him?” he asked softly.

Her anger subsided as she met his gaze. “Do you want me to let go of your hand?”

Connal smiled a little. “No, my lady.”

## Chapter Fifteen



**F**iacail descended into the hold, noting the number of her still-nauseated sisters had decreased as the Cait Sith had grown accustomed to living on the boat. As she made her way to the back room where they had locked up the mortals, she wondered if she should ask the enchantress to permit them to dock again. Over the last two days Derdruí had amused herself by tormenting the strongest of the captives, whose screams had gone on for hours. Unless they soon stopped at another island the sovereign would have to content herself with the few scrawny babblers that remained.

The stench of death rolled out of the captives' room as soon as Fiacail lifted the bar, and when she glanced inside she rubbed her tired eyes. "Speal."

Her sister joined her, making a tsking sound as she peered through the doorway. "I reckoned Dearg had another of her spells last night. Did she slay them all, then? What shall you tell the princess?"

"That you permitted that berserk wench play with her prisoners." As Speal cowered she slammed the door shut. "Where went that wee brat?"

She pointed to the ceiling. "She's taken to sitting on that bar across the great pole with that flappy cloth." When Fiacail glared at her she held up her hands. "I cannae remember all the names the mortals use for their cursed vessel parts."

Fiacail returned to the upper deck, and spotted Dearg perched on the yard of the main mast sail. She had not yet

shed the form of the merchant's pampered daughter, or scrubbed off the dried blood streaking her face and gown. In her hand she clutched the hilt of her favorite blade, which appeared to have snapped in half, silently indicating the ferocity of her butchery in the night.

"I wouldnae, Sister," one of the sailors said as she approached the mast. "She's vowed to gut the next of us that plagues her."

Fiacail glanced at the cabin before she stretched out her claws and used them to scale the mast. Although she was tempted to kick Dearg from her perch into the sea, she climbed out onto the yard and sat down beside her.

"I'm told you indulged yourself again," she said, looking out at the endless expanse of dark blue. "Shall you enliven the last minute you breathe by explaining why you wasted the last of our sovereign's amusements, and invited her wrath to fall on all our heads?"

"I've my reasons." Dearg offered her the ruined blade. "Go on and kill me, then. You've ever wished to."

Pitching the broken weapon into the ocean gave Fiacail no satisfaction. "You've no' been right in the head since Insii Orc." That wasn't true—Dearg had always teetered on the brink of madness—but it seemed kinder to give her an excuse. "'Tis the hoors' memories again? This pampered wench didnae wipe them clean?"

Her sister regarded her. "You're so busy licking Derdruí's boots you dinnae ken what's wrong with the Cait Sith. We've wasted centuries slaying mortals to acquire their shapes and memories so we may replace them, and why? So we may hide our true selves in those stolen lives for a few decades before we must flee and do thus again?" She stared out at the waves. "'Tis pathetic."

"We could try slay some druids," Fiacail suggested. "They're like us, in a fashion. Mayhap we'll be born anew instead of living forever."

“Druids, they’re cows in robes. The MacMar, they’re half-mortal like us. Only Prince Mar created an island to hide them from our sovereign. ’Tis how much he loved his halflings.” Dearg’s shoulders sagged. “We dinnae even ken which Fae to claim as our sire. He abandoned us in this miserable realm. How many of us died being burned or hacked apart for changing on the full moon, or no’ ageing, or being too strong? A hundred? Two?”

“No more died since the princess found us and taught us how to find each other and live among mortals,” Fiacail reminded her. “In return we vowed serve her for eternity. Mayhap when we find the clan for her, she shall gift us the island after she slays them.”

“Ever you offer us hope. I cannae decide if ’tis charming, naïve, or your secret method of torture.” Dearg’s small hand touched hers for a moment. “The enchantress doesnae care for us, Sister. You’ve seen how much we disgust her. She refuses tell us anything about our Fae sire. To her we’re naught but her hunting dogs. She shallnae reward us once we’ve served her purpose.”

The cabin door flung open. “Where are my evening diversions?”

Before she could stop her Dearg jumped from the yard to the deck, where she boldly approached the enchantress.

“I killed the last of the mortals in the night.” The little Cait Sith dipped into a deep curtsy. “The screams and begging for mercy annoyed me.”

Derdrui walked around her, inspecting her bedraggled, blood-stained gown. “You didnae think to gag them?”

“The screams of those you tormented all night annoyed me, Princess,” Dearg explained. “Ever I’ve wondered, how do you make them suffer so much for so long? Mayhap you might teach me do the same. I’ve some slavers to chase once we’re done slaving for you.”

The enchantress laughed as if delighted.

By that time Fiacail had climbed down the mast and rushed over to step between them. “Our sister drank from some crazed mortals on Insii Orc, my sovereign. ’Tis why she spouts such nonsense. Permit me lock her below until her head clears, and she remembers the vow she took to you.”

“At least this runt has always amused me.” Derdruí pushed her aside, and stroked a languid hand over Dearth’s head. “Of all you halflings, you are the one most like the Fae. Lovely and heartless and utterly self-absorbed.” She tipped up her chin to look into her eyes. “All that, and yet half-mortal. Have you any idea how much your existence offends my kind? How dearly the Fae would wish to cut you to pieces if they ever looked upon you? I’ve always protected you girls, and now you steal from me what was my only pleasure in this wretched place.”

Fiacail surged forward, only to be flung across the deck to smash into a water barrel.

“You cannae,” Speal whispered, grabbing her as she scrambled up to go after their sister. “’Tis the true reason she slew the last mortals. Our sister wishes for death.”

“Apologies, my sovereign,” the little Cait Sith said. “Next time I shall share my sport with you. Ever I’ve yearned see how you keep them alive so long.”

For a moment everyone held their breath as Derdruí went still. Then, with a husky laugh, the enchantress patted Dearth on the head.

“You see? Just like the Fae.” The enchantress yawned. “Clean up your mess, and take us to another island. You may collect my diversions for me.” She strolled back into the cabin.

Speal gripped the railing as her knees shook. “Gods blind me, but I reckoned her dead.”

“Forgive me the blow, Sister,” Dearth said as she trudged past Fiacail and climbed down the ladder into the hold.

The enchantress hadn’t struck her, Fiacail realized. The little Cait Sith had.

“Set sail for Ornyst,” she called out, and leaned over the railing to empty her belly into the roiling waves.



ONCE THEY RETURNED TO THE STRONGHOLD CONNAL reluctantly allowed Valerie to retreat to the guest chamber while he bathed and changed. When he emerged from his rooms intent on speaking to her again, Fletcher intercepted him in the passage to report on storm damage to the curtain wall, the gardens and several barns which would require repair. He only half-listened until the seneschal mentioned Nyall being struck by lightning.

“Why the fack was he out of doors?” Connal demanded as he strode toward the garrison hall.

“Some lads remained at their posts to watch for you, my lord,” Fletcher said, and caught his arm. “The captain’s no’ in his chamber. He’s yet drilling the men in the lists.”

“After being struck and burned by lightning?” He turned around and ran to the gallery above the lists, where he saw his captain standing and watching the sparring matches. As the seneschal joined him he muttered, “He seems himself. Did Duncan see to his burns?”

“The captain claimed they’re mild, and refused to permit the healer treat them.” He nodded toward Nyall’s back. “He’s well enough. So do you seem, my lord. Did you take refuge in the village last night?”

“In the hills.” He thought of all that had occurred between him and Valerie in the shelter, and the unpleasant confrontation of the morning. “Mistress Bakers doesnae wish wed me. She reckons the druids on the mainland may aid her return to her time. Make plain to all the men and vassals that no one may take her off the island. ’Tis my order.”

“So you scheme to...force her wed you?” Fletcher asked, and held up his hands when Connal glowered at him. “I only wish you think on such. The lady leaving, ’twould mend the rift with the Finfolk. Merrick shouldnae object, as ’twill salvage his pride.”



“I’m no’ handing her over to the fucking druids.” The thought of abandoning Valerie on the mainland made a knot in his gut. “I shall walk with Merrick again, and settle the matter. Send word that we shall meet in twoday.”

He went down to the great hall, where he hoped to see Valerie enjoying the morning meal with Duncan and Shaw. Instead the healer and his senior chieftain stood speaking to one of the shore patrollers, who stood holding a bundle of rags. Connal went over to them, and as he drew closer he saw the rags were part of a shredded tunic wrapped around something.

“Fair morning, my lord.” The patroller looked nervously at Shaw before he said, “We found something near the north end of the bay. ’Twas wedged between some rocks.” He lifted part of the tunic to reveal a man’s callused hand.

Connal took the severed remains from him, and held it close to his chest so he could examine it without startling the maids serving the meal. It had been torn off just below the wrist, and had lodged in the end a long, triangular-shaped tooth gleaming against the torn flesh.

The tooth he recognized at once. “A white-mouth attacked someone?”

“’Twould seem so, yet we’ve no’ found the rest of the body, my lord,” the patroller admitted.

“Send another patrol to the bay shore. I want the length of it searched for the remains,” Connal told Shaw, who nodded and trotted off. He then regarded Duncan. “’Tis the hand of a sailor.”

“Aye, ’twas my thinking.” The healer sighed. “Merrick’s men likely attacked another fisher that strayed into their waters. They vowed no’ drown the crews any more, but mayhap the white-mouth attacked before they rescued the poor lad.”

Connal handed him the gruesome bundle. “Preserve the hand, and that tooth as well. I may need the thing as proof if ’twas done by purpose.”

“Merrick cannae send sharks after the drowning,” Duncan chided. “He only parlays with the white-mouths to keep them away from his settlement. In truth, we’re no’ sure he accomplishes such. Do the creatures speak a sea language like the whales and dolphins?”

“I cannae tell you, but if anyone speaks shark, ’tis Merrick.” Connal surveyed the hall to assure he hadn’t missed Valerie. “Has Mistress Baker come to break her fast?”

“Fletcher took a tray to her chamber earlier.” The healer’s dark blue eyes gleamed with amusement. “You’ve taken an uncommon interest in the lady of late. Shall I soon call her sister?”

“She refused me again, and wishes go to the mainland to ask aid of the druids—which I shallnae permit her do.” He saw Duncan’s mouth curve. “What? ’Tis my right as laird to decide who leaves the island, and who stays.”

“Aye, my lord.” Still smirking, the healer sat down with a group of sentinels to eat.

Connal knew he should do the same, but he had no desire for food. He left the hall and trod the passages as he thought on what he would say to Merrick once they walked. He could claim he’d hand-fasted with Valerie, and spent their wedding night in the hills, but the Finfolk king would then take offense at being denied the ceremony. The lady too could easily contradict his claim.

He stopped, finding himself in front of the guest chamber. Doubtless after the passionate night they’d shared she’d be slumbering, or perhaps bathing. He should go to the labyrinth for the walk, Connal thought even as he reached for the door latch.

Inside cool air from the open window greeted him, and a few candles flickered as he walked over to the bed where Valerie now slept. She’d bathed, he could tell from the change in her scent, and now wore only a thin linen shift. As he sat down beside her he grew disgruntled that she would hurry to wash away all traces of him. At the same time the desire that

had all but burned him alive last night returned, hotter and stronger than before.

“Are we going to argue again?” she murmured without opening her eyes.

“No. Aye.” He lay down beside her, tugging her over to face him. Her lips appeared still swollen from the many kisses he’d bestowed on her, and made him wish to do naught else for the remainder of the day. “Stay on the island. I shall send word to the druids asking for help as I promised. Here we may protect you,” he added when she finally looked at him. “On the mainland you’ll dwell alone among strangers. At least you ken me and my clan.”

“So you haven’t even tried to find a solution yet.” Valerie rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. “If I stay here, I’ll never return to where I belong. At least if I meet with the druids there’s some hope.”

Wedding him she considered hopeless, Connal thought. *Mayhap ’tis.*

“To return to a time where your husband’s lover wishes you dead, aye.” Reminding her seemed cruel, yet necessary if he was to convince her. “Our vassals, they’ve many children you might teach. We shall make a place for you here to live as you wish, my lady...or you may make good on the night we shared and take my name.”

“In my time, people have sex without strings,” she muttered. “I should have mentioned that before we got naked.”

“I wish you mine in name.” That would solve the problem with Merrick, and add greatly to his own satisfaction. He placed his hand on her flat little belly. “Dinnae you want the same? The two of us, ’tis good.”

Valerie didn’t say more, and he rubbed his palm against her in a slow circle. She didn’t object when he slid his fingers down to take hold of the shift’s hem and draw it up to her navel. Looking upon the tidy path of soft gold curls over her quim made him long to kiss her there.

“Don’t let me stop you,” she said, longing making her voice husky.

Connal straddled her, tugging her thighs open before he settled between them. The lovely flower of her quim had begun to bloom for him, and he pressed his lips to the soft pink folds. She moved under him, a moan slipping from her as he parted her with his tongue. She tasted of woman and sweetness, and made him bury his mouth against her.

Stroking her little pearl made his cock swell, but Connal ignored the troublesome thing. This he did for her, to lavish on her all that he could offer. Her hips moved, lifting and falling, and her hands found his hair. By the time he brought her to her pleasure she was panting and twisting, made wild by his loving.

When he came up over her to kiss her Valerie reached down, pushing at his treads until she freed him.

“I want you inside me now,” she whispered, her eyes dark with need.

Coming into her made him groan, for his mouth and her bliss had turned her hot and silky-wet. She gripped his cock from within as if she meant to hold him forever in her little sheath, and that drove him wild. Facking into her, driving and pumping with all his own need, made him grunt. Her legs curled around him, and he tore at the bodice of the shift so he could touch her cheeks as he facked her harder.

“Wed me,” he said as he drove into her core. “You may take me as much as you wish. I shall fuck you day and night, however you want. You want my cock in you, aye? ’Twill never leave you alone, then.”

In his mind he thought of all the ways he wished take her, pouring those dreams into her even as he plunged into her again and again. He wanted to kiss her pretty quim while she sucked his cock. He needed to spill his seed onto her breasts while she watched. He desired her bent over before him, his cock piercing the little flower between her arse. He would drown her in his cream, and kiss her until all she could do was cry out his name.

Valerie convulsed under him as she came to her delight, and he held himself inside her to relish every racking tremor before he came out of her, and brought her hand to his cock.

“’Tis yours,” Connal told her as he stroked himself against her palm. “Play with me, then. Make me your lover. Take me as your husband.”

She surged forward, wrapping her lips around his cockhead and sucking as he came, drinking of his seed before releasing him and pumping her hand on his shaft. The last ribbons of his cream spilled over her flushed breasts, and he nearly collapsed on her before rolling away.

They lay together, both panting, and Connal imagined night after night of loving her in such fashions. He would never tire of taking her, having her, and being loved by her.

“The wild and crazy sex is very nice,” she said, “but that’s not...” He turned to look at her, but she gazed at the ceiling. “It’s not a reason to get married.” She sounded as though she’d intended to say something else. “My place is in the twenty-first century,” she added quietly as she closed her eyes. “Please go. I really need to get some sleep.”

He imagined pulling her into his arms and kissing her until he aroused her again, and knew she wouldn’t resist. She would give herself to him again because she desired him; she knew he could give her as much pleasure as she wanted, too. Yet once more he thought of Joana, and how frightened she had been of becoming his wife. He had taken his time with her; why was it so hard to do the same with Valerie? He simply needed to ease her into coming around to his way of thinking.

“Rest, then, my lady.” He bent over to kiss her brow, and then rose from the bed and covered her with the blanket before he left.

From the guest chamber Connal went to the lists, where he summoned another chieftain to take over from the captain drilling the men. To Nyaall he said, “Come with me.”

“The lightning struck the spear I took from one of the sentinels too stupid to come inside from the storm,” the captain

said when they reached the infirmary. "I've but a few burns."

Connal pushed him inside, where Duncan rose from his work table. "Healer, get out."

"As you wish, my lord." The healer picked up his satchel, gave Nyall a frown, and left.

The captain sighed and pulled off his tunic, exposing the feathery burns on his chest and arm that appeared shiny and white now. "As you see I'm healed, my lord. 'Tis naught to concern you."

"'Tisnae the wounds that trouble me." Connal walked around him to examine the burns on his back. "You've the blood of a Fae water elemental in your veins. What harms mortals doesnae do the same to a MacMar. Look at me."

Nyall regarded him. "I'm no' blind."

He threw a punch at the captain's face. Instead of flinching or defending himself Nyall simply caught his fist, and strange, crackling light filled his dark eyes.

"Our sire warned me that we may be changed by elemental forces," Connal said softly as white sparks jumped from the captain's fist to bounce off his arm. "'Twould seem you've lightning in your veins now. 'Twill come over you when you're angry, or fearful, or seized by any strong emotion, I reckon."

Nyall released him, and turned away. "'Twill fade in time."

"Shaw reckoned the same with his change. He yet awaits a reprieve." He watched the light vanish from the captain's eyes. "'Tis lucky such happened to you. You ken how to control your temper and moods."

"Aye." He pulled on his tunic. "I'll take care."

"Valerie wishes to leave Caladh and journey to the mainland to meet with the druids." As Nyall gave him a startled look he nodded. "'Tis her resolution now. Mine, 'tis to keep her on the island. No one's to aid her. Make that clear to the clan."

“You spent a night with her, my lord. Even now you smell of the lady.” The captain hesitated before he said, “Couldnae we claim you’re hand-fast with her?”

“Merrick shall settle for naught less than a true wedding before the next moon. I cannae force Valerie wed me.” He saw his brother’s expression and sighed. “Aye, and so I can, but I shallnae. The lady comes to me willing, or no’ at all.”

Nyall’s jaw tightened. “’Twill break the truce.”

“Fack the truce.” Connal strode out of the infirmary.

## Chapter Sixteen



**D**uxor sent the monster to again hide near the islet before he returned to the settlement, where he swam through a hidden underground cave with a shaft that led up to his dwelling. His sire had dug out the tunnel a little at a time, intending to use it to escape if his coup failed. Now it permitted his son to evade Jamaran's watchers when he tired of playing polite hostage.

He needed to think on what he had heard the strange females discussing on the vessel.

*You're so busy licking Derdruí's boots you dinnae ken what's wrong with the Cait Sith. We've wasted centuries slaying mortals to acquire their shapes and memories so we may replace them, and why? So we may hide our true selves in those stolen lives for a few decades before we must flee and do thus again?*

Duxor had no doubt what the half-Fae females had claimed was true, and exactly the kind of power he desperately needed. With their abilities they could easily kill Merrick and replace him. That would allow him to be rid of the king and have his revenge while keeping Jamaran and the Selseus from discovering the assassination. The puppet that replaced Merrick would then be his to control, and through her he could finally rule.

*So I shall, if I may transform a shifter into my creature. If they hold onto their power after transformation. If I may control them as Merrick does Jamaran.*



So many unknowns made Duxor uneasy, but he could resolve them all with one bold move: capture one of the shifters and transform her. Since fusing the mortal with the white-mouth had turned the fisherman into his creature, surely the same would happen with the female he stole from the Cait Sith. If the halfling proved resistant, he would simply have his monster tear her to pieces.

As he sensed someone approaching he cleared his thoughts, focusing on the hideous ammonite tower sculpture he had been assembling as a tribute to the king.

Jamaran entered his dwelling without announcing himself, and glided around Duxor as he inspected the room. *No one's seen you for days. Where did you go?*

*I took my daily swims around the kelp forest, Commander,* he told him, looking as bewildered as he could manage. *Mayhap 'twas when your men checked on me. I'm no' permitted to leave the settlement without an escort.*

The pale bastart slapped him with a current of water. *Dinnae lie to me.*

Duxor tucked his thumb inside his belt to stroke the tiny vial hidden there. It contained a large amount of venom that he had painstakingly collected from weevers. The Selseus killed the burrowing fish the moment they spotted them, as the fish's barbs inflicted painful wounds on the immortals, but could kill mortals or their mates. He'd always hoped he could use the venom to end Jamaran, but the time for that had not yet arrived.

*I've no reason to lie.* He went to his last cache and removed four small creamy pearls of the poorest quality. *May I offer you something to ease your mood, then?*

Jamaran swam up behind him, hovering so close that his water rushed over the back of Duxor's neck. *I shall put you in the cage.*

Duxor had never once been threatened in such a manner, thanks to Merrick's guilt over his *màthair's* end. The cage, which lay in a cave on the outskirts of the settlement, had

always been used to briefly imprison those who defied or displeased the king. After his sire had been executed, his *màthair* had vanished, and everyone had assumed she'd gone off to live in exile. Merrick had been the one to discover her corpse in the cage some months later.

Like everyone Jamaran still thought his *màthair* had chosen to lock herself in the cage and starve herself to death. She had, after all, never made a sound the entire time she remained there.

Of course, she'd already been dead.

*Aye, so you should. I'm the son of a traitor. Or mayhap you should end me.* Duxor turned to make as if he were surprised. *Och, I remember, you cannae. The king showed me mercy and declared me innocent of all wrong doing. Even you ken I took no part in my sire's schemes. He trusts me, why dinnae you? Now if you'll excuse me, I must finish this before the celebration.*

The commander's washed-out eyes locked with his, and then he regarded the sculpture. *Why do you think so much on this ugly thing you build? To keep the king deceived?*

*'Tis a tribute to Merrick's rule. All that he's done to better our lives and those of our kin. Well, no' you or I, but all the others.* He reached out to caress the sculpture, and then used his fist to destroy the delicate tower. *Since you reckon the thing unsightly, I shall begin anew. Mayhap with abalone shell and some pieces of the dead reef.*

Jamaran picked up one of the broken sections, and slammed it onto his work table, causing the brittle shells to break apart into tiny fragments that floated down to the floor. *I dinnae jest with you, Duxor. Cease your scheming, for if you seek to follow your sire's path, I shall watch you die staked out beneath the sun.*

*'Tis pleasing to ken I'll no' die alone, Commander.* Duxor watched him, hoping for once the outsider would forget his orders and come at him. But no, Jamaran simply turned his back on him and swam out, leaving behind two men to guard him.

For the next hour he worked at his sculpture, amusing himself by making it even uglier than before. At nightfall the guards would grow weary and forget to look in on him, and that was when he would slip out and collect his monster.

*I shall train the creature how to serve me well, and set up a prison somewhere I may do my work without fear of discovery. Then we shall go fishing for a half-Fae to join our cause.*



VALERIE WOKE IN DARKNESS, AND YAWNED AS SHE SAT UP AND pushed the curls out of her face. Someone—Fletcher, probably—had left her a tray of food, which proved to be still warm when she got up to inspect it. She nibbled on an oatcake as she went to peer out the window at the curtain wall. The sun had dropped down to the horizon, and some men were working on filling in a big crack in the battlements. From the scorch marks on the stones around it, Valerie guessed it had been struck by lightning.

The door behind her opened and closed, and steps moved across the floor. Expecting it to be Connal for another round of Wed-me-or-else, she turned around to see Meg crouched in front of the hearth building a fire.

“Hi, there.” She went over to watch as the chamber maid blew on some kindling. “I can do that now, you know, without Shaw helping me.”

The red-haired girl nodded, but still finished placing the splits before she stood. “The laird bid me assure you’re warm and want for naught. I see you found the food I brought.”

“*You* brought me the food.” With difficulty she gulped down her last bite of oatcake. “Ah, why? That’s not your job.”

“You’ve been married, Fletcher says, and ken something of men.” Meg went over and closed the window covering before she lit a rush in the fire and went around lighting the candles. “I’d speak to one of the older maids, but their parents arranged their matches. Also, none of them much like me because I’m Ériann.”

This was getting very complicated, Valerie thought, but at least she wasn't trying to poison her. She hoped. "Okay, so what do you need to talk about with me?"

The chamber maid tossed the rush into the hearth and then faced her. "How do you ken if a man's in love with you? Should the laird do something particular?"

The question was so unexpected her jaw dropped. "You think Connal has fallen in love with you?"

Meg made a rude sound. "No' our laird. I mention him only as an important man, truly too far above you to even notice you breathe. That sort. Only he follows you and torments you and saves you and offers teach you to swim."

"I already know how to swim," Valerie said, confused again.

"No' you, me." She put her hands on her hips and stared up at the ceiling for a moment. "You're a teacher. Teach me how a wench may tell when a man loves her."

"Well, it's how he treats you, I guess. Shaw can be very friendly...but I don't think it's Shaw," she said as the maid's expression darkened. "I don't have to know who it is. A man who falls in love usually wants to be near you, and compliments you."

Meg shook her head. "He says I'm ugly."

"Maybe he was joking," she suggested. "Has he said anything nice to you?"

"He scolds. He bullies." Meg started pacing back and forth in front of the hearth. "He's a man that appears at your worst moment and gives you the very breath from his lungs, only you imagine he's kissing you instead, and mayhap he did, and you cannae sleep nor eat nor drive him from your every thought. Only he says naught of love, and you cannae kill him. That sort of man."

Fighting to keep a straight face, Valerie said, "Don't kill him. Ask him if he loves you."

Meg stopped pacing and glared at her. “What? Why? He should tell me.”

“Maybe he’s shy.” Was it Fletcher? She hoped not for the girl’s sake, because to the seneschal she looked like every other woman on the island: a big blur. “Anyway, you’ll never know until you do, and if you just happen to have any affection for him, then you’ll know if it’s safe to tell him. Can I ask you a question?”

“I’m no’ telling you his name,” the chamber maid snapped.

She would probably die on the rack before admitting who her crush was, Valerie decided. “How old are you?”

“Old enough.” Meg folded her arms. “My first moon time came six years past this winter.”

Valerie translated that as her menstrual cycle, and then went still. The girl used a comparative measurement of puberty and time instead of simply stating her age. *She doesn’t know how old she is.*

“That means you’re probably eighteen or nineteen,” she said casually. “That makes you an adult.”

“A woman, she’s grown as soon as her moon time comes, Mistress,” Meg said. “I’m so old I’ll soon be named a crone. Why do you wish ken?”

“I was just curious. Also, it’s rude to call elderly women crones.” She smiled brightly to remove the sting from the rebuke. “I was your age when I fell in love the first time. It’s crazy and upsetting, and you don’t know what to do with all that emotion. But it can be wonderful, too.” Although she thought she’d been talking about Dale, it was Connal’s face that popped into her mind. She cleared her throat. “Just ask him if he’s in love with you. It’s better to know than to wonder.”

Meg gave her a suspicious look, and then bobbed and hurried out.

Valerie sat down by the nicely-blazing fire, and held out her hands to warm them. “If Meg thinks she’s over the hill, I should be dust lining a coffin.” Again her thoughts returned to

Connal. What kind of life could a mortal have with an immortal? As a knock sounded she sighed. "Please don't be the laird." In a louder voice she said, "Come in."

Nyall stepped inside, a steaming mug in his hand. "I reckoned you might enjoy an evening brew, Mistress."

She peered at him. "Are you in love with Meg?"

"I dinnae ken...the laird's chamber maid? Och, no, my lady." He brought over the mug and handed it to her. "She's but a maiden, and much too young. Why ask you that?"

"Somebody is in love with her, or is messing with her. I don't know which. Anyway, I'll talk to Fletcher about it in the morning. Thanks for the tea." When he didn't leave she sighed. "Which was an excuse to come in here, I'm guessing."

Nyall inclined his head. "The laird said you wish journey to the mainland and seek aid from the druids. You should ken he's commanded the clan no' to take you from the island. No MacMar shall act against his orders."

"I know. I tried to talk him into the idea." Although she'd successfully convinced herself, now she wasn't so sure. "It's okay. Maybe we'll find another way to get me out of the twelfth century."

Nyall came to crouch next to her chair. "I name my best friend the Finfolk garrison commander, Jamaran. We dinnae wish war with each other, my lady. Yet should you remain unmarried on Caladh, 'twill push Merrick against the laird. Neither shall relent, and that shall break the truce. If such happens, many shall die."

"You're sure you really can't disobey Connal's orders?" she asked.

"The laird doesnae command Jamaran," the captain said carefully. "For the sake of keeping the peace, he may do much. When the Vikings held him enslaved, he risked his life to free the king. His masters meant to execute him for betraying them. If no' for Merrick, he would have drowned at sea."

"How awful." Valerie grew horrified. "But he can't carry me over to the mainland."

“The Finfolk possess boats that move swiftly and cannae be easily seen,” Nyall assured her. “Jamaran’s been to the mainland many times. He’s trustworthy, I promise you, and shall likely give you aid once you explain.”

Now Valerie understood. “You haven’t asked your best friend to smuggle me off Caladh yet?”

“I may only arrange for you meet him,” he told her. “What you speak of with him, ’tisnae my concern.”

“You’re even sneakier than I thought.” She knew it would upset Connal if she pulled this off, but at least he wouldn’t risk starting a war over her. “Okay. Just tell me one thing: why are you doing this?”

The captain took out a small roll of parchment. “’Tis something you should first read.”



THE NEXT MORNING VALERIE STOPPED BY THE INFIRMARY TO get another dose of Duncan’s headache potion, and blamed it on a sleepless night. The healer didn’t believe her, and insisted on checking her over first.

“You’re flushed.” He looked into her eyes. “No, you’re angry.”

“You really are a good doctor.” Before he could touch her she got up from the stool and went over to his black cabinet. “Do you have a magical time travel device in your collection? Because I’d really like to borrow it for a minute.”

“How do you ken I collect anything?” Before she could reply he winced. “I left the doors unlocked the day you helped me.”

“I didn’t touch anything, I promise. I just put the bottle back. And I looked at your stuff for a few minutes.” She rubbed her throbbing brow. “There might have been a little door that opened and closed on its own.”

Duncan came over and released the latch mechanism, which Valerie saw was a wooden version of several nautilus shells that interlocked with each other to form the handle.

“Caladh, ’twas created by my Fae Sire,” the healer said as he opened the doors. “The very land itself, ’tis saturated in his magic. That attracts certain other objects to our shores. I’ve been collecting them for centuries, mainly so I may prevent a mortal from touching them.”

“Touching them would be bad?” To her it looked like a lot of junk.

Duncan took out a piece of what appeared to be moldy driftwood, holding it tightly as he held it up between them. It suddenly sprouted arms, legs and a pointed eyeless head with a toothy snout. The thing snarled soundlessly at Valerie before it tried to bite him.

“Aye, ’twas once a woodland imp.” He stroked the creature’s back, and it shuddered before it turned back into a piece of moldy-looking wood. “The melia created these as their guards.”

“How cute.” She concealed a shudder. “Does it bite you until you get out of the tree Fae’s forest?”

“They burrow under your skin and devour you from the inside out, slowly, as they once did to woodsmen who tried chop down their melia’s tree.” He placed the imp back in its compartment. “You said one of the doors opened?”

“That one.” As soon as Valerie pointed, it swung open. “Just like that.”

Duncan reached in and pulled out a handful of jelly-like blue water that bounced up and down on his palm, flattened and turned into a watery glove, and finally pulled itself back together to form a perfect sphere.

“What is that?” Valerie said, fascinated now.

“I dinnae ken. I found it covering the face of a dead fisherman that washed ashore. ’Twas no water in his lungs, and no’ a mark on his body. This creature had smothered him, I reckon.” He placed the orb back in the cabinet. “My sire once told me of ancient sirens whose tears serve as their weapons. Mayhap ’tis such.”



Now she didn't bother to hide her disgust. "If they're so dangerous, why do you keep them?"

"No' all prove deadly." He took out a third specimen, which looked like a simple bracelet of amber beads. "If I may?"

With some misgivings Valerie held out her wrist, around which Duncan tied the bracelet. It then began to slowly turn around her wrist, the beads taking on a subtle glow. "That's all it does? I'm not going to turn into a frog?"

"'Tis but a pretty bauble that alights and moves against the skin, mayhap fashioned for a maiden by her Fae lover." He removed the bracelet. "Or made with the intent to seduce a mortal. I cannae say."

After he closed the cabinet he made her headache potion, which she drank down all at once with a grimace.

"My brain thanks you." She covered her mouth to stop a yawn. "Did you know about the druids offering to help me?"

Duncan shook his head. "The laird, he's no' yet sent a message to the tribe in Aberdeen."

"Oh, he sent one, and got an answer." She considered showing him the parchment Nyall had given her, but he might take it from her, and she needed to show it to the Finfolk commander. "They want me to come to them so they can examine the ring, and see if the enchantment that brought me here works both ways. They also mentioned that if it doesn't, they might have an alternative method to send me back." She forced a smile. "Only I can't leave the island."

The healer dragged a hand over the back of his head. "Blind me."

"Yep. That's why I'm flushed and angry and have a headache—or I did. Thanks for the prescription." She headed toward the door, and then hesitated. "Duncan, talk to Fletcher and see if he can get you an assistant. Someone who wants to learn about healing, who can handle the patients for you. You shouldn't have to lock up your pain in that cabinet."

## Chapter Seventeen



**A**t noon Valerie slipped out of the stronghold through the back gate Nyall had left open, and followed his directions to a cove on the far end of the bay. Although she didn't make it obvious that she was sneaking out of the castle, she tried not to draw attention to herself. As she approached the spot, she suddenly wondered if she was actually being set up for something entirely different, and stopped just short of the embankment.

"He wouldn't have his best friend kill me." She nodded in agreement with herself. "No, he's too proud. He'd kill me himself."

Sitting down on a flat-topped rock, Valerie tried to look calm and at ease. Being nervous might scare off the Finfolk commander, and then she'd never get off the island.

Water sloshed toward her, and then a tall, white-haired man rose out of the cove. He looked like a paler version of Nyall, with a matching height and build and the exact same stern expression. He also didn't look too happy to be summoned to this meeting, making her wonder if Nyall really knew his best friend all that well.

"Mistress." He ducked his head. "The captain said you wished speak with me."

"Yes. I'm sorry to pull you away from, ah, commanding the garrison." She smiled. "Okay, here's my problem. I need someone to take me to the mainland to meet some druids. Apparently they might have a way to return me to my time."

She produced the scroll Connal had tried to hide from her. “Can you read this?”

Jamaran nodded, and took the parchment from her to unroll it. After looking over the message he frowned at her. “’Tis truth, what they claim?”

“Duncan told Nyall that it is, and I trust them.” She didn’t have the same confidence in the commander, but Nyall had vouched for him, and the captain wanted her off the island more than anyone else. “Also, I can’t stay here and start a war between your people and the clan.”

“You could wed the laird,” he pointed out.

“Do you want to marry me?” As he took a step back she chuckled. “Don’t worry, I’m just trying to make a point.”

“I cannae take you as a mate, Mistress,” Jamaran said. “I’m no’ Selseus by birth, and I’ve no power to transform you. Nor do I desire a wife.”

“Exactly. That’s how I am about marrying Connal.” She glanced back toward Dun Ard. “He doesn’t really want me, either, other than as a playmate. This is something that’s been brewing between him and Merrick long before I got here. He also lost his wife the last time he allowed a woman to go to the mainland, and he never got over it. That’s why he doesn’t want me to leave Caladh. He thinks history is going to repeat itself.”

“I see.” Jamaran thought for a moment. “Why didnae you ask Nyall help you?”

“The laird issued orders to the clan to keep me on the island, and he’s not willing to disobey him.” Valerie grimaced. “I need someone who isn’t a MacMar to get me out of here. The captain said I could count on you.”

He looked over her as if he wasn’t sure who she was now. “You’re very trusting of a stranger.”

“You mean, you could take me far out to sea, and knock me out before you dumped me in the water to drown,” she guessed, nodding. “Nyall said the Vikings did something like that to you after you freed Merrick. Are you that vicious, Commander?”

“No.” He sat down on the embankment, resting his elbows on his knees. When she perched beside him he said, “I shall take you, but I cannae remain at your side, nor bring you back. If the druids’ magics fail, then you must remain with their tribe, and make your life among them. ’Tis acceptable to you, then?”

“That’s my Plan B.” She gave him a sideways glance. “What will Merrick do if he finds out you were the one who smuggled me off the island?”

“He shallnae reward me,” Jamaran said drily. “Dinnae fret. The king’s fond of me. Even when ’tis discovered, he shall show me mercy.” He picked up a stone and tossed it in the water. “You’ve decided ’tis what you desire? You’re certain ’tis no other course you may take?”

“I know staying here will only make the situation get worse. I’ve tried to convince Connal, but he’s determined to do things his way. I’m also a little...weak where he’s concerned.” She sighed. “Once I’m gone he’ll see this was the best solution.”

Jamaran stood, and offered her a hand to help her to her feet. “’Twill take a day to sail to the mainland. Meet me here after sunset. Bring a warm cloak, a large waterskin, and some food for yourself.”

“Thank you, Commander.” She watched him wade into the water and swim off, her emotions more anxious than relieved. “Did you hear all that, Captain?”

“No, for then I should report such to the laird.” Nyall came out of the shadows and walked down to stand on some stones beside her. “How fares your belly on the water?”

“Much better on it than drowning in it. Not that I intend to travel by boat anywhere.” She touched his arm. “Thank you for doing this. I suspect you’re both going to get a lot of grief because of me.”

The captain moved his shoulders. “’Tis naught compared to what you’ll endure if the druids cannae return you.” He looked down at her. “You should reconsider staying on

Caladh. 'Tis a hard life for a female among those on the mainland. Mortals there oft endure famine, plague and war. Viking raiders still come to burn villages and enslave the helpless. Should you escape the scourges, you'll grow old quickly, toiling from dawn to dusk—and the druids, they dinnae wed outsiders. You'll spend your life alone.”

“Goodness, maybe I should have accepted your offer.” She nudged him with her elbow. “I’m kidding. Try to be a little optimistic, please. I’m a smart, resourceful woman, and the druids seem to know what they’re doing. By this time next week I’ll probably be planning lessons at my dining room table while I talk to realtors and overdose on coffee.” She saw how he was looking at her. “Or I would, if I was planning to leave the island at sunset, which I’m definitely not going to do.”

“Take care, my lady, that you may live with whatever you plan,” he told her.



CONNAL CAME TO THE GREAT HALL FOR THE EVENING MEAL, but had no interest in food. As Meg piled platter after platter of food before him all he could do was stare at the empty seat between Duncan and Shaw. He then waited for his men to at least make their daily reports, but everyone at the table seemed to be ignoring him.

“Do I become a spirit, that my chieftains and healer shallnae look upon me?” he finally asked.

Duncan met his gaze. “You’re no’ a spirit, my lord.”

“You but act as one,” Shaw said, draining his goblet and placing it back on the table with slightly more force than was necessary. “A blind, deaf, eejit spirit who shall go on haunting your bed chamber for all eternity.” He got to his feet, bellowed for some guards, and headed out to the lists.

Fletcher appeared with a cup of brew, which he placed before Connal before he regarded the other men. “’Tis good at times, my mortal weakness. I neednae look upon anyone I dinnae wish see.”

Connal surged to his feet. "I'm the laird."

"Aye, but today you're an arse as well." The seneschal sniffed as he stalked off.

The senior chieftains all finished their meals at that moment and departed, leaving him alone with Duncan, who seemed intent on crumbling a bannock one morsel at a time.

"Tell me," he said to the healer, resigning himself to another gentle scolding for whatever he'd done to outrage the men.

"What possessed you to forbid Valerie leave the island?" Duncan demanded, angrier than Connal had ever seen him. Before he could reply he shook his head. "The lady, she didnae wish come here. She's accepted all that's happened, and asked naught of us in return. She's offered her help time and again, and no' just to me. She's been warm and kind, and only desires return to her home. You ken the druids shallnae harm her. Indeed, if they cannae send her back, they'd care for her and see she wants for naught. Only you forbid her go."

"I cannae protect her on the mainland," Connal countered.

The healer dropped the oatcake and rose to his feet. "She's no' yours to protect, you great addled eejit."

He watched Duncan stomp out of the hall, unable to accept that his gentlest brother had just shouted at him. What had Valerie said to turn all the men against him? Had she wept prettily and accused him of using her for his own pleasure? For the woman he'd loved last night had not been in the slightest unwilling.

Connal left the hall without eating, brushing by Meg as she offered to bring him a different meal. As he passed his guards the men averted their gazes and offered only the barest acknowledgement of his presence. At the gates the guards moved with insulting slowness to raise the portcullis to permit him pass. When he reached the walking labyrinth he stopped and looked back at the stronghold.

*I'll stay with you.*

He could only blame Valerie for this muddle. She had promised him that when he'd offered to protect her, but now she wished leave him. She'd spent the night waking his desires and pouring bliss through him, but she refused to wed him. She hadn't resisted when he'd seduced her again. She'd shown him a glimpse of a new life with a woman to cherish, and then accused him of still being in love with Joana.

*It's no' her fault, any more than 'twas my wife's.*

Connal began walking the stone path, his thoughts clearing. All the empty months he'd idled away while mourning Joana weighed on him; he'd left the clan to fend for themselves. Doubtless that was also the reason Merrick had chosen to corner him over Valerie. The Ffolk king had always been a friend of sorts, yet for the last year he'd ignored him while wallowing in his own pain.

Since Valerie had come to Caladh the pain of loss had eased. Indeed, if he were honest with himself it had all but gone.

He imagined Joana beside him, although she had never walked the path with him. She would wear a hat to protect her fair skin against the sun, and a heavier gown and shawl because she easily grew cold. Her small hand she'd tuck inside his elbow, and she'd tug on his arm whenever he forgot to shorten his strides to match hers.

*I love you, Husband.*

His wife had loved him, of that much Connal was certain. From her first greeting to her final farewell, Joana had always smiled upon him. Affection had glowed in her eyes. Although it had been no easy thing, she had left her family in Aberdeen to wed him and become the mistress of Dun Ard. She had never complained about being separated from her kin and friends, nor ever once voiced a desire to return to her old life. He had only ever seen her content and happy, and took pleasure in believing she was exactly that.

*Only I was wrong, Wife. I didnae see the signs of your despair, because you hid them from me, like the clothes you made for the bairn you'd never birth.*

The Joana he imagined bowed her head so that the brim of her hat covered her face. When she looked at him again she was Valerie Baker, her flowery eyes sparkling in the sunlight, her lovely pout of a mouth tight with temper.

*What have you done to yourself since your wife died, Laird MacMar?*

He had turned himself like the lost melia of the stone forest, Connal realized, hard and cold and alone. Valerie had been the only one brave enough to tell him. Yet she had deceived him, too.

*Don't keep anything back. Do anything you want. I want this. I want you.*

If he knew anything about women, it was that they acted on emotion, not reason. Valerie would not have given him leave to love her so generously without loving him as well.

*Take me to the mainland, and then you can come back here and mourn your wife the way you want to.*

At the time she'd said that he'd thought her being only cruel, but now he wondered if she had been jealous. His grief for Joana had stood between them, an unseen wall he had built to keep everyone at a distance. Perhaps Valerie had her own, built to protect herself after her husband had died.

*We're the same. Trapped by our own hurt.*

Connal stopped walking, and discovered he'd reached the center of the labyrinth. Night had fallen, and the light of the waxing moon bathed the stones in silvery light. He glanced over at the place his second would stand, and saw Shaw there watching him. The chieftain stood with his arms folded, his expression mulish. If Connal chose to stand in the labyrinth's heart for the rest of the night, Shaw would stand with him.

"I'm no' haunting my bed chamber, you see," he called out to him.

His brother shrugged. "You're yet alone again, and sulking as ever. What difference makes the location?"



“Merrick shall come on the morrow.” Connal gazed out at the bay. “I must persuade him give me more time. Another moon, and she shall accept me.”

Shaw stepped over the outer stone wall, and then another, pausing only to unsheathe his sword and ram the tip into the ground. When he reached him, the chieftain had his hands fisted and ready to strike.

“You dinnae agree?” Connal asked mildly.

“I’ve been held captive by a tribe no’ my own,” Shaw said through his teeth. “I did their bidding, because refusing meant they’d beat me unconscious. I worked until I dropped in their fields, and slept on cold ground. I ate whatever they fed me, even if I suspected ’twould make me boak. I learned their ways, even those repulsive to me.” He lifted his arm. “And then I became one of them.”

“Brother.” He reached out to him, only to drop his hand when Shaw flinched away.

“I wished every night for you and the clan come for me,” the chieftain admitted. “As a lad I reckoned if only I endured, surely you would. I stopped wishing the first time they took me on a raid. By then the Pritani, they’d learned I couldnae easily die, and so used me as a shield.” His dark eyes met Connal’s gaze. “Dinnae do the same to Mistress Baker, I beg you.”

Shaw left him there to retrieve his sword and follow the path back to Dun Ard. His steps lagging, Connal walked out of the labyrinth and down to the shore. There he saw one of the Finfolk’s ghost boats crossing the bay. It had sailed too far away for him to see who was taking a haul to the mainland, but he envied their freedom to leave behind their troubles.

“Take me with you,” Connal murmured, growing wistful as he watched the boat disappear in the mist.



VALERIE HAD EXPECTED TO BECOME A LITTLE SEASICK, BUT thanks to calm waters she never once became nauseated. Jamaran stayed busy adjusting the sails to catch the breeze, but

now and then he would come over to check on her. It seemed odd to see him dressed in a tunic, trousers and boots like one of the clan, but she guessed he couldn't show up on the mainland in his Finfolk clothing. In the same vein she'd dressed in one of the maid's gowns Fletcher had brought to her, and brought along the hooded cloak Shaw had given her.

"How do you know we're heading in the right direction?" she asked, which made him smile a little. "I know you've made the trip a lot, but how can you see anything at night?"

"Even mortals who sail ken how to find their course in the dark," the commander assured her, and gestured at the sky. "The stars guide them. As for me, I well ken the ocean currents, and which to follow to the mainland."

Despite the light construction of the boat, which had been made from some sort of dark gray hides stretched over a frame of fitted whale bones, it appeared very sturdy. The sail had been stitched together out of the same hide material. That Fletcher had referred to the Finfolk's vessels as "ghost boats" seemed an apt description, as she imagined it would be almost impossible to spot them on the water.

She wanted to look back at the island, too many times. She forced herself to watch Jamaran instead.

They made good time from what Valerie could see, and yet the faster they sailed away, the more doubts piled on her. Connal would be furious that she had escaped Caladh. Nyall would probably be punished for helping her, as would Jamaran when he returned. Her running away might even make things between the Finfolk and the MacMar worse.

If the druids really did send her back to the future, what would happen once she arrived? Hopefully she wouldn't end up back in her car and finish drowning in the lake. Candace was still there, too, and Dale's lover could try to kill her again. Even if she somehow dodged all the problems in her time, she had no one waiting for her, or even missing her.

*Stop making excuses to go back to the island, she told herself. Even if you loved Connal, he's not over Joana. There's nothing for you there, either.*

When they finally came within the sight of land Jamaran did something to slow down the boat, and changed direction to head for what appeared to be a deserted rocky beach. There he used a paddle to guide the boat into the shallows, and hefted a long rusted iron pole with two barbed arms attached to a thick-linked chain. Valerie realized it was an anchor when he dropped it over the side.

“Welcome to Aberdeen, my lady,” he said.

She had been expecting to see some sort of town or settlement; the area where he’d anchored appeared to be nothing but rocks, brush, and moss-covered hills. Had he lied to her? Her other, earlier suspicions started popping up in her head. “Ah, *this* is Aberdeen?”

“No, my lady.” He pointed to his left. “We must go inland a bit. I cannae dock where mortals may see the boat.” He held out his hand as if to help her up, and when she took it he swung her up in his arms, and stepped over the side of the boat to carry her ashore.

“I could have walked, you know,” Valerie mentioned when he placed her on her feet.

“Your gown and cloak, ’twould grow wet, and draw attention when we reach town. Give me a moment, please.” He left her there and waded back out to the boat, pulling up the anchor before dragging it beneath some trees growing right beside the water.

His casual show of tremendous strength made Valerie a little ashamed of herself. Jamaran could have easily killed her at the cove, or as soon as they’d sailed past the mist barrier. Getting rid of her body wouldn’t have posed much of a problem for him, either.

“May I ask you a question?” she said when he came back to her. At his nod she added, “What’s the real reason you’re helping me?”

Jamaran stared out at the sea for a long moment.

Had she insulted him? “You don’t have to tell me if it’s none of my business.”

“’Tis that we’re much the same, my lady,” he said finally. “I didnae wish to become one of the Finfolk. Merrick saved my life by transforming me, but by doing thus he took from me the family I left behind back in Francia. As Finfolk never again could I see my parents, my brothers, or the lady I loved and meant to wed.” He glanced at her. “I wished give you the choice denied me.”

“Thank you for that.” She tried to smile as she blinked back her tears. “I’m not crying, I promise. The wind is stinging my eyes.”

He smiled, changing his stern features into something utterly glorious. “Aye, my lady.”

## Chapter Eighteen



**H**alfway to Ornyst, Fiacail smelled something not Cait Sith nor their sovereign, and followed it to the stern. All she could see was the wake that lay on the dark waters behind them. Her hair blew around her face, for they were sailing into the wind, which also accounted for their lack of speed. At this rate it would take them another full day to reach the islands, which would not improve Derdruí's mood.

*Nor does moving like a snail sweeten mine.*

The waxing of the full moon tempted her to blame her terrible mood on her monthly curse, which had been building slowly since her last change. Unlike mortal females, the Cait Sith did not bleed during their change time, nor could they conceive bairns. On the night of the full moon they instead reverted to their full feline forms, complete with fur, fangs and claws. Yet Fiacail knew her time would not come over her for another tenday. Until it did she would grow more restless and on edge, and her mood would darken, but she had never before experienced phantom smells, or this sense of strangeness.

The wrongness of the scent reminded her of the captive they'd lost during their last search for the MacMar. Aside from the humiliation inflicted by that escape, the fool mortal had left the same unpleasant stink in her nose. It made her long for the night when she could become her Fae self, and shrug away all the thoughts and reason of her mortal side. Often she and Speal would retreat to the highlands to hunt drovers and shepherds in the night. Perhaps that was what made her so

unsettled, for here on the sea she had nowhere to run, nowhere to take refuge.

“You ken that?” Speal asked as she came beside her to peer out at the water. “’Tis making my skin creep.”

“Hold your tongue.” Fiacail narrowed her eyes against the darkness. She had better vision in the dark than all mortals and most animals, and now she saw a faint trail of tiny lights hovering just above the waves. She’d seen the like before whenever Derdruí had cast a spell. “’Tis Fae magic.”

“There.” Dearg jumped down from the mast yard and pointed. “Spell trace. Something enchanted crossed the water here.”

“A Fae casting spells in the midst of the sea?” Speal chuckled. “You’re addled, Sister.”

The little Cait Sith breathed in. “Doesnae your nose work? ’Tis old magic, born of water and bound to something...no’ Fae.”

“A mortal.” Fiacail didn’t recognize this female’s scent, which tasted sweet on her tongue. “No’ a maiden, an older wench. How should a mortal become wrapped in spell trace and end in the ocean?”

“She possesses something belonging to the Fae.” Dearg grimaced. “And something more and alive, ’tis with her. ’Tis like fish.”

Speal leaned forward to look in the water. “Could she be drowned and caught in a fisher’s net?”

“No, she yet lives. I can yet taste her pulse in the air.” Fiacail wanted to find the mortal and rip out her throat for reminding her of her disgrace.

“I’ve smelled such before tonight,” Speal said slowly, frowning as she thought. “’Twas in Aberdeen last year.”

“Forget that,” Dearg said as she darted a quick look at Fiacail. “The spell trace, ’tis what matters.”

“So it does, Runt.” Derdruí pushed them aside as she climbed up to stand on the stern rails, and breathed in.

Something like pain passed over her dark features as she murmured, "'Tis very old magic, cast by Mar. His death spell, in fact. Now, leave me alone."

Fiacail dragged both of the other Cait Sith away from the enchantress and yanked them a safe distance away on the deck. "Keep back if you wish your heads remain attached. You ken what's she's like when she senses the prince."

"How can old magic leave such a trace? That heartless bastart died a thousand years past," Speal whispered, her eyes rounding.

"A Fae's death spell never ends, fool. 'Twas cast with his life as well as the last of his magic." Dearg watched the princess without blinking. "Mayhap 'twas shed by the MacMar's island, Fia?"

"Mar created Caladh before he died. 'Tis enveloping the mortal, mayhap protecting the slut." Fiacail sent a wordless command to the rest of her sisters to ready themselves, and then carefully approached the enchantress. "My sovereign, do you wish us continue to Ornyst?"

"Change course to follow the spell trace," Derdruí said without looking at her. "'Tis flowing back the way we came from the mainland. Someone there has been touched by Mar's magic."

The crew jumped into action, turning the vessel around and trimming the sails to catch the wind. Speal went to guide the rudder, and Dearg climbed to the topmost yard to serve as lookout. Fiacail made her rounds, assuring the sisters did their work properly, hoping the enchantress would return to her cabin. Instead Derdruí went to the bow, perching on it as the spell trace washed over the boat.

Fiacail knew their sovereign wouldn't fall into the sea, but still hovered close enough to watch her. The enchantress seemed to be breathing in the prince's magic, and at one point spread out her hands when the spell trace grew thicker. When the blue and green lights touched Derdruí's skin they winked out, which made her wonder if she was somehow absorbing the power.

“Mar was a water elemental,” the princess said, as if she’d heard her thoughts. “I am a royal Therion, so our magics were discordant. That is why the prince’s spell trace repels you, and makes Speal’s flesh crawl. What little magic there is in your halfling blood jars with his.”

She drew a little closer. “It doesnae seem do the same to you, my sovereign.”

“Of course, it doesn’t.” Derdrui turned around so swiftly Fiacail flinched. “I am full-blood Fae, as was he. The portents promised Mar to me. From the beginning of time we were meant for each other, our lives intertwined over and again. Only he fell into Eilonwy’s snare. I had every right to slay that simpering woodland rat for stealing him from me.”

“Aye, my sovereign.” She bowed low.

“Cease your cowering.” The enchantress braced a hand on the railing as the boat pitched slightly. “I know only too well you will never understand what Fae love truly is. I gave my heart to the prince, wholly and without reserve—I, a royal who commanded the affections of the highest among the court. Yet Mar turned his back on me. He betrayed me, not only with Eilonwy, but with every filthy mortal wench he bedded in this dreadful place.”

Fiacail had heard the tale only once before, when Derdrui had found her and the other Cait Sith in the lowlands. She had shown them pity by gathering them and revealing what they were, and how they had been abandoned in the mortal realm by their Fae sire. She had then privileged them by recounting her tragic love affair with Mar, which had driven her to seek vengeance. They had all understood her pain.

“For such his sons shall die at your hands, my sovereign.” She didn’t wish to further anger the princess, so she added, “I’m happy to keep watch as we return to the mainland, if you wish rest.”

“I rested long enough in the king’s prison.” The enchantress’s eyes shifted to the spell trace trail. “My vengeance shall only be complete when the last of Mar’s half-mortal sons dies squirming on my claws. Lead me to them,



Fiacail, and I shall see to it that you and your sisters want for nothing ever again.”

## Chapter Nineteen



Nyall knew the moment he walked into the great hall to have the morning meal that the laird had discovered their guest missing. Instead of eating, Connal stood with all of his chieftains, gestured at a map and issuing orders. More clansmen watched from behind them, their expressions grim. Maids and menservants hovered anxiously on the fringes, some standing on their toes to see what was happening, others holding platters of food they had yet to serve. No one appeared to be eating or even interested in a meal.

*'Tis time for the reckoning, then.*

He walked up to the dais table to see Shaw standing behind the laird. The chieftain glared at him, shaking his head as if to warn him to remain silent. Fletcher also gave him a direct look that indicated his ire. Duncan, Nyall assumed, had warned them that he'd gone to Valerie with the druid's message.

"She doesnae ken her way beyond the village," the laird was saying. "Dagan, check the shepherd's shelter in the hills there. The lady may take refuge if she's weary." Before the chieftain could reply he held up his hand. "If you see she sleeps, dinnae wake her. Send a patroller to fetch me."

Nyall could say nothing, of course; that had been his plan. Allowing Connal to believe Valerie had become lost, however, seemed crueler.

"Captain, you ken the shoreline better than any other clansman," the laird said as soon as he noticed him. "Take a

patrol on horses. She couldnae go too far—”

“Mistress Baker left the island, my lord,” Nyall said, making the men around him stare and then quickly move away.

Connal straightened and peered at him. “What? How?”

“By boat, my lord. The lady journeys to meet with the druids.” Duncan appeared at his side. “She’s gone in the hope they may return her to her time.”

The laird’s eyes narrowed. “You two flouted my orders?”

“No’ one of the clan gave Mistress Baker aid, nor arranged for the boat. That I may vow to you.” Fletcher went over to stand with Nyall and the healer. “Tell him what you did for the lady, Captain.”

“I translated the message from the druids for Mistress Baker, and asked Jamaran meet with her.” As Connal came around the table, followed closely by Shaw, he stood his ground. “I dinnae ken the nature of their arrangements, but he likely took her by ghost boat to Aberdeen last night.”

The laird took hold of his tunic. “You dared defy me?”

“Now, Brother, calm yourself,” Shaw said as he tried to get between them. “’Tis done and she’s gone.” He staggered backward as Connal punched him in the jaw, and then his eyes darkened. “She didnae want you, you over-proud dolt.”

“She wanted me all of a night and again, you eejit.” After shouting that the laird lunged at him, and the two men went down fighting.

“Dinnae break any bones,” Duncan warned as he saw Shaw grab Connal’s arm and twist it as they rolled back and forth. “For I’ll no’ set them again.”

Men scattered this way and that as the chieftain and laird staggered to their feet and pummeled each other in earnest now. Nyall knew Shaw to be holding back, and only returned a mild blow for every savage punch he took. Connal, on the other hand, appeared fully intent on beating him senseless.

“Dinnae dance with me, you wee scunner,” the laird shouted, shoving Shaw over a table. “Fight like a fucking man.”

The chieftain landed lightly on his feet, and brought down his inked arm on the trestle’s top, which split it into three pieces and made the legs snap.

“I cannae, you blind dobber,” Shaw roared back at him.

A large wave of water suddenly appeared over them, falling to drench them both.

“Enough.” Fletcher dropped the empty bucket. “If you mean to kill each other, go to the lists. I’ll no’ trouble the maids mop up your blood. Better still, I’ll save the clan more grief and end you both myself.”

Everyone in the clan had seen the seneschal lose his temper a few times. The threat of that happening again made most of the men back away from him until they lined the walls.

“Apologies, Fletch,” Shaw muttered, wiping his bloodied nose with the side of his hand as he eyed the laird. “My lord.”

Connal took a step toward him before shaking his head and turning away. “Dinnae cross me again today, Chieftain.”

“You shall cease threatening our brothers,” Fletcher said, appearing still unappeased. “What the fuck ’tis wrong with you?”

“’Tis what I suspected,” Duncan said, folding his arms. “He’s in love with the lady. Why else should he beat his own brother thus?”

Meg, who had just walked in from the kitchens, stared in horror at the laird before running back out.

“I shall deal with you later,” Connal promised the healer, his eyes glittering with cold fury. “Fletcher, go to MacLeir and bid him ready the ferryboat. The stronghold, ’tis yours until I return with Valerie. Shaw, summon five of your best, and dinnae come near me again until the ferry docks. Captain, I’d

toss your arse in the dungeons, but I need your arm, so you'll come along as well."

Nyall wondered what his eldest brother would do if he said no. Then he thought of Jamaran being caught on his return to the bay, and what the laird might do to him if he refused to give him any information about Valerie. "Aye, my lord."

From there the clan moved into action, and Nyall went with Shaw to the garrison hall, waiting for the chieftain to condemn him for his part in the lady's escape. He spat some blood on the ground, probed a rapidly-darkening bruise under his right eye, but otherwise kept silent.

"I'm no longer a lad you need coddle." Nyall stopped him outside the hall. "Say what you wish."

"Eejit. Dolt. Reckless, thoughtless arse." With each word the chieftain delivered a smack to the back of his head. "You're worse than a lad with half the sense. Involving that white-haired bastart in your scheme when you ken the strain between the clan and the Finfolk, 'tis never been so great. Didnae you once think to speak with me or Fletcher? Didnae you ken how crazed 'twould turn Connal?"

"Aye." He nodded toward the hall. "'Tis been a year and more since I've seen him so lively."

Shaw pinched the bridge of his nose. "Gods take me back to the fucking Pritani." He went into the garrison hall and began bellowing for the men he wanted.

Before Nyall could follow he heard a shout for aid. He turned and ran toward the sound, and saw the gate guards swarming around the drooping figure of Jamaran, still dripping wet from the sea. He seized the portcullis to jerk it up, and suddenly dozens of arcs of white light exploded all over the gate, scorching the iron-plated oak. As soon as he released it white wisps of steam rose from the gate's blackened wood.

*No' steam. 'Tis smoldering.*

Nyall used a fire bucket of sand to thoroughly douse the portcullis before ordering the wide-eyed guards to raise it. The warped gate only lifted part way before becoming stuck, and

he ducked under it to hurry to Jamaran, who panted as if strangling on the air. He'd also been badly beaten and slashed on the arms, chest and legs.

"We must take him back to the bay," Nyall told the other men, seeing that Jamaran's wounds still bled, and knowing only the Finfolk could heal him. He put an arm around his friend, who sagged with exhaustion. "Come, Commander."

"I must first tell you," his best friend gasped, and then dragged in a lungful of air before he added, "Mistress Baker."

"'Twill wait," he assured him. "You cannae remain on land in such a state."

Shaw joined them, glancing back at the ruined portcullis before he went to help Nyall with Jamaran. "What manner of sea beast tangled with you, Commander? A whale-killer?"

"Mistress Baker," the commander said again, and held out an object attached to a thin chain. "She didnae reach the meeting place in Aberdeen."

Nyall frowned as he took Valerie's locket from him. "Did you bring her back to the island?"

"I couldnae," Jamaran said. "A dark woman and a dozen sailors ambushed us when we reached the harborside. I tried to fight them, but 'twere too many. They took the lady and left me for dead."

## Chapter Twenty



Remembering how her captors had easily swarmed Jamaran and tossed his ravaged body into the sea convinced Valerie to stop struggling and go along with them into the town. She constantly blinked back tears of horror and pain, hoping against the odds that the Ffolk commander had somehow survived the vicious attack. She had no idea if the twelfth century had some form of authorities like the police who might act when they saw she was in danger, but no one tried to stop them. On the contrary, everyone who crossed their path hurried out of it, not even looking back to see what was happening.

*I'm on my own now.* If she was going to survive this, she had to be ready to seize any opportunity to escape.

Although one of her eyes had nearly swollen shut from a hard blow she'd taken during the attack, Valerie could still see clearly out of the other. The dark woman who walked ahead of them seemed entirely out of place with her roughly-dressed sailor companions and the women of Aberdeen; her fine gown, oddly-cropped hair and languid movements looked completely foreign compared to the other females they passed in the streets. She also seemed naggingly familiar, as if Valerie had seen her before now.

As for the sailors, their high-pitched voices didn't match their broad, rugged bodies. All of them had dark eyes filled with menace, and walked with slow, long strides that looked as if they tested the ground with every step. A very unpleasant

odor came from them that seemed to grow thicker the longer they walked.

“Dinnae think it,” one of the sailors said when Valerie eyed an alleyway they passed. “If you run, we’ll hunt you down.”

“I’m not an animal,” she said. Although she had tried several times to read the thoughts of the men, she couldn’t connect to their minds at all. “Why are you doing this?”

The sailor’s eyes gleamed with bright malice as he smiled. “You’ve something our princess desires very much, wench.”

*Our princess.* Valerie looked at the dark woman again, and the way she carried herself did suggest she considered herself regal. The monarchical term kept echoing in her thoughts: princess...princess...until Shaw’s story came back to her.

*In ancient times a dark princess became obsessed with Prince Mar, a Fae water elemental.*

*No matter where he went, she chased after him, and threatened kill everyone he loved.*

*He protected us by creating Caladh, which he bespelled to hide the clan and our vassals from the enchantress.*

Could the dark woman be Derdruí? Had they abducted her because they’d seen her with Jamaran, or had somehow otherwise connected her to Caladh and the MacMar?

*Whether that’s true or not, I can’t say anything about the island or the clan.*

They arrived at a large house on a promontory overlooking the sea, and some of the sailors left the group to take positions as if keeping watch. The rest entered the house, where most scattered, leaving Valerie alone with the dark woman and the last three sailors, who marched her into a big room filled with fine furnishings and a desk on which mounds of gold had been scattered.

“Bind her to something,” the tallest of the sailors told the heaviest, who jerked Valerie over to a wooden chair, shoved her into it, and tied the rope they had been using like a leash around her.



“May we shed these loathsome forms, my princess?” At her nod the smallest sailor clapped his hands, and then regarded Valerie. “Good, I wish to play.”

Valerie’s heart skipped a beat as she watched the tiny sailor’s body reshape itself into that of a young, beautiful girl with burnished red hair and the blackest eyes she’d ever seen.

“Do not toy with her just yet, Runt.” The dark woman came over to Valerie, her long-fingered hands reaching for her face. “I must first know how she comes to be wrapped in my love’s magic.”

Somehow Valerie knew letting the woman touch her would be worse than anything the shape-shifter could do. “I found a ring. That’s all.”

“She’s no’ Scottish.” The heavy sailor, who by now had shifted into an even larger pale-haired woman with small yellow-brown eyes, came over behind the chair and tried to yank Joana’s ring off her hand. A moment later she howled in pain and staggered back.

“She’s been warded.” As the tall sailor came toward Valerie her body and face shifted into that of a middle-aged brunette woman with a sharp nose. “We cannae permit you touch her, my princess.”

“Mar’s magic can never harm me, Fiacail,” the dark woman said, and yet the moment her fingertips grazed Valerie’s cheek she frowned. “It is not my prince’s enchantment that protects her.” She drew back her hand and peered down at Valerie for a long moment. “She bears the death spell of another, bound to that ring by an old enchantment. One cast not far from here.”

Valerie saw her stare through the window at the sea cliff beyond the house.

The tall brunette drew a dagger. “Permit me cut off her finger, my princess, and that should break the spell.”

“Please don’t do that,” Valerie said quickly. “You’re right, I’m not Scottish. I’m from another place in the future, and I found this ring in a lake. It saved my life and brought me back

to this time.” She tried to look harmless as she regarded the dark woman. “I don’t want to hurt anyone, your majesty.”

“I am Derdruí, a royal Fae of Elphyne.” She drew herself up the way a cat did when it stretched. “But I think you knew that. Who told you of me? The bastard sons of my lover, Mar? Ah, your scent changes, so they did. Where is that cursed island on which they hide from me?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know.” That was the truth; Valerie had no idea of the direction in which Caladh lay. “I came to Aberdeen to look for help. I don’t belong here.”

“You do not.” Suddenly the enchantress grabbed her by the throat and lifted her and the chair off the floor until she was at her eye level. “The ring cannot shield you from me. Where are they?”

Valerie couldn’t speak; Derdruí held her so tightly she couldn’t take a breath. A wave of dizziness came over her, and her vision grew tunneled. She stared into the Fae’s eyes, the whites of which shrank as her dark irises expanded.

*She’s going to tear off my head,* was her last thought before she blacked out.

Coming out of the void of unconsciousness Valerie slowly became aware of two things: she wasn’t dead yet, and wherever she was, it was freezing cold. She lay with her hands still bound behind her back, and a strip of dirty linen gagging her. When she tried to see where she was she could only open one eye to a murky darkness. Vaguely she made out the shapes of barrels and smaller kegs, and smelled something like rotting vegetables.

A door opened, and the tall brunette came in holding a lantern, which she raised so that it shed light on Valerie.

“Still alive, then? You should be proud, wench. I may count on one hand those who survived angering our princess.” She crouched down beside her, setting the lantern atop a keg before jerking her up into a sitting position. “You willnae live much longer, so tell me how to find the MacMar.”

Valerie glanced down at the gag in her mouth, and then at Fiacail.

“Apologies. I’m no’ accustomed to speaking by tongue.” The shapeshifter reached to tug down the strip.

“What are you?” Valerie couldn’t help asking.

“Cait Sith.” She held out the fingers of one hand, from which long, curved claws sprang. “We serve the Princess Derdruí, who’s sworn vengeance against the sons of Mar for his betrayal of her. You’ve seen something of our powers, so dinnae even think to trifle with me. Where hides the clan?”

“I don’t know any clan.” She turned her head to spit out a piece of linen left from the rag. “I’m from the future, not this time.”

“You wear the ring of that wee black-haired thief who escaped me last year. Her people, they’re druid kind, or so she claimed.” Fiacail leaned closer. “’Tis the same in your time, aye? Or mayhap you and Joana share a bloodline.”

Valerie went still. “Who is Joana?”

“Joana Arasgain, daughter of my husband’s friend. He claimed the little mouse had wed one of the MacMar, and oft returned to Aberdeen to visit her kin. After he told me thus, I waited until she came again and caught her on the way back to the docks.” The shapeshifter’s expression darkened. “Like you she claimed to ken naught of the MacMar, yet I could smell the stink of those halfling bastards on her. Although I could slay her, drink her blood and by thus take all her memories of the island and the clan, I offered to spare her life if she’d aid us.”

“But she didn’t, so you killed her,” she murmured, watching her face.

Fiacail made a rude sound. “She begged me untie her so she could draw a map for us, the deceitful little wretch. Only she ran from the house instead, and jumped from the cliff. Somehow she guessed we cannae take memories from the dead.” She leaned in closer. “I’ll no’ make that mistake again with you, pretty lass.”

Valerie closed her eyes for a moment, silently thanking Joana for her sacrifice. Now somehow she had to do whatever she could to protect the MacMar. Years of teaching had given her the ability to project authority, but it was loving Connal that filled her with strength now.

*I do love him. If I have to, I'll die for him, too.*

“I don’t want to die,” she said, aching with the knowledge that everything her lover believed about his wife was wrong. “But honestly, I don’t know anything that can help you. I only came here to meet some druids. I could have gotten the smell on me because I bumped into one of them on the way into town. There were a bunch of men at the docks on the boat that brought me here. Maybe they belonged to the clan you want to find.”

The shapeshifter didn’t say anything for a while, but simply watched her. Then, with a small smirk, she nodded.

“Tell me more of this boat that brought you to Aberdeen,” Fiacail said.



BY THE TIME MACLEIR CAME WITHIN SIGHT OF THE MAINLAND Connal had paced the length and breadth of the ferry boat dozens of times. Nyall and the clansmen who had come with him kept their distance, but Shaw refused to leave him alone.

“I’ll no’ tussle with you again,” he warned the chieftain as he watched the shore. “We’ve come to find Valerie. I dinnae ken if Jamaran spoke the truth, but if he lied, we must talk sense into her before the fucking druids cast some eejit spell.”

“They’d send her to her time through a sacred oak grove.” When Connal glared at him Shaw smiled. “I ken a wee bit of their methods. The Pritani and the magic folk, they’re grand friends.”

Connal already regretted the fight they’d had in the great hall; trust his brother to make that worse. “Someday you and I shall talk long and in great detail about your time enslaved.”

“You’ve other matters to attend.” Shaw glanced at the lone figure standing at the bow. “Forgiving the captain for aiding the lady should come first.”

“I cannae fathom why he did thus.” Connal glared at Nyall’s back. “He’s ever hated all females.”

“Dinnae you recall his lady *màthair* died?” the chieftain chided. “’Tis haunted the lad since the day he found her body in the stone forest.”

MacLeir maneuvered the ferry to the end pier, where the dockers trotted out to help with the moorings. Connal didn’t wait for the ramp but leapt over the side and strode toward the cluster of buildings on the harborside. Shaw caught up with him as he reached the road, and jerked his thumb toward the nearest tavern.

“Ale and whiskey loosens tongues,” the chieftain said.

Inside the dark common room of the tavern men sat talking and drinking, but all fell silent when they saw Connal and Shaw. The tavern keep came from behind his counter, a jug in one hand and two mugs in the other.

“I’m seeking a lady taken against her will from the harborside,” Connal said loudly. He measured Valerie’s height with his hand. “Fair curls, pale-skinned and slender-limbed. She wears a brown gown with gray fur boots, and mayhap a dark hooded cloak. Her name, ’tis Mistress Valerie Baker.”

None of the men said anything.

Shaw held up a small purse. “Silver for the truth.”

The men began murmuring, and at last one burly, sad-faced docker came over to them and said, “They came after dawn with her, and took her up the hill road to the west of town. ’Tis only Haig’s house on the cliff up there, and he’s gone missing a time now.”

Connal put a hand on his shoulder. “My thanks, friend.”

“We shall pay you when we return,” Shaw said.

“I dinnae want your coin,” the docker said. “From the look of her, the poor lass took a hard beating from those bastards.”

'Twas no way to treat such a wee fine lady."

"Why didnae you stop them?" Connal demanded.

"Too many for me to fight to free her, and they're no' right." He grimaced. "They looked like sailors, but mince more than walk. Aye, and the lot reek of boak and dirty fur, like sick cats." He shook his head. "Like nightmares dressed up as sailors."

Outside the tavern Shaw related the docker's tale to the other men, while Connal looked toward the west of town. He knew the cliff just beyond the merchant's house only too well; he'd watched his wife jump from it a year past.

*Must I see another woman I love dead?*

"We'll go and search the place, my lord," Nyall said, coming to stand beside him. "You should wait here."

"You reckon I'm too facking cowardly go?" he demanded.

The captain shook his head. "Your mortal weakness shall defeat you. Aye, and you've endured enough pain, my lord."

"My pain and your meddling put my woman in danger. We go and fight for her together." He started for the hill road.

Shaw and Nyall flanked him as they made their way through the harborside and walked up the road leading up the hill. Connal could sense the dizziness ready to beset him, but kept his gaze fixed on the horizon. The chieftain signaled for them to halt and scatter, and as Connal took cover behind some brambles he saw why. Two sailors, both moving with small steps, stood watch at the top of the road. Just looking at them made Connor's temper seethe.

"We'll charge the watchers," Shaw told him, drawing his sword. "You and Nyall, go round the back of the house. No doubt they've confined the lady inside."

He nodded. "Stay alive."

All of the men but him and the captain ran up the road and rushed at the watching sailors, who screeched and fled. As more sailors appeared to fight the clansmen, the laird paused for a moment to see his brothers wade into them. Jamaran had

been swarmed, but without greater numbers the enemy was proving no match for the clan.

Connal nodded to Nyall, and hurried with him off the road and along the hillside. When they were out of sight, they scrambled up to the edge of the promontory, where they ran to the back of the house. A heavy, pale-haired woman screeched as she yanked open a door and came at them swinging her arms like cudgels, her hands crooked and huge black claws sprouting from her fingers.

Connal punched her in the face, knocking her out cold on the ground. When a smaller female emerged and tried to stab him in the chest, Nyall grabbed her from behind and clamped his arms around her.

“Go,” the captain said.

Connal ran through the door and paused briefly in the small kitchen. He drew his dagger from the sheath at his waist. Voices came from the front of the house, but none that he recognized as Valerie’s. Silently, he crept into the short hallway.

*Where do they keep her?*

He crossed a branching passageway, glancing left and right, before he chanced a quick look into the front room. Two women with their backs to him were dragging a table across the floor. Valerie was not there.

As he backed up a pace, a hand gripped his shoulder. He spun and the tip of the blade paused just in front of Nyall’s throat. His captain lowered his eyes to it and then looked at the front room. Connal shook his head and nodded toward the side passages. Quietly, as they retraced their steps, Connal motioned for Nyall to take one passage, then he took the other.

Only one door lay ahead of him, at the very end of the dark hall. Dagger in front, he slowly grasped its handle and opened the door inward. A faint creak sounded, stopping him, until the sounds of more furniture scraping across the floor came from the front room. Slowly he pushed the door open and peered into the darkness. A few barrels and crates were stacked in the

corner, but there, in the center of the floor, he saw the faint gleam of Valerie's curls. He sheathed the dagger and snatched her up from the floor.

"Hi." Her battered face lit up with a smile. "Can I stay with you?"

Cradling her against his chest, Connal kissed her gently, and then looked through the open door to see Nyall, the corner of his mouth crooked up. More scraping sounds came from the front of the house.

Connal grasped Valerie tighter, while keeping his eyes on the captain. "We need a diversion."

Nyall's eyes darted sideways. "I shall lead them to the rear door and down the hill." Before Connal could warn him to use care, the captain was gone. In another moment, his voice rang out clear. "Come lads, through the kitchen!"

The sound of pounding feet in the hallway answered him. After a few seconds of silence, Connal clutched Valerie to his chest and sprinted for the front of the house. But there he skidded to a halt.

A woman stood in front of the well-barricaded entry, a dark, exquisite-looking female who exactly resembled the fiend in every legend he'd been told about his sire's worst enemy.

"Derdrui," he said, as rage swept through him.

"Son of Mar." The Fae enchantress bared her teeth, which elongated into two rows of sharp fangs. "How mannerly of you to come and seek me out. Come here, so I may kiss you hello, and goodbye."

Connal couldn't risk charging the woman, not with Valerie in his arms. He sensed Derdrui wouldn't bargain with him, either. He looked around the room, and then shifted his love against him so that her body hid his dagger. Although the door and one of the windows had been blocked, they had not yet finished with the other.

"Hold tight," he murmured to her, as he lifted her arm around his neck. Slowly, his hand slid from her back to the hilt



of his blade.

Derdruí shifted her stance, looking between him and Valerie. “You were safe on your island, Son of Mar. Now I shall—”

His hand flashed out in front of him as the dagger sliced through the air. Without waiting to see it sink into the enchantress’s face, he lunged for the second window. In one bound, he leapt atop the chest of drawers that covered its lower half and rammed sideways through the thick covering above it.

He fell out of the house onto the stony ground, turning as he did so that Valerie landed atop him. Staggering to his feet, he ran for the road, which his men blocked as they forced the sailors to retreat in a running brawl. He then changed direction, heading for the edge of the cliff where a year ago Joana had jumped. As he looked over, he saw what awaited them.

*Joana did this. So must I.*

“Run down the hill there. I shall draw them to me,” he told her, knowing it unlikely he would survive smashing his body on the rocks below. “When the battle’s done I shall come back for you.”

But as soon as he put Valerie on her feet, she stiffened and her eyes seemed to look through him. Although he reached for her shoulders to point her down the hill, she took hold of his hands and looked over the edge. “Do you trust me?”

Derdruí appeared, her body changing into a huge, monstrous-looking creature with wide jaws and impossibly strong, brutish limbs.

Valerie pulled him back from the edge a few paces.

“With all my heart,” he promised her.

“Run fast.” She yanked him after her as she ran to the edge of the cliff.

Connal should have stopped her, but he knew death waited for them in either direction. Going with her into oblivion was

surely the finest end he could imagine.

As they jumped from the edge, he pulled her to him, holding her tightly as they plummeted. Then, incredibly, the air rushing passed them lit up with blue and green lights, and he sensed for the first time in a thousand years the presence of his sire.

*Do you wish live, my son?*

Connal smiled as his death came rushing at him. *Aye, Sire. More than anything.*

A voice he had only dreamed of for the last year then spoke, coming from inside his heart. *Then you must live, my dearest husband, Joana said, and love again.*

## Chapter Twenty-One



Valerie thought she might flash back to the terrible drop off the bridge, but the gentle voice had again been insistent and reassuring.

*Do you wish him live?*

Now, even as they plunged downward, Connal's arms were warm and safe. It had been the right choice. She would die as soon as the fall ended, of course, but with the running jump they'd taken there was a chance her love might clear the rocks below and survive.

*If he doesn't, then we'll be together in the next place.*

Something wrapped around them, and their fall slowed as the air filled with flashing blue and green shimmers of light. She looked down at Joana's ring, the stone of which shone so brightly now it hurt her eyes. Suddenly she was floating with Connal instead of falling, her hair drifting around her face as if they were already underwater.

*I died for him, the soft voice whispered inside her mind. You must live for him.*

*Yes, she thought back to the ghost of her man's first love. I will.*

Their fall ended when Valerie's feet touched the top of a flat stone, and Connal staggered before clutching her to him. They both looked down and then at each other in amazement once they'd seen that they now stood on top of the rocks that should have killed them.

“My sire,” he murmured as the lights slowly faded away. “’Twas his magic saved us.”

She touched the ring, which still glowed. “Him and Joana, I think.”

Above them she saw Shaw and Nyall, both white-faced and bloody, staring at them over the edge. She smiled and waved, and then sat down on the rock, tugging Connal down beside her.

“There’s something you don’t know about Joana’s death,” she said, and when he started to protest she touched his mouth. “Please, let me tell you. It’s not good news, but you really need to hear this.”

Relating what Fiacail had told her didn’t spare him the pain of knowing his wife had been caught in an impossible situation, Valerie knew, but as she revealed the reason for Joana’s suicide Connal went very still.

“It must have taken so much courage for her to jump off that cliff,” she said finally. “But I know she did it so that the Cait Sith couldn’t take her memories. Her death protected you and everyone on Caladh. You can only do that for someone you love more than yourself—the way Joana loved you.”

Tears spilled down his face. “Aye, that I ken now.”

Valerie put her arms around him, and held him without speaking for a long time. All the doubt and fear had left her heart, too, and all she wanted was to be with him. In this time, in this Scotland, on his enchanted island—this was her home. Nothing else mattered anymore.

Finally Connal drew back and wiped his face with his sleeve. “Once the men come for us, I shall take you to the druids directly. I only wish stay and assure they may see you safely away.”

“I’m not going back.” She glanced down at Joana’s ring. “I made a promise to Joana that I would live for you. I love you, Connal.” As he pulled her back into his arms she laughed. “I guess that’s the good news.”

A shout made them both look down to the water, where a small skiff rocked in the waves rolling into the cliff. Shaw stood with a coil of rope in his hands, which he tossed up to the laird as Nyall tried to keep the boat steady.

“Lower the lady first,” the chieftain shouted up to them. “Then convince me why I shouldnae leave your sorry arse here to rot.”

“I’m the laird,” Connal called back down to him. “And you cannae hold the wedding without me.”

Shaw grinned. “Indeed? I may wed the lady in your place.”

Connal tied the rope into a sling around Valerie, showing her where to hold it before he carefully lowered her down to the skiff. Nyall caught her and helped her out before tossing the rope back up to the laird. He looped it around a boulder before climbing down and joining them.

“Derdrui and her shifters, they’ve fled,” Shaw said. “MacLeir came to aid us, and shouted something in Fae. His voice sent them all running down the hill, holding their ears and yowling.” He glanced up at the cliff. “Still, we shouldnae linger.”

“My thanks.” Connal met her gaze. “Shall we return to Caladh, then, *mo bòidhchead*?”

“Yes, please.” She cuddled close to him. “Let’s go home.”



“FOUR DEAD, THREE BADLY WOUNDED, INCLUDING DEARG,” Speal said as she came out of the barn in which they had taken refuge. “My head, ’tis yet ringing from that troll’s attack.”

“That disgusting creature was sired on a mortal by Leir.” Derdrui lay back against the bale of hay behind her. “When next we meet I shall cut out his tongue before I rip out his throat. What of the MacMar?”

“Gone by now, my princess.” Fiacail braced herself for a blow that didn’t come. “We must return to the vessel and leave this place before we’re discovered.”

“I suppose we must.” The enchantress surveyed the corpses of the farmer, his family and workers, all of whom lay scattered around their dwelling. “We shall go at nightfall. Where are those two drovers you captured? I am in need of diversion.”

“Inside the barn, my princess.” Speal sat down beside Fiacail, and waited until Derdruí went in before she said, “Dearg should survive. I cannae say the same of the others. Bata’s so weak from losing blood she cannae shift back, and Teine lost a hand and an ear. What more must we do to repay our sovereign’s kindness to us?”

*How many more of us shall suffer and die,* was what she meant.

Fiacail closed her eyes. “Everything she wishes.”

“The MacMar, they’re strong and fast, and dinnae cower before us,” Speal said, sounding tired now. “Less than ten easily trounced twice as many of us. The one they called captain possesses a sword arm like naught I’ve beheld. Another moved like flood water, and bore old Pritani skinwork.”

“I dinnae care how they fight, or what ink they etch on their hides,” she told her.

“You should. I lived for a time with the Pritani, you ken. In the old times they summoned the spirits of their gods, and allowed them possess the bodies of their young warriors as they inked them with their symbols. Sometimes the spirits, they never left those warriors.” She rubbed her reddened eyes. “That MacMar, he carries something dark and dire.”

“I dinnae care,” Fiacail repeated, although she knew her sister’s apprehension to be justified. They had never faced the MacMar in battle, and from the ferocity of their fighting to the terrible troll with the soul-piercing voice, they presented a far greater threat than she had ever imagined.

*Less than ten. How shall Derdruí slaughter an entire clan of them?*

The sound of a wagon approaching from a distance made Fiacaíl stand. “Come and help me drag the bodies into the house. We must set fire to the place before we leave.”

The slash on her side had already begun to heal, but Fiacaíl had grown so drained of strength she could barely lug the dead back into the farmhouse. A faint cry made her look around the front room until she spotted a cradle near the hearth. Another, softer sound came from one of the back rooms. She went to the cradle first, and drew back the blanket covering the tiny bairn inside.

“’Tis newly born,” Speal said as she joined her. “Now that the mam’s dead, ’twill starve. I’ll snap the neck.”

Fiacaíl caught her hand before she could. “We’ve slain enough mortals for one day.” She reached in and picked up the infant, holding it against her shoulder as she stroked its back to calm it. “Look in the kitchens. I heard something. Don’t kill that, either.”

Speal went to the back of the house, and returned holding a very young maid by the back of her dirty gown. She looked half-starved, and bore the yellow-brown bruises of an old beating. Yet when she saw Fiacaíl holding the bairn she surged forward, her thin arms reaching out for the child.

“Please, mistress,” the maid begged. “Dinnae harm him. He’s but threeday old.”

She knew she should end them both, but a distant scream came then from the direction of the barn. It reminded her of that long ago day when the blacksmith had taken his sledge to her for daring to heal overnight. Before that she had always wished for better, a man to love and care for her, and bairns she would never starve, strike or terrify.

That gentle, wistful girl had been beaten out of Fiacaíl.

Without thinking greatly of what she did, she placed the baby in the maid’s arms. “Take him and run. Go as far as you may. Say naught of what happened here, for if any more come, we shall slay them as we did your master and his kin. Then we shall hunt for you and the bairn, do you understand?”

The maid nodded frantically, and rushed out of the house holding the baby against her flat chest.

“Sometime I wonder if you’re more mortal than Fae, Fia,” Speal said. “Our princess shallnae thank you for releasing them.”

“Tell her, and after she rips off my head she shall name you in charge of the Cait Sith.” She saw her sister’s grimace and nodded. “Aye, ’tisnae a place anyone desires take from me. So, then, forget what you saw.”

When Fiacail emerged from the house she looked for the maid, but saw no sign of her. She saw the girl’s boot prints in the dirt, however, and deliberately walked over them to destroy the tracks before she headed to the barn.



VALERIE HADN’T SLEPT WHILE BEING HELD CAPTIVE, CONNAL guessed, for as soon as they boarded the ferry she fell asleep in his arms. He took her to a quiet spot near the stern, where MacLeir kept piles of blankets for his passengers, and lay her on them. As he covered her with his cloak the ferryman trudged by, glancing at Valerie before he winked and went to releasing the moorings.

After a time Shaw came to stand at the railings beside him.

“That fiendish creature that chased you from the house, ’twas Derdruì?” he asked in a quiet voice.

“I reckon.” Once they returned to Dun Ard he would tell his chieftains and captains all he had learned this day, Connal thought, including the reason Joana had died. For now he simply wanted to watch over Valerie. “I think the enchantress, she’s come to the mortal realm to hunt the clan again.”

“Those things that serve her, they’re strong as ten men and fight like wounded animals,” the chieftain said. “Half-Fae like us, I’ll wager.”

MacLeir stopped and handed them a hastily-written note before heading for the bow.



“Cait Sith, ’tis the name of Derdruí’s warriors,” Connal said after he read the ferryman’s message. “They share blood with the Fae Therion, and may assume the shape of any mortal whom they slay.”

Shaw’s expression turned bleak. “You’re certain you rescued the true Mistress Baker?”

MacLeir, who was now coming back from the bow, stopped and glared at him before tapping the side of his nose.

“Those things cannae conceal their smell from other half-Fae, eh?” When the ferryman nodded Connal smiled. “I ken she’s the woman I love, no’ some halfling shifter in her form. Aside from my acquaintance with every inch of her, even battered and bloody, she yet smells of a new spring day.”

The chieftain sighed. “We need take care, then, with anyone who leaves and returns to Caladh. No’ MacLeir, for ’twould take a god like his sire to end him, but the mortals he ferries to the mainland.”

Connal noticed Valerie stirring, and sent Shaw to help the ferryman before going to her. As he knelt down beside her she blinked at him with her unbruised eye.

“I’m sorry.” She yawned as she pushed herself upright.

“Sleep,” Connal told her. “We’ve no’ yet arrived.”

“I’ve slept enough,” she said, then looked up at him, her eyebrows raised. “I really have.” A smile crept across her face. “After a year of almost never sleeping.” Her gaze went to the water beyond the rail. “Did the men look for Jamaran before we left?”

“The Finfolk commander returned to the island this morn, wounded but alive,” he told her. “’Twas he who told us you’d been taken on the mainland.”

“Oh, good. Not that he’s hurt, but I was hoping he wasn’t dead.” She ducked her head and swiped at her eyes. “I’m sorry I ran away. I thought it was best for both of us, but instead I almost got you and your men killed.”

“Our men.” He sat down and pulled her onto his lap. “Like me, they’re yours now.”

Valerie gave him a solemn look. “I won’t live very long, you know. I get only one lifetime. Are you okay with that?” When he nodded she took hold of his hand. “Are you still going to be okay when I’m old and wrinkly, and I hobble when I walk?”

“I cannae wait for that part,” he told her, just as seriously. “You’ll be the loveliest crone on Caladh.”

“First rule of our new relationship,” she said, holding up one finger. “We do not call elderly women crones.”



A FEW DAYS AFTER RETURNING TO THE ISLAND VALERIE CAME back to the stronghold with Fletcher once they had finished inspecting the available out buildings in the bailey. She had plenty of things to discuss with Connal before the wedding next week, but setting up a school at Dun Ard for the vassal’s young children had risen to the top of the list.

“I think we can renovate that last granary to serve as a classroom,” she told the seneschal. “If the carpenters can enlarge the windows and replace the flooring, that is. Half the kids here won’t wear shoes, and I don’t want to spend the day picking splinters out of their feet.”

“Must they truly learn numbers and alchemy as well as reading and scribing?” Fletcher asked. “And why should the wee lassies be taught?”

“Math, Science, Reading and Writing,” she corrected him. “Those are just the basics. Even if the children spend their entire lives on the island, education is important. Also, if you haven’t yet noticed, I’m a lassie.”

He grimaced. “Apologies, my lady. ’Twill prove interesting, no doubt.”

Valerie went upstairs to wash up before the evening meal, during which she planned to talk to the chieftains about recruiting some teachers from the local village to help her

share the new workload. Since there were about fifty children in need of schooling, she thought splitting them into morning and afternoon classes would be sensible. She sat down at her desk to make more notes.

A knock on the door made her call out, "Come in, please."

Nyall entered and bowed before coming over to inspect her writing. "Wedding plans, my lady?"

"Class schedules. I'm not giving up being a teacher." She set down her pen. "What can I do for you, Captain?"

"Jamaran brought this with him when he came to warn us you'd been captured." Nyall placed the locket Dale had given her on the table. "I hope 'twillnae make you unhappy."

Why did she hate the sight of it? "No, it's fine. Thank you." She glanced up at him. "How is the commander?"

"Fully healed now," the captain said. "He and Merrick and the other Finfolk, they're out searching for Duxor, one of their men. He's a troublesome one, but went missing some days ago."

"I hope they find him," Valerie said. "We've had enough trouble to deal with lately."

"Aye, my lady." The captain bowed again before he left the bed chamber.

Valerie picked up her last remembrance of Dale. The chain's clasp had been broken when the shapeshifter had yanked her away from Jamaran during the attack. She could probably ask Connal if the stronghold's smith could repair it, but she didn't want to wear it again.

*Maybe I drove him to kill himself, but I didn't want that. It wasn't intentional. He should have talked to me and told me how depressed he was.*

She opened the locket to look at the tiny picture of Dale one last time, and a tiny bundle of paper fell into her lap. When she unfolded the one-inch strip, which had somehow stayed dry, she saw printing on one side in ten point Calibri—the same font Dale had always used for his class notes.

*I hope you'll find this someday. My doctor diagnosed me with stomach cancer six months ago, but none of his treatments have worked. It's spread to my liver and lungs now, and I can barely get out of bed anymore. I'm sorry for the affair, taking your money, and every other foolish thing I did. I'm going to end it tonight. This is all I can do to spare both of us more pain. Find a better man than me, and be happy, Val. I love you—D.*

The note slipped out of her fingers as everything that she hadn't understood suddenly became clear. Dale's hair loss had probably been the result of chemotherapy. He'd likely used the money from her savings to pay for alternative treatments that their medical insurance didn't cover. Knowing he was terminally ill explained his angry outbursts whenever she had talked about the future. Perhaps everything he'd done had been a desperate attempt to cling to life while concealing his condition from her.

*If only he had trusted me.*

Valerie knew exactly why her husband had been so secretive. Dale's mother had been diagnosed with stomach cancer while he was in high school, and his father hadn't been able to cope with the responsibility and left them. Dale had been the one to nurse his mother through treatment until her death, which had been slow and terribly painful. Valerie even remembered her husband saying that if he ever got as sick as his mom he'd rather kill himself than die the way she had.

Somehow Valerie had wandered down from the bed chamber and now stood in the great hall, where the maids were busy setting up the trestle tables for the evening meal. She should have helped them, but she needed a moment to compose herself, and went to sit by the fire.

A hand rested on her shoulder. "Something wrong, *mo bòidhchead?*"

"I'm all right." The knot of grief she had been carrying for more than a year now unraveled inside Valerie. "Dale left a note in my locket. I've always blamed myself for driving him

to commit suicide, but it actually had nothing to do with me. He killed himself because he was very sick.”

Connal sat down beside her on the bench, and she read the note to him, and briefly explained her husband’s history with his mother’s illness. Then, without knowing exactly why she did it, she walked over to the hearth and dropped Dale’s note into the flames. Standing there and watching it burn gave her a sense of closure that she had never before experienced.

“What may I do?” the laird asked, joining her.

“There’s nothing we can do. Dale won’t be born for another eight centuries. Even if I had known he was sick, and tried to persuade him to keep fighting for his life, in the end I think he still would have jumped off that bridge.” As Connal’s arm came around her she leaned against him. “It’s just sad. Like finding out the real reason that Joana died.” She looked up at him. “Your wife was really brave, you know.”

“Aye, and ever I’ll hold her memory in my heart.” He kissed her brow. “Just as you’ll remember Dale.”

Together they helped the maids finish setting up the hall for the meal before Connal took her to sit with him and his men at the dais table. Her good mood restored, she talked to the chieftains about her plans for the school, and even got a few volunteers to help with making desks and creating a twelfth-century version of a chalkboard from slate.

*This is my life now*, Valerie thought once she helped the maids carry the dishes into the kitchens. *No more wallowing in the past.*

Meg came up to her carrying the box she’d asked her to remove from the laird’s bedchamber. “Might I give these to Lachina, then, my lady?”

“Of course.” Some of the baby clothes Joana had made would still fit the little boy, she thought, which made a lightbulb go off in her head. “Do you know why Lady Joana made those clothes, Meg?”

“Och, Lachina cannae sew,” the maid said, rolling her eyes. “My lady offered make them for her bairn. I but forgot

them until you bid me take the box.”

Valerie touched her arm. “Thanks for telling me.”

Connal caught her on the way back into the hall. “Enough, my lady. I’ve something to give you.”

She accompanied him to their bed chamber, and along the way told him the real reason why Joana had made the baby clothes.

“To be generous,” he said, “’twas so like her.” He shook his head. “’Tis a wonder I didnae see it.”

“It’s amazing what we don’t see,” Valerie said, taking his hand. “Especially when it’s right in front of us.”

He chuckled as he smiled down at her.

Once inside the room she saw Meg had lit so many candles the golden stone walls glowed like rough topaz. The laird brought her to sit by the hearth, and then went down on one knee in front of her.

“You really don’t have to propose again,” Valerie told him. “I love you dearly, and I will marry you whenever you want. If that hand-fasting stuff is true, then we’re already married.”

“I’ve a gift.” He gave her a stern look, and then took hold of her hand and slid her old wedding ring from her finger. “First, ’tis time to let go the past.” He took her other hand and removed Joana’s ring, too. “For both of us.”

“How did you do that?” She couldn’t believe he got the ring off in one try when she’d spent weeks failing to budge it. “No, don’t tell me.”

Connal set the ring aside and produced another of such delicate, lacy gold it looked spun from gilded cobwebs. The stone set in the filigree shimmered dark at first, but as he slid it onto her finger it caught the candlelight and seemed to burst with every color of the rainbow.

“Oh, it’s gorgeous.” She leaned forward to kiss him. “I love it. I love you.”

He raised her hand to his lips, and then took hold of her other hand. "As I love you, Valerie Baker. I want naught but spend the rest of our days together. Say you'll wed me, please."

"I will, Connal MacMar." She watched him slide the ring onto her finger, the beautiful stone catching the candlelight and growing brighter. When she glanced over at where he had placed the other rings, she saw her old wedding ring sitting in a small pool of water. "What happened to Joana's ring?"

The little puddle stretched and rippled, and from it poured green and blue sparks poured into the air and started to whirl around them. Valerie grabbed his arms, and something happened that flashed over them both like a blinding white search light.

*The rest of your days shall be shared, my daughter, my son.  
Love, 'tis eternal.*

The light faded, and the puddle became ordinary water again.

Valerie looked up at Connal. "What just happened?"

"'Twas the prince." Connal suddenly hefted her into his arms, and ran from the bedchamber into the passage, down the stairs and out of the stronghold. As he carried her Valerie tried not to laugh, but everything inside her had grown warm and lovely and new.

She only shrieked when the laird dove into the sea with her, and then held her beneath the surface when she would have come up for air.

She didn't need air, Valerie realized, watching his face. The sea's salt wasn't even stinging her eyes. She wasn't breathing water, but she seemed to be fine. She didn't even try to hold her breath.

Connal waited until any ordinary mortal would have drowned before he urged her up to the surface. She didn't choke or sputter, but simply began breathing air again.

"What was that?" she asked, smiling.

“My sire’s final gift to us.” He cradled her face between his palms. “You cannae drown, just as the MacMar. ’Tis only one reason for such.”

Valerie thought she might faint.

“I’m immortal like you now?” When he nodded she kissed him, laughing and crying and overwhelmed with new joy. “I’m going to love you forever.”

“And I you, Valerie.” He kissed her.

THE END

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Another book awaits you in Immortal Highlander Clan  
MacMar (Fletcher Book 2).

For a sneak peek, turn the page.



# Sneak Peek

*Fletcher (Immortal Highlander Clan MacMar Book 2)*

Excerpt

## CHAPTER ONE

“Are you headed to a party, Miss?” the cab driver asked, glancing at Lark Ambrose via the rearview mirror.

“Central Park, please.” She’d already told him that, she recalled, emerging from the daze. “I’m sorry. I’m just going for a walk in the park.”

“In that get-up?” The cabbie gave her a big grin. “Love how you gals dress for spring.”

She glanced down at her get-up, a hand-embroidered gown she no longer had a reason to wear. She knew every stitch, as she’d been working on it daily for the last seven months. The cascade of light pink and gold flowers and pale green leaves on the blush, tulle overlay exactly matched those embroidered in the time of Jane Austen. The underdress, made of champagne silk marocain, fit her petite body like a second skin, thanks to the long lacing of the corset back. She’d even stitched on one by one the two thousand, seven hundred and fourteen tiny golden pearl beads around the modest neckline, sleeve cuffs and hems.

As an expert seamstress, Lark had made costumes for some of the biggest productions on Broadway. Why shouldn't she make her own dream wedding dress?

*Too bad I'm not getting married.*

She took a deep breath and tried to think of something other than the disaster she had just left behind at the church. The lingering odor of industrial citrus told her sensitive nose that the interior of the cab had been recently cleaned. Her driver, a middle-aged man with kind eyes, wore a nice, understated cologne, and sipped hazelnut coffee from a shatter-proof tumbler. Even the morning air, which usually stank acridly of the exhaust fume/old urine/rusting steel girder perfume of the city, smelled fresh.

All in all, the perfect day for the wedding she'd never have.

*He's gone.* Janice Grant, her former future mother-in-law, had burst into the dressing room at the church, crying so hard she'd barely gotten out the words. *He called me to say that he and Kate are eloping. Oh, my dear girl, I'm so sorry.*

At first Lark had been confused. He and Kate couldn't mean Lawrence Grant, her fiancé, and Kate Corbin, his secretary and her only friend. The two people closest to her in the world worked together, but they wouldn't have run off to get married. Not with two hundred guests waiting in the sanctuary, all of whom were Lawrence's friends and extended family. Not on Lark's wedding day.

The jinx couldn't do this to her.

After several frantic, unanswered phone calls to her vanished groom, Lark began checking other things. Her honeymoon plane tickets had been cancelled and refunded to Mr. Lawrence Grant, the airline agent told her. According to the bank he'd also emptied and closed their new joint checking account, taking every penny Lark had saved for their new life together. His landlord claimed he'd even sublet his Manhattan apartment, which they had planned to share when she moved in after the honeymoon, to a nice young couple from Jersey.

In twenty-four hours Lawrence Grant had rendered Lark homeless and penniless before leaving her at the altar to run away with another woman.

Still clinging to a shred of hope that it was all some sort of horrible practical joke, Lark had called Kate's parents in Georgia. They had told her that their daughter had phoned the night before to say she was eloping with the man she loved. She simply hadn't mentioned to them that the man had promised to marry Lark on the same day.

"Ah, Miss?" When she looked up the cabbie gave her another smile. "Central Park."

Lark looked out the window at the oasis of green beside them. She had only occasionally walked through part of the eight hundred and forty-three acres of lawns, trees and gardens. After a long day of sewing, cast fittings or trips to the garment district to source specialty fabrics and trims, she usually went home to collapse. Since she'd taken off two weeks from work for the now-cancelled honeymoon, and she had nowhere to live at the moment, she had nothing to do but walk.

"Thanks." Since Lark had maxed out her credit card making deposits for the wedding, she handed over the fare in cash along with a generous tip. "Have a great day."

People glanced at her from the moment she entered the park, but no one stared. Lark became amused by that. Surely even in New York City it wasn't every day they saw a freckled, skinny redhead dolled up like a pageant queen. Or maybe she was simply forgettable, even in a wedding gown. She silently blessed her decision not to add a train to her skirt, because the tulle and silk would have snagged on every twig, root and dead leaf she walked over. She was also glad she'd opted for pale pink flats; navigating the park's terrain in heels would have been a nightmare.

*Your wedding day is the nightmare, thanks to the jinx. Just like the rest of your life.*



Since early childhood the bad luck Lark thought of as the jinx had shadowed her, snatching away everyone who had loved and cared for her. When she was three years old a truck driver's brakes had failed, causing a pileup on the highway that had killed her parents on their way to pick her up from daycare. Bacterial pneumonia had stolen the widowed grandmother who had been raising her during elementary school. Lark's godmother had then taken her in, but a custody battle during her subsequent bad divorce had rendered her emotionally and financially incapable of looking after her as well as her own four children. Lark's last resort had been to live with her father's brother, a busy Broadway director.

*I never planned to have a family, Matthew Ambrose had told her as he unpacked her little suitcase in the guest room of his Manhattan apartment. But it's me or foster care. So, let's make it work, huh, kid?*

Making it work meant eating nothing but takeout, largely looking after herself, and spending her nights and weekends at the theater, but at least the jinx had left Uncle Matt alone. While he was working, Lark had found a quiet corner backstage where she could do her homework, which was usually in the costume fitting room. There she watched the show seamstress and dressers work, and when she grew bored she began to help them, and got a crash course in tailoring and repairing clothes. One of her uncle's neighbors, an Italian grandmother, also befriended her and taught her how to cook. By the time she graduated high school she was making meals for herself and Uncle Matt as well as her own clothes.

*I'll send you to design school if you want, her uncle had told her. But the fashion industry is really tough. You don't need a degree to work on Broadway, sweetheart.*

Lark had opted to go to vocational school to train as a seamstress, and two years later had landed her first job as a wardrobe assistant. From there she had piled on experience, going from show to show and sometimes filling in for other seamstresses out sick. She'd thought about dating, although with her shyness and worry over the jinx, that had been difficult for her. A friend she'd made at school, Kate, finally

fixed her up on a blind date with her newly-divorced boss, a corporate tax lawyer.

At their first meeting Lawrence Grant had seemed the typical New York City professional: a dark-haired, blue-eyed smooth talker in a well-tailored gray suit. Lark had long ago accepted that, with her very short, slight build, stick-straight red hair and head-to-toe freckles she'd always look like a fifth grader playing dress-up. He seemed more suitable for someone like her beautiful, brunette friend Kate, she'd thought, unaware of just how right she was.

Lawrence had been charming, sophisticated and everything Lark wasn't. What had impressed her was how painfully honest he was about his failed marriage.

"I'm always busy with my work," he admitted over coffee at the little bistro where they'd met. "My ex wanted a husband who stays home every night and on weekends, which I couldn't do all the time. It's really my fault she left me for another guy."

Pity for him prompted Lark to accept a second date to see a movie together, and after that a dinner date. Rather quickly she realized they weren't a perfect match; Lawrence had no interest in her job, Broadway, or much of anything else outside his work. Once he learned she'd gone to vocational school instead of college he talked down to her, as if she might not understand what he meant. Lark wondered if she bored him, and dreaded her bad luck enough to be worried for him as well. Yet he kept asking her out, and didn't seem to mind taking things slowly.

That unhurried pace allowed her to gradually gain a sense of security. If she didn't rush things, maybe the jinx wouldn't take Lawrence away from her.

In the three years that followed, Lark worked hard to establish a solid reputation as an innovative, quick-thinking and reliable seamstress. She began cautiously making plans for the future, when she hoped to become a wardrobe director. Her relationship with Lawrence went along without a single hitch, too. She adapted to his likes and preferences, and discovered

new ways to enjoy city life. He then proposed, and although she had some doubts, she convinced herself it was time to get married. It seemed that at last the jinx that had stalked her through life had finally ended.

Only it hadn't.

"Sorry, sweetheart," Uncle Matt had managed to tell her after she'd found him on the floor of their apartment. "Can't make it to the wedding. Love you, kid."

Nearly a thousand of the show people who liked Matthew Ambrose had come to his funeral on Valentine's Day. That day remained a blur of kind faces, comforting hand clasps and soft, sad voices, through which Lark had sat, numbed by disbelief. The family lawyer met with her a few days later to explain that her uncle had been in considerable debt with his production company, requiring the sale of his apartment and belongings to satisfy his creditors. Fortunately she would be allowed to live there until everything was finalized at the end of April, when she would be getting married and moving in with her new husband.

Lawrence and Kate hadn't been able to attend Uncle Matt's funeral, Lark remembered. They had both used work as an excuse, although she wondered if they'd simply taken the opportunity to shack up for the weekend.

Now as she walked across the terrace by the park's lake, she suspected sex may have played a significant part in the disaster of her non-wedding. Because she was shy as well as a virgin, Lark had kept her relationship with Lawrence confined to kisses only. When he told her that he adored her, and wanted to marry her, she asked if he could wait until their wedding night before they made love for the first time. Although he'd laughed a little, he told her he understood, and after that never pressured her. Perhaps he'd already been sleeping with Kate when he'd agreed to wait.

Lark had never had a single suspicion about either of them. Lawrence had said he loved her countless times. Kate had been her friend for years.

Even now she wanted to believe they had unexpectedly fallen in love but couldn't face her, yet that didn't seem right. When she thought about it, Kate had been avoiding her for the last couple of weeks. Lawrence had lost interest in helping her with the final wedding arrangements as well. She wished she knew the truth. Why hadn't the man she'd loved explained why he would do this instead of running away from their wedding without a word or any warning?

*The jinx, that's why.*

A ringing sound broke through her thoughts, and Lark stopped to take out her cell phone. On the display she saw the number, which she recognized, and briefly considered blocking the caller.

Instead she answered it. "Aren't you on my honeymoon?"

A gust of breath came over the line before Kate said in a low, sad voice, "I'm so sorry, Chickie."

In the background she could hear a toilet flushing. She had the same opinion about her friend's silly nickname for her. "Are you calling me from a restroom?"

"Lawrence told me not to, so I had to sneak in here before we got on the plane," Kate said, rushing out the words. "I just thought you should know. We've been on and off since his divorce. It wasn't ever serious. It's because you wouldn't put out. Really, Chickie, you can't make a guy wait two years for sex. Then a month ago I got sick, and I was scared it was something bad, and, well, turns out it wasn't. I'm pregnant."

Lark closed her eyes. *That explains it all.*

"Congratulations." Lawrence had talked a few times about having children, which he'd wanted badly, but Lark's jinx had made it impossible for her to even think about starting a family. "Let me know where you're registered, and I'll send you something for the baby. Oh, right, I can't. You two ran off with all my money."

"I told him to leave some for you, but he wants to start over, you know, and make a clean break. Plus he lost a lot last winter on some bad investments, so we need it for the little

one and our new place. You're a hard worker, Chickie. I know you'll get back on your feet in no time." Kate sniffed. "I really wanted to see your dress."

Did she think they were still friends? Lark wondered. "It's a shame you didn't. It turned out beautiful. It's all I have to wear now, too. Where is my luggage?"

"This happened so quick I didn't have time to pack. We're the same size, so Lawrence said I should just wear your things." Kate sighed as if she'd been forced to steal her clothes. "You don't mind, do you? I'll ship everything back to you when we come back from...um, I'm not supposed to tell you that."

If she ever got it back, she'd have to burn her honeymoon wardrobe along with her wedding dress, Lark thought. "What happened to everything I moved to Lawrence's apartment before he sublet it?"

"I don't know. I'll find out if he put it in with his stuff when the moving company came," her former friend said. "I'm sure he did. He's not a bad guy, Chickie. Look at what he did for me and the baby."

By now any other woman would have been screaming with outrage, but all Lark could manage was a terrible pity. Unless she lied, Kate would never be able to brag about her wedding, or even the reason she had married Lawrence, which for her would be punishment enough. As for her cheating, runaway groom, Lark simply didn't care anymore. At any time he could have called off the wedding, but instead he had turned what was supposed to be one of the most important days in her life into a bad joke. In that sense, the jinx had done her a favor.

"Look, I can't talk much longer," her ex-friend said. "Lawrence is waiting at the gate."

"No problem," Lark assured her. "Please don't ever call me again."

As Kate babbled something, Lark ended the call, and tucked her phone back in her little clutch, which held only a lipstick and her wallet. After paying the cab fare she had



maybe twenty-six dollars to her name. With no husband, clothes, or place to call home now, that was all she had to live on until her next pay check, which wouldn't come for another two weeks.

Could she live on two dollars a day in New York City? She was about to find out.

At the bottom of her clutch she found a couple of quarters, and looked down at Bethesda Fountain in the complex below the terrace bridge. A winged angel crowned the big sculpture in the center, from which poured sparkling water into a huge lower basin. Big black planters in the water with lotus, colocasia and papyrus plants ringed the center sculpture. Tiny glints of copper and silver from the coins people threw into the fountain made her head for the stairs. Right now the area around the fountain stood deserted, so it was the perfect time to make a wish.

*After all this I deserve one, right?*

Lark walked up to the concrete rim of the basin, and arranged her gown so she could sit down there. Looking up at the angel statue and the four little cherubs beneath her gave her some comfort. Uncle Matt hadn't been religious, but she dimly remembered her grandmother taking her to church. The idea of an afterlife still appealed to her. She wanted to believe that was where her family had gone, and were now waiting for her.

She took out the quarters, and tossed them into the shimmering water. "I wish someone would love me and stay with me forever."

The afternoon sun made rainbows in the mist, and the water in the basin sparkled with pretty blue and green glints, but as she watched the two coins sink to the bottom of the basin she saw a beautiful silver ring someone had dropped there. The large green stone in it looked like an emerald, which meant it was probably expensive. Lark reached out, dipping her hand in the water to try to pick it up. The disturbance her fingers made caused the ring to roll away, and

she bent over to grab it before it got sucked into one of the fountain's drains.

Someone snatched her clutch out of her other hand, and shoved her into the water. Lark's head hit the side of a planter, so hard she heard bone crack. As pain like nothing she'd ever experienced shot through her, and blood reddened the water around her, she realized she had been mugged. Through the shallow water over her Lark saw the bronze angel atop the fountain shimmering, one hand reaching toward her as if it meant to pull her out. She wished it could have, because while only a few inches of water separated her from the air, she didn't have the strength to push herself up. From the way her vision was graying she'd be unconscious in another few moments.

She was going to drown in Bethesda Fountain. In her wedding gown. On her wedding day. For twenty-six dollars and a lipstick.

*This is how it ends?* Lark saw the beautiful ring float into her palm, and curled her fingers over it. Perhaps whoever had dropped it in the fountain had been heartbroken, too. But this was how she'd die, in a place that was supposed to grant wishes? *Does it have to be this way?*

A sense of being held in gentle arms came over her, and she heard a woman whisper, *Do you wish live?*

Was someone saving her?

*We can,* a deeper, man's voice said. *Do you wish live?*

*I do.* Lark didn't care that she should have been using those words at the church right now; everything in her heart desperately wanted another chance. *Please help me.*

The pain in her head faded, and she was so sure now she was dying she looked up, hoping to see the sun one last time through the water. She must have been crying, as her eyes stung, and the sunlight had turned blue and green. Something flung her up, and she surfaced not in the fountain but in an ocean in front of a white-sanded beach. Someone had their

arms around her, and as she sputtered and coughed the person shifted her, lifting her out of the sea and against a broad chest.

Lark looked up at the man carrying her to shore, and wondered exactly how hard she'd hit her head. How had she gone from Bethesda Fountain in Central Park to an ocean? Who was this guy? Not a lifeguard. He wore badly-sewn clothing made of some rough, unevenly-woven fabric. From his shaggy mane of sun-streaked brown hair to his matching eyes, however, he looked like someone from a dream. Fiercely handsome and commanding all at once, he could have easily been the leading actor of a sold-out show. Men like him didn't pull girls like her out of a fountain—or sea, she corrected herself.

Maybe he was an angel.

The man glanced down at her, his expression growing instantly astonished, as if he'd never before seen a woman. "By the gods, you're lovely."

*Religious, Scottish, and needs glasses,* she thought absently, fascinated by his low, velvet-soft voice. It seemed strange that she wasn't afraid of him in the slightest. Nothing in her life had ever given her such a sense of reassurance as this moment, being held and carried by a complete stranger. Maybe she had died.

He tightened his arms around her. "Dinnae fear, lass. You're safe now."

Safe, in the arms of a big, gorgeous man. Lark had so many questions she didn't even know where to start. *Heaven is a beach? Why is the angel Scottish? Where's my family?*

When he reached the shore the big man carefully lowered her onto the sand, and knelt down beside her to drape his blue, green and white wool plaid over her shoulders. He started checking her over, pushing back her hair from her face and looking at her neck and arms. Too astonished to object, she simply watched him. She'd never liked being touched by strangers, but his gentle hands soothed her. Again she experienced that overwhelming sense of being protected by this man, although she had no reason to think that.

He'd explain all this to her, Lark thought, and it would somehow make sense.

"You've a gash here, lass," the man asked, touching the side of her head. "Did you fall from a boat?"

"Someone pushed me into a fountain in Central Park." She saw him go still at the sound of her voice. "My name is Lark Ambrose. Who are you?"

"Fletcher MacMar." He frowned as he squinted at her face, and then took hold of her hand. "My apologies. 'Tis only that I can see you."

"I'm not a ghost." At least, she hoped she wasn't. "Where am I, Mr. MacMar?"

"The island, 'tis called Caladh." He helped her to her feet, which was when she realized how tall he was. "We must go before the... Can you walk, Mistress Ambrose?"

Her legs wobbled a little with her first step, but she'd been in worse shape at the church. Afraid he would disappear if she refused, she said, "If you help, I think so."

"Aye." He seemed to like holding her hand, and didn't rush as he guided her toward a stairway carved out of one of the nearby cliffs.

As they walked across the sand Lark kept glancing his way. Not only was he well over six feet tall—the top of her head came to just above his elbow—he was built like a superhero, judging by all the muscular bulges under his soaked garments. He had a light tan to go with the amazing highlights in his hair, which looked so natural he must have paid a fortune to get them done. When he lifted his head and the sun glowed on his face his eyes turned pure gold, or maybe that was a trick of the light. He hadn't shaved in a few days, but the shadowy beard and mustache looked perfect on him. Everything did, really.

She glanced down at her wedding dress, which the fountain and the ocean had thoroughly soaked. None of the embroidery she'd worked so hard to stitch appeared wrecked,

although the silk underdress was dry-clean only, so that was ruined.

*I don't care*, Lark thought, almost relieved. *Not like I'll ever have to wear it again.*

As they reached the cliff she finally looked up to see another impossible sight: a huge golden castle soaring up from the rocky top, surrounded by double walls and protected by men with spears and bows. Like Fletcher they wore long tunics, trousers and boots; each man wore a plaid draped over the shoulders and wrapped around the torso. None of them wore kilts, which confused Lark. Even when they weren't historically accurate, most directors always opted for kilts during productions of *Brigadoon* or *MacBeth*. A kilt said Scotland like no other garment.

*Who stages a play on an island?*

"I'll carry you," Fletcher said, reaching to lift her again.

"That's okay." Reflexively she put her hand on his chest. "I'm a bit steadier."

He frowned at her hand, and then she saw why: the ring she'd found in the fountain was on her finger. Lark couldn't remember putting it on, but everything had happened so fast she might have forgotten.

"I found the ring in the fountain in Central Park, and then I was mugged and shoved in the water," she told him. "I hit my head on a planter in the basin. Something else happened..." She stopped, unsure if she should mention the voices. "Is this near Canarsie Pol?"

"I dinnae ken such a place," Fletcher admitted. "Permit me take you to the stronghold, Mistress. There we may better fathom what's happened."

"That's the stronghold?" She pointed up at the castle, and he nodded. "Am I in trouble, Mr. MacMar?" He didn't look as if he wanted to answer that, so she added, "Will you stay with me?"

"Aye, lass." He covered her hand with his. "For as long as you wish."



[Buy Fletcher \(Immortal Highlander Clan MacMar Book 2\)](#)

# Glossary

Here are some brief definitions to help you navigate the medieval world of the Clan MacMar series.

adulting: millennial slang for behaving like a responsible adult

aft castle: the stern structure behind the mizzenmast and above the transom on large sailing ships

all-heal: another name for the herb valerian

Almany: archaic name for Germany

Area 51: a conspiracy theorist reference to Homey Airport, a top-secret Air Force facility within the Nevada Test and Training Range

arse: ass

assist: millennial slang for assistance or help

bae: millennial acronym for before anyone else

bailey: outer wall of a castle

baklava: a Greek dessert made of phyllo dough filled with nuts and soaked in honey

ballocks: testicles

bàs: Scots Gaelic for death

bawbag: scrotum

baws: testicles

besotted: old term for infatuated

bet: millennial slang for okay (used as an agreement)

big mad: millennial slang for furious

big yikes: millennial slang interjection for something embarrassing, disturbing or shocking

birlinn: a galley propelled by sail and oar

boak: vomit

boon: gift, power

bovine: cow-like

bràmair: Scots Gaelic for sweetheart

breac-sheunain: freckles

Cait Sith: half-Therion shape shifters

can't even: millennial slang for being rendered helpless

carrack: a large European merchant ship that operated during the 14th to 17th centuries

cataplexy: a medical condition in which a person enters a trance or has a seizure that leads to a loss of sensation and consciousness; includes rigidity of the body

centurial: an archaic reference meaning one hundred years

changeling: a Fae child left in exchange for a human child

cheb: Scottish slang for "breasts"

chevalier: a knight or a gallant man

chib: shiv or makeshift knife

Chlíodhna: Celtic goddess of the afterlife, beauty and the sea

churn dash: the staff or plunger in a churn

clatty: Scottish slang for dirty

clottie dumpling: traditional pudding



co-chèilidh: Scots Gaelic for together, used to mean lover

colicus: colic

conger: a large, predatory eel

cossetted: pampered or coddled

cote: shed for pigeons

deets: millennial slang for details

ditz: slang for idiot

dobber: a stupid person

eejit: idiot

effigy: a doll, scarecrow or similar object roughly made to resemble a person which is meant to be destroyed or burned for symbolic reasons.

Elphyne: the otherworld of the Fae

Érieann: Irish

extra: millennial slang for too much

fab: millennial slang for fabulous

fack: fuck

Fae: people and artifacts from the magical realm

fail: millennial slang for failure

fash: Scottish slang for confuse

Finfolk: the clan's word for the Selseus

fire: millennial slang for anything amazing

firesteel: a metal implement used to spark kindling for a fire

forecastle: a raised deck at the bow of a ship

Francia: medieval name for France

get busy: slang for have sex

ginormous: millennial slang combining the words giant and enormous

gorse: a large evergreen shrub with needle like leaves

hairsplitter: a slur for someone who argues over unimportant details

halflings: a term used for the offspring of Fae and mortals

hartshorn: a type of smelling salts rendered from deer horns

homeopath: a medical practitioner who uses natural substances to treat the injured and diseased

hooch: southern slang for liquor

hoor: whore, prostitute

imp: a small demon or otherworldly creature

indie: millennial slang for independent

Insii Cait: old name for Shetland

Insii Orc: old name for Orkney

jobby: Scottish slang for poop

kalends: the first day of the month in the ancient Roman calendar

laird: lord

l'amour courtois: French for "courtly love"

landcrawler: slur used by the Finfolk for people who live on land

landwalker: polite term used by the Finfolk for people who live on land

leine: long shirt

lit: millennial slang for excellent, great, wonderful

lochan: small lake

maister: mister

màthair: mother

mawkish: weakly sentimental

mayweed: another name for stinking chamomile, a malodorous plant

meet and greet: slang for an introductory meeting

melia: woodland Fae who inhabit trees

ménage à trois: French for a sexual relationship involving three people

merrow: a mermaid or merman

mo bòidhchead: my beauty

mojito: a cocktail based on a traditional Cuban punch, typically made of white rum, lime or lemon juice, sugar, crushed fresh mint leaves and sparkling water

morpew: skin lesions or blisters, historically caused by scurvy

nacre: mother-of-pearl

narked: diver slang for suffering from nitrogen narcosis, a dangerous condition caused by deep diving which creates an altered emotional state ranging from anxiety to euphoria

NDE: acronym for near-death experience

neoprene: a synthetic polymer much like rubber

Nifon: archaic name for Japan

Nóregr: archaic name for Norway

null: cancel

och: expression of surprise, disapproval, regret

Ornyst: old name for Unst

OTP: millennial slang acronym that stands for One True Pairing

ovate: a rank of druid above novices; one who is trained and skilled

p: millennial slang for pretty

Papou: Greek for grandfather

parlay: negotiate, bargain

pells: belts

pervy: slang for perverted

Pished: Scottish slang for intoxicated

portents: omens, signs or other indicators of events yet to happen

Poseidon: Greek god of the sea

pottage: soup or stew

primeur: a vegetable or fruit picked while still young and small

quim: vagina

ratchet: millennial slang for angry, rude, disrespectful

Reparation: an ancient war between the Fae that took place in Elphyne

Ronalsee: an archaic name for North Ronaldsay island

salty: millennial slang for angry

scunner: an annoying person

Selse: home world of the Finfolk

Selseus: Finfolk's name for their race

seneschal: steward or major-domo of a medieval great house

skiff: a small boat

skinwork: tattoos

slaps: millennial slang for something delightful

smite: a blow or to strike

sneaks: slang for sneakers

spill: millennial slang for passing along gossip

stalker and fan: used to describe the actions of an avid fan

STEM: an acronym that stands for science, technology, engineering and mathematics

stupit: stupid

swaddling: diaper

swain: male boyfriend or lover

swol: millennial slang for buff, well-built

tadger: slang for penis

TBR: millennial slang acronym for To Be Real, which means being brutally honest

tenterhook: a hook used to fasten cloth to a wooden frame

Therion: shape-shifting type of Fae

thermocline: a high-gradient layer based on temperature in a large body of water

tight: millennial slang for nervous, upset

TMI: acronym for “too much information”

totes: millennial slang for totally

tragic: millennial slang for a terrible burden

trotter: pig’s foot

tsunami: a giant wave or waves caused by undersea earthquakes or eruptions

turncoat: traitor

turned up: millennial slang for excited

uber: millennial slang for very much

uiseag: Scots Gaelic for lark

vetch: a plant in the legume family

walk of shame: slang for a woman going home after an unplanned sexual encounter, usually wearing the same clothes she had on the day before

walkabout: slang for wandering

ward: an open-air courtyard

warding: imprisonment or shielding spell

wee: small

weevers - a fish that can sting

whale-killer: orca

whinge: whine and complain

whirl bone: archaic name for arthritis

white swelling: archaic name for bone tuberculosis

White-mouth: local term for a mako shark

wulvers: werewolf-like creatures from Scottish mythology

Yetland: archaic word for Shetland

# Pronunciation Guide

A selection of the more challenging words in the Immortal Highlander, Clan MacMar series.

Agda: ay-DAH

Aili: EYE-lee

Alain Ducasse: uh-LAHN doo-KAHS

Alston: ALLS-tuhn

Ambrose: AYM-brohs

Anga: AHN-gah

Angalan: AHN-gah-lahn

Armstrong: ARM-struhng

Baker: BAYK-er

Bàs: BAHS

Bata: BAH-tah

Bered: BAYRD

Bertie: BUR-tee

Boec Arasgain: BOW-see ah-RAHZ-geen

Bràmair: BRAH-meer

Breac-sheunain: BREHK-hay-een

Briga: BREE-gah

Brittany: BRIT-an-ee

Brochan: BROH-kin

Brodie: BROH-dee

Buster: BUHS-ter

Cait Sith: KAT SHEE

Caladh: KELL-ah

Cameron: KAM-er-on

Candace: KAYN-dehs

Caroline: CAYR-oh-lehn

Ceardach: KER-dik

Chlíodhna: KLEE-nah

Clydie: CLEYE-dee

Co-chèilidh: KOH-kay-lee

Connal: CAHN-ehl

Cora: KOR-ah

Corbin: COR-behn

Dagan: DAH-guhn

Dale: DAYL

Dashel: DAH-shehl

David: DAY-vehd

Dearg: DEERG

Derdruí: DARE-dree-oo

Dugles: DUH-gulls

Duncan: DUN-kin

Dun Ard: DUN AHRD

Duxor: DUHCKS-or



Eilidh: EH-lee  
Eilonwy: eh-LAHN-wee  
Eldfjall: EHLD-fee-ahl  
Ellis: EL-ehs  
Elphyne: EL-fehn  
Engus: EEN-guhs  
Érieann: AYR-ehn  
Erskin: ER-skeen  
Eva: EE-vah  
Fairley: FAYR-lee  
Fairburn: FAYR-buhrn  
Ferran: FEER-ehn  
Fiacail: FEE-ah-kill  
Fletcher: FLEH-chehr  
Freja: FREE-jah  
Fumigalli: FOOM-ah-gah-lee  
Gardarsholmur: GER-der-shohl-mer  
George: JORJ  
Gerta: GER-tah  
Gilla: GIL-ah  
Gilroy: GEEL-roy  
Gina: JEE-nah  
Gitaki: juh-TAHK-ee  
Gonzalez: guhn-ZAH-lehz  
Grant: GRAYNT  
Gus: GUHS  
Gustin: GUHS-teen  
Hudson: HUHD-suhn

Idonea: EYE-doh-nee  
Insii Cait: EN-see CAYT  
Insii Orc: EN-see ORK  
Jack: JAHK  
Jamaran: JAH-mah-rah  
Jamma: JAY-mah  
Janice: JAH-nees  
Jean Louis-Deniot: SHON LOO-wee DEHN-ee-oh  
Jean Maran: SHON mah-RAHN  
Joana Arasgain: joh-AHN-ah ah-RAHZ-geen  
Jorunn: JOR-uhn  
Julianne: JOOL-ee-ayn  
Kai: KEYE  
Kate: KAYT  
Klee: KLEE  
Lachina: LAY-chah  
Lark: LARK  
Lawrence: LAW-rehns  
Leannan sìth: LAHN-awn-shee  
Leir: LEER  
Lugh: LOO  
Mace: MAH-cheh  
Mackay: mah-KAY  
MacLeir: mahk-LEER  
MacMar: mahk-MAHR  
Magnus Haig: MAHG-nuhs HAYG  
Maja: MAH-jah  
Mar: MAHR

Margret: MAHR-greht  
Matthew: MAH-theeoo  
Maxwell: MAHKS-wehl  
Meg: MEHG  
Melanie: MEH-lahn-ee  
Melia: MEH-lee-ah  
Merrick: MEHR-rehk  
Merrivane: MEHR-ee-vayn  
Merrow: MEHR-oh  
Mingas: MEEN-guhs  
Mitchell: MEECH-uhl  
mo bòidhchead: MUH BOYCH  
Nicole: nee-KOHL  
Nicolina: nee-koh-LEE-nah  
Nóregr: NOR-ehg  
Nyall: NEYE-ahl  
Ornyst: OHR-neest  
Papou: pah-POO  
Parish: PAYR-eesh  
Paul: PAWL  
Rabert: RAY-burt  
Richard: RITCH-erd  
Rona Haig: ROW-nah HAYG  
Ronalsee: RAHN-ahl-see  
Sarah: SAYR-ah  
Scott: SCAHT  
Sensei: SEHN-say  
Shoran: shor-AHN

Selse: SELL-see  
Selseus: SELL-see-ahs  
Shaw: SHAW  
Sherona: SHUR-oh-nah  
Speal: SPAHL  
Sylvaen: seel-VAY-ehn  
Tarney: TAHR-nee  
Taupal: TAW-pawl  
Tethys: THE-theez  
Teine: TEE-nah  
Theol: THEEL  
Therion: THEH-ree-ahn  
Tilly: TEE-lee  
Tiree: teye-REE  
Trabalar: TRAH-bahl-ah  
Tsunami: soo-NAH-mee  
Uiseag: YOU-see-ahg  
Valerie: VAHL-er-ee  
Whitley: WIT-lee  
Worth: WERTH  
Wilcox: WEEL-kahks  
Yetland: YEHT-luhnd  
Ysal: EE-sahl  
Ysala: EE-sahl-ah

# Dedication

*For Mr. H.*

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