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RACHEL VAN DYKEN

A WARRIOR
for
CHRISTMAS

A DARK WARRIORS SPECIAL HOLIDAY NOVELLA

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
DONNA GRANT

A WARRIOR FOR CHRISTMAS

DARK WARRIORS

BOOK 9

DONNA GRANT®

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DONNA
GRANT

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

A WARRIOR FOR CHRISTMAS

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DEAR READER—



When I started the *Dark Sword* series, I knew it would be something special. It all began with a question: Why did the Romans never conquer Scotland? A simple enough query that many historians believe they could—and have—answer(ed). However, since Rome wrote the history books, I've always wondered what the *real* reason was.

My love of Scotland and the Medieval period is where the series began. I was a historical writer then, and only a historical writer—until my editor asked me to be a contemporary writer. So, my beloved *Warriors and Druids* went from Medieval to modern-day. Unfortunately, because of that, my publisher insisted on a series name change. I fought to keep it the same because I knew readers would be confused, but I ultimately lost that battle. So, the *Dark Sword* series became the *Dark Warriors*.

I loved writing in the *Dark Sword/Dark Warriors* series. I loved everything about it. The heroes, the heroines, and, yes, even the villains. It wasn't the first series I ended, but it was one of the most difficult ones. Sure, I still wrote in the world, but I had to say farewell to the *Warriors and Druids*.

Except, I couldn't. Not completely. That's why I have them pop up in the other connected series throughout the *Dark World*. And each time I do—or did—there was an overwhelmingly positive response from readers. Which, of course, meant I had to keep doing it. That's why I wrote this holiday story. For *you*, the reader, who has begged and pleaded for more *Warriors and Druids*.

Yet, when I ended the *DS/DW* series, I honestly believed it would be the hard-stop end to them. It was why the epilogue at the end of Malcolm's book, *MIDNIGHT'S PROMISE*, gave a glimpse into each couple's future. But...since I couldn't leave the Warriors and Druids alone, that epilogue won't match up to what's happening now in the overall Dark World. My best advice is to take that epilogue and imagine it far, far, *far* in the future.

For now, I leave you with a holiday visit to MacLeod Castle...

xoxox,

DG

LUCAN AND CARA



December

MacLeod Castle

The gray sky stared back at Lucan as he gazed at the steady snowfall through the window. Behind him, his wife Cara sat on the floor, surrounded by different-sized pots in an assortment of colors as she sank her hands into the soil.

He'd built the conservatory especially for her. It didn't matter what season it was, Cara was always with her beloved plants. If she wasn't tending to one, she was planting seeds and helping them grow with her Druid magic as she was doing now. However, Lucan had wanted to give her a place to do so out of the weather.

Lucan had surprised her with the conservatory over two hundred years ago. In his opinion, it had been the best Christmas present he had ever given her. He had yet to gift her anything that even came remotely close in the years since.

"You're brooding."

Cara's sweet voice pulled him out of his thoughts. He grunted. "I'm no'."

"You forget, love. I know you better than you know yourself. Tell me what thoughts have pulled you under."

Lucan turned to her. Her brunette locks were pulled into a loose bun atop her head with wisps of curls falling to frame her heart-shaped face that he never tired of looking at.

She was covered in dirt from her elbows to her fingertips as she knelt before a large pot and stirred the soil with her hands. She always said there was nothing better than feeling the dirt between her fingers, and he happened to agree. Which was why he often helped her. He watched her cover the seeds in the soil and then place her hands atop it before letting her magic flow from her palms into the dirt. Within moments, seeds sprouted and grew tall, forming a lush bush with red berries. Mistletoe was always hung throughout the castle during December and used for the solstice, and Cara made sure there was always plenty.

She sat back with a smile and dusted off her hands. “That should do for now.” She climbed to her feet and faced him. Her mahogany eyes searched his face. “What is it?”

Lucan walked to her and wiped a smudge of dirt from her cheek. “It’s nothing, I assure you.”

“Lucan MacLeod,” she stated. “We don’t keep secrets, remember?”

“It’s no’ a secret, darlin’.”

“It is if you don’t tell me.”

He flattened his lips and sighed, knowing she wouldn’t give up until he told her. “I doona know what to get you this year.”

“Is that all?” she asked with a laugh and shook her head.

“Is that *all*?” he repeated, slightly offended that she didn’t see what a conundrum it was.

She put her hands on his chest and grinned up at him. “You don’t need to get me anything. You know that.”

“I like to see you opening my gifts.”

“But I don’t need anything.”

“That isna the point,” he argued.

She stepped back and began cleaning up the dirt that’d spilled during her work. “We’ve had over four hundred Yules, my love.”

“I know.” That was why it was so difficult for him to find something to give her. His wife was simple in her desires—plants. He had gotten seeds from all over the world for her until there was no more to give. Maybe he should ask the Dragon Kings if they could bring some from Zora. The realm was similar to Earth but different enough that there might be new flora.

Cara straightened, dusted off her jeans, and caught his gaze. “I have all I need with you.”

“I appreciate that, but—”

“But you’re still going to get me something,” she said with a shake of her head.

Lucan lifted the heavy pot and carried it off to the side to put with the other mistletoe plants. “It gives me pleasure.” He watched her pause beside another plant and whisper to it. “You doona seem to have the same problem finding gifts for me.”

She glanced at him over her shoulder and smiled slyly.

“What’s your secret?” he pushed.

Cara faced him and shrugged. “If I find something that reminds me of you, then I get it.”

“That’s it?” It couldn’t be that easy. She always gave him terrific gifts.

She laughed. “Ever since you presented me with the conservatory, you’ve been trying to outdo it. There’s no need.”

He disagreed. He remembered the look of utter joy on her face when he showed her the inside. She hadn’t been able to stop touching the pots, bags of soil, and the seed packets waiting for her. They had locked themselves in the room for the rest of the day. Between rounds of sex, he’d helped her begin her indoor garden. Not a day went by that she wasn’t in the conservatory.

“How many times have we mulled over the fact that so many things had to go right for us to meet?” she asked.

Lucan raked a hand through his black hair. “Too many to remember.”

“And how many times have we considered everything we had to go through to triumph over Deirdre, Declan, and Jason?”

Just the mention of the Druids who had sought to control Warriors like him made Lucan’s heart skip a beat. The primeval gods inside each Warrior had been called up from Hell to defeat Rome, but the Druids hadn’t been able to return them. So, the gods had moved through the bloodline to the strongest in each clan. Lucan shared the god Apodattoo with his two brothers. Where they’d once thought it meant the end of everything, their immortality had opened up another world, ushered in by Cara’s arrival to the castle that fateful day in 1603. After three hundred years in the crumbling ruins of his castle, there was suddenly someone else. And not just anyone. Cara. A beautiful temptress who had enticed him beyond reason. She had brought sunshine into his dreary life.

“Numerous,” he answered.

Cara smiled gently, her dark eyes showering him with love. “You, Fallon, and Quinn survived the god within you when so many others succumbed.”

“Because it was divided between us.” To this day, Lucan wasn’t sure if any of them would have been strong enough to take control of the god had it gone to only one of them.



Cara walked to him and took his hands, placing them on her waist before looping her arms around his neck. His sea green eyes held hers as she smoothed a strand of his black hair back from his face. She thought about the day they’d met. She had been picking mushrooms near the cliffs, and the land had given way beneath her. Lucan had caught her before she plunged to her death.

“I discovered that I was a Druid,” she said. “You gave that to me.”

He shook his head. “That wasna me, darlin’.”

“I would never have found out had Deirdre not attacked. So, aye, I consider that a gift.”

Lucan grinned at her. “You gave me my life back. Before you, I merely existed here, thinking about the days when our clan was strong and plentiful while living in the ruins of the castle, the clan gone. Because of us.”

“You and your brothers not only prevailed over your god but also kept Deirdre at bay when she would’ve captured you for her army of Warriors.”

“I wasna the only one to triumph. You, my beautiful wife, stood against Deirdre, too. The *drough* was formidable, but you didna back down.”

“Because you were there. The love between us kept me going, even when all seemed lost.”

She didn’t like to think about the times they had nearly fallen to Deirdre. The Druid had been powerful and relentless. There had been instances she had been sure they would lose. But, somehow, they’d managed to come out on top until they ultimately defeated her.

“Word spread quickly,” Cara continued. “Other Warriors who hadn’t succumbed to the wills of their gods came to MacLeod Castle. You and your brothers took them in. You created your own army, one that intended to stand against Deirdre and any *drough* after her who sought to use the Warriors for their gain.”

“We lost our clan—our blooded family. But in turn, we found another. No’ just Warriors, but Druids of incredible strength and power.”

“So, see, my Warrior? You’ve given me more than I ever thought possible.”

He kissed her gently. “I appreciate what you’re doing, but I still want to have something wrapped for our celebration.”

The winter solstice was a day that everyone at the castle celebrated together. Each couple spent Christmas together separate from the group, but they gathered again for a big

celebration on Boxing Day. It had been their tradition for more decades than Cara could remember.

She looked at her handsome husband. “I can go a year without something.”

“All right. I’m game to do that. If you doona get *me* anything.”

Her lips parted. “I...I can’t do that. I already bought your gift.”

“Then we’re exchanging.”

“There’s no rule that says each of us has to give the other a gift.”

Lucan leaned his head back and laughed. “That’s pretty much the premise.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

He lifted her with a sexy smile she knew well. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he held her securely. Lucan kissed her softly before whispering, “When you stop giving me gifts, I’ll stop giving them to you.”

“That’s not fair,” she said between kisses. “I like finding things for you.”

Lucan chuckled. “Then I suppose we’ll both have to deal with it.”

“Hmm,” she murmured as the press of their lips lingered. She leaned back and looked at him. “There is an early gift you could give me.”

He quirked a brow. “Oh? What might that be?” he teased.

She glanced at the open door. “Remember when you gave me this incredible room?”

His cock hardened against her.

“You do,” she said with a sexy grin. “Get the doors?”

Lucan didn’t have to be told twice. He released her and strode to the doors, shutting and then locking them. When he turned back, she had already pulled out the blankets and pillows they stashed there for just such an occasion.

She yanked off her clothes in record time and then released her hair and crooked a finger at him. Lucan ate up the space between them and yanked her against him.

“Och, woman. How you make me ache.”

With heavy-lidded eyes, she yanked open his shirt. Buttons went flying in all directions. “Then let me ease you.”

He was naked in seconds. Desire consumed her as he cupped her breasts and thumbed her hard nipples. He lowered her to the blankets and took her mouth in a searing kiss as her fingers wrapped around his length.

A storm roiled outside, and another kind raged within the conservatory—one they both sought, chasing the pleasure they knew awaited them.

MISTLETOE KISS COCKTAIL



INGREDIENTS:

For the rosemary simple syrup*:

- ½ cup water
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- 1 sprig rosemary

For a small batch:

- 6 oz vodka
- 1 oz freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 2 oz rosemary simple syrup
- Club soda
- Handful of fresh cranberries (whole frozen berries are fine)
- 2 sprigs of rosemary

For a large batch:

- 30 oz vodka (3 ¾ cups or approximately 1 liter)
- 5 oz freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 10 oz (1 ¼ cups) rosemary simple syrup (triple the recipe above)
- 1 liter club soda
- ½ bag of fresh cranberries (or whole frozen berries)
- 10 sprigs of rosemary

INSTRUCTIONS:

To make the rosemary simple syrup:

Combine the water and sugar in a small saucepan set over medium-high heat. Bring to a boil while stirring occasionally to dissolve the sugar. Allow the mixture to boil for 5 minutes and then remove from the heat and drop in the sprig of rosemary. Allow the rosemary to steep for about 15 minutes and then discard the sprig. Pour the simple syrup into a glass jar or bottle, cool to room temperature, cover, and refrigerate.

To make a small batch:

Pour vodka, lemon juice, and simple syrup into a drink shaker filled with ice. Cover and shake well to blend. Divide drink mix between 2 rocks glasses filled with ice, straining the ice from the shaker as you pour. You'll only want to fill the glasses $\frac{3}{4}$ -full. Top with club soda and a few cranberries for garnish. Add a sprig of rosemary to use as a stirrer.

To make a large batch:

Pour vodka, lemon juice, and simple syrup into a pitcher filled with ice and stir well to combine.

When ready to serve, pour the drink mix into an ice-filled rocks glass to $\frac{3}{4}$ -full. Top each drink with club soda and a few cranberries for garnish. Add a sprig of rosemary to each drink as they are served to use as a stirrer.

If you make the large batch before your guests arrive, be sure to keep the pitcher in the fridge to ensure the drinks are icy-cold when they arrive.

NOTES:

*The rosemary simple syrup recipe above will make more than you need for a small batch, but the leftovers store well in an airtight container, like a mason jar, in the fridge for up to 2 weeks.

PARTY TIME TIPS:

If you plan to serve this drink at a party, here are a few tips for prep:

1. Print out instructions so your guests know how to assemble the drinks and post at your drink station.
2. Ready an ice bucket filled with ice as well as drink glasses so guests can help themselves to drinks from the pitcher.
3. Have a small bowl of cranberries ready to go.
4. Stand the rosemary sprigs up in a small glass.

FALLON AND LARENA



Larena sang along to *A Holly Jolly Christmas* by Burl Ives, blaring from the speakers in the great hall as she made her way to Fallon's office. It had once been a solar, but they had long ago converted it into an office during one of their many castle remodels.

She bit into a gingerbread cookie as she leaned against the doorway and watched her husband and fellow Warrior, Fallon. As the eldest of the MacLeod brothers, he took his duties seriously. Sometimes, too seriously. He was also the leader of the Warriors and Druids who called the castle home. Which meant he felt the weight of responsibility.

Not that she let him carry it alone. They shared many of the obligations, but being a laird and all that entailed had been ingrained in Fallon from a young age. Those who lived at the castle were a different kind of clan than those who had once resided here, but Fallon was still very much a laird.

His dark brown hair was on the long side and disheveled from him running his fingers through it. His brow was furrowed, and his lips were drawn tight. He wore a hunter green Henley shirt that made his dark green eyes pop even more. A shadow of a beard covered his chiseled jaw, and his gold torc gleamed just beneath his shirt. She caught sight of the boar heads on each end.

"If you're going to stare, the least you could do is share the cookie," Fallon said without looking up from the paper he studied.

Larena grinned as she pushed away from the doorway and walked to the desk. “You know I don’t share cookies. However, I brought one for you.”

He lowered the paper and looked up at her with a smile. Even after so many centuries together, he could still make her heart skip a beat as it had from the first moment she’d seen him. She handed him one of the cookies as she sat on the edge of the large, wooden desk.

Fallon leaned back in the chair and bit off the head of the gingerbread man. “Hmm. Just what I needed.”

“You can thank Reaghan. I didn’t think it was possible for her to better her recipe, but somehow, she did.”

“Or she used her magic.”

They shared a smile.

Larena finished her cookie and glanced at the papers Fallon had been poring over. She noted Vaughn’s name. The Dragon King was a solicitor for Dreagan, but he also did work for the Warriors.

“It’s the final bit of paperwork to secure the land that’s rightfully ours once and for all,” Fallon said.

She looked into his dark green eyes. “It was the right way to go. It would’ve been too much to prove you are who you are since everyone believed the MacLeod clan had been wiped out.”

“Vaughn was correct, but it doesna make things any easier. This land was my birthright. I should be happy that it’s ours now. And I am.”

“But?” she pressed.

He sighed as he shrugged a shoulder. “People like us doona get peace for long, sweetheart.”

“Ah. You’re referring to the Skye Druids.” She leaned back on her hands and looked around at the framed photos of MacLeod Castle through the four hundred years they had lived here.

“You’re right. People like us don’t get normal lives. We were

chosen for these roles. We've succeeded multiple times in the past, and we will continue to do so."

Fallon studied her for a long moment. "What did I ever do to deserve you?"

"You're just lucky, is all," she said with a grin.

"Aye," he replied seriously.

She frowned as she sat up. "You're worried."

"I'm always worried. Everything we have here is fragile. We lived apart from the rest of the world for hundreds of years. The magic Isla used to hide the castle kept the Druids from aging, as long as they stayed in it. Thanks to our friendship with the Dragon Kings, they can now leave the castle without fear of aging. We were the only ones who didn't have to worry about that since you're a Warrior."

Larena grimaced as she recalled those difficult years when none of the Druids had left the castle grounds. "But that's behind us now. You can't think about the problems that will come next because there will always be something."

"It's my duty to try and foresee any issues and be prepared."

"You're a Warrior, handsome," she said as she slipped from the desk and straddled his lap. "Not a god. You can only do so much. Besides, you do too much now."

"*We* do," he corrected.

She winked at him. "We can never prepare for everything, but we're strong. We have friends who have come to our aid, and we have gone to theirs. That's how we keep prevailing against those trying to shift the balance in their favor. We're not in this alone."

"Did anyone ever tell you how wise you are?" he asked with a grin.

Larena shot him a flirty smile. "There is this one guy. Handsome as sin, he is."

"Is that right?" Fallon asked with narrowed eyes.

She nodded. "Oh, yes. He's an amazing lover, too."

“I doona think I like this man.”

“I could introduce you. Maybe you could learn a thing or two from him.”

“Minx,” he said as he yanked her against him and kissed her.

Larena sighed into the kiss, sliding her fingers into the cool strands of his dark hair. When Fallon ended the kiss, she jumped up and tugged on his hand. “You need a break.”

“I still have work to do.”

“It’ll be there later. For now, you’re mine.”



Fallon followed behind his wife, feeling the dregs of the day falling away. Larena somehow always knew what he needed. She had her straight, golden blond hair in a loose braid today, and her smoky blue eyes seemed to grin at him as she looked over her shoulder.

She might be the only female Warrior, but Larena was so much more to him. Lover, friend, confidante, and partner. There wasn’t anything about their lives they didn’t share. She understood him as few could. She didn’t demand that he change. Instead, she stood beside him and helped him shoulder whatever he carried.

He knew exactly how it would feel without her. Because he had lost her for a short time. She had been shot by those fighting the Warriors, and not by just any bullets. The X90 bullets were special. They contained wyrran blood—animals created by Deirdre to fight for her. Only the Druids, with their healing power, had been able to bring Larena back from the brink of death.

But when he’d thought she was lost to him, Fallon had discovered what his life would be like without her. The stark emptiness was even more damning than what he had experienced after the god had been released and inhabited him and his brothers. He’d only *thought* he knew pain and

loneliness. He hadn't really known, not until he believed Larena was lost to him.

Yet she had been brought back by the Druids. And he was grateful for every day he had with her. Warriors were virtually immortal, but that didn't mean they couldn't be killed. They weren't invincible. It was why he worried constantly about new enemies that may arise. Because his wife was right—they were the kind of people who fought against evil attempting to tip the balance to their side.

He let those thoughts drift away as Larena pulled him outside. The snow fell steadily and soon stuck to her hair and eyelashes as she released his hand and twirled around, laughing. Somehow, despite everything she had endured, Larena found a way to live each moment, whatever it might be, fully.

She reminded Fallon to embrace life and that not everything was doom and gloom. Because he knew he could sink deep into such thoughts. Whenever he did, she was always there to bring him into the light and shower him with love. He was the man he was now because of her.

He turned to look back at the castle. Just then, a snowball hit him square in the face. He blew the snow away and looked at Larena, who stood laughing. He wiped the rest of the snow from him. "Oh, you'll pay for that."

"Only if you catch me," she said as she turned and took off.

He raced after her, their gods giving them enhanced senses and the ability to run much faster than a human. She ran through the snow, zigzagging left and right to keep him guessing. But he was gaining on her.

As he ran, he scooped up handfuls of snow and packed a ball tightly. When it was big enough, he tossed it at her. It landed on her shoulder, showering her with snow. Her laughter trailed after her as she continued to run. Fallon's smile was huge as he pumped his legs faster, gaining ground. Just as he was about to catch her, she veered to the left. He skidded as he turned and hurried after her once more.

“I thought you were faster than that,” she taunted over her shoulder.

Fallon felt the god within him thrill when he called for more speed. Then, he had her. He looped an arm around her waist and yanked her against him as he turned and dropped them into a thick pile of snow, rolling until he was on top of her.

“I always catch you,” he told her, breathing heavily.

In a blink, she had him on his back, her legs straddling him. “Maybe I *let* you catch me.”

“Oh, I know you better than that.” He pulled her down for a kiss. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

He caressed her face. “For knowing when I need a break. For giving me reasons to smile and laugh. And love.”

“My pleasure.”

“You’re getting wet.”

“So are you. I guess that means we should get out of these clothes,” she said with a knowing look.

Fallon grabbed her hips and rocked her against his erection. “I do like the way you think.”

“The bed? Or the bath?”

“Why no’ both?”

They jumped up together and strolled, hand in hand, toward the side of the castle. Then, they used their powers and jumped to the battlement wall so they could climb the cold stones to the window of their room.

They came together in a flurry of kisses and hands, each trying to get the other’s clothes off first. Larena laughed breathlessly as she gazed up at him. “I love you.”

“And I love you,” he said as he backed her toward the bathroom that housed their large tub, big enough for two.

Larena started the water and returned for another kiss. One item at a time, they divested each other of their remaining

clothing before they got into the tub of steaming water.

GINGERBREAD RECIPE



COOK TIME:

Prep: 1 hour 45 min

Cook: 8 min

Total: 1 hour 53 min

SERVING SIZE:

3 – 4 dozen

INGREDIENTS:

Gingerbread:

- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup unsalted butter
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup brown sugar, packed
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup molasses or syrup
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons cinnamon
- 2 teaspoons ground ginger
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon allspice
- 1 egg
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon baking soda
- 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups all-purpose flour

Frosting:

- 2 cups powdered sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla

- 4 tablespoons milk

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. In a medium saucepan, melt butter over medium-low heat.
2. Add brown sugar, molasses/syrup, salt, cinnamon, ground ginger, and allspice. Stir mixture together until well incorporated. Remove from heat.
3. Transfer mixture to a medium to large mixing bowl and add the egg and beat it in with the mixture.
4. In a separate bowl, add baking powder, soda, and flour and whisk together.
5. Add flour to the molasses mixture and stir together with a wooden spoon.
6. Divide dough into two equal halves. Over a sheet of plastic wrap, shape dough into a thick large rectangle and wrap each tightly. Refrigerate for at least one hour.
7. Preheat oven to 350°F. Line cookie sheets with parchment paper and set aside.
8. On a floured surface, roll dough into ¼-inch-thick rectangle with a floured rolling pin.*
9. Cut out shapes with gingerbread man cookie cutter or cookie cutter of choice. Place at least an inch apart on cookie sheets.
10. Bake for 8-9 minutes or until edges are browned. Let cool on cookie sheets for a few minutes and then transfer to cooling racks.
11. Once completely cooled, frost cookies or sprinkle with powdered sugar.
12. Store in airtight containers at room temperature or in freezer.

NOTES:

If flour seems sticky upon taking it out of the refrigerator, continue to sprinkle flour over dough and work it in with your hands until the consistency is improved and you are able to roll it out easier.

QUINN AND MARCAIL



Quinn didn't need to search the castle long to find Marcail. His wife was in one of the spare bedchambers upstairs, sitting on the floor, a thick pillow beneath her bum. An assortment of wrapping paper, colored ribbon, scissors, tape, and gift tags were all within easy reach. He grinned as he watched her tie an intricate bow. After she'd lifted the box and looked at it from all angles, she set it aside. Then she shot him a grin over her shoulder.

"Come to help?" she asked.

He chuckled as he carefully stepped over the rolls of wrapping paper. "I know better."

It was her turn to laugh. "That's right. This is my thing."

It wasn't that Marcail didn't love decorating for the holidays, but she had a passion for wrapping. Stacks of different-sized and shaped boxes grouped by color rested in locations around the empty chamber. She spent hours at a time in the chamber, working on each box, wrapping it to perfection before tying it off with incredible bows.

Most of the couples handed the wrapping duties over to Marcail. While Tara and Aisley liked to do their own, all the men brought their gifts to his wife to wrap. Everyone, that was, except for him. He'd learned his lesson after getting Marcail to wrap her own gifts one year. He hadn't made that mistake again. Instead, he set about learning how to wrap as beautifully as she did.

Well, it wasn't as nice, but it was close.

He'd do anything to keep her happy and learning how to wrap was nothing. Now, he leaned a shoulder against the wall and studied the sets of gifts. Each year, he tried to determine which color paper belonged to which couple. Marvail didn't just love wrapping, she adored shopping for the paper, too. The girls usually spent an entire day finding just the right paper and ribbon to match their decorations.

"You'll never guess this year," she said with a grin.

Quinn had never gotten them all right. It wasn't easy since each couple switched colors every year. Never in his wildest dreams would he have thought to have two rooms in the castle devoted to nothing but storage for Christmas. There were twenty trees—because the castle always had more than one, and there were extras for anyone who wanted to use one. Then there were the boxes of ornaments and decorations—organized by color, of course.

And who did all of that? His beautiful wife.

It was up to each couple to decide on the tree and color before telling Marvail so she could make sure everyone had what they needed to decorate. Every year, the girls came back from one of their many shopping trips with more decorations, and, of course, tote boxes to organize everything.

Marvail looked up from cutting paper. "What are you grinning about?"

"I'm wondering how long it'll be before the holiday decorations need a third room."

Her smile widened. "Sooner than you might think."

"All right," he said and rubbed his hands together. "Let's get to this."

His eyes scanned the presents. They weren't huge piles. Instead, each couple only had a handful of gifts each. He counted fourteen groups, which meant Marvail had wrapped some for everyone. By the stacks of boxes beside her, she still had a few to go. He didn't know how she kept up with whose was whose, but she always did—all without looking inside. He wouldn't be able to keep from peeking. Which was one reason

he wasn't allowed in the room with her for long. He only had so much fortitude before he caved and reached for an unwrapped box.

"Do I need to kick you out now?" Marvail asked without looking at him. "You're eyeing the unwrapped boxes already."

Ah, his beautiful wife knew him too well. He grinned at her. "I'm in complete control."

"Right." She laughed.

He couldn't even argue with her because she was right. And she knew it. Then again, Marvail was usually always right. She shot him a side-eye, which made him return his attention to the wrapped bundles.

First up, a set with each package wrapped in a different green plaid. She'd used white, black, and different shades of green ribbon. The gift tags were a green so dark they almost looked black.

Then came the blue. The paper was solid, matte navy with gold velvet ribbons and matching gold gift tags.

There was a rustic white and linen-colored set. The wrapping was either brown kraft paper or white with natural designs, along with linen and white-colored ribbons to match. The tags were natural-colored.

Next was the soft gray and pale pink collection. There was narrow gray-and-white-striped paper, all white, white with gray ornaments, pink, and pink with gold snowflakes. Marvail varied the ribbon combination on the packages and added pink name tags.

Finally, he came to the red—historically his favorite. She'd mixed the bold red and black buffalo check with cream paper that had a pearlescent finish. The plaid had been paired with cream velvet, while she'd used black ribbon edged with red glitter with the cream. The gift tags were black with red lettering.

That brought him to the burgundy and gold. It was a muted burgundy, the paper looking as if it had been scraped. Marvail

used gold or burgundy velvet ribbon edged with metallic gold. The name tags were gold.

His gaze landed on the packages wrapped in a deep, metallic teal. Each had a dried orange slice tied with a copper-colored ribbon. Tucked against the orange were sticks of cinnamon and sprigs of rosemary. The gift tags were copper.

Then came the metallics—lustrous bronze, silver, gold, and copper paper. Matching ribbons of different widths—and name cards—were alternated to create a stunning vision.

When he saw the next packages, he decided to change his favorite for the year. Some boxes were wrapped in matte black paper with red ribbon, while others had a small-check black and red plaid with either black or red ribbon. The gift tags were a metallic red.

Next up was the white and silver group. From metallic silver to white paper and several combinations of both, they drew the eye. White and silver ribbons and matching gift tags completed the assortment.

His gaze shifted to the next pile of gifts in rose gold paper with different holiday designs. All were finished with elaborate gold, white, and rose gold ribbons and white gift tags.

The next group consisted of shimmery lavender and matte white paper. The presents were finished with either glittering lavender ribbon or white tulle and had lavender gift tags.

A unique green and gold combination was next. The greens ranged from sage to hunter, and every paper had a design in gold. The boxes were completed with velvet, shimmery, or glittery gold ribbon and green gift tags.

Last was an icy blue, silver, and white paper set. The ribbons were a metallic silver, glittery pale blue, and navy with icy blue tags.

“Well?” Marvail said as she got to her feet and faced him.

Quinn pointed to the matte black and red set. “That’s ours.”

“Oh?” she asked, giving nothing away.

He nodded, feeling surer by the second. “My skin changes to black when I release the god inside me, and you know how I love red.”

“I’ve not used black before. Why would I now?”

His grin widened. “Because I know you.”



Marcail couldn’t hold back her smile. “It seems you do.”

“I like the combination. Great choice.”

She beamed because she loved when he got excited about such things. “Care to try the rest?”

“The royal blue and gold are for Fallon and Larena.”

“Two in a row. Good start.”

His sly smile told her he planned to get it all this year. “The metallics are for Lucan and Cara.”

Her brows shot up on her forehead. “Three in a row.”

“The rose gold is for Ramsey and Tara.”

“Keep going,” she urged.

Quinn pumped his fist in the air before looking over the remaining ten groups. “The green plaid, I think that’s for...” he said, dragging out the *r*, “hm. Maybe...Camdyn and—no, no’ Camdyn. I say Ian and Danielle.”

“You nearly bungled that one. Yes, it’s for Ian and Dani.”

“My best is nine in a row. I’m going to beat it this year,” he told her.

Marcail smiled. It was a silly game they played, but it was theirs, and she cherished every second.

“The rustic white and brown is for Galen and Reagan. The gray, pink, and white is for Laura and Charon, and the red and black plaid is for Broc and Sonya.”

“Correct on all three.”

“One more to tie my record,” Quinn said to himself as he rubbed his hands together. He cleared his throat and said, “The burgundy and gold belongs to Phelan and Aisley.”

“Well done,” Marcail complimented.

He winked at her. “The teal is...” He paused, tapping his fingers on his chin. “Give me a second.”

Marcail watched him, silently saying the names in her head and hoping he got them right.

His pale green gaze slid to her. A lock of his light brown hair fell into his eyes, but he didn’t seem to notice. “The teal is for Isla and Hayden.”

She didn’t answer right away, because what was the point of the game if she couldn’t have any fun?

“You’re killing me, lass. Did I get it right?”

Marcail finally caved and nodded.

“Yes!” he bellowed and pumped both fists. “Four more to go.”

“If you get them all this year, it will make it harder for next year.”

He shot her a perturbed look. “Doona distract me, woman.”

That only made her smile. As he considered the last four, her mind turned to their son, Aiden, and his wife, Britt.

Thankfully, Quinn didn’t leave her to her thoughts for long.

“The white and silver is for Ar—I mean Logan and Gwynn.” His gaze searched hers. “Am I correct? Tell me I’m right.”

“You are.”

Quinn’s smile was blinding. “That means the lavender is for Camdyn and Saffron.”

“It is.”

“Two to go,” he murmured, concentrating on the last two sets.

“The ice blue is Malcolm and Evie’s, and the sage green is for Arran and Ronnie.”

She blinked, shocked that he had finally gotten them all right after all these years. “I can’t believe it.”

Quinn walked to her and wrapped his arms around her, lifting her so he could turn her in a circle. “I knew I’d get it one day.” He kissed her and then gently set her on her feet. “Now, tell me what’s wrong.”

She was so taken aback by the subject change that it took her a moment to realize what he’d said. “What?”

“I spoke with Sonya downstairs. She said you’ve been distracted. It’s about Aiden, is it no’?”

Marcail should’ve known she couldn’t hide it from him. “Aye. I hate that they won’t be here for the solstice, Christmas, or Boxing Day. We’ve always had at least one winter holiday with them.”

“Ah, love,” he said and brought her against his chest. “It’s only one year. We see them all the time.”

“But it’s the holidays,” she argued.

Quinn kissed her on top of her head. “They’ll be here for New Year’s. They deserve to have time to themselves.”

“I agree. Just not when families are supposed to be together.”

He rubbed his hands up and down her back. “We’ve always done our best to give them space. Our son’s upbringing was different because he wasna a Warrior. He’s a Druid, but we can no’ keep him here.”

“I know.” He wasn’t saying anything that Marcail hadn’t told herself a hundred times. But she missed her son and daughter-in-law. It didn’t seem right that they weren’t here.

Quinn leaned away to look at her. “Do you remember what it was like for you, no’ being able to leave the castle lands?”

“Aye. I hated it.”

“Which is why we’re no’ going to do the same to Aiden and Britt.” He pulled her against him once more. “Doona think I’m no’ missing them because I am. I’m just trying hard no’ to let it show.”

That made her smile. “I know you are. Thank you.”

“I did warn them that they would have to make it up to us when they got back.”

Marcail was the one to lean back this time. “A party?” she asked excitedly.

“Ah, my love. The biggest one you want to have.”

“Can we invite the Dragon Kings? What about Rhona and Balladyn? Oh, and the rest of the Reapers?”

He laughed and smiled as he rubbed his nose against hers.

“Anyone you want.”

“I have so much planning to do,” she said as she glanced at the rest of the presents she had to wrap.

Quinn held her when she tried to move away. “Nay, lass. No’ quite yet,” he said in that husky voice she knew so well.

Her stomach quivered in excitement as she met his lips for a kiss.

NON-ALCOHOLIC MULLED WINE



COOK TIME:

Prep: 5 min

Cook: 30 min

Total: 35 min

SERVING:

8 cups

EQUIPMENT:

Fine mesh sieve

Ladle

Citrus juicer

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 large oranges, divided
- 64 oz cran-grape juice
- 6 whole cinnamon sticks
- 4 whole star anise
- 8 whole cloves

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Slice one orange into thin wheels and juice the second orange.

2. Place orange slices, juice, cinnamon sticks, cloves, and star anise in a large saucepan or Dutch oven. Bring just to a boil, reduce heat and simmer for at least 20 – 30 minutes (see notes below), stirring occasionally.
3. Strain juice through mesh sieve. Return juice to pan and stir in reserved orange juice. Serve warm and garnish with additional orange slices and whole spices, if desired.

NOTES:

- No cran-grape juice? Use half a bottle of grape juice and half a bottle of cranberry juice instead. Or just grape juice.
- Make this recipe up to 3 days ahead of time. It can be frozen for up to 2 months.
- The 30-minute simmer time is a starting point. The longer the juice simmers with the spices, the more flavorful the drink will be.
- Can also be made in a slow cooker. Mull ingredients in slow cooker for at least two hours.

HAYDEN AND ISLA



Isla finished knitting the blanket and held it up to look it over. She was happy with the outcome. Most especially that she'd decided on an ombre pattern. The off-white to cream to beige to brown was really eye-catching. But her favorite thing about it was the cabled wave pattern.

She set aside the blanket and put away the yarn and her needles. Isla glanced out the window of her home perched near the cliffs and sighed at the beauty.

"It never gets old, does it?" Hayden said as he walked up behind her.

She didn't need to ask to know that he referred to the spectacular view of the sea. "Never."

"The snowfall is going to get worse as the day goes on. Should make for a beautiful solstice tomorrow."

Isla leaned back against her husband as he wrapped his arms around her. This was her favorite time of year. It didn't matter the kind of weather they had, it was always magical. "It's stunning, but I think this year will be special."

"Oh?" he asked, his chest rumbling with his deep voice. "Why is that?"

"Just a feeling."

There was a slight pause, then he asked, "Have the Ancients spoken to you?"

"No." Unfortunately, she hadn't heard the Ancients since they'd been cut off the last time she and the other Druids had

heard them. She would've thought she'd dreamed the entire thing if other Druids hadn't heard them, too. "I know they're picky about who they speak to and when, but this is concerning."

"They're the Ancients. I doona think you need to worry."

Isla hoped that he was right. She turned in his arms and gazed into his black eyes. He had his blond hair pulled back in a queue at the base of his neck, the top still damp from being out in the snow. "What's going on at the castle?"

"The usual," he said with a smile. "Utter chaos. I saw Lucan shut the door to the conservatory, which means that nobody will see him and Cara for several hours."

Isla laughed. "They do love that room."

"Larena managed to get Fallon out of his office. I heard Quinn shout for joy, so I think he might have guessed everyone's colors this year."

"It's taken him long enough," she replied with a chuckle.

"There are fourteen couples."

She bit her lip. "But sixteen Warriors."

There was a pause before he said, "Dale?"

Isla heard the reproach in his voice and hid her wince. "He is one of you."

"He worked with Jason. Against us. That can no' easily be forgotten."

"No one is saying it has to be. But in the end, Dale prevailed. He got control of his god. He made a life for himself. He and Rennie."

"She bound his god."

"But he is still one of us. If we needed him, his god could be unbound."

Hayden sighed, his wide lips flattening into a firm line. "How long have you been planning to bring up Dale?"

"A wee bit."

“Why did you no’ tell me?”

She gave him a pointed look. “Do you hear the way you’re talking? That’s why.”

Hayden released her and stepped back before running a hand down his face.

“It’s been years since everything happened with our enemies. We’ve made a life. Dale was left alone, but he found his way,” Isla pressed.

“I admit to being surprised by that. You’re no’ the only one who’s kept up with him. We thought we’d have to hunt him down and—”

“And kill him,” Isla finished grimly. She twisted her lips. “It could’ve gone that route. He could’ve succumbed to his god and lost complete control, but he didn’t.”

Hayden grunted. “I’m thankful for that. I didna relish the idea of taking his life. But I would’ve done it if it meant saving others.”

“I know. I would have, too.” She went to him and took his hands in hers. “Isn’t it time to let go of the past? Move forward? Dale and Rennie have never come to us or asked for anything. I’m not saying we should give them a room in the castle, but I’d like to invite them over for the solstice. Maybe they can come to dinner on Boxing Day next year if it goes well.”

Hayden regarded her with his black eyes. “You know they may refuse.”

“As is their right. But we need to reach out to them. You remember what it was like when you were alone, don’t you? Before you found other Warriors?”

“It was bloody hell,” he murmured.

She nodded. “It was.”

“Shite. Now, I feel bad for no’ thinking of this sooner.”

Hope sprang up in her heart. “Does that mean you’ll invite him?”

“It means I’ll talk to the others about it. Fallon, Lucan, and Quinn keep saying the castle is our home, but it’s theirs, first and foremost. I wouldna invite someone they didna want there. Same with the other Warriors.”

“I understand.”

She ran her hands over his muscular chest as she rose on tiptoe to kiss him. “Thank you.”

“Doona thank me yet. Nothing may come of this.”

“You listened to me, though.”

“Och,” he said with a frown. “I always listen. I may no’ like what you say, but I listen.”

She grinned and pulled his head down for another kiss.



Hayden held Isla’s petite form tightly against him. Her straight, black hair hung down her back, brushing against the backs of his hands. When he straightened and looked into her ice blue eyes, he fought the urge to shield her from anything and everything bad in the world—though his wife needed no one to protect her. She was one of the most powerful Druids on Earth and could take care of herself.

But he was a protector. So, that’s what he did. Isla had a good heart, and he didn’t want her getting hurt. While he understood her reasoning about Dale, he was hesitant simply because he didn’t want Dale to refuse them—which was a real possibility. The Warriors at the castle had turned their backs on Dale. They had thought him dead at first, but when they’d learned that he wasn’t, they had been prepared to end his life if need be. They had fought too long and hard to have someone come after them again.

Hayden was soaked in the blood of his enemies, and nothing ever washed that away. The only thing that even came close was Isla’s love. She had given it unconditionally from the start, even when he fought against his desire for her—fool that he was. But love had conquered his anger and hate.

Deirdre, one of their former enemies, had controlled Isla. It was likely why she sought to include Dale now. She knew what it was like to be on the wrong side of things. For many years, Hayden had woken up in a cold sweat when he thought about what could've happened to Isla had any other Warrior but him found her. They would've killed her.

Hayden had meant to take her life, but the way she'd looked at him had stopped him. That same look told him how much inviting Dale and Rennie to the castle meant to her now. Despite the centuries of terror and pain that Deirdre had inflicted upon Isla, forcing her to do unspeakable things, Isla had found her way.

Just as Dale had.

Hayden smoothed a lock of Isla's midnight hair from her face. "You're something verra special."

"Because I'm yours," she replied.

"And I'm yours."

Isla smiled at him, giving him a look so filled with love that his heart skipped a beat. Suddenly, he was irritated that everyone had agreed to spend an extra night at the castle. He would prefer to carry his wife into their room and have his way with her for the rest of the day and into the night. But they could disappear to their chambers once they finished with dinner later. "Shall we go to the castle now?"

"Let me box up the blanket first."

"Is that your present this year?"

She beamed. "It is. It came out better than I'd hoped. I had no idea I'd love knitting so much. I'm thinking of making you a sweater next."

"I like the sound of that." He watched her lift the blanket and fold it neatly before putting it in a box and placing the lid on top.

For many years, everyone at the castle had bought gifts for each other and exchanged them during Boxing Day dinner. Several decades ago, they'd changed things up, and had

everyone draw a name. The only caveat was that the gift had to be handmade by the person giving it.

Which made for some really fun—and sometimes funny—and interesting gifts.

“You drew Camdyn’s name, aye?”

“I did. Have you made your present for Broc yet?”

Hayden thought about the dagger he’d forged the day before.

“I need to finish the hilt.”

“Check the boxes I have in the spare closet. I should have one that will fit. And don’t forget to use the tissue paper this time. Pad it so the dagger doesn’t move around.”

He bit back his grin. “I’ll be sure to do that.”

She straightened and shot him a flat look. “You’ve seen the stacks of tissue paper I have. There’s plenty. Stuff it. Tight.”

“I will,” he replied firmly. “Trust me. I learned my lesson last year.”

Isla put on her boots and then her coat. Hayden grabbed the box and met her at the door. They made their way to the car. Normally, they walked to the castle. It was a bit of a hike, but they enjoyed the stroll. Not so in this weather, however. The cold didn’t bother him, and Isla promised it didn’t bother her either, but each time he gave in, her lips were nearly blue by the time they arrived. He wasn’t giving her that option today.

The ride to the castle took only a few minutes. They parked next to the other vehicles and got out. The sound of Christmas music could be heard, even outside. Isla met Hayden’s gaze as they both laughed. The castle was always chaotic. It couldn’t be anything less with so many couples, but it was always more so during the holidays.

Hayden hurried to the door, holding her so she didn’t slip on the ice. Once inside, they hung up their coats. Isla took the box from him and made her way upstairs to give it to Marvail, who was obsessed with wrapping. Hayden had to admit that he always looked forward to seeing what she created. However,

some of the presents were so pretty he didn't want to open them.

He didn't care what decorations they put up, but Isla liked his input, so he made sure he always gave her his opinion. This year, he had selected the copper, alongside Isla's choice of teal, which he had to admit, looked amazing on their flocked tree. From now on, he would do more than nod to Isla when she threw out colors.

Hayden's eyes followed Isla up the stairs, lingering on the sway of her hips encased in the pants that molded to her beautiful body. He loved her in those jeans, and he knew she had worn them with the charcoal gray jumper for that reason. Only when she was out of sight did he look around. The great hall was aglow with all the Christmas lights.

Garland hung over every door and window—and everywhere else the girls could find a place for it. The twenty-four-foot tree stood off to the side, drenched in neutral colors, pinecones, popcorn, cranberries, and dried fruit strung together. The girls had called it *cottagecore*. He thought it looked like they'd decorated by taking a trip into the woods. Regardless, he quite liked the outcome.

Hayden spotted Galen exiting the kitchen with the largest cookie Hayden had ever seen. He called out to his friend. Galen nodded as he chewed and made his way over.

"Made just for me," Galen said around a crumbly mouthful.

Hayden chuckled. "It's to keep you out of the kitchen for a wee bit."

"I know," he replied with a grin. "That's why I like it."

"I need to talk to you about something." Hayden explained about Dale while Galen ate.

Galen shrugged when he finished. "I think it's a good idea to invite him. Want me to help you talk to the others?"

"Aye. That'll make things go faster. Thanks."

Hayden slapped him on the back and smiled as they headed in different directions. By the time Isla returned, he'd already

spoken to Ian and Broc. When Hayden saw her, he walked to Isla. “Galen, Ian, and Broc are good with Dale coming. Galen is helping me query everyone.”

“Really?” she asked, her eyes lighting up.

Hayden wrapped an arm around her shoulders and led her to the kitchen. “That’s only three of us.”

“Four, including you.”

“Five. You’re forgetting yourself. It isn’t just the Warriors who need to agree to this. It’s everyone.”

She beamed up at him. “You’re pretty wonderful.”

“I know,” he said with a wink.

In the kitchen, he snagged a mini-tart that sat cooling on the island and bit into it. He groaned at the amazing taste of the roast beef and Gruyère. Isla wiped some of the crumbs from his lips. He tipped his chin up at the wine fridge, and Isla nodded with a grin. They loved to sit before the hearth in the great hall after it had been decorated, and they hadn’t had a chance to do that yet.

She got a bottle of wine as she spoke to Reaghan, Saffron, and Larena, who had done the baking for the day. Hayden chuckled as he watched the trio toss flour at each other. Isla ducked out of the way just in time. She got two glasses as he piled tarts on a plate and slipped out of the kitchen before they caught him.

By the time Isla joined him, he was situated in one of the two chairs. Hayden handed Isla a tart and opened the wine. After it had been poured, they clinked their glasses together.

“To family,” he said.

Isla smiled, her eyes tearing up. “To family.”

No matter what, he would convince everyone to invite Dale. And if he had to go to Dale himself, he would make damn sure the Warrior was at the solstice. Because that’s what his wife wanted.

“I love you,” she said.

He leaned over and kissed her. “I love you.”

They settled back in the chairs with nothing but the lights from the tree, garland, and the blaze in the hearth lighting the room. With the music blaring, he took stock of his family and felt gratitude and love fill him.

Isla slid her hand into his and smiled. Hayden grabbed another tart. It would be a great holiday.

ROAST BEEF AND GRUYÈRE MINI-TARTS



SERVINGS:

12 servings

INGREDIENTS:

- 12 prepared mini-tart shells
- About 7 oz of thinly sliced roast beef
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 1 shallot, diced
- 1 cup shiitake mushrooms, thinly sliced
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme, chopped
- ¼ cup cream cheese, room temperature
- 1 egg, room temperature
- 1 tablespoon horseradish
- 1 cup Gruyère cheese, grated
- Salt and pepper to taste

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Preheat oven to 375°F. Remove mini-tart shells from freezer and place on a parchment-lined baking sheet. Place a small mound of the sliced roast beef into each cup.
2. Heat a medium skillet over medium-high heat. Melt butter, then add shallots and mushrooms. Add thyme, salt, and pepper and then sauté until browned. Remove from heat. Spoon mushrooms onto roast beef.

3. Place cream cheese and egg into a small bowl and whisk until smooth. Season with a pinch of salt and pepper. Spoon into tart shells, allowing the mixture to settle into them.
4. Sprinkle each cup with some grated cheese before transferring to the oven to bake for 20 minutes. Cool for 5 minutes before serving.

GALEN AND REAGHAN



Reaghan smiled when she felt familiar arms wrap around her. Galen nuzzled her neck, making her smile.

“You smell like cookies,” he murmured.

She couldn’t help but laugh. No matter how much Galen ate, he was always hungry. “That’s your stomach talking.”

He slowly ran his lips up to her hairline at the back of her neck. “Mmm. I disagree.”

“I’m covered in flour,” she warned.

His chest rumbled as he chuckled. “When has that ever bothered me?”

Reaghan turned to face him, his deep blue eyes locked on her. She tucked a strand of dark blond hair that had fallen into his face behind his ear. “I need to clean up.”

“Where are the others?”

“They were here early this morning, well before me. So, I told them I’d clean.”

Galen gave her a quick kiss on the lips. “I’ll help.”

Reaghan walked to the sink as Galen began putting away all the treats they’d baked. She glanced at him just in time to see him pop a cookie into his mouth. “Try not to eat everything.”

He just winked at her in response. “Hayden and Isla want to invite Dale to the solstice.”

“Dale? Really?” Reaghan asked in surprise.

“You doona agree?”

“It’s not that,” she told him as she scrubbed a pan. “I just hadn’t thought about him in a long time. Which, now that I say it, sounds horrible.”

Galen set aside a container of cookies and reached for an empty tin. “It isna, babe. And I doubt you’re the only one.”

She paused and looked at her husband. “Have you thought about him?”

“Aye. On occasion.”

“You never said anything.”

He glanced up and shrugged. “What’s there to say? He fought against us. He chose his side.”

“Some might say that he didn’t really have a choice.”

“Some,” Galen said in a soft voice.

Reaghan stopped washing and turned toward him. He blew out a breath and lifted his gaze to her. “Tell me,” she urged when she saw him struggling.

Galen shrugged. “If things had gone differently for him, he could’ve joined us. If things had gone differently for me or any Warrior here, we could’ve ended up in his shoes.”

“You can’t think like that. Everything happened the way it was supposed to.”

“Maybe. Yet, it was Isla who brought this up to Hayden. It should’ve been one of us.”

Reaghan shook her head. “It doesn’t matter who thought about it. What matters is that we’re talking about it now.”

“I know.” Galen went back to packing the food.

Reaghan returned to her washing, but she couldn’t stop thinking about Dale. Had they been wrong not to reach out years ago? He’d been their enemy but he wasn’t now. At least, she hoped not. There were plenty of *droughs* around who could step into the shoes of ones like Deirdre, Declan, and Jason, those who had endeavored to control the Warriors for

power. Who was to say that Dale wouldn't join forces with one of them? Especially with things happening on the Isle of Skye with the Druids.

"What do you think about Dale joining us?" Galen asked.

Reaghan rinsed a pan and set it aside to drain. "Usually, after we vanquish an enemy, they're not around for us to consider such a thing."

"Exactly. He might be a Warrior, but he fought all of us at the castle. No' just the Warriors."

"If I've learned anything throughout my life, it's that everyone deserves a second chance." She met Galen's dark blue eyes and smiled softly. "Everyone. I agree that he should be invited."

Galen grinned as he walked over and kissed her gently. "Always the voice of wisdom."

"Don't you forget it."

"Doona worry, babe. You willna let me."

Reaghan threw a handful of water on him.

"Och, lass. You doona want to get into a water-throwing war with me. Remember what happened last time?"

Oh, did she ever. It had been a decadent night of hedonism.

"You keep looking at me like that, and I willna be responsible for what happens next," he warned, his eyes darkening with need.

Reaghan heard a bout of laughter come through the kitchen door, a reminder that they weren't at home but at the castle. Regretfully, she turned back to the dishes. "Later."

"A promise I intend to make you keep."

"Without a doubt," she said, glancing over her shoulder at him.

She returned to the washing, her thoughts on the happiness that those at the castle had found throughout the years. While she knew that Galen and the other Warriors had kept tabs on

Dale, as she'd said, she hadn't thought of him in years. As long as he wasn't making trouble for anyone, she hadn't cared. She hadn't thought about what his life might be like or if he'd had trouble adjusting after Jason's defeat. She hadn't wondered if he'd had somewhere to go or anyone who could help him.

There had finally been peace for the Warriors and Druids at MacLeod Castle, and that was all she had cared about. But she should have been concerned for Dale. He had eventually found his way, but it wasn't because of any of them. They had left him to his own devices, and he could've just as easily returned to evil.

If he had, the blame could have—and *would* have—been laid at their feet. Everyone at the castle knew firsthand how difficult it was for the Warriors to remain in control of the gods within them. They, of anyone, should have lent Dale a hand. He might not have taken it, but they should've offered regardless. And the Druids should've helped.

Reaghan finished the last of the dishes and rinsed the sink before reaching for a towel, only to find that Galen was already drying. "I didn't know you were there."

"You were deep in thought."

She shrugged. "Hard not to be."



Galen tugged on an auburn curl that'd escaped Reaghan's ponytail. "I understand."

"Reading my mind without warning me isn't nice," she scolded.

After so many centuries, he had perfected his mind-reading power, but he made sure not to use it on those closest to him unless he felt it was needed. "I wanted to make sure you were all right."

"I am."

“Your thoughts say otherwise.”

She shrugged and began wiping down the counters and island. “It’s difficult not to think about what we failed to do for Dale.”

“You know we’ve always kept an eye on him. Just in case.”

“I know. Though it’s not like we talk about him. Ever.”

Galen realized that might not have been the right move. “We do.”

“You mean the Warriors?” she said, her head snapping up.

He searched her gray eyes and nodded. “Until there was a reason to talk about him, it was decided that—”

“That the women didn’t need to know,” she said over him.

Galen wrinkled his nose at how that sounded coming from her lips. “We had good intentions.”

“Men,” she said in exasperation. “How many times do we have to tell you that we’re perfectly capable of handling things? We don’t need you to shield us from everything.”

“Aye, babe, maybe no’, but we’re protectors by nature. It’s what we do.”

A wet towel hit him in the side of the head. Galen shook it off to find Reagan with her hands on her hips and fire in her eyes as she glared.

“Do. Not. Try. That,” she bit out.

But he knew he had already won. “Try what?” he asked innocently. He set aside the last pan and spread out the towel to dry before bending to retrieve the one his wife had thrown at him. He placed it next to his and faced her. “You fell in love with a Warrior. You knew what you were getting into.”

“Did I?” she retorted icily, but the light in her eyes danced. “I don’t think I did.”

He took a slow step toward her. “Should I remind you? I know just where to touch to make you melt.”

“And I know where to touch you.”

His balls tightened in anticipation. He took another step. “Aye. You do.”

Her pulse jumped wildly in her throat. Galen bit back his grin as he came within reaching distance of her. Reaghan suddenly turned and raced from the kitchen. He smiled before running after her. Her playful shriek filled the hall as she made for the stairs. Galen rushed past the others, ignoring someone calling his name as he raced after his wife.

Reaghan glanced over her shoulder at him, a smile on her beautiful lips. He jumped to the second floor, landing as she reached the top. He snatched her to him and hoisted her over one shoulder.

“Galen!” she shouted over the music and playfully hit his back. “Put me down. You cheated.”

“It isna cheating if you run from him!” Hayden shouted after them.

Galen lifted a hand of thanks to him and strode down the hall to the rooms they kept at the castle. He kicked the door shut behind them and tossed his wife onto the bed, following quickly to cover her body with his.

She reached for him and pulled his full weight atop her. “Mmm. The feel of you gets me every time.”

He gripped her hip with one hand and ground into her softness. It didn’t matter how many centuries passed, he never tired of this woman. She was part of him. His heart, his soul. His very essence. The passion between them had been unmistakable from the beginning, and it never let up.

“You’re the reason I’m the man I am,” he whispered.

She cupped his face, her eyes soft and full of love. “You were already a good man, my love. But we make a great team. Individually, we are strong. Together, however, we’re formidable.”

“Oh, aye.” He bent and placed his lips on hers, lingering. “I love you more than you’ll ever know.”

“Show me,” she said, her voice rough with need.

Galen slipped his hand under her jumper and took her mouth in a heated kiss.

SPICY POMEGRANATE MOSCOW MULE



FOR A SINGLE GLASS:

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 oz vodka (brand of choice)
- Juice from ½ a lime
- Juice from ¼ of a small grapefruit—plus slices for serving
- 1/3 cup pomegranate juice
- 1-2 jalapeño slices
- Ginger beer for topping
- Pomegranate arils and fresh mint for serving

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Fill a cocktail glass with ice.
2. Combine the vodka, lime juice, grapefruit juice, pomegranate juice, and jalapeños in a cocktail shaker.
3. Fill with ice and shake until combined - about 1 minute.
4. Strain into your prepared glass.
5. Top with ginger beer.
6. Garnish as desired.

FOR A PITCHER:

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 cup vodka (brand of choice)
- Juice of 2 limes (about ½ cup)
- Juice of a small grapefruit (about ½ cup)
- 1 1/3 cups pomegranate juice
- 1 jalapeño, sliced
- Ginger beer for topping
- Pomegranate arils and fresh mint for serving

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Combine the vodka, lime juice, grapefruit juice, pomegranate juice, and jalapeños in a large pitcher. Stir to combine.
2. Chill for 2 hours. The longer the jalapeños sit, the spicier the drink.
3. Strain out the jalapeños and discard.
4. Return the drink to the pitcher and chill until ready to serve.
5. When ready to serve, fill the pitcher with ice and top off with ginger beer. Or fill glasses with the spicy mix and top each glass with the ginger beer.

BROC AND SONYA



“Rummy,” Sonya said as she laid down her last card.

Broc grinned from across the table as Arran and Veronica looked at the cards still left in their hands. “That puts Sonya with the most points,” he said as he tallied their games.

Arran counted the cards he had left and gave the total to Broc. Then he glanced at Sonya. “You’re on a winning streak.”

“Tell me about it,” Ronnie said as she glanced at the notepad that put her dead last. She drank the last of her wine. “I think I need a refill. Anyone else?”

Broc shook his head. “I’m good, thanks.”

“Not me,” Sonya replied.

Arran got to his feet. “I’ll come with you. I want to see what’s left over from lunch.”

“No,” Ronnie said as she pushed back her chair. “You want to see if you can find more strawberry scones.”

Arran chuckled. “Yep.”

Sonya waited until the couple was gone before putting her foot atop Broc’s leg under the table. He immediately placed his hand over her bare ankle, knowing that she was cold.

“It would help if you wore socks. Or boots,” he told her.

She shrugged. “They didn’t go with the outfit.”

“Then maybe choose something else to wear.”

“Do you know me at all?” she teased.

He rolled his brown eyes and reached into his back pocket. “Oh, aye. I know you so well that I brought socks.” He dangled the fuzzy socks with Baby Yoda on them from his thumb and forefinger.

She shouldn’t have been surprised. Broc always looked out for her—just as she did him. It was nice knowing that someone was there and knew you better than you knew yourself most times. She couldn’t imagine life without him. She didn’t even want to try.

He removed the ballet flat from her foot and tugged the sock on before motioning for her to give him her other foot. Within moments, her feet and ankles were warming.

“I should’ve put some socks in my purse,” she said.

“Now that you have the socks and have boots here, how about a walk?”

She grinned and jumped up. “That sounds delightful.”

It wasn’t long before she was snuggled into her thick coat and scarf. Broc put on a coat, but he didn’t button it because the extreme weather didn’t bother the Warriors. Then, they walked together from the castle out into the snow.

“There’s going to be a thick layer for the solstice,” Broc said.

“Something about the fire reflecting off the snow is so pretty.”

He squeezed her hand and directed her toward the trees. “I have to agree.”

They walked in silence, listening to the snow fall. It wasn’t until they reached the woods that she released him and stood among the tall trees with her eyes closed. She didn’t need to be near them to hear what they said, but standing with the trees always soothed her in ways she couldn’t quite put into words.

She had heard the trees from the time she was a small child. Their whispers and greetings. Their warnings. They had saved her many times. Now, as they stood like silent sentries with the snow piling atop their branches, she felt their contentment and delight. Few knew that everything had a voice, even trees. Not everyone could hear those whispers, but a select few could.

The trees loved every season. The spring meant new growth, new life. Summer was filled with abundance. Fall came with shedding the old. And winter brought the snow. The trees loved how it tickled their bark and piled higher and higher on their branches.

When she opened her eyes, she saw that Broc watched her. A muscle in his cheek moved, making her notice his incredible jawline and his handsome face that still made her stomach flutter. His nostrils flared.

“I love watching you listening to them,” he said tenderly.

She removed a glove and took his hand to place it on a tree, then covered it with hers. “Close your eyes.”

“You know I can no’ hear them.”

“Trust me.” He did as she asked. Then softly, she said, “Listen to the silence. In it, you’ll feel them. They don’t shiver as we do. They stand tall and proud while providing shelter for others. Their limbs remain sturdy and strong, no matter how much snow and ice form. They welcome each season and the changes they bring.” She studied his face, watching as the furrow in his brow eased, and his lips curved into a slight smile. “You feel it.”

“I...do.”

“Everyone who tries can feel them. You don’t need to hear their words to sense their emotions.”

Broc’s dark eyes opened as he smiled at her. “I wish I could hear them.”

“I wish you could, too.”

“What are they saying now?”

It was her turn to grin. “They welcome us. They’re glad we’re here, walking among them when so many ignore them during the long, dark winter.”

“But no’ you.”

“There is pleasure to be found in the woods, no matter the season. Rain or shine. Hot or cold. The trees are there, waiting

to share their wonders with us.”

Broc pulled her against him. “You’re a marvel.”

“I’m just me.”

“Like I said. A marvel.”

She buried her hands beneath his coat. “So are you. The only Warrior with wings. I love watching you fly.”

“We’ve come a long way from where we were when we first met.”

“We’ve still got a long way to go.”

He kissed her forehead. “I love the sound of that.”

She rested her cheek against his chest and listened to his heartbeat. “More dangers are coming.”

“Did the trees tell you that?”

“They’ve been uneasy since the incident with the Ancients.”



Broc held Sonya a little tighter. The Ancients were Druids who had long left the mortal world. They chose who and when they spoke. If they ever spoke, they did so in riddles. While none of the Druids could call them up at will, the Ancients spoke to Isla most of all. Yet it wasn’t that long ago that every Druid at MacLeod Castle had heard the Ancients’ shouts before they suddenly went silent.

And they’d been quiet ever since.

The longer that continued, the more Broc was convinced that something was very, very wrong. The Ancients were extremely powerful entities. He wasn’t sure anyone could call them spirits since they never took form, but it seemed they were always there. He didn’t know anything that could do them harm. And it wasn’t unlike them not to answer any of the Druids. Sonya had told him repeatedly that there was nothing to worry about, but he saw the concern growing in her amber eyes.

“Do the trees know what happened that night with the Ancients?” It wasn’t the first time he’d asked the question, and he hoped that one day the trees might tell Sonya something.

She shook her head of curly red hair. “Nothing.”

“But they’re troubled?”

“That night rattled the world,” she said as she lifted her head to look at him. “It wasn’t only us who heard the Ancients. The Skye Druids did, as well. And I bet if we asked, we’d discover that every Druid did. Not to mention the plants. Animals. Everything heard and felt it.”

Broc brushed snow from her cheek. “Which isna something that’s happened before.”

“Not that we know of. The Ancients have always been around. We don’t know their reasoning for anything. We can only speculate.”

“I doona have a good feeling about it.”

“None of us does, honey. But what can we do?”

He shrugged and turned Sonya to press her against a tree. “I think we need to try something. Anything.”

“I agree. I’m just not sure what. We can’t make the Ancients talk if they don’t want to.”

“What if something happened to them?”

Her brow furrowed. “What do you mean? They’re the Ancients. What could possibly happen to them?”

“I doona know. It was just a question.” But it had obviously upset her. He decided to turn the conversation for now. Broc looked at the tree limbs overhead. “I never would’ve guessed they enjoyed winter.”

She grinned, the lines of worry easing from her face. “They provide so very much for so many. They’re incredible.”

“Do they get lonely when there isna someone like you near to hear them?”

“They talk to each other.”

He gazed down at her. “We will do our part to protect as many of them as we can.”

“That’s one of the many reasons I love you.” She beamed up at him.

Broc tugged out her glove and helped her put it on. Her nose was turning red, which meant it was time to return to the warmth of the castle. They headed toward the gigantic stone structure on the cliffs with the sea beyond. It had been their home for many years before they built their own place deep in the forest.

“There’s nothing better than being with family,” Sonya said.

He smiled as he glanced at her. “It is my favorite time of year. It might be loud and chaotic, but I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

“Hmm. Agreed. What we have here at the castle is something extraordinary. We could’ve moved on from each other and gone our separate ways, but I’m glad we didn’t.”

“We’re a family. An unconventional one, but a family all the same.”

She leaned her head against his arm as they made their way back to the castle.

Broc looked upward. The thick clouds hid the sun.

“I’m not that cold.”

He jerked his head toward Sonya. “What?”

“You want to fly,” she said with a grin. “I know that look of yours.”

Broc hesitated. “You’re already chilled.”

“I’m never too cold for that.”

He grinned and called to the god inside him as his skin turned indigo. Talons extended from his fingers, fangs filled his mouth, and wings tore through his sweater and coat.

Sonya sighed. “You could’ve removed them first.”

“What’s the fun in that?” He shed his ruined clothes and gathered her into his arms before unfurling his wings.

When he jumped into the air and started to fly, Sonya’s smile was bright. He flew them around the castle and out over the sea. When he felt a tremor go through her, he turned and made for the castle. A large bed piled with warm blankets and a fire awaited them. He felt her gaze and looked at her. They shared a smile as he landed atop the battlements. He didn’t release her as he made his way into the castle and to their room, where he intended to spend the rest of the day warming her.

CINNAMON CREAM CHEESE COOKIES



COOK TIME:

Prep: 10 min

Cook: 10 min

Total: 20 min

SERVING:

Approximately 28 cookies

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 stick unsalted butter, softened
- 4 oz cream cheese, softened
- 1 ½ cup powdered sugar
- 1 egg, room temperature
- ½ teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon vanilla bean paste or extract
- Pinch of salt
- 1 ¾ cup all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup granulated sugar
- 1 tablespoon ground cinnamon

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. In a large bowl, cream the butter and cream cheese with a hand mixer until smooth. Gradually add the powdered sugar until combined. Add egg, baking powder, vanilla, and salt. Mix to combine. Add flour

slowly until fully incorporated, scraping the sides as needed. Place in fridge for one hour to rest. Dough needs to be chilled before baking. DO NOT skip this step.

2. Preheat oven to 375°F. In a small bowl, mix the cinnamon and sugar. Set aside.
3. Roll dough into 1-inch-sized balls (about 2 teaspoons worth of dough). Roll until coated in the cinnamon-sugar mixture. Place on a parchment-lined cookie sheet (to reduce spreading) about 2 inches apart.
4. Bake for 8-9 minutes until just set. Do not overbake. It is hard to tell when these cookies are ready. They will puff up but won't get golden brown. Let cool on baking sheet for 10 minutes. Transfer cookies to a wire rack and let cool completely.

LOGAN AND GWYNN



Logan reclined naked on the bed, propped against the headboard, his arm tucked behind his head as Gwynn paced before the fire with only a blanket wrapped around her.

She glanced at him and sighed loudly. “I’ve got nothing. Nada. Not one. Single. Thing.”

“There’s still time.”

“Time?” she repeated shrilly in her Texas accent as she halted and shot him an incredulous look with her violet eyes. “I have no time, baby. I’m *out* of time.”

Logan licked his lips to keep his smile hidden. He knew better than to tease Gwynn when she was in this kind of mood. She never found it funny, and he would likely spend the next few days apologizing. It had taken him a wee bit to realize that, but he’d learned his lesson. “It’s just a gift.”

“That we’re supposed to *make* ourselves,” she muttered as she began pacing again. She shook her head of black hair. “I’m not crafty. I have no craft.”

It took everything he had not to burst out laughing. Logan bit his tongue to keep his expression passive. It was a good thing, too, because Gwynn looked at him to make sure. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood on the plush rug. Even with the remodeling they’d done on the castle, nothing could fully keep the dampness and cold out of the stones.

He crossed the bare stones to the next rug where his wife paced. Logan gently grabbed her shoulders and looked into her stunning eyes that had held him captive from the first moment

he'd seen them. "You do this every year. And you think of something every time."

"I'm out of ideas this time. Truly. Tell me again why I can't just buy something off Etsy? No one would know."

"You would."

She let out a dramatic sigh. "I hate when you're right."

Logan felt the chill on her skin and led her back to the bed. They climbed under the covers. Once she was settled against him, he said, "Take a breath, and we'll tackle this."

"Remind me why we don't buy presents for each other anymore?"

"Because it's more personal to give something we've made." What he didn't say was that the idea for these gifts had been hers and Larena's. That wouldn't make the situation better.

She sighed once more. "I'm drawing a blank."

"It isn't who it's for, it's what you're making. Try to find something you can create for an individual instead of creating something and gifting it."

"Stop being rational and logical."

This time, he didn't suppress the chuckle. "Only when you need it, darlin'. Now, you know exactly what to get Lucan."

"It was just my luck that I had to draw one of you."

Logan frowned. "I'm trying not to be offended."

"You know what I mean. It's easier to find gifts for women. But Larena just *had* to suggest that everyone's name go in the pot together." She lifted her head to look at him. "Why aren't you complaining about picking Sonya's name?"

"Because a gift is a gift."

"Yes, and it's supposed to be unique for each individual. Not just something someone slaps together and says: '*Here, open it.*'"

He'd hoped that she would reach the conclusion on her own. But as smart as his wife was, she got too lost in a problem at

times to see the solution clearly. “What business do you have, beautiful?”

She rolled her eyes and plopped her head back on his chest. “Candle making.”

“How successful is said business?”

“You know how much.”

“Tell me,” he urged.

Gwynn was silent for a moment before grumbling, “Very successful.”

“And what do you do periodically throughout the year?”

“Make new scents for the seasons or holidays.”

He grinned as he heard her voice lighten as her mind started turning with ideas. “Aye. Now, what could you make Lucan that would be singularly his?”

“His own scent,” she said as she sat up with a bright smile. “You really think he’d like that?”

Logan caressed the side of her face, taking in the ethereal beauty that was his Druid wife. “Verra much. I know I love mine.”

“You’re my husband. You’re supposed to say that,” she teased.

He pulled her down onto his chest for a slow, leisurely kiss. “You chose the scents that made you think of me. Why would I no’ love it? It came from you.”

“Keep talking like that, and we won’t make dinner.”

He settled her on top of him and grinned. “Trust me. Many will no’ be sitting down tonight.”

“Then I won’t feel bad at all.”

“Now that your crisis is over, can we focus on me?”

“You?” she asked with a laugh.

He rolled her onto her back and tickled her. “Aye, me.”

“Stop.” She squealed while laughing.

Logan gave her a few more tickles before he relented. "I'm glad you talked me into staying at the castle tonight."

"It's been some time since we all stayed in our old rooms for more than a night. Cara thought it would be nice to have everyone close before the solstice."

"Makes you think back to when we all lived in such close quarters."

"And hid out in our rooms to get some time alone," she said with a laugh.

He gave her a quick kiss. "The bickering could get out of hand at times."

"The love and the laughter."

"Aye. Family is about all of that."



Gwynn moved a lock of golden brown hair from Logan's face. His warm, hazel eyes stared down at her with such love that it made her breath catch. Loving him and being loved by him was the easiest thing she had ever done. He always knew exactly what to say to calm her when she became irrational.

"Have I told you today how much I love you?" she asked.

One side of his mouth lifted in a smile. "Actually, you have no'."

She cupped his face in her hands. "I love you, my amazing Warrior."

"And I love you, my stunning Druid."

Logan rolled to his side and brought her with him. No matter how much time she spent in Scotland, she couldn't get used to the cold. It seeped into her very bones. Thankfully, he didn't mind snuggling beneath the covers with the fire roaring. And his body heat kept her from becoming frozen.

He held her gently against him as her mind went through the scents she had that she used in her candle business. She had

created the Etsy shop as a hobby, but it had taken off to the point where she couldn't make the orders fast enough. Luckily, her friends were always ready to help. She wasn't the only one with a prosperous business, and while they all kept their profits, they also added to the castle's overall pot.

After all, the MacLeods had given everyone a home and provided safety.

It didn't take long for her to come up with a scent that was uniquely Lucan. One she really hoped he would enjoy. Now that she had her gift chosen and in mind and only had to make it, she returned her focus to her husband.

He once more had a hand tucked behind his head as he stared into the fire across the room. She kissed his muscular chest, which made him smile and glance at her.

"What are you making for Sonya?"

Logan's grin widened. "You'll have to wait and see."

"That isn't fair. Give me a hint. You have all kinds of talents, but I'm curious."

"You can no' wait a few days?"

She playfully poked at his ribs. "You know I have no patience for surprises."

"Which is why I'm no' telling you."

"Then perhaps we'll make dinner, after all."

"Oh?" he said and wiggled his fingers. "Is more tickling necessary?"

She snapped her arms to her sides. "Nope."

"Just a wee one?" he taunted.

"You're not funny."

"I'm verra funny."

She tried to tickle him, but it was no use. Logan couldn't be tickled. Not even on the bottom of his feet. She should know. She'd tried every part of his body. "Fine. You don't want to tell me the gift, then don't."

“Good.” His smile slipped then.

“What?” she pressed. “Is it about Dale?”

Logan nodded and pulled her down onto his chest once more.

“Are you against it?” she asked.

“Nay. It just got me thinking about how different my life could’ve been.”

She shook her head. “Don’t do that. It’s useless to waste that kind of time. It didn’t happen to you. You’re here. With me.” She wrapped an arm over his stomach and squeezed. “Right where you belong.”

“Exactly where I belong.”

Her thoughts remained on the Warrior outcast. “Do you think Dale will come? And what’s his wife’s name? It starts with an *R*.”

“Rennie.”

“That’s it.”

Logan wound a strand of her hair around his finger as he often did when he was thinking. “I doona know.”

“Would you, if you were in their place?”

“Good question. What would you want to do?”

“Ugh. I don’t know.” Gwynn thought about that for a moment. “Maybe I’d agree.”

Logan’s chest rose as he inhaled. “I’d accept.”

“You would? Why?”

“Being a Warrior can be lonely. The loneliest. I credit the fact that all of us had each other to lean on with us becoming as strong as we were and are. If I had remained on my own...I doona know what might have happened.”

She kissed his chest and smoothed her hand over his upper body. “You’ll never have to be alone again. I’ll be beside you. Always.”

Logan put a finger beneath her chin to tilt her head back. Then his lips claimed hers in a scorching kiss. Desire swept over them once more as their limbs tangled and need consumed them. They forgot about everything but the pleasure between them.

When Logan slid inside her, Gwynn moaned low in her throat. She wrapped her legs around his waist and began to meet his thrusts. All thoughts fell away as she succumbed to her husband's skillful hands.

JACK FROST WINTER COCKTAIL



SERVING:

Serves 4

EQUIPMENT:

Blender

INGREDIENTS:

- Light corn syrup for rimming glasses
- 1/3 cup sweetened coconut flakes for rimming glasses
- 3 – 4 cups crushed ice
- 1 cup pineapple juice
- ½ cup Blue Curaçao liqueur
- ½ cup light rum
- ½ cup cream of coconut (not coconut milk)

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Pour a thin layer of corn syrup onto a shallow plate and the coconut flakes onto a second shallow plate. Dip the rim of the cocktail glass into the syrup and then the coconut flakes. Set aside.
2. In a blender, add the ice, pineapple juice, Blue Curaçao, rum, and cream of coconut. Blend until smooth.
3. Pour the mixture into glasses and serve immediately.

IAN AND DANIELLE



“I love this green. *Stay off the lawn* is the name,” Dani said as she swiped the nail polish wand over Ian’s toenail.

Ian chuckled but didn’t look up from painting her toes. They sat facing each other on the bed, their feet in each other’s laps. “I personally like the gold I chose for you. *Enter the Golden Era.*”

“Ooh. Nice name,” she said and glanced at the toes he had already painted. “Do you think we should go down after this? I should probably help with dinner.”

“We can. I’m sure Hayden and Isla are still by the fire, and Lucan and Cara might come out of the conservatory by then,” he said with a smile. “The music has been turned down. My bet is that was Hayden’s doing.”

That usually meant that most had found their rooms. Dani used the side of her nail to wipe away some polish that got on Ian’s skin. She had made sure their day was packed with things to do so hopefully his mind wouldn’t turn to his twin—who was now a Dragon King.

The holidays were especially difficult for Ian. While he and Tristan stayed in contact with each other, their duties kept them apart. To make matters worse, Tristan still hadn’t recovered all his memories from when he had been Duncan. At least, he had some of them. That was all that mattered to her when it came to Ian.

Her husband’s head was bent, showing her the streaks of blond in his light brown hair that she loved to run her fingers

through. He changed styles often, constantly trying different looks. Now, his top was on the longer side, while the sides had been trimmed neatly. His sherry-colored eyes lifted to hers.

“I’m being careful,” he said with a smile. “Promise.”

“You have a steadier hand than I do. I’m not worried.”

He eyed her for a moment. “I hope you’re staring because I’m too handsome to ignore and no’ because you think I’m worrying about Tristan.”

“I wouldn’t dream of that.”

Ian quirked a brow. “Right. I told you yesterday that I was fine. I spoke with him earlier this week.”

“And?” she pushed when he didn’t elaborate.

He finished a nail and dropped the handle into the nail polish bottle before leaning back and looking at her. “Funny you should ask. Tristan proposed something.”

Dani drummed her fingers on his foot. “Why didn’t you say anything before?”

“We have our traditions, honey.”

“That doesn’t mean they can’t be changed or altered. He’s your twin. One you thought was dead until a few years ago.”

The fact that no one—not even the Dragon Kings—knew how Duncan had become one of them was something that no one forgot. When Duncan was found on Dreagan, the Kings hadn’t known what to do with him. He had no memory of anything—not even his name. Which was why everyone called him Tristan now.

Ian rubbed his thumb into the arch of her foot just as she liked it. “True.”

“If you don’t spit it out already, Ian Kerr, I’m going to wax your eyebrows while you sleep.”

“I’m a light sleeper. You’d never get it done.”

“Oh, you want to test that?” she threatened.

He shook his head. “I’d rather not.”

“Smart man. Now, please tell me what Tristan wanted,” she begged.

“To get together.”

“Perfect. When?”

“Christmas evening.”

She shrugged. “I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

“It willna be just us four.”

It took Dani a moment before she realized what he was saying.

“Tristan is mated with Samantha, and Sammi’s half-sister, Jane, is mated to Banan.”

“Aye. Tristan is proposing that the three couples have dinner together.”

“They’re family. Why not?”

His smile was full of relief. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

“Did you really think I wouldn’t want to go?”

“I wasna sure.”

“He’s your brother. I will never say no to us getting together. No matter what.”

Ian continued to massage her foot. “I’ve no’ spent much time with Banan or Sammi—or Jane, for that matter.”

“Then it’s a good time to start. The Kings aren’t fighting the Others anymore, and things are relatively calm for the rest of us.”

“How long will that last?”

She flicked his little toe. “Don’t ask that. Just be grateful for what we have.”

“Aye, wife,” he said with a wicked grin.

She finished the second coat of polish and reached for the bottle of topcoat. “With Dale being invited to the castle and now this, it’s going to be a special season.”

“I doona think everyone has given their consent yet about Dale,” he cautioned.

Dani waved away his words. “I don’t think there will be an issue.”



Ian watched her tuck a long strand of silvery blond hair behind her ear. Her emerald eyes were locked on his feet as she meticulously painted his toenails. He had been polishing Dani’s toenails for years. She even wanted him to choose the colors more often than not.

The first time they’d polished each other’s toes had been when they were both a tad tipsy. It had been so much fun that they did it regularly now. It was intimate and something that was theirs alone.

“Where are we going for this dinner with your brother?” she asked.

Ian applied the second coat to her toes. “Tristan suggested we come to Dreagan, but he said they could come to our home, too.”

“Let’s go there since this was his idea,” she proposed. “Next year, they can come to ours.”

“I like that. Good thinking.”

She grinned up at him. “I’m good like that.”

“More than you know.”

Dani blew him a kiss. “Is this a formal event?”

“He didna say.”

“Ian, my love, I have to know what to wear. I hate to be over or underdressed.”

He laughed, realizing his mistake as soon as she began to talk. “I’ll check with him tomorrow.”

“Maybe I should call Sammi.”

“That would probably be better. It isna like we men obsess over such things.”

She snorted loudly. “So, the fact that your closet is full of clothes makes no never mind to you?”

“Precisely,” he replied.

“You’re impossible.”

He screwed the cap on the polish and held out his hand for the topcoat. Dani tossed it to him. He quickly put it on all her toes.

“Should we bring gifts?”

Ian stilled. He hadn’t thought of that either.

“I’ll bring that up with Sammi and Jane, as well.”

He looked at his wife and smiled. “You’re the best.”

“I know. You can make it up to me with another foot massage.”

“Already coming,” he said as he set aside the bottle of topcoat. Then he had his hands on her feet again, gently massaging.

“Would you want to bring a gift?”

“You know me. I love giving gifts, but not everyone feels the same. It’s kinda short notice, so I don’t want to put any pressure on them.”

Ian frowned. “Them? What about us? That’s two gifts. Or four if we buy for each individual.”

“Oh, it’d be four,” she announced.

Of course, it would, he thought with a smile. “What if we doona say anything to them? What if we bring the gifts just in case? That way, no one gets put on the spot.”

“If I bring gifts, I’m going to want to give them.”

“Then we do. Right before we leave, so there’s no awkwardness for anyone. I doona care if I have anything, but they may feel differently. I suppose you already have ideas for gifts?”

Her grin was huge as she ran both of her thumbs upward along the arch of his foot. “Of course. It wouldn’t be much. Just some fun items. I’d see what candles Gwynn has left over from the holiday rush and pick one for both Sammi and Jane. I

know that Isla has been obsessed with knitting lately. She keeps making scarves and giving them out, so I would see if there are some of those to add to the candles.”

“That would be nice. What about the guys?”

“Well, there is the stash of weapons Hayden has been forging.”

“Can I pick them out?”

She nodded. “Absolutely.”

“Then it’s settled. We’ll get that done tomorrow.”

“And the gifts to Marvail. I’m so glad she loves to wrap because I hate everything about it.”

Ian moved his hands up her legs, shoving the sweatpants upward as he did. “It does make things easier. Our large family can be a lot to take sometimes, but I wouldna want it any other way.”

“Me, either. And it looks like our family might be getting even bigger. Before too long, we might be celebrating with all the Dragon Kings.”

“Oh, that would be a sight.”

Dani settled against the pillows and scooted farther down the bed so he could reach more of her leg. “Do you think they’d ever let us visit Zora? I’m dying to know everything about the new realm. And I confess, I’d love to see dragons flying freely.”

“It certainly isn’t something that would ever happen here. Ask Tristan when we get together.”

“I’ll do that,” she said and moved even closer to him. “Maybe do more of my legs,” she coaxed.

He glanced at her toes. “The polish is still wet.”

“Then we’ll have to repaint them,” she said with a seductive smile.

Ian crawled over her and braced his hands on either side of her head as he looked deep into her emerald eyes. “I can no’ deny you anything.”

“Then strip. Because I want to feel you deep inside me.”

He tore his clothes—and then hers—to get them free.

KETO-FRIENDLY PIZZA ROLL-UPS



INGREDIENTS:

- 12 slices of mozzarella cheese
- Pepperoni slices (regular or mini-sized)
- Italian seasoning
- Keto marinara sauce

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Preheat oven to 400°F.
2. Line a cookie sheet with parchment paper or a baking mat.
3. Lay slices of cheese on baking mat and add pepperoni. Place in the oven for 6 minutes or until cheese slices start to brown on the edges.
4. Remove from oven and allow cheese to cool slightly. Then sprinkle with Italian seasoning.
5. Roll (pin with toothpicks, if needed) and serve with your favorite dipping sauce.

CAMDYN AND SAFFRON



Saffron shouldered open the door to the room. She grinned as she spotted Camdyn reclining on the floor before the hearth where she'd left him. His black head was bent over a sketch pad as he drew. She came up beside her husband and handed him a cup of tea. When he didn't immediately reach for it, she kicked off her slippers and sank onto her knees beside him.

His head whipped to her. "Sorry, sweetheart. I didn't hear you."

"I know," she said with a smile.

He shifted on the pile of pillows so she could move more fully onto the rug. Then he set the notebook in her lap as he sipped his tea. "What do you think?"

Saffron put both hands around her mug to warm them, the heat of the fire only helping to comfort her more. She studied the elaborate landscape design on the pad that was now balanced on her legs. "I think you've outdone yourself."

"Really?" he asked, his dark eyes alit with pleasure.

"Absolutely. I think this is your best yet."

He stretched a leg toward the fire as he leaned one elbow on a pillow and looked at her. "I would never have realized how much I enjoyed this if you hadn't wanted to redesign our garden."

"Redesign?" she asked with a laugh. "We didn't have a garden. We had weeds and overgrown bushes."

"But it *was* a garden."

She shook her head at him before sipping her spiked chai tea. The bourbon she added created the perfect combination for the holidays. It hadn't taken long for others to try it and fall in love with it just like her—including her husband. "Fine. It was a garden *of sorts*. It's spectacular now."

"Aye," he said, pleased beyond measure at her words.

It helped when his power was controlling earth. That, combined with his skills at designing and then added to Cara's way with plants, and the garden truly was a work of art and a wonderful area for their daughter, Emma, to play. Saffron smiled when she thought of Emma, Bran, and Mallory spending a couple of nights at Dreagan with the Dragon Kings so the adults could celebrate Yule.

Saffron looked again at Camdyn's sketch. She had been attempting to convince him to open his own business since he enjoyed the design part of it so much, but he always reminded her that he couldn't use his power with regular people. And she kept trying to remind *him* that he didn't need to.

For him, however, that was half the fun.

"So, who is this one for?" she asked again. That was when she took a closer look at more than the garden. When she spotted the cliffs, she jerked her eyes to him. "It's for Larena."

"I heard her talking to Cara about wanting to do more on the left side of the castle."

Saffron tossed the pad at him, suddenly suspicious. "You used magic to draw her name, didn't you?"

He hesitated. "Maybe."

"Camdyn!" she cried in disbelief. "We're not supposed to do that."

"It wouldna have been fair to trade with someone."

"Neither is using magic."

He snorted loudly as he sat up. "And you've never used magic to draw someone's name?"

Saffron lifted her chin. "That was different."

“Och, lass. It’s the same and you know it.”

“It was the perfect gift for Aisley. I knew she’d love it.”

“Aye, and this is perfect for Larena.”

She rolled her eyes and stuck her still-chilled feet under his leg. “Fine. But we can’t do this going forward.”

“I make no promises,” he replied with a wink. “So, is it the normal downstairs?”

Saffron chuckled as she swallowed another sip of tea.

“Exactly. Hayden and Isla are still down there. I heard voices from the game room, though. No sign of anyone else. I’m really glad I didn’t start cooking.”

“Had you, then everyone would’ve come down for dinner.”

“Maybe. But they wouldn’t have wanted to.”

He shifted her feet tighter against him. “This is why we agreed on two nights this year. Maybe tomorrow night we’ll have the dinner we always miss.”

“With two extra settings.”

“Aye.”

She returned his stare. “Do you know if Fallon has contacted Dale yet?”

“I doona even know if Fallon has been told. I saw him and Larena climbing the outside wall of the castle to their rooms earlier.”

Saffron giggled. “What is it about all of us being back here that does that to us?”

“I think it reminds us of the bonds we formed, the victories we achieved over the *drougths*, and the love we discovered.”

That made her think of when she had first been brought to the castle. A *drough* had blinded her with his magic so he could use her seer abilities for himself. Saffron had been terrified. After years of blindness, her sight was returned thanks to the Druids at the castle. But she’d found peace and love with Camdyn.

“Doona think of the past,” he whispered.

She smiled and shook her head. “Why not? It makes me think of you.”

“It took you a long time to break free of the fear that held you.”

“I won’t ever go back to that again. You helped me see the strength in myself. I know what I survived and came out the other side stronger and more confident than before. I also know another *drough* could come at us again. We’re prepared, though.”

He gently touched her face with the backs of his knuckles.

“Aye. We are.”

It was an empty statement. Even in the years of peace, the Warriors and Druids at MacLeod Castle kept training. Because evil never rested, and it never slept. It was always there, waiting for the right moment to strike. Saffron and the other Druids had trained and worked on their battle magic to be ready.

“The past shapes us. Every decision, every action.” She set aside her tea and curled against Camdyn. “The past doesn’t scare me because I’m here now. My enemies aren’t.”



Camdyn was constantly amazed at Saffron. She had an inner strength that astounded him every time. What she had endured at the *drough*’s hands was horrendous, but it didn’t break her. He finished off the tea and placed the empty mug on the floor before sliding down on the pillows and wrapping an arm around her. She moved her long, walnut-colored hair out of the way.

His gaze locked on the orange flames dancing in the hearth. He and Saffron had ended up in this exact spot gazing at the fire so many times over the years. She claimed that he helped her see her strength, but the truth was, *she* was the one who helped him find his way.

No matter what any of the Warriors said, they had all been broken in some way. Some Warriors only found death to ease them. Camdyn had wished for that, as well at times. But that was long before he'd found his brothers at the castle—and well before Saffron.

“Now who is lost in the past?” she said without shifting her head.

Camdyn grinned. “Guilty. I think all this talk of Dale has me looking back. You're right, though. Parts of my past make me sad, but in the end, everything that happened made me the man I am.”

“Regardless of whether Dale comes here or not, I think we're all thinking of the past and everything each of us endured. We celebrated our victories, but we didn't talk about what happened.”

“It was over. There wasna a need.”

“I think that's where we went wrong. Just because something is over doesn't mean it leaves a person. How long did the nightmares of my blindness haunt me?”

He glanced down to find her tawny eyes focused on him.

“Months,” he answered.

“I only overcame it by talking them out with you. *We*,” she said, motioning her hand between them, “have talked about the past, but have you and any of the others?”

“No' in the way you mean.” He sighed and frowned. “I doona think we did it because we were afraid to discuss it. It was more us looking forward and preparing for what would come next.”

She blew out a deep breath. “Maybe, if Dale comes, it's time we all sit and talk.”

“Lass, he was the enemy.”

“*Was* being the operative word,” she pointed out.

Camdyn twisted his lips. “What I'm trying to say is that none of us wants to remind him of what he did.”

“Or that he fought against us? That he tried to kill each of us?”

“We tried to kill him, too.”

Her gaze skated away. “Maybe you’re right and talking now wouldn’t be wise. It would be his first time here. But I still believe all of you should talk.”

“What about the Druids? All of you fought, as well.”

“I’m not leaving us out. Believe me, I know we need to have some discussions, too. I’m going to make sure that happens.”

He kissed her forehead. “I know you will.” Leave it to his beloved to look out for others. Then he stilled, reminded of her power as a seer. “Did you see something?”

“No. I would’ve told you,” she hurriedly said as she placed her hand over his heart and returned her gaze to the fire. “I can try to see if something comes up.”

“Nay. It’s almost the solstice. Let’s enjoy the time we have. It’s never enough as it is.”

“Good point.” After a long pause, she said, “However, there is something I should’ve told you last week.”

Camdyn waited for her to look at him before he asked, “You had a vision?”

“I did.”

If she hadn’t come to him immediately, then it hadn’t been important. Still, he didn’t like that she had kept it to herself. When she bit her bottom lip, his heart clenched. “What is it?”

“I saw myself holding a baby.”

“A bairn? O-ours?” He could barely get the words out. They had discussed it, but that was all they had done.

She shrugged. “I just saw the babe in my arms as it looked up at me. It could be ours, or it could be someone else’s. That’s all I saw in my vision. And before you ask, yes, I tried to look deeper and expand the area to find out more, but there was nothing.”

Camdyn looked at her stomach and fought not to put his hand over it. The idea of her belly swelling with their child made him giddy—and terrified him at the same time.

“Say something,” she urged.

He blinked and returned his gaze to her face. “I doona know what to say.”

“What if it *is* our child?”

“Then I’d be overjoyed.”

“Does that mean...should we...?”

Her words trailed off, but he knew exactly what she was asking. “We could continue to come up with reasons for why we shouldna bring another child into this world. There will always be something.”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Yet I’m beginning to think if we want another bairn that we should have one.”

Her face split into a huge grin as she threw her arms around him. “Oh, Camdyn. I couldn’t agree more.”

He caught her lips with his for a long, deep kiss. “Might as well start tonight.”

Her tawny eyes glowed with desire as she rose on her knees and removed her jumper, quickly followed by her bra. Camdyn gathered her back into his arms and kissed her until she was breathless and begging for more.

SPIKED CHAI TEA



COOK TIME:

Prep: 5 min

Cook: 20 min

Total: 25 min

SERVING:

Serves 4

INGREDIENTS:

- 3 cups hot water
- 4 black tea bags
- 4 green cardamom pods, crushed
- 4 whole allspice berries, crushed
- 4 whole cloves
- 1 star anise
- 2 whole cinnamon sticks
- ½ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon ground ginger
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
- 3 cups vanilla almond milk
- ¼ cup honey
- ½ cup good quality bourbon

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. In a medium saucepan, combine water, tea bags, vanilla, spices, and ginger. Bring to a boil over medium/high heat before reducing to a simmer.
2. Stir in the almond milk and honey, whisking to combine.
3. Remove from heat and allow to sit for 10 minutes to steep.
4. Strain through a fine mesh sieve to remove the bulk of the spices and the tea bags, making sure that only the liquid remains.
5. Pour into a heat-proof serving pitcher and stir in the bourbon.
6. Enjoy!

NOTES:

It can be made without alcohol.

RAMSEY AND TARA



“Yes!” Tara shouted as her character on the Portal 2 video game won. Her light brown hair bounced as she jumped.

Ramsey cut her a look. “You doona have to rub it in.”

“Oh, but I do.” She reclined on the sofa and set aside the controller to grab a handful of popcorn. “How many times have you done a victory lap when you’ve won?”

He finished off his whisky. “I doona know what you mean.”

“Ha,” she said and threw a piece of popcorn at him.

Ramsey grinned and set down his empty glass. “Another game?”

“Yes.” Then her blue-green eyes dimmed. “Wait. Isn’t it getting late? Like time for dinner late?”

“I am a wee bit peckish. Let’s go check.”

They rose and walked from the game room. He waited until they were in the corridor before draping an arm over her shoulders. She moved closer and linked her arm around his waist, hooking her thumb in a belt loop.

“They turned down the music already,” Tara said.

He grunted in acknowledgment. When they emerged in the great hall, Ramsey’s gaze locked on Hayden and Isla, who were deep in conversation before the massive hearth. A glance toward the conservatory showed that the doors were still shut, which meant Lucan and Cara were inside and didn’t want to be disturbed.

Neither he nor Tara said anything until they entered the kitchen. Earlier, amazing tantalizing aromas had drifted from the room, enticing him and everyone else with the treats being cooked. Now, his stomach rumbled.

A sound from the right drew his attention. Ramsey flicked on the lights. Galen crouched before the lower set of cupboards. He held a tin with the lid off in one hand and had a half-eaten cookie between his lips.

“Hungry?” Tara asked with a laugh.

Galen straightened and pushed the rest of the cookie into his mouth. Around it, he said, “Actually, it was Reaghan who wanted a snack. I figured since I was getting her some food, I’d grab something for myself.”

“Just leave some for the rest of us,” Ramsey replied.

Galen merely grinned. “It’s no’ my fault if you’re too slow in getting the cookies.”

“Take as many as you want of those,” Tara said as she walked to the fridge. “We hid the bulk of the goodies.”

Ramsey busted out laughing at the horror on Galen’s face.

“You doona have time to look now. You’d better get back with Reaghan’s food before she comes looking for you.”

“Bloody hell,” Galen mumbled as he gathered the items he’d already laid out on the counter and hurried from the kitchen.

Tara put away the tin that Galen had been eating from. “Before you ask, yes, we really did hide food. We have to, babe. Galen is a never-ending pit of hunger. I swear, I have no idea how Reaghan keeps her kitchen stocked.”

“She doesna. At least she stopped trying to years ago. Galen goes to the store at least once a day because she refuses to keep buying food.”

“Ha. Good for her.” Tara turned slowly in the kitchen. “Since there’s no lavish meal, what do you want?”

He walked to the pantry and opened the doors to reveal the room behind it. “Let’s see what we can find. Do we want a meal?”

“I plan on kicking your arse again in the game,” she called.

“That means something we can eat with our fingers.”

“And not get on the controllers,” she added as she walked into the pantry with him.

He glanced at her and nodded. “Good point.”

They rummaged through the shelves of food. Ramsey looked at the bag of Cheetos, but he had seen the way Tara purposefully didn't grab it. They were her favorite, but she couldn't eat just one. No, she ate the entire bag, and since it was the largest size there was, not only would she consume all of it, but there would be orange dust all over the controllers.

“Don't you dare,” she warned when she saw him eyeing the cheesy snacks.

He held up his hands before him. “I'm no'.”

“Just making sure you don't.” After a moment, she said, “There is cheese in the fridge.”

“Crackers and cheese?”

Her eyes widened. “And olives?”

“Of course.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I'm going to need a bit more than that right now, though.”

“There is some roasted chicken left from lunch. We can make a sandwich with the fresh loaf of bread Cara baked. Without the Cheetos,” he told her when she started to reach for them.

“Later,” she whispered to the bag and walked from the pantry.

It didn't take long for them to make their sandwiches. While he cut the four different kinds of cheese, Tara picked a selection of crackers and emptied the last of the green olives into a shallow bowl. Ramsey put everything on a tray and was about to walk from the kitchen when Tara held up a finger, asking him to wait.

She pulled containers from the fridge and got out some more bowls. He chuckled when he saw the strawberries, raspberries,

and blueberries. After returning the fruit to the fridge, she got the can of whipped cream and two bottles of water.

“What?” she asked as she set the bowls on the tray. “I like whipped cream with my fruit.”

He merely shook his head and followed her from the kitchen. On their way through the great hall, he spotted Arran and Ronnie in the library. The front door opened, and Laura stumbled inside, followed by Charon.

“Sorry we’re late,” she said and shook off the snow from her coat before hanging it up. “It’s Charon’s fault.”

“It’s no’,” Charon said and hiccupped loudly. “Where’s the food?”

“Where do you think?” Hayden answered with a laugh.

Laura waved at them and ushered Charon into the kitchen. Ramsey and Tara used the opportunity and left. Back in the game room, they closed the door and set out their food.



Tara didn’t waste any time getting the new game going. She took a few bites of her sandwich but found it easier to pick up the cheese cubes. Then, their game was on. Both she and Ramsey were ridiculously competitive in whatever they did, but it never dissolved into a fight. They made sure of that.

She made a wrong decision with her character that she knew would be detrimental to the rest of the game, and she wasn’t wrong. That decision allowed Ramsey to get ahead—and stay there. But she wouldn’t give up that easily. This game might be new to them both, but they were quick studies.

“I’ve got this game,” Ramsey called before they were halfway through it.

She didn’t answer as she made another bad move. “Damn,” she growled when her character was nearly killed. Tara managed to come back from that, but there was no way she could beat Ramsey. Her stomach rumbled, and she glanced at

the food. She could either eat or play. Then she saw the whipped cream—and a smile formed as she thought of another game they could play.

Ramsey was on his feet, his entire body moving as he turned the controller one way and then the other as if he could crawl through the screen and make the character do what he wanted. Tara used the opportunity to quickly strip out of her clothes. He didn't bat an eye when she grabbed the whipped cream.

“Baby,” she called.

“You're no' going to distract me,” he warned. “I'm winning.”

She cleared her throat and put her hand on her hips as she stood waiting for him to look at her. “Baby. You're really going to want to look my way.”

Ramsey did a double-take. Then he dropped the controller and was before her in a split second. He fell to his knees and looked up at her breasts where the whipped cream covered her nipples.

“You minx,” he growled, desire burning hotly in his eyes.

She grinned. “I was tired of playing that game. There's another I'd rather play.”

“Who am I to refuse you?” he asked with a grin as he leaned forward and closed his mouth around her nipple, sucking deeply.

She dropped her head back with a moan. God, he felt so good. Her sex throbbed with need. As if sensing the urgency, he stood and yanked down his pants before lifting her and pressing her against the wall. Tara wrapped her legs around his waist just as the blunt head of his cock brushed her center.

She looked deeply into his gray eyes as he slid inside her. The breath locked in her throat. He whispered her name before claiming her lips in a passionate, fervent kiss. His hips began to rock. She slid her fingers into the cool strands of his black hair. No matter how often their bodies joined, she couldn't get enough of him. She knew she would never get enough.

Not in this lifetime.

Not in a hundred.

She moaned in regret when his lips left hers. Tara forced open her eyes to find the half-Warrior, half-Druid who had captured her heart watching her.

“You’re close.” His voice was rough with desire.

Tara couldn’t find words, so she nodded. She *was* close to climaxing. All she needed was...

Her thoughts vanished as Ramsey drove into her harder, deeper, the force of it rubbing her against the wall. His fingers dug into her bottom, but she only felt the thick length of him inside her, each thrust pushing her closer and closer to the edge. His name was on her lips when her body stiffened, pulses of pleasure rolling through her, growing and expanding until they consumed her.

Tara opened her eyes to find herself lying on the sofa with Ramsey still inside her, licking the last of the whipped cream from her as the walls of her sex convulsed with the aftereffects of the climax.

“There you are,” he said in his sexy voice.

She smiled up at him. “That was amazing.”

“How about round two?”

“You’re still on round one.”

His smile grew as he leisurely pulled out and then pushed back inside her just as slowly. “Is that an aye?”

“Yes,” she said breathlessly. “God, yes.”

KETO MINI-CHEESECAKES



COOK TIME:

Prep: 10 min

Cook: 1 hr 20 min

Total: 1 hr 30 min

SERVING:

Serves 6

INGREDIENTS:

For Crust:

- ½ cup almond flour
- 1 tablespoon monk fruit
- ¼ teaspoon cinnamon
- Pinch of salt
- 2 tablespoons butter, melted

Cheesecake:

- 8 oz cream cheese, room temperature
- ½ cup monk fruit
- 1 large egg, room temperature
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract
- ¼ teaspoon salt

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Preheat oven to 300°F. Grease a 6-cup muffin tin or prepare with cupcake liners and set aside.
2. Make the crust: Combine almond flour, monk fruit, cinnamon, and salt. Stir well to break up any lumps in the almond flour. If you want the crust all the way up the sides of the cheesecake, double the crust's recipe.
3. Add melted butter to the dry ingredients and stir to combine. Using your fingertips, press down to flatten into the bottom of the muffin tin.
4. Bake for 10-15 minutes, until just beginning to brown. Remove and let cool for at least 10 minutes while you make the batter.
5. Batter: In a large mixing bowl, beat the softened cream cheese until smooth. Add the monk fruit, egg, vanilla extract, and salt. Stir together until well combined.
6. Pour the batter on top of the crusts. Bake for 18-20 minutes. Cheesecakes are done when the centers still jiggle when you tap the sides of the pan.
7. Remove from oven. Let cool for 30 minutes, then cover and chill in the refrigerator. Serve with fresh berries and/or whipped cream.
8. If you didn't use cupcake liners, run a thin paring knife around the edge of the cheesecakes to help release them from the muffin pan. If cheesecakes are really stuck, place the bottom of the muffin pan into a sink of hot water for about 15-30 seconds.

ARRAN AND VERONICA



“We should tell the others.”

Arran glanced through the open door of the library and then closed it so no one could overhear them. He walked back to his wife. “We will.”

Ronnie reverently held the broken gold torque in her hands. She lifted it to look closer at the ends worn by time. “There’s more in the cave. I know it.”

“I’ve no doubt there is.” If Arran knew one thing about Ronnie, it was that digging in the dirt for historical finds made her the happiest. It was how they’d met—and how they now lived.

She lowered the torque and speared him with her hazel eyes. The light brought out the gold in her irises. “I bet this is from one of Fallon, Lucan, and Quinn’s ancestors. I need to clean it properly to get the thousands of years of grime off it so it gleams once more.”

“We will.”

“Why are you whispering?”

Arran shrugged. “We’ve always spoken to the brothers before digging on the land. We didna do that today.”

“It wasn’t as if I expected to find anything.”

He quirked a brow. “Really?” he asked sarcastically.

Ronnie wrinkled her nose. “Fine. I always expect to find something.” She shoved a strand of wheat-colored hair from

her face. “Besides, they told us we could look wherever we wanted on MacLeod land.” Her eyes suddenly widened. “You want to use this as your gift.”

“I want *you* to use it,” he corrected. “You drew Quinn’s name. No’ me.”

“Oh, that’s right.” She looked at the metal in her hands once more. “I wish I would’ve found the other piece. But I will. I’ll tell Quinn that when I give him this. I can feel the items waiting to be discovered in that cave.”

Arran couldn’t stop smiling at the excitement in her voice. Her Druid magic allowed her to find magical objects. While the torque didn’t hold magic, he had witnessed his wife’s ability to sense when artifacts were waiting to be discovered. He believed her when she said there was more.

The cliffs below the castle were riddled with caves—an entire network of them. In the years before Arran met Ronnie, he and the other Warriors had often explored the tunnels. But he hadn’t been looking for artifacts then. He wondered how much they had missed during those early times. No doubt he would be spending a lot of time in the caves over the coming months. They were between digs at the moment, which gave them the perfect opportunity.

“I want Dani to touch it and see its history.” Ronnie grabbed a pillow from one of the sofas and placed it on a table before gently lowering the necklace to rest on top.

With a castle full of Druids who all had special abilities, it made things easier sometimes. Though he was always hesitant to ask Dani to use her magic since there was a chance the object could show her terrible things. But he knew better than to remind his wife of that. She was well aware of the consequences if Dani agreed to touch it—as did Dani herself.

Arran took Ronnie’s hands in his and pulled her to the sofa. He sat and tugged her down beside him. A moment later, a soft meow could be heard, and Bastet, Larena’s black cat, uncurled from her bed near the fire and stretched before making her way to them.

Bright green eyes looked at him before she jumped onto his lap. Arran scratched Bastet under the chin, which was her favorite spot. The cat immediately began to purr. After a few minutes, she turned in a circle and curled up.

“And you say she doesn’t like you best,” Ronnie said with a snort.

He grinned and stroked the feline’s long, soft fur. “I give good scratches.”

“I can’t argue with that.” They shared a smile before Ronnie rested her head on his shoulder. “Are you happy?”

He was shocked at her question. “Verra much so. Are you?”

“Oh, yes.”

Arran mulled over the question and couldn’t help but wonder if there was more to it. “Have I made you think I was unhappy?”

“Not at all,” she replied. “I just wanted to be sure. I look back and reflect on this at certain times of the year. Christmas always makes me examine the things I have. I’m grateful for all of them, but most especially you and our love.”

He put an arm around her and held her close. “Aye, *mo chridhe*.”

“I love when you call me your heart.”

“Because you are.” He paused briefly and watched as Bastet stretched across both their laps. “If I’m ever unhappy, I’ll let you know.”

She lifted her head to look at him, a smile curving her lips. “I will, too.”

“I’m grateful for you,” he said as he gazed into her expressive eyes.

“We have a great life. Besides battling evil and fighting off those who want to kill us.”

Arran chuckled. “Besides that, aye, we do.”

“I never thought I’d have anyone like you. You swept me off my feet. Literally.”

He thought back to their meeting at the archeological site.

“You didn’t make it easy.”

“If you want something badly enough, you have to earn it,” she replied with a smile.

“You were worth every second.”

They fell into silence, listening to the fire crackle and Bastet purr. They did have a great life. Nothing was set in stone, and it would always be that way, but he would fight for Ronnie and their love. As well as against evil. There were no guarantees. Every day was a gift, and he treasured it. Everyone at the castle knew how lucky they were to have survived.

And that could be taken from them at any second.

But Arran wouldn’t think about that. He had Ronnie in his arms, Bastet in his lap, and his family at the castle. It was nearly as perfect as it could get.



Ronnie sank her fingers into Bastet’s silky fur. She stared at the cat while thinking about the threat that had been growing. She wasn’t the only Druid who’d felt it, but since no one could name it, they hadn’t spoken about it. Yet. She planned to bring it up after the holidays. After what’d happened on the Isle of Skye and then the Ancients’ silenced screams, she couldn’t shake the unease that swelled each day.

At first, she’d thought it was all in her head, but she knew it wasn’t. Something was going on. Did it mean that the Warriors and Druids of MacLeod Castle needed to get involved? She couldn’t say either way for sure. But if something threatened their fragile and delicate balance, they had to do something.

Arran’s shoulders rose as he inhaled deeply. She lifted her head, straightened, and looked at the man who held her heart and protected her with his very life. He had his dark hair

shoved away from his chiseled face. Honey-colored eyes turned to her.

“What is it?”

“Can’t a wife look at her handsome husband?” she teased.

His answering grin made her heart skip a beat. “Are my clothes in the way?”

She laughed loudly, causing Bastet to lift her head and glare at them disapprovingly. Ronnie leaned forward and pressed her lips to Arran’s. “They’re always in the way.”

“I can strip,” he offered, waggling his eyebrows.

“Tempting. Especially since I know that everyone else is occupied.”

“Tempting?” he repeated, confusion in his expression. “Just tempting? I must be losing my touch.”

She rolled her eyes at his dramatic words. “You know you’re not. We have Bastet. I don’t want to disturb her. Do you?”

“I guess no’,” he said as he looked at the cat. He caught Ronnie’s gaze. “You’re no’ fooling me, you know.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I know you’re worried. You and every Druid here. We are, too, just so you know.”

She sighed. She should’ve known that she couldn’t keep something like that from Arran. “It isn’t that I didn’t want to talk to you about it.”

“I know why you didna. It’s the same reason I’ve no’ brought it up. It’s the holidays. A time for joy and celebration.” He pulled her closer. “I only wanted you to know that you doona have to carry the burden alone.”

“I know.” No matter what might be going on in her life, Arran was always there, strong and steady like a standing stone. The world might batter him, but he withstood it all. That gave her the strength to do the same, even when things got too difficult.

“So, can I give you a gift tonight?”

She laughed and shook her head. “It isn’t Christmas. It isn’t even Christmas Eve.”

“You’re no’ going to actually make me wait, are you?”

From the moment Arran bought her a gift, he wanted to give it to her. There was no waiting for him. He tried to leave hints to make her guess what it might be. When that didn’t work, he attempted to trick her into opening the present, but she always stood firm. She liked the surprise, and she even enjoyed seeing the gifts under the tree as the anticipation grew.

Not Arran. He was fine holding off opening his gifts, but he literally couldn’t wait to give things to her. He’d grown so impatient in the past that he had opened a gift for her, simply because he’d wanted her to have it right then.

The process they went through every year got progressively worse once December started. By Christmas Eve, Arran was ready to tear into every one of her gifts and just set them all in front of her. As a compromise, she opened one gift the night before Christmas. It took Arran all day to decide which one he wanted her to open. Even then, he would change his mind a dozen times before she finally grabbed one herself.

But she loved the game they played. Arran and the other Warriors hadn’t had a normal life. Not just because they were several centuries old, but because most of them had lost their families when their gods were unbound. When Arran found joy in anything, she accepted it for what it was—all of it.

“You know I am going to make you wait,” she stated firmly.

“I brought a gift. Just in case.” He grinned knowingly. “I think you’ll love it.”

Ronnie laughed. “I love everything you get me, but we’re waiting.”

“It can no’ wait.”

Before she could reply, he gently lifted Bastet off his lap and settled the feline on hers. Then Arran was up and out of the library. Ronnie shifted so the cat could settle more comfortably. As soon as Arran returned, she said, “I’m not

opening it, and you'd better not either. No gifts. Not yet. Just a few more days. You can wait."

"Like I said, this can no' wait." He stopped before her with a large box and carefully set it on the floor.

She eyed it, then him. "Where did you have that hiding?"

"Hayden and Isla were watching it for me."

Watching it? He made it sound like it would sprout legs and run off. "No, I'm no—" The words died when she heard something. She frowned, thinking it was her imagination. Then Bastet jumped down and began sniffing the box in earnest.

"Open it," Arran said with a nod, his eyes dancing with excitement.

She heard the noise again. It was unmistakably a meow. A tiny meow. Ronnie had never yanked a ribbon faster. She carefully opened the lid and looked inside to see a solid white fur ball with blue eyes staring up at her. The kitten rose on its hind legs and meowed up at them. Bastet peered over the box to look inside.

"Oh, my God. You're the cutest thing," Ronnie said as she lifted the kitten out of the box and held it against her. The kitten began to purr loudly as it rubbed its head against her chin.

"What do you think of her?" Arran asked.

Ronnie looked at him and leaned forward to kiss him. "She's perfect. Thank you."

"She's young enough that we can train her to go on the digs with us and even walk on a leash."

She held up the kitten before her. "Do you want to come dig with us?"

The kitten meowed, which made them laugh. Bastet jumped up onto the sofa next to Ronnie and sniffed the kitten. Then the kitten squirmed to get down and went to Bastet. The two curled up together on the sofa, and Bastet started licking the new edition.

“Now comes the hard part—naming her.”

Arran laughed. “I’ve no doubt everyone will be happy to give recommendations.”

“She’s so perfect. And she and Bastet get along, which means bringing her to the castle every time we come.” Ronnie smoothed her fingers through his hair. “We’ll have to introduce her to Laura and Charon’s dogs.”

“They love Bastet, so I doona think that’ll be an issue. So?” Arran said as he moved the box out of the way and sat on the floor to lean sideways against her legs. “Happy you got to open a gift early?”

She playfully slapped at his arm. “You know I am. I’ve wanted a kitten for so long.”

“I know,” he said. “Merry Christmas, *mo chridhe*.”

“Merry Christmas, my heart.”

DRUNKEN SNOWMAN COCKTAIL



INGREDIENTS:

- ¼ cup white chocolate, melted
- ¼ cup milk chocolate shavings
- 1 pint vanilla ice cream
- 2 cups hot chocolate
- ½ cup Baileys Irish Cream
- 1 cup whipped cream for topping

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. In two separate dishes, pour the melted white chocolate and milk chocolate shavings.
2. Dip the rims of two mugs into the melted white chocolate, followed immediately by the milk chocolate shavings.
3. Add two scoops of ice cream to each mug.
4. Pour the hot chocolate and Baileys on top.
5. Finish with whipped cream and any extra milk chocolate shavings.

CHARON AND LAURA



“We’re in,” Laura said with a long sigh. The dogs rushed past her and ran to greet Hayden and Isla. Laura removed her coat to hang it on a hook, then took off her boots. Charon leaned against a wall, waiting for her. She went to him and ruffled his dark hair to get the snow off. “Now for some food.”

“I’m fine,” he said and hiccupped.

She rolled her eyes and turned him to head toward the kitchen. “Not even close, sweetheart.”

Once they were in the kitchen, she pulled out a stool at the bar and made sure he was in it before rummaging for food. Laura glanced up when she heard voices and found Isla carrying Sterling, their Scottish terrier. Sterling desperately attempted to lick Isla’s face while wagging his tail happily. Hayden followed behind Isla with their West Highland terrier, Jock, who stared adoringly up at him.

“Let me guess,” Hayden said with a chuckle as he came up beside Charon. “You spent the day trying to come up with a new cocktail recipe.”

Charon groaned and dropped his head into his hands. “I was sooooo close.”

Laura turned with an armful of food that she dumped onto the island before kicking the fridge closed with her foot. “You had fourteen different glasses on the bar when I made us leave.”

“I whittled it down from seventy,” Charon grumbled.

Isla’s eyes widened. “Seventy?”

“And that’s why my husband is drunk,” Laura stated.

Charon lifted his head. “I’m no’ sloshed, love.”

Hayden laughed as he set Jock down. “Aye, you are, my friend.”

“I was so close,” Charon said again.

Laura couldn’t stop the smile. After the last two years of coming up with a special drink to celebrate the solstice, Charon had been stumped for weeks. Two days ago, he’d started making cocktails randomly, but he hadn’t been happy with any of them. Then, yesterday, he’d been desperate. He hadn’t come to bed the night before. Instead, he’d spent the entire night trying to find just the right drink. She kept telling him that he didn’t need to do it, but Charon was nothing if not stubborn.

He held up his thumb and forefinger and looked at her with his deep brown eyes. “So close, love.”

“Oh. I forgot the box,” Laura said and started around the island.

Hayden rose to stop her. “Where is it?”

“In the back of the car.”

“I’ll get it.”

“Thanks,” she called after him. Then she returned her gaze to Charon.

Isla put some roasted chicken with some of Cara’s baked bread on a plate and shoved it at him. Charon closed his eyes and ate. Laura blew out a breath. Her husband wanted to make the holidays perfect every year. He’d made the first cocktail on a whim, but it had been a huge hit. The second year, he’d planned the cocktail for a month, and it had been another hit. Which, of course, meant he felt he had to outdo both.

“So sorry we’re late,” Laura told Isla. “I was trying to make it for dinner, but the roads are getting so bad.”

Sonya waved away her words. “There was no dinner. As usual, everyone went their separate ways.”

Hayden walked in with a large crate full of liquor that Charon brought for those who wanted it. Everyone liked something different, and he never left anyone out. Laura put a bow on each bottle and handed them out.

She saw Hayden eyeing the bottle of Rémy Martin XO brandy. “That’s yours. Take it.”

“Oh, you guys didn’t need to do that,” Isla said as she walked to Hayden, but her smile said she was delighted with the bottle.

Hayden slapped Charon on the back before Hayden hugged her. “Thank you both. I think we’ll go up and sample this now.”

“Have fun,” Laura called as the couple left. Sterling and Jock sat at Charon’s feet, waiting for crumbs to fall, which she knew Charon purposefully allowed.

He caught her gaze. “I did what you asked me no’ to do.”

“Oh?” she said as she walked to him and put an arm around him. “What might that be?”

“No’ to let creating the drink consume me.”

She kissed the side of his face and rested her chin on his shoulder. “I keep telling you that not everything has to be perfect. We’ve had some of the best times when everything went wrong. Remember the picnic?”

That made him chuckle, his eyes crinkling as he gazed at her. “I forgot to pack food because I was intent on the champagne remaining the perfect temperature until we opened it.”

“And I forgot the blanket.”

“And the beautiful day turned into a torrential storm that soaked us within seconds.”

She laughed, recalling how wonderful it had been. “It was the *best* day.”

“I particularly liked that we had the loch all to ourselves.”

“Because no one wanted to be out in the weather.”

“Aye. We had quite a lot of fun.” His eyes heated.

She moved to sit on the stool next to him. “We really did.”

“I have an idea,” he said, pushing the empty plate away to face her.

“What’s that?”

“I fix everyone whatever drink they want.”

She leaned forward and wrapped her arms around him. “I like that idea.”

“I have another idea.”

“Oh?” she asked.

He took her hand and rose. “Follow me.”



Charon walked from the kitchen with Laura at his side, their two dogs on their heels. He brought her to the huge, lit tree she had helped to decorate weeks earlier and stood in its soft glow.

“Do you know why I want it to be perfect every year?” he asked.

She looked at him. “Because you’re a perfectionist.”

He chuckled. “That’s part of it.” Charon smoothed his hands over her dark, wavy hair and gazed into her moss green eyes. “It’s also because I know how precious this life we have is. I know how close I came to losing you. December is your favorite time of year. We watch a Christmas movie nearly every night. We host a large holiday party for the entire town. You go to great lengths to ensure your gifts are personal, so everyone knows you put a lot of thought into them. You deserve the same, love. It’s why I try to make it perfect.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. “The thing is, everything is already perfect. Because you’re here with me. You’re all I need.”

He brushed a tear from her cheek. “Everything I do is for you.”

“I love you so much that it sometimes feels as if my heart is about to burst,” she said as more tears fell.

She threw her arms around him and buried her face in his neck as he held her. Charon glanced down to see the dogs staring at them, their heads tilted to the side. He grinned, his heart full. He had Laura, the dogs, and his family. And he wouldn’t trade any of it.

He leaned back and cupped her face in his hands. Charon caught her eyes and shot her a smile. “You were worried that we were late, but it looks as if we have the rest of the evening to ourselves.”

Laura sniffed, her eyes dancing with merriment. “You have a devious mind, husband. I like it.”

“I thought you might. Should we grab some food?”

“Unless you want to come down later?”

Charon snorted and shook his head. “You’re right. Better stock up now.”

They returned to the kitchen, grabbed some items for themselves and the dogs, and were on their way to the stairs when they heard a commotion by the front door. Charon detoured and spotted Evie.

“Honey, we were no’ the last ones,” Charon told her.

Evie grinned as Malcolm walked up behind her with his arms loaded down with bags. He bent to release them before turning and going back outside.

“What is all of that?” Laura asked.

Evie bit her lip as she bent to pet the dogs, who rushed around her, trying to get her attention. “Well, I kinda decided to buy presents for a kids’ home.”

“Then she said we should help more than one,” Malcolm said as he returned with even more presents. “So, here we are.”

Laura looked at Charon. "That's a good idea. We do something for those in Ferness, but perhaps we should do more."

"Anything you want," he replied with a smile. Charon looked at Malcolm. "Need help?"

"We got it," Evie said.

Laura waved at the couple. "There was no dinner, so help yourselves to whatever is in the kitchen."

"We'll see you two in the morning," Charon called.

When they walked into the bedroom, Laura asked, "Should we have helped them carry in the bags?"

"They declined any help." He set down the food as the dogs found their beds near the hearth. When he straightened, Laura pushed him back onto the bed. As he fell, he caught her hand, pulling her with him. She squealed with delight as he rolled on top of her. "You said something about helping Evie and Mal."

"No, I didn't," she said and tried to pull his head down for a kiss.

Charon made as if he were getting up. "You're right. I should help."

"Charon," Laura called as she gripped him firmly. "Kiss me now."

"Och. Such a bossy lass," he murmured with a half-smile.

She grinned wickedly. "You love it."

"Aye. I do," he whispered just before he kissed her.

HOLLY JOLLY CHRISTMAS CITRUS COCKTAIL



FOR A SINGLE GLASS:

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 oz vodka (brand of choice)
- ½ oz St-Germain elderflower liqueur
- 1/3 cup freshly squeezed clementine or blood orange juice
- Ginger beer for topping
- Pomegranate arils for topping
- 1 sprig fresh thyme

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Fill a cocktail glass with ice.
2. Add the vodka, elderflower liqueur, and clementine juice. Top with ginger beer. Add the pomegranates and thyme.
3. Enjoy!

FOR A SINGLE PITCHER:

INGREDIENTS:

Serves 4. Can be doubled.

- 1 cup vodka
- ½ cup St-Germain elderflower liqueur

- 1 ½ cups freshly squeezed clementine or blood orange juice
- 2 12-oz ginger beers
- 1 aril from 1 pomegranate
- 4 sprigs of fresh thyme

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. In a large pitcher, combine the vodka, elderflower liqueur, and clementine/blood orange juice. Chill until ready to serve.
2. Just before serving, add ice, ginger beer, and pomegranate arils. Serve garnished with thyme.

PHELAN AND AISLEY



“Your silence is worrying,” Aisley said, sitting between Phelan’s legs on the bed as he braided her hair. She had been teaching him different plaits for over a year now. His reasoning? Because they might have a daughter someday, and he wanted to be able to do her hair. Aisley loved when Phelan played with her hair. That meant she was always ready and willing when he wanted to practice on her.

He blew out a breath. “I have to concentrate. This inverted fishtail isna exactly simple.”

She smiled.

“And my fingers doona move as I need them to,” he complained.

Aisley ran her hands along his bare legs that rested on either side of her. “You can say no.”

“It isna that.”

“Then what is it?” She was getting impatient since they had been discussing the issue all day. The *issue* being whether Phelan should follow Rhi’s suggestion and help the Light and Dark Fae come together to create the Council that would govern both sides.

Phelan held out his hand for the hair tie. Once Aisley had given it to him, he tied off the ends of her hair. “The braid isna bad, but I need more practice.”

“It took you a few tries to master the fishtail. Give it some time with the inverted.”

He pulled her back to his chest as he reclined against the headboard on the pile of pillows behind him. “It’s the same bloody braid.”

“Not really. But we both know you’re not irritated at the plait.”

“Nay. I’m no’.”

She looked up at the ceiling, waiting for him to talk. Only a handful of Fae knew who Phelan was. And there were pros and cons to him making himself known. The Fae, in general, weren’t exactly accepting of Halflings, which was exactly what Phelan was. Half Fae, half human, and all Warrior. But his Fae side was that of royalty. Not that it mattered much any longer, especially if they formed the Council.

His strong arms came around her, holding her gently but firmly. “Things will change for us if I do this.”

“We’ve talked about that.”

“We’ve guessed,” he replied. “We can no’ know for sure.”

“Rhi wouldn’t have asked if she didn’t think you could help.”

Phelan grunted. “Rhi is on Zora with Con, doing who knows what. She has other concerns.”

“Rhi has done enough for the Fae, in my opinion. Let her and Con have their time together. They deserve it. Besides, they’re getting to know their children.”

Phelan pressed his cheek against her head. “There was a time I wanted to know the Fae. Then I came to terms with the fact that it was better if they didn’t know about me.”

“Because of Usaël. She’s gone now and no longer a concern.”

“There are others like her out there. We both know that.”

Aisley reached up and hooked her hands on his arms. “Then don’t contact the Fae.”

“And if the Council fails and they go to war? The Dragon Kings have already stopped one Fae War. No one will take too kindly to knowing that I was the catalyst.”

She sat up and faced him, shifting her legs so they lay on either side of his hips. Aisley looked deep into his blue-gray eyes and brought his face down for a soft kiss. “It wouldn’t rest on your shoulders alone. There are those actively opposing and fighting the formation of the Fae council. Their voices are the loudest. Those wanting the Council leaned too heavily on Rhi. That’s why she stepped away to begin with. She knew they had to learn to fight for what they want.”

“What if they lean too heavily on me?”

“They might.”

He raked a hand through his dark locks, shoving the thick strands from his face. “I’m no’ sure I want that responsibility.”

“Then there’s your answer.”

“So, you doona want me to help the Fae?”

Aisley barked a laugh and gripped his arms in frustration.

“That’s your decision.”

“Nay, beautiful. It’s *ours*. This affects both of us.”

“You know I’ll support you, whatever you decide.”

“I want to know what you think.”

Aisley touched her braid, feeling the weave with her fingertips. She had put off giving him her opinion because she’d wanted to see which way he was leaning first. “It’s an honor that Rhi asked you to go to the Fae. Obviously, she thinks you can do some good.”

“But?” Phelan asked when she paused.

“But...the fact that Rhi stepped away gives me pause. She spoke at length about how crucial it was that the Fae change. And the first step in that is doing away with royalty to have a Council.”

“And if it is so important, why did she leave?” Phelan nodded.

“I keep thinking about that, too.”

Aisley took one of his hands and held it up as she flattened her palm against his and threaded their fingers. “There’s a real

possibility that the Fae won't welcome you, despite Rhi having invited you. She's not there to introduce you."

"They may no' believe that she asked me for assistance."

"There's that, yes." She shrugged. "On the other hand, the Fae might gladly welcome you. If they do, you'd likely feel obligated to lend support. Because once you're in, you'd be all in. That would take a lot of your time. Things are semi-peaceful at the moment, but what if that changes? We're talking about our world with the Warriors colliding with that of the Fae."

His brow furrowed. "The Fae know about the Warriors."

"They ignore you all. There's a difference."

Phelan's expression hardened. "No' to mention, the Light might accept me, but we both know the Dark never will."

"They'd likely see you as an interloper."

"The odds are great that my appearance might only make things worse."

"There seems to be more cons than items in the pro column."



Phelan looked into Aisley's fawn-colored eyes and twisted his lips. "I think the right choice is for me to stay out of Fae business. My family hid me for a reason. I doona think the Fae need to know about me."

"Or what your blood can do."

No matter how much time had passed, he couldn't think about the healing power of his blood without thinking of being held prisoner by Deirdre all those long years ago. Maybe the memories would no longer feel like a kick in the gut someday. "You brought up a good point, though. What if we're needed on the Isle of Skye again? My place is with you and our family."

"So. Decision made?"

“Decision made,” he agreed.

She eyed him, one brow raised. “How do you feel about it?”

Phelan paused and thought it over. He released a breath as his entire body relaxed. “Good. I feel good about it.”

“Just what I wanted to hear.” She leaned forward, rubbing her bare breasts against his chest. “Perhaps we can get back to our fun?” she asked with a grin.

He laughed. He couldn’t help himself. “Whose turn is it?”

“Mine,” she said and leaned over to get the remote from the bedside table.

Aisley flipped the long, black length of her braid over her shoulder and shot him a grin as she scrolled through their list of movies. With so much to discuss, they had opted to stay in their rooms at the castle. Aisley had even stocked it beforehand in case their talk went through the day, which it had.

She shot him a grin as she settled between his legs and used him as a backrest. He was mildly surprised when she chose *The Holiday* since it was one of his favorite Christmas movies. Phelan moved Aisley’s hair aside and kissed the spot on the back of her neck that always sent shivers down her spine.

“Ooh,” she murmured. “Should I not play the movie?”

He licked her earlobe. “I’m no’ going to miss out on Cameron Diaz and Kate Winslet.”

“As if I want to miss Jude Law.”

“I guess that means this waits,” he replied between kisses on her neck. Phelan waited to hear her laugh and tease him back, but there was no response. He lifted his head and looked at her.

“I just want to be sure you’re happy with your decision.”

He smiled and kissed her brow. “It would’ve never dawned on me to do anything had Rhi no’ come to us. It was only because the request came from her that I even considered it at all. I might have Fae blood, but I’ve never felt part of them. I only

would've gone to the Light if I thought there was a chance that I could do some good and that something would come out of my assistance."

"Rhi would argue that something *would* come out of you being there."

Phelan saw the chills on Aisley's skin and moved the down comforter to cover their legs. "That would be Rhi trying to guilt me because *she* feels guilty by no' being there herself."

"Ohhh. Look at you piecing that together," Aisley said with a pleased smile. "I hadn't thought of that, but I think you're right. She can't be two places at once."

"If the Reapers stay out of Fae business, I think a Halfling should, as well." Phelan shrugged one shoulder. "The more I say it, the more I know I've made the right decision."

Aisley grinned. "You agreed to invite Dale a lot quicker than you decided this."

"People change."

"I agree, which is why I voted to invite him and Rennie. I can't wait to meet her. Both of them, actually. Besides, Dale helped save me."

Phelan tugged her head against his chest and kissed the top of it. "You're a good woman, beautiful."

"You're a good man, sexy."

"Does that mean I can watch Kate and Cameron now?"

Aisley laughed and started the movie.

Phelan tightened his whole body around her before he whispered in her ear. "I love you."

"I love you more."

"I love you most."

She turned her head and met his gaze. "Forever and always."

"Forever and always."

EASY CRANBERRY BRIE BITES



COOK TIME:

Prep: 5 min

Cook: 8 min

Total: 13 min

SERVINGS:

15 bites

INGREDIENTS:

- 4 oz Brie cheese
- ½ cup cranberry sauce
- 1.9 oz package frozen mini filo (15 shells)

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Preheat oven to 350°F.
2. Cut the Brie into ½-inch squares. Rind can be removed if preferred.
3. Place shells on a small parchment-paper-lined baking sheet.
4. Place a Brie square in each shell.
5. Top the Brie with ½ teaspoon of cranberry sauce. (see notes below)
6. Bake for 7-8 minutes. Serve warm or at room temperature.

NOTES:

- **MAKE AHEAD:** make bites according to directions but do not bake. Place the filled shells back in the tray they came in and cover tightly with plastic wrap. Place the tray back in the box and freeze for up to 3 months. Allow the bites to thaw before baking as directed above.
- Pepper jelly, fig preserves, honey, or your favorite jam or preserves can be substituted for the cranberry sauce.
- You can make a delicious homemade cranberry sauce by combining one cup water, one cup sugar, and a 12-oz bag of fresh cranberries in a saucepan over high heat. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to medium, and cook for 10 minutes. Cool and store covered in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks.
- You can substitute puff pastry or crescent roll dough for the filo shells. Cut the pastry into small squares and place into mini-muffin cups. Then, follow the rest of the recipe. You may need to add a few minutes to the cooking time.
- Leftovers can be stored covered in the refrigerator for 2 to 3 days. To reheat, place them in a 350°F oven for a few minutes. Do not reheat in the microwave.

MALCOLM AND EVIE



Malcolm stared at the pile of bags filled with presents for needy children of all ages.

“Marcail is going to kill me,” Evie murmured as she stood beside him.

He chuckled and wrapped an arm around her. “She might when she realizes a second load is coming tomorrow.”

“I’ll help her.”

“You forget that she loves to wrap.”

“Maybe a few, but not hundreds.” Evie looked up at him with her blue eyes. “I overdid it, didn’t I?”

He shifted so they faced each other and pulled her against him. “It’s the holidays, and thousands of children are without families or anyone to spend these days with. What’s one gift?”

“Using my words against me,” she said with a shrewd nod. “I should’ve seen that coming.”

He kissed her and looked at the packages again. “Perhaps we should help Marcail.”

“If you’re offering, then I know we bought a lot.” She sighed loudly. “I’m just worried the gifts won’t get everywhere in time.”

“Let me worry about that.”

Her eyes lit up. “You have an idea?”

“I do.”

She moved out of his arms and yanked her brown curls away from her face to clip them at the back of her head. He didn't know where the clip had come from, and he had given up trying to decipher how she always had something to use for her hair a long time ago. He couldn't get enough of the length and feel of the curls in his hands and spread out on the pillow beside him.

“Should we lug the bags upstairs?” Evie asked.

Malcolm took her hand and tugged her toward the kitchen. “It's been a long day after an arduous drive—in the snow, I might add. Everyone else has gone to their chambers. Which means...”

“We have the kitchen to ourselves.” Evie squealed softly and rushed past him to dig in the cabinets and pantry for sweets and other fare.

He stood to the side and watched. It was safer that way. Evie had a major sweet tooth, and when she was stressed, it got even worse. Malcolm had made the mistake of thinking that he could share her coconut cookies once. He'd nearly lost his hand.

The bliss on Evie's face when she found the container of cheesecake bites made him smile. She had her eyes closed as she ate first one and then a second. Only after she'd swallowed the second did she look at him and point at the treats.

“Want one?” she asked.

He made his way to the bacon-wrapped, cream-cheese-stuffed jalapeños. “I've been waiting for these all day.”

“We can't eat them all,” Evie whispered as she glanced at the door. “They've been cooking and baking all day, and I wasn't here to help.”

“We won't eat them all.”

She glanced at the cheesecake bites. “You might have to take these away from me.”

“No' happening, darlin'.”

“But...I’ll eat them all. You know I’ll be all grumbly and annoyed that I ate so much sugar at once. Not to mention the guilt I’ll feel for not leaving any for the others.”

He held out the plate of jalapeños. “Have one of these.”

“I’d rather not have my mouth on fire, thank you very much,” she stated flatly.

Malcolm looked around. “There’s food everywhere. Just put the lid on those and find something else.”

“But these are...so good,” she said, looking longingly at the bites.

Malcolm called her name and slowly said, “Put the lid on the container and step away.”

“I should.” Yet she ate another one.

He shook his head and grabbed another jalapeño before searching for something else. As soon as he saw the cold roasted chicken, it made him think of the late-night snacks they used to have when they lived at the castle.

“I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist that,” Evie said.

Malcolm tore off a piece of chicken and held it out to her. “It’s better than sugar.”

“Just so we’re clear, nothing is better than sugar. However,” she said as she set aside the cheesecakes and walked to him. “I do love this roasted chicken.”

They ate at the island in silence. He finished first and washed his hands before bringing Evie a towel. While she cleaned up, he put everything away. He turned around to find her leaning back against the sink, her hands on the counter.

“I need to thank you for stopping me from eating all that sugar,” she said with a sly grin.

He made his way to her. “We both know you hyped up on sugar isn’t the way to sleep.”

“Who said anything about sleeping?”

“Oh.” Now, it was his turn to grin. “You think you know what I want?”

She looked at the ceiling for a moment. “I’m fairly certain I know exactly what you want.”

“What is that?”

“Me, of course. You can’t get enough of me.”

He saw the teasing in her eyes, but her words were all truth.

“Is that so?”

“If you can catch me.”

She was out of the kitchen before he knew what had happened. Malcolm smiled slowly and took his time turning off all the lights before walking from the kitchen. He stood in the great hall and listened for his wife. The last place she would go would be their rooms, which meant she could be anywhere in the castle.

His enhanced hearing told him that she was to his left. As he concentrated, he made out the sound of her boots on the stone steps. She was going to one of the towers. He jumped to the second floor and walked to the stairs that led up to where he thought she’d gone. When he listened again, he heard only silence.

“You’re getting good, darlin’,” he whispered with a smile.



Evie shivered in the chilly tower, but she wouldn’t be cold for long. She stood in the middle of the room and waited. Their game was also training—just in case. Because evil never slept. She wanted to be prepared in case they had to fight anything with enhanced senses. So, she’d learned to walk silently—or as quietly as one could when running.

Part of the exercise was to see if she could determine where Malcolm was on his hunt to locate her. He always found her. Most times, there was battle training once he did, but she had other things on her mind tonight. She waited, listening

intently. She couldn't hear the way he and the other Warriors did, which meant she had to be ready for anything.

A blast of cold air hit her from behind. She whirled around to see Malcolm, the window open behind him.

"Weather willna stop the enemy," he stated as he stalked toward her.

Her breath hitched in her lungs as she gazed at his windswept golden blond hair. A lock landed against the scar on his face, his azure eyes blazing with hunger. His power exhilarated her. Snow clung to his eyelashes, clothes, and hair and swirled around them in the room. She gazed at his broad shoulders and the way his thin sweater molded to his thickly muscled chest. She knew how tender and loving his arms felt around her.

In two strides, he was before her. There were no words as he yanked her against him, his mouth descending on hers in a kiss that scorched her from the inside out. As her passion grew, the kiss turned more heated, more fervent.

More needy.

He ended the kiss and pressed his forehead to hers. He was as breathless as she when he said, "It's too cold for you."

"I'm on fire."

She barely got the words out before he had her against the wall, their bodies rubbing against each other as they yanked, pulled, and tore their clothes to get them off. Malcolm gathered her against him, sat on the floor, and then lay back so she straddled him.

Evie bit back a gasp when her bare skin met the cold stones. The chill only lasted a moment because Malcolm's hands slowly ran up her legs to her hips then her waist until he cupped her breasts. A sigh fell from her lips when he began thumbing her nipples. The desire shot straight down to her center, making it pulse. She needed him inside her. Now.

She rose to her knees and took his cock in hand, guiding him to her entrance. His eyes darkened when she lowered herself onto his length until she had taken all of him. Only then did she begin moving her hips. Malcolm sat up, holding her firmly

against him as he captured her lips in a searing kiss, their bodies moving against each other, creating the friction they both needed.

“Evie,” he whispered against her mouth.

She dug her nails into his back as the desire tightened. Their tempo increased. She tore her lips from his in an effort to drag more air into her lungs. Her head fell back as her climax crept closer and closer each time he moved inside her. His large hand splayed across her back, keeping her close so their bodies slid against each other.

A gasp of surprise fell from her lips when Malcolm’s hand fisted in her hair. Then his lips wrapped around a nipple. She screamed as the orgasm swallowed her and swept her away, pleasure rolling through her in cresting waves. Malcolm’s arms tightened around her as he whispered her name. Then he stiffened as he climaxed.

It took some time before she came back to herself. They remained locked in each other’s embrace. Evie opened her eyes and watched the snow dancing around them in the moonlight. She cooled rapidly, but she was loath to move. Still, she couldn’t suppress the shiver that went through her.

“Shite,” Malcolm said and swiftly got to his feet. He released her and shut the window.

Evie shook as she tried to put on her torn clothing. Malcolm gathered their garments before lifting her into his arms. She huddled against him, seeking his warmth as he rushed down the stairs. In no time, he had them ensconced in their room. He threw back the duvet and deposited her in the bed as he added more logs to the fire. Then he was under the covers with her, holding her tight.

“How do you stay so warm?” she asked as she pressed herself against him.

He chuckled while rubbing his hands up and down her back. “I’m sorry. I should’ve closed the window after I came in.”

“I didn’t remember either.” She looked at him with a grin. “I was thinking of other things.”

His azure eyes darkened. “Aye,” he whispered.

“I know what will warm me up. You.”

“Ah, lass. You’re my match in every way.”

She pulled his head down for a kiss as she sank her fingers into his hair. He rolled atop her as his cock thickened between them. As fire licked through her body once more, there were no other thoughts of cold.

“I love you,” she whispered as he slid inside her.

BACON-WRAPPED STUFFED JALAPEÑOS



COOK TIME:

Prep: 15 min

Cook: 20 min

Total: 35 min

SERVINGS:

8 jalapeños

INGREDIENTS:

- 8 large jalapeños, seeds removed
- 8 oz cream cheese, softened
- 1 ½ cups cheese of choice, grated
- ¼ cup green onions, sliced
- 1/8 cup cilantro, chopped
- 8 slices of bacon

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Preheat oven to 350°F
2. Fry bacon until it starts to get crisp. Remove and place on a plate lined with paper towels.
3. Slice just a little off the top, lengthwise, of each jalapeño, spooning out the seeds and hollowing out the pepper. Rinse jalapeños and discard any loose seeds that may remain.
4. Dry jalapeños and place them on a baking sheet.

5. In a medium bowl, beat cream cheese for 2 minutes, then add grated cheese, onions, and cilantro.
6. Spoon cheese mixture into each jalapeño and place back on baking sheet.
7. Wrap bacon around each pepper and secure with a couple of toothpicks.
8. Pop into the oven and bake for 18-20 minutes.
9. Remove and enjoy!

DALE AND RENNIE



Dale stopped the car on the side of the road. The entrance to MacLeod Castle was in a few hundred yards. It was hidden, but Fallon's directions had been quite clear.

"You can change your mind."

He turned his head to the side and looked into Rennie's green eyes. "I know."

"Do you want to go back home?"

His gaze slid back to the road.

Rennie's hand gently rested on his arm. "Honey, the invitation came out of nowhere. You've never heard from them before now."

"What if they doona send another invite?"

"Then they're arseholes who don't deserve to know you."

He smiled as he glanced at her. Leave it to his amazing woman to put it so bluntly. But his smile vanished quickly. "I want this."

"Then why aren't you driving?" She sighed and let her hand fall away. "You're a different man than the one you were before we met. Obviously, they know that."

"They've been watching me." He couldn't know that for sure, but he'd do it if he were in their shoes.

Rennie shifted in her seat to face him. She had her dark brown waves pulled back in a bun, and long bangs tangled in her lashes. "Maybe. I say they've waited too long to get to know

you. Then again, I didn't witness what happened before. I have your stories. And they have theirs. You told me they were good, decent people. It's not like they asked us to come just to kill us."

He briefly squeezed his eyes closed before looking at her. "That's where your imagination went?"

"I read a lot," she said with a shrug as if that explained everything.

And, in a way, it did.

"If they wanted me dead, they would've killed me a long time ago."

Rennie put her hand atop his on the gearshift. "They haven't. Instead, they asked us here. So, drive, honey. Let's get there, because I need out of this car before my bladder bursts."

Dale chuckled and pressed the accelerator. He drove to where the road curved and then turned the wheel slightly to the other side, just as Fallon had instructed. They drove off the road and passed through the shield.

"My goodness," Rennie whispered in awe as she caught sight of the castle through the trees.

Once clear of the forest, they got their first good look at the castle. It had been a long time since he'd seen it, but it was still just as beautiful. Maybe even more so with the snow.

"Wow. Just...wow," Rennie murmured.

Dale's heart thudded in his chest. He couldn't remember the last time he had been this nervous. He parked his vehicle next to others and found his hands shaking as he got out of the car. It was a clear, cold morning. The sunlight reflected off the newly fallen snow, making it sparkle. The sound of gulls and puffins could be heard in the distance, as well as the crashing of waves. He tilted his head back and gazed at the imposing structure of the castle before him.

Rennie's hand slid into his as she came up beside him. He turned his head to her and grinned. Given all the things he had done, he never once allowed himself to believe that he

deserved love—especially not from a Druid like her. But she had helped him see that he *did* deserve it. It had been a long process because he'd had a lot of emotional and mental healing to do. She had stayed beside him the entire time, lending him her strength and enveloping him in love.

He might have wanted to tread the path of good, but it was only with her help that he had succeeded.

“As pretty as this is, I’m freezing. And I have to pee,” she told him with a twinkle in her eyes.

Before Dale could reply, the opening castle door drew his attention. He froze when he spotted the MacLeod brothers. The trio walked out onto the steps of the castle, shoulder to shoulder. It had been years since he had seen them last, but he would’ve recognized them anywhere.

“Welcome,” Lucan said with a smile. “We’re glad to have you both.”

Dale felt Rennie tug on his hand as she walked toward the brothers. His feet felt like bricks as he trudged after her. He scanned the area, looking for other Warriors in case this was a trap.

“Hello,” Rennie said when they reached the brothers. “I’m Rennie.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Quinn. I should also warn you there are a bunch of us. We willna hold it against you if you doona remember all our names.”

Rennie laughed and turned to Fallon. Dale didn’t hear what they said. Blood rushed in his ears. His memories took him back to a different time when the MacLeods and everyone associated with them had been his enemies.

Someone firmly grasping his shoulder jerked him out of his thoughts. Dale blinked and looked into Fallon’s dark green eyes. Was this when they told him the invitation had all been a ruse? Would they exact their revenge on him now?

“The past is in the past,” Fallon said in a low voice. Behind him, Quinn and Lucan kept Rennie occupied. “We have the

best of intentions. You and Rennie are safe here and among friends.”

Friends. That certainly wasn't a word he'd thought to connect to the Warriors and Druids of MacLeod Castle. Dale swallowed and released a breath. “How did you know?”

“That you were thinking about the past? Or that this might be a trap?” Fallon shrugged and then grinned. “Because I would be doing the same.”

“What I did—”

“Doesna need to be discussed,” Fallon interrupted him. “No' by us, that is. If you need to talk about it, we willna stop you.”

Dale nodded, understanding dawning. “But this is a celebration.”

“Exactly.” Then the eldest MacLeod moved to the side and said loudly enough so Rennie could hear, “This is an informal event. We're a loud, unruly bunch, so please make yourselves at home. If you want a tour of the castle, we'll be happy to make that happen. Mingle, eat, and drink until it's time for the Yule celebration.”



Rennie wasn't oblivious to the private exchange between Dale and Fallon. Dale had looked more relaxed after, so she was grateful for whatever the elder MacLeod had said that'd helped put him at ease.

Her stomach tightened as she followed Quinn inside the castle to a restroom. When she returned, Dale was on her heels as they went farther inside. She knew about the Warriors and Druids, and she had hoped to meet them one day, but she had never expected it to be so soon. Knowing that she was about to face other immortals like Dale and their Druid counterparts, she was more than a little nervous.

Her gaze swept the castle, noting the beautiful rugs, ancient weapons, and tapestries hanging on the walls, interspersed with new artwork. It was a mix of old and new everywhere she

looked. It shouldn't have worked, but it did. Beautifully. She could easily explore the castle for days and want to start all over again. There was just so much to see.

Quinn talked, but she only listened with half an ear because she was too busy gazing in wonder at everything.

"You're gawking," Dale whispered in her ear.

She shot him a look and playfully hit him. "I can't help it. This place is amazing."

"Thank you," Lucan said, pleasure on his face at her compliment.

Suddenly, they were in the great hall, the ceiling soaring above them. There was a massive hearth, one so big that she could walk into it without bending. Tables with chairs were set in a U-shape in the middle of the room. And off to the side was the largest Christmas tree she had ever seen. But the decorations didn't end there. Lighted and decorated garland was everywhere.

"We tend to go all out," said a petite woman with long, black hair and the bluest eyes Rennie had ever seen. The Druid held out her hand. "I'm Isla."

Then, introductions took some time. Rennie met each of the Druids and their Warrior husbands. Not once did anyone show any kind of disdain or contempt for her or Dale. The relief was so substantial that she got lightheaded. Dale steadied her by tightening his arm around her. When she looked at him, he gave her a soft smile, telling her that he knew exactly what had happened.

The women welcomed her easily, and Rennie was soon drawn into conversations with them. She listened as they told her story after story. She laughed long and hard at many of them. When she glanced up, she found Dale with the men. She hadn't realized they had moved away from each other. It had happened slowly, but they had been welcomed so warmly that it was easy to relax and enjoy the day.

"We're really glad you both came," Ronnie said.

Cara nodded. "We should've done this sooner."

“I feel bad that we didn’t,” Reagan stated.

Rennie shook her head. “Please, don’t. I’m a firm believer that things happen when they’re supposed to. However, I do want to say that Dale needed this. So, thank you all, from the bottom of my heart.”

“Stop. All of you,” Aisley said with a glower. “I forgot my waterproof mascara, and if you all keep talking like this, I’m going to cry.”

Larena chuckled. “Going to cry? I already am.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” Tara grumbled and wiped at her eyes.

Aisley grunted and dabbed at her face with the sleeve of her shirt.

Rennie looked at the fourteen women around her and realized she could be friends with them. Not acquaintances, but real friends who kept in contact weekly. The kind who met up for lunches, went shopping, and had girls’ weekends.

Her head swiveled to look at Dale. He was laughing and seemed at ease, as if he had been friends with them for years. Her heart swelled at the sight. He had needed this—more than he’d realized. Because no matter how many times she told him that he was a different man now, he never truly believed her. There had always been a nugget of doubt in his mind that he would never be able to shake off his past. But here, now, surrounded by those who had once been his enemies, they might actually be able to see the wonderful, kind, loving man that he was—regardless of his past mistakes.

As if sensing her gaze, he turned his head, and his dark eyes met hers. He mouthed: *I love you*. She grinned and mouthed it back.

This was the start of something new for both of them.

“It’s time,” Sonya said.

Rennie checked her phone to see that they had been talking for hours. “Time for what?”

“Come,” Laura said with a grin. “We’ll show you.”

Rennie followed the group from the hall into a back room. There was a table with ivy hair wreaths. Each of the women took one and set it atop their heads until only one remained.

Saffron lifted the circlet. “We made this for you. You don’t have to wear it.”

“I want to,” she said hurriedly.

Saffron smiled and gently set it on Rennie’s hair. She reached up and touched it. Then the other woman turned her to face a mirror on the wall so she could see her reflection.

“I take that smile to mean you like it,” Marvail said.

Rennie blinked the sudden moisture from her eyes. “Very much.”

“We’d better get to the food before it’s all gone,” Gwynn said into the silence that followed.

Dani came up beside Rennie and explained. “We set out food so everyone can grab whatever they wish. There is also mead since that’s what we prefer during these celebrations, but there will be other choices, as well, both alcoholic and non-alcoholic. I should warn you about Galen. He has a pit for a stomach. He’s never full. Which means we like to get there before he does.”

“I’ve hidden food before,” Evie said.

Reaghan snorted loudly. “I hide food from my husband every day.”

Everyone burst out laughing as they made their way to the kitchen.

Rennie was shocked at the amount of food spread around the kitchen. There was everything anyone could possibly want. And she tried all of it. Just as the others had warned, Galen was the first of the men into the kitchen. They hadn’t been joking about the amount of food he ate.

Dale came up beside her as she stood near a window, eating and watching the others. “I like your hair wreath.”

“Me, too,” she said with a bright smile. “I’m so glad we came.”

“I am, too.”

“I’ve never been to a solstice celebration. I’m eager to see what it’s all about.”

He smoothed the backs of his knuckles down her cheek. “You willna have long to wait.”

“Do you think we’ll be invited back?”

Dale nodded his head of thick, dark hair. “We already have been.”

She gazed into his dark eyes. “Are you happy?”

“More than you could imagine.”

Rennie leaned against him and shared her plate of food. Yes, this was a new beginning for them.

CANDY CANE MARTINI



INGREDIENTS:

- 1 oz vanilla vodka
- 1 oz crème de cacao
- 1 oz peppermint schnapps
- ¼ oz grenadine
- 1 oz half and half
- 1 candy cane, crushed for garnish

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Fill a cocktail shaker with ice and add vanilla vodka, crème de cacao, and peppermint schnapps. Shake until very cold. About 20-30 seconds.
2. Add half and half. Swirl to combine.
3. In a chilled martini glass, pour grenadine into the bottom and swirl around the edges.
4. Strain and pour candy cane martini into the glass. Add crushed candy cane to garnish.
5. Sip and enjoy responsibly.

NOTES:

- Always use high-quality ice to make any cocktail.
- If you don't have vanilla vodka, plain, whipped cream, or peppermint vodka will work.
- If you use peppermint vodka, cut back on the peppermint schnapps.

- Crème de menthe will work in place of peppermint schnapps, but it will be green -eliminate the grenadine to keep the color pretty.

THE WINTER SOLSTICE



The night was cold and clear, and the quarter-moon hung in the inky sky with billions of stars as observers. Between the castle and the cliffs, a massive fire roared, sending sparks dancing into the night.

The longest night of the year was a special celebration. One that Fallon loved to watch. The Druids with their ivy hair wreaths stood in a circle around the fire, their hands joined. Cara had given out mistletoe to everyone as a blessing since the winter fruit of mistletoe was a symbol of life to the Celts in the dark winter months. Fallon and his brothers might not be Druids, but they were well acquainted with the Yule ceremony from their youth.

“Seeing this never gets old,” Larena whispered as she joined him.

He wrapped an arm around her and accepted the cup of mead she’d brought for him. Everyone at the castle took part in brewing their own mead. There were different flavors for everyone, which was another reason their family worked. What had Rennie called them? *A found family*.

Aye. He liked that. Because they had found each other and decided to stay together. That made them strong.

“Here it comes,” Larena said excitedly. “This is my favorite part.”

Fallon listened as the Druids began their chant of gratitude and thanks for the year and for the one that was to come. As their

voices grew, the flames of the fire licked higher and higher as if trying to reach the stars.

The Druids' magic washed over each of them before expanding and covering everything that made up MacLeod land. Of all the seasonal Druid celebrations, the winter solstice was his favorite. Was it the weather? The deep, dark of the night? Perhaps it was something else entirely. He didn't know or care.

He looked at Larena, who had her hair wreath atop her head of golden blond hair. She met his gaze as a slow smile curved her lips.

When the Druids ended their chant, Fallon lifted his cup into the air. "To family!"

"To family!" everyone shouted in response.

He took a drink of mead and smiled at his wife beside him, sighing in utter and complete contentment.

CRAB AND GOUDA-STUFFED MUSHROOMS



COOK TIME:

Prep: 30 min

Cook: 30 min

Total: 1 hour

SERVINGS:

18 – 20 mushrooms

INGREDIENTS:

- 24 oz cremini mushrooms, about 2 inches in diameter, cleaned
- ¼ cup olive oil, divided
- 1/3 cup sliced scallions, plus additional for garnish
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 4 oz cream cheese
- 2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
- 1 teaspoon Old Bay seasoning
- 2 tablespoons grated parmesan
- 1 cup shredded Gouda, divided
- 6 oz lump crab meat
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Lemon wedges for serving
- Optional – hot sauce, to taste

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Preheat oven to 400°F with rack in the middle position.
2. Remove stems from mushrooms and set aside. Use a small spoon to gently hollow out a small portion of the mushroom cavities, removing gills.
3. On a lined baking sheet, toss mushroom caps with 2 tablespoons olive oil and a few pinches of salt and pepper. Arrange mushrooms in a single layer, cavity-side down. Roast for about 15 minutes until liquid is released. Remove from oven, drain liquid from pan, and flip caps. Set aside.
4. While mushrooms are roasting, finely chop stems. Heat remaining 2 tablespoons of oil in a nonstick skillet until simmering.
5. Add chopped stems with $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon each of salt and pepper, and cook, stirring often, until liquid is released, and mushrooms are soft but not brown—about 5 minutes.
6. In a bowl, mix cream cheese, Dijon mustard, and Worcestershire sauce. Stir in mushroom mixture, parmesan cheese, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup shredded Gouda, and seafood seasoning. Gently stir in crab meat, breaking up any large pieces. Season to taste with salt and pepper and hot sauce (if using).
7. Fill roasted mushroom caps with filling mixture, packing it into the cavity and mounding slightly. Top each mushroom with remaining Gouda.
8. Bake for 5 – 7 minutes until cheese is melted and filling is heated through. Serve hot, topped with additional sliced scallions and a squeeze of lemon juice.

THANK YOU



Thank you for reading **A DARK WARRIOR FOR CHRISTMAS**. I hope you enjoyed revisiting each couple from the Dark Warrior series as much as I did! If you are new to the Dark Warriors or Dark Swords series, take a look back at the beginning of the DARK UNIVERSE with **DANGEROUS HIGHLANDER**.

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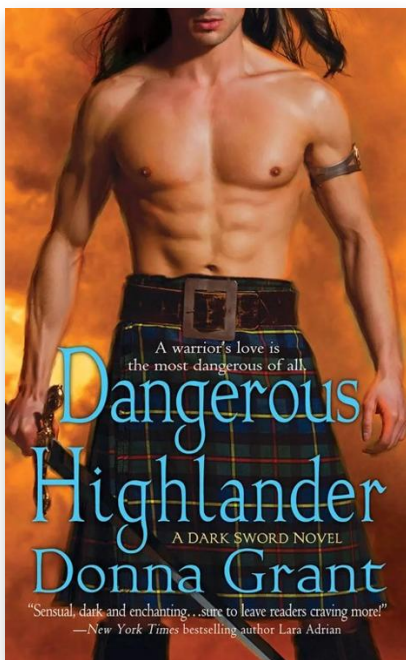
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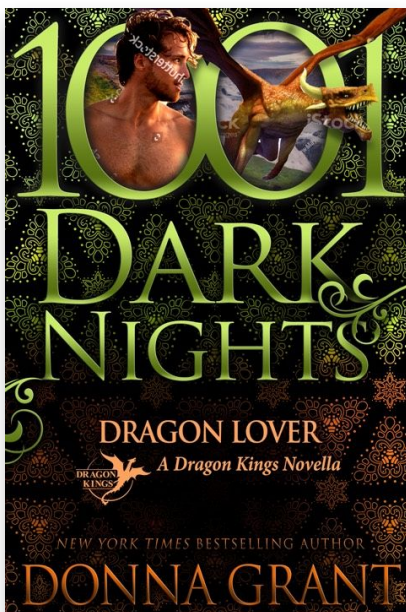
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author Donna Grant® has been praised for her “totally addictive” and “unique and sensual” stories.

She’s written more than one hundred novels spanning multiple genres of romance including the bestselling Dragon Kings® series that features a thrilling combination of Druids, Fae, and immortal Highlanders who are dark, dangerous, and irresistible. She lives in Texas with her dog and a cat.

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