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Highlander's
ETERNAL
Bride

Maddie MacKenna

HIGHLANDER'S ETERNAL BRIDE

A MEDIEVAL HISTORICAL TIME-TRAVELING
ROMANCE NOVEL

MADDIE MACKENNA

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SCOTTISH BROGUE GLOSSARY

Here is a very useful glossary my good friend and fellow author *Lydia Kendall* sent to me, that will help you better understand **the Scottish Brogue** used:

about - about

ach - oh

afore - before

an' - and

anythin - anything

a'side - beside

askin' - asking

a'tween - between

auld - old

aye - yes

bampot - a jerk

bare bannock- a type of biscuit

bearin' - bearing

beddin' - bedding or sleeping with

bellend - a vulgar slang word

blethering - blabbing

blootered - drunk

bonnie - beautiful or pretty

bonniest - prettiest
cannae - cannot
chargin' - charging
cheesin' - happy
clocked - noticed
c'mon- come on
couldn'ae - couldn't
coupla - couple of
crivens - hell
cuddie - idiot
dae - do
dinin' - dining
dinnae - didn't or don't
disnae - doesn't
dobber - idiot
doesn'ae - doesn't
dolton - idiot
doon - down
dram - a measure of whiskey
efter - after
eh' - right
'ere - here
fer - for
frein - friend
fey - from
gae - get or give
git - a contemptible person
gonnae - going to

greetin' - dying

hae - have

hald - hold

haven'ae - haven't

heed - head

heedstart - head start

hid - had

hoovered - gobbled

intoxicated - drunk

kip - rest

lass - young girl

leavin - leaving

legless - drunk

me - my

nae - not

no' - not

noo - now

nothin' - nothing,

oan - on

o' - of

Och - an Olympian spirit who rules the sun

oot- out

packin- packing

pished - drunk

scooby - clue

scrans - food

shite - shit

sittin' - sitting

so's - so as
somethin' - something
soonds ' sounds
stonking - stinking
tae - to
teasin' - teasing
thrawn - perverse, ill-tempered
tryin' - trying
wallops - idiot
wee -small
wheest - talking
whit's - what's
wi' - with
wid - would
wisnae - was not
withoot - without
wouldnae - wouldn't
ya - you
ye - you
yea - yes
ye'll - you'll
yer - your
yerself - yourself
ye're - you're
ye've - you've

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A GIFT FROM THE HIGHLANDS

Thank you very much for purchasing my book. It really means a lot to me, because this is the best way to show me your love and support!

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Once again, I can't thank you enough for your support!

Maddie MacKenna

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ABOUT THE BOOK

A fated love lasting through the centuries...

Laird Jack Lyons needs a miracle to save his clan from financial ruin. And it comes in the form of a bewitching heiress, who claims to be from an entirely other timeline...

When a fortune-teller cursed her in ancient Gaelic, Isla Lambert realizes her future is doomed. For her trip to Scotland turns into a trip to the past, to a time long forgotten from history.

How can an English heiress from 1973 and a Highland Laird from the 1650s be bound for eternity?

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BIRLET SHALLOWS, SCOTLAND

*B*ubbly laughter filled the air around Isla Lambert, as she lifted her wine glass to her lips and drank deeply from it. She grinned widely again, then gathered the cards on the table to her chest. “I win,” she announced as she stared into the sullen faces of the men around the table. Isla flung her head back and laughed a bit more to celebrate her victory.

To her side, Penny Harper laughed gingerly, then tossed a coin to prove the game was over and Isla had won her bet. The crowd watching the card game behind them roared and cheered for her. Isla marveled in the rush of adrenaline that surged through her and made her heart thump wildly in her chest.

Nothing ever trumped the joy and excitement she got from nights like this. It wasn't her first time in Birlet Shallows, but it was her first time at the fair, and it was turning out to be more fun than she anticipated.

Isla got up from her seat, her friends Penny, Ada, and Katherine following, and together all four of them walked out of the pub.

“That was incredible,” Penny gushed. “You ousted those men, totally beat them like it was nothing.” Penny’s voice was getting a bit too high pitched, due to the drunkenness of the girl.

“True, she was amazing,” Ada agreed before adjusting her hat on her head. It was a cool night, unlike the stormy weather Isla had witnessed since she arrived on the shores of Scotland. She didn’t plan to travel there for long. Just until the start of winter when she could return to her home in London.

A place that doesn’t feel like home anymore.

The thought crossed through Isla’s mind and left a wake of raw pain in her chest. She shrugged it off and released a deep breath. Not wanting to remember anything about her life back home, she stopped walking down the street toward her parked car and turned back to her friends.

“What do you say we go to the fair in the main market?” Isla suggested in an enthusiastic voice as she held the skirt of her dress and twirled around on her feet. “We could enjoy the starry night as we drive toward the square, and when we get there, we’ll join the fun. I hear there’s always a round table of drinks...” she said with a suggestive laugh as she looked at Katherine who already had a fierce blush on.

“Plus, we’ll get to meet handsome Highlanders,” Ada suggested.

“Highlanders?” Isla asked as she continued walking in front of her friends again. She smoothed a hand down her short black hair and angled her head over her shoulder. “Don’t you know

the history of this place? They may be handsome, but they are nothing like the gentlemen of England.”

Isla spent most of her time back in London reading and researching history. It was her favorite pastime, and she did it a lot, since she didn't have anything else to do during the day. Born an heiress of a great fortune had those little perks. But her friends usually spent their time shopping or lounging together, and they always loved to hear what Isla learned from her books. Isla started humming to herself as they continued to where her car was parked.

Once she got in, Katherine took the front seat while Penny and Ada sat in the back. She saw Penny's excited grin through her rearview mirror, causing Isla to entertain some tingles of excitement inside too.

She always enjoyed being in Scotland. Enjoying the lovely nature was one reason, but besides that the people had a beautiful culture, and it was always exciting to participate in fairs of this kind.

When they reached the square, Isla led her group toward the crowd. It took a few minutes for them get to the front of the crowd where they could watch the jugglers' show.

Isla pinned her eyes to the fire; the performer toyed with it, and she kept watching until the show ended, clapping as the performers bowed in front of them. She usually didn't fancy crowds like this. Isla noticed some of the locals were crowded in a corner trying to participate in the dance while the rest focused on purchasing items from the local sellers.

She was about to turn to Ada when she felt a hand touch her wrist. Isla nearly jumped from the shock. Her eyes widened, she gasped and turned around to see an old woman holding her hand.

“Bonnie lass,” the woman said, flashing Isla a toothy grin. “Did I scare ye?”

A frown appeared on Isla’s face as she pulled her hand away from the strange woman’s, and a shudder raced up her spine. The woman had the greenest eyes she had ever seen. They were like crystals, or emeralds. Isla didn’t think they were real. Who could look so...

Her gaze flickered over the woman’s face. She took in her long red hair, the smile curving on her lips and the way her eyes gleamed with a certain mischief Isla did not miss.

“What do you want?” Isla asked perturbed, as her friends came up to stand behind her. She let her gaze drift over the woman’s ragged clothes, and the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes.

“To tell yer future,” the woman replied in a thick Scottish accent, maintaining the same smile that nearly crept Isla out.

The tingles of excitement she felt on her skin earlier turned into goosebumps and she shook her head. “I don’t believe in such things, sorry,” she said, then turned to walk away with her friends.

Fortune telling? What a joke, Isla thought with a small sarcastic laugh. Only uneducated minds believed a human like them could tell their future by palm reading and sign languages. It was absurd!

Over the years, Isla had run into a few con artists like the woman offering to tell her fortune for money. She always laughed them off. She wasn't that silly. Her friends, however, kept glancing behind them and murmuring.

“Would you not like to know?” she heard Penny ask Ada.

Isla hooked her hand into Katherine's, and they continued walking down the street while the girls talked about the wine they had tasted at the pub earlier. They had made it to the rows of food sellers, and Katherine was trying out a pie from one stand when Isla turned and saw the red-haired woman behind her again.

“Fortunes are as expensive as gold... what do you stand to lose by knowing yers?” the woman asked Isla. “There's always somethin' to learn... a fate to avoid if ye learn what happens.”

“I'm not interested, old woman,” she snapped this time, then folded her hands over her chest. She was about to continue with a lecture on why fortune tellers could never be real when Ada said in an excited voice, “I'd like to have mine read.”

Ada was grinning and giggling with excitement when the woman nodded softly, then took Ada's hands and said, “Come with me, child.”

Isla huffed. Ada had a soft heart, and that made her naïve and easily fooled. Her brilliant smile came out, and Isla could already tell that she would believe whatever rubbish this woman told her.

Isla shook her head and released an exasperated sigh as she watched Ada enter the tent with the woman.

“What you two fancy that stuff too?” she asked Penny and Katherine when she noticed them whispering to each other. Penny shrugged, Katherine didn’t say anything, but Isla could tell that they were interested. “Fine,” Isla continued. “Just don’t give her any money. You will be foolish to believe whatever she says anyway.”

She pouted and folded her arms over her chest after that. *Unbelievable!*

In a few minutes her friends took turns going into the tent, and when it was over the red-haired woman came out with them again.

“You should try it, Isla,” Penny tried to convince her. “I was told I would live a long life... Ada will marry a prince, too. Who knows what yours might tell?”

Isla rolled her eyes. She wasn’t the least bit interested in any of this, but she was sure her friends, Penny especially, wouldn’t let her hear the end of it.

“Fine,” she muttered then marched toward the tent where the old woman stood at. Was it just in her head or did she see a

smirk on the woman's lips? It was the kind that sent a cold shiver through her spine and made Isla tremble regardless of how disinterested she was.



Inside the tent, Isla sat on the ground in front of the woman's table and crossed her legs in front of her. She couldn't shake off the dizziness that suddenly overcame her when a strong wind blew against the tent. Her stomach started to churn, she felt the screaming urge to leave this place, but as she tried to fight it off, her eyes landed on a green stone on the table.

The entire place smelled like sage and incense. She wriggled her nose and looked around the tent. The fire in a corner burned bright, and a strange feeling crept over her, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand.

The woman sitting opposite her noticed what she was looking at and said, "Yer palms, child. I can only tell what yer fortune is like if I look at them."

Isla swallowed hard, then stretched out her hand reluctantly.

Another jolt of electricity raced through her when the woman grabbed her hand and stared at it for a long time. The lines on the woman's forehead suddenly creased together before she spoke. "I see darkness... lots of darkness. Friends will betray ye, men will try to kill ye, and ye shall lose everything."

Isla's eyes met the woman's cold green ones, and she was tranced for a second before she snatched her hand away.

“I warn ye, child... the man ye meet when ye’re about to die shall be yer everything and yer demise from the world ye’ve known all yer life. It is yer fate... a horrible one.”

“You’re lying!” Isla yelled suddenly, feeling a burst of anger that her time was wasted like this. She jumped to her feet and jabbed a finger in the woman’s direction. “You do this a lot don’t you? Deceive and lie to innocent girls?”

“I only speak what I see in their stars.”

“Nonsense,” Isla trembled again, then shook her head. Her muscles tensed, and quivered. The heat flushing through her was one of anger, and it made her veins pulsate with blood rushing through her. “This was a waste of my time,” she exploded, then tried to control her already labored breathing by sucking in deep breaths to calm her riled nerves.

She turned to storm out of the tent when the woman called her name, shocking her. Isla froze to the spot, unable to move for the next few seconds that passed.

How does she know that? How does she know my name?

“Take this medallion,” the woman said, and Isla finally turned to see her standing right behind her. “Ye need to find the remaining ruins of the cave near the village’s dried-up loch. In the cave, ye’ll find the key to this medallion, and when ye use it, the world around ye will return to its proper place. Ye might even find something ye’ve always wanted... love.”

All right, now she's proven she is insane, Isla thought as she frowned. "Love is the last thing I hope to find," she defended herself and was about to refuse the medallion when the woman continued, "Take it... it's a gift. A family heirloom I have inherited from me maither and her maither before her. It has existed for over six centuries."

Isla still hesitated, but as she stared at the green stone in the woman's hand, she was suddenly enticed. *Where have I seen it before?*

A strange sensation crept through her. Isla couldn't shake off the feeling closing in on her and squeezing her lungs until it felt like she couldn't breathe.

She snapped herself back to reality and took the medallion from the woman. "Thank ye," she muttered as she grabbed it.

That smirk Isla saw earlier returned and it sent another shiver right through her.

"Thig an t-uisge agus tillidh sibh gu am far a bheil so dhanachd gad thoirt gu agus bidh sibh beo na laithean an sin a stri ri bhith beo gus an ionnsiach sibh gradh agus maitheanas," the woman rasped.

"What does that mean?" Isla wondered, feeling terror seize her lungs. But the woman only smiled and turned her back, dismissing Isla from her tent once and for all.

Isla tried to ignore her strange words as she exited the tent. She lifted her hands on her cheeks to hide her reddened skin as

her friends rushed toward her.

“How was it?” Ada asked.

“What was your fortune?” Penny continued.

“Will you meet a handsome Highlander? Is there a prince in the story?”

Isla shook her head. “Stop it,” she said in a sterner and louder voice to get them to stop rambling and making her feel more nervous that she already did. When her friends quieted down, she continued, “That woman in there is a crazy fraud. A witch. And you shouldn’t listen to anything she’s told you. She’s insane.” She felt bad at the defeated look on her friends’ faces, but they had forced her into something she didn’t want to do, and now she was terrified of her own future.

Isla walked away from them after that. She no longer felt the need to explore or enjoy the fair. Right now, she just wanted to get back to the bed and breakfast and sleep the night off.

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*I*t rained heavily that night while Isla tried to force herself to sleep. Nothing could take the strange woman's words out of her head or the chill that raced up her spine while she spoke to them.

The man ye meet shall be yer everything, and yer demise from the world.

As she tossed in her bed, she forced her eyes to close again and willed her mind to shut down. A rumble of thunder from outside jarred her awake again, and this time, Isla sat up in her bed with a loud groan.

She pushed the sheets covering her body away and combed her fingers through her thick mass of black hair.

What did she mean? Who was that woman anyway?

Her eyes wandered around the room. It landed on the medallion on her nightstand. The green stone in the middle of a gold casing stared back at her until she felt a bit light headed.

I have seen this medallion before. Isla had explored history so much that it was hard for her to remember where exactly she had read of it.

The same creeping sensation she had felt earlier while at the fair returned, and this one brought a tremble to Isla's nerves and muscles. Knots formed in the pit of her stomach, the hairs on her skin stood, and strangely it felt again like she had seen the stone before.

She closed her eyes and searched her mind. Isla consumed a lot of history books, and she was certain she had read about a precious medallion in the Birlet Shallows' history somewhere. She just couldn't place it.

When she opened her eyes again and stared at the stone, it finally dawned on her.

Clan Kirkpatrick. An ancient Scottish clan whose entire family was wiped out in a disastrous storm that plagued the Highlands in the 1400's. Isla remembered the story as soon as the Clan's name came to mind.

She had read about them while studying the history of the United Kingdom. She remembered the wife of Laird Kirkpatrick was an English woman, Maleah Calloway; and it was rumored to be a spelled medallion she brought to the Highlands with her.

The Clan's people never truly accepted her as one of them and it was even rumored that the disaster that led to their death was caused by one of her children.

After the disastrous storm that raged their land and took lives, the Clan had lost a lot, but some men had survived. Those who survived remained on the land while others migrated from their homes toward the sea and dedicated their lives to fishing and watching the borders.

The Calloways ended up being a major sea merchants in the Scottish Highlands.

Isla shivered as she slowly picked the medallion up and looked at it deeply. *Could it be the same medallion I've seen in the books?*

A deep laugh rumbled past her lips then. Isla felt her chest tighten further as she thought of the woman's words again. Did that mean that the old woman claiming to be a gypsy was a descendant of the Kirkpatrick Clan? How else did she get this medallion?

How insane. She decided to toss the woman's words out of her mind and get a goodnight's rest. Her travel through Scotland had only lasted a few weeks, and Isla was not yet ready to part with the lovely Highlands.

Isla kept staring at the medallion, thinking, until she finally decided.

So be it, I'll find out if it's real for myself, she thought and got out of bed to head for the famous dried-up Loch Leven only a mile away from her bed and breakfast.



By the time Isla made it to the loch the rain had subsided into a drizzle. She got out of her car and walked the rest of the distance. The sky was still dark, and she could hear the chirps of birds in the sky they came out of their hiding place.

She shivered from the cold air and tried to stop her stomach from quivering in anticipation of what she was to find. Even though she did not believe in fortunes and magic, she still loved to explore.

Isla held the hem of her dress high and counted her steps until she got to the massive cave just beside the non-existent loch.

She couldn't imagine how beautiful the now flaky grounds would have looked when the blue-green waters existed on it.

Must have been magical.

She sucked in a deep breath and looked at the veil of darkness extending into the passage under the huge rock. She swallowed hard and held her breath steady. Once she stepped in there, she doubted she would be able to see anything as the rising sun would not reflect in there because of the thick layering rock covering it.

She had lived her years craving adventure. Whenever she visited a new land, she liked to experience what life was like for them there.

What's in a cave I can't explore?

Isla wanted to solve that mystery, so she put one foot in front of her, and started walking into the cave with slow strides.

Isla held the medallion tight and raised the flashlight up she carried from her car, hoping she could find her path. The hand holding the medallion quivered. Isla inhaled sharply and took in the unique earthy smell associated with rain and damp dust.

She wondered how long it had been since anyone came under the cave here. As she continued walking, her mind drifted off to her friends.

Once I find nothing here, I'll tell them they've been defrauded.
Isla couldn't wait to get back to the main village and tell them how she had found nothing in the cave that woman had told them about.

She suddenly stopped when she met a solid wall. It blocked the path further and left her with nothing else to do than walk back out. Isla scoffed and raised the medallion up again. "What did she say about finding a key?"

A second after she spoke, her gaze caught onto something shiny by her left and she turned toward it. Isla gasped and her jaw dropped.

On the wall to her left, she saw something moving and nearly screamed before she realized it was a mouse. Isla looked closer and noticed a carved-out space on the wall too. It had the same shape as the medallion she held.

This is impossible, she thought as she slowly lifted the medallion and placed it on the spot. The instant she did that, the ground beneath her feet shifted, and her head swooned. She staggered back, her hand dropped from the wall and next thing she heard was long whispers deep inside her.

Thig an t-uisge agus tillidh sibh gu am far a bheil so dhanachd gad thoirt gu agus bidh sibh beo na laithean and sin a stri ri bhith beo gus an ionnsiach sibh gradh agus maitheanas.

Isla heard the same words the old woman had whispered to her back at the fair. She put her hands on the sides of her head and tried to fight off the dizziness that overpowered every other emotion she was feeling.

It was stronger than her however, Isla could no longer control her breathing or the rising pulse in her temples. Her limbs suddenly felt weak, she heard a loud rumble of thunder outside just before her lids dropped closed and she fell limply to the ground with a loud thud.

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BIRLET SHALLOWS, SCOTLAND

1650

Jack Lyons dismounted his stallion when he reached the main market of the small village settlement, Glencoe. As his boots hit the ground, he marched toward the crowd of villagers gathered and tried to make his way to the front.

“My Laird,” a guard greeted as soon he saw him. Jack nodded once then looked from the guard to the crowd of villagers chanting praises in native Gaelic. He enjoyed riding out to the villages to watch his people whenever they held celebrations in the market square. His Clan was small, but the people enjoyed their feasts and gatherings.

“What is goin’ on?” Jack asked as he rubbed a hand over his jaw.

“The people are celebratin’ their champion in the joustin’ competitions. Sir Cristian Meade won the final rounds, and the people sing his praises.”

“Cristian Meade?” Jack asked, not knowing who his guard was referring to.

“Aye, My Laird... he’s of House Meade, and he is a knight. A new Knight added to our guards.”

Jack nodded, then turned away from the scene. Another of his guards had taken his horse to tie it in a corner, and as he strolled around the market in silence, he inspected his surroundings.

Glencoe was one of the small settlements of Clan Humphreys and Jack was Laird of the people here and in the other two settlements, Birlet Shallows and Onich. He liked to keep himself informed on the happenings among his people. Even though Birlet Shallows and Onich were far off, he still had a tight grip on the happenings there and got his reports from the village head and guards.

“The rains last night destroyed the vineyards in the Castle,” his guard reported. Jack glanced at him before the man added, “The council wants a meeting. They want to decide what happens next. As soon as winter comes, Clan Humphreys might not have enough to sustain itself and it is predicted to be a long winter this year.”

“Cancel the council meetin’,” Jack answered. “I will call one when it pleases me.”

“My Laird—”

“I have only just returned from the great market of Birlet Shallows, and I willnae have the council tell me what to do with the proceedin’s of the sales this time. I ken how to rule my people, and I will do just that,” he contended before he combed his fingers through his hair. “I will ride back to the Castle, stay with the men and continue inspections.”

Jack did not miss the stiff set line on the guards’ lips as he bowed his head in agreement. “Aye, My Laird.”

He watched the guard walk away from him and sighed. What was the point of all this? He did his best to make sure his people were safe most times, but his councilmen still bothered more about calling meetings to discuss his love life.

Jack’s muscles strained because he knew it was all they wanted to talk about in their small meeting.

Everything he had done in the past eight years was for his people, and yet the small council always found a way to either thwart or frustrate his plans simply because it did not suit their needs.

While Jack was more concerned about the well-being of the Clan and making sure he could provide protection for every man, his council was more concerned with matters of his life and heirs. They wanted him to take a lady wife, bed her and make sons.

That will not help the Clan survive.

Jack was lost in his thoughts and didn't realize he had walked far off from the market toward the vast expanse of lands covered in lush grass. As he admired the lush fields, he remembered the dream he had the previous night. The images were vivid in his head. Jack recalled the scent of roses that invaded his senses as he moved close to the woman standing with her back to him in his Castle's dungeons, and the shiver that raced through him when he had put a hand on her shoulder to stir her in his direction.

He woke up before he saw the woman's face, but that little scene was etched into his memory like it was one of importance.

Time to get back to the Castle, he thought, dragging his thoughts back to reality before turning and walking back toward the market. He didn't make it far before he heard a loud, horrifying scream that cut through his hearing and pierced at his heart.



Jack raced toward the direction of the scream. When he rounded the corner around a cottage closest to the village, saw a woman struggling to push the men who held her away.

She was small compared to their larger frames and nothing she did could ever make her break free from them.

His first instinct whenever he saw anyone in trouble was to jump in and save the day, but Jack froze in his steps when the woman's head whipped in his direction and his gaze landed on hers.

She had the deepest shade of green eyes he had ever seen. Her short wavy, black hair tumbled down to her shoulder blades, and he didn't need to get too close to see the creamy white shade of her skin, and the hue of crimson on her cheeks.

An instant tingle raced through his body, his muscles tightened a bit, but the woman yelled again, and this time her words sounded like curses.

"Let me go," she continued as the man holding her arm laughed loud and then sneered.

She's English, Jack realized when he heard her clear intonation and language. She was also spirited as she struggled even in the face of danger.

"What do ye think ye're doin'?" Jack roared in a loud voice to get her attacker's attention. Once the three men turned in his direction fully, he marched toward them and took out his sword sheathed to his side. "Let the lass go."

"She isnae a Scottish lass," one of them replied. "She's nae from here, and we arenae either so we dinnae answer to ye."

The woman whimpered as the man suddenly grabbed her tight against his body and put the dirk he held to her neck.

Jack's blood surged forth in a rush that filled him with anger.

His gaze narrowed on the woman again. Jack had never seen a color like the one she was wearing. He didn't know what to

call it, but the shade made her skin look even more appealing.

Her lips trembled as they parted slightly. The full-skirt dress she wore clung tight to her body and the bodice pushed her feminine parts up, exposing lovely, creamy skin at her chest.

“We will take the lass into one of these caves and we will do as we please with her,” one of the men said to Jack. His voice was barely audible as Jack stared at the mesmerizing woman.

What is this pool of heat settling inside me? He had never felt anything like it, and it was instant. He couldn't tear his eyes off her but when he saw her attacker press his blade deeper into her neck, his already tense muscles strained.

“Let her go now,” Jack threatened as he tightened his grip on the head of his sword. “If ye want to live ye will do as I say.”

“What will ye do otherwise?” another man of the three asked, then they all laughed and started to chatter in an ancient Gaelic dialect he didn't fully understand.

Jack took one menacing step toward the men, then he raised his sword. “Release her,” he ordered again.

He saw a tear slide down the woman's cheek, and that surprisingly made his heart ache. He couldn't understand the feeling, but he pushed it aside. What mattered first was that he free her from these men.

“Sheath yer sword, my man,” the man holding her captive said. “We will fight ye either way.”

Jack got his opportunity when the first two men approached him with their swords drawn for battle. He moved quickly and all his skill came into play. In minutes, he had put them down, and he was faced with only one opponent left.

The woman he was trying to save had squeezed her eyes shut and she was crying harder now. Jack motioned for the man to come at him, and he lunged forward when the man pushed her to the ground and attacked him.

Jack cut him down too, then sheathed his sword, hurried toward the woman, and lifted her to her feet with both hands. It was then he caught the scent of roses that clung to her. His insides quivered because of it instantly, and a craving stirred up inside him as his gaze dropped to her lips.

“Ye are safe now,” he said to her, then gathered her close before he could stop himself. “Ye are safe.”

She leaned closer to him and sobbed for a while. Jack lifted his hand and patted her back gently, hoping to ease her fear and panic so he could speak to her and find out if she was lost.

He had never met a woman in all the Highlands who would dress so provocatively, or one who would look so refined as she.

“Are ye all right now?” he asked her in a soft voice; she hiccupped as she pulled back from him. The woman wiped her

hands over her cheeks and pressed her lips together.

Her left brow arched softly, before she shook her head. Jack did not think she heard him, so he tried again. “Are ye all right? Are ye hurt anywhere?”

“No, I am not,” she answered. “Thank you for saving my life.” Their gazes merged for a moment, and she blew out air from her lips before she continued. “I am Isla... Isla Lambert,” she introduced and extended a hand like Jack was supposed to somehow know who she was.

When Jack did not move to place his hand in hers, she spoke again.

“I need to find Birlet Shallows,” she said in response to his question. Jack’s forehead squeezed into numerous deep lines, and he stared at her confusion as she repeated the statement in a clearer accent.

“I need to find Birlet Shallows. I need to go back to the fair happening there... I don’t know how I got lost.”

“What fair?” he asked her.

“The Great Fair of Birlet Shallows,” she answered. “The one that happens right before Lammas, the Scottish tradition.”

“The fair doesnae happen for three months, and Birlet Shallows is miles from here,” he answered her while

maintaining his frown. “Have ye hurt yer head, Lass? I can help ye if ye are lost.”

Jack saw her blink twice as her face paled further. “I don’t understand what you mean,” she said. “There’s a fair... in the Birlet Shallows village. I was right there with my friends and then there was this fortune teller, and a medallion and—” she was ranting.

He gave the woman one long hard look and contemplated leaving her there again, but her gaze met and pinned his again, and the same tingle dashed through his heart and softened it.

“Ye should come with me,” he suggested, “else ye might get attacked by the highwaymen again. They are ken to roam the streets of this village.”

“Come with ye where?” she asked as she eyed him warily.

Jack rubbed the back of his neck and answered. “To my Castle in Onich. Humphreys Castle. I am Laird Humphreys, and I will help ye.”

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*T*his is insane... this is... Isla's mind was a torrent of thoughts and even during the chaos, the only thing she could constantly think of was the red-haired woman and her words.

Whatever she meant, and whatever that medallion was, she didn't know. All she knew was she had to get back to her friends, and to the bed and breakfast.

She put her right hand on her forehead and closed her eyes for a bit. "How did this happen?" she muttered under her breath.

Isla had been searching for the cave she had entered when those men attacked her. She felt the coldness of the blade pressing into her neck again and her eyes snapped open.

She lifted a hand to rub her neck, then swallowed hard and looked at the man standing in front of her again. He was also staring at her. His eyes were a lovely shade of hazel brown, and his hair the same shade as the old woman she had met at the fair. It was a fiery red that almost looked like it burned under the sun.

Isla wrapped her arms around her abdomen, and she eyed him closely. He had saved her and she thankful to him, but why was she here?

Why is he dressed like that? Her thoughts clouded her but did not draw her out of her confusion.

Even the brigands that attacked her were dressed in kilts and boots that reached their calves. They had long hair and beards that they left untrimmed, and their looks reminded her of ancient men who lived far up the hills in Scotland.

The Highlanders. She licked her lips and arched a brow. *Is he one of them? Dressing this way for the feast?*

She knew what kilts were; she even recognized the plaids and léine. It was an old Scottish look for men, and they mainly let their hair loose and free like the man in front of her now.

What did he say he was? A laird? Clan Humphreys?

She remembered a Clan Humphreys from her studies. In the 1700's they were the strongest clan to exist on the Highlands. Their known influence with the English and the French had brought civilization to the Highlands.

They also played a vital role in the merger of the two great lands of England and Scotland under Queen Anne.

“Ye should come with me,” the man said. His voice cut into her wandering thoughts, and took her arm before she could

dodge his touch.

“No,” Isla said in a steady voice and tried to push away from him. “There’s a cave, and there was this woman at the fair... I must go back; I must find the cave near the dried-up Loch Leven. I must find it so I can return to my friends. It’s morning they will be searching for me.”

“The loch is miles from here and it isnae dried up,” he answered. “There’s nae fair... nae for the next three months. What do ye intend to do in the wild until then? Find some cave? The Loch Leven doesnae even have a cave close by, so what are ye talkin’ about?”

Isla shook her head frantically and tried to break free from the man’s grip. “You’re insane. This isn’t a joke,” she continued. “I must find my friends: Ada, Penny, and Katherine... we traveled from England, there was—”

She finally managed to break free from the man’s grip, but the force of her freedom made her lose her balance and fall to the ground. Isla groaned as her behind landed hard on the ground. She felt the ache radiate through her spine until it nearly shut out her reasoning.

Tears instantly stung her eyes, and her chest grew tighter. It wasn’t just because of the pain from her fall. She was terrified. Her muscles wouldn’t stop quivering, her mind wouldn’t stop racing.

What’s happening... what’s happening to me?

Isla felt the tears slide down her cheeks, but she stubbornly wiped them away and blew out air from her lips. Her stomach grumbled. She remembered having wine the night before and refusing any dinner because she had been bothered about the fortune teller.

The man standing in front of her extended a hand to help her off the ground, but she proudly rejected it, and got on her feet without his assistance.

“Did ye hurt ye head perhaps when those men attacked ye?” he asked as he assessed her closely with his hands on his lips. He then released a deep breath and added, “Listen to me. I dinnae have much time. My Castle is still two days from here, and I must make it back in time. I can take ye to Humphreys with me, and when it’s time for the fair we can come back and find the gypsy ye encountered.”

“She is not a gypsy,” Isla replied hotly, determined not to believe that the woman she had met was a fortune teller. “She is some crazy old woman who lied to me and made me refuse a very good dinner and good wine last night.”

She huffed and looked away from the man watching her with a slack expression. Isla did not believe in such things. Magic, witchcraft, and any element of the supernatural were purely fallacious.

Anyone who believed them was simply a moron.

“Who did you say you are?” she asked after she cleared her throat and dusted the skirts of her dress. Isla hiked her chin up and met his gaze. Isla needed to be sure this man wasn’t a

swindler who wanted to hold her for ransom. All she had on her was her precious jewelry and she was yet to find her friends and luggage so she couldn't afford to get in trouble.

“Laird Humphreys,” the man answered, then hiked his chin higher.

“Your first name,” she asked in a louder voice that sounded irritated even to her own ears.

“Jack Lyons.”

Her mind instantly did a calculation. *Clan Humphreys*, the title was familiar and so was the name Jack Lyons.

Isla's eyes widened as she looked at the man again. He threaded his fingers through his red hair as he watched her. She had read of the Humphreys Clan a million times, and she knew the heritage of the Clan's Lairdship.

Jack Lyons was Laird in the 1600's. She couldn't remember the year exactly, but he had died in battle, without an heir and the Lairdship had passed on to his first cousin who ruled and brought chaos on the land before he passed on and handed over to his son, Luke Lyons.

He really can't be Jack Lyons, Isla thought as she stared at him.

She frowned as she regarded him closely, and he asked, “So, what's yer decision? Will ye come with me?”

Isla tried to control the fear rising inside her as she kept staring at him. “What year is this?” she asked in a faint voice, hoping his reply would prove that her suspicions were wrong.

Jack instead scoffed as he eyed her. “It’s 1650,” he answered. “How is it that ye dinnae ken this?”

Isla forgot to breathe for a second, and as the implication of his answer sunk in, she lowered her face into her hands and burst into uncontrollable laughter that lasted a second before it turned to tears streaming down her cheeks.



Jack stared at her, his mouth agape and his brain in confusion. *What do I do? Why is she sobbing? How did one laugh and then sob at the same time?*

This woman had clearly hit her head badly during the attack with the brigands.

He didn’t understand this woman. First off, she was dressed in a strange way, and it seemed as if she had completely lost her mind or perhaps her memory.

Either way she was crying now, and he was moved with the intense urge to console her. Jack didn’t want to react to the push inside him to go to her, but in the end, he couldn’t ignore it, so he gently brought his hands to her back, and started to gently stroke her.

“How is this possible?” she sobbed and murmured, “How am I here? It’s not right, I can’t be here.”

“Where are ye ought to be?” he asked before he could stop himself. Jack didn’t think that he needed to concern himself with her matters.

He should be on his way. He had saved her life, so he should let her continue her path, but somehow, his heart wouldn’t let him do that.

She raised her head and stared at him with her teary eyes. Her green gaze was hypnotizing. It drew him in and sent a myriad of emotions through him. Jack was left breathless by the intensity and shock of what he was feeling, so he decided to put some distance between him and the woman.

“1973,” she answered in the same whispering tone. “I live in 1973... I am... my friends,” she stammered, then pressed her lips together and continued crying again.

Jack didn’t think he heard her right at first, but it suddenly dawned on him what she was saying, so he arched a brow.

“1973,” she repeated before she drew away from him. “I was at the fair in Birlet Shallows in 1973, and I was—”

Jack didn’t let her finish before he burst into a fit of laughter that tickled his sides. He didn’t stop laughing for the next few seconds while she stared at him.

She's either insane or a witch. He didn't want to entertain this madness any longer, so he forced his laughter down, and pressed his lips into a thin line.

"I'm heading for my Castle now," he said, then turned away from her to walk away.

"Wait," she called. Jack didn't want to turn, but once again he couldn't resist. "I am not insane, and I am not lying either. I speak the truth. I am from 1973."

"Ye do realize ye are sayin' that ye are from the future?" he asked her. "The people here will cast stones at ye if ye speak this madness elsewhere."

"It is not madness," she defended, then closed the distance between them with one large step. "I can prove it to you," she continued. "I can tell you of your family's lineage and what is to come after now."

Jack felt the tendons of his neck tense, and the tight draw of his shoulders caused pain to spring to the back of his neck.

He was tense, his body poised like a bow on a string, and as he stared into her overly damp eyes, and listened to the tremors in her voice, his skin started to crawl with a creeping sensation.

"In year 1642, the late laird who would be your father died from an unknown illness and his wife shortly after. His first and only son—" she paused, then continued, "Jack Lyons inherits his Lairdship, but he also passes without any male heirs or any heir at all. The Lairdship passes on to his cousin,

Aideen Lyons, who destroys the Clan and leads the Humphreys Clan into playing a vital role that will lead to the merger of Scottish islands and Highlands and England to form one kingdom known as the United Kingdom under the rule of Queen Anne.”

Jack kept staring at her as she rattled on. He didn't understand some of the words she used, and what was that about a merger of Scotland and England?

She's insane.

He stopped her by raising a hand and released a deep exasperated breath. “I cannae handle any of this,” he said as he shook his head. “Good luck findin’ yer fair and loch.”

Jack turned and started marching away, but the next sentence out of her mouth made him stop right in his tracks. “I ken of the Humphreys Clan’s secret passed on from generation to generation. The secret of Ardenhill and the treasures buried underneath the Humphreys Castle’s hill.”

Jack spun back around to her, and he saw that she wasn't smiling.

“That secret is naythin’ but a myth,” he told her after a short laugh. “Ye have been listenin’ to many stories... perhaps from yer parents?”

“I do not listen to child stories, and this is not a joke. I mean it... some years from now the treasure will be found. It will be discovered and will be used against your Clan. It is the

downfall of the Humphreys Clan. In a few years from now, even you will not be able to fight the rebellion coming.”

Jack thought he saw a smile on her lips, but when he blinked and looked again, it wasn't there. She was simply staring at him with wide eyes, and an expression that he read as fear.

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Isla tried to control the heavy pounding of her heart as she walked beside Jack Lyons in silence. All of this was still unbelievable to her. How could she be in 1650?

She still refused to accept it was real until they reached the market and she saw the reality for herself. The nearby neigh of a horse made Isla jump in shock and surprise, and she grabbed Jack's arm spontaneously to shield herself.

The rider on the horse simply galloped past them. Isla swallowed hard and when she looked up she found Jack regarding her closely. "Never seen a horse?" he asked her in a gruff tone.

She nodded once, then slowly released his hand. "This is insane. I don't understand it."

"Imagine what I feel like after all ye have told me," he replied before he continued walking ahead again. Isla admired his tall build for a second because she couldn't help herself.

His shoulders were broad; if they hugged he would completely envelope her. The thought of touching his chest crossed her

mind, but she pushed it away quickly and shook her head.

I barely even know the man. How could she crave such body contact?

Her gaze drifted down his back. He had well-toned legs even though half of them were covered by his kilt. Isla imagined what he would look like underneath his léine. Another instant the thought crossed her mind she nearly choked on her spit.

He looked over his shoulder at her as she coughed. “Is there a name for the color ye are wearin’ right now in yer time?” he suddenly asked as she ignored the flush heating up her skin and hurried to catch up with him.

Isla glanced down at the azure dress she wore. It was stained with dirt from the ground and ripped at the sleeves and hem from her struggling with those brigands.

“What color is that ye are wearin’?” he suddenly asked as his gaze drifted down her body. “I havenae seen it here before.” The way his eyes narrowed as he looked at her pricked her skin with heat.

It felt like he staring at her naked even though she was fully clothed. There was a certain heat in his stare, and how his eyes lingered on her body.

“Azure,” she answered him. When he frowned, she added. “It’s a shade of blue.” She pressed closer to his side to avoid the man rolling a cart of vegetables past them. Isla’s stomach

grumbled when she saw the fresh carrots and apples arranged on a table in front of a stall they passed.

She put her hand on it and groaned before nibbling on her lower lip. Just then Jack stopped walking and moved to a horse tied into a corner.

“Are we ridin’ on that?” she asked in a strained voice as she regarded him and the golden-haired beast closely.

“Aye, we are,” he answered as she stroked the horse’s hair. “This is May and she’s a beastly rider. She’s the healthiest of all mares I own, ye will enjoy ridin’ on her.”

Isla shook her head. “How far is yer Castle? We could hire a carriage or buy one?” she suggested. “How do I sit on horseback without falling off and breaking my neck?”

“Ye learn,” he told her, ignoring everything else she had said, and extended his hand to her. “Put yer hand in mine and I will guide ye.”

Isla hesitated. She cringed inside at what she would need to do though. Her skin felt sticky as she needed to wash up, and her dress was in ruins.

I must find that crazy old lady and make her take me back.

“Come on,” Jack encouraged, his hand still outstretched to her. Isla slowly put her hand in his. Once their skin touched, her breath hitched in her throat, and she swooned on her feet.

“I got ye,” he told her as he grabbed her waist, lifted her off the ground like she weighed nothing and placed her on his saddle. She was about to ask him how he would ride when he got on the horse behind her and sat astride with his legs on both sides.

Isla sucked in a deep breath. His body pressed into hers now, and she felt the hard planes of his muscles. Warmth from him seeped into her, she caught a whiff of his earthy, masculine scent and her tongue darted out to lick her lips nervously.

He yelled as he kicked the horse to a trot, and then they started galloping down the path in front of them.

The wind blew Isla’s hair while she sat straight and tense in front of him, her body paralyzed by his nearness, but her heart and pulse doing tremendous races inside her.

They rode like that for a long time in silence until he slowed near a loch and jumped off the horse again. Isla let him help her down, and she was close to his chest when her feet touched the ground.

Their gazes locked firmly, and his face was only inches away from hers, but that lasted only a heartbeat before they both sprang apart.

He went to the loch and scooped a little of the water into his hand so he could wash his face and drink.

She stared at her feet and noticed her shoes were missing. Her toes were stained with dirt, her heel hurt, and she hadn't even realized she had been bare foot this entire time.

God dammit, she cursed internally, then raised her head when she suddenly heard his voice.

“Huh?” Isla asked.

“What is it like in England in 1973?” he asked her. “I have never been to England, I someday want to go there, but I want to ken what it's like. I dreamed of traveling the world as a little lad for years until responsibility came.”

“England is—” Isla did not know how best to explain her land to him now. They were things she couldn't tell him; else she might scare him off. If she mentioned the colonization, and the societal rules of the contemporary monarch, he might not believe her.

Also how was she to explain that people had been brilliant enough to invent cars? Medicine like penicillin and even modern-day ranges?

“Developed in ways you can't even begin to imagine,” she told him instead as she felt that best summarized it.

“Do people now fly?” he asked, and Isla saw a smile on his lips that reached the sides of his eyes. When she didn't answer at first, his eyes widened. “Dinna tell me that people fly.”

“No, of course not, come on,” she answered, and they both burst into a vagrant laugh that tore from them both and rippled through the air. When Isla quieted down, she slowly added, “But they invented planes and that helps people travel around more easily, and cars too for travel on land.”

“Cars?” he repeated, and she nodded.

“There is no use for horses or carriages like now.”

His smile returned and he seemed genuinely interested in what she had to say as he walked back in her direction. Jack didn't mount his horse or help her up as she expected him to, instead, he sat on the ground beside a tree and motioned for her to come seat.

“What about castles? Do they still exist?” he asked.

“Most of them are being sold, others are kept as historic sites for those who love history to visit and tour. Many of the Highland clans dinnae exist as clans anymore... just rich, aristocratic families after the Clan system was abolished.”

“Tell me more,” he urged, and she suspected he was genuinely interested in what she had to say.

Isla relaxed against the tree bark, and it felt good to rest her muscles. She nodded then brushed her hair away from the side of her face before she dove right into telling him about her time, 1973.



They mounted the horse and rode down the wet path leading to his Castle, Isla kept thinking of what could be happening back in her time. She wondered if her friends cared about looking for her.

Penny, Ada, and Katherine were the only people she could rely on back there. After her parents died, Isla had been left with nothing but an entire estate to herself and many workers whom she barely even knew on her father's establishments. Her uncle ran the businesses, as her father's wealth had gone directly to him after his passing.

Isla kept the estate as stated in his will, and she had comforted herself with what she could.

She wondered if there was a reason why this had happened to her now. Isla didn't think it could be a coincidence.

She held her chin high as she bounced on the horse in front of Jack. He had been quiet for a while, like his attention was focused on the journey ahead of them. Once or twice Isla glanced over her shoulder to look at him. Every time she met his blank expression and hard-set jaw. She wondered what was going through his mind.

Does he believe a word of what I have told him so far?

Of course she hadn't gone into the details of some of the historic events she had mentioned, and she hadn't even talked

about some at all, like the Battle of Culloden, but all she had said, Isla wasn't sure Jack fully understood her.

When they reached a bend and took another stony path leading further into the wild, she asked, "How much further do we have to go?"

"It's a two-day ride to Humphreys Castle," he answered without slowing his pace. "If ye are exhausted we could take a break so ye can rest."

"I am all right," she answered as she shook her head. It would take a while for her to get used to his accent, and deep timbre of his voice, but Isla was certain she would adapt.

"I have to get back to my Castle in time," he said. "My people need me, and my man-at-arms anticipates my arrival."

"Man-at-arms?" she asked, not understanding his choice of words.

"He's like an adviser. I tell him everythin' and we do the plottin' together."

"Oh," Isla gasped. "My father used to have one of those. His name is Arnold. He is now in charge of my father's businesses, and all he does is make me money."

"Money?" he asked in confusion, and Isla's lips curved into a grin. "Women dinnae need to work and make money."

“Do ye also believe that they only belong in the Castle or household to clean up and squeeze out heirs?” she retorted, not giving him a chance to reply or defend himself before adding, “That is a primitive way of thinkin’ in my time.”

Jack said nothing, but his frown stayed, so she continued, “Let’s just say I am a noble lady of very high status back in my time in England. I have wealth, an estate to myself and everything anyone could ever think of.”

He slowed the pace then and when the horse came to a complete stop, he said, “I dinnae think a woman is only for squeezin’ out heirs, I am simply shocked that lasses make money in yer time.”

“Yes, of course we do,” Isla replied, then turned to look at him, and the sharp movement made her lose her balance on the saddle. She yelped, but Jack moved fast and caught her by the waist before she fell off the horse.

“Careful, else ye’ll break yer neck,” he said as he steadied her back.

Isla lost her breath for a second, and it wasn’t only because of her near fall. He was holding her waist and his body was closer to hers now, pressing into her until her skin flushed with the heat emanating from him.

“I... thanks,” she said, cleared her throat, then adjusted herself on the saddle. “Money is what we use to buy items in the market. It’s like your Pound Scots. Ours is just pounds now.”

Jack was staring at her in an intense way that made her shiver, and she felt a weird tension in the air to as their short silence festered.

“I have an idea,” Jack suddenly said once a second passed. Isla was caught off balance when he jumped off the saddle, clamped his hands on her waist and put her on the ground too.

She gasped and her hands moved to his chest to hold on for support. Isla didn't think Jack noticed she was nervous, and even as her cheeks flushed, she had to push the tingles rising inside her down and focus on what he was saying to her.

“What do you mean?” Isla asked.

“Ye want to go back to yer time, and I want to help my people. We can help each other.”

Her brows furrowed together as she wasn't fully understanding what he meant yet.

“My people intend for me to help the Clan either by makin' us alliances to brin' in enough to support the Clan through the winter, or by me takin' a wife. My plan is for ye to be my betrothed. That way ye can help me pretend to them, and I can help ye find the gypsy who cursed ye.”

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Jack stared at her and waited for a reaction. She blinked at first, her green eyes remained entwined with his, and the rush of heat that had been coursing through him since he touched her waist earlier multiplied.

He was doing his best to stay calm. Her looks pierced through his heart at high speed. Jack had never seen anyone this beautiful. Now that he stood closer to her, he could see her smooth skin, and the freckles on her cheeks.

The crimson shade on there was lovely. Jack felt the urge to brush his hands over the side of her face and push away the strands of hair falling there. If all she said was true... if she was truly from the future, then she could help him.

He didn't need to take a Lady Wife like his Clansmen wanted if she acted as his betrothed, and when the time came, he could help her find the gypsy who brought her here to his land.

The more he thought of the idea, the more it made sense to him, but she was still quiet, staring at him like she had not heard what he said.

“Isla,” he called, and she finally blinked. “Did ye hear a word I just said?”

“I did, I just...” she paused, then she shook her head and burst into a short laugh, “you want me to be your betrothed?”

“Only for the time being,” he said to her. “I can help ye find the gypsy ye need to find once the fair starts in three months, and—”

“Three months?” she gasped. “I did not think I’d have to stay here that long, and... three months?”

She moved away from him, shoved her fingers through her hair, and started pacing around. “I cannot stay here; I’m not supposed to be here, and this... wedding you is simply the craziest of it all... how do we make that happen? I do not even know who you are.”

“I am an honorable man, and I will keep my word and help ye find yer way back to yer time. It is a fake betrothal so ye are expected to do nothin’ of course.”

She folded her arms over her chest. “Do you even believe a word of all I told you since? Do you believe I am from the future?”

She gauged his expression after asking, trying to tell what he was thinking.

“I do believe ye,” he answered. “Maybe nay all of it, but aye, ye are a very strange lady so I can believe that ye dinnae belong here.”

Isla stopped midway when an angry rumble came from the cloud and disrupted her rant. She raised her head to the sky at the same time Jack did, and he noticed the clouds were gathering high above. The once blueness slowly turned into a mid-gray that hinted at darkness even though it was still midday and the wind that blew against them was strong enough to ruffle her hair.

He moved quickly and led her toward the shade provided by a wide oak tree. Shortly after, the rain started.

“It is a crazy plan,” Jack said to her. “But we can help each other this way. Also the treasure ye speak of... if it really exists and I dinnae believe that it is anythin’ more than a myth, but if it is real then it will benefit me and my Clan.”

“I will never pass as your betrothed,” she said. “Besides, your people do not even know me, and I do not know anything about you.” She stopped, pressed her lips together, then continued. “In my time people usually court before they propose marriage.”

Jack smiled. He loved her actions, and the expressions she made as she spoke. Her lips either lifted at the sides or paused, and she made small hand gestures while her brows arched, creased, and even sometimes furrowed.

Isla was expressive, and he sensed there was a fire to her he was yet to experience. Jack didn’t think she was crazy even

though believing everything she said was still hard for him.

But how else would she know about my Clan if she wasn't from here? And the things she said about Scotland and England, how true is that?

Jack looked back at her when she asked, "Even if I agree to this, how do we find your people help? You said you needed support to make sure you can provide for them. I'm guessing my dowry will do that, but I have no dowry. I have nothing here, not until I can return to where I came from."

"The treasure will be yer dowry when it is found, and my people willnae ask for it until it is time for us to wed. I will handle all of that, ye neednae worry about it," he replied. "Anythin' else doesnae matter. I will handle the rest, I just need ye to be by my side. We can make everyone believe we are betrothed, that way they will let me continue with my plans to secure the future of my Clan."

"Do you really have a plan? One that would work?" she asked, then dropped her hands to her side.

"I will come up with somethin'," he told her before he dragged in a deep breath and released it slowly.

Jack couldn't tell if she felt the same sensations that crept through him and made his heart skip. It made his breath hitch in his throat and made it difficult for him to think.

It seemed like she was thinking as she kept looking at him. Her eyes did not leave his for a long time, but when she

looked away in the end, she said, “This will work because you’re in luck. I happen to know a lot about Scottish traditions and lifestyle. It’s going to be so much fun.”

Jack frowned because she had used another word he did not understand. “Lifestyle?” he repeated.

This time, she flung her head back and laughed. “Interesting,” she said. “Lifestyle is a word used to describe how people in a certain time are living.”

She smiled wide. Her eyes lit up in a way he hadn’t seen before, and her cheeks glowed. The image of her that way etched into his memory, and as they continued their ride after the rain subsided again, Jack found himself thinking about it, and reliving in the moment when he heard the bubbly ripples of her laugh.

His body hardened just from replaying the thought in his mind and he already knew that this was going to be an adventurous time for him considering how he already responded to Isla’s nearness.



Isla didn’t think Jack’s plan was an impossible one to achieve. Her only problem was, how could she survive here for three months until the fair?

She was still trying to take in the news of being here in 1650. Her head still felt like someone had smashed her hard and she had chest pains just from her heavy breathing, but the afternoon skies had turned to evening, and now night was upon them, but there was no difference.

I am really in 1650. It was starting to dawn on her as time rolled by slowly. Isla shook her head and tried to re-focus her thoughts on the present. She still had to find a way to locate that cave and get back to her friends.

They had paused in their journey again. This time, they took shelter in a cave. Isla tried her luck to see if she would find the medallion. She went into the cave with a torch Jack made for her, but there was nothing in there.

By the time she got back out, Jack was standing in front of the campfire he made. Her gaze dropped to the animal he held in one hand and as he dropped to a squat, Isla walked closer to the fire to see what he was doing.

“Is that—” she trailed off before she could complete the question, and Jack’s answer finished it for her.

“A rabbit,” he said, “it’s our supper.”

He took out a knife from the side of his boots, got down on his knees and started to skin the animal. The first cut he made on the rabbit sent a bolt of nausea right through her.

Isla groaned and turned away. Her right hand moved to her abdomen, and the left one to her chest. Another retching sound tore out from her throat as goosebumps arose all over her skin.

“You’re going to eat that?” she asked. “An animal you’ve skinned yourself?”

Jack didn't say anything to her, so she sucked in a deep breath to still her quivering insides.

"It's just meat," he said to her as he continued skinning. "Surely ye do eat meat, dinnae ye?"

Isla shook her head. Her stomach threatened to roll until she emptied her insides on the ground, but she continued gulping in large chunks of air as she found a spot to sit beneath a tree.

"I do eat meat. But not one skinned by my hands. That's—"

"Normal," he told her before he finished what he was doing and put the rabbit over the flames. He returned to her side after washing his hands in the loch close by.

Jack sat on the ground and drew his legs up in front of him.

"So, ye never hunt?"

"Never," she answered.

"Used a bow and arrow? Or perhaps tried to learn to ride a horse?"

She shook her head again, and he chuckled. "What have ye done then?"

“I have traveled, seen numerous circus shows and orchestras. I enjoy attending balls and dinners. I drink wine and read history, then travel with my friends to the places I read about.”

“What about yer family?” he asked.

Isla fell silent after he asked the question. She never talked about herself to anyone because she rarely ever got the chance to. Not even with Ada, Penny, and Katherine. She didn’t even consider herself that close to any of them.

Besides the memorable times they shared traveling and visiting fairs, they never talked about anything else. It was the first time in a long while, but Isla felt a hollow emptiness in her heart as she sat there with Jack.

“I don’t have parents,” Isla answered him after a while. “They died in an accident eight years ago, so I’m all alone.”

“Not anymore,” he said, and surprised her when he put his hand over hers and squeezed gently. “For the time you are here, you have me friendship, and that’s nae goin’ to change.”

Isla angled her head to his side so she could look at him. The intensity of his brown eyes as she stared right back at her tightened her chest and made it difficult for her to breathe properly for a second.

“We are friends?” she whispered, mesmerized by the intensity of his eyes.

“If ye want us to be,” he replied in a low baritone voice, making her insides churn.

A low hum started to warm her blood, and it seemed as if his face drew closer to hers. His nearness made her heart pound harder, and her head swooned.

Jack’s horse suddenly neighed and shied. The sound cut into the moment and made them jerk apart. Jack was on his feet the next instant. He hurried away from her to his horse, and he patted the horse’s big neck to make it settle down.

“It’s all right. Ye’re all right,” Isla heard him say until the horse quieted before he returned to the campfire.

“Are you really going to eat that?” she asked as she got on her feet to walk over to him.

“Aye,” he answered. “We Scots like to kill our own food.”

“That’s gross.”

“There you go again using another strange word,” he commented, and Isla burst into a short laugh. She could hardly ever remember that she was to speak in a certain way to fit in here.

“I am sorry, My Laird, I will dae my best to speak correctly when we meet with the council,” she said mimicking a Scottish accent even though it didn’t sound anything close to his.

“It’s my honor, My Lady,” he said, then took her hand and raised it to his lips for a kiss. “I will call ye Lady Sassenach from now on. The title suits ye.”

Isla grinned wide, and another hearty, genuine chortle burst free from her. “What does it mean?”

“It means a typical English lady,” he told her with a smile.

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Jack watched Isla as she dozed while resting against the tree. He felt terrible that she had nothing to eat that night as she wouldn't taste the roasted meat he made even though she was starving, and he wished there was a place he could get something better like haggis or soup for her to eat.

They were in the wild for now. By dawn he hoped they would have entered the outskirts of Onich, the village where his castle was so he could make it to the Castle before midday. Jack could not wait until he could rest in his own bed.

Isla murmured something in her sleep, then her head tilted to one side. He caught her before she dozed and fell to the ground, then he gently lifted her head and rested it on his shoulder.

She smelled like roses... he loved the scent, and he couldn't stop admiring her smooth skin and craving to stroke it with his hands. From how she spoke and acted, he suspected she was a passionate woman, one that would respond to him if he touched her.

They had only just met, and he was thinking of touching her already.

Get a hold of yourself, Jack, he warned himself.

She sighed then and his gaze dropped to her lips. Jack couldn't tear his eyes away from her after that. Her lips were full, a rosy shade of pink and they looked tender. He wondered what it would feel like to kiss her, and thread his fingers through her hair.

While Isla was outspoken and said a lot of strange things, she was still a very beautiful woman. Jack had noticed that from the moment he set eyes on her with those brigands.

A tiny clench of anger appeared in his heart as he remembered the blade pressed against her neck. Before he could stop himself, he lifted his right hand and trailed a finger over her neck. *Why do I feel the urge to protect her?*

Her skin felt soft and warm. *Would the rest of her feel that way?*

She is bonnie.

He cleared his throat when heat pricked at the back of his neck and burned his cheeks. Jack lay on the ground next to her, then shut his eyes and willed himself to sleep. They had to be up early to continue their journey.

He didn't sleep for long, and the entire time his eyes were shut, he kept thinking of her smile.

A slight groan left his lips when he woke up and saw her leg draped over his body. It was unexpected, but it happened because his muscles quivered and all he could suddenly think of was her. Jack put his hand on her wrist and gently pried it off his chest.

He released the breath he didn't realize he was holding when she sighed and turned away from him. This time with her back pressed into his body. His arousal hardened further and froze him to one spot.

What are ye thinking? Before he could stop himself; a hand came over her waist. Jack had the intentions of moving away from her, but the gentle breeze that blew then made him catch a deeper whiff of her scent.

It filled his lungs and lingered until he swooned with the heady desire rushing through him.

Enough.

Startled with the intensity of what he was feeling, he jerked to his feet and hurried away to put some distance between them before he did something as stupid as turn her around and kiss her.

Jack combed his fingers through his hair and rubbed a hand over his face. The sooner he got her to his Castle, the better for them both.



Isla did not see Jack when she woke up. The first thing she did after sitting up was to look around her. The leaves on the trees danced slightly to the wind in the air, and she could hear the distant chirps of the birds in the sky.

The rising sun shone beneath the deep departing cloud of night, and as she got on her feet and lifted her arms up over her head, she felt the knots in her muscles ease up a bit.

Isla remembered she hadn't eaten a thing since she arrived in this past land when her stomach grumbled loud and threatened noisily. She clutched it, looked to the burned-out campfire from last night, and remembered the rabbit Jack had skinned alive. The memory instantly made her flush and her nausea returned.

"Don't worry, I won't feed ye rabbit this mornin'," Jack said as he appeared from a distance in front of her. He held a sack in his right hand and his sword drawn out in the other.

"Then what?" she asked.

"Berries," he answered then came to her and handed her the bunch he brought with him.

"When we return to the Castle, there will be plenty of food for ye. Haggis, soup, or bare broth, whatever it is that ye may like to eat," he said as he closed the distance between them in quick, long strides.

His steps thudded on the ground as he walked away. Isla lifted a hand to push her hair off the sides of her face, then she

pursed her lips. She began eating the berries and following his strides.

“How about baked stew, or maybe a sandwich?” Isla asked, instantly listing her favorites, and completely forgetting that she was not in a place to have any of that. “Tea? Maybe a muffin or some pie?”

“There will be pie,” Jack answered. “But what is a sandwich?”

When Jack frowned a bit, she realized her mistake. “Oh...” she gasped, and her shoulder slumped forward, “I keep forgetting where I am. I don’t think I can get used to this. What am I going to do if I can never go back?” she questioned, voicing the panicked thought as it came to mind. “I will not survive here.”

“We will find the cave ye seek in the end,” Jack told her.

Isla’s heart warmed as she lifted her gaze to his again. She hadn’t thought he would believe her story at first. If anyone had told her this would happen she would have laughed in the person’s face too.

But here she was living in a world where horses, kilts and skinning animals were the order of day. It was horrific to think of. She already missed her warm bath and scented oils.

Isla’s dresses were always made with the finest of silk and lace. Her hats too. She wore gloves to protect her nails, but here her fingers already had dirt lodged in them from the touse with those horrible men yesterday

Her hands dropped to her sides, and she stared hard at him. Jack's towering height was impressive, and his looks stole her breath away every time she looked at him.

The familiar sensations that made her blood pound in her veins and her jittery breath returned. His brown eyes narrowed as he looked at her, the corner of his lips quirked as he smiled, and she saw the flash of his left-cheek dimple.

Isla's insides turned to mush as he closed the distance between them. She didn't know if it was a dream, but a memory of her lying next to him, her hands on his chest so she felt his steady heartbeat was clear in her head.

Her lips went dry, and she had to lick them.

"The Castle is not far from us now. Once we leave here we enter Onich, and we can get ye proper clothes before we continue our journey."

"What do you mean proper clothes?" she asked with an arched brow as she took the sack of berries from him, opened it, and tossed one into her mouth. "Mine is all right," she added and glanced down at her dress. "It is dirty, yes, but still fine and lovely."

She tossed another berry in her mouth and marveled at the taste as soon as the juice hit her tongue. She ate a few more before she raised her head again and found Jack staring at her.

“It is a strange color and people will wonder. The last thin’ I want is to draw more attention to ye.”

Her cheeks burned again when his eyes drifted over her face, settled on her lips for some time then moved down to her chest.

She swallowed hard. *I will not get used to this feeling.* She had been around gentlemen before. At balls and dinners, she danced and talked with a whole lot of them.

Charming dukes, rogues, earls, name them, Isla had once planned to meet her husband and marry him before she turned twenty-four. Her parents then died and that dream had ceased to exist.

After that incident, all she wanted to do was live freely and not care about anyone or anything but herself, and she had done just that. She had partied when she wanted, drank wine and hosted friends as she liked... she even denied many proposals too.

“What ye are wearin’ is considered strange here. We dinnae want anyone to suspect where ye are from so we need to make it seem like ye are from here, My Lady. This color is nae in existence and many willnae find it proper.”

“I see, so what’s proper? Wearing an old brown wool earasaid with a hair bonnet?” she teased and smiled when he chuckled.

“Ye can dress English if ye please. Ye just need to act like a lady in this time. For example, ye should curtsy when ye greet

yer Laird.”

Isla moved back from him and curtsied. “Is this Scottish and appropriate enough?” she asked.

Jack smiled before he shook his head. “Ye need to go a little bit lower for yer curtsy.”

He put his hand on her waist and helped her curtsy again. Feeling the heat from his hands made Isla shiver inside. She felt faint, and her lips parted on their accord even though he was only just staring at her.

Isla regained her senses first and moved away from him.

“We should continue our journey,” he said as he turned away from her, and she saw him ruffle his hair before he continued toward his horse. Isla ate some more of her berries, then she joined him.

Once in the saddle again, they continued their ride. The entire time she kept wondering what it would feel like to have him closer to her, close enough to feel his lips come down on hers.

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Jack stopped riding to show her the beautiful Loch Onich and the valleys. Isla looked awed as she stared at the waters, bent over, and put her hand in it. “This is so beautiful,” she commented as she straightened and turned to him again. “The valley’s lovely too. I have never seen any like this in my life.”

“Ye dinnae travel many times,” he stated.

“I do travel... I just have never been this far up the Highlands before. It was my first time in Birlet Shallows. Usually when I visited Scotland, I stayed in the capital with my parents and explored some of the cities near there.”

“The Lowlands are as bonnie as it is up here.”

“I know,” she answered with a short laugh. “I like the view.”

Ducks floated among the weeds growing on the side of the loch, and when Jack sucked in a deep breath, he inhaled the fresh scent of the wildflowers surrounding where they stood.

When he was younger, he had visited the loch with his mother often. Jack remembered watching her sit under a tree close by. Then she would raise her head to the sky and stare at it for long before looking back and telling him, “The skies are a world on its own. If ye speak to them, they can hear ye.”

“I love this particular loch too,” he said to her when she lowered herself to a squat again and put her hand in the water. Isla picked a rock from the ground, tossed it into the water and the splash of water suddenly disturbed the water birds hovering on top of the surface.

“There’s many more that I can show ye,” he said to her when she rose to her feet and turned to him again. “Caves, hilltops and bonnie villages. When ye get to the Castle, ye will like what ye see. Humphreys Castle is rumored to be the bonniest in all the Highlands. My ancestors built it on the top of Ardenhill. It took many years for the workers to reach the end of the tower they built, but in the end it was worth it,” he boasted.

“I have read a lot about Scottish history, but nothing can trump seeing all of this myself. I want to see the hilltops too, and caves,” she said with enthusiasm. Jack loved the gleam he saw in her eyes.

“I’ll show ye,” he agreed. They took a detour from their journey to his Castle, and he took her round the Onich to show her the biggest meadow they had there.

Tall trees surrounded the entire place, ants moved through the grass as they strolled around it, and Jack held the reins of his horse tight in one hand as he walked beside her.

Shafts of golden sun lit up the place in patches, and Jack admired the reflection of it on Isla's creamy skin. When he looked to her, she was grinning and staring at the clouds.

He longed to touch her hair and put his hands on her waist like he did earlier when he taught her to curtsy. Jack imagined bringing her close to him so he could inhale her sweet scent, then he would inch his head ever slowly toward hers until he tasted her lips.

Isla suddenly stopped, and Jack saw her bend over to the ground. "It's a grave marker," she said when she looked back up at him again.

"Must have been one of the villagers buried there," Jack told her as she rose to her feet again. He stared at the stone marker and the carvings in Gaelic that read: *To our war hero and father.*

Jack's throat instantly tightened as he read the words. During his father's reign, Clan Humphreys hadn't known many years of peace.

They had fought wars, defended themselves against rebellions, and thrived to survive in chaos all because his father had made alliances with power-hungry clans who saw themselves as conquerors.

In the bid to conquer more Highland clans, they had nearly lost everything including their Castle. Jack had vowed on the day his father died never to make the same mistakes.

He wanted to be a peaceful leader, but fierce and dedicated to caring for his people.

“We should head toward the market now. We need to get ye proper clothes.”

Isla put her hand in his when he reached out to her, and he led her back to his horse.

By the time they arrived the market, he could tell that she was stunned. Her eyes wandered the crowd. Some traders were enjoying themselves with the drummer’s music and the Highland dance some lasses were performing. Jack noticed how engrossed Isla was in watching the scene. She didn’t even look at him when he walked past her and got to a trader’s store, who sold silk dresses, and earasaids.

It was always busy in the afternoon, and they could buy what they needed without hassle because they were a lot of varieties to choose from.

He didn’t have enough to buy her expensive clothing, but he could get her something appropriate to wear to the Castle instead. Isla was soon dancing with the crowd of lasses when Jack turned back to look for her.

He paused and admired her. Her steps were perfect, like she had been dancing the Celtic steps all her life. There was a brilliant smile on her face as she kicked one leg in front of her, then put her right hand at her back and side walked around her partner.

She looked so wild and free, laughing as she stepped to the drums and tossing her hands in the air to wriggle her body and match what the others were doing.

Jack enjoyed watching her so much, he forgot he was supposed to be protecting her, and making sure no one suspected that she seemed different from the rest of them. He also had to make sure that she did not tell the things she knew to anyone else.

The dance ended with a loud applause, Isla curtsied just like he had showed her, then she walked over to him.

“That was amazin’,” he told her as she joined him at the trader’s stand again.

“Thank you,” she answered before she surprised him by hooking her hand in his. Isla looked around them and added. “Oh... shopping, that’s my favorite thing to do.”

“Ye just did it again. Used a word I dinnae understand.”

She laughed and patted his arm gently. “I meant buying’ new thin’s are my favorite things to do. Do not worry, My Laird. You will learn.”

Jack couldn’t hold back the laugh that left his lips as he stood there with her. Isla Lambert made his heart lighter than it had been in years.

Isla exchanged her gold jewelry and items for more dresses and earasaids than Jack had intended to get her. By the time she changed into one of the green color dresses and came out of the stall, Jack was standing right on the same spot waiting for her.

She curtsied in front of him, then lifted her hands and patted her hair back. He didn't say anything for a while as he stared at her, but she saw his eyes drift down her body before his gaze landed on hers again.

“Do I look that bad?” she asked, with a small frown that made her lips pout. Jack shook his head and sighed.

“Ye look perfect,” he said to her. Isla smiled and he responded with a matching grin. He couldn't hold it back. Besides, there was that tingle that raced through him in that moment. A kind he had never felt before.

The green dress blended with her creamy skin and made her look beautiful. Jack's finger itched with the urge to touch her bare skin and stroke it. Her full lower lip called for his attention.

Does she know what she does to me? Did she even realize it?

He didn't think so. There was an innocence surrounding her that he admired too. It made the sensations of heat stroking through him more intense than ever.

“We should head on,” he said after looking away from her and controlling his heated thoughts.

They continued their journey for the rest of the day, and by the time they finally reached the gates of the Castle, Isla was dozing on the horse with Jack behind her to steady and make sure she didn't fall off.

Her eyes slowly opened when she didn't feel the horse's movements beneath her again. Isla rubbed her hands over her eyes, yawned and turned to look behind her.

Just then, men clothed in kilts and léine rushed out of the Castle and came to stand in front of their horse. They bowed their heads all at once. Jack got off his horse and helped her down first before he walked to them.

"My Laird," one of the men stepped forward. "Welcome."

Isla watched the scene before her in disbelief. She was aware that she now lived in the seventeenth century, but each time she saw these people it was a reminder that this was no dream.

She was still quiet behind Jack when she suddenly felt a curious gaze on her. Isla averted her eyes immediately and lowered it, not knowing what to do next.

Jack then took her hand and gently pulled her forward, so she stood by his side. "This is Lady Isla Lambert of Deumont," Jack introduced her. "And she is my betrothed."

Isla sucked in a deep breath after he made the announcement. She didn't know if she had expected a more open reaction to his absurd plan or if she had hoped that she would return to her

time before they even arrived his Castle, but here she was standing with a laird from the seventeenth century and dressed like a lady of that time.

Isla chuckled. Her outburst surprised everyone as they all turned to look at her, and it seemed only Jack understood why she laughed because his eyes turned solemn on hers and he shook his head, gently passing a message for her to stay calm with his cool gaze.

“Prepare her a chamber on my wing of the Castle. I want her comfortable, fed and well rested.”

“Aye, My Laird,” his men chorused, then Jack released her and walked away.

Standing alone, Isla suddenly felt exposed and vulnerable.

She didn’t know if she ought to curtsy or extend her hand to the man staring at her with wide, curious, and intent dark eyes.

“I am Jamie Norwood,” the man introduced when she met his gaze briefly. Isla slowly lifted her hand to him for a kiss and when he released her again, he added, “I will show ye to the wing and have ye assigned a servant for yer help.”

“Thank you, my lord,” she answered.

Jamie shook his head. “Nay a lord,” he said in his thick Scottish accent. “Sir Jamie it is, My Lady, and welcome to Humphreys.”

Isla hooked her hand when he extended a braced arm and he led her up the stairway, past the second landing to the third where he showed her to her chamber.

“As the Laird has requested, we will make sure ye are comfortable here, My Lady.”

“Thank ye Jami... Sir Jamie,” she corrected herself before she made the slip of calling him by his first name like it was so commonly done in England in 1973.

Jamie smiled at her. “Mar sin leat.”

Isla went into the chamber when he left her alone. She closed the door behind her, released a deep breath and waked slowly to the large bed in the center of the extremely wide chamber.

“This is insane,” she muttered as she dropped on it and relaxed.

What would Penny, Ada and Katherine be doing? Did they search for me? Did they find the gypsy?

Isla felt a tear slide down her cheek. She never appreciated her life before. It would end one day anyway, so why did doing anything besides living in the moment matter?

Some months back, Isla never would have agreed to do anything besides what pleased and made her happy, but now

she had to ride horses and pretend to be someone else so she could find her way back to a life she had never appreciated.

Isla fell asleep on the bed in a short time after she lay there. The next time she opened her eyes, the scent of lavender and roses had filled the entire chamber, and it was warmer than usual.

She sat up on the bed and quickly looked around her. There was flame in the fireplace now, and through the open windows, she could see it was dark outside.

Isla moved to get on her feet with the intent to walk to the window and stare outside, but her eyes caught onto a glittering object on the bed beside her, so she stopped midway and reached for it.

Her heart stopped in her chest as she stared at the green medallion in her hand. The green emerald staring back at her seemed like it had life. There was a reddish flame right in the center, and it twirled until it hypnotized her.

As fear and panic filled Isla's heart, she suddenly heard the whispers of the gypsy's words float around her.

*Thig an t-uisge agus tillidh sibh gu am far a bheil so dhanachd
gad thoirt gu agus bidh sibh beo na laithean an sin a stri ri
bhith beo gus an ionnsiach sibh gradh agus maitheanas.*

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Isla knew she would lose her mind if this kept happening. Numerous questions ran through her mind as she stared at the medallion. In her mind, the gypsy was laughing at her, and at the same time spewing words in Gaelic that Isla couldn't understand no matter how many times she remembered it.

Chills spread though her arms and the rest of her body. She dropped the medallion on the bed, closed her eyes and counted to three, hoping it would disappear just as it had come.

How did it get here? She couldn't remember carrying it with her when she woke up in the middle of nowhere, so how was it possible that the medallion was here right now?

She was sure she had left it in that cave as she couldn't remember having it on her while she fought off those brigands and rode here with Jack.

This is probably the key I need to go back just as I came here.

Almost paralyzed with fear, she collapsed on the bed again, and shut her eyes tight. The chamber door opened and a young

girl walked into the room.

She closed the door behind her, curtsied, then raised her head and looked at Isla. “My Lady, I am Faye, here to serve yer every need.”

Isla stared at her in dumb shock. She didn’t know what to say to the girl at first, but Isla regained her mind and cleared her throat. “Thank you,” she said but didn’t get up from the bed. The sheets covered the medallion. Isla’s heart pounded in her chest as she waited for the girl to enter the chamber fully and talk to her. “I have prepared ye a bath and the kitchen will bring yer meal shortly.”

The mention of food had Isla’s stomach rolling and crying out in joy. She put a hand there and rubbed. *I hope it’s not anything skinned this time.*

As she looked at the girl, she didn’t think it was possible for her to skin anything herself.

“Thank you,” Isla said again, not knowing what else to say.

“I should help ye with yer bath, My Lady,” the girl said, and still waited for Isla to get on her feet so she could assist with taking off the dress and handing her a robe.

Minutes later, Isla’s skin smelled of roses and lavender. Both relaxing scents made her muscles feel more relieved than they had since the start of this entire ordeal.

While Faye left the chamber to bring Isla her meal, she took the medallion out from under her sheets and stared at it hard.

I wonder if there's a cave here somewhere.

Isla intended to find it. Once it was time for the fair, she would go back to Birlet Shallows and find that gypsy woman who had brought her here. Once she went back to her time, she would also make sure she paid for her magical practices.

She kept mulling over all the ways she could get her pound of flesh on the gypsy. When Isla's food arrived, and Faye set it on a table in front of her, she took her time to stare at the bowl of soup, and vegetables laid by the side of it.

“This is mutton, My Lady,” Faye said. “The chief cook has prepared this meal specially for ye and for the Laird as it is his favorite. Mutton stew with vegetables.”

Isla stared hard at the bowl, and her stomach cried out to her again.

She could no longer deny a warm meal. Isla had to eat something, else, she would really lose her mind.

After eyeing the food in front of her for a second, she groaned before she had a taste of the stew. As she chewed the meat, she realized it tasted like the lamb chops she had for lunch many times while she traveled through Coventry in England.

Isla's hunger took over every other sense she had, and she didn't pause until she had emptied the bowl.

It was the best meal she had eaten in a while, and when she relaxed back on her bed and closed her eyes, it was easy for her to fall asleep.



It rained into the early hours of the morning, and Jack was in his study the entire night going through the tax reports that had accumulated in his time away.

His mind wandered to Isla at intervals. *What was she doing? Was she asleep?* He hoped she could rest enough as it was a long ride back to his Castle and he could tell she was exhausted by the time they arrived.

With a sigh, he dragged his thoughts back to the reports again and forced himself to focus.

Every village in his land had its revenue and proceedings for each year and he always held the village chief accountable for anything that went missing in every of the village's treasury and store. This was the method Jack used to avoid corrupt rulers like his father had harbored during his Lairdship reign.

He didn't hear his study door open, but he raised his head when he heard his brother Elliot call for him.

"Brother," Jack called, excited to see him. He got on his feet, walked around his table and enveloped Elliot into a tight, warm hug.

“How was yer journey, My Laird?”

His brother’s smile warmed his heart when he pulled back, and Jack patted his shoulder.

“Successful,” Jack answered. He showed Elliot to a seat, then walked to a shelf to pick a brandy and quaich. Jack sipped his brandy after he handed his brother the second quaich, then he relaxed on his seat and crossed his legs in front of him.

“I just returned from the night’s watch in the village. The rain had made it impossible for much to be done. The villagers are strugglin’ to stay warm in the cold... the farmers hope it doesnae turn to a storm that will affect the new crops planted.”

“How far did they go with the planting?”

“We will have enough crops to harvest this year at this rate,” his brother replied. “It’s a good thin’ we struck that deal with Clan Doune. It would have been difficult to have enough men work our fields.”

“They helped,” Jack agreed as he remembered his visit to the neighboring clan where he made alliances with them, offering to provide the merchants safe passage through Humphreys border to England.

“It is a shorter route for us, and they will no longer need to form partnership with Clan McDonalds who are far off to the south.”

“What about Aideen?” Jack asked, referring to his late uncle’s only son. Aideen was also his most trusted council member and the general of his army. “Does he ken of my return?”

“Aye, he does,” Elliot replied. “Everyone kens of yer return, and they are all talkin’ about the bonnie lass ye have returned with. Tell me, Brother, is it true? Are ye takin’ her as yer Lady Wife?”

Elliot didn’t bother to mask his charming grin and the mischief Jack saw in his brother’s eyes made him shake his head and get to his feet.

“I have asked her to wed me,” Jack told him, then emptied his quaich before walking to his chair.

“The council will take great joy in that news,” Elliot said.

“I doubt they will,” Jack told him, then sighed. He trusted his brother more than anyone else in the world, and he felt safe telling Elliot his secret. “She is an English lady and I ken it will stir some dispute but I dinnae care. I will wed whom I please... the councilmen willnae make that choice for me.”

“The heart is all that matters, Brother,” Elliot replied, siding with him. “I do hope to find my own bonnie lass some day and wed her. Once I do, I will leave ye to the politics of our land.”

They both laughed after Elliot’s statement, then Jack cleared his throat, and rubbed a hand over his face and neck.

“Dinnae be mistaken though. I havenae taken a likin’ to the lady, so I will announce our betrothal when the time is right. Until I have found the perfect way to get enough wealth to make our treasury big again and repair all that needs fixin’ in our land. At this rate we cannae afford another war, but if it ever comes our way, we dinnae have enough to protect ourselves.”

“I will make the council believe I am takin’ the lady as wife, but I willnae go through the weddin’ in the end because the lady will return to her country, and I will have found what I need.”

Jack did not miss the frown on his brother’s face as he explained the plan to him.

“Brother... the council... if they find out of this plan then—”

“They willnae find out if nayone tells them. Besides, the council willnae tell me when to take a wife, or what lass to take a likin’ to. I will dae both when it pleases me and that is final.”

Elliot pressed his lips together, then he asked, “And does the Lady ken of this plan? Does she agree to it?”

“Aye she does. She also needs my help to get back to England,” he told Elliot before he laughed inwardly because of how crazy this entire plan seemed.

How is it possible that she is from the future? How in the God's names did she get here then?

Jack hadn't asked those questions yet. He had been somewhat fascinated by her from the start and spellbound by her laugh and beauty. He would find the time to ask her about how she got here, and why she came here.

"Just dinnae tell this to anyone," Jack said to his brother when he brought his mind back to reality. "Nay soul must hear of this, dae ye understand me?"

"Ye have my word, Brother, ye can always trust that I will keep it," Elliot answered. "The Lady will also be well cared for while she is here."

"And protected also," Jack added when he suddenly remembered that brigand holding her captive with a dirk to her neck. His chest constricted at the memory and a fierce surge of the need to keep her safe came with it.

After Elliot left his study, Jack walked to his window. The rain had subsided into a drizzle, but the air still had a cold bite to it.

The slight shiver that passed through Jack reminded him of how Isla had curled up by his side while they lay on his plaid the other night in the wild.

Her body had felt so soft, and she had smelled like the best rose oils he had ever known. Desire burned deep inside him as he remembered that scent and the feel of her skin, but he

pushed the thought away and returned to his seat so he could continue his work.

Jack didn't need her on his mind at this point. He just needed her by his side, and when the time was right, he would take her back to Birlet Shallows so she could find the gypsy who had brought her here.

If any of that was real.

His attention was buried in work again, and he didn't know how much time passed until another soft knock came on his study door and made him raise his head to check who walked in.

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Isla couldn't go to sleep. Her mind kept racing the entire time, her head too, and each time she sat up on the bed, her hand moved to the medallion on her neck, and she fiddled with it while her thoughts raced.

She gave up after a while, got out of bed and slowly walked out of her chamber. The door opened with a tiny creak as she stepped onto the corridor. It was cold outside, the light breeze tingling over her skin and she rubbed her arms with both hands before continuing her way down the stairs.

There were guards at the foot of the stairs to remind Isla again of where she was. The men here had larger frames and hair full enough to give them a wolfish look. What amazed her was how they managed to carry the sheathed sword around. One time Isla had visited a museum in London, and she had touched a sword. It was heavier than she had imagined.

"My Lady," one guard greeted then bowed his head with much enthusiasm. She also didn't think she could get used to being called that. "Have ye no rest?"

"Where's the Laird? I need to find him," Isla said, then her fingers moved to the medallion on her neck again. She touched

the object unknowingly every time now. it was like she needed to make sure it was always with her. “Did he leave the Castle?”

“The Laird is in his study, My Lady. Let me take ye to him.”

She walked with the guard on the Castle’s ground landing around the corner and followed him until they reached a door.

The guard stepped back for her to knock, then she opened the door fully and stepped in.

Jack raised his head from what he was reading. Her heart did a slow dive in her chest the instant his brown eyes merged with hers. Her pulse also skipped a beat. The response made her lick her lower lip and nibble on it.

His study was large, the desk behind which he sat wide and sturdy and he looked magnificent where he sat behind it.

“Isla,” he called. She walked further into the study and looked around so she could take in the full space properly.

It was even wider than her chamber. It was like a library. Books towered high on shelves to the ceiling, and there was a large settee on the side close to a table.

“I could not sleep,” Isla told him. “I can’t bring my mind to come to rest.”

She saw the look of concern that crossed Jack's face. It made his brows crease and his lips curved downward into a grim line. "Why is that?"

He dropped the scroll he held and got on his feet. Isla was once again reminded of how magnificent he looked each time he stood next to her. She raised her head a bit to meet his gaze, then shook her head. "I keep thinking about the fair in Birlet Shallows and how I need to get back to find that gypsy. You must know of any caves around, don't you? Or any gypsies? I am sure they exist freely at a time like this."

He walked over to where she stood and put his hands on her shoulder. "I dinnae ken of any caves," he told her. "Or gypsies. The Highlands are not welcoming to any form of witch practices... gypsies dinnae roam the streets as they used to in the fourteenth century."

Isla's shoulders slumped forward, and she released another dejected smile. Jack dragged in a deep breath, then he moved away from her and walked to his desk again.

"What are you working on?" Isla walked behind him. She already missed the warmth of his touch, and that made her want to stay close to him again.

"Just tax reports," he told her. She could tell that he was working so hard to provide for his people. Isla hadn't even met the lot of them, and she already felt like they were lucky.

To have someone who cares to provide.

She wrapped her arms over her elbows and followed Jack to his desk. When he sat, she stood beside his chair, and put a hand on his shoulder. “I wish there was a way I could help you,” she said to him. “Back in my time my father left me an entire fortune before he passed away. I could have helped you and your Clan, but I must go back to be able to do that.”

Jack shook his head and gave her a tiny smile. “I will find a way,” he said. “Ye dinnae have to worry about a thin’.”

His gaze merged with hers now, and Isla felt the same tingle return. This time it raced up her spine. She forgot to breathe when his gaze darkened and became more intense.

Isla’s own drifted down to his full lips, and she imagined what it would feel like to have him kiss her. The thought lingered in her mind as it entered, and there was no pushing it out.

Since she first saw him, it was like her thoughts no longer belonged to her. She kept thinking about all the things he had said, and his plan to present her as his betrothed.

What if it goes wrong? Or someone finds out that I am not from here? What happens then? Could she trust Jack to protect her if anything happened?

I barely even know him.

“Ye need to stop worryin’,” Jack said, then pulled his gaze away first and cleared his throat. He got on his feet without warning, and that move brought him closer to her. The hard planes of his thighs and abdomen pressed into hers. There was

no control for Isla who put her right hand on his chest and slid it down to his abdomen. Jack's low groan was the proof she needed that he felt and enjoyed her light touch.

Isla gasped. Jack's hands moved up her back to stop her from falling backward out of shock, and the feel of his warm hands on her caused everything else to fade into nothingness.

"Isla," he murmured in a gruff voice just at the same time as she said.

"Jack—"

Their words were a mingle of low, seductive gasps that charged the air around them with electricity and made Jack's head swoon.

How could she make him feel this way? The sensuous flow of heat tickling down his nerves was one he had never felt. The need to touch her, bring her close and taste her small lips was evident in the way his eyes raked over her face.

Jack could feel every tense muscle in his body snap as his nerves sprang alive and his desire surged higher. He had never wanted any woman this way.

Their attraction was sizzling... she could feel it to because his hand came to her back, and she gasped from the contact.

He slowly inched his head closer to hers until he could feel the heat of her breath, but just when his lips were about close over

hers, his cousin's voice interrupted.

“My Laird—”

They sprang apart immediately, and Isla staggered away from him with her cheeks flushing like the bright shade of flames in a fireplace.

Jack cleared his throat and he turned away to face his cousin while she scurried away from him to the settee and sat.

“What is it?” he asked while massaging the back of his neck to ease the tension there.

“Tax reports have arrived from the villages. They need yer attention immediately.”

“I will look into it,” Jack replied. “I would like to introduce you to my betrothed, Lady Isla Lambert.” His cousin bowed his head then walked away, then Jack faced Isla and saw that she was watching him closely.

“Ye should retire for the night,” he said, not ready to analyze the heated sensations coursing through him else he might lose every ounce of restraint he had left and take her right there on his settee.

Isla only nodded, then she got on her feet and walked out of his study, closing the door behind her with a loud thud.

That night, Jack dreamed of her in his restless sleep. Isla was standing in front of the ruins of what seemed to be his castle. Tears rolled down her cheeks and held the green medallion in her hand and she whispered, "I am sorry."

He woke up after that, confused and bothered by the dream he just had. A sense of foreboding overcame him as he sat there, and Jack couldn't push that away.

It settled in the pit of his stomach, formed knots there, and tightened. Whatever that dream meant, he would never let his castle fall... ever.

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Isla couldn't take her mind off Jack. The more she thought about their almost-kiss experience, the higher her body heat rose. Soon, she was unable stay still in her chamber.

We would have kissed... she was certain of it. If his cousin hadn't walked into the study in that moment, then she would have learned what his lips would feel like on hers.

She shivered just from the thought of it, wondering what it would feel like to kiss him would make her spend the entire night awake. Now that the thoughts had entered her mind, there was no taking them out.

She walked around the hallway and tried to take her mind off him.

When she reached the foot of the stairs, she noticed the servants were unusually hurrying around the Castle. Isla hadn't spoken to anyone here yet. She still found it strange that she had to use a washcloth and stay in wide chamber with ancient dresser stands and mirrors.

As she strolled out of the Castle walls and entered the garden, the fresh scent of daffodils and lilies hit her nostrils. It was a bright day, the afternoon sun slowly filtered through the clouds and shone directly on the plants.

The vibrant colors that filled the garden gave Isla's spirit a boost. Back home in England, she had a garden in her father's estate too, and she enjoyed spending time there with Penny especially as she lived close to Isla.

She was enjoying the sight in front of her when a voice greeted behind her and shocked her out of the thoughts racing through her mind.

"My Lady."

Isla spun around sharply. The man standing beside her was tall, with looks the same as Jack. His eyes were an intense brown shade that matched the fiery red of his hair.

His beard covered a vast part of his face, and his build towered above hers.

Was every man here this tall?

Isla blinked, and the man flashed her a grin that lifted the corners of his eyes. "Elliot, My Lady. I am the Laird's younger brother, remember?"

"Oh." *Yes, I remember.* There was a striking resemblance between both men, but Jack was taller and wider in frame.

Isla extended a hand to him for a shake, but he lifted it to his lips and kissed the back of her palm instead. “It is nice to make your acquaintance.”

“How do ye find the Castle, My Lady?” Elliot asked as she fell into step beside him. “My brother tells me ye have journeyed far from England, and ye have never been this far up the Highlands.” Isla nodded, not trusting her voice to not quiver. He stopped and faced her. “Well, I am here to make sure ye see every inch of the Castle and explore the rich history we have here.”

Isla smiled. She didn’t think there was any part of history that she wasn’t familiar with already. The Castle was just as magnificent as she had read. It was her first time being in any Scottish castle and living in one, but the ways were not completely strange to her.

If only he knew.

“I am grateful,” she said to Elliot and put a hand on her chest. “Thank you for walking with me.”

Elliot seemed to be a charmer because he grinned again then extended a bent arm for her to hook her hand in.

They continued their stroll around the garden, and Elliot told her a lot about the Humphreys Castle.

“My faither’s reign was the most turbulent in our history. Our people have struggled for years to be normal again. My

brother works hard to make this happen, and it is good to see that he has found some time to live for himself again. My brother is usually very quiet and doesnae like to be around anyone but himself.”

Elliot’s light tone made her laugh, and she enjoyed listening to him talk about Jack, so she didn’t interrupt.

“It seems like he does not like to do anything besides work. I can’t find him anywhere since I came down this morning.”

In truth, Isla had hoped to see Jack so they could talk about what had almost happened the previous night. Or just talk in general. She wanted to know if he felt the same tingles that floated through her.

Elliot gave her a suggestive smile, and Isla arched a brow softly. “I’m afraid I do not understand what you mean.”

“The betrothal,” he replied. “My brother announced it to the entire Clan this mornin’. Did ye nae ken? He asked that the servants leave ye to yer sleep as he dinnae want to disturb ye.”

Isla’s jaw nearly dropped, but she snapped it back together.

The nerve of this man. How could he announce it without her presence?

He had almost kissed her, and now he was announcing their betrothal to his entire Clan without her presence.

She feigned a smile for Elliot who continued speaking. “The weddin’ feast preparations have begun. It is tradition here to celebrate whenever there is a weddin’ on hand.”

Elliot was about to say more when they heard footsteps and they both turned to see Jack walk into the garden with Jamie.

At least Jamie looked different from both Elliot and Jack. He had blond hair and blue eyes that seemed too intense to be human.

“My Lady,” Jack said with a small head bow. Jamie standing by his side wore a tight look. His lips remained in a small line and his forehead creased and he wore a scowl that made him look fierce.

Jamie bowed his head to Isla and said, “I trust ye are enjoyin’ the view of the garden, My Lady.”

“I am,” she replied with a smile that Jamie didn’t return. Jamie’s tight expression showed he was not fond of her. It didn’t bother her anyway... she was not going to be here for long, so why should it?

Isla nearly scoffed from how he maintained his tight look. She could instantly tell that this man did not like her.

It didn’t matter anyway. Isla hiked her chin higher and leveled her gaze on Jack. “May I have a word with you?” she asked.

She didn't give Jack the time to respond before she gave Elliot a small nod and walked to a corner to wait for him. Isla saw Jack say something to his brother and man-at-arms before he excused himself and came to meet her.

“When ye address me in front of my people, ye have to say My Laird.”

Isla folded her arms over her chest. “You almost kiss me and then kick me out,” she said. “Then you make the announcement of our fake betrothal without me?”

“I dinnae kick ye out, and please keep yer voice down,” he cautioned. She saw something flash in his eyes, but he didn't frown or raise his tone. “No one should ken what we have planned to do.”

Isla moved back from him when he moved closer to her. His scent hit her nostrils and sent a shiver up her spine.

“I announced our betrothal immediately because someone saw us last night. My cousin walked in on us if ye recall. Announcin' it was the only way to make it official.”

Isla knew he was right. A part of her was simply worked up about it because of what happened last night. Her gaze met his and she felt the tingle race through her again.

“So, what happens next?” she asked. Heat pooled at the back of her neck, and she lifted a hand to rub it away.

Was he not going to talk about the almost kiss?

“We prepare for the feast, and I keep working on my Clan. With our marriage they believe I have enough from yer dowry to fend for the Clan, so I need to make more sales and raise what we need.”

“Oh—” she gasped.

Jack nodded, and they fell silent for a second before his gaze softened a little. “How do ye feel today? Have ye been able to eat?”

Isla realized after he asked that she had eaten nothing since she woke up that morning. Her stomach grumbled a bit now that she was aware of it, and she wrapped her arms around her abdomen.

“I will have the servants bring ye somethin’ ye can eat.”

“Thank ye,” she said.

Jack simply nodded, then turned to walk away from her, but stopped abruptly, and faced her again. “About last night—”

Isla’s pulse skipped a beat once he mentioned the previous night, and her throat tightened so much she had to swallow.

“What about it?” she asked. Her voice had become husky, and another shiver raved through her.

Jack's eyes searched hers, and the air around them tensed as she felt a pull draw her toward him.

"It shouldn't have happened, and I am sorry that it did," he said before he pulled back.

Isla watched him walk away as the heat that started a burning path through her suddenly faded away.



Hours had passed since her last encounter with Jack, and it was time for supper when she last saw him. It was her first time dining at the large table with him and the others in the Great Hall.

Isla was formally introduced to Aideen Lyons, the Laird's first cousin, and she took a seat at Jack's right side.

The servants served Cullen skink and vegetables. Isla watched as everyone enjoyed their meal while she selected out the vegetables to fill her empty stomach. She had filled her stomach with fruits all day and after looking forward to supper for hours, she still couldn't eat what they served.

Aideen asked her questions about England, and at least talking to him distracted her.

"I always enjoy my time in London," he said to her. "As a merchant I am there several times in the year. I love to visit the gentlemen clubs and drink fine wine."

Isla smiled as Aideen continued talking about his adventures in England. She liked him already as he was chatty and more likeable in general than Jack's man-at-arms who kept giving her a hard stare.

She turned to Jack's side when she felt him tap her hand, and she noticed that he had selected out his own vegetables and meat for her to eat.

Jack exchanged their plates and placed his in front of her. "Eat," he said before motioning for a servant to come to him.

"Bring the Lady *Forfar bridie*, she should be able to enjoy that. Dinnae bring pudding, instead bring more fish and ham."

"Aye, My Laird," she replied with a curtsy then hurried away.

Isla's heart warmed as she looked at him, and a smile curved out on her lips. Jack was an attentive man, and he had noticed that she could barely eat the haddock and pudding they had served, so she had opted for the vegetables instead.

Once the servant arrived with the meal and placed it in front of her, she picked up her cutlery and dug into the food, filling her appetite with it.

After supper, Jack left early, and she ended up talking with Aideen until late in the night when the stars had completely come out. They were standing in front of the Castle, and Aideen had handed her his coat to keep her warm.

“Why did ye journey this far?” Aideen finally asked after they had spent hours talking about England’s many festivals and the merchantry. Her father had been a very prosperous businessman too, so Isla understood most of what Aideen knew about importing through the borders and the exchanges with other countries in the East.

“For the Birlet Shallows Fair,” she replied to him. “I attend it every year with my faither, but he dinnae come this year.”

Isla knew she had to be careful with whatever information she let out anyone here. They could never find out she was not from their time; else it could pose a lot of problems for Jack. Especially if they found out their betrothal was a lie.

“But the fair doesnae happen until weeks from now.”

“I know,” she answered. “I wanted to explore the Highlands for a bit before then. I met Jack during my tour of Birlet Shallows and he was nice to me. It’s hard not to fall for a man as charming as he.”

Aideen smiled at her. “Aye, my cousin is a real charmer,” he agreed, and they both laughed.

“My Lady,” he heard Jack call for her, and Isla turned to see him come into the garden. “Ye should retire for the night,” he said. “I will walk ye.”

Isla bade Aideen goodnight, then she hooked her arm in Jack’s and let him walk her to her chamber.

“Thank you for tonight,” she told him. “At the table,” she added when his brows furrowed a bit.

“Ah... that,” he replied, then chuckled. “I cannae let ye starve, My Lady. Ye are my responsibility now.”

His last statement warmed her heart and made her grin too. “Does this mean ye will take care of me?”

Jack held her gaze for some time and surprised her when he reached out to stroke her chin. “Aye,” he said. “I will.”

She watched him walk away until he was out of sight before she entered her chamber and closed the door behind her. Jack Lyons acted in ways that confused her heart.

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Jack was pleased with the progress of his Clan's farming. While he visited the farmlands the next afternoon and watched the men work on the hedges of the seeds they were to sow, he strolled with his cousin Aideen and inspected their work.

"Thank goodness for the English lass," Aideen said as he faced Jack. "With her dowry ye can help the Clan for the rest of the year while we look forward to the new harvest with hopes that the drought willnae affect us this year."

Jack nodded. That was his plan exactly. Once the fair ended, the harvest would begin. They had been able to gather enough crops for sales this year already, but they needed much more if they were going to survive the long winter predicted by the Clan's wise men.

Also, they needed to build back their armory and treasury to make sure their Clan stayed defended against whomever dared to roust a war from the other lands. Jack could not wait until his Clan was strong enough to defend itself against any others who might dare to challenge them.

I would do anything to make sure we are great again.

“She mentioned she came for the fair and ye both met in Birlet Shallows,” Aideen continued. “She must enjoy travelin’ to come all the way from England without her parents or a chaperone like the English lasses always have.”

“I ken,” he answered and rubbed the back of his neck. “She is a bold one.”

Jack didn’t want to talk about Isla much with anyone. He couldn’t risk them finding out the things only he knew about her.

“Aye, she did. I met her and her father, we spent a few days together and I ken I wanted to marry her then. Besides it is time I took a lass for wife to strength my claim to the Lairdship is it nay?”

“Aye, it is,” his cousin agreed. “She will make a good wife, but... the councilmen have their concerns. Lady Isla is bonnie and will make a fine Lady of the Castle, but she is nay Scot. This Clan has never married outside the bloodlines before. There are many bonnie Scottish lasses to pick from and—”

“I willnae listen to this talk, Aideen,” Jack said, cutting into his cousin’s words before he went any further. “I ken ye speak for the small council, but I will choose who to spend the rest of my life with nay the council.”

“My Laird—”

“Tell the councilmen this willnae be discussed, and report to me about the other villages instead.”

He saw Aideen’s lips form a thin line before he cleared his throat and said, “As ye wish it, My Laird.”

Aideen had always been his greatest supporter even when the other high Clansmen had been against him inheriting the Lairdship because of his father’s many mistakes and sins.

Aideen kept talking about the reports from the other village chiefs and the preparations for the coming winter on their end.

“They need more guards and the guards being sent to Birlet Shallows need more weapons. We dinnae have enough in our armory to go round anymore.”

“I have brought back small proceedings from my sales in Birlet Shallows. Send word to Clan McDonalds whom we always purchase weapons from. We can bring some into the Clan while we wait—”

“For yer dowry?” Aideen asked.

“Aye,” Jack replied.

His time with his cousin at the farmlands passed slowly, and by the time they rode back to the Castle, Jack found his brother with Isla by the moats both rolling in laughter.

He knew his brother Elliot to always cause a ruckus. He never took anything seriously even as leader of the Clan's knight watch.

"Brother," Jack said when he excused himself from Aideen and walked over to them. Isla instantly beamed when he reached them and seeing the way her eyes gleamed sparked a flame inside him.

Jack had to admit to himself that she was the most elegant and beautiful woman he had ever seen. Now what he needed to come to terms with was the shiver that raced through him and made his nerves tingle when he was close to her.

Their almost-kiss had only been a slip of judgment, he told himself. But for two nights now, he kept thinking of it, and wondering what it would feel like to kiss her.

Stop it!

"How is that ye manage to do that every time?" his brother asked, and Jack dragged his thoughts away from Isla. He also cleared his throat because he realized he had been staring at her.

"Do what?"

"Sound so fierce? I could never do it." Elliot tried mimicking Jack's tone of speaking, and his gestures made Isla laugh harder until her ears and cheeks reddened.

Jack couldn't wipe his own smile off his face. "Ye make jest of everythin', Brother," he said.

"Pardon me. I find that I enjoy the Lady's company. She kens a lot about history and is a fast learner. Can ye believe she kens about the ruin of Kirkpatrick that happened a hundred years before our faither was born? The disaster that brought the downfall of the entire Kirkpatrick Clan."

"I mingle with lots of scholars," Isla chirped in, and Elliot turned to her again to continue the conversation.

"Mind if I steal her?" Jack interrupted his brother. He knew how inquisitive Elliot could get and he did not want to Isla to get into a situation where she would say the wrong things.

"Of course," Elliot replied and his eyes gleamed. "She is all yers."

After Elliot walked away, Isla was still grinning and shaking her head. "He is very interesting to be around," she said. "Can't remember the last time I spoke to anyone for this long."

"I am glad that ye are enjoyin' yerself."

"Not entirely," she replied. "I mean the servants here still look at me different, and then there's your man-at-arms." Isla sucked in a deep breath before she added, "I do not think he likes me very much."

“Jamie is a little tough, but he loosens up after a while. He will get used to ye.”

She shrugged. “It doesn’t matter anyway; I don’t plan to be here for long, remember?”

No, he didn’t, but she just reminded him. Jack nodded once, then turned and faced the deep gully of the dried-up moats.

“Ye should be careful of how much ye tell my brother or anyone else here about the thin’ ye ken. They might nay understand this as the people here are a bit—”

“Conservative?” she supplied.

“That is what I mean,” Jack said with a smile. “The words ye use are nae common here.”

Isla chuckled. “Everyone knows what conservative means, come on. There are scholars here too, are they not? Your cousin seems like one, he knows a lot about England.”

“Just try nae to be so different from lasses of our time,” he advised.

“Yes, Sir,” she replied and then they both laughed.

Jack lowered his gaze into the dried moat for a while, and thought about what to say to her next, but Isla’s mind had

already moved ahead, so she spoke first. “Do you spend most of your days outside the Castle in the fields?”

He nodded. “I inspect the work in the farmlands, hold council meetings with the high Clansmen to discuss the matters arisin’ in every village on my land, and also settle disputes among my Clansmen.”

“You forgot mentioning hosting of feasts... it is a laird’s thing to do.”

“Ah, yes. I do host feasts,” he replied with a smile.

Isla shook her head, then suddenly stepped away from the short wall she leaned on and did a twirl while holding the skirts of her earasaid. “Is this how the ladies dance at the feasts?” she asked.

Jack shook his head. “Let me show ye.”

He moved to her, took her left hand, and held it up to face his palm flat, then he stepped to her right side while she went to the left, kicked his foot out to show the Highland steps, then moved to her right side again.

“Interesting,” Isla said as she quickly learned the steps and started to dance with him. Jack loved how fast her mind worked. They danced around for a while, then stopped and both laughed.

Isla put her hands on her cheeks after her rippling sounds in her heart subsided, then she met his gaze. His own heart was pounding as he stared at her, and Jack needed to control his breathing.

It didn't take long for him to do it. When he looked away, he raised his head to the sky and inhaled the dampness in the air that hinted at a coming rain.

“What about ye?” he asked after a short silence. “What do ye spend yer time doin' in England?”

“I have my morning tea, sit in the garden, and read with my friends, attend orchestras on the weekends, find time to visit the park and walk with gentlemen. I also attend balls and parties. My friends have this obsession with finding a husband, so they always are among the socialites.”

“And ye didnae intend to find a husband?”

“I do not need one,” she replied to him. Her response sparked an interest in him, and Jack found himself leaning toward her so he could listen to her talk. He loved the sound of her voice and the small hand movements she made while talking.

“My parents were the perfect couple to the outside world, but they were never happy at home. My mother had needed a husband to fend for her, and my father needed a wife for appearances. There's a saying among the English elites that the wives are there to warm the bed and charm the friends. That's a perfect description of what my mother's role was.”

“And ye dinnae want that?”

“Never—” Isla turned to him and met his gaze. “If I am to wed a man then it will be because I find that I can be my true self with him.”

Jack loved how outspoken she was, but he sensed that there was a part of her still shielded away from what she let everyone see. He noticed how she quickly averted her eyes from his when he asked, “And what’s yer true self?”

She was an intelligent woman, beautiful too, but he could tell she was wealthy in her time. The strange color and expensive jewelry she wore when he met her proved it. But he wanted to know who the real Isla was.

Jack liked to think of himself as a man who simply cared about others more than himself. He had realized that part of him a long time ago. Seeing others happy made him happy. He lived his life that way... but what about her?

“You know,” she answered on a solemn tone. “It is the first time anyone has asked me that question.”

Jack fell quiet as he listened to her. “Back in my time, I have no family and my friends... we have a lot in common and we enjoy ourselves together, but I do not think they truly know who I am. I do not think I know who I am myself.”

“Well there’s something magical about the Highlands. It’s a beautiful and magical place, that helps ye find what ye truly like and desire.”

“What do ye truly like and desire?” she asked him as she held his gaze again.

Her question filled Jack with a longing he hadn’t experienced before, and it caused his heart to feel warm. “I’ve always wanted my Clan to be powerful again, and my people to be happy,” he answered.

“That’s really selfless,” she told him. “But what about you? What do you truly like and desire for yourself?”

Her next question tossed him into a state of confusion. Jack had never considered himself as unhappy or lacking in anything before. He loved his life as it was.

He didn’t understand why his heart was starting to feel this way now. Like there was a longing he had never truly acknowledged. Isla was the reason he felt it... her voice had settled in his head, and his nerves were on high end as memories of their almost-kiss flashed in his mind.

Right then in that moment, the one thing Jack knew he truly desired and wanted was her.

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Isla stayed up until midnight after the talk with Jack and she kept thinking about the question he asked. She rolled over to her side at some point and stared out of the window.

The way he looked at her was the most tormenting of all, and each time she remembered his touch, her heart did slow dances it had never done before.

It was a starry night, and the wind from outside blew in through the window and kissed her skin. It sent a light chill up her spine, so she closed her eyes and let herself enjoy it.

Isla wondered what it would feel like if Jack lay with her now and enjoyed the breeze too. There was a uniqueness to his voice. Each time he spoke to her, his soft baritone stirred her nerves alive and made it seem as if he was the only one existing in that moment.

She had never felt that strange connection to anyone before.

By early morning, she got out of bed and moved to stand by her window. It didn't take long before she saw Jack and his

brother walk toward the Castle's vast field. From her window, she had a perfect view of the lands covered in lush grasses and little wildflowers.

Dawn was yet to break fully, but she could still see their figures as they started to train outside. Isla watched them for a long time until her servant Faye came into her chamber with her washcloth and water.

“It is the day of the feast, My Lady,” Isla said to her as she walked over to the bath to clean up. “The Castle will be full of guests and villagers soon enough. They are all comin’ to watch ye and the Laird celebrate yer betrothal.”

Isla heard the excitement in the girl's tone as she prepared Isla a bath. “We always feast at times like this. The Laird and his Lady-to-be will dance, and drink wine, and many lairds will come to celebrate.”

“Is it that exciting to watch the Laird and his betrothed?” she asked, wanting to understand how these people enjoyed feasting so much. It was basically two people forcing the entire village to celebrate because they were marrying.

Back in England, she hated attending balls and parties for this purpose. Many of the young women who attended solely did because of their dreams of finding a husband. The men also wanted to find some young, naive lady they could court and possibly have a few rendezvous with.

Isla had enjoyed her own share of explorations through her traveling. That was more interesting than sitting in a dress and pretending to find boring conversations funny.

“Aye. People love to celebrate their Laird’s happiness. There’s goin’ to be a lot of lairds and clans attendin’ tonight, My Lady. That is the most excitin’ part. Ye must look yer best. The Castle’s seamstress has prepared yer dress. I will bring it soon.”

Faye’s words ended on a squeal and seeing the girl’s excitement made Isla’s heart light. She chuckled because it was amusing to watch, then focused on her bath again.

After Faye left, Isla took off her night robe and got in the bath. She soaked herself in it and let the warm water ease her nerves while she inhaled the scent of rose oils Faye had used.

Isla sat a while and looked around the chamber. She remembered the dance with the Laird, and a smile crept up her lips. It seemed like he was skilled at it, and she couldn’t wait to dance with him tonight.

At least that is something to look forward to.

Isla finished her bath and headed down to the Great Hall to have breakfast with everyone else. Elliot and Aideen bowed to her when she entered. Jack was already seated at the table, and Jamie was the last to join them.

“My Lady,” the woman who walked in beside Jamie greeted. “I am Moira,” she said with a curtsy.

“She’s Jamie’s wife,” Elliot said as Moira straightened again and flashed a soft smile Isla’s way.

Jamie had taken his seat at the table without sparing Isla more than a nod, and Jack motioned for her to take his spot.

“It’s lovely to meet ye, Moira,” Isla said to Moira before she walked toward the table.

“Likewise, My Lady.”

“Please, call me Isla,” she said. Moira seemed not much older than her, and Isla at least wanted to have one person in this Castle who didn’t refer to her with the title.

They had specially cured Ayrshire bacon with game soup, and it was the first time Isla was enjoying soup since she arrived the Castle. She realized the food did not taste so strange to her as she ate that morning, and Jack constantly gave her more meat and vegetables.

His consciousness of her eating preferences made her notice how much attention he paid to those around him. Jack’s words from the previous night flashed in her mind as she ate, and it sparked her curiosity again.

After eating, she walked with Moira around the garden, and she enjoyed her company so much. “Why did I not meet you when I first arrived?” she asked Moira.

“That is because I was away at Onich,” Moira replied. “I am the Clan’s healer and I travel to treat the villagers who need me from time to time.”

“Healer,” Isla repeated. “I have always had interest in the art of treating people using herbs and plants.”

“That is perfect then, I could teach you,” Moira suggested even before Isla ended her statement. “I learned all I know about healin’ from the Laird’s late maither. She was very knowledgeable. A kind and sweet soul. The entire Clan loved her even though they despised her husband.”

“What happened to her?” Isla asked. Even though Jack had told her about his Clan’s hardship, he hadn’t said a lot about his parents. The little she knew from history told her that the late laird was a conqueror who dreamed of expanding his clan. History books mentioned little of his family life.

“She died shortly after the war that killed her husband and devastated us all. Ever since all the new Laird has done is try to restore peace. He is very different from his father.”

Isla knew that already. He had saved her life the first day they met.

“I will teach ye all I ken about healing if ye want.”

A tiny squeal escaped Isla at her excitement, and she pressed it down with a giggle as she got lost in the excitement of the moment. “I would love that very much,” Isla answered before adding, “Oh, this is going to be so much fun,” she said before she could stop herself.

Moira frowned a bit, and Isla quickly corrected herself. “I will enjoy learning from you, Moira.”

“As I will enjoy teaching My Lady.”

They hooked hands and continued their stroll. Isla had the feeling she just made a new friend.



Moira was nothing like Ada, Penny, and Katherine. She had an intelligent mind, and she also shared a passion for history. Isla enjoyed speaking with her because she found that she did not need to overtly explain the details of history whenever she brought up a conversation.

Moira led most of their talk about the Highland’s history as they finished preparing for the feast and headed to the Great Hall.

“Ye look the bonniest, Isla,” Moira told her as Isla stepped down the last stair and paused to look at herself. “This dress was made perfectly for ye.”

Green was not her favorite color, and it was the first time she was proud of wearing it. The gold embroidery on the entire fabric made the dress look elegant. The low V-neck cut showed off her neckline and top of her breasts.

“Really?” Isla asked Moira. “I do look beautiful?”

Moira nodded. “I am sure the Laird willnae be able to take his eyes off ye. Nay man in there will be able to take their eyes off ye.”

I wonder if the same goes for Jack.

Moira herself was a beautiful woman. She had long blonde hair and her eyes were the same shade as Jamie’s. Isla especially loved her smile. It flashed her dimples and made her look like a little child.

They entered the Great Hall together, and the music stopped at the same time. Truly, heads turned in their direction and Isla inhaled sharply when her gaze landed on Jack.

He was looking at her too, and his lips were slightly parted. The hand holding his quaich stopped above his lips, and a second passed while they looked at each other before he averted his eyes first and drank deeply from the quaich.

Isla kept her chin high as she entered the Hall.

“Ye should sit by the Laird’s side,” Moira told her.

When Isla reached Jack’s side and sat, she cleared her throat and leaned close to him a bit. “When does the dance start?”

Jack glanced in her direction, and she smiled. “I want to show off the new skill I learned.”

Jack smiled too and shook his head. “The dance starts when I give the order for it to start.”

“And when is that?”

Jack rose to his feet and lifted his quaich. “A toast,” he announced, and the Hall fell silent. Isla looked around and saw there were a lot of people looking in their direction.

Most of them wore different colors from the red and black Jack’s Clansmen wore. She could identify some the Clans by their colors.

Green belonged to Clan Mackintosh, blue was for the Calloway merchants who were a part of the Kirkpatrick Clan, and black was for... her thoughts trailed off for a second as her eyes stayed on the man who had joined Jack to stand and toast to their betrothal.

“To many blissful years, Laird Humphreys.”

Black belongs to Clan Kirkpatrick, Isla thought as her heartbeat gained speed and her pulse skyrocketed. This was it... this was her chance.

Suddenly the thought of spending hours dancing and talking to strangers seemed appealing for the first time to Isla. Tonight she could talk to Laird Kirkpatrick and find out what she could about the Clan the first owner of the medallion had been married into.

Jack had finished the toast before he extended a hand for her to stand. They shared the first dance, and she matched his rhythm and steps perfectly.

“You look amazing tonight,” he told her before he twirled her around the first time. Isla was closer in his arms than the first time now, and she pressed her hand over the hard wall of his chest.

“And you clean up nicely yourself,” she replied. His hair was a little bit shorter than it was the previous day, and he had also trimmed his beard. Isla’s gaze drifted to his lips for a brief second before she met his eyes again.

“Who knew you were this good at dancing?” he asked. His voice sounded too husky to her, or was she imagining it?

“I’m a fast learner.” She lowered her own voice as she replied, and she became strongly aware of her own heartbeat.

A tiny gasp left her when his arm moved around her waist and brought her closer to him. The move stole Isla’s breath away and made her tremble inside.

Her eyes met his, and for a second she forgot everything else on her mind. Her entire being and body was fixed on him and the intense look in his eyes.

Time passed as the music continued in the background. Isla could barely hear it now because she was completely enveloped by his nearness. His scent clouded her judgment.

She even forgot that she was to find a way to dance with Laird Kirkpatrick.

Being in Jack's arms like this made her feel like a different person. There was that magnetic pull between them again. It made her lean closer to him, and she closed her eyes when he did the same.

His hot breath tickled her face and made her draw in a long, deep sigh. The pit of her stomach quivered in anticipation, her lids remained closer, but his lips never came.

Isla expected a kiss, but the song came to a slow end, and cheers erupted in the crowd. She realized she was breathing heavily again when she opened her eyes. Jack hadn't moved from where he stood.

His own chest rose and fell, and his ears had taken on another shade of red. It showed his flush and at least made her realize that she did not feel this attraction alone.

His labored breathing matched hers, and she took the first step away from him when she realized they were the only ones left on the dance floor.

Jack bowed to show the end of the dance and she curtsied.

The clapping continued. Isla turned to look at the crowd and she saw everyone grinning as they celebrated. Moira was beaming too, and she waved at Isla. The only person in the hall who wasn't excited was Jamie Norwood. As Isla's gaze

landed on him, a creeping sensation crawled up her spine and chilled her bones.

Why did it feel like Jamie had something against her?

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The feast was going as planned and Jack was happy that everyone was enjoying themselves even though he could barely do the same. He kept looking at Isla. After their dance, she had moved on to dance with Moira and then Elliot.

When Laird Kirkpatrick, one of his guests had asked for a dance, she had willingly obliged him. Now they were twirling around his dance floor and grinning at each other. His body stiffened in his chair as he watched them, and he didn't even realize he was clenching his fists on the table until he saw his brother's smile.

"She seems to be enjoyin' herself for someone who hates balls," he said to himself as he drank his ale deeply.

"Jealousy is not a great color on ye," his cousin said by his side, and made him realize he said his words out loud.

Aideen chuckled as Jack looked at him. "I can tell ye care so much about the Lady. Ye hate to see her with another man. Why dinnae ye go out there and make her dance with ye instead?"

Jack made no comment as his cousin spoke. His frown, however, stayed as he watched her twirl around and then laugh out loud again.

“She is a bonnie lass,” Aideen continued as a servant filled Jack’s cup. “I understand why ye are so taken with her, Cousin.”

“Aye, she is.” He sensed that his cousin was about to bring up the topic of him taking a wife from the Scottish clans, and he did not want to hear it.

“What about her people? Will they come for the weddin’?”

“Aye, they will,” Jack answered. “Ye mustnae question my choices, Aideen. I ken what I am doin’ choosin’ the lass to be my wife.”

“We havenae seen her people, Jack. I simply worry that the councilmen will think she is some—”

“Isla is a reputable lady... I willnae have ye or anyone else question this.”

His gaze followed Isla’s every move on the dance floor. When Laird Kirkpatrick put his hand around her waist, he jerked to his feet before he could control himself.

His brother stopped dancing with Moira to look at him. Jamie too had a questioning look on his face. It was usual for the

Laird's betrothed to share a dance with anyone who asked her hand.

Laird Kirkpatrick had done nothing wrong expect follow the Highland dance steps, so Jack knew he had no reason to feel this heat roaring through him, but strangely he couldn't stand watching her in another man's arms.

"I will excuse myself now," he said after clearing his throat. Jack walked out of the Great Hall at the same time the music ended. Relief washed through him as he saw Isla step away from Laird Kirkpatrick out of the corner of his eye.

He had made it down the hall when he heard her call for him, and he spun back around to see her hurrying toward him. Isla's smile was energetic as she closed the distance between them.

When she got close, she missed a step and nearly fell face flat, but Jack moved fast and caught her. Jack steadied her with both hands, and his worried gaze searched hers. "Are ye all right? It seems like ye have drank too much wine already."

"No, No," she answered and shook her head. "I am all right. I am just excited. I spoke to Laird Kirkpatrick, and I found out something. There are lots of gypsies in his Clan. The original owner of the medallion was from there, and I am sure if I travel to his land, I might be able to find the gypsy who cursed me."

Is this why she had been so engrossed in her conversation with him? She was trying to find her way back to her time.

Jack did not know if to feel relieved that she did not admire Laird Kirkpatrick, or worse that she was eager to return to her place even though it was clear that they had some sort of affection for each other now.

She put a hand on his arm. "This might be my way home. If I can find the gypsy there, it means I will not need to wait three months for the Birlet Shallows fair to start."

Jack had been lost in her eyes for a second, but her words pulled him back to reality and reminded him that she was not the woman he wanted to be taken with.

He cleared his throat to dispel the fog of desire that had clouded his judgment for a second. "Ye want to travel to Kirkpatrick?" he asked.

She nodded with more energy, then reached into the neckline of her dress and showed him the medallion. Staring at the sparking green stone attached to it made his head swoon, and he nearly lost his balance.

Jack touched the emerald and swallowed hard. Images from the dream he had some nights back flashed in his mind, and it made him shudder.

"I think if I can find any gypsy they will tell me what power this medallion holds, and I will learn how to get back to my time."

Jack pulled his gaze from the medallion when he thought he saw movement in the darker parts of the hallway. He grabbed

Isla's hand and led her out of the Castle into the garden where he was sure they could speak without anyone hearing them.

“Then what about the fair? Dinnae ye want to wait until then?”

Jack was reluctant to let her go. A part of him had started to dread the day when she would figure out a way to return to her time in England.

Why is that?

“I will attend the fair, but I also believe there is a reason why I came here. I wanted to know all I can about this medallion and its owner. There might be some reason the gypsy chose me to come here.”

“All right,” he told her. “But if we go to Kirkpatrick, nay one can ken what we are there to do.”

Isla nodded in agreement. Her eyes shone with emotion when she closed the medallion in her hand and sighed. “Thank you so much for your help, Jack.”

He froze when she came close to him and kissed his cheek. “You are indeed a kind man.”

Jack did not feel kindness as he touched the spot where her soft lips had grazed. No part of the hunger that ravaged him was kind. Instead, it was a fire that would consume them both and lead to heart ache if he acted on it.

He knew all this, yet he couldn't stop himself from enjoying her scent. Instead of pulling away, his arm moved around her waist, and he brought her closer to his body.

They didn't need any more words after that. Isla didn't know who moved first, but in the next second, she was pressed into his body and his lips fully covered hers for the kiss she had imagined.



Isla had kissed men before. Back in London, she had gone on a few dates as they referred to it now. Courtship was a different idea in the new London, and sometimes, if she liked the man, she had kissed him.

It was only ever brief, and never this hot. Jack's kiss was able to sweep her off her feet and steal the rest of her senses away. He tasted like wine and what heated Isla up was the feel of his palm cupping her chin to tilt her head.

His body was hot and pressed against hers. Isla could barely feel her feet on the ground as his arms tightened their grip around her waist. She slid her fingers into his hair once her hand moved to his neck.

He growled into her mouth, then did the same to her. Isla moaned too. The burst of excitement surging through her made it difficult for her to think straight or think at all.

Jack was panting by the time he withdrew. His forehead rested on hers, his eyes searched hers, and Isla did not need him to say anything before their lips joined. A slow, sensual dance of their lips began, and her heartbeat started to thunder.

His hands moved up her body to her back he tipped her closer to him. She was plastered against him from neck to knee, and it wasn't enough because he kept bringing her closer and molding her waist with both hands too.

Jack's tongue stroked into her mouth and started a dance of fire in her. He led the way while she kissed him back, his hands slowly trailed down to her bottom, and when he caressed her there, Isla groaned and tore her lips away from his.

They panted for a second then he kissed her again and stole her thoughts. She tried to think, tried to breathe... but none of that was possible. Jack's scent and the heat from his body consumed her mind. Her brain told her to get away from him, but she couldn't move.

When he pressed her closer to the hard planes of his body, his hardness pressed against her stomach and aroused warmth at the center of her thighs.

She staggered back as her senses returned. They were both breathing harshly. Their haggard breaths coupled with Isla's pounding heart were the only sound in the garden. She wondered if Jack could hear her pounding heart.

Isla's right hand moved to her lips, and she fingered the soft folds. Her cheeks burned with scarlet heat, and she couldn't miss his gaze. This kiss screamed passion. It wasn't just the kind she could ignore.

“Ye should return to the feast or to yer chamber,” Jack said in a gruff tone then as he lowered his head and ran his fingers through his hair. “I shouldnae have done that, My Lady. I am truly sorry,” he apologized.

Dumbfounded and unable to speak because she was still yet to catch her breath, Isla simply dropped her hands to her sides, then nodded softly before she turned and walked away from him.

What just happened? Her hand moved to her lips again and she touched the swollen folds. Jack’s kiss would never leave her mind, she was certain of it.



“Scottish feasts are much more interesting than any ball or cocktail party you could attend in England,” Isla told Moira the next day as they sat in the healing room and attended to Moira’s patients.

“Cocktail?” Moira asked her.

“It’s a kind of drink,” Isla explained. “We make it in England.”

“Oh... the rich and elites. I’m sure it’s what the Queen drinks.”

Isla laughed at Moira’s joke and both their riotous sounds filled the room. She liked Moira. The woman matched Isla’s definition of the kind of woman she saw herself.

Even last night at the feast, Moira had taught her three more Highland dance steps. Isla had a lot to show Penny when she returned to her time. Penny was a great dancer, and her Scottish heritage made her even better at doing the Celtic moves.

“Here, make sure you mash these roots perfectly so when we immerse them in ale, they come out better,” Moira explained to her.

Isla did as Moira explained with enthusiasm. She loved that she was learning new things. Today, Moira was showing her to make a root herb for stools and even though the rare ginseng roots did not smell so good, Isla knew they would be effective.

Isla was shocked her stomach hadn't hurt this afternoon when she got out of bed. She drank and ate pie until early this morning because the feast lasted that long. Isla was completely exhausted when it had finally ended, but Moira did not even look a little bit fazed.

Isla was sure everyone in the Castle besides the servants woke up by midday because the feast. Moira had come to find her so they could come up here and prepare herbs together, and she had obliged.

She loved that she could learn something new from Moira. Compared to her friends back in her time, Moira had more vast knowledge the kind of things that interested Isla. She knew they would be good friends soon.

Spending her time with Moira was better than sitting in her chamber all day. *I have nothing better to do anyway besides*

think of that kiss.

She had not seen Jack since she came out of her chamber, and she remembered Moira mentioning he rode out with Jamie and Elliot earlier.

Every time she tried to keep her mind straight, it wandered back to Jack and the heat of his skin against hers as their lips mingled.

A soft knock on the door caught their attention, and when the door opened Aideen came into the room.

“Do ye have somethin’ for pain?” he asked after he greeted them both and sat.

“Aye, I do,” Moira replied, and Isla watched her walk to a shelf, reach for a dark vial and hand it over to Aideen. “Make sure to take it only at night. It makes ye drowsy.”

“Thank ye, Moira, ye do good work.”

After Aideen left them again, Isla asked, “Did he get hurt?”

Moira nodded. “Aye, in a conflict with some brigands weeks back. He got stabbed in his side while protectin’ the Laird. He has been in so many battles with the Laird and has saved him countless times.”

Isla imagined what that would have been like. *Jack must have been injured a few times himself*, she thought before she focused on squashing the roots again.

It was night by the time she finished preparing the herbs with Moira. While Moira retired to her chamber, Isla decided to go on a short walk. Whenever she felt tired back at home, she usually sat on her room's balcony and stared outside her father's estate.

The Lambert Estate was always so busy that even at nighttime the merchants' servants still pushed carts back to the in-house storerooms her father had built to house his merchandise after arrival from the ports.

No week passed without goods arriving at the Estate and business always boomed even after her parent's death. Her uncle had inherited the business while Isla took the Estate. Life was not the same without her parents though.

Even though Isla couldn't say they had loved each other, she could say they had loved her so much, and she missed them every day since they passed.

Arriving in this place had offered her peace for a while. Isla realized she hadn't even had the time to miss them since she came here.

How long has it been already?

It was her second week now. How long was she going to stay here?

She was lost in her thoughts until she heard someone clear their throat behind her. Jack was there when she turned around and he had his hands behind him.

“How are ye doin’?” he asked. His voice reminded her of how his groan sounded that night. Her gaze dropped to his lips before she could stop herself, and her breath hitched in her throat.

She wondered if he thought of it too, or if he wanted to do it again like she craved.

“Great... I wanted to enjoy some fresh air.” Isla waited to see if he would come closer to her, and when he didn’t, she asked, “What do you have behind you?”

“I was at the village today, and I saw something that would look bonnie on ye,” he answered.

He brought out his hand and showed her the neck piece he held. “It’s lovely, isn’t it?”

“You got this for me?” Isla asked in a shaky voice as she stared at the gold neck piece. It was simple, with a heart-shaped pendant, but she loved it anyway.

“Aye, I did,” he replied, then motioned for her to turn around.

Isla lifted her hair out of the way, and he removed the medallion before placing the pendant on her skin. His fingers

brushed the back of her neck and stirred heat in her.

Jack walked to her front and stared at the pendant for a while on her neck before he said, "It suits ye."

"Thank ye," Isla told him. Her heart swelled with warmth in her chest, and he took her hand, placed the medallion in it, and closed her fingers over it.

"Keep this one safe. Ye will need it when the time comes, but for now ye should wear this."

"I'll never take it off," she said as a tear slid down her cheek.

Isla didn't understand why either, but it was her first time receiving a gift from anyone other than her parents and it touched her deeply.

Without rethinking her actions, she moved closer to him and wrapped her arms around him for a hug. It didn't take long before she felt his strong arms tighten around her so his warmth could make her whole.

When they separated, she hooked her arm in his and they started a slow walk together. Jack matched her pace for some time before glancing in her direction and asking, "How do ye enjoy yer stay in the Castle?"

"It's been amazing," she replied. "I haven't felt this free and happy before. I hardly even remember that I am not from this

time at all. Except of course when it comes to the food. I'm always reminded of how different it is here."

He laughed at that, and she looked at him to see how his cheeks widened. Jack put a hand on her back as they walked and the feel of his larger palm on the slender curve of her back sent shivers right through her.

Her skin tingled, and desire started a slow hum in the pit of her stomach.

"I am happy ye can adjust. It's been a bit silent from my Clansmen since I announced our betrothal. I am sure they will soon find some other request to annoy me with."

"The pains of being Laird," she commented, and they both laughed. "Ye do great work anyway. Ye are a great Laird."

"I wouldn't call myself that."

"Why not when it is true? You will lead your people well and provide all that they need to be a strong Clan." Jack's smile wavered when she stopped walking and looked at him.

He faced her, then took her hands and held them tightly in his.

"You flatter me," he said in a soft tone as their gazes met.

The air around them tensed just from their heated gazes, and he used his thumb to stroke her cheeks gently before pressing

it over her lower lip.

“I keep thinkin’ about that kiss,” Isla said before she could stop herself. She heard her heartbeat hammering in her chest and swallowed hard while trying to control it.

Jack caressed her lip again before he released a deep breath. “And so do I,” he admitted. “But I cannae do it again. For both our sakes.”

Their heated gazes lasted, but Jack took his finger away from her mouth and turned so they could continue their walk.

She steadied her shaky insides and walked with him while they continued talking about his Clan.

I guess I must forget it too.

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*J*sla's scent lingered on Jack's body throughout the night. Each time he closed his eyes, he remembered the softness of her body as it pressed into him, and he wished he hadn't held himself back from kissing her after she confessed to thinking about their kiss earlier.

Dawn broke and he forced himself out of bed because he had to meet with other Clansmen. Jack needed to go for a ride to clear his head.

When he walked out of his chamber and got to the ground landing, he saw Elliot and Aideen standing at the Castle's door.

"Is there a problem?" Jack asked after descending the stairs.

"My Laird," they greeted. The pale look on Aideen's face made a knot form in the pit of his stomach and the first thought that came to his mind was that something terrible had happened in the village.

"The stable lad went missin' last night, and nayone has seen him since," Elliot reported. "I have also nay seen him this

mornin’.”

Jack frowned. He remembered the lad who had worked for the Castle even while his father lived, and Jack noticed he always played on the fields with his sister.

“What about the sister?” Jack asked. “I ken she works in the Castle here as one of the kitchen servants.” Jack remembered them both because he had brought them into the Castle personally after their parents died last year.

They had nowhere else to go, so offering them a place in his Castle was the right thing to do.

“Nay one has seen her either. They are both missin’,” his cousin replied.

He didn’t like waking up to terrible news. It always made his day feel hectic from the start. “Let’s have the men search the entire Castle and the village,” he told his brother. “I want to know if they were seen when I return from the moors.”

“Aye, My Laird.”

Jack got to the stables, took his golden-haired mare, and rode far into the moors where he could enjoy the strong windy atmosphere and let the breeze ruffle his hair.

Jack rode until he got the edge of the cliff surrounding Humphreys Castle. He then got down from his saddle, walked to the edge of the cliff, and stood there. This was the one place

where he could always hear himself think while enjoying the wind blowing against his face and stealing his breath away.

Standing at the edge always made him feel on top of the world. The only sensation that had topped that was being close to Isla and kissing her.

Jack's insides felt alive for the first time in his life. His thoughts wandered to all he had learned from Isla and smiled as he processed them. Then he realized she had mentioned the treasure of Ardenhill.

What if she was right? What if it wasn't a myth?

Jack laughed as the thought entered his mind, then he shook his head hard and laughed again to himself.

That's crazy. Now I sound crazy like her.

He remembered telling her they could use the treasure if the need arose, and this was the perfect time for it. Once they found the treasure, whatever it was, then he could use it to fund all his Clan's needs and make sure they had enough weapons in their armory.

Also, he wouldn't need his betrothal to Isla anymore once they could stand on their own. It was a perfect idea because Isla would leave eventually and then what would happen to his Clan?

But what if it's only a myth?

When the doubtful thoughts entered his mind, Jack decided to stop thinking about the treasure. Even if the treasure was real it would take years to find it, and it was why no one had found it since.

He shrugged them off again and focused on enjoying his time by the cliff. Jack stayed by the edge of the cliff until the morning sun started to show, then he rode back to the Castle to start his day.

Jack rounded up the meeting with his councilmen who for the first time had little dissatisfactions to complain of. For the past seven years not once had he had a peaceful council meeting until today.

At least they no longer hammer on me finding a lass to wed.
Jack had settled that aspect of his Clansmen's fear.

His men who rode out to the village still hadn't found the stable lad and his sister, and Jack grew worried because it was unusual for one of his servants to go missing.

His cousin briefed him on the situation at the borders. "We have the Calloways refusing to grant our merchants access to their border roads unless we pay their entitled fund."

Jack hadn't raised money for that yet, but he was sure to come up with something soon. He rubbed the back of his neck and stopped walking when he reached the foot the stairs. "Send men to them and ask that their leader visit my Castle. I will do the negotiations in person."

“What about the funds from the dowry? Surely, we have enough to pay the Calloways now, so why not pay them?”

Jack shook his head. “I will pay under my own terms. Just send the word.”

Aideen’s forehead creased with frown lines that Jack ignored, and after a few seconds passed Aideen bowed, turned, and hurried out of the Castle.

Jack sighed. He was about to walk up the stairs when he saw Isla come in from the garden’s entrance with Moira. She laughed at something Moira said to her, and the warm sound graced the atmosphere. It brightened his mood suddenly, and he smiled even before he realized he had started back down the stairs again to meet her.

“My Lady—”

“Jack,” she said in a light tone, and thrust her hands forward. Jack saw the dirt on her palms and the smudge on her cheeks. “I learned to uproot sage today. It’s a sacred herb used for making many potions. A love potion is one of them. Maybe I will use it to charm you into loving me.”

She laughed at her joke, and Moira joined her. “She doesnae mean it, My Laird,” Moira said, then gave Isla a gentle nudge in her side.

Jack found it relaxing that she was enjoying herself. He had expected her to stay indoors since she was not used to his time,

but it looked like she was adapting already.

She even wore his Clan colors today. Her dress was an embroidery of gold on red and her hair was styled in numerous twists with pins that held them in place on top of her head.

Humphreys women braided their hair with wool made from sheep's skin and the style had passed on from generations to the recent times.

She was wearing the pendant he gifted her the previous night, and the gold looked even brighter as it rested on her creamy skin.

"I would like a word," Jack said to Isla while she spoke to Moira in hushed tones. She raised her head to meet his gaze, and he added with a smile. "Do ye mind?" Watching her suddenly filled him with the urge to have her to himself. Jack began planning a time out with her, away from the Castle.

"Oh... of course not," she replied to him. "I will clean my hands and meet ye in the Castle."

Jack nodded. "I will be waiting."

Isla's smile widened at the corners of her lips before she walked past him and headed into the kitchen. The scent of roses breezed past him when she walked away, and he indulged in it.

Love and roses, he thought as he remembered her comment about making a love potion. He didn't know about love, but it seemed as if she had already bewitched him with thoughts of her.

She's all I can think about.



Jack led her out of the Castle and toward the stables when she joined him some minutes later. “Ye enjoy the art of healin’?” he asked her.

Isla nodded, and he stole a glance at her before entering the stable to bring out his horse.

“Yes, I enjoy it, and Moira is also a great teacher,” she replied. “I am learnin’ a lot from her.”

Jack stroked his horse's mane as he listened to her, and she continued talking about her new passion.

“I find that it makes me happy when I see the sick patients relieved because of the potions I make. I think this might be part of who I am, and I just never knew it. I used to hate being around people so much and I spent most of my time in my history books.”

“Look how that has served ye,” he pointed out.

“It surely has,” she said with a chuckle. “I mean you never would have believed me if I did not tell ye the things I know.”

“Well, today, ye will learn to ride on yer own,” Jack told her the patted his saddle. “Hop on.”

Isla hesitated at first, but he stuck out a hand to her and she put hers in so he could help her mount. Once he was satisfied that she was seated properly he climbed up behind her, then kicked the horse’s sides to get it to trot.

Jack led them out of the Castle, and they rode for a long time; he got to the vast fields beneath the hill where they could have some privacy. They were not far from the Humphreys’ market and since it was a Saturday, Jack could hear the drums coming from the square where the villagers had their weekly jousting competition.

The villagers used this means to entertain themselves and it was a long-standing event that could not be displaced even if he tried. His father used to host jousts in the Castle too while he ruled. Jack had changed that rule because he did not fancy watching people fight and hurt themselves for a simple gift from the Laird.

It never made sense to him.

He returned his thoughts to the present and helped her get off the saddle. Jack didn’t release her hand as he walked with her to away from the tree where he had tied the reins.

“It’s always lovely out here,” she said as she raised her head and stared at the sky. Jack couldn’t hold himself back. He stroked her hair, and she turned back to look at him. Jack felt

his pulse skip and he had to remind himself once again that he couldn't let himself feel anything for her.

“Jack,” she whispered. Her soft tone made his pulse jump then quiver, and he became strongly aware of his own heartbeat.

Her voice soothed him and made him forget all that. Jack got lost in the moment. His gaze drifted to her lips, and he considered tasting her again. Heat flooded him, and he also craved to be touched by her.

If he did, then he knew for certain that he would lose his mind this time. Isla leaned forward first. Her hand came up to his chest and her face inched closer until he felt the heat of her breath.

The kiss was inevitable. Jack took her lips for the heated kiss and her taste engulfed him. He slid his hands into her hair and massaged her scalp while he pressed her against him.

Her response made it hotter for him, and Jack lost control. He caressed her back and pressed her tighter against him, so she felt the tension in his body.

“This is what ye do to me,” Jack whispered hoarsely when he pulled his lips from hers. She initiated the next kiss and this time, he switched positions, so she rested on the tree, then he slid his tongue into her mouth.

His hands grazed over her breasts as he pressed her against his chest, and hers flattened on his back to make sure he stayed

close to her. Even though being this close to her was torture, he could endure it because it also brought him pleasure.

Their tongues danced around and heightened their pleasure. Jack tilted her chin higher so she couldn't break free from him. His ferocious hunger overtook every fiber of his being and made him lose his balance.

“My Laird,” someone called, and he jerked away from her like he was burned.

Jack staggered backward, Isla lifted her right hand to touch her lips and the knots in the pit of his stomach tightened. There was no way he could stay away from her now. He knew it and felt it deep in his bones.

But what happens when it's time for her to leave?

His nerves were raw with need. Jack was struggling to restrain himself because his man-at-arms was scowling at him.

“Jamie, what is it?” he asked when he finally found his voice. He combed his fingers through his hair and cleared his throat.

“We found the stable lad and his sister in the crypts.”

“The crypts?” Jack asked in an unsure voice. “What in the heavens were they doin' in the crypts?”

Jamie's frown stayed as he shook his head. "They were not doin' anythin' there, My Laird. Their bodies were found there. Someone murdered them and put their bodies in the crypts."

"Oh my—" he heard Isla gasp and he turned to see the terror in her eyes.

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Jack hurried into the Castle after he arrived. Jamie was telling him more about the dead stable lad and his sister as they hurried down the descending stairs that led past the dungeons to the treasury.

How did this happen? Who could have done this?

Jack had seen many villagers murdered during his father's reign and he vowed to never let such happen under his rule. Whoever did this had to be an insider. He was certain of it.

On the far end was the crypts the Castle hadn't used in years. Jack remembered his mother always told him that the space buried under the Castle's study used to be where generations of Lairds were buried before the great plague.

The Highlanders had adopted burning their dead after that and not many went down to the crypts since then. Jack couldn't even remember the last time he went in there.

"They were murdered. The sister's throat was slit, and the lad has a burn under his foot. I think they must have followed

someone down here. Whomever it was they followed; it definitely was not a stranger.”

“Take their bodies to the ground landin’,” he ordered Jamie, then he brushed a hand over his head and sighed. “I want them to have a proper funeral. Also interrogate every guard on watch last night. I want to ken how this happened under their watch.”

His cousin came into the crypt before Jack could leave and said to him, “I heard from Elliot that the stable lad and his sister were found down here. Do ye ken what happened yet?”

Jack shook his head. “I just found out from Jamie myself. Call a meeting with every guard. We need to tighten security around the Castle and the village too. The guards who were supposed to be here last night were nay on their post, so they will be punished.”

“Ye think they were murdered by someone close to us?”

“The sister’s throat was slit in our crypts. They wouldnae just come here except they were asked to or lured here. Or someone killed and brought their bodies here to hide,” Jack analyzed as he marched out of the crypt and jogged up the stairs with his cousin. When they got to the front of the Castle a small crowd of servants had gathered.

The Castle bells tolled to alert everyone of what had happened. His people hadn’t experienced the horror of living in fear for seven years since he took the Lairdship and Jack had vowed never to let them go back to that time of fear.

I will find this killer and end him before this gets out of hand.

He didn't know what the end game was yet, but from experience when strange murders began, it always hinted at a coming war.

“For anyone to murder a mere stable lad and his sister then it means they knew somethin’,” Aideen said. “I believe we must be watchful from now on.”

“I will address the servants. Ye address the guards and let them ken that we are in desperate times henceforth. There is nay room for slackin’ anymore. I want any suspicious activity reported and anyone who defies the curfew arrested.”

“Aye, My Laird.”

Jack hurried into the courtyard where the members of his Castle had slowly started to gather, then he clapped to gain their attention and began his speech.

“There isnae need for panic among us yet—”



Isla was still shaken from the news about the dead stable lad and his sister hours after the frenzy in the Castle had subsided. She was in her chamber now, and Faye was brushing her hair as she sat in front of her dresser.

“I can't believe someone murdered them,” she said out loud even though she was thinking the words to herself. What sort

of person murdered a child?

Faye dropped the brush she held and replied, “The Laird will handle it, My Lady. Ye shouldnae worry as we all trust him.”

Faye sounded as if things like this happened frequently, and she shuddered at the thought of what Jack had to deal with each time it happened.

Before now, Isla would have found it stupid that anyone would entrust their fate to someone else. If Jack made a mistake and failed to protect the servants, then what would happen to them? She had always hated blind trust. It was why she did not believe in love and happy ever afters.

They trust that a person will keep them happy for the rest of their lives.

Isla believed it was more logical to trust no one else but herself. She had survived through her toughest times and pain after her parent’s death that way. *By depending on only myself.*

“Ye trust the Laird that much?” she asked Faye and turned around in her chair so she could look at her.

“I dae and everyone here does. He has taken care of most of us and made sure we were safe by risking his life. He had also won many battles to defend this Clan,” Faye replied. “He has saved the Clan from ruin many times. He has fought and won countless battles for his faither and there is nay man more deservin’ to lead us than him.”

Isla didn't contend that Jack was an honorable man. It was the trust she was not so sure off.

But you trust him to help you go back to your time?

The doubting question entered her mind and made her realize she wasn't so different from Faye. She too trusted Jack to help her, and he had already saved her once.

Isla remembered their kisses as she sat there, and heat bit into the skin at her neck and back. The flush made her clear her throat and she put her hands on her cheeks.

How was it that she kept wanting more of him each time he touched her? It wouldn't matter anyway. Once she went to Kirkpatrick or the fair and found the gypsy, she would get back to her time and none of these growing feelings would matter.

All her feelings would not matter to either her or Jack. Jack especially. He had a life here, and in history he turned out as a great laird who died fighting for his people. Isla had a feeling that this murder had set the pedestal for the trend of events that would lead to his death.

I wouldn't want to see that happen. If anything happened to Jack while she was here, then her heart would never recover. Isla had come to care about him.

She had supper in her chamber that night after Faye served her. The Cullen skink did not taste as horrible as it did the first time she ate it, and she enjoyed the rolled scallops by its side.

Isla went to bed with thoughts of Jack on her mind, but she dreamed of the gypsy and the curse.

It's a horrible fate.

Those words played in her mind as she jerked awake, sweaty, and shivering. Isla got out of bed and opened her dresser. The medallion was still there, and it shone brightly.

She just needed to find the gypsy and end this once and for all.



Isla met Jack in his study the next afternoon after she finished with Moira. She had washed up first and changed into clean clothes because the ones she had on before smelled of smoke and she was sure her hair had stalks in it.

Jack didn't seem happy when she walked in. He had a bottle of brandy on his desk, and he was drinking from his quaich when she closed the door behind him.

"Jack," she called and stepped closer. He met her gaze briefly, and Isla noticed his tormented look. Her heart instantly went out to him, and she wished there was a way to console him.

"Did you need something?" he asked when she got to him. Isla quickly shook her head. She stood by the side of his chair and put a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry for what happened to the stable lad and his sister,” she said.

“There is nay reason for ye to be sorry. I let my guard down and my enemies think I am weak, so they have come in and killed an innocent lad and lass.”

“I wonder who must have done this,” she lamented. Isla couldn’t think of a reason why it would have happened. The stable lad and his sister were mere servants, and she didn’t think there was any important reason why they had to be killed.

“I will take the measures I have to take now and never make the same mistake twice. The Highland clans will never miss an opportunity to create strife and troubles in my land and if that is my enemy’s intent, then they willnae get the chance to strike again.”

“I want to help you in any way I can,” Isla said the second the thought entered her mind. “You can tell me what I can do.”

Jack was quiet for a long time, and she wondered if he had anything to ask of her as he stared hard at the scroll in front of him. He sighed after some time, then shook his head and muttered, “This is insane—”

“Tell me,” Isla insisted, then gently pushed aside some scrolls so she could lean against his desk. She stayed that way for some time, then she sat on the edge and faced him fully.

“The Myth of Ardenhill,” Jack began, then trailed off again. “You said it wasn’t a myth and that it was real. Was that a joke, or did you mean it?”

“It isn’t a myth,” Isla replied. “In the year 1900 the treasure is found under Humphreys Castle buried deep in the underground caves men are yet to explore.”

“And that means it’s there right now?” Jack asked. “If it was found in the 1900’s then it means the treasure is there right now, and it is—”

“It is gold,” Isla cut in as she realized what he was driving at. Her pulse spiked and her eyes widened. “There’s gold right here and if you find it, then your Clan will never be poor or weak ever again.”

Her voice had become hushed, like she was whispering to a child, and Jack nodded as the corner of his lips quirked a little. “Are ye ready for an adventure?” he asked her.

Isla giggled. “Oh yes!” She loved adventures and lived for them. It’s the reason why she had come to Birlet Shallows in the first place. Isla’s entire body tingled in anticipation of what was to come as Jack got on his feet, walked over to his huge shelf, and pulled out a wide scroll map.

“In here lies the secrets and every nook and cranny of this Castle and the grounds beyond. It was designed by my grandfather, and it is perfectly detailed. We call it the Hump’s eye.”

“I know it,” Isla said then dashed to where Jack stood, and stared at the map with him. “I know the Hump’s eye. The map shows expanse of vast lands, hills and mountains that make up the Highlands. Even before the war, the Scots and English had used the map to determine the terrains that would hold their men for the battle. Culloden doesn’t survive after this bloody battle, and it makes the fall of Scotland.”

“Scotland falls?” he asked her.

Isla shook her head. “Not entirely, but they become one with England. Most of the Highland clans don’t exist for much longer after the merger.”

She saw emotion flash in his eyes at the revelation and instantly regretted that she had divulged so much in her moment of excitement. “Jack—”

“Let’s focus on the treasure,” he stopped her, then let her peek at the map. “You know better, so you should know the exact place where the treasure was found and what it looked like.”

“I don’t think you understand,” Isla said with a frown as she raised her head and looked at Jack. “Yes, I know where the treasure was found, but it’s not a box or sack of precious stones you can lift into your chamber and use. It’s an entire mine. A gold mine, and it’s buried under your Castle.”

She pointed at the circled spot on the map that showed the cave beneath the Castle to buttress her point as Jack met her gaze.

“A gold mine?” he asked in a shaky tone. His eyes widened with his disbelief and Isla simply nodded.

“A gold mine,” she repeated as a smile curved out on her lips and slowly Jack began to laugh.

The riotous sound filled the air and tickled Isla until she joined him. *History is about to get rewritten*, she thought as she glanced at Jack when his laughter quieted down. Once they found the treasure, his Clan would have all they wanted, and his name would go down in history books for discovering another gold mine on the Highlands.

Rumbling thunder struck outside and sent a shiver up Isla’s spine. The downpour came without warning and reminded her of the night she was transported back to this time.

The weird sensation that crept up her spine stayed and made her wrap her arms around her body as her paranoid thoughts roamed free. *Is something important about to happen again?*

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Three weeks later, Jack's men began work in the Castle's caves. His Clan's fortune had completely changed because of Isla and as busy as he was over the past few days, he still made time to meet her in the evenings so they could enjoy supper together and walk the gardens.

Jack was looking forward to doing the same this evening once he returned to the Castle. He spent his entire day at the village with his brother and cousin. They had been training the new guards added to the army he already had.

After locking those who had failed to guard the crypts in the dungeon, he needed more loyal men in his guard. His brother and cousin were in charge of the selection, but Jack liked to train them in person when he had the chance.

Now that they had gold, they could afford whatever weaponry they wished. Jack planned to make sure he groomed enough goldsmiths here in his Clan, so they didn't have to depend much on other clans to help them process their gold.

"Those caves have been abandoned for centuries... how did ye do it, Brother? How did ye ken the mines existed?" his brother asked when Jack moved closer to them.

“I went down there to inspect and see if I could find any clue as to why the stable lad and his sister were found near there.”

He knew Elliot was still yet to understand what had happened, and Jack had been considering confiding in him about Isla for some days now. Jack didn't know how his brother would react. Jamie already did not like Isla, he could tell as his man-at-arms rarely ever said any words to her.

Jack didn't think his men would understand Isla any more than they did now if they found out the truth. The only one she seemed to enjoy her besides his brother was Moira and he was glad she could at least associate with someone who could keep her company.

He dragged in a deep breath and began telling his brother and cousin the story he had practiced repeatedly in his head and with Isla so no one would question their discovery. “I went inspecting the entire Castle grounds night after night when the stable lad and lass were murdered and one night I decided to check the abandoned caves beneath the west wing. The walls had cracked a bit. When I tripped and fell I discovered the ground was harder than usual, and my sheath made a clang when it hit the ground.

“Beneath me right here was the rusty, ugly-looking substance.”

“Then the goldsmith you sent for went down there and confirmed it was gold,” Aideen added with enthusiasm. Jack could tell the story excited his cousin.

“Aye,” Jack said and smiled. “This is good fortune for our Clan, thank the heavens.”

He saw his brother’s pleased nod and Aideen’s too before he patted Aideen’s shoulder and added. “I will ride back to the Castle now, ye stay here and inspect the work.”

Jack walked away from them, found his horse tied to a wooden stalk buried deep in the ground, then mounted and rode off.

It was a five-minute ride back to his Castle. The workers were working in the cave again, and he could hear the clang of metal as they hit and nipped away at the mines.

Jack was thankful the west wing wasn’t built in conjunction to the part of the Castle in use. The work ongoing there wouldn’t affect anyone who lived in the Castle and he didn’t have to worry about moving some of his people.

His heart was lighter now and it had been for days since they made the discovery. He was grateful to Isla, and there was very little he could do to show her how much gratitude he felt.

Now it was his turn to repay her. He had to help her find the gypsy who brought her here so she could return to her time.

Jack wondered why she had come here at all. *Was it a curse?* He wished he could make Isla stay regardless. What would he do about his growing feelings for her once she left?

Jack thought about her as he entered the Castle, and she was the first person he saw when he glanced toward the garden entrance briefly.

“My Laird,” she greeted and curtsied. Her curtsy always made him smile. She was slowly getting accustomed to the way of life here. Even her way of speaking had slowly begun to adjust too.

“My Lady.” He went to her, took her hand, and kissed the front of her palm. “How has yer day been?”

Jack didn’t need her to answer before he noticed the dull look in her eyes. Her cheeks also glistened like she had been crying, and he instantly hated that. “Isla...” he mumbled, then pulled her toward a corner of the hallway where they stood, “what is it? Have ye been cryin’?”

She shook her head and forced on a smile, but Jack noticed even that wasn’t genuine. “I just wondered what would be happenin’ back in my time. I wonder if anyone misses me. It is a sad thing because while I was with them... my friends, I never really appreciated being with them. Now I wonder if they miss me, and I would give anything to find out how they are doing.”

His heart ached as she spoke. Slowly, his chest tightened, and he felt the pressure nearly squash his breathing.

She misses her home. Jack had hoped she was happy here, and he had told himself that her adapting to their way of life meant she was happy, but she clearly wasn’t.

Am I the one who is so fond of her?

He didn't know how best to comfort her, so he wrapped his arms around her. They stayed in the hug for some time, he lifted a hand and patted her hair back, then pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Let's go to Kirkpatrick," he said. "We will ride out tomorrow and try to find any gypsy in their main village. I'm sure we will be able to learn somethin' and even if we don't, the harvest is ever near now, and the fair comes first. We will attend the Birlet Shallows Fair, and I am sure ye will find the gypsy who has brought ye here... that way ye can return to yer time."

Jack only hoped his words could comfort her even though they made his heart break. Isla missed her own world, and he knew he would have to let her go someday.

I have known this from the start. But Jack had let himself care for her anyway and now he couldn't see how it was possible for him not to miss her to death after she was finally gone.



They journeyed to Kirkpatrick as he had promised the next day. Isla sat in front of him on the saddle, and his strong arms held her sides to keep her from falling off.

His hands at her sides made her relax against him until she felt his chin on top of her head. Jack's body was strong all round, and as she pressed into the hard planes of it, she felt her insides turn soft with need for him.

She was getting more comfortable in a saddle and Isla realized it happened each time she went riding. Isla knew she would

get better if she practiced it on her own frequently, but that didn't matter now.

Today might be the day she returned to her time. If she found the gypsy she was looking for, then it was possible. She ought to be overjoyed at the possibility, but she couldn't help the pang in her heart that stopped her from feeling joy.

Instead, it felt like she would be leaving some parts of herself behind. When Jack found her on the ground landing yesterday, she had been thinking about her parents and missing them which had made her cry.

Isla didn't think she would run into him when she headed for her chamber. As much as she had begun loving Scotland, and the people here in this Castle, she still missed her home.

She never knew she would miss Penny and her other friends if she was separated from them. There were her friends, yes, but she had always believed herself to be smarter than them in every way.

Isla knew the ladies liked and enjoyed her company because of her social status and she had stayed friends with them anyway because she had no one else. Without them, she would have been utterly alone.

She had known that, but she never appreciated it.

Was I such a horrible person?

They rode in silence for a long time, then he paused for their horse to drink and rest.

Isla stood by the loch side while Jack stroked the horse's mane. She remembered when they first met and journeyed to his Castle. Even then, Jack had taken care of her, and he hadn't even known what kind of woman she was.

He had asked her once who she truly was, and Isla hadn't had an answer for him then. She wondered if he knew who she was now.

"How do ye feel?" Jack asked as he came to stand beside her. "We are only a few hours from Kirkpatrick now. Are ye scared that ye will find the gypsy or happy?"

"Both," she replied after a while. "The first time I met the gypsy I didn't believe what she told me, or that the medallion had any power and now here I am. I wonder what I will learn this time. What I really wish to know is what is happening back in my time while I am here? Am I missing? Or is everything still as it was?"

Jack's smile was gentle before he took her hand in his. Her gaze dropped to where their hands joined. His larger palm completely engulfed hers and he squeezed her fingers.

"I am goin' to be with ye this time, and the gypsy willnae hurt ye."

"Of course I ken she will not," she said with a short laugh. "I trust ye to protect me."

Isla looked at him and she lost track of time briefly when their gazes met. Heat rose inside her, flushed her cheeks, and created intense pools of desire in her loins. She realized they hadn't done more than kiss. The last time he had kissed her on the fields, it had felt like they would do more, but Jamie had interrupted with bad news and since then they hadn't had another chance.

She turned to face him squarely, then lifted a hand to his chest. "Jack," she whispered as she held onto his gaze.

Isla leaned closer to him until their lips touched. Jack cupped one hand over her cheek and slid the other one into her hair. His lips were soft and warm as he licked her lower one, then slide his tongue in.

Isla whimpered when he pressed her harder against him, growled into her mouth and moved his hand from her cheek, over the swell of her breasts, then to her back so he could mold her bottom to him.

His hardness pressed into her abdomen, and the kiss was slowly heating into another level when the horse neighed suddenly, and they jerked apart.

Jack turned away from her, combed his fingers through his hair, and cleared his throat. She also nibbled on her lower lip, then ran her fingers through her hair.

"We must make haste," Jack finally spoke first, and she turned to him. "Kirkpatrick is close now and we need to arrive before dusk."

“All right,” she replied, then walked over to the saddle and mounted it without his help this time.

“Good,” Jack complimented. “Ye will be good enough for yer own soon.”



The late hours of the night had arrived when they finally found an inn in a village named Crail. Jack had been here a few times himself but only when his father had needed him to spy on the Kirkpatricks and find out what he could about their army.

The Kirkpatricks were a small clan. The smallest in the Highlands, but they were once the most powerful of all clans. Their spot on the Highland border with the Lowlands placed them at high positions with the merchants and they were also known allies for many other clans because of this.

The disaster that destroyed their clan and reduced them to what they now were was a storm. It was rumored that the Highlands had never seen anything like it.

The storm affected only their clan and wiped almost all the noble families out in their sleep. Water carried off huts and cottages, their farmlands wasted away, and the Castle was destroyed by a great lightning strike that killed the Laird in his sleep.

The rest of the Highlands had called the storm a great curse on their land. Many rumored it was because of the Laird's strange

wife who was rumored to be a witch, and they hadn't stopped until she was stoned to death in her very own Castle's courtyard.

The villagers celebrated her death for years. Jack had never heard a more gruesome history.

Jack remembered that history too well. The Kirkpatricks had managed to get back on their feet after many years, but nothing was the same after that storm.

"May we have a room for the night?" Jack said to the older woman that opened the door of the inn for him and Isla.

Isla gasped and took off the cloak covering her head once they entered the inn. The woman standing in front of Jack put on a smile that sent a chill through his nerves.

"You're the gypsy," he heard Isla say and he quickly turned to her.

Her skin had paled, and her eyes were wider than he had ever seen it. Jack saw her pupils dilate, and her lower lip trembled as she reached out and grabbed the older woman's wrist. "You are the one who cursed me." Isla's voice thundered in a way Jack had never heard.

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“*J*innae ken what ye speak off, My Lady,” the woman denied. Isla saw only black spots as she stared back at her with fury and clenched her teeth. “I can read yer fortune though if ye want. I can tell ye what fate awaits ye in the years to come.”

“I do not care for your lies,” Isla replied harshly. “I just want you to tell me how to get back to 1973 at once.”

She was a hundred percent certain this woman was the gypsy she had met in Birlet Shallows. Her fate had shone today, and she had run into her here again. The smile on the woman’s face irritated her. It showed the full set of teeth and the dimples in her left cheek.

Her eyes also gleamed with the same madness Isla had witnessed on the gypsy who cursed her, and it made her stomach form tight knots.

I am so sure it is the same woman.

“I do not believe you,” she said and tightened her grip on the woman’s hand. “You must undo what you have done and send

me back to my time.”

Jack remained quiet at her side, and she moved closer to the woman, then yanked away the cloak covering her hair. Her hair was a fiery red shade too, but it was shorter and fell to a million curls that reached the side of her jaws.

“You must undo what you have done,” Isla repeated, determined not to let go of the woman’s hand even when she heard Jack call for her.

Isla’s pulse was on high speed now. She swallowed hard, shook her head, and maintained eye contact with the gypsy.

“Do ye really want to return? Is that what ye want?” the gypsy asked.

I knew it was her.

“I do,” Isla replied without hesitating. “Undo what you have done.”

The woman smiled. The kind that left Isla’s nerves feeling raw and entangled with fury. Why did she smile? What was she trying to do this time?

“Ye still think for only yerself, Child,” the woman replied. “Ye are still as selfish as ever and ye have nae learned to think of others first.”

Isla frowned in confusion. “What are you talking about—”

“Until ye learn how to be selfless, ye cannae return. I am afraid yer fate hasnae changed, Child. Ye still deserve the horrible fate with which ye were born with. If ye desperately wish to return to yer time, then ye shall return. Yer fate was to die there anyway.”

What is she talking about? Isla’s knees weakened, and she knew her face grew ashen white. When she looked at Jack, his jaw had hardened.

His voice boomed around the room as he asked. “What fate do ye speak of?”

Her words caused Isla to tremble inside, and she felt the medallion resting on her chest gain heat; it nearly burned her skin. She yelped, released the woman, and hurriedly took it off from her neck.

The medallion’s light shone bright, and nearly blinded her, so she tossed it to the ground in panic. “What is happening?” she asked in a shaky voice.

Jack had come to stand beside her and hold her hand, but his presence did little to unnerve her. “Isla,” he called again but his voice barely cut into her confused mind.

When she shivered hard, he wrapped his hands around her shoulders and pulled her to him. “I am right beside ye,” he murmured, and his words offered her some form of courage.

Having him close made her feel more relaxed.

The woman's eyes gleamed and taunted Isla as she laughed. "Yer fate remains the same as ye have nae learned to put others first. In Birlet Shallows ye died and the world has forgotten who ye are. Even if ye return now, nay one will remember ye."

"That is not possible," Isla replied as she shook her head. "I do not believe a word you say. I will not believe you ever because you speak lies."

"Then I will show ye and make ye believe."

The woman yanked Isla out of Jack's grasp before she could brace herself, and instantly she fell into the trance she weaved. Isla saw the crowd gathered at the fair and heard the music that filled the air.

Her friends laughed, everyone partied, but no one noticed the cloaked figure heading toward her until the pointed end of his dagger stuck into her gut and drew her blood.

She fell to the ground limp, and no one still noticed. They all partied and enjoyed the pyromancer's performance until she took her last breath.

How can this happen? How can it be real?

"Ye die in that life, Child. Even if ye return there now, it doesnae change the endin' of what ye just saw. It is yer fate to

die at that fair, and it has happened already.”

“So if I stay here, then I die there, and even if I return, I will still die?” Isla asked, seeking clarity so she fully understood what the woman was saying.

Isla gasped back to reality as the trance had only lasted a second before the woman released her. Her fear closed in on her and made it difficult for her to breathe. Hot tears stung her eyes and blurred her vision. “Liar,” she yelled on top of her voice. Her words ended on a wheezing breath.

“I dinnae speak lies. It is only yer fate,” she replied with another smile. “It is the fate that awaits ye even if ye return to yer time. Nothin’ has changed. A horrible fate awaits ye.”

The woman then burst into a loud cackle that sounded all too familiar in Isla’s ears. Just as the other gypsy had laughed at her in the past.

“Let us get out of here,” Jack told Isla, then spun her around and led her out of the inn. Once they were outside, she tore herself from Jack’s hold and staggered away from him.

The pains in her chest threatened to cut her breath short, and Isla already felt double the pain. *How is this possible?*

The entire time while she stayed here, her body lay cold and lifeless in her time because she had been stabbed.

Who would have done this?

“I need to breathe,” she cried out and dropped limply to the ground because her legs wouldn’t carry her. Isla’s body felt too flushed and hot to be normal. She shivered uncontrollably, and she couldn’t see anything besides shadows in the seconds that followed.

“Isla,” she heard Jack call, but it was too late. She had given into the fears that enveloped her from the panic that threatened to consume her whole.



Isla was in and out of her sleep-dazed state for the next two days and it worried Jack. After they left the inn, Isla fainted, and another woman had rushed out and offered to help them.

Jack hadn’t seen the older woman when he carried Isla back into the inn. In fact, Madeleine, the owner of the inn who helped them claimed there was no one like that at the inn.

Two days had passed, and he had searched and waited to see the gypsy again.

Had she cursed Isla? Put her in a tranced sleep she couldn’t get out?

His mind ran with his worrisome thoughts and there was nothing to keep him centered. He was pacing around the chamber they stayed in now and watching dusk befall the sky.

This marked their third night in Kirkpatrick. They had found the gypsy, but now Jack couldn't understand why Isla was this feverish in her sleep.

After the gypsy's words and the fate she spoke of, all he could do was worry about her. *What if she doesn't recover?* He didn't want to think about such things now. The thought of losing Isla left a bitter taste at the back of his throat and made his insides hurt.

He went to her bedside and put his hand on her forehead. Her skin burned. Her lips were a darker shade than usual, and he knew it was from the fever.

A soft knock on the door made him rise to his feet again, and he walked to open it. Madeleine came onto the room with a bowl of clean water and fresh towels. "How is she?" she asked.

"Not better," Jack replied and helped her carry the water to the bedside stool. He put it down and sat at the bedside. "The fever stays, and I fear it willnae calm anytime soon."

"I ken she will be better," Madeleine replied and pierced him with her intense dark looks. "Lucky for ye both I am a healer, and I will make sure yer wife gets better."

Jack did not correct her notion of them being married. As he stared at Isla, he wished she was his. Hearing her admit to the gypsy that she wanted to return to her time had hurt his feelings. The ache still lingered in his heart until now.

He pushed his hurt aside and looked at Madeline. She was trying to feed Isla some tonic and he helped her lift Isla's head off the pillows.

"This will help with the fever. She will get better by the break of dawn."

"Thank ye so much for yer help," Jack said to her.

"It is my duty. I dinnae think ye both are from around here," Madeleine said. "Yer Clan colors."

"I am from Humphreys," he told her, but that was all he said.

Madeline nodded and rose to her feet. "I will return to check on her." He nodded while Madeline tuned to walk to the door, but she stopped again and asked. "Does that belong to her?" she asked.

Jack saw her point at the medallion on the dresser. He had retrieved it from the ground after they re-entered the inn two days ago and had kept it because he knew it would be important to Isla.

"Aye, it does."

"That is a cursed medallion," Madeleine continued. "Here in Kirkpatrick we believe that the Gods bless and curse. The symbols on the neckpiece show that this a cursed one. Whoever wears it is doomed to the fate of death."

Jack stared at the medallion as hard as Madeleine did. “The last owner of a cursed medallion was a Laird’s wife. She existed over centuries ago and she was stoned to death by her own people.”

“That was centuries ago and this medallion doesnae belong to her,” Jack replied. He didn’t have to worry. Once Isla returned to her time, her life would return to normal.

He remembered the gypsy’s words then, and something squeezed tight at his heart.

“She wears it, so that means it is her fate.”

Madeline left the chamber then and Jack moved closer to Isla on the bed. He lay down and gathered her in his arms so he could feel her body close the entire time.

By morning when he woke up, she also stirred awake and groaned. He sat up in bed and peered down at her. “Are ye all right?”

“What happened?” Isla asked as she rubbed her eyes and then her temples. “Did I faint?”

“Aye, ye did.”

Jack hugged her tight after she managed to sit up and he ran his hands down her back.

“The gypsy?” she asked.

“She disappeared,” he told her when he pulled back. He expected a flash of disappointment to cross her expression, but it didn’t. She simply sighed in relief and slumped against his body again.

Jack didn’t move away. He simply allowed himself to enjoy her closeness because he knew the time to say goodbye was near. She had helped his Clan and saved them from ruin. Now it was his turn to keep his end of the bargain and make sure she returned to her time safely regardless of how it would make him feel.

Jack knew now that seeing her leave would devastate him. All his life he had cared about what his people wanted. This was the first time he wanted something more for himself.

It is Isla... it’s all her. She had somehow worked her way into his heart and the more time passed with them together, the deeper his desire ran.

As Jack resolved in his mind on what he had to do, the gypsy’s words haunted him.

I am afraid yer fate hasnae changed, Child. Ye still deserve the horrible fate with which ye were born with. If ye desperately wish to return to yer time, then ye shall return. Yer fate was to die there anyway.

Madeline had also confirmed that medallion was cursed. How sure was he it was safe for her to return? What if the gypsy

was right and her fate was to die?

Jack knew he would never let that happen. If her fate turned out real, then he would convince her to stay here and never return.

That is what he must do, and he felt strongly in his heart that it was the right decision.

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They returned to Jack's Castle the next day, but Isla remained tormented by the gypsy's words. No matter how hard she tried to forget, she saw the woman in her dreams and heard her mocking laugh even while she was wide awake.

They instilled fear in her and made her wonder if returning was the right choice. Isla had watched herself die in a crowd of people and no one even noticed what had happened to her while they enjoyed the pyromancer's show.

She was standing on the balcony of the second landing and staring at the dark skies. The stars had come out to play tonight, and she heard the waves of the leaves, and felt the breeze blow them.

"You seem lost in thought," someone said behind her, and she turned to see Elliot. He wore his usual charming smile and stood with his hands crossed behind him.

Isla sighed and shook her head. "I just enjoy hearing my own thoughts sometimes."

“It is good to meditate,” he told her, then closed the distance between them and stood by her side. “I find that ye make the right decisions when ye think on yer own.”

“That is true,” she agreed with a small laugh that ended on a smile. “How was yer day at the village? I am sure ye spent the day training knights to fight and saving women who need your help.”

“On the contrary, I soiled myself in dirt while huntin’ boar, then got kicked in the ass by my brother durin’ a duel. He is the best swordsman I have ever met.”

“Many boast of his skill,” Isla said. “He must truly be a hero for you all.”

Elliot nodded. “I admire my brother a lot. I want him to be happy, and it seems like you make him happy. Recently, he’s done more than just sit in council meetin’s and hunt. He’s gone ridin’, he’s enjoyed feasts and even laughed. Ye are different Isla... it is good to have ye as one of us.”

Elliot’s words made Isla’s heart soften. She lowered her gaze from him a bit, and she felt a lightness in her limbs.

“It is my first time feeling at peace anywhere too,” she told Elliot. “I feel like I belong here even though I don’t.”

Isla meant every word. Back in England, she had never really been happy even though she had everything any young woman could have dreamed of.

Her life was a perfect dream. Gentlemen sought out her hand in marriage every month, her friends begged for her attention and her father's workers worshipped her. Isla's life had been golden to everyone but her.

But not here. Here, no one worshipped her. Instead, they welcomed her and made her love them. Moira, Jack, Elliot... they were starting to feel like family.

But this isn't where I am meant to be.

How is that she found this peace in a place where she really didn't belong?

Elliot left her after a little while, and she stayed out there for a few more minutes before heading to her chamber.

Faye had prepared a bath and brought in supper. Isla cleaned up and put on her night robe before eating the sowans with mutton ham she was served. She went to bed with a heavy mind, but when thoughts of Jack slid into her thoughts, Isla was finally able to relax and sleep peacefully.

The next day, she worked with Moira on tonics for painful menstruation and helped her stitch a guard's cut in his right arm before they went out into the garden to get more herbs.

Isla had finished preparing the tonic Moira left her to make when she heard a noise from outside. She hurried to the healing chamber's window and looked outside to see for herself.

Some guards had gathered, someone lay on the ground, and she saw other servants rush out of the Castle's door toward the scene.

A horse neighed close and soon Isla saw Jack jump off his saddle and make his way through the crowd. He then lifted the body from the ground and marched toward the Castle.

Isla knew they would bring the injured one to the healing chamber, and since Moira wasn't here, she sprang into action. She arranged the bedding, smoothed it out, then cleared her worktable.

Soon a knock came on the door, and she hurried to open it.

"Where is Moira?" Jack asked as he entered the room and put the woman on the bed. "She was stabbed, and she is bleeding. We need the healer."

"I can take care of her," Isla said. She had never treated anyone alone, but she had learned enough already to do it on her own, and she wanted to.

All she had to do was stop the bleeding, and then feed the woman the right tonic to help fight any infection from her cut.

What if the blade that cut her was poisoned? The question entered Isla's mind like doubt, but she shoved it out quickly. Moira would be here soon. In the meantime she just had to do what she already learned.

“We need ye to nay make any mistakes,” Jack told her as he stared deep into her eyes. “I must find out who attacked her in the fields, so I need her to stay alive. Are ye certain ye can dae this?”

“Trust me,” she replied in a steady voice that surprised her too.

“Always.”

Isla nodded, then swallowed hard, and turned to the woman on the bed. Her gaze finally settled on the woman’s face and her heart did a slow dive in her chest as she stammered. “Penny?”

The woman on the bed was a striking replica of her friend Penelope Harper.



Isla managed to stop the woman’s bleeding regardless of her own nervousness, then she wiped off sweat and grit from the woman’s forehead and neck before feeding her the tonic.

She couldn’t help but gawk at the uncanny resemblance this woman had with her friend Penelope. She had never believed in reincarnation or any of the Gods or religions, but with this and all that had happened to her in the past months how could she deny that it was real?

The woman murmured something in her pain-dazed state, and Isla bent closer to her so she could listen. The door burst open, and Moira rushed in.

“What has happened?” Moira asked.

Isla briefed her on all she had done to keep the woman alive, and Moira smiled at her. “Ye did it all perfectly, like I would have done it. Good work, Isla, ye saved a life.”

She pressed a palm to her heart and sighed. “Thank goodness. I would have hated to make a mistake,” Isla said.

The rest of the day she stayed with Moira by the woman’s side, and she silently hoped for the woman’s recovery. Isla wanted to learn what had happened more than anyone else, and she also wanted to confirm if this woman was Penelope Harper, her friend from England in 1973.

By evening when she dined with everyone at the Great Hall, Jack made a toast to celebrate her.

“Ye saved a life today,” he said as he lifted his quaich and toasted her. “To Isla.”

“To Isla,” everyone at the table chorused except Jamie. Isla drank from her wine as she watched him feign a smile when Elliot began talking to him. She wondered if Jamie wasn’t pleased that she had saved a life, or he just wasn’t pleased that she had saved that woman’s life.

A wild thought entered her head as she sat there and enjoyed the Howtowdie with drappit eggs served.

“It’s young hen with poached eggs,” Moira whispered to Isla’s comment on how amazing the meal tasted and motioned for the servant to bring her more.

She had her fill of wine and was a little bit light headed by the end of supper. As she walked toward the stairs to get to her chamber, she saw Jamie standing with two guards, ordering them in a native dialect.

Isla stopped walking and listened in on his conversation. “Ha mi airson gun toir thu cunntas dhomhas agus chan ann don uachdaran.”

Isla could only understand some words of what he said because he spoke rapidly, and she repeated them to herself. “I want you to report to me—”

She gasped and covered her mouth with her hand when the sound drew Jamie’s attention. Jamie’s frown deepened. He placed a hand on his sword’s sheath and walked over to her.

Isla took a step back, swallowed hard, and hiked her chin high defiantly. “Sir Jamie,” she called. “A word if you may?”

“I have been meanin’ to speak with ye too, My Lady,” he said, then bowed his head. “Ye did a great thin’ savin’ that woman’s life today. I never would have believed that ye do such kind work.”

Bold. Isla arched a brow and waited for him to say more. When he didn’t, she cleared her throat and spoke. “We have barely said a word to each other since I arrived at this Castle

nearly two months now. I take it that I am not going to be a friend or ally of yours.”

“You need allies?” he asked.

She shook her head. “You know what I mean. This is going to be my new home and I intend to be loved here.”

“It isnae yet yer home, My Lady,” he told her. “I dinnae have anythin’ against ye, however. I merely wished to thank ye.”

He bowed, then walked away from her.

Isla scoffed as she watched him retreat. She had a strange feeling about Jamie, and she planned to tell Jack about it.

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Jack finished his activities in the village on time the next afternoon, and the only thought on his mind as he rode back to the Castle was Isla. He wanted to spend time with her as she had been in his thoughts for days unending now.

There's no avoiding thoughts of her now. Since he couldn't get her out of his head, he decided to enjoy her company instead.

What could it hurt? Besides, he missed her laugh, and he wanted to see her smile.

When he arrived the Castle, he asked her servant Faye for her whereabouts.

"The garden, My Laird," Faye answered before he marched toward the garden to find her.

Moira and Isla were giggling at something when he entered, and Moira rose to her feet to curtsy.

“How are ye, my ladies?” he asked them both before walking to Isla and taking her hand to help her to her feet.

“It’s a lovely afternoon,” Isla answered. “The sun is not too tough today and Moira and I were just talking about riding on the moors.”

Jack’s gaze flickered over hers, and the flush that appeared on her cheeks made him shiver inside. Whenever he stared at her lips, he remembered their kiss and the passionate way she responded to him.

He had never felt that like that before. It toyed with his senses and constantly made him crave more of her.

“Ridin’ sounds excitin’,” he answered her after a few seconds of them staring at each other passed.

Jack turned when Moira said, “I will excuse myself now, My Laird... I must attend to patients.”

Moira curtsied and hurried away before he could say anything else, and he faced Isla again.

She wore a sheepish grin when he looked at her, and unable to stop himself, he reached out and stroked a thumb over her cheek.

“Ye ready?”

“I bet I can win ye in a ride today,” she answered, then tugged her hand free from his and began running toward the stables.

Jack followed. Isla giggled loud as she held the hem of her dress and ran. He doubled his pace to meet up with her and reached out to grab her waist once he drew close.

Her body plastered against his and she laughed and having her close stirred his hardness until he couldn't breathe properly.

His hands were wrapped around her waist now, and her chest heaved as it pressed against his chest.

Jack only had to lower his gaze, then he could see her lips and the creamy skin of her breasts.

Oh, Heavens—

He felt giddy with desire, and his head inched forward before he could stop himself from moving closer to her.

They heard footsteps approach and broke apart immediately.

Isla plastered her hands on her cheeks and looked away from him while Jack cleared his throat and tried to control the rush of excitement that surged through him and screamed at his nerves to come alive.

Jack went into the stables and brought out two horses. He handed her the reins to one, and their fingers brushed against

each other's.

His breath hitched in his throat, but he pushed back the tingles that sprang free again and mounted his saddle first.

“Let's see if ye can win this ride,” he challenged after she did the same, and they both set out into the moors with the same speed.

The ride was enjoyable. Jack enjoyed the breeze on his hair, and the breezy affect her laughter had as it mingled in the air. They rode for a long time until they reached the cliff surrounding his land, then they dismounted, and he took her hand in his.

“Do ye ever wish to see what it will be like down there?” she asked as she stared at the faraway Lowlands ahead. “It looks so beautiful.”

“It is bonnie,” he replied, then linked their fingers and lifted it so he could kiss each one of hers. His body was swimming with need for her. Each passing day, his desire grew, and it was difficult to stay away.

He had to constantly remind himself of all the reasons why they could not be together. Those reasons seemed less important now that he was with her and enjoying the light scent of roses that always clung to her.

“I wish I could have come here with my parents. My mother especially... she would have loved Scotland so much.”

“This era of Scotland?” he asked, and she nodded.

“She loved history, and I shared the passion with her. My father was busier with his business than anything else, but whenever he was around, he enjoyed talking with us about the topic too. My parents did not love each other, but they grew fond of each other in the end and found common ground.”

“Mine is the exact opposite,” he told her. “They could never find common ground. My father preferred his wars and battles to anything else while my mother just loved to help people. The villagers loved her deeply.”

“They love ye too,” she replied and looked at him. “Ye make a fine laird.”

He was quiet for some time before he asked, “What happens if ye dinnae return to yer time? Would it be so wrong if ye stayed here instead?”

His question must have surprised Isla because she simply stared at him for a long time without blinking. Jack took both her hands and waited for her to speak, but when she didn't, he continued, “Ye heard the gypsy... if ye return to yer time then ye will die.”

“If I stay here I still have the same fate... I dinnae believe what the like of that woman says,” she answered. “This isnae where I belong, Jack, regardless of—” she stopped, and he wondered what she was going to say next.

“Regardless of what feelings we might have because they will pass, and when they do, what if I am not at peace here? Will your people ever truly accept me as their own?”

“If ye remain here, then I can protect ye,” he continued, hoping he could convince her to change her mind and stay instead. “The thought of yer getting hurt Isla... I dinnae want to ever think about that.”

Their gazes lingered and this time Jack was tempted to do more than just kiss her. They were alone at the cliff, and he could indulge in more than a few kisses.

He wanted to know what it would feel like to slide his hands under her earasaid and past the garters she wore so he could touch her moist core.

Jack shivered and tried to control his lustful thoughts. The back of his neck burned, and when a crimson color appeared on her cheeks, he wondered if she felt the same stroke of heat in the air.

The breeze ruffled her hair, and he reached out to tuck some strands behind her ear and smoothed the scattered tendrils down.

Jack couldn't resist the final urge that came, so he leaned down and tasted her lips. It was a very brief kiss. The contact made his nerves squeeze with high desire. He knew if he continued, then he would take her right there and he didn't want that.

“I wish I could stay,” she said, and he could tell that she was torn. “I do love it here in Scotland.”

Jack sighed. It was her choice in the end, and he could never force her to decide otherwise.

All I care for is that she is happy.

“We should head back to the Castle,” he suggested as he struggled with his urges.

Isla stared deep into his eyes, then she raised herself on tiptoe and pressed her lips to his for a gentle kiss.

A tiny growl left his lips when she pulled back. “I’m tryin’ my best here, Isla... I dinnae want to—”

“To what?” she asked in a sultry tone when he did not finish his sentence.

“To ravish ye,” he answered in a thunderous voice, then pulled her closer to him and nuzzled his cheek over the side of her neck. Her scent filled his nostrils, he released another loud growl and pressed his lips to her cheek instead of her lips.

One more taste of that mouth and he would not hold back.

“We should return,” he said through his labored breathing.

Isla swallowed hard, he saw her throat bob, and her lips parted as she nodded. “We should.”

Jack moved away from her, turned around and shut his eyes. He willed his breath to return to normal, then he walked over to his horse and mounted.

“Another ride?” he suggested after giving her time to mount.

“Oh yes,” she answered, then trotted forward without warning so she could gallop ahead of him.



The injured woman woke up the two evenings later, and Isla was the only one in the healing chamber when she groaned and opened her eyes.

“Goirteas,” she mumbled, then licked her dry lips and swallowed.

“I do not speak Gaelic,” Isla said to her as she put more cloth under her head for support.

“It hurts,” she repeated. “My sides hurt and my head too.”

“You will heal,” Isla told her. “I must tell the Laird you are awake. Do you feel dizzy in any way? You lost a lot of blood, and yer wounds were deep so you will feel a lot of pain, but that will pass too.”

The woman shook her head and that relieved Isla a bit. She brought her a tonic for the pain, then watched her drink from it before she took the cup away.

The woman's skin had regained some color and even though she still winced in pain and complained of aches everywhere, Isla could tell that she would recover quick.

“What is your name?” Isla asked next because she couldn't hold her curiosity any longer. *How could both women resemble each other so much?*

She stared deep in the woman's blue eyes and waited for a reply. Isla suddenly became aware of her heartbeat. A stroke of heat flooded her and made her insides hotter.

“Penelope,” the woman replied. Every reasoning came to a grinding halt at the mention of the name, and Isla blinked.

This is real... it's her.

She didn't know what to say next, so she nodded, and rose to her feet. “I will be back.”

Isla's mind raced with different thoughts as she hurried out of the chamber. This was proof that reincarnation was possible.

So, does this mean the fate the gypsy saw really is mine?

Her body trembled and she chose not to believe it still. The thought of dying or being dead in her time was one she couldn't completely deal with.

It can't be, she told her herself even though deep down she could no longer doubt it. Her coming to the past was enough proof.

Isla went in search of Jack and found him in the courtyard standing with his brother and Aideen. They were engrossed in a conversation when she got to them and interrupted. "The woman is awake," Isla announced. All three men moved at once to follow her to the chamber.

By the time they returned, no one lay on the bed and the chamber was empty.

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Jack's heavy chest made his breathing difficult, and his mind raced with panicked thoughts. *How did she get away?* Someone must have entered the chamber while Isla left, else how would the injured woman go missing?

“Search the entire Castle grounds, I want her found and brought back,” Jack ordered, then stormed out of the chamber himself. He planned to go searching himself. He had to find the woman as anything she knew might be helpful in finding who had attacked her inside his Castle.

He noticed Isla still stood inside as he walked away, but he didn't have the time to go to her yet. He had to find the woman.

His guards marched around the Castle as they searched. Jack and Elliot hurried to the ground landing and used the back stairs to get to the escape grounds beneath the Castle. Whoever had taken the injured woman from the Castle knew his way around.

“Where is Jamie?” Jack asked they searched the dark hallway and continued toward the exit. He stopped in his tracks when he heard soft sobs, and something twisted deep in his gut.

“I hear someone crying,” Jack said to his brother before he spun around to search around him. He took the first right corner he saw, then saw the shadow of someone crouched into a corner. “Who is there?” Jack thundered as he moved closer to the source of the cries.

“It’s a person,” Elliot said behind him and matched his steps.

Jack put a hand on the sheath of his sword then moved closer. He took his hand off when he saw the woman crouched on the ground, her hands tied, and eyes shielded with a black sack cloth.

He bent and took the covering off her eyes. “It’s her,” he said to Elliot. “Who did this to ye?” he asked the woman as he untied her hands and helped her to her feet again. “Who brought ye down here?”

She wobbled, so Jack lifted her off the ground. “I dinnae see his face, My Laird,” she replied amid her tears. “He covered his face and wore a cloak. He bundled me and was about taking me out of the Castle, but he dropped me here and fled when he realized the guards were searching for him.”

“Ye are safe now,” Jack said then lifted her into his arms and took her away from the dark tunnels.

When he returned to the healing chamber, he sent Elliot to inform Aideen that he had found the woman in the lower escape grounds.

“Whoever tried to take her must have abandoned her in the lower grounds because they couldnae get out in time,” Jack said to Isla as he lay the woman on the bed again.

Moira came marching into the room and began feeding the woman a tonic to calm her down because she was sobbing hysterically.

“Did she see who?” Isla asked in a strained voice.

Jack shook his head. “She dinnae. I intend to find this person myself,” he said with more determination. “It has to be someone right under my nose.”

Aideen returned with Elliot, and Jack frowned when he didn’t see Jamie with them.

“Where is Jamie?” he asked Aideen.

“I havenae seen him, My Laird,” Aideen answered.

“Gather a council meetin’,” Jack said. “It is time we became better defended against our challengers. Any who thinks our clan is weak will have what’s comin’ for them.”

“Ye think this is an act of war?” Elliot asked.

“Someone is stirring thin’s up to get a response from my councilmen. We’ve seen it happen before. The second the safety of the village became uncertain; the councilmen started

to worry and murmur. Soon they will deem me unfit to lead them. I cannae let that happen.”

Jack knew this game too well. During his father’s reign a faction of councilmen had been so dissatisfied with his ruling, they had instigated riots among the people and caused chaos.

If people continued getting hurt in his Castle then it would send a message that his security was weak, and it would give his enemies leverage to invade their Clan.

Even though his father had refused to acknowledge their cries for him to forfeit his seat as Laird, Jack had known what the councilmen wanted.

He never considered his father a competent leader. Jack bore the marks of his father’s constant incompetency and it made him vow to become a different ruler. His need to conquer lands had turned him into something else and nearly ruined them all.

“Find me Jamie,” Jack told his brother before he went into his study and carried on with reading his reports until time for the council meeting came.

Once he was seated in the Great Hall with his men, he finally saw Jamie come in.

“Where have ye been?” he asked.

“I had somethin’s to settle in the village, My Laird,” Jamie replied to him before taking his seat by Jack’s right hand.

The meeting proceeded after that, and Jack listened to his councilmen voice their dissatisfaction at the recent murders.

“This makes the villagers feel unsafe,” one of the councilmen complained. “It is unlikely that they will be happy to stay in a Clan where people get murdered like flies.”

“Watch yer words, Sir Michael,” Aideen warned after the man’s fierce words.

“I speak the truth, General,” the man countered. “What happens if someone tries to steal our gold? We cannae defend ourselves from an inside enemy, so how do we fight the external one?”

Aideen was about to reply, but Jack put a hand on his cousin’s hand to stop him.

“I will find whoever is responsible,” Jack told them. “I have tightened security in the village and around the Castle. The workers minin’ our gold will be protected too and ye neednae worry about anythin’.”

“What about the people in the village? What happens if they someday get murdered by this scheming enemy?”

“Then I will punish whoever is responsible,” he replied. “We willnae show our weakness and let our enemies undermine us.”

Never again.”

Jack hoped he had been able to calm some of the rousing fear in the people with his words. He did not have the strength to settle any internal disputes currently.

After the meeting, he sat with Jamie in his study working on how they could tighten the security around the Castle’s escape and hidden routes. They talked for a long time and kept thinking of ways to secure the Castle better.

“Whoever is doin’ this is someone in here who kens this Castle very well. I am certain the injured woman kens somethin’ and he wants to have her killed before she speaks. Or perhaps she is just a target because she is weak, and this is a ploy to stir trouble.”

“It’s why we must speak to her quickly and find out what she kens. The danger isnae past yet, My Laird.”

Jack agreed with Jamie. He got on his feet and finished the brandy in his quaich before heading toward the door.

“My Laird,” Jamie said, and he stopped in his tracks. “There have been rumors about the Lady ye intend to wed in the village. I have been investigatin’ after I heard. The villagers have a rumor goin’ around that the lady is—”

Jamie didn’t finish his sentence, so Jack turned to him. “What is it, Jamie?” he asked.

“Rumors that the Lady is a strange one, and that a local dreamer foresaw the destruction she brings on our land. They say she is cursed.”

Jack briefly remembered Madeline’s words. It rang in his head and chilled his spine, he quickly stilled that feeling and stared hard at Jamie.

“A dreamer?” he asked.

“Aye, My Laird.”

“One who has never met or seen her? He kens she is cursed because of his dream?”

“He foresaw—”

“Nonsense, Jamie,” Jack cut in. “Whoever speaks these lies should be brought to me. I’d like to ken where their dreams come from.”

Without another word, he walked out of his study and headed for the healing chamber to find Isla and the woman she had saved.



Isla questioned Penelope about the things she remembered. “Do ye live in the village? Did ye see the face of the man that attacked ye?”

“I live in the Castle, My Lady,” Penelope answered her. “I have worked here since I was nine-and-ten.”

Even their voices are similar, Isla thought as she realized how much she sounded like her friend Penelope.

It was still a nerve-racking realization to Isla. How could they look so much alike and have the same voice? Even their eyes were the same shade of blue and their mannerisms were the same. The girl’s smile wavered a little as she began to tell Isla what happened on the day she was hurt.

“I was walkin’ in the fields, and I heard someone approach me from behind. When I turned around, it was a man dressed all in black. His face and head were covered so I could only see his eyes.”

Isla blinked for a second to see if all of this would fade, but her eyes opened again, and Penelope was still on the bed.

“Who attacked you?” Isla asked next.

She saw panic rise in the girl’s eyes, then she lowered her head and gripped the sheets at her side tight. “I dinnae remember, My Lady.”

The door opened then, and Jack walked in with Jamie. Isla noticed Jamie’s displeased expression once he saw her seated there. His lips formed a tighter thin line and his eyes narrowed at the corners.

“Has she said anythin’?” Jack asked and put a hand on her shoulder.

“She does not remember,” Isla replied to him.

“What do ye remember?” Jack asked Penelope.

“I was in the fields, My Laird. I was to get more vegetables for the kitchen. I work in the kitchen, and I have served for eight years here. I was workin’ when a man in black approached me. I dinnae see his face, and he moved quickly... I thought he was to walk past me, but—” Penelope stopped and shook her head. She sounded strained and Jack saw sweat break out on her forehead as she began to shiver.

“I dinnae remember,” she finally added and gasped. Isla moved from where she sat and returned with water for the girl.

“Did ye say he wore black?” Jamie asked.

Penelope nodded. “Aye, he did.”

“Did he cover his face?”

“I could only see his eyes.”

“Have ye ever heard of the blacks, My Laird?” Jamie asked as he turned to Jack.

Jack shook his head. “Nay,” he answered.

“They are assassins trained in the farthest valleys of Isle Lewis. They are known to be Norsemen mainly and are trained to kill.”

“Ye think one of them is in my Castle? Killin’ people?”

“It is highly likely that whoever murdered the stable lad and his sister have tried to do the same to this lass.”

Jack did not want to discuss these matters in Isla’s presence as he did not want to upset her, so he sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

“I will investigate this matter. In the meantime, ye keep her safe,” he said and turned to Isla. “She is yer responsibility now.”

The rest of the day, Jack worked on tax reports, declined many outrageous requests from his village heads who believed he had too many resources to waste simply because they found gold on their land.

Jack wondered what their Clan would be like years from now in Isla’s time. He slowly found himself thinking of her as those thoughts entered his mind.

Night came and passed by slowly. Jack was out of the Castle by dawn again and this time he spent his entire day in the

village inspecting the goldsmiths working to make blades, sheaths, and armor out of the gold they found for their armory.

They also made lots of artifacts and jewelries to be sold to other clans and used to fund his treasury. Jack was certain his Clan would be back on their feet once he had gathered enough funds and weapons.

He returned to the Castle later that evening and was on his way up to his chamber for a quick wash when Isla approached him.

She grinned wide as she called him, "Jack." Then she ran toward him.

He caught her before she tripped, then steadied her again. "Careful," Jack whispered. "Ye will fall over and hurt yerself."

Isla nodded, then swallowed and spoke. "Are ye headin' out of the Castle again?"

"Nay, nay tonight," he replied as his eyes searched hers.

"I made ye somethin'... a pie," she said as she beamed. Jack's gaze searched hers and he loved the twinkle he saw there.

How was it possible that she wasn't happy here? He constantly found himself wishing that she was.

"A pie?" he finally replied after his initial shock had passed.

“I made it specially for ye,” she said. “I’ll bring it to yer chamber.”

“All right.” Jack replied with a laugh that tickled his sides, then he put his right hand on her cheek. “I can’t wait to taste it.”

Other thoughts entered his mind when he mentioned ‘taste’, and his gaze drifted to her lips.

“I’ll be right there,” Isla said in a faint voice and Jack nodded before he took his hand off her cheek.

He went to his chamber and washed up quickly. He was putting on clean léine when a soft knock came on the door, and Isla came into the chamber.

She stopped at the entrance after closing the door and held the tray of pie in her hands.

“Come in, Isla” he said to her, his eyes not leaving hers for a second as she walked to the table and placed the pie there.

Jack walked over to her, then sat on his bed. “Thank ye.”

He patted the side of his bed showing that she could sit, and Isla lowered herself to the bed.

“Come on, try it,” she urged.

He took a bite of the pie, closed his eyes, and savored the taste of apples and cinnamon blended into it. “Hm, this is amazing,” he said to her.

“Moira taught me to make it,” Isla replied with another wide grin. “I wanted to do something for you, and I remembered you eat a lot of pie whenever we dine together so I decided to make some for you.”

“Ye noticed that?” he asked.

Isla nodded and smiled. “I did.”

Silence filled the air after her answer, and Jack slowly felt the tick of his pulse and rising hunger.

Isla was right here, on his bed, and her lips were more beckoning than ever. He wanted to taste her and fill himself with her taste.

Jack put a hand on hers that rested on her lap, and he said in a husky tone. “Stay with me tonight, Isla. I want to be with ye tonight.”

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Jack's words made her heart swell, and she drew in a deep breath because she needed it. Her skin tingled where his hand touched hers, and her cheeks burned with the same fire that already consumed the rest of her body.

She wanted him to touch her body and make her feel his heated passion without holding back. Isla knew he wanted this too... she could see it in the way he looked at her.

She didn't know what to say to him. Words had suddenly failed her, and her lips only parted when he slowly drew closer to her, and gently kissed her.

Her eyes closed, she savored the brief contact and felt her desire rise like a tornado inside her. Heat flooded the pit of Isla's stomach, and her toes curled with it.

She wanted to stay with him tonight too. It was her first time staying with a man, but her body already shivered in anticipation of what would happen.

Isla had read it in books numerous times. While her friends like to imagine and talk about it, she preferred to read as she

was knowledgeable. Now that she was with a man... with Jack... she couldn't think of what to do besides letting him pull her closer to kiss her again.

It was like she drank from his lips because the next kiss made her drunk. Isla tasted the pie on his lips and licked before she kissed him back. His hands had moved under her earasaid already and she could feel his fingers grazing over the garters she wore under.

She moaned, then he tipped her back on the bed.

"I want to feel all of ye," Jack murmured against her neck. He kept kissing her in different places. Isla didn't know how to handle all the sensations that swamped her at once.

Her body started to tremble when he parted her thighs and rested himself there. Jack kissed her lips again, then tipped her chin to one side so he could kiss his way down her neck to her breast exposed in the earasaid she wore.

She felt vulnerable, and her hands wandered over his back too so she could feel his sinew muscles and enjoy his hardness.

She cried out when his hands strayed over the swell of her breasts. The heat was too much to bear, but she wanted it anyway. He pulled at the sash holding her earasaid together in front, then pushed the sleeves down her shoulders and exposed her breasts to him.

Jack didn't hesitate to take one nipple in his mouth. Feeling his hot tongue and the heat from his lips on her sensitive skin

there made her buck her hips off the bed.

“Jack,” she gasped. Her fingers tangled in his hair, her body coiled tighter, and knew she was wetter than ever now.

“Let me feel ye, Isla,” he murmured in a thick voice that didn’t sound like his own. Jack made her relax on the bed again then he moved from one nipple to the other and teased it with his tongue.

His hands moved down to her core again and she felt his thumb rub over her sensitive spot before one finger dipped into her and drew a loud moan from her lips.

“Let me feel all of ye,” he said as she rocked her hips against his fingers and let him stroke her deeply. After a few more strokes, he withdrew his fingers, and kissed her lips again before nuzzling the side of her neck.

He pushed her earasaid lower as he kissed his way down her body. When he got to the apex of her thighs, he gently parted them and rubbed his thumb over a spot Isla had never imagined would give her pleasure.

She nibbled on her lower lip to keep herself from crying out. Her body shivered like it never had and Isla felt herself grow wetter with each passing second as he rubbed his thumb over her.

Next, he kissed her inner thighs. Her fingers moved on their own accord to his hair, and she caressed his scalp while he

scattered kisses across her thighs and made her dance on the bed.

His tongue then licked over her female part and that was all it took to send her into a mindless state of pleasure.

Isla's hips moved off the bed and matched his rhythm. She loved what he was doing to her, and she wanted it to never stop.

Jack blew his breath on her when he paused, then he slid a finger into her, stroked and sent her over the edge. While she shook on the bed, his lips returned and lapped at her juices.

Isla in her mindless state did not realize that Jack had not yet pleased himself. She rode the waves of her own climax to completion and her body kept singing even moments after it had stopped.

Jack did not take his lips off her either. He continued to pleasure her until another rocking ecstasy hit Isla again. Her body hummed to the tone he set when he kissed his way back up, took her lips and she tasted her essence there.

He fell to the side of the bed and brought her close to rest closer to his body. Jack was still fully clothed, and Isla trailed a hand up his chest. His heart beat tremendously fast when she placed her palm over his chest.

Isla swallowed hard and let her hand stay there. She loved feeling his heartbeat. It calmed her and made her feel emotions she had never felt.

The way their breaths merged was enough to make her feel at peace

Tonight, she didn't want to think about anything besides him, so she rested her head on his chest and closed her eyes. Jack tightened his hold on her body, and she snuggled closer until her cheeks pressed on his chest.

It was a blissful sleep for her, and she didn't feel Jack move to leave the bed either even as the clouds poured out their hearts in a fearsome storm that ravaged the night.



Isla hadn't enjoyed a sleep as much as she had that one. She opened her eyes slowly and snuggled closer to Jack's body so she could feel his warmth. His hand came up her back, and he pressed her closer.

The full length of his body remained plastered against her, and no feeling could trump the heat sizzling through her as she lay next to him.

She wondered why he hadn't pleased himself last night. Even now as they lay on the bed Isla could feel his hardness press into her abdomen. It made her want more of him, but it was evident he was holding back.

What worries him?

She had shut out all reasonable thoughts last night, but now that the feverish desire had passed, her fear had returned.

What would happen if I don't return to my time?

Isla found that she enjoyed being here in Humphreys. This place had a genuine peace to it, and unlike back in England, she was happy here. She had people who cared for her, like Moira, and now she had met a woman who was a spitting image of her friend Penelope.

She wondered what the woman's experiences would be but did not want to dwell on that thought for long. Today, she planned to find out all she could from Penelope.

Isla was still playing around with her thoughts when Jack stirred awake, then pulled her over his body so she lay on top of him. He kissed her before he opened his eyes, and she enjoyed the feel of his tongue inside her mouth. She also loved it.

"Good morrow," he whispered before stroking a hand over her hair.

"Jack," Isla began as he let her roll over to the bed and sit up. He got out of the bed and walked over to the dresser. Dawn broke slowly, and light filtered through the windows into the chamber. Isla could see how magnificent the space was.

And how manly Jack's body was. She admired the full length of his torso as he stood with his back to her and reached for a robe hanging near his bath.

His legs were toned, his behind muscles taut. The spread of his shoulders made him look even bigger now that he was naked. Before Jack slid on the robe, Isla saw the cut marks on his back.

He faced her, and she saw three more on his chest. They weren't ragged looking, but they made her heart ache. She got out of the bed, went to him, and put her hands on his chest.

"These scars," she whispered as her throat tightened with emotion.

"Proof of my time in battle," he replied. "They say a man is appraised by how many battle scars he has, but a wise man knows when to avoid having those scars and—"

"Live to fight another day," Isla completed before he could finish his sentence. A tear slid down her cheek, and she closed her eyes.

"Dinnae cry," he told her. "It doesnae hurt anymore."

"I'm not," she answered and released a deep breath. "I just... it hurts me to see them that's all."

Her hand was still on his chest, and Jack put his over it, then gently squeezed. "It hurts me to see ye worry about me."

Isla lifted her head and met his gaze "I have fought many battles, Isla, all of which I have won. It is the first time in my

life I ken that I want somethin' for myself, and what I want... what I really want right now in this moment, is ye."

Her chest grew heavier because of his words. Isla should have been delighted that he wanted her as she knew she wanted him too, but the feelings sinking into her were far from happiness.

I still must return home. What happens to us then?

She said nothing of the words that bothered her, but hugged Jack tightly like her life depended on it.

Sometime later after Jack left the chamber, Isla returned to hers for a bath. When she reached the healing chamber, Moira was there singing as she prepared tonics.

Isla joined her and noticed Penelope was not on the bed. "Is Penelope all right?" she asked Moira.

"Aye. The Laird requested her presence in his study, so she was escorted there by two guards."

"Is she strong enough to walk?"

"Aye, she is."

Isla relaxed a bit from knowing Penelope was all right, then she continued working on the herbs as Moira showed her.

It was evening when Penelope returned to the chamber, and Moira left. Isla fed her some tonic for strength then checked her wounds.

“It will heal,” she told Penelope.

“Thank ye, My Lady,” Penelope said to her, and she smiled.

“Do you have any family?” Isla asked her. “A father?”

Penelope shook her head. “I lost my parents sometime back. My father was a rich merchant, but I lost everythin’ to my uncle after his demise and I came to work in the Castle. I have lived here eight years, My Lady.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Isla said and covered Penelope’s hand with hers. She probably felt emotion for Penelope because she knew a lot more about her in a future life.

“Thank ye, My Lady,” Penelope answered. “Ye are as kind as they say ye are.”

“Who?” Isla asked.

“The servants and villagers, My Lady. They all talk about ye and say the Laird is blessed with ye. Many of us arenae used to havin’ a Lady of the Castle. Since the last Lady passed there has been nay one else around here. Even the councilmen feared that the Laird will pass with no heirs to carry on his lineage. They feel at peace now.”

Penelope's revelation warmed Isla's heart, but it also made it ache. When she returned to England like she had wished to for months unending now, what would Jack's fate be then?

Isla wondered if her being here changed history in any way. They had found the treasure of Ardenhill, so that meant that had to change in the future too right?

Is it even possible to change the future?

She remembered the history books and the mention of the Humphreys Clan. They were not a rich a clan but a strong one regardless of the many battles they had fought.

Jack Lyons was a great laird who had passed in battle in the year 1651 and before then, he ruled eight years. Those were the most peaceful years the Clan Humphreys had ever seen since the previous laird his father took over.

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Jack couldn't keep his heart steady. He was in a good mood the entire day and his men noticed this even during the training on the fields.

"Tighten yer stance," he ordered the new recruits, then took out his sword and attacked one of them without warning. They fought, turned around and clashed blades until he maneuvered the young lad and made him drop his sword. "Ye just lost yer head," Jack told him. "Ye must move quick else ye die."

"When ye fight the enemy, ye must never hesitate. When ye fight any enemy, even if it is me, yer Laird, ye must never hesitate."

He attacked the next guard, and they fought until the guard stuck the sharp end of his sword toward Jack's abdomen. "Very good," Jack complimented the lad. "Ye learn fast."

The training went on for hours. He felt energetic and light today and he knew he could do this for hours unending. Jack could tell his brother and cousin were exhausted.

Aideen had his hands on his waist while he watched, but Elliot was not having it. He had found a spot to sit on the ground and relax while watching. Jack enjoyed his training sessions more than anything. Besides being with Isla, they were the best part of his day.

It was a chance to flex his muscles and practice his skill. He had always been good at swordsmanship since he was young, and he had started his training when he was five-and-ten.

He could never forget his first lesson with his father. Learning the skill had come easy for him and that had made his father proud.

“That will be all for today,” Jack announced and dispersed the men before he walked over to his cousin and brother.

He dropped his hand on Aideen’s shoulder and grinned. “Exhausted?”

“Yer energy is unmatched today, My Laird,” Aideen answered. “Ye act as refreshed as man whose been charmed by a lass.”

“My brother’s definitely a very happy man these days,” Elliot teased as he joined them. “Look, he even smiles like one. He is the happiest these days. It is true that being betrothed is one way to make a man happy.”

“Do ye both question my happiness now, or would ye rather me be the sulkin’ laird who is never pleased?”

“Of course not,” Elliot answered. “I like ye so much better when ye arenae grumpy, Brother.”

They laughed, and Jack rubbed his hair before he raised his head to sky and sighed. “It’s a beautiful day for a hunt,” he said. “What do ye think? We can go out ridin’ past the village and hunt ourselves some meat for dinner.”

“As much as I would love to bring down a large red deer myself, My Laird, I must remind ye that ye have a council meetin’ this afternoon.” Aideen reminded him as they walked toward the Castle. “The men want to meet with ye concernin’ the issues at the borders. We are yet to pay our dues to our neighbors controlling the border.”

“I will have them paid,” Jack answered. “We have the gold. We can afford to pay some damn merchants.”

They entered the Castle and Jack saw Jamie then. He motioned for him to approach then said, “Send men to Calloway to pay the merchants what they’ve asked so they let our ships in through the waters. Have the village head in Onich deliver these shipments to the Castle himself.”

Jamie bowed and left to carry out Jack’s request, so Jack turned to his cousin. “See? Handled... now, would ye join in the hunt?”

“Not quite yet, Brother,” Elliot interrupted this time and Jack nearly rolled his eyes.

It was the first time in his life he wanted to do something different. He longed to spend time out in the fields hunting, not because it was some momentous event, but because he felt like being free.

“What is it this time?”

“The councilmen also ask for yer weddin’ plans. It’s been weeks since the betrothal feast, the people are hungry for a weddin’. They want to see their Laird and his Lady Wife speak their sacred vows in front of the Gods and make children with haste.”

“Ye all urged me to find a lass to betroth and I have done that. Now ye urge that I hasten my marriage plans?”

Jack laughed at his brother’s statement, and his cousin joined him.

“Naythin’ I do can ever be enough for the councilmen can it?”

“Ye are Laird, Brother,” Elliot answered as he laughed. “A lot is expected of ye still.”

“All right, all right... announce that the weddin’ will happen in a three fortnights,” he said without thinking. He just needed everyone to back off a bit.

“That is too long, My Laird,” his cousin said.

Just then Isla appeared at the top of the stairs with Moira and her servant. He hadn't seen her look this beautiful before. Her hair was let down to her shoulders, it had gained length since he first saw her, and her cheeks glowed as she laughed.

She raised the hem of her earasaid and began descending the stairs once she saw him. Her eyes were pinned to his, and all his cousin and brother spoke of had faded into the background.

Aideen cleared his throat by Jack's side, and that dragged him back to reality. "My Laird."

"Nay now, Aideen," Jack said in a tone that didn't hide his irritation.

"Of course." Aideen walked away, leaving him with Elliot, and Isla curtsied once she got to him. Even her curtsy was perfect now.

His heart started a slow dance in his chest, and she made his pulse skitter.

"My Laird," Moira greeted and so did Faye as they curtsied and left.

"Do ye mind?" Jack said to his brother who grinned at Isla and was about to speak to her.

"Of course," Elliot answered with a knowing smile, then bowed and walked away from Jack.

Alone with Isla now, Jack took her hand and kissed the front of her palms. “My Lady,” he said with an arched brow.

Isla smiled and her cheeks gained a lovely shade of crimson. Images of their last night flashed in his head. He hadn’t taken her last night because he had wanted her to experience pleasure first.

Jack’s entire body had begged for release, but his control surprised him. Never would he have imagined he would have a naked lass in his bed and not take her.

Her pleasure had come first no matter the hunger.

“What are ye doin’?” he asked while holding her hand in his.

“Nothing of importance,” Isla replied. “I would have loved to stroll the garden and have some tea, but then I remembered you don’t have tea around here.”

“We do have tea,” he told her, and she shook her head.

“I know you do, but it’s not the same kind. I craved something with biscuits and maybe some apple pie.”

Jack understood she was talking about her English foods again, so he simply tucked her hand in his arm, turned and walked with her to the garden.

“The kitchen can make ye some pie,” he suggested.

“It does not taste the same,” she replied with a soft smile. “Let us walk though... I enjoy walking with you.”

“A walk in the garden wouldnae be bad,” he said, then led her out of the Castle.

They had walked in silence for some time before he stopped close to the center oak tree in the middle of the wide garden and faced her.

“I ken ye miss yer home and yer time, Isla,” he began when he looked at her. “I cannae begin to imagine how hard it must have been for ye all this time, and I am also thankful for helpin’ me. The treasure ye found in the cave under the hill, and yer support by pretendin’ to be my betrothed... all of it.”

He realized there was so much he could thank her for, and not many ways he could do it. “There is nae many ways I can thank ye, Isla.”

“You do not need to,” she quickly replied. Isla simply smiled at him and shook her head. “It is my first time carin’ about anyone,” she replied. “I do care for you, Jack, and I am glad I could help. Ye asked me some time back who I really was... I didn’t know that then, but I do know who I want to be now.”

Jack smiled as he listened to her, his eyes did not leave hers for a second and he loved the way she searched his gaze as she spoke.

“I want to be a woman who helps others. When I helped save Penelope, it made me feel great, and whenever I’m around you or Moira, I feel like I’m seen for the first time. It used to be about my history books, my journeys, and fairs, my balls, and performances, but it was never about me as a person and that’s different here.”

Jack kissed her before she could say anything else. It felt like his heart would explode if it didn’t. It wasn’t a passionate kiss that made sparks fly. It was a gentle brush of his lips on hers that showed the tenderness in his heart.

“There is still a lot to learn,” he told her. “When ye return to yer time, ye will have enough stories for yer friends.”

“What do you have in mind?” she asked and slanted her brow.

“Ye’ll see.” There was a mischievous gleam in her eyes as she laughed, and Jack’s heart lightened in response to it.

Jack took her to the stables and handed her a horse to ride on her own. “First off a race,” he said.

“I will fall off and break my neck,” she said as she held the reins of the black stallion, he handed her and laughed.

“Not on my watch,” Jack told her. “Just sit on the saddle, hold the reins tight and keep yer balance.”

She nodded, then did as he instructed. Jack waited until she was comfortable on her mount before he climbed on his saddle

and started the race.

Isla couldn't go too fast, so he maintained her pace, and made sure he stayed by her side as they rode far off into the moors until they got to the top of the Ardenhill Cliff.

The Castle lay far off from where they were now, and from the top of the cliff, Jack could look down and enjoy the lovely green pastures and loch beneath.

He had been down the cliff before with his brother when they were younger. The Clan had gone hunting, his father had killed a red deer, and his mother had stayed in their tent with her lady friends knitting and entertaining them.

It was Jack's first hunt experience, he was eight. He remembered thinking then that his father was a brave man ready to fight and make their land great. Jack hadn't known the darkest truth of battle then.

"My first-time hunting was at the foot of this cliff," he told her after silence had passed between them. "I was eight."

"That was brave of you," she complimented and glanced to his side.

"Aye, it was. Even though my faither did the killin'."

She laughed, and he joined her with a light chuckle. "When I was eight, I spent time with my nurse reading books and learning poetry."

“We’ve led different lives,” he told her. “Too different.”

“But yet it feels similar, like I’ve been here my entire life.”

They fell silent again, and Jack was enjoying this time with her. They had walked the garden a few times and enjoyed riding, but he hadn’t really talked to her this deeply in a while.

Jack thought about his brother and men asking for their wedding date.

Oh, how I wish that could be true, he thought. It would be nice to spend many more days with Isla like this. They could go riding, fishing, hunting, and even sleep out in the cottage near the caves so they could hunt for more gold.

He would protect her, and make sure she was happy. They would have many healthy babies. Lads and lasses who would play around the Castle and fill it with laughter that sounded like Isla’s.

Jack would love for all of this to happen. He wanted this to be real, but what could he do? It wasn’t possible. He didn’t believe the magic that had brought Isla here would let her stay.

Sooner or later, the time would come for her to return. And the Birlet Shallows Fair was drawing close now.

His deep longing for more time with her caused him to sigh. He was suddenly curious about what she knew of his Clan in

the future. Jack remembered she had mentioned a series of events when they first met.

He could barely remember them now.

“What does it say about me in yer history books when I’m fifty?” he suddenly asked her.

Isla turned to him, and her eyes held his for a long moment. He tried to read the expression in her green orbs. Lines pulled at the corners of her mouth and made it twitch. A thin smile finally showed as she looked away from him and answered,

“You wed the most beautiful woman your Clansmen had ever seen, and you have babies to take over your reign.”

It seemed like a logical end for him, Jack reasoned, but not a happy ending. He could tell because Isla was a terrible liar, and she couldn’t hold his gaze while speaking.

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Over the next week, Isla and Jack spent most of their time together. They went riding on the moors and then hunting past the village. Isla had never shot an arrow, or even held one before then, but Jack taught her all the tricks.

She got her first deer one afternoon while they went hunting past the village fields, and her excited laughter filled the air as Jack hurried to bring the deer to their horse. They took it to the Castle and handed it over to the guard that carried it to the kitchen.

That evening Isla was still feeling the rush of excitement that came with doing something wild for herself. She had never had this much time to enjoy the open before, and Jack spent more time with her these days, so it was much more enjoyable.

When she wasn't with him, she stayed with Moira in the Castle instead, but Isla preferred hunting and riding with Jack.

Jack also taught her to use a dirk. It was a strange name to call a dagger, but what did it matter? She was living in preposterous times, and she had to learn to defend herself.

She had learned to throw the dirk at a target and hold it tight to stab someone who tried to hurt her. The knowledge would also be useful once she returned to her time too.

As the thought of retuning entered her mind, she remembered the gypsy's warning about her fate.

Ye will die either way. Could she believe what that woman said?

She shoved the thought out of her mind again and decided to enjoy her day regardless.

Her smile widened that afternoon as she strolled the Castle with Moira, then spotted Jack walking into the Castle with Jamie and Elliot by his side.

Elliot winked at her, but Jamie kept his face still and continued his path. Isla found it uncomfortable that she was growing this close to Moira and yet Moira's husband did not like her still.

Was he just a difficult man?

Jack came to her, and Moira excused them. "How are ye doin' My Lady?" he asked.

"I could do better with some wine," she said and rubbed the back of her neck. Just thinking about Jamie made her muscles tense. Isla suddenly remembered the conversation she had overheard with Jamie and the guards.

How had it slipped her mind? Jamie seemed to be hiding something from Jack that night. He had asked the guards to report to him and not the Laird.

What was he up to?

“Isla?” Jack called and pulled her thoughts back to reality. “Are ye all right?”

“Yes, yes,” she quickly answered. “I just thought of something to tell you.”

She put a hand on Jack’s for a second, then pulled away. “What’s happening in the village these days? You seem busy today.”

“The search for who tried to kill Penelope is still on. There’s no lead yet, but Jamie’s theory still stands with me. It might be one of the blacks. They are the most dangerous assassins in Scotland.”

“Who would hire assassins to kill common servants?” Isla asked, but her mind was really trying to process it. What would servants have that someone would want? Unless they were, of course, trying to cover up something only servants could know or overhear.

If Penelope knew anything she could have spoken by now. Or was she pretending not to because she wanted to live?

“Or someone is tryin’ to undermine my power and authority in the Clan by stirring fear among the people.”

“That sounds like a more reasonable reason,” she replied.

She continued talking with Jack about the issue for some time while they stood there until some guards came to find him.

Isla ran into Jamie on her way back to her chamber, and she requested to have a word with him.

They stood at the top of the stairs for some time before Jamie said, “Why have ye asked to speak with me, My Lady?”

“I just thought we might talk. The last time we spoke was quite not enough for me. I still do not understand why you dislike me, Sir Jamie.”

Jamie chuckled and it was the first time she saw any sort of expression on his face while she was around him.

“Dislike is a strong word, My Lady. I dinnae dislike ye... I would never.”

He bowed his head after that, and Isla waited for him to say more.

“But?” she asked when he remained quiet.

“I find that I am very protective of My Laird,” he said. “I am sworn to protect him from any whom I feel is a danger to him.”

“And you think I am a danger to him? Why would you think that?”

“Because many here wouldnae admit yet, but they dinnae think that the Laird should wed a—”

Isla waited for him to finish his sentence. She suspected he was going to state that their laird should not wed her because she was a stranger in their land, but she wanted to let him speak first before concluding.

“I have heard rumors, My Lady. Many of the noble men of our Clan and the councilmen dinnae think the Laird should wed an outlander. These are very traditional men, My Lady, and ye are an English woman. Our Clan keeps its bonds within the Highlands. This is the first time it’s being heard of in Humphreys.”

Isla scoffed at his revelation, then she burst into a short laugh. “You do not approve of me because I am not Scot?”

Jamie’s silence proved that she was right. Isla shook her head. “Jack saved my life when we first met, and I will never hurt him. If you simply do not approve of me because of my origins, Sir Jamie, then you are a small-minded man.”

Jamie frowned, and Isla immediately suspected it was because he did not understand her phrase. She hiked her chin high and

levelled him with a cold stare just like he always did her.

“I will be here for the rest of my life, Sir Jamie. It is best you start to trust me now. Once the wedding is complete, I will be Lady of the Castle. We have the same interest at heart and that is Jack. I do not want enemies.”

“I amnae yer enemy, My Lady,” he said.

“Ye are simply not a fan.”

Another frown from him, and Isla corrected herself. “Friend, I mean.”

She didn’t even know why she was saying these things to Jamie. Isla realized she was taking her role here too seriously.

You won’t even be here that long.

She sighed and shook her head. “That will be all, Sir Jamie,” she said.

He bowed then walked away from her and she turned to follow his retreating figure. Jamie had no idea she was also distrusting of him.

He’s not the only one with instincts.



“Your man-at-arms is racist,” she told Jack later that night when they sat in the garden together to enjoy the moonlight.

“What?” Jack asked. “I dinnae understand ye, Isla,” he added. He had his head lifted to the sky as he relaxed in his chair, but now he was looking at her.

“Jamie,” she continued, “can you believe, he doesn’t like me because I am English? This is the first it’s being heard of in Humphreys he said,” she continued, while mimicking Jamie’s tone of voice. “Can you believe it?”

Isla looked to Jack and found that he was staring at her in confusion. “You have no idea what I’m talking about do you?”

Jack shook his head. “But I do enjoy listening to ye talk,” he added with a smile. “It seems like Jamie has offended ye.”

“He did not offend me. He is... he just reminds of the men back in England who think very little of women. He thinks you are better off wedding a Highland or Scottish woman.”

“Jamie is my friend, and he will come around.”

“What does it matter? I won’t even be here that long,” Isla said, then looked away from him. “It would have been nice to have everyone here like me.”

Jack laughed at that, and her lips formed a pout. “I meant that.”

“I ken... it’s just—” he chuckled as he spoke, then stopped and grinned at her. Seeing him laugh easily like this made her heart flutter harder for him.

Isla knew it would be difficult when it was eventually time for her to go. Especially since they were already spending so much time together like this.

“It seems like ye did not have many friends back in yer time.”

“On the contrary I did,” she replied, then launched right into telling Jack all about her life in Rosewood.

As she spoke, she remembered the gypsy’s words about her fate and the vision she had seen. Isla wondered if that was real.

She shivered at the thought of it and felt a lump form in her throat.

“I find that I don’t miss them that often these days,” she said. “I think I am really getting used to be being here now.”

Her hand rested on the table, and Jack placed his on hers very briefly. He toyed with her fingers before he withdrew, and she instantly missed his warmth.

She didn’t think she would ever be able to say goodbye to Jack when the time came. Isla was slowly feeling the fondness grow. It would be devastating to know that she would never be able to return here.

“My men keep askin’ for our weddin’ date... we’ve been betrothed for a while now.”

Isla shook her head. “What did you tell them?”

Jack didn’t answer, so she added. “I wonder what you will have to tell them when I leave. Do you say I died? Or returned to England? The latter will only make Jamie hate me more, and those who already like me will not feel the same way after that.”

Jack looked at her again, and she felt the pang in her heart grow. “They will forget.”

And so will you, Isla’s mind completed. Tears suddenly stung her eyes, and to push them back, she had to look away from him, raise her head to the dark sky and blink them away.

She blew out air from her lips and cleared her throat to get rid of her hoarse voice. “We can give them the weddin’ they want,” she spoke after some time.

“How do ye mean?”

“Your men want a wedding. We can give them the wedding they want Jack. I don’t mind.”

In Isla’s heart, she knew it was a lie. She did mind. Marrying Jack was binding herself to him. She never thought she would marry, even back in England. Isla always viewed marriage as a necessary evil.

Many women married not because they needed companionship, but because they wanted a place in society.

Isla had always preferred relevance. With Jack, she found she wanted a place at his side, even if it was only for a short time.

I'm falling in love with him.

Her heart ached at the realization. Why did it have to be a man she couldn't end up with it? Why did she have to care for Jack? Was the gypsy's plan all along? To bring her here and teach her a lesson about love?

Isla's sadness grew with the ache in her heart when Jack shook his head and spoke, "I willnae be able to take ye to wife, Isla. Not unless ye decided to stay here for the rest of our life."

He got on his feet after that, and she did the same. Isla felt a tear slide down her cheek as he kissed her palm and added,

"That choice is solely yers to make, Isla. I willnae ever ask ye do anythin' against yer wish. The fair is in two fortnights now and ye will return to yer time. I only wish ye can remember me after ye have returned because I will never forget ye."

"Jack—" she called in a very faint voice as he turned away from her and walked toward the garden exit.

Isla dropped on the chair, and let the tears fall. She knew it was her choice now just as Jack clearly stated. But could she

trust him well enough to give up her real life and stay here?

Could she give up everything to live with him? To stay in this place, she had come to love.

Isla heard the gypsy's laugh in the back of her head, and it made knots tighten in the pit of her stomach.

What choice must I make?

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The moment with Isla got too intense and he had to tell her the truth. He couldn't keep thinking of a future with her when he knew it in his heart.

She would leave and return to her time where she belonged. In the end he would pick a Highland lass for wife and hope to the Heavens that he could live with the ache Isla would leave behind.

Jack went out to the village with his guards early the next morning to calm the riot at the market square. His guards managed to settle the uprising, but the angry chants and protests from the people continued.

"Another farmer was murdered last night," Aideen informed him. "I think Jamie was right and this the work of the Blacks."

"My Clan is a target," Jack said. "Someone is tryin' to cause a rift between me and my people and it's workin'," he said when he saw the crowd of villagers weeping and chanting in their native language.

“My Laird, we must send a man far north to speak with the leader of the Blacks,” Aideen said to convince him.

“I cannae dae that,” Jack replied. “We dinnae ken for certain that the Blacks are responsible, and if they are why would they choose Humphreys of all the Clans closest to them? What could they possibly want? Land? Gold?”

The possibility of making new enemies since they now possess gold which was very valuable in the entire Highland was real. Jack had hoped he would not have to wage war on any clan, but he still would do anything to protect his people.

Even if it meant going to war.

A worker pushed a cart full of already furnaced gold past them and Jack’s jaw hardened.

Elliot must have read his thoughts because he instantly announced. “Gold. Humphreys was never a target to any clan, and after our father’s death we ceased being threats too. Now that we have gold we are on their minds.”

“Unless someone is usin’ the Blacks to try and take power from us, I dinnae see why Norsemen will be interested in our land or gold,” Jack replied. “It is definitely one of the Clans, and they are using our own men against us.”

Jack could not think of anyone else he could trust other than his brother, Jamie, and Aideen. With their help, he could find this enemy and end them.

He rubbed the back of his neck and stood with his brother and cousin while his guards worked on calming the riot. When Jack finally had the villager's attention, he began to address them in his native dialect.

Jack had left Jamie at the Castle to handle the meeting with the council. As he rounded up his speech, he saw Jamie ride toward them with speed.

Jamie dismounted his saddle, bowed his head then said to Jack. "The councilmen were harder to calm today. They insist the Laird attends to the urgent requests at the borders. The Calloways refused our payment and have requested for payment in gold instead."

Jack's neck muscles tensed, and he shook his head. "Never have we paid the Calloways in gold ever."

"Back then we dinnae have it. Now we dae," his cousin stated.

"Nonsense, I willnae have this." Jack grew livid. "I will ride for Calloway and make sure those men see reason myself."

He mounted his saddle as he spoke but could not move because his cousin stopped him. "Anger isnae the way to settle disputes, My Laird," Aideen said. "Tossing caution to the wind isnae right. First we must come up with a plan. If ye dinnae want to offer gold, we should have another plan for negotiations sake."

"We dinnae need another plan," Jamie said. "We can ride to Calloway and make them accept payment like they always

have. In good faith, of course, except they are rousin' to start a war."

"The Calloways have been allies of our Clan for centuries. They exist as a small colony in Kirkpatrick, but doesnae mean that they dinnae have the backin' and support of Laird Kirkpatrick, they are after all one house only divided because of circumstances. We cannae make enemy of them by underestimatin' their power, My Laird... we must act with caution."

"The Kirkpatrick history isnae what I am interested in," Jack cut in. He already sensed an argument looming between Jamie and Aideen and he didn't want that.

"I will ride for Kirkpatrick," he continued, "in good faith and I will make them an offer. If they want gold in exchange for their border way, then I assume I might consider it if the offer is reasonable."

Aideen seemed pleased with his decision, but Jamie did not. He rode back to the Castle and spent the rest of his day in his study mapping out an offer for the Calloways.

Jamie came into his study later that evening, and Jack offered him a drink. They shared a bottle of brandy and discussed his proposal. Although his Clan had gold, they still needed the means to do business with the other Highland clans and Calloway's water way was their only out to the Clans in the west and east.

Why did they turn against me now? He hadn't thought far enough to reason that the gold might benefit his Clan as well

as cause issues.

“There is somethin’ I must tell ye, My Laird,” Jamie said to him after he closed the scroll in front of him and lifted his quaich to his lips for another sip of his drink.

“A friend of mine... a merchant from Clan Campbell traveled to England of recent times and I sent word to him askin’ about the Lady Isla’s family. He sent word back.”

Jamie’s words about Isla’s family instantly made his heart do a slow dive in his chest and panic rose in him.

Jack’s attention moved to Jamie as he lifted his gaze to meet his. “Ye did what?” he asked in a cold tone. “Why did ye do that?”

Jamie’s eyes narrowed a bit, and Jack could see his surprise. Jack’s entire body froze, and his mind did a rapid spin.

What do I tell him now? How do I explain this?

“I was curious about the English lady ye brought home without family. He sent word back from Rosewood London which happens to be where Lady Isla is from like ye mentioned. Lord Lambert’s only daughter Isla Lambert died a year ago. The family is in mournin’ still.”

Jack blinked at the information Jamie just gave to him. His throat grew tight, and he searched his brain for words.

He hadn't even thought about the possibility of Isla existing in this time too. Now that Jamie brought it up, Jack knew he had to explain to his friend what was really happening.

“My Laird?” Jamie called in a questioning tone. “She is an imposter, My Laird, one ye must seize at once.”

Jamie got on his feet and Jack did the same. He grabbed his friend's hand from across where he stood and looked him right in the eye.

Not knowing what else to say, Jack told him in a cold tone. “Lock the door, Jamie... there are thin's ye must ken.”

“My Laird—”

“Now,” he ordered.



Jack spent hours explaining the details of what happened and how he met Isla to Jamie, but still he could tell Jamie hadn't fully grasped what he was saying. “This is the truth I tell ye, Jamie, and ye can tell nay one,” he warned again.

“My Laird—” Jamie said.

“This is a secret ye must carry to yer grave, Jamie,” he continued, not giving Jamie a chance to speak. “Ye dinnae must understand it, I struggle to understand myself but ye must never speak it to anyone else. Do ye understand?”

“I am loyal to ye, My Laird, but this is an insane plan that ye have mapped out here. The Lords in our council are wise men and if ye keep pushin’ the weddin’ for longer they will begin to question and raise other suggestions. Ye must do somethin’.”

“I just need to help Isla get back to her time, then I will take a wife as they want me to do,” he replied to Jamie.

Jamie got on his feet, walked to the table, and picked the brandy. He gulped down the entire thing, then groaned long and loud.

“That burned,” he admitted before returning to his seat again. “I needed to make sure all ye have told me is real and I amnae dreamin’.”

Jack sighed and rubbed his forehead to ease the strain he felt there. “It is only a fortnight to the fair now. It will soon be over. She has helped me in her time here and it is my turn to do the same for her.”

Jamie blinked, then leaned forward on his chair again. “So, the treasure from beneath the caves... the gold?”

“She ken there was gold there because she kens our history,” he replied. “She helped me find it and it wasnae much of a search. In her time, the gold was found so she knew the right place to search.”

Jamie burst into a long hard laugh that made Jack laugh too, and when it was over, silence befell his study.

“I still worry for ye,” Jamie finally said. “How do we ken she doesnae have an ulterior motive in comin’ here? A sinister one?”

Jack shook his head. “Isla isnae like that. She is a wonderful woman once ye get to ken her. I ken ye are lookin’ out for me, Jamie, and tryin’ to protect me, but I tell ye this... I trust her.”

“It sounds like more than trust,” Jamie replied. “I see both of ye together, My Laird, I ken ye care for her.”

When Jack said nothing else, Jamie asked, “May I speak freely?”

“Of course,” Jack answered. “I always want ye to speak freely, Jamie.”

“I think ye love her.”

Jamie saying words Jack had been battling with his heart was like a splash of cold water in his face, and it made him shift uncomfortably in his chair.

“I cannae love her, Jamie,” he replied in a low voice. “And now ye ken why... she is never goin’ to choose me or her—” he trailed off and shook his head. “It is best nay to think about it.”

“But ye do love her, and I think she might even love ye too. I see how ye look at her even when we have supper together. I might nae have trusted or liked the lady much, but I can tell she admires ye.”

Jack chuckled as he remembered the term Isla had used to refer to Jamie. “I dinnae think she likes ye very much either,” he said.

“Understandable. I have been tough with her from the start, but it was only because I dinnae trust her. She appeared suddenly with nay family or relatives and ye brought her to the Castle. Nay one has visited since she arrived. I am the only one sayin’ it, but I ken the others are thinkin’ it too.”

“If anyone asks, I will simply tell them she is an orphan who has nay family. That part is true, Jamie.”

Jack, however, found it strange that while Isla came here from another time, she had also existed in this life too.

He wondered if the Isla in this time would be alike to her, and what her life would have been like.

Would she love history and travels? Would she have a witty mouth and sharp mind just like this one?

His thoughts wandered while Jamie’s voice faded into the background. Jack stayed in his study until the early morning hours after Jamie retired for the night.

He avoided his chamber because of the memories of Isla in his bed. Her passionate moans still stayed in his head and the feel of her breathless whispers on his skin made him taut with desire the entire night. It was torture thinking about her, but what could he do?

Unable to stop himself, he left his study and went to her chamber after it was past mid-night. Jack opened her door slowly, hoping she was awake, but Isla was fast asleep.

He went into the chamber and pulled the sheets over her body to protect her from the wind filtering into her room from the windows.

Jack closed the drapes, then moved to her bedside again and watched her sleep for a while. Isla was beautiful even in her sleep and staring at her filled him with longing.

Talking to Jamie tonight had brought him clarity about his feelings for her, but he still couldn't admit it to himself. If he ever did, then he wouldn't be able to let her go.

Jack didn't want to ever stop her from doing what she wanted. Isla's happiness now mattered more than anything to him. At least during her time here, he had made her smile. That was enough.

He leaned down and pecked her forehead. His lips lingered before he brushed tendrils of hair falling to the sides of her face.

Jack returned to his study to pass the night, and after falling asleep on his settee, he dreamed of Isla.

In his dreams, she wept, and once again, there was chaos around her.

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Isla woke up with a pounding ache in her head. She had the strangest dream, and the images of her lying on that bed in her room back in England lingered in her mind hours after she had left her chamber for the day.

She wondered what had happened. The gypsy had shown her images of what happened to her during the fair. She was stabbed and lying unconscious on the ground while no one noticed.

Now in her dreams she was in her room, bleeding, and surrounded by her worried friends and her family's physician. It dawned on Isla that the gypsy's vision might have been true.

I might really be dying back in my time.

Her thoughts remained troubled even as she sat in the healing chamber alone.

There were not many patients to treat today, so later that evening, she had time to walk the garden with Moira and enjoy the evening breeze.

The gypsy had appeared in her dream. Isla could remember the woman's cold stare, and the grin on her face as she said: *The time for ye to return is near.*

This had to be a sign that she could finally return home. She ought to be excited by that prospect. Instead, she was in a sullen mood all day and unable to eat even the haddock she had grown to enjoy.

"Ye seem lost in thought," Moira said to her after they had completed a walk around the garden. "What bothers ye?"

Isla believed she could share her thoughts with Moira. They grew closer with each passing day, and she needed someone to talk to. Penelope had returned to her duties after recovering from her wound and since Jack hadn't found the culprit, the security around the Castle stayed ever vigilant.

They were guards at almost every turn and entrance now.

"What would you do if you have come to love something, but you have to let it go?" she asked after glancing Moira's way.

"Why would ye need to let somethin' ye love go?" Moira questioned. "If ye love it ye should hold onto it, right?"

"True," Isla said. "But what if they were consequences? Let me give you a literal example. What if you fell in love with a man who doesn't exist in your world? Like... a man from a past time?"

Moira stopped walking, and Isla faced her. She held her breath because Moira's eyes had bulged, and she was frozen in a spot.

Suddenly, she burst into a fit of laughter. Her voice boomed in the air, then she clutched her sides, bent over, and laughed some more.

"That was a funny joke," Moira said when she finally settled.

Isla feigned a laugh to make the moment pass. *Did you think she would understand you?*

"Did ye read that in a text? History text? The kind that talks of fairy tales and magic?"

Isla nodded. "Yes... back in England I did. The story plagues me so."

Moira shook her head. "I think those who love each belong together. They wouldn't fall in love if they shouldn't be together."

Isla's lips tipped on a smile, but it didn't fully form.

They continued their stroll, and she released a deep breath to ease the tightness in her chest.

Back in her time England, her people would be searching for her. She imagined her friends would worry and then her father's estate. What would happen to all they had left her?

She had nothing to remind her of her parents here besides her memory.

If she chose Jack now out of love, would those memories be enough after time passed?

Love... the word made her heartbeat slow, and the rapid pull of air into her lungs made her lungs tight.

I'm in love with him.

The realization struck like lightning and made her clench her fists at her sides. *Did Jack feel the same way?*

Isla felt like she was living in a tragic romance text. The likes of the Shakespearean Romeo and Juliet story.

Tears stung at her eyes, and she pushed them back because she didn't want Moira to ask questions. To Moira, she was betrothed to the Laird, and it had to stay that way.

During supper that night, Isla barely said a word. She noticed Jamie staring at her with his usual intense gaze. It made her uncomfortable. She looked at Jack and found that he had barely touched his food.

He also avoided looking at her. They finished their meal and Isla headed for her chamber. She couldn't find sleep even after hours of pacing around in the dark.

The fireplace provided warmth that filled the chamber, but it was nothing compared to what Jack's arms provided.

Every passing second made her long for him more. When she couldn't take it anymore, Isla decided to seek him out. She left her chamber in a hurry and headed for his study so she could speak with him.

She didn't know what she wanted to speak of exactly, but her mind was racing with different thoughts.

Isla didn't think Jack would send her away. The last time they spoke in the garden, she had interpreted his words as an invitation. If she decided to stay here then they could be together.

Would there be any consequences? Would the gypsy allow it?

She was torn in her thoughts as she passed the stairs and reached the ground landing. Isla reached Jack's study door and paused when she heard voices from inside.

The door was slightly ajar, so she could hear Jack's voice. The other person in his study was Aideen. She recognized his voice too.

"The Calloways have proposed marriage to the daughter of their chief merchant."

"They ken I am betrothed," Jack replied. "Why would they still propose marriage?"

Aideen was silent, and Isla's heart pounded until she felt a piercing ache in her chest.

“Marriage to an outlander has never been heard of in Humphreys before. But we could convince Calloway to request differently. The Lady Isla is already here and willnae want to break faith with the English household she belongs to.”

The courage Isla had managed to gather earlier slowly faded. Jack receiving a marriage proposal from another clan was probably a good thing. Once she disappeared from his time, he would move on with someone else.

Isla was not sure she wanted to stay yet. Could she tell him her feelings and then leave him still when the time came?

Doubts made her flounder, so she stepped away from the door and was about to walk away when she felt strong hands grab her.

A palm pressed over her mouth and muffled her scream.

Her captor dragged her away from the door and delivered a strong blow to the side of her head that knocked her out in an instant.



Jack realized Isla was missing the next morning when Moira and Isla's servant Faye came to find and show him the note

left in her chamber.

“Faye told me she hasnae seen her all mornin’ and I grew worried after I tried to find her in the garden and the healin’ chamber.”

Jack immediately ordered his men to start a search around the Castle and its environs. He did not let them do it alone.

He began to panic when all his men returned without a positive report. “She isnae in the Castle, My Laird,” Jamie told him. “We have searched everywhere.”

Jack stared at the note he had bunched up in his fist and his jaw hardened.

Ye ken where to find yer English lass when ye are ready.

The only thought that came to his mind was the Calloways. “I must ride for Kirkpatrick,” Jack said to Elliot who had come to stand beside him.

“The Calloways are behind this,” he continued.

“We must be careful, My Laird,” Aideen said before Jack could think of anything else.

“Ye ken they are behind this,” he said to his cousin.

“We must ride out, My Laird,” Jamie said. “I dinnae think we should let these merchants think we are weak. If they got in here and took Lady Isla then we must get her back no matter the costs.”

Jamie and Aideen were about arguing over what step to take when Jack stopped them.

“I have made my decision; we ride out now. I dinnae need ye both arguin’ about it. Elliot, ye are to stay back in the Castle and stay on guard. I want every guard questioned. I need to ken how Isla was taken from my Castle without alertin’ anyone.”

He marched away from them while his anger buzzed within him. Jack’s head hurt, but not as much as his heart did.

How did this happen? The only way someone would have broken into his Castle was through an insider. One of his men had betrayed him to the Calloways, and he had to find out who.

The recent trend of events happening proved it already. First the murders that led to his villagers and Councilmen’s complaints and now Isla’s kidnapping.

Jack made it to the stables in blind rage and mounted his saddle. It was a six-hour ride at a steady pace to the Calloway borders of the Kirkpatrick Clan, but he could make it there in lesser time if he made haste.

His men rode behind him. The Castle could not be left unattended in the wake of these times, so as usual, his brother had to stay back while he rode out with Aideen and Jamie.

All he could think of was Isla as he galloped past the thick over-grown pastures of the hilly Humphreys land and headed west toward Kirkpatrick.

By the time Jack arrived on Kirkpatrick soil, it was midday. He did not need to rest, all he had to do was find their leader and speak his terms with him.

His men rode behind him, he was charged and ready to face anyone who tried to keep him from Isla or hurt her.

Anyone—

Jack arrived at the meadows where most of the Calloway merchants made their home. These merchants had the favor of the Kirkpatrick Clan as they were one house and brothers of their laird.

He knew they would never act without the favor of their laird. Jack was ready to face anyone this time, but he still bore in mind that he could not be the first to instigate a war with these people.

I still need them regardless.

Why now of all times? Jack believed his Clan had passed the worst of times, and he had hoped things would ride on

smoothly for them now that they had wealth.

Calloway's guards surrounded the meadows even before Jack reached them. He slowed his ride until his mare halted, then he jumped off his horse and approached the line-up of men in front of him.

Aideen did the same, and so did Jamie. The rest of his guards waited for the command of their General Aideen.

“Laird Humphreys,” the Calloway's general called. “We've been expectin' ye. Our Master wants to have negotiations with ye in person and he is pleased that ye have arrived here safely.”

A smile curved up on the man's lips. Jack tensed and placed his hand on the head of his sheathed sword. One wrong move from these men and he would respond to protect himself.

“Ye Master has somethin' of mine. I believe he left me this note.”

Jack reached into the pocket of his kilt and handed the crumpled note to the general before him.

“Our Master would like to speak with ye alone, Laird Humphreys. In good faith, of course.”

Jack hated the smug smile that appeared on the man's lips. Seeing as he did not deny the note, he could tell that they really did have Isla.

The question that burned on his mind was who helped them get in his Castle?

It had to be someone closest to him. *Jamie? Aideen? Or someone else in his Castle?* He did not believe either Jamie or Aideen would ever betray him.

Countless times, his cousin and man-at-arms saved his life and worked together with him for the better of their Clan. His trust in them was not given... it was earned.

Jack knew his enemy loomed closer than ever.

Isla was taken from the Castle, and no one had raised an alarm. It meant those loyal to this enemy worked for him too.

His first step once he eventually found their Master was to rip all of them of their swords and titles as knights then lock them up in his dungeons forever.

The only one who knew Isla's origin so far was Jamie, and his clan had been allies with the Calloways for many years now it was hard to understand why they had turned against him.

"I will meet yer Master," he said. "but I want my wife back."

"She isnae yet yer wife, Laird Humphreys. And like I said... our Master has been awaitin' yer arrival... for negotiations."

Aideen stepped behind him, and his movement instantly made the Calloway men tense. They moved to draw their swords, and so did Jack's men.

Both sides stood on the defense now. The leader of the Calloway men had his sword drawn at Jack, and Aideen had his sword drawn back at him.

Jack placed his hand on Aideen's sword and gently lowered it.

"Seas sios," he said, asking his men to stand down.

Once they obeyed him, Jack said to the leader, "I will meet yer Master now."

"Come with me, My Laird," the man replied with a head bow.

Jack nodded to his cousin to prove that it was all right, then he followed the leader toward the tent while his men stayed on guard with the Calloway guards.

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*S*sla realized she was bound by both hands and feet when she slowly opened her eyes. She whimpered because the flames lighting where she lay cut through her pain-dazed brain and caused her pain.

Her throat felt sore, and her stomach hurt too. She remembered hearing Jack and Aideen's conversation about him breaking their betrothal for another woman, and then the blow to her head that knocked her unconscious.

Where am I?

She heard Jack's steady voice just as her heart started to race.

"I want her back," he said to whomever he spoke to.

Hearing him instantly sent a wave of relief through her.

He came for me... she closed her eyes again and swallowed hard. Jack kept negotiating with the captor and she listened intently.

Jack's presence made her relax a bit. Knowing he had come for her was relieving. It also softened her heart toward him and increased the tender feelings she already had for him.

"We have been allies for many years, Master Calloway. It is indeed sad that ye break faith with my Clan."

"It isnae my intention. But my people need more than just some peasant offerin's of wool and farm produce. Our waterways fetch yer Clan much more profits especially now that ye have what every Highland clan would ever want... Gold."

"I am betrothed to the Lady. Joining our houses by marriage isnae up for discussion. I have already committed myself to the woman I am betrothed to. I cannae break my word."

"Betrothals have been broken before. Especially when it happens with outlanders. We are from great clans, My Laird, and it is true that our men are yet to take wife from the outlands. Certainly, nay an English one."

"A laird in yer history took an English wife once."

"And look how that ended for us."

Isla wished she could shut out the conversation at this point.

Whatever Jack decided to do should not affect her or make her feel this tightness in her chest. It was the best decision for him,

and he had to make it.

She squeezed her eyes shut as if that would help, but it didn't.

“I amnae sayin’ ye should break yer betrothal immediately, My Laird. I am sayin’ take my daughter and consider her as a match. One week and if ye still decide nay, then I am open to discuss other negotiations.”

“My decision will remain the same even after many weeks pass, Master. I chose who I take to wife, and the English woman is mine.”

The Master said nothing else, and next thing, Isla heard footsteps resound closer to where she lay, and she stiffened.

Someone grabbed her and hurled her over his shoulders while she pretended to be unconscious, then he dropped her on the ground again and she instantly felt warm hands touch her.

She recognized Jack’s touch even though she didn’t open her eyes.

“I must say Laird Humphreys that I had nay intentions of hurtin’ the Lady. I had to draw ye out here. But this isnae over. Ye will accept my terms of gold or wife my daughter. Our borders will be closed to yer clan until then.”

“How much gold do ye want?”

“150 troy ounces every time yer shipments arrive.”

“That is outrageous.”

“The choice is yers.”

Jack lifted Isla off the ground and in the next second, she felt cold breeze touch her skin. She opened her eyes finally and whispered his name.

“Jack—”

His gaze dropped to her, and his eyes widened. “Put me down, Jack. I can walk on my own.”

He slowly set her on her feet then instantly ran his hands down her arms and touched her face. “How are ye feelin’?” he asked in a panicked tone. “Did they hurt ye in any way? If they did, I will go back in there and—”

“I’m all right, Jack,” she interrupted and put a hand on his chest. Isla stared deep into his eyes and added, “They did not hurt me.”

“Isla—”

“I am all right, they dinnae hurt me,” she told him as he held her arms and brought her into his embrace for a tight hug. “They used me as bait to lure ye out. It could have been a trap.”

“I dinnae come here alone,” he replied. “I knew it would be dangerous.”

Jack did not release her even as he spoke, and she snuggled deeper into his arms. Isla let herself enjoy the comfort for some seconds before she pulled back.

“I heard all he asked of you.”

“Isla—”

“I will return to my time soon. You should make the choice to wed his daughter now before it is late. Do not let your Clan suffer and do not lose an ally.”

“The Master is nay actin’ on his own. He isnae fool to break faith with my Clan. I believe someone is influencin’ his actions. I just need to find out who.”

“But—”

“No buts now, Isla. Let us return home first, we will talk about this later.”

He took her hand and linked their fingers, then led her toward where his men waited.

Isla saw Jamie and Aideen standing with over a hundred men Jack had brought here to fight for her.

She mounted his saddle quietly then he did too, and they started the journey back. Heat from his body pressed against her backside the entire bumpy ride. Isla grew more aware of him... his scent, his strength and her own heartbeat hammering harder against her ribcage.

The night's heavy wind blew at her skin and made it difficult for her to hold back her tears. If the gypsy had wanted to cause her pain then she had succeeded because Isla's heart clenched tight.

She could count the days until she left this place. Staying was no longer an option. Jack's safety and his Clan's prosperity mattered more than her feelings.

Jack's Clan would suffer if she did not, and she could never let that happen.

Not when she had fallen this deeply in love with him.



They arrived at Jack's Castle the next morning, and Isla was fast asleep. Jack carried her into her chamber, then he dismissed all his guards and servants. He sat with her on the bed and watched her sleep.

Isla's soft breaths filled the quiet chamber and helped him relax.

Jack massaged the back of his neck after that and closed his eyes for a while.

He had to decide fast and stick to it. If Master Calloway wanted him to take his daughter to wife, then it was a better option than paying them so much gold every time his Clansmen needed to use the borders for their business.

Isla would leave and he would need a wife anyway. What was the point of refusing the Master's proposition?

He hated that he had to make this choice when all his heart wanted was to have her to himself. If fate had brought them together, then why did they need to be apart?

He left her chamber after watching her sleep the entire night, then went into his study to read his tax reports. By morning, Jack had barely gotten a few hours of sleep when he heard resounding footsteps close in on his chamber.

The door opened after a swift knock. Aideen and Elliot walked in, and the tight look on both their faces made his stomach clench. His posture squared and he dreaded whatever news they brought.

What had happened this time?

“There's been a fire in the village,” Aideen announced in a cold tone. Jack's pulse instantly skyrocketed alongside the tension eating through his nerves.

Elliot took over next. “The farmers have lost most of their lands and crops for the season. The flames leak higher into the sky as we speak. The ranchers have lost lands, cattle, and sheep. There is chaos in Onich, My Laird.”

“All of this happened in one night?” Jack queried as he rose from his chair in panic. “Summon the village heads.”

“I did, My Laird,” Aideen answered. “They caught some men in Onich’s main village. Brigands who had attacked the fields and set flames to it. The guards bring them here as we speak.”

“I will punish them,” Jack said through gritted teeth before he gave orders for his brother to gather his councilmen and prepare the dungeons to receive the culprits once they arrived.

“Where is Jamie?” Jack asked.

“Nay one has seen him,” Elliot replied.

“Ye might need to consider the Master’s proposition, My Laird,” Aideen said. “We have been allies with the Calloways for many years. Losing faith with them will spark a rebellion among the merchants and they will cease to do business with us if there is no means to pass through the Calloway borders to our lands. Humphreys cannae afford to lose shipments currently when we are only gettin’ on our feet again.”

“Do ye think I dinnae ken all this?” he asked his cousin. “What will ye have me do instead? Break faith with the English woman?”

“The English woman’s faither isnae here, none of her family has arrived the borders of our land so far.”

Jack did not say anything before his cousin continued, “Except of course ye love the lady.”

“I willnae discuss this anymore. Find me Jamie and bring him here.”

His brother bowed and left the chamber, but Aideen did not.

“Cousin,” Aideen continued.

“Why dinnae ye wed the Master’s daughter instead?” Jack suggested. “In good faith, of course, and for the good of our Clan. Surely, Cousin, ye are well of age to take a lass to wife.”

“The Master asked for yer hand.”

“Ye are of Lyons blood. My paternal uncle’s only survivin’ son. Ye can take the lady to wife.”

“It will be my honor to do anythin’ for the better of the Clan, My Laird,” Aideen said. “Duty always comes first. It is the ultimate sacrifice of a true laird.”

“I have... sacrificed a lot for this Clan. I have done everythin’ within my power for the Clan and once just this once, I want to do somethin’ for myself,” Jack yelled.

His ears burned, and so did his cheeks. He didn't understand the sudden outburst or why it came out at a time like this.

Jack knew he would do anything for his Clan still, but Isla... she was the one thing he wanted, and he couldn't have her. Not because of his Clan, but because of fate.

He realized his anger was not with his cousin for speaking the truth. He hated that he met and fell for a woman he couldn't have.

Gods be good. Jack's throat burned as his cousin stared at him hard, then said, "As ye wish it, My Laird."

Aideen left his study, and he sank into his chair, buried his head in his hands and shut his eyes tight.

It was only a few days until the Birlet Shallows Fair now. The end was near and there was no changing it. Isla would return to her time, he would take a lass to wife, wed her, and have babes. Isla had said it herself.

Right now, he had to focus on catching the culprit trying to sabotage his Clan by turning the Calloways against him, murdering his people, and burning their fields.

I'll make sure they pay.

He waited until Jamie came into his study before he got on his feet again. "Where were ye?"

“In the village, My Laird,” Jamie replied in a breathless voice. “I rode here as soon as I got word from Elliot. Onich burns as we speak.”

“We are in tryin’ times, Jamie, and we move from one precarious situation to the other, but we might even have a bigger issue at hand now.”

“The Master’s marriage proposal?”

“Nay,” Jack replied. “An inside man betrayin’ us. It’s the only logical explanation for these recent happenin’s. There is only one man I can trust to do this for me, and that is ye.”

Jamie’s gaze landed on him and Jack’s jaw tightened.

“Tell me what to do, My Laird.”

Jack moved to close his study door, then he turned to Jamie and launched right into his plan.

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Isla woke up alone in her chamber. She rolled around on her bed then sat up and pressed a hand over her forehead.

Her mind was a jumble of thoughts and it had been that way since the previous night. She kept thinking of Jack and what she needed to do to save his plan.

Isla's had moved to the necklace he had gifted her, and she fingered it before she smiled. Being with Jack these past times had taught her a lot already. She had learned to enjoy people and care for them too.

I will forever cherish him and this gift. The bleakness in her heart overtook every other emotion. It did not seem like she would ever recover from missing him. Isla was still here, and it hurt this deep. What would it feel like once she returned?

After leaving her chamber, she noticed the Castle was a bit quiet as she walked toward the healing chamber in search of Moira. Isla ran into Penelope for the first time since the girl recovered.

She smiled, and Penelope curtsied. “How are you doing?” Isla asked.

“I am all right, My Lady,” she answered. Isla could tell she was better. Her complexion did not look as pale anymore, and she walked without touching her abdomen.

“And the pain?” Isla asked before reaching out to touch Penelope’s side.

“It is all right, My Lady.”

“I’m glad.”

Isla smiled at her, then looked around before asking. “Have ye seen Moira anywhere? Or the Laird?”

“The Laird rode out this mornin’, and I havenae seen the healer, My Lady.”

A guard walked up to them then and bowed to Isla. “The Laird has requested that ye dinnae leave yer chamber today, My Lady. Nay until he returns.”

Isla frowned as she heard the guard’s order. “What is happening?” she asked. “Where is the Laird?”

“He rode out to Onich this mornin’,” the guard answered.

“And he asked that ye guard me?”

“Aye, he did.”

Isla was about to argue with the guard when she saw Jamie walk into the Castle with some men. She instantly walked away from Penelope and headed over to him.

Jamie bowed his head once he saw her, then dismissed his men.

“What has happened in the village?” Isla asked. “Is Jack all right?”

“He is with his trusted men, My Lady, and he has asked me to stay back in the Castle to take care of thin’s here. Ye arenae to leave yer chamber until he returns. It isnae safe for ye after what happened with the Calloways.”

“It is not safe for anyone,” Isla replied. “I do not wish to be locked away like a child.”

“It is the Laird’s command.”

“I do not intend to obey it,” she replied immediately, then raised her chin defiantly. “I get that you do not like me, Sir Jamie, but I am worried about the Laird and this Clan just as much as you are. You do not need to like or trust me. But you must accept that I care for Jack.”

Jamie did not have the usual grim expression on his face or the frown he wore whenever he saw her. He simply stared at her for a while before he nodded softly and said, "I accept it, My Lady."

Shocked, Isla arched a brow. She folded a hand over her chest, and waited for him to say more, but he didn't.

"You do?" she asked when Jamie remained quiet.

"Will ye walk with me?"

It was the first time he was offering to spend even longer than a second in her company and that surprised Isla also. She had to make sure it was Jamie she spoke to, so she gave him another closer look.

When nothing changed in the next minute, she turned and matched his steps as they walked down the hallway.

"I first met the Laird as a wee lad in battle. His faither was Laird durin' the time of the war between the great houses of Lyons and McGill."

"McGill?" she asked. "What clan is that?"

"Clan Campbell," Jamie replied. "The McGill's are their leading family. The Lairdship has been with them for years."

“My faither died in that war, my brother too, and my life was saved when the Laird took a cut in the back for me. He could have died, but it dinnae matter, he had saved me instead... tell me how I can nay be loyal to such a man?”

Isla remembered one of the scars she saw on Jack’s body. “He also risked his life to save me,” she told Jamie with a sad smile as she remembered that first day they met. “That is how we met.”

She swallowed hard as she imagined how painful it must have been for him back then to recover from all of that.

“He saved my life, and I swore to him to protect him with it. Until the end of my days I willnae watch the Laird ever get hurt or ambushed.”

“So, you would give your life for him.”

“A thousand times,” he answered. “I will do anythin’ he asks of me... even give my life.”

Isla stopped walking and faced Jamie. “He is lucky to have a man as loyal as you, Sir Jamie. Nay many men will be this loyal to their laird. I do hope the inside enemy is found soon, so peace can reign.”

“Soon, My Lady,” Jamie replied, then nodded and continued. “But I must ask what ye intentions are with the Laird, Lady Isla. Do ye care for him as deeply as he does ye?”

Isla did not know how best to answer Jamie's question, so she gave him a shaky smile and said, "We are betrothed to one another. I love Jack, just as deeply as he loves me."

Jamie held her gaze for a long time like he was still suspicious of her before he finally nodded. "Then he really is a lucky man," he said with a gentle smile that gave Isla hope of a possibility that Jamie would come to trust her one day.

Days passed after her conversation with Jamie, but Jack was still yet to return to the Castle. With every passing second, Isla grew worried. she spent her nights thinking of him and imagining every possible scenario of what could be happening in Onich.

At the same time the day to her departure grew closer than ever.

She spent her days with Moira learning new ways to make stronger potions for poisons and skin illnesses.

Isla watched her mix a balm for sores and smiled to herself. In her time, there was penicillin and many other medicines to treat most of the illnesses Moira prepared herbs for.

She had often wondered what life had been like for the medievals whenever she read history of countries like France and the Dornish kingdom, now Denmark.

Isla would never have imagined back then that she would exist in their time.

When she returned to her chamber on the fourth night without Jack's presence in the Castle, she took the medallion out of her dresser's lowest drawer and stared at it for a long time.

The green emerald shone as always, and it filled her with the familiar chill that made her nerves twist tight.

Isla wrapped her hands around the medallion that night and lay in her bed. Her thoughts stayed with Jack, and she hoped he was safe where he was.

She fell asleep after a long time thinking, but it was a short sleep before she felt hands shake her out of it. Isla groggily sighed and opened her eyes.

Faye's round and wild brown ones stared right back at her. The fear in the girl's eyes jerked Isla awake immediately.

"What is it?" she asked Faye who looked spooked.

"It is the Laird, My Lady," Faye said in a hushed tone that started Isla's panic.

"He has returned?"

Isla scrambled out of her bed and dashed for the door. She had almost opened it when she realized she was only in her nightgown.

“The Laird is injured, My Lady,” Faye told her as she hurried to her dresser to grab the earasaid she had worn the previous day.

Isla froze after Faye’s announcement. She blinked rapidly to process the words properly.

“The Laird is injured, My Lady. The healer tries to save his life as we speak.”

Oh, Heavens—

Tears instantly streamed down her cheeks, and her heart nearly failed her as she stood there. With trembling limbs, Isla managed to get in her earasaid, then she ran out of her chamber with the intent to get to Jack and be at his side like her life depended on it.



Hours later, the look on Moira’s face was not pleasing to Isla. Moira’s frown deepened with every passing second and it made Isla’s worry eat at her insides until she felt raw nerves arise.

“He is not better?” she asked as she paced the chamber.

“Pacin’ doesnae help me focus, My Lady,” Moira said to her as she lifted a bowl of herbs and poured it over the unsightly deep cut in Jack’s abdomen.

Isla wrapped her right hand around her throat and blinked back her tears. Elliot and Aideen had left the chamber hours ago to attend to the councilmen who were already clamoring for the Laird to be replaced by another leader as the Clan could not be left unattended to in these times, and Isla's fury grew that the men Jack risked his life for every time did not believe in him.

"It is only hours since he was injured," she said. "They already seek to take his Lairdship from him and give it to someone else."

"It is only the order of thin's, My Lady. The seat cannae be left unattended to for long. The Laird's brother lives. It is tradition that he act as Laird in these times."

"Jack is still alive."

"Barely," Moira said and met Isla's gaze. Isla hated the look in Moira's eyes. She had seen the look before when Moira treated some villagers who did not look like they had a chance of survival.

"I cannae say for certain that he will live through this. The wound is infected, and this means that the blade that cut him was poisoned."

"Then we can make an antidote."

"It isnae that simple, My Lady. We must find which poison caused this to make an antidote. It fears me that this is a poison I have never seen in my life."

“There has to be somethin’ we can do.”

Moira began wiping the sweat off Jack’s face and Isla could not bear to watch so she turned away from the bed and squeezed her eyes shut.

Isla had been holding back her tears for hours, and now, she could no longer push them away, so she let them fall.

She wept silently as she stood there and wiped her cheeks with both hands before turning to Moira who now stood at Jack’s beside with a grim look.

“This is all I can do for him,” she said.

Isla moved to his bedside, and Moira left the chamber, so they were alone.

She took Jack’s hand and smoothed a hand over his hair. Her heart clenched painfully in her chest when she leaned down and brushed her lips over his.

His lips still burned with his fever and he murmured words that made no sense as he slept.

Isla wished she had access to the medicines of her time. With it she could save Jack’s life and make sure he did not die like the history books mentioned.

She loved him. Her heart could no longer deny it and seeing him fight for his life in pain like this only tore at her more.

Isla lowered her head to the bed and cried in anguish for there was nothing she could do to help him. She felt helpless, and she knew if Jack died then she could never leave this place with her heart intact.

Knowing he was alive and well would have been her solace. But how could she live in her own world when she knew he had lost his life?

It didn't take long before she fell asleep while sitting on his side of the bed. It was a troubled sleep. Her chest would not stop aching and the tears kept streaming down her cheeks. But during the early hours of dawn, Isla felt a light hand graze her.

She lifted her head, expecting to see Jack awake, but he still lay on the bed unmoving.

"The Heavens always hear our cries, My Lady," a voice said in the dark chamber. Isla's gaze turned sharply to the angle it came from.

She gasped and jerked to her feet when she saw the gypsy sitting in a corner of the chamber. The flames from the fireplace lit the place suddenly, and Isla saw the woman's smile.

"The Heavens will grant ye a wish, My Lady. All ye must do is make it. Do ye wish to return home, now is the time to make it."

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*W*hy now of all times? She had hoped to spend some more time with Jack before leaving. Why did the gypsy have to appear to her now?

Isla blinked to make sure she wasn't dreaming. She remembered then that her friends Ada and Katherine always told her to differentiate a dream by trying to read numbers out loud.

"One, two, three—" Isla raised a brow and met the gypsy's gaze again. "This is a dream isn't it?"

"If ye wish to return to yer time then when the fair comes ye will find the way to return immediately."

"Then why bring me here at all?" Isla queried. "Why did you have to bring me here?"

The woman said nothing as she maintained her grin. Isla's hands formed fists at her sides.

“The Laird will not die, will he?” she asked before glancing in Jack’s direction briefly. Her heart ached for him again and when she turned to the gypsy, she realized the woman was on her feet.

“His fate is yer choice now, My Lady. If ye chose him, he lives. If ye dinnae then he dies.”

“If I chose him then I must stay here forever. What happens to my life back in my time? My friends... my people?”

Isla swallowed. “A horrible fate,” the gypsy told her just like she did the night they first met.

“Is this the lesson you wished to teach me?” she asked in a cracked voice and tears in her eyes. “Your plan was to make me to choose between love and my life?”

“Do ye love the Laird? Do ye choose to save his life?”

Isla let the tears fall as she remained rooted to a spot.

A horrible fate indeed, she thought amid her pain. How could she choose to let Jack die? And if she stayed here, then what would happen to his Clan? Isla could avoid all the battles and bloodshed that was to come.

Even though in the history books he doesn’t live a long life, she could at least avert the battle that ends his life.

Change history. It was a chilling thought, but what other choice did she have? They were never meant to be.

The Master was clear, he needed Jack to make a choice. If she stayed, he could not marry the Master's daughter. If she disappeared, he would die. In that second, a million thoughts flashed through her mind at once. They all left Isla in more pain than she could have imagined feeling.

What do I do?

Her heart was still torn. Isla remembered her friends Ada, and Katherine. Meeting Penelope in this time, and saving her life was Isla's first time doing anything to help anyone else but herself.

She had also helped Jack. Coming to this time had helped her feel loved for the first time since she lost her parents. Even with her friends in England, she had never really been happy.

But I am here.

She closed her eyes and let another tear slip. "I cannot let him die," she whispered before she opened her eyes again. "Please save him. I'll stay here... I'll do anything, just... I need him to live."

The gypsy was quiet for a long time before she finally stood on her feet and walked over to Isla. Isla froze when the gypsy grabbed her hand and placed a small vial in it.

“A sacrifice for love, that’s what makes us human isn’t it?”

The gypsy’s smile seemed genuine for the first time since all of this started. Isla looked in the woman’s eyes and suddenly didn’t feel the usual terrifying chills that tormented her sleep.

“The Laird will live and so will ye. When the fair starts, return to Birlet Shallows and ye will find yer way out. The lesson was love, Child, and ye have learned it well.”

“I can return as well?” she stammered in surprise at the gypsy’s words. “Because I chose to save his life?”

“Because ye chose love.”

“This makes no sense,” Isla muttered as she stared at the woman. “Why teach me a lesson about love when I cannot be with the one I love?”

The gypsy smile was wistful, but she did not answer Isla’s question. “All ye have wished for was to return to yer time. Now is the chance... the fair is only a few days away now. Good luck.”

Isla closed her eyes again, and she felt a gentle breeze whoosh past her. When next she opened them, she was alone in the chamber, the vial in her hand too.

She sighed as she stared it, then quickly wiped her tears away and turned to Jack’s bedside. Without second thoughts, she opened his mouth and emptied its contents in.

Once it was done, she sat at his bedside, and held his hand tight.

Good luck. The gypsy's words echoed in her head. Yes, she would need it. Once she returned to her time, she would need luck to forget all about Jack and move on with her life as it should be.



Jack's recovery shocked everyone including himself. He felt no pain in his side even though the wound from his battle remained at his side.

The surge of energy coursing through him made him get out of bed early and join his men on the training fields. It felt like he had never been unconscious or hurt.

"My Laird, ye shouldnae be with a sword at a time like this," Aideen said when he came out to the field and saw Jack fighting with Jamie.

"Jamie, ye shouldnae known better," Aideen said.

"I have warned the Laird," Jamie responded. "He needs his rest as he has only just recovered."

"The healer says the infection is gone, and my wound is healin'. I feel strong, there's no pain or fever," Jack said to them before sheathing his sword and placing his hands on both

his cousin and friend's shoulder. "Lastly, since when do ye two agree on anythin'?"

"They are right, Brother," Elliot said from behind them.

Jack groaned and turned around. "Nay ye too, Brother," he replied then laughed because he felt well. "I feel all right, ye all needn't worry about me."

"The council worries," Aideen said. "They feared they would lose ye to yer wounds, My Laird."

"The brigands who attacked my village were arrested and I am all right. I will have them punished once I find out who sent them, and we will all be happy. There is much to celebrate, so ye all should be happy."

Jack smiled as he spoke, then he spotted Isla standing far away at the Castle's entrance with Moira and Penelope at her side.

Since he recovered three days ago, he had not seen much of her. It seemed like she was avoiding him. Jack could understand it. After the talks with the Master and his councilmen urging him to break his betrothal with her, his heart was worried sick.

He tried to tell himself it was for the better. Isla was returning to her time soon, so he ought to agree to the Master's proposal. He could not do that yet. Not until he asked Isla one last time what she wanted to do.

Would she stay with him?

He swallowed hard and tore his gaze away from her because Aideen was saying something about the council. Jack drew out his sword again and beckoned on his brother to join him.

They parried for a long time, and he realized he was getting better at his swordsmanship.

“Ye fight better and different, Brother,” Elliot complimented. “Sharper moves.”

“I survived death, that is why I guess,” Jack said with a laugh, but no one else found it exciting so he stopped laughing and cleared his throat.

“What will ye all have me do?”

“Take rest, My Laird,” Aideen said.

“I agree,” Jamie added.

“Ye two agreein’ on thin’s doesnae sit right with me,” Jack said as he sheathed his sword and started walking toward the Castle. “I prefer it when ye disagree.”

Jack caught a smile on Jamie’s lips, but his cousin seemed more interested in talking about the council still.

He saw Isla turn and walk into the Castle once she spotted him drawing closer to the building. Jack went into his study and sat with his brother, Jamie, and his cousin.

“How many councilmen proposed to have me unseated?”

“More than half,” his brother answered. “Thank goodness ye recovered. It would be a horrible fate of mine to seat as Laird,” Elliot said and shuddered. “I dread that seat. I am much happier as yer brother only.”

Jack smiled. “Ye have heard Elliot,” he said to Aideen and Jamie. “Do well to let the councilmen ken he doesnae wish to be Laird over anyone so they are stuck with me.”

Everyone laughed, then the moment turned serious as Jack asked for updates on the prisoners they had taken in from Onich.

“Has any of them confessed anything?” he asked Aideen.

“Nay,” Aideen replied. “They are best killed, My Laird. Punish them for treason as they are men loyal to only themselves. If they attacked the village then it is for their own benefit.”

“Someone could have paid them to attack,” Jamie pointed out. “I suggest we keep interrogatin’ them until they confess, My Laird.”

“There it is,” Jack said with a chuckle. “Opposin’ ideas as usual.”

Elliot smiled and Jack shook his head. “I’m afraid I agree with Aideen this time. Ye must send a message to anyone who dares challenge our Clan. We are nay longer weak and vulnerable.”

Jack ordered them to punish the leader of the brigand for the entire village to see, then spread the word, so all the other villages in his land would know what had happened.

Everyone left his study except Jamie, and he asked. “What about our plan?”

Jack had ordered Jamie to be his eyes and ears with the guards. He knew to find the man betraying them then he had to act like he trusted everyone.

“I did as ye asked, My Laird. I asked every guard to watch the dungeons in turns. This will allow me to watch their interactions with the brigands. Also I have assigned someone to watch the servant Penelope. Whoever tried to kill her the first time will try again if she kens somethin’.”

“I also am watchful of the secret passages. They are sealed, and only Aideen, Elliot and I have the access to those areas. If anyone ever gets into this Castle to commit murder then it must be done by one of us.”

“Good,” Jack said.

He dismissed Jamie after that, then sat in front of his desk for a long time plotting in his mind. While he had put Jamie in charge of a secret watch and investigation of everyone around him, he also had a plan of his own.

Jack lifted his léine and stared at the cut covered in herbs on his lower side. He had seen the face of the man who had cut him. Dark hawkish eyes with a remarkable scar slashing through the left brow down to the left cheek, and hair as black as night.

He knew exactly who to look for this time, and he knew just the right man who could help him. Jack took out his quill pen and scribbled down a note to send to the Highland's best spy.

Odin Bullock from Clan Robertson, the oldest clan to exist was the only man who could find anyone including a ghost with his ravens and pigeons.

All Jack needed to do was describe the man in question. He knew he would hear from Odin in a few days.

After sending Jamie to deliver the message to his Clan's messenger, he went out to find Isla.

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Isla hummed to herself as she sat outside in the garden and enjoyed the stary night. She rested on her chair and closed her eyes. Her mind was full of thoughts from the Shakespearean novel Romeo and Juliet.

It was the only literature she could relate herself to now. Isla had never believed that she needed to love any man, but now she was falling in love with one she could never be with.

“My Lady,” Jack’s voice called and cut into her thoughts. Isla turned to see him standing behind her, his hands crossed at his back.

“Ye have been avoidin’ me,” he said.

“It is nothin’ of the sort,” Isla answered as she rose to her feet and faced him. She had her hair loose tonight because she wanted to feel more like her old self since she was returnin’ soon, but seeing Jack now made her heart tingle and that was nothing like how the old Isla felt.

He walked around and took the empty chair beside hers. Isla sat again and crossed her fingers on her lap.

“I have recovered from a near-death experience, and I have wished to sit with ye like this and yet I havenae got the chance because my Clansmen always want my attention.”

Isla looked at him and the light breeze in the night’s sky picked up tendrils of her hair. Jack brushed them away before she could, and the feel of his fingers on her skin created a whole new wave of tension inside her.

Their eyes met, hers slowly drifted to his lips, and she shivered inside.

“I am glad that ye are all right,” she told him before she looked away.

Jack didn’t let her cast her gaze aside completely. He put a finger on her chin and tilted her head back to his. “Stay with me, Isla,” he suddenly said as he leaned closer to her. “I need ye to stay here with me.”

His finger caressed her chin, then moved to her lower lip and teased it. Isla wanted more than anything to give in to his request.

I would give anything to be with him, but I cannot let him suffer for that choice.

“I want ye here with me. These past months with ye have been my happiest and... I dinnae want to exist without ye here. We can be happy here together; we can have a life and—”

“It is an impossible fate, Jack,” she whispered to him, trying to be strong even though the words broke her heart. “Even if I wanted to stay here, it will only cause doom for yer Clan. The Calloways will not rest until they make you marry the woman they have proposed to you.”

“I dinnae care about that.”

“But you do,” she corrected. “All you have ever done is for your Clan, Jack. You have loved them, you have sacrificed for them, you have been wounded for them. If I stay and we wed, then you will lose a lot. If you give out that much gold to the Calloways, then you will lose a lot.”

“We have found the treasure of Ardenhill. Gold buried in the caves beneath the Castle, but it takes a good leader to manage such wealth. If the Calloways get too strong, they will covet what you have... if they do then the threat of war looms.”

“You cannot afford another war. Not when your Clan just recovered from the devastation of the past.”

“Is this what happens in yer history books?” he asked as he took his finger off her lips. “War breaks out and it scares ye so?”

Isla swallowed. She needed to make him see why she couldn't stay. It was the only way out for both. After a deep sigh, she took his hands and tightened her grip on him. “I lied to you once, Jack,” she began.

Jack's brows furrowed, and his gaze searched hers. "In history, you do not live long enough to father your own children and make heirs. If war breaks, then you will die in the war, and that will be the end of your reign. The Lairdship passes to your cousin after that. I do not want that to be your fate."

"I do not want that to happen, Jack. I will not be happy here if I know that's how it ends. We can avert this and save your Clan that you love so much."

"Isla—"

Her voice strained further as she continued, trying to convince him that she was making the right choice regardless of what they were both feeling.

Isla could barely hear herself. "I must return to my own family too, Jack. My friends must have searched for me for months and my Estate will be unattended. I do not know what has happened in my time... I cannot stay here forever and leave behind those who care for me because of my own selfishness. If there is anything I have learned here, it is that loving others is what makes us human."

"I never appreciated those who cared for me after my parents' death because I was too lost in my own sadness. Not anymore —"

Isla's heart broke as she said the words to him. She fought the tears and the tightness in her throat. This was not the time to be weak. She was making a sacrifice for love, and it was ironic because she had never believed such emotion existed.

Jack's tormented gaze held onto hers for a long time and the pained look in his eyes tugged at her heart more. Isla shunned the feelings as they crept into her, and she fought the urge to cry that overshadowed every other feeling

You must strong to make the right choice for both your sakes.

“Then we must leave for Birlet Shallows in two days. The fair starts by the week's end. Once we get there we will need to find the gypsy and make her tell us what we need to do.”

She nodded as she held onto his hand, and Jack switched it, so his larger palms covered hers. “I willnae forget ye, Isla, or all that ye did for me. I willnae forget ye because I love ye.”

I love you too, she wanted to say, but she couldn't. If she admitted her feelings now then she would never be able to follow through with her plan.

I must do this. Isla convinced herself of what she must do and tried to stay strong.

However, the swelling in her heart made it difficult for her to keep the tears at bay. She hiccupped, and tried to speak, but he kissed her then. It was brief and sweet, but it made her ache like never before.

Could she survive this pain? Or live without Jack?

I must... I have to.

Her lids fluttered closed when Jack pressed a kiss to her forehead. He got up and walked away from her, leaving Isla to her own silent tears and sorrow.



Isla tried saying goodbye to everyone in her own way. She spent time with Penelope in the kitchen even though Faye tried to make her leave the fireplace and return to her chamber.

“My Lady, ye need to leave the fireside. The Lady of the Castle shouldnae be seen in the kitchen.”

Faye spoke in hushed tones and Isla could see that some servants stared at her as she lifted a basket of fruits from the ground and carried into the kitchen.

“I love helpin’,” she told Faye with a smile just before Moira came to join them.

Isla sat with Penelope as she started slicing the fruits. It was her last supper in the Castle, and she wanted it to be special. The last time she made pie, Jack had loved it.

Memories of that night entered her mind and she flushed. Jack’s gentleness made the night unforgettable, and Isla hoped she could get one more chance with him like that before it was time for her to leave.

She made another pie that night, and when it was time for supper, everyone gathered in the Great Hall to eat.

While the usual light conversations flowed around the table, Isla spoke with Elliot about his adventure traveling to the Sottish capital and his plans to one day visit England.

“England is truly as beautiful as they say,” Isla told him. “You should visit.”

After supper, Isla stayed with Moira in the healing room and made more tonic with her. By the time she retired to her chamber for the night, she was exhausted.

She could not find sleep, however, as she lay on her bed until dawn.

Their journey to Birlet Shallows started before first light. Jack, Isla, and a guard rode for a long distance until they passed the borders leading to Onich and continued until evening.

They were silent the entire journey. Jack was riding at her pace on his saddle with his gaze fixed ahead of him the entire night. Isla wondered if his heart was as heavy as hers.

When they reached Onich borders, Jack slowed his gallop until he came to a complete halt. “We rest here for tonight,” he said to her. “Tomorrow, we arrive at Birlet Shallows.”

She nodded as she looked at him, and he took the reins from her. Jack led her past the short fence to the cottage that lay in the middle of a wide expanse of land surrounded with lovely trees providing shade for them.

Jack had prepared for their journey. He had the kitchen pack them fruits and nuts for riding. Once they got into the cottage, Isla waited outside while the guard went into the tent to clean the dusty bedding.

She sat under a tree, lost in her thoughts until Jack returned and handed her some nuts.

“Will we have rabbit for supper today too?” she asked, remembering when they first met. Jack smiled at the memory, then sat beside her and shook his head.

“There’s dried meat packed for ye,” he said. “I ken ye willnae eat rabbit.”

He reached into the sporran attached to the waist of his kilt and offered her the dried meat wrapped in sack cloth.

“Thank you.” Isla chewed the meat while they sat in silence, and the guard walked around the cottage to make sure there was no threat around.

“All clear, My Laird,” the guard said when he returned.

Jack nodded and dismissed him, then gave Isla his attention again. “The fair is usually a great occasion,” Jack said after some time passed. “As a little lad, I used to attend with my parents. My father, of course, met with village heads and Clansmen while my maither and I enjoyed the festivity. My favorite part of it was the pyromancer’s performance.”

“I loved watching those too,” Isla said with a smile. The vision she had seen when the gypsy touched her appeared in her memory and made her shiver.

Had she really been stabbed? Did she die at the fair?

Isla pushed the thoughts away as they entered her mind, and she focused on Jack again. The Birlet Shallows Fair had modernized over the years, and most of the performances Jack enjoyed in his time had changed.

The abolishment of the Clans and laws restricting the use of tartans and kilts had most Scots dressing like Englishmen now. Although they allowed the kilts during celebrations, they still were not commonly worn.

Isla however let him talk about his fond memories of the fair, and she enjoyed listening to him describe the scenes and dances.

She had learned some steps from him, and she intended to enjoy her time at the fair one last time before she found the gypsy.

The hours faded fast and soon night turned to dawn again. Isla had fallen asleep while they sat under the tree, and she figured Jack carried her inside the cottage while she slept.

When she sat up in the bed, he was nowhere in sight. Isla stepped outside the cottage and found him sitting on the same spot as last night. His head rested on the tree bark, and he looked like he was in a peaceful slumber.

She turned away, not wanting to disturb, but he called her name and rose to his feet. “We must continue our journey,” he said once he straightened and stretched his arms out wide.

Isla nodded, then returned into the cottage to wash her face. The saddles were ready once she returned, she mounted, and took charge of the reins.

The skies raged with the threat of an oncoming storm, but it did not rain during their final ride to Birlet Shallows.

It was her last day here. Tonight, she intended to spend with Jack. One last time she wanted to be in his arms, so that when she returned, she hoped she could live without regrets.

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Loud music thundered around Jack and Isla when they arrived the Birlet Shallows village square. The people had gathered to watch the dancer's performance for the evening.

During the fair, the villagers lit a bonfire and danced around it. The women served already roasted meat from the hunt earlier in the day and the children enjoyed their games.

Jack showed Isla the Birlet Shallows figure which was a symbol of worship for the ancient Birlet Shallows who existed in the sixth century.

"This is said to be a deity," he told Isla as he showed her the wood sculpted carving that they hung near the bonfire.

"They do not celebrate with the deity in my time," Isla said with a smile as she stared into the bonfire. Jack wondered what went through her mind as she fell silent again.

He moved closer to her because he felt the need to touch her and feel her skin next to his one last time. Last night, he left

the chamber because sleeping beside her been torture he could not put himself through.

How could he hold her close and inhale her scent without craving her. Jack knew he could not have her without her permission, so he did not need to torture himself further.

Jack noticed that the crowd increased and for a second, he lost sight of the guard with him until he spotted the man standing in a corner, his eyes intent on them.

He had not gotten word from Odin yet, but he expected that in the coming days he would. Once he could identify the assassin, he would know what step to take next.

Jack looked at Isla again and saw that she fiddled with the pendant on her neck.

“Do ye have the medallion?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yes, I do.”

He nodded and fell silent again.

“Jack?” Isla called after a while and turned to him. She fixed her green eyes on him, and Jack noticed the wistful look in her eyes.

“Let’s join the dance,” she said after she dropped her hands.

Jack nodded and took her hands. He led her to the dance area and when the villagers noticed their presence, they began to chant in Gaelic.

“What do they sing?” Isla asked as they started dancing to the drummer’s rhythm. the chants grew louder, most of the women formed a circle around Isla and Jack and began the Celtic dance steps too.

“Praises to the Laird,” he answered her before grinning. “The people in this time are fiercely loyal to their Laird and Lady.”

“And I am their Lady?” Isla asked with gleaming eyes as she curtsied and started another round of dance.

“Aye, ye are.” She tossed her head back and giggled before hooking her arm around his and starting the circle turns of their steps.

Children clapped and joined in the dance. Jack hadn’t enjoyed himself this much in a long time. He danced until his heels started to hurt, and Isla laughed out loud until tears shimmered in her eyes.

Jack pulled her away from the crowd and led her to the corner where some women gathered to light lamps and make a wish to the Gods. He took Isla’s hand in his and linked their fingers.

Isla suddenly froze and pulled her hands out of his. “That tent,” she said in a panicked voice and faced him. “That’s the same tent the gypsy stays in. She read fortunes.”

Jack was about speaking when Isla dashed toward the tent, and he went with her. They got there at the same time; a woman came out.

“It’s her,” Isla blurted. Jack grabbed the woman’s arm and spun her around. He also recognized her as the older woman they met in Kirkpatrick when they visited.

Isla was at his side immediately; Jack could hear her labored breathing as she said, “It’s you.”

The woman smiled. “Let me read your fortune, Child,” she said in rich Gaelic only Jack could understand.

“She wants to read your fortune,” Jack said to Isla. They went into the tent, and he stood by the entrance while Isla sat in front of the woman.

Standing inside the tent filled him with a strange feeling. It felt as if he had seen something similar. Jack looked around him and noticed the signs and symbols on the walls. A shiver raced up his spine, and he tried to fight it off while holding himself still.

Isla had her hands in the gypsy’s and strong wind blew against the flames in the fireplace. Cold seeped into his body and made knots form in the pit of his stomach.

Silence filled the tent for a long time and the gypsy was about to speak to Isla when men suddenly barged into the tent with their swords drawn.

Jack moved fast, reached for his sword, and slashed down the first man who attacked him. “Isla,” he yelled as more of them trooped into the tent.

They dressed in black from head to toe. Out of the corner of his eye, he looked and realized Isla was alone, and the gypsy nowhere in sight.

“Drop ye sword,” one of them said to Jack in a thick voice.

“Unmask yerself,” Jack answered. “If ye wish to attack me then I should at least see the face of my attacker.”

One of his attackers had Isla now, and she struggled to break free from his grasp as he pressed a dirk to her neck. Jack counted ten men, including the woman pointing a sword at him.

He tightened his grip on his sword and swallowed hard. His heart pounded in his chest while he struggled to maintain his grasp on control.

The gypsy had vanished before his eyes like she hadn’t been in this tent seconds ago.

“Let the Lady go,” Jack said. “It is me ye’ve come for.”

“The lady will safely return to Humphreys,” the man in front of him replied. “Ye are right... it is ye we have come for.”

“Then show yerself,” Jack goaded.

The man in front of him signaled for Isla’s captor to drag her out of the tent. Jack’s gaze burned into Isla’s figure as they dragged her out, and all he could think of was saving her.

His vision blurred and his anger made him see red spots. Fury burned a path through his nerves and blinded him.

Once Isla was no longer in the tent, his jaw hardened, and his eyes narrowed. The man leading them lifted a hand and took off the black cloth wrapped around his face.

Jack saw the scar. It ran deep from his left brow to cheek and looked severely scarred.

“Ye are one of the blacks.”

“Tonight is yer final night, My Laird. If ye lower yer weapon then ye die an honorable death.”

“If I dinnae?”

“Then we will cut through ye like an animal.”

The threat rang deep, but it didn’t scare Jack. He was a warrior, one who had survived battles against more than a thousand armies from different clans. His scars were proof of it, and if he were ever to die by another man’s sword, then he would die a warrior.

Jack shook his head. “A true warrior never dies without a fight.”

In the next second, his attacker came at him, and he moved swiftly, lifted his sword and clashed blades with him.



Isla knew she had to get away from the man holding her captive. He dragged her out of the tent and hid behind it. She could hear the drums and claps in the distance away while she struggled against the man.

No one would hear her if she screamed and even if anyone heard, no one would come. She could still hear sword clashing. Her heart went out to Jack and the thought of him getting wounded made her want to scream.

Be brave, Isla.

They reached a horse tied to a tree stump and the man started tying Isla’s hands with a rope. Isla closed her eyes and shoved her knee upward to hit him.

Luckily, she collided with his groin and his grip on her loosened.

She yelped as she broke free, dragged the dagger sheathed to his side, and stabbed him with it.

The man groaned, fell to the ground, and Isla froze for a second.

I killed someone; she panicked as she stared at the body on the ground. Shaking, she untied the reins, climbed the saddle, and kicked the horse to a start while hoping the man didn't die.

She couldn't stand the thought of being responsible for his death.

Isla galloped around the tent, with her heart pounding so loud, she could hear it beating against her rib cage.

Jack burst out of the tent at the same time she reached its front. He had blood on his face and hands.

The second he saw her; one man came out of the tent.

“Jack, watch out,” she yelled, but he already turned and slashed the man in two with his sword.

Jack hurried to the saddle, got on, then kicked the horse into a gallop.

“What just happened?” Isla asked in panic as they rode far away from the fair. Jack didn't stop until they were out of Birlet Shallows and heading toward the bordering lands of a neighboring clan.

Jack finally stopped when they reached a small settlement. He found them an inn for the night and stabled his horse before taking her hand and leading her inside.

The inn was empty, Jack probably knew what he was doing as they marched in and met the woman seated at a table.

She looked up at him long and hard, then shook her head and rose to her feet.

The woman gave them a chamber without question, then returned after some minutes with a towel and water for them.

Isla accepted it at the door, and the woman walked away silently again.

“Where is this place?” she asked after handing over the towel to Jack. “Those men—”

“This is the Red Sparrows Inn. No one asks questions here, and anyone who sleeps here is either a spy or outcast. We are safe for the night, even if anyone comes in here to find us, the Sparrow willnae say a word.”

“Do you trust her that much? You do not know the woman,” she replied, and he saw her worry in the way her eyes dart around the chamber they were in.

“It is the safest place we can be tonight,” he told her. “The men who tried to attack me—”

Jack stopped and winced like he was in pain. He right hand moved to his side and Isla realized then that he was bleeding.

She covered her mouth, but her shock only lasted a second before she hurried to him. "You are wounded," she cried out as she lifted his hand and saw a blood on his léine.

"It's a mere cut, dinnae worry," he said before lifting his léine so she could see the cut. "It isnae deep, it will heal fast so ye dinnae have to worry."

"We need to treat it still," Isla said before looking at him.

Jack swallowed hard. "The men who attacked me are assassins. I killed the ones in the tent, but I am certain that is not all of them. There will be more after me and I cannae think of anywhere else that will be safe besides here. The lady we met at the entrance is a healer. Ye should get her for me."

Isla still did not think it was safe for her, but she had to trust Jack's words.

She hurried out front to find the woman, and once she did, she said in a fake Scottish accent she had managed to learn. "Ye must hurry, the man is wounded and needs help."

The woman said nothing. Isla wondered if she could speak. She watched as the woman went into an inner chamber, then returned with a vial and handed it to her with a box.

Isla opened it and found it was all she needed to treat and stitch Jack's wound.

When she returned to the chamber, Jack had taken off his léine and was standing in the middle of the wide empty chamber with his back to her.

Seeing his naked body aroused her even though he was injured. Isla shoved all heated thoughts that entered her mind as she locked the chamber and went to him.

Jack turned around and she said, "Herbs for your wound."

He nodded, then sat on the bed so she could clean his wound with a damp towel and treat it.

"Do ye ken why it is safe here for us tonight?" he asked her after a while.

Isla shook her head. Then she washed her hands in the bowl of water and returned to sit beside him. "The woman down there was born dumb. Even if she sees anything, she cannae speak it."

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Isla's terror had subsided now, but her pulse still raced as she lay beside Jack on the bed. Hours had passed since they reached this inn, but it seemed like it was a slow night, and the morrow was far away.

She sighed and rolled to her side so she could face Jack. "Jack?" she called in shaky voice, fearing he was asleep, but he was not. He turned to her and murmured before touching her face.

"Your thoughts are troubled," he said to her.

Isla nodded. "The guard with us disappeared. He must have been the one to betray you," she said.

"I ken," he answered. "I saw him while we danced, but by the time we entered the tent, I had lost track of him. Ye neednae worry about this. I will find out who is responsible for this. Ye must however find the gypsy again tomorrow and return to yer time as planned. There is nae—"

Isla pressed a finger to his lips to stop him from saying more.

“I know what I must do,” she said in a light tone. Her words shook with every emotion she felt, and her skin shivered just from touching his lips.

“I do not wish to think of it tonight.”

“Isla—”

“I want one night with you, Jack. His gaze held hers as she tried to gather her courage from deep inside to tell him what she felt in the moment.

Desire was like molten lava slowly flooding her. She could feel it pulse in her veins and the sweet spot between her legs. That one night they shared in his chamber was unforgettable. Isla wanted to such pleasure again.

One more time.

“Make love to me, Jack,” she whispered. Her strained voice sounded hoarse. Her cheeks flamed and so did the rest of her. “Take me tonight.”

He froze, and didn’t move, so she did and pressed her lips to his for a kiss. Jack took control after that. His kiss ignited a spark. Something powerful and energetic surged inside her as she lifted her arms and wrapped them around his neck.

This is it, Isla thought as she let herself go. She closed her eyes and let him take the lead. His hands gently lowered her to the

bed, and his body laid over hers until she felt the heat of his skin and the hardness in his kilt all press into her at once.

He tasted delicious, better than any tea or wine Isla had tasted. His tongue swept over hers in a sleek dance that made her blood hum. It was a slow, sensual dance that led to tremors. None of it was as tantalizing as the feel of his hand slowly moving up her torso to the swell of her breast.

“Isla,” he breathed. Her name danced off his lips like light music.

Jack paused and looked into her eyes. “Are ye sure?” he asked.

She saw passion and heat, but there was also a gentleness in there that made her nod.

“More than anything in the world right now.”

The next kiss sealed their passion. Jack slowly undid the sash of her earasaid and pushed the puffy sleeves off her arms.

Isla gasped once his fingers touched the bare skin of her neck. He wrapped his fingers around there and licked the corner of her mouth.

Jack met her gaze again before he nibbled on her lower lip, then dipped his head and kissed her neck.

The spot beneath her earlobes tickled as he kissed her there. Her breasts became heavy even before he touched her through the sheer fabric of her chemise.

His touch heated her up, his right thigh nudged her legs open, and she parted both her lips and legs for him. Somehow, his hands reached the underskirts of her earasaid, and he grazed the bare skin of her thighs

Isla shivered and moaned. His fingers traveled higher, toward her parted center, then he stroked her moist folds.

A growl escaped his lips before he dragged his lips from hers and feasted on the pulse under her earlobes again.

“I have imagined doin’ this to ye night after night,” he said in her ear. The words only made her tremble harder.

Isla’s fingers dug into his arms, and she felt his muscles shiver. He felt this same need that ravaged her. She could tell.

He stopped kissing her, then took his time to slowly peel off her earasaid and chemise. Isla lay naked on the bed now, her thighs parted, her chest heavy and body trembling on the bed.

His eyes slowly drifted over her. She wondered if he could see her in the dark chamber.

“I love every inch of ye, Isla,” he told her, and she felt shivers run through her.

His gaze darkened. A groan escaped his lips before he kissed her lips again, then covered one breast with his palm. He kneaded slowly while kissing her neck, then breast.

Jack's finger flickered over her already erect nipple, and it tightened further. His tongue moved over one, and her hands gripped the sheets.

"Jack," she murmured, she felt his thighs rock into her soft spot. The friction made her legs quiver on the bed. Jack did not stop rocking into her.

He suckled one nipple while kneading the other breast. His slow ministrations made her grow wetter. He slowly trailed his tongue over her skin and moved lower to her abdomen and then the apex of her thighs.

Once Isla felt his tongue slide over her, she bucked her hips and cried out. There was no holding back now. She wanted to feel all he had to give.

Jack murmured as he kissed her feminine folds again, then slid his fingers over it. He teased her center, made her toes curl, and drew out her pleased moan.

"Let me hear ye," he whispered as she threaded her fingers through his hair. Isla squeezed her eyes shut and let the sensations rock her.

It was more than she ever imagined she would feel, and that made her turn to mush on the bed.

Jack didn't stop kissing, licking, and teasing with his tongue. He kissed every inch of her inner thighs, rubbed her with his thumb and licked her again.

Isla writhed on the bed now. She knew the best was yet to come. This time she planned to pleasure him too and let him take her.

When he brought his lips back to hers, she tasted her essence on him. His tongue moved into her mouth and teased. Isla matched his tempo and kissed him back until she was breathless.

Her hands stayed in his hair as she matched his hunger. Tongues rolled and she pressed her body into his again.

His hands came around her waist and her name tore out of his lips in a ragged tone. "I will make love to ye," he said.

The threat of ecstasy danced in his tone. Isla loved it.

She kissed him first and wrapped her legs around his waist. Jack's hands slid to her behind and he rolled over on the bed, so she straddled his thighs.

He rocked her into him hard and lifted his hips off the bed like he wanted to thrust into her.

Isla wanted to feel him deep inside her. She tried to take off his kilt but couldn't. Her finger shook, her breaths came out in

puffs, and she felt a little flush embarrass her as she didn't know what to do next.

His hands kept fondling her. They moved from her breasts to her waist and then to her neck.

Isla had never considered herself beautiful, but she truly felt like that as he looked at her. His hands encircled her waist again and she looked down before grinding over him.

Jack shifted so she lay on the bed beneath him again, then he undid his kilt, took it off and climbed in the bed. Her eyes widened as she stared at his full length. Isla did not want to hold back, so she reached out to stroke him.

The act gave him pleasure because he flung his head back and growled deep. The expression of sheer ecstasy on his face was her undoing. It made Isla's nerves dance with the need to hear more from him.

The guttural sound encouraged her, so she repeated the act, and tightened her grip around him. He thrust his hips and pumped into her hand before he stopped her.

Jack took her lips for another long kiss that ended by giving her a light wince. Isla realized he had thrust into her when she felt her body adjust to the feel of his warmth and full length inside her.

Isla's lips parted and he kissed her senseless before framing her cheeks with both hands and whispering. "Does it hurt?"

She shook her head and swallowed hard. It burned a little but that was nothing compared to the liquid pleasure melting through her nerves. Their gazes locked, and she felt him pulsate inside her. Isla's senses heightened to everything happening to her body.

She heard every breath he took and felt his heart beating against hers. The way he looked at her made the sensations rise higher inside her.

Isla moved her hips first and Jack groaned. "Dinnae move," he said. "I dinnae want to hurt ye." His fingers brushed the strands of hair falling to her forehead away as he spoke, and he kissed the tip of her nose before caressing her cheeks.

Isla ignored him and hooked her legs around his waist. She brought his head down so she could kiss him. His lips clung to hers and her hands trailed down his back until she pressed him deeper into her.

His hands lifted her off the bed and he thrust into her deeply again, then groaned into the side of her neck. His teeth grazed the spot he kissed, and that sent her over the edge. Isla rocked her hips to his as her climax rocked her to the core.

His sweaty skin glided over hers as Isla lifted her hips to match his thrusts. The only sound in the chamber was their heavy breathing and moans.

Isla loved the heat. When he linked their fingers, she closed her eyes and gave herself to the building pleasure in her veins. Nothing else mattered to her but him in that moment.

Time rolled by slowly as they loved each other. Every stroke of his body inside her brought her closer to completion, and with each gasp came his murmurs of affection. She clung to him; her body was his... her heart and soul too.

They tumbled over the edge together. Lips joined in a passionate dance, and bodies one. Every thrust of his hips brought her closer to completion, and her body danced to the tune he set.

She had hoped one night would be enough, but it wasn't. Jack made love to her again as the birds in the night sky chirped outside, and the heavy wind blew against the leaves of the tree, threatening to bless the earth with rain.

Isla wished to absorb all of him. His scent and passion. She needed to remember for the rest of time to come what it felt like to be in his arms.

His warmth seeped into her and made it even more pleasurable until they fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms to enjoy their blissful union.

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Jack basked in the warmth of having Isla close, and the softness of her skin. He loved every inch of it. The way her soft breaths touched his face and the fervent response of her kisses whenever his lips touched hers. He knew what he must do even as they lay there.

By dawn, he had to let Isla return to her time, and that would be the end. Jack's heart grew heavy at the thought of never seeing her again.

How would I get her out of my heart?

He had grown fond of her and now imagining his life in his Clan without her was bleak. Jack sighed and tried to focus on the moment they shared at the time.

Isla was fast asleep, her head on his chest and her naked body curled into his. His passion stirred with the need to have her again, and he smoothed a hand down her back to caress her skin and press her supple body into his. He still wanted to make love to her, but he did not want to tire her out.

The things she does to me... last night was amazing, he had never experienced such passion and pleasure before. His heart and body belonged to her now.

Isla murmured some words in her sleep and opened her eyes. She raised her head and looked at him. “Jack,” she whispered in the same sultry tone that made him always want to let his restraints go.

Jack covered her lips with his for a tender kiss, and he took his time to explore her mouth until she was breathless. Tears welled up in her eyes when he let her go. Next he kissed her forehead, then her nose and lips again.

“I still want ye, Isla,” he told her when he felt his body harden in response to her nearness. Isla’s reply was to shift and move closer to his body.

She moved the hand on her waist down to her bottom and placed it there.

“I’m yours.”

They needed no more words. They made love passionately into the morning. Jack intended to fill his mind and soul with her.

He needed the images of her in ecstasy in his head. It was the only way he could get through the rest of his life without her.

The second time she fell asleep, he lay awake to watch her and once first light came, he slowly got out of bed and started to get dressed.

“Stay longer,” Isla called when she sat up in the bed. Her naked body begged for his attention. The slope of her breasts and the slight part of her rosy, pink lips.

“I want to,” he told and moved to the bed so he could sit and take her hand in his. “But ye must return to yer time, and I must get back to my Clan.”

Jack was struggling with the urge to throw all sense of reasoning to the wind and just lie there with her.

“I know what we must do, it’s just—” she said and closed her eyes. He saw a tear slide down her cheek and he told himself he had to stay strong else he would never be able to leave.

Jack stilled his heart while his thumb stroked over her wet cheek. “Dinnae cry... I beg ye,” he pleaded. “It makes this harder for me.”

“I will miss ye, Jack,” she whispered.

He kissed her again, and let his tongue delve deep into her mouth before he rose to his feet. her taste lingered on his lips and his heart thundered against his ribcage like it would break free from it.

“Ye must leave before I do,” he told her as she got on her feet and put on her earasaid. He watched her comb her fingers through her hair and took in every sensuous move of her body.

I will always remember her. Jack had never expected to fall in love with any woman, yet alone one who did not belong in his time.

His heart would go with Isla... he was certain of that, but he couldn't say a thing, else he would cling to her and beg her not to ever leave.

“Goodbye,” Isla said first after she finished dressing. She looked at him one last time, then closed the distance between them and hugged him tight.

Jack nodded. His throat tightened so he couldn't speak, and once she dashed out of the cottage, he picked his sword, sheathed it into his side and headed out to return to his Clan.



Jack didn't make it far before he noticed the cloaked rider catching his pace from behind. He straightened his frame in his saddle, kicked the sides of his horse, and galloped through the fields.

His heart raced, and fear pumped through him. Jack realized the rider behind him had the intention of following his every move.

When he took a right turn, the cloaked man did the same, then drew out a bow, aimed and fired an arrow toward Jack.

Jack ducked to evade the arrow, and he lost his balance. He toppled off his saddle, landed hard on the ground, and rolled while every inch of his body slammed against the hardened ground.

His spooked horse neighed and hurried away. Jack groaned and opened his eyes. He fought the pain racing through every nerve in his body and fought to stand erect.

When he got on his feet, his attacker had reached him, with a drawn sword.

“Show yerself,” Jack said in a tensed voice as he held his aching sides. The stich Isla made yesterday on his wound must have ripped open because of his fall. He could feel warmth seep onto his fingers, and when he looked down, there was a little blood. “Who sent ye?”

“What does that matter?” the man replied. “Ye are goin’ to die here today anyway. Yer brother is dead, and so is everyone else ye care about. Once ye die... none of it will matter.”

Jack scoffed, then touched the head of his sword and drew it out, pointed it at his attacker, he answered, “Then show yer face if I am goin’ to die. I want to see the face my killer at least.”

The man hesitated, then he slowly took off the cloak and the black cloth wrapped over his mouth and nose. Jack stared into the darkest eyes he had ever seen, and a shiver raced up his spine as he took in the man’s fierce looks.

“Yer name?”

“Murdock Black,” he answered. “Ye ken the blacks. Nay one sees one of us and lives... nay one sees me and lives.”

The corner of Jack’s lips lifted into a smirk, but he didn’t make his move. He exchanged heated looks with Murdock for another few seconds before both raised their swords and started the dance at once.

The swish sound of steel blades clashing filled the air. Jack ducked, and avoided the blow to his side, then his blade pierced through Murdock’s arm.

Neither of them backed down or relented. Minutes passed and pain slithered through Jack when Murdock landed another cut on his thigh. Then the back of his leg.

His knees gave way and he dropped to the ground crying out in pain as Murdock raised his sword one last time to end him. He closed his eyes and expected the pain. The only thought on his mind in that final moment was Isla.

Jack envisioned her smiling at him, and then laughing. The light in her eyes offered him solace, and hearing her soft sounds made his heart ache less

The pain he expected didn’t come. Instead he heard a groan, opened his eyes, and saw Murdock drop to his knees. Blood spluttered out of his mouth and his eyes widened.

Behind him, an old woman stood with a dirk in her hand and a terrified look on her face.

She saved me, Jack thought as a wave of dizziness washed through him. He wanted to thank her. He opened his mouth, but the words didn't come until he dropped to the ground and gave into the bleak darkness surrounding him.



Isla searched the entire market where the villagers had gathered for the third day of their fair. Drums filled the air, screams and chants in their native dialect made it difficult for her to hear herself think and as her gaze scanned through the crowd in search of the tent she was in last night, she kept thinking about Jack.

Can I do this? Can I leave him?

Isla didn't think she wanted to anymore. When she first came here, she had craved her own home... her friends, her wealth and everything that came with living in a more modern England but now in this moment, she wanted Jack.

His family... his brother who made her laugh, Moira who had taught her a lot, and even Jamie. Even as stiff as he always was with her, Isla would miss him. Being here with Jack had changed her life. She wasn't so sure she wanted to end all now.

After another few minute's search, she finally spotted the tent she needed to find, and dashed toward it. Isla barged into the tent and saw the gypsy sitting on the other side of her table,

her attention buried on the palm of the young girl sitting with her.

Isla wanted to scream at the girl and tell her to run from the gypsy, but she held back her words, and waited until the girl left the room giggling before she spoke.

“Ye must take me back to my time now.”

Isla moved and sat in front of the gypsy. The woman smiled at her and extended a hand. “Show me yer hand, Child.”

She willingly gave the gypsy her hand, determined to not fear her this time. A long moment of silence passed before the gypsy looked at her and said,

“Yer time has come, but ye must decide what ye want to do. Will ye return to yer time? Or will ye stay?” Another second passed before the gypsy added, “Will ye stay for love.”

Isla swallowed hard and asked. “Love?”

“Ye ken what I speak of, Child... the choice is what ye must make.”

“Tell me how to return.”

The gypsy’s frown deepened, and her shoulders slumped forward a little before she replied. “Beneath the Castle’s dungeons... the caves are ruins of what was once the

magnificent castle ye have lived in. The cave beneath the Castle is where ye shall find the key.”

Isla’s brows arched together, an image of the cave she had gone to by the dried-up loch in her time flashed in her mind and it suddenly dawned on her. *It’s the same castle*, she murmured as she lifted her gaze to the gypsy again.

“It was beneath ye the entire time.”

Isla jerked to her feet after the revelation, then she lifted the hem of her earasaid and hurried toward the exit of the tent but stopped when the gypsy said,

“Be careful, Child... what ye seek might nay be what fate has in store for ye.”

This time, she didn’t care about the gypsy’s warnings. It didn’t matter anyway as it was time for her to return home.

I have to get back to Humphreys at once. And once she got there, she had no intentions of letting anyone ken she returned. Not until she had left this time completely.

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The next time Jack opened his eyes, he realized he was in a dark room and the atmosphere smelled of sage. He coughed and pain spilled through his side as he tried to sit up on the bed.

“Dinnae move,” a soft voice said to him. “If ye do ye will make the pain worse.” He blinked and tried to understand what was happening.

His head pounded like it would split in two, and his throat was sore.

“Wh—”

“Ye were injured in a fight. It seemed like the man was about to kill ye and I couldnae let that happen.”

Jack looked at the woman properly. She had fiery red hair, and her eyes were mismatched colors of blue and green that made her look—

Strange. It was the only word that came to mind, so he described her with it. He lifted a hand to his throat and rubbed gently. “Water, please?”

The woman moved around the chamber, then returned with a quaich. She helped him sit up, then fed him the water. Jack wiped an arm over his lips, then focused on her again. she was staring back at him with hawkish eyes, and it made him uncomfortable.

“Thank ye,” he said. “For savin’ my life... I am indebted to ye, My Lady.”

“I am nay lady,” she answered. “I am a healer for the seamen.”

“The Calloways?”

“Aye,” she replied. “I couldnae let them kill ye on my faither’s property, so I killed the man instead.”

She pressed her lips into a thin line, then said, “I hope I havenae killed the wrong man. Ye are innocent in whatever must have happened are ye?”

“Aye,” Jack replied in a heartbeats. “Ye dinnae make the wrong choice and I will reward ye properly once I get back to my Clan. I must ask though that ye help me return.”

“Yer clan?” she asked.

“Humphreys,” he replied, but didn’t add more since he didn’t want to give up his identity to her. She got on her feet and paced around the chamber a bit, then returned with more herbs and balms for his wound. “Ye have a lot of wounds, so I implore that ye rest for a bit.”

“I cannae afford rest at the moment,” Jack replied as he remembered Murdock’s words.

He swallowed hard and breathed out deeply. *If Elliot really is dead then—*

He didn’t want to complete the thought. Jack couldn’t imagine his brother hurt or dead. It would ruin him. He pushed back the horrid thoughts that had entered his mind away and adjusted himself on the bed.

“I intend to stay only until dawn and then I must leave. Give me whatever ye have for strength. I promise to reward ye with anythin’ ye may want once I return home.”

The woman assessed him closely. Her eyes wandered over his face, and he sensed her hesitation. If she was loyal to the Calloways, then she could mention that she had saved him, and that could be dangerous.

Jack had no idea who wanted him dead yet.

Could it be the Calloways? Or some other clan enemy he had incurred?

He had tried his best to lead a peaceful Clan, so why would anyone want to kill him by sending assassins.

“All right,” she said after a while. “Drink this.”

He took the quaich she offered and drank deeply from it. Whatever was inside tasted like chalk, and he instantly hated it.

“Thank ye,” Jack told her even though his throat burned from the liquid. She nodded once, then got on her feet and walked to the door.

“May I ken yer name?” he asked once she touched the doorknob.

“Sorcha,” she replied, then left the chamber.

He sat awake on the bed for a long time trying his best to control his worrisome thoughts.

I must get back home. Isla must have returned to her time now, and that was another ache that Jack couldn't let himself dwell on now because it might consume him. He would have the time to miss her once he was sure his Clan was not in chaos.

At dawn, he got out of bed and slid into the fresher clothes Sorcha brought him.

“Ye must drink this during the journey to keep yer strength,” she advised. “It is nay right that ye journey far in yer condition though.”

“I will return, Sorcha,” he said, making a solemn promise in his heart to come reward the healer for saving his life.

She curtsied to him, and he snuck out of the tiny cottage where she lived in the faraway fields belonging to the Calloways. Jack resumed his journey with high speed on the horse she handed him too.

The ride to Humphreys should be a three day one, but Jack’s relentless gallop made him arrive in half the time.

His head hurt more than ever when he rode in through his Castle’s gates. He had noticed the village was half empty while he rode past it, and now he saw locals streaming into the Castle and heading into the main building.

Jack dismounted and re-adjusted the cloak on his head before marching toward the entrance. Two guards noticed him as he approached, and they instantly hurried in his direction.

He took off the cloak he wore once they drew close, and their shock was evident in the wide-eyed stare he received.

“My Laird,” one of them stammered as his face paled further than its already ashen-white shade.

They both bowed, and Jack asked, “What is happenin’?”

“There’s a coronation, My Laird,” one of them replied. “The council man are appointin’ the next laird after the news of yer

death in Birlet Shallows... there's been grievin' in the Clan, My Laird."

The guard's voice shook as he spoke, and Jack understood his shock and confusion.

"Announce my return," he told them as he removed the cloak he wore completely and tossed it to the ground. "I will speak to the councilmen myself. Bring me Jamie too, and my brother."

Neither of the guards moved after his last order, and Jack's brows squeezed together as he waited for them to speak. Knots formed deep inside him even before they said anything. It twisted at his guts until it led him to hold his breath.

"There's sad news, My Laird... neither of us expected that he willnae return when he went out ridin' on the mornin' ye left for Birlet Shallows.



Isla arrived at Humphreys on the third day after she left the gypsy. She was exhausted from her ride, and every muscle in her body ached.

All she craved was a hot bath and good sleep in her own bed this time, and not the Scottish bedding she had grown accustomed to.

Her stomach grumbled as she made it past the lifeless village.

Where is everyone? She thought as she rode her horse past the vast fields and headed toward the Castle.

Isla was hoping she wouldn't run into Jack until she made it to the dungeons tonight to find her way home. If she saw him one more time, then she might not be able to follow through with the plan.

That last night they shared was forever etched into her memory. His gentle touch when he took her, and his hot murmurs of pleasure.

She wished she could tell him what she felt, and how much she loved him. It wouldn't matter even if she did.

Isla knew she had to leave this time, so Jack could carry on with his life, and wed the lady proposed to him.

Does his fate change though? She hoped it would. If he wed the lady, then the war would be avoided, and he wouldn't die.

When she reached a small crowd gathered and she saw the Humphreys Clan color's being carried by some guards, she stopped and dismounted her horse.

Isla's heart thundered in her chest as she covered her head with the cloak and walked slowly toward the gathered villagers.

“We have gathered here today to celebrate the life of our loved one. A true knight and a charming young man the Clan has ever seen—”

Isla's head swooned a bit as she froze in a spot. Her breath hitched in her throat, she lifted a hand to cover her mouth and tears gathered in her eyes.

A funeral... the bile that rose in her throat matched the tension racking her insides as she wondered who had died.

Oh God... tears blurred her vision, and without thinking she began making her way through the crowd to get to the front where she could see what was happening.

The villagers surrounding her murmured as she forced her way through, parting the crowd with both outstretched hands. Her stomach felt rock hard, and her racing heartbeat caused pains in her chest.

“We celebrate the life of our very own. A true Humphrey... Elliot Lyons, brother, and son to our Clan. His name will forever live on our lips, and we will remember him for the rest of our days.”

Isla did not recognize the man speaking, but he was dressed in the Humphreys Clan colors, and she suspected he was an old, respected member of the council.

She gasped at the mention of Elliot's name. Her eyes darted across everyone standing in front to Jack. She saw him even though he stood with his back to her, and his head bowed.

His shoulders looked smaller than ever, and her pain pierced at her heart as she took a step forward to rush to him.

A firm grip stopped her, and Isla spun around to see the gypsy standing behind her.

“If ye go to him now, then it all ends here... this is yer last chance to return, My Child. Ye must choose wisely.”

“He’s in pain... he needs me now more than ever,” she whispered, then turned to look at Jack again. When she glanced over her shoulder again, the gypsy no longer stood there.

Torn between her heart and her life, Isla withdrew into the crowd and let the tears stream down her cheeks without warning.

How did this happen? How did Elliot die? In that moment, she remembered his smile, and the lightness in his laugh each time they were together.

Isla knew Jack was devastated and the only thought that came to her mind was to comfort him, but she couldn’t do that.

She couldn’t process her thoughts properly as she hurried to her horse, so she could mount and continue her ride. Isla’s plan was to hide out in the Castle until night when she could sneak to the caves without anyone noticing.

But can I really leave now? as she rode away, she kept glancing over her shoulder to the distancing crowd.

Elliot was gone, and that meant Jack was in his darkest moments. She had only known Elliot for three months, but Jack had known him his entire life, and his pain would surmount any feeling he had ever had.

Isla could relate to this. She had felt the exact same way after her parents died years back.

I was all alone even though I was surrounded by people.

She knew the bleakness Jack would feel and she couldn't just leave him like that... *could she?*

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Jack's entire attention was buried in the ale in front of him. His cousin and Jamie kept discussing the details of what would happen now that they had buried Elliot.

"The men will bury his ashes in the crypt and his memorial will be held on this day next year. The councilmen are suggestin' that we tighten security around the Castle and shut it to all locals from the village. After the attempt on yer life we cannae risk anyone enterin' the Castle," Jamie was saying.

"Elliot's death is indeed sad news, My Laird, but it is now more than ever that the Clan needs ye to—"

Jack slammed his quaich on his table and looked at both his men.

Jamie's eyes fixed on his, and his cousin's held compassion. *Did they both understand what had just happened? Did they understand that he had lost his only surviving blood?*

"Elliot was a good man," he said. "He was kind and free... he cared very little for politics and the fights between clans. All he wanted was to defend the people, travel, and drink good

wine, meet a lass he could marry and lead a small, happy life... he was a good man.”

Jack rose to his feet, tears blinded his vision, but they didn't fall because he hardened his jaw and clenched his fist.

“My Laird,” Jamie began. “I understand... I am also hurt by what has happened. Elliot meant a lot to all of us.”

Jack shook his head. He needed to either drink more ale or go somewhere else, so he did not have to listen to their political talk at a time like this.

His heart grew heavier by the second. For a moment, he wished Isla was here with him. That way he could hug her close and enjoy her scent for some time. She would have understood him better at a time like this.

With her soft words and her tender touch, she could have comforted him more.

“I need to be alone.”

Neither Jamie nor Aideen said anything thankfully. They both left his study in silence, and he poured himself more ale, then called for a guard to bring him more.

In a short time he had emptied three quaiches and he was nowhere near satisfied. A servant came into his study with his supper.

Jack's stomach was too tight to keep anything down.

His joints ached, his wounds felt sore, but none of that mattered. He stood by his study window for a long time and stared into the dark night.

Were the Heavens so cruel to take a good man and let those who had killed him go free? Jack did not believe in that kind of justice. The only way his heart would rest was if he found his brother's killer, and he planned to dedicate the rest of his life to doing that.

Later that night, Moira came to his chamber and dressed his wounds. Jack sat in silence as she worked a cloth around his mid-section to cover the cut there, then handed him a vial of tonic.

"It is for strength, My Laird," she said in a tender voice.

He took it from her and stared into her eyes before drinking. Moira hadn't asked him a word about Isla since he arrived, and even after explaining to his cousin and Jamie that she had stayed back in Birlet Shallows, he still had to think of what to tell them next when she did not return.

"Thank ye, Moira," he said after he drank and wiped his lips. She stayed on the chair next to his bedside for some time, and Jack desperately needed someone to talk to, so he asked, "Do ye think it was my fault? That perhaps there was a way I could have avoided what happened to Elliot?"

“Nay one could have avoided it, My Laird. He rode out that mornin’ to enjoy his time out in the open fields, and never returned. He was ambushed and killed... it was nay yer fault.”

“I just wish I was with him in his final moments. Maybe I could have protected him and fought by his side one last time.”

Jack struggled to find his breath

“We all thought ye died, My Laird,” Moira continued, and Jack looked at her. “Jamie and I, we—” She trailed off, her eyes turned teary, then she hiccupped and continued, “We thought ye were dead too and the entire Clan mourned for ye. Aideen mourned for ye... and Elliot. He was the most devastated among us when he learned of what happened to ye in Birlet Shallows and Elliot on our own land.”

“If I had stayed back then—”

“I trust that ye will find the killers, My Laird... everyone looks up to ye,” Moira told him. “And we believe in ye.”

Her smile was shaky, and Jack nodded as he felt the strength of the herbs mixed in her tonic take effect and weaken his muscles so he could relax.

“I hope this is to make me sleep peacefully,” he said to her after combing his fingers through his hair and sighing. “My mind willnae rest.”

“Ye must rest and regain yer strength, My Laird... ye will need it for the days ahead.”

Moira rose to her feet, then curtsied and walked out of his chamber. Alone with his thoughts now, he lay on his bed, spread his arms out wide and stared at the ceiling.

Isla’s voice came to him. Her soft laugh, and how her eyes sparkled when a smile cramped her cheek. He dwelled on that thought because it eased his pain and made him ease into a light sleep.



Isla entered the Castle with a crowd of servants returning from the fields with their baskets attached to their side hip. She didn’t need anyone to notice her, so once she dropped her basket, she snuck past the guards and headed toward the dark lower stairway leading to the dungeons.

She had been down to the caves with Jack before. The night they had found the treasure just lying in wait, she had wandered around the caves, not knowing that the key she sought was right here.

Her right hand moved to the medallion on her neck, and she fingered it a little while pushing every other thought out of her mind.

This was the moment she had waited for these past months.

When she reached the dungeons and continued to the last landing, she heard footsteps approach her and voices.

Isla ducked behind one pillar and held her breath while listening to their conversation. Her heart hammered in her chest, but she controlled her fear and licked her dry lips. All she needed to do was wait until they left then she could hurry along and continue to the caves she sought.

As she hid there in the shadows, their conversation caught her attention. “It happens tonight,” one guard said to the other.

“The Laird dies tonight. Everythin’ is in place, and once it happens we will be free to do whatever we want just as he as promised. We dinnae need to do anythin’ besides leave the Laird’s door unguarded. We will get rewarded for it in the end anyway.”

“It is sad that this has to happen,” the second guard said. “He was indeed a good Laird... the best our Clan has seen.”

“Master will make a better Laird.”

Bile rose in Isla’s throat as she listened to them. *Master? Who could it be?*

The men stopped walking and she heard one of them sigh.

“The Laird’s brother could nay have stood a chance against us even if we hadn’t ambushed him in the fields. Since the assassins failed, it is our duty to now make sure the Laird doesnae live past tonight.”

“What was our Master’s orders?”

“We dinnae need to do anythin’ besides watch the Castle tonight. Nay one comes in as the Laird ordered. He will go to the Laird’s chamber, and he will end it all himself.”

The last statement made her pulse jump, and she nearly cried out from the shock of what she just heard, but she plastered her hand tighter over her lips and held herself back.

Someone is going to kill Jack ... I have to warn him. Isla felt rooted to the spot, and she made sure to silence her panicked whimpers.

All her nerves were on high alert now, and the only thought racing through her mind was Jack’s safety. Isla couldn’t return to her time knowing that he wasn’t safe.

What would be the whole point of this then? She was leaving because she needed Jack to be happy. She wanted him to wed someone, have children and protect his Clan, but now that she knew of this plan? She couldn’t leave.

As she stood there, frozen in one place, she realized what her choice was going to be.

It’s Jack... Isla did not just love him, she wanted to tell him how much she did.

While her mind raced, she waited for the guards to walk past her before she dropped her hands again and sucked in a deep

breath to steady her lungs.

Isla knew what she had to do, so without hesitating, she adjusted her cloak over her head and turned away from the caves and hurried back toward the path she came from with caution not to get caught.

I must get back to Jack... she had to warn him of what was planned against him tonight.

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Jack drifted in and out of sleep. He tried to fight the grogginess, especially when he heard footsteps, and someone entered his chamber. His eyelids opened and he tried to keep them open so he could see the face in the shadows.

What's happening?

His entire body ached. It had to be because of his battle wounds, and the concoction Moira had given him earlier tonight. It was the only explanation for why he felt so weak.

When Jack realized his cousin was the one who entered his chamber and approached his bed, he relaxed a bit, and let his eyes close again.

In his short sleep, he dreamed of Isla, and they were happy in his dream. She had stayed with him instead of returning to her time, they wed and had lovely children.

Jack enjoyed hearing her laugh. It sounded so real that he did not realize it was all a dream as a smile spread out on his lips and his heart warmed with flutters that resembled butterflies.

The light footsteps closing in on him encroached into the bliss of his dream, but Jack wanted to ignore anything that would take him out of the happiness he enjoyed.

When a scream followed in the next second, it tore him out of the sleep-dazed state he was in.

He sat up on his bed with a loud gasp. His eyes flew open, he saw the blade pointed at him, and instantly jerked out of his bed, rolled over to the other side, and grabbed his sword.

“Jack.” His heart leaped in his chest when he faced the entrance of his Castle and realized the one calling for him was Isla.

“Isla... what are ye—” He didn’t finish his sentence before Aideen lurched for him and thrust his blade forward to stab him.

Jack saw his cousin’s wild eyes, and his brows raised. He dodged his cousin’s strike, while his mind tried to understand what was happening.

They started a battle of swords when Aideen drew out his sword and began fighting him.

“Why do ye do this, Aideen?” Jack asked when he could finally find his voice. His voice sounded shrill with his disbelief, and even though his entire body ached, it was nothing compared to the pain that entered his heart.

Isla stood by the chamber's entrance, her eyes wide, and her hands covering her mouth. He noticed the terrified stare in her eyes when his gaze drifted to her briefly, then his cousin's blade cut through his arm and yanked a cry from his lips.

Jack landed the next strike on his cousin's thigh. The clash of swords in the air was the only sound in the chamber. The metallic scent of blood, the only smell in the air.

"Ye amaze me, Cousin, and ye leave me no other choice," Aideen roared as he backed away a little. "Imagine my surprise when ye returned from Birlet Shallows unharmed. It is like the Heavens are toyin' with me."

Aideen tossed his head back and cackled. The gleam in his eyes increased, and the smug smirk that appeared on his lips finally made Jack realized what was happening.

"It was ye all along?" Jack stammered. "Ye... it was ye who sent the Blacks to find and kill me?"

"Dinnae make it sound like a big deal, Cousin," Aideen answered, his sword still aimed at Jack. "Ye should have died long ago in that war. The only reason why ye made it back alive is because of Jamie. I soon realized that I made a mistake in sparing yer life."

Jack blinked, but his surprise only lasted a second. He saw Isla inch forward as they spoke, and panic rose in his chest. His eyes widened, and he tried to signal her to stay back without letting Aideen realize that she was approaching him with the dirk he had dropped on the floor minutes earlier.

“Ye’ve plotted behind me this entire time while all I have done is trust ye.”

“Ye wound me, Cousin... all ye have ever done is command and make me feel less than ye. The Lairdship is rightfully mine and nay yers.”

Aideen’s fierce voice thundered around his chamber. His chest rose and fell with the force of his breathing, and he shook his head before adding. “Ye never listen to me... this is all because of ye. The Lairdship should have been mine from the start.”

“And Elliot? Is that why ye killed him? So there will be nayone left to fight ye once I die?” Jack asked in a strained voice.

Deep down he wished his cousin would deny at least this crime and he desperately hoped it was not true.

How could Aideen do this?

When Aideen’s smirk grew wider, he knew and every bubble of hope he had burst.

“Was that yer doin’ too? What did Elliot ever do to ye?”

“He had to die too, dinnae ye see? After endin’ ye and the foolish English lady in Birlet Shallows, I had to make sure there was no other contestant to my inheritance of the Lairdship.

“I must confess I did care for ye cousin... but I will do better for this Clan than ye have ever done, and yer pretty English lady? Well, I ken all about her and where she is from.”

“Ye would never have found out anyway and ye will have died peacefully. It wasnae my plan to make ye suffer first,” Aideen continued. “The councilmen will support me once ye are gone. The killin’s in the Castle and the chaos in the village... all of that was to make sure they realize how incompetent ye are as their Laird, and they did.”

“They will never support ye,” Jack said through gritted teeth. “In the end, they will see ye as ye are, and someone else who thinks ye arenae worthy will fight to oust ye.”

Aideen laughed again. He tossed his head back a bit, cackled, then fixed his cold stare on Jack again. “And who will that be? Ye have nay heirs remember? Even the Calloways are on my side now. Since ye refused to wed their daughter like they asked, ye would have caused strife between our Clan and their men... dinnae ye see that ye would have ruined Humphreys in the end?”

“It is ye who will ruin this Clan.”

“I have given my everythin’ to this Clan,” Aideen yelled. His expression changed and the flash of anger in his eyes chilled Jack’s spine.

Isla made her move then, but Aideen was faster. He grabbed her wrist before she could stab him, twisted it, and spun her

around so he could press his blade to her neck and hold her captive.

“Ye let her go this instant,” Jack threatened as his empty hand formed a tight fist at his side. “Let her go... ye fight is with me.”

“Of course it is... but it will be fun to make her watch, wouldnae it? I’d like to see how the English lady from the future reacts to watchin’ ye die—”

“Ye knew?”

“Of course I knew,” he replied with a loud mocking laugh. “I heard ye in yer study the other night with Jamie... ye are indeed somethin’, Jack. Nay one would have believed ye could come up with such an amazin’ plan to wed a witch. Either way, once I end ye tonight, she will be mine.”

Jack saw Isla’s lids close, and she squeezed her eyes shut tight, swallowed hard and released a deep sigh as a tear slid down her cheek.

He couldn’t stand seeing that blade near her skin. It made him lose his restraint and forget all about the pain that plagued him earlier.

Blinded with fury and swift as a wind in the air, Jack clenched his jaw hard, took out the dirk attached to his side, and threw it at Aideen. The dirk pierced his chest and made him lose his balance.

Isla whimpered and he saw blood on her neck as she fell to the floor and put her hand there. Aideen advanced toward her, but Jack leaped forward and attacked him first.

This time his sword pierced into Aideen's side, but he didn't relent. He raised it in the air, clashed it to Aideen's, and met his gaze before thrusting it forward one last time to pierce his abdomen.

His cousin's eyes widened but narrowed at the corners, blood spilled out of his mouth, and he coughed before dropping to his knees.

"This is what betrayal feels like," he said in a thick voice as his own eyes burned with the that of his tears and his heart ached more than ever.

How could it be Aideen? Of all people? How could his cousin betray him?

Aideen tried to speak... the veins on his forehead and the sides of his face popped out, but the words didn't form and he groaned and dropped to the floor.

Relief flood Jack once he saw Aideen's limp body on the floor. He hurried to Isla at the same time she rose to her feet and came to him. Jack ran his hands down her sides and checked to see if she was hurt anywhere.

Besides the tiny cut on her neck from Aideen's blade, she wasn't hurt anywhere else and that eased his worry a bit. Jack

could not stand to see her hurt, or even bear the thought of losing her.

“How are ye here?” he asked, ignoring his own pain as he stared deep into her eyes. “I thought ye returned to yer time?”

Isla shook her head and he saw her throat bob as she swallowed hard. “I could not leave... I had to come find you,” she said amid tears. “I returned and I found out about Elliot, then I overheard some guards speaking about you and what would happen tonight, so I had to come find you.”

“There was no guard standing by my door?” he asked as his eyes searched hers.

“No one,” she replied. “It’s like they are all loyal to Aideen and they were dispersed before he came up here. It was all part of his plan. The guards I overheard said they would be rewarded for leaving your door unguarded. Aideen had planned to pass your death off as the work of an unknown assassin after he killed you.”

Jack gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes tightly shut for a long time. He didn’t need to hear more. He was just glad that she was safe, so he pulled her into his arms and hugged her tight. When her soft hands wrapped around his body, he felt her warmth and it seeped into the cold parts of his body.

Jack smoothed his hand down her back and molded her closer to his body so he could enjoy her nearness one last time.

Now that she was here, he didn’t want to let her go ever again.

“I’m glad ye are here,” he whispered as his dizziness clamped over his mind again and began pulling him in the abyss. “I wanted one more chance to tell you that—”

His voice trailed off. Jack felt his knees gave way and in the next second, he was battling to stay awake so he could tell Isla the words that he longed to say out loud.

I love ye, Isla... ye should ken that before ye leave.

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Isla yelled for help when Jack collapsed in her arms. Jamie was the first that burst into the chamber, the panicked expression and pale look on his face instantly told her that he had no idea what had been happening.

“What has happened?” he asked in a shrill voice as he hurried to her and took Jack’s body from her arms.

Once Jack was on the bed, she said in a panicked voice, “I will go find the healer.”

Isla hurried out of the chamber and ran to Moira. Her heart kept pounding in her chest as she feared that Jack was badly hurt from the fight with Aideen.

What if something happens to him?

She had given up her chance to return home to come save his life... it didn’t matter where she was from anyway. Her heart was with Jack, and if she returned now, she would be miserable for the rest of her life.

That was not the life she wanted.

She found Moira in her chamber. “Isla...” Moira called in surprise once she saw her, “ye have returned?”

“The Laird is bleeding,” Isla announced without returning Moira’s greetings. “You must hurry.”

Moira did not ask any questions as she slid out of her bed and reached for a robe to put over her night dress. They ran down the hallway together after she grabbed a basket next to her bed and followed Isla.

When they reached Jack’s chamber, Jamie was still by his side, and Moira instantly began checking his wounds.

Isla stood in a corner, her hands in her hair, and her heart raw with pain. Her throat couldn’t form any words, the knots in her stomach squeezed until she felt it would bleed, and her worry rose with every passing second.

“He will regain consciousness,” Moira said after some minutes of checking his wounds and making sure his bleeding was not excessive. “His former wounds have been treated and I gave him something to help him sleep earlier, so he is only asleep.”

“Oh—” Isla gasped and dropped her hands to her sides. Her limbs shook like never before, so she found a chair and dropped on it before they gave way.

“I need an explanation of what happened here tonight,” Jamie asked once he rose to his feet.

Isla swallowed and hung her head low. He hadn't noticed the body on the ground yet as it was on the other side of the bed, and she knew she had to show him, so she pointed.

“Aideen attacked Jack in his sleep, and I came back here to warn him.”

Jamie's brows furrowed, but when Isla pointed at where Aideen's body lay, he took a step toward it to check for himself.

“He came in here to kill Jack in his sleep since the assassins he sent did not complete their task. It was Aideen behind everything all this while and he was right under our noses.”

Thick silence filled the room. Neither Jack or Moira moved, and Isla could tell that the news also shook them.

“And Elliot?” Moira finally asked in a barely audible voice.

Jamie had his hands tightened into clenched his fists at his sides and hardened his jaw.

“He was also responsible for Elliot's ambush and death.”

“Oh, Heavens,” Moira gasped. “How could he do this?”

No one would ever get over the shock of Aideen's betrayal. They had all been completely blindsided by it and caught up in looking for the inside enemy when he was closer than ever.

Jamie left the chamber in silence after that, but Moira stayed to watch Jack with her and she didn't leave until dawn broke, and Jack finally opened his eyes.



The resounding ache in his head blinded him as he slowly tried to sit up on his bed. Jack had the strangest dream. Isla was with him in it, and he had her in his arms and told he how much he loved her.

They had made passionate love, and he hadn't wanted to let her go. The dream had felt so real, he did not want to wake from it.

Soft hands touched him and assisted him to sit on the bed. He groaned and put a hand on his forehead.

"Are you all right?" Isla asked, and her voice jerked him to reality. He focused on her and gaped for a second. To make sure she was real, Jack lifted a hand and touched her cheek.

"Yes, it is me," she whispered. "How do you feel, Jack?"

"Ye are here? How... how are ye here?" he stammered as his brows squished together. "What about the gypsy? What about ___"

Images of what happened the previous night slowly started to drift into his memory and as he remembered, the ache in his heart returned.

“Ye should have gone back,” he continued, still in shock that he was seeing her, and she was really by his side.

“You are all right... it is all over now,” Isla said to console him, and he met her gaze. Tears welled up in her eyes as she nodded, and Jack muffled back his own sob as they threatened to break free from his lips.

“Aideen—”

“He’s dead,” she answered. “It’s over. Jamie came with some guards to take his body out and your chamber was cleaned.”

Jack’s shoulders slumped with relief, but his heart did not ease. His cousin... the last family he had... was his enemy all along and he had missed it.

Could he ever forgive himself? Especially after losing Elliot?

Isla moved closer and hugged him. He let himself enjoy her embrace while his turmoiled thoughts ran free.

“I am so glad you are safe,” she whispered as she tightened her grip around his neck and dragged in a shaky breath.

“Why did ye return?” he asked when he finally pulled back from her and stared into her eyes.

He used his thumb to wipe her cheeks, and she sighed before responding. “I could not leave, Jack... not when my heart is here. I found the gypsy and she told me that the door I searched for was beneath the caves of your Castle, so I had to return here... I found out about Elliot’s death after I arrived, and then while I was in the caves, I overheard some guards talking about killing you tonight—

“I had to come back.”

He framed her cheeks with both hands and stared deep into her eyes as she spoke. “I had to come back because I love you, Jack, and I never want to be anywhere else but at your side.”

Her words made him blink. His heart had been melting inside him since he woke up and saw her, but her confession left him breathless, and in that second, his own words failed him.

“I love you, Jack,” she repeated. “I am solely and utterly in love with you, and I... I wanted you to know that. I could not return to my time knowing that you would be hurt. I would never be at peace that way.”

Jack kissed her as his response. He couldn’t say anything because his throat was too tight, but he needed to feel her lips on his and enjoy her taste first.

When he withdrew, they were both breathless and he couldn’t think of anything else to say to her than what he was feeling.

“I love ye too, Isla... I wanted to tell ye that, but I feared that if I said the words then I would beg ye to stay and ye would remain unhappy here.”

“I could never be unhappy here... not when I am with you,” she replied and moved closer to him on the bed. She put her hand on his chest and lowered her lashes until her gaze dropped to his lips and made his insides tingle.

“I feared that ye would be, so I could never tell ye how much I loved ye... I couldnae keep ye here against yer wish.”

“I want to be here,” she quickly added, and a smile tugged the corner of her lips open. “I want to spend my life here with you, Jack.”

Isla took his hand and put it on her chest. “My heart now beats for you, Jack, so nothing else matters.” Her touch was as tender as ever, and the warmth from her skin warmed his.

“Ye will stay?” he asked, his voice a light whisper. When she nodded, he added. “I love ye, Isla, and I will always love ye.”

They shared another passionate kiss to seal their professions of love, and it made Jack feel at peace in that moment. Everything else would fall in place, he was certain of it.

Now that his shadow enemy was dead, Jack had a lot to work to do. He planned to find every man and woman loyal to Aideen and make sure they paid for what they did to his brother, and his people.

Whatever happened next, he had Isla by his side and that mattered to him more than anything else. He never expected to fall in love, but here he was, completely in love with the strange woman he had saved months ago.

Nothing else mattered in that moment but their passion, and Jack hoped it would last a lifetime.

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Jack recovered quickly over the next few days, but nothing was the same in his Castle after the incident with Aideen in his chamber.

Jamie gathered every guard in their Clan and while they displayed Aideen's body for all to see, he had announced his intentions to hunt and kill every man who had supported Aideen's schemes to kill Jack and take over the Lairdship.

"Jamie's measures are drastic," Jack said to Isla as they strolled the garden. Three days had passed since Jamie threatened the guards and every servant in the Clan and Jack was still grieving, not only from losing his brother but from losing his cousin... the one person he had thought he could trust.

Jack's blind trust in Aideen was earned because they had grown together. Aideen had saved his life numerous times in battle, and he had done the same. Thinking back to the past now, he realized it was possible Aideen did everything he did back then just so Jack could trust him and let his guard down.

Never again, he swore as he nursed the hurt of his cousin's costly betrayal. It had cost Jack his brother, and many innocent

lives. He did not think he could ever forget or forgive Aideen for what he did.

Ever:

It still hurt and pained him that he missed all the signs with Aideen. How did he not notice that his cousin had been scheming behind him all this while?

“I trusted Aideen and shared a lot with him. He had the Norsemen paid to murder me and was behind all the killings in the village as part of his ploy to cause a riot and have the people hate me.”

“It is all over now,” Isla consoled and took his hand so she could link their fingers. Her hands were soft in his, and her skin warmed his. Jack loved having her close... he loved her, he hadn't been more certain of anything else in his life like he was of this.

“Aideen is dead, and your Clan will be peaceful once more, Jack... the people still believe in you,” she said. “You just need to lead them right.”

In everything that had happened, Jack was most grateful that she was here with him now, and glad that she chose him.

“Isla...” he began and turned her to face him, “are ye sure ye dinnae want to go back?” he asked. “I love ye and I want ye to be happy, but I need to ken that ye will be happy if ye stay here with me.”

Jack held his breath as he waited for her reply. He knew she had given up her chance to return to come save his life, and he owed her for every good luck that had come his way since she arrived on his land, but he could not keep her here if she was not completely happy with the choice.

“This is my choice, Jack,” she told him, then moved closer so their bodies touched. “I want to be here... I choose to be here because I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life here. I do not care what my fates tells me... all that matters is that I spend the rest of my days with you.”

His heart swelled with love for her, and he couldn't hold back so he leaned forward and kissed her deeply. Their tongues joined in a passionate dance, and he poured his heart and every feeling he had into the kiss.

Jack wanted to her to know how much he loved her, and he planned to spend the rest of his life showing her.



Days later when Jack was finally strong enough, he traveled back to the bordering Kirkpatrick lands to find the woman who had saved him from Murdock.

He remembered the path to the cottage, and when he arrived there, she was sitting in front of her cottage attending to some children on her porch.

Once she saw him, she scrambled to her feet and curtsied. Jack smiled and greeted her with a small head bow.

“I promised to come back and reward ye,” he said when the woman looked at him again. He looked around her large yard, then motioned for the men that rode with him to come forward with the boxes of gold jewelry and silk.

“This is too much, My Laird,” she said in a hushed tone as she looked into the boxes the guards held open for her.

“This is only a small gift to show my gratitude,” he told her. “I am Laird Humphreys and ye are welcome at my Castle anytime if ye need my help.”

She curtsied again and he smiled. Jack’s heart felt lighter now that he had kept his word of rewarding her. All that was left was for him to return home to Isla.

The ride back to his Castle was faster than ever, and Isla was waiting out front for him when he arrived. She rushed to hug him, and he wrapped his arms around her waist and let them drift up her back.

“I missed you,” she whispered into his ear before he drew back. Even though he had only been gone a few days, he had missed her too.

He saw Jamie smiling with Moira as they came out of the Castle and Moira curtsied while Jamie bowed.

“Welcome back, My Laird,” Jamie said.

“Thank ye, Jamie,” Jack answered with a smile. Moira and Isla left them to discuss the Clan, and Jack took Jamie into his study so they could talk at length.

“Word came from Calloway. They have agreed to yer earlier suggestion and will let us use their sea borders.”

“Their marriage proposal?” Jack asked.

“It has been dropped. Aideen was the one influencing their decision the entire time and causing the troubles. The Calloways have nay intention of makin’ an enemy out of us.”

Jack rose to his feet and walked over to the shelves in his study to grab a bottle of brandy. He poured Jamie some and they both sat to enjoy the drink.

“I willnae forgive myself for nay noticin’ what Aideen was up to,” Jamie said after a long time of silence had passed between them.

“I am also to blame,” Jack answered. “I trusted him too much and put him in charge of the guards, so he could use them at his disposal.”

“I willnae let my guard down around anyone again,” Jamie continued. “If anythin’ had happened to ye then—”

“It is I who willnae forgive myself for losin’ Elliot,” Jack said to his friend before he drank deeply from his quaich. That ache

would never leave his heart and he would always remember his brother fondly.

“To Elliot,” Jack toasted when he filled both their quaiches again.

“To Elliot,” Jamie replied, then drank in one deep slug.

It was all over now... all each of them could do was look to the brighter days ahead, and Jack hoped his would be fully of joy and laughter with the woman he loved.

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EPILOGUE

ONE MONTH LATER...

Isla walked into the kirk with Jamie by her side and she couldn't hold back the grin that spread on her lips as she saw Jack standing in the front pew his attention fixed solely on her.

This day came quicker than she expected, and she was finally fulfilling her dream of pledging her life to Jack. There was no other reason to be this excited beside this man right here with her.

"Thank you, Jamie," she whispered when Jamie stopped in front of the front row and let her walk the remaining distance to where Jack stood eagerly waiting.

"Ye look bonnie," Jack said to her as he took her hand, linked their fingers then raised it to his lips for a kiss. His lips lingered on her skin, and she loved the heat that raced through her nerves and made her feel alive.

Isla flushed beet red, and she fixed her gaze on his, and waited for him to say more. The priest was ready to bless their union and she only needed to say the words he read out loud to them for the ceremony to be complete.

“I have waited for this day a while now,” Jack told her. “Ye have made me the happiest man in the Highlands.”

His smile reached the corners of his eyes, and Isla’s heart fluttered harder in her chest.

“I promise to spend the rest of my life, lovin’ and cherishin’ ye for all eternity, until death do us part,” Jack repeated after the priest. “Our union shall be one of love and passion until the end of our days. We shall live as one, and I shall protect ye as mine... I love ye, Isla Lambert, from this day until the end of our days.”

When he finished, it was her turn to recite the same vows. Isla cleared her throat, then made sure her eyes stayed steady on his so he could see her sincerity.

“I love ye, Jack, always and forever.”

“I now pronounce ye both man and wife,” the priest announced, then the crowd in the Kirk erupted into cheers to celebrate their union.

Isla’s heart danced joyously as Jack took off her veil then leaned in and kissed her lips tenderly. It was supposed to be a chaste kiss, but when his tongue slid into her mouth, she lost control and gave into the passion hinted in his taste.

When the kiss ended, he pulled back, then took the plaid of his tartan and tied it around her hands to show that she was one

with him. They faced the crowd together, and the smiles on the faces that filled the Kirk lifted Isla's spirits.

I could really belong here, she thought, excited that these people will come to love and accept her as one of their own just like Jack did.

Moira and Jamie were clapping in the front row, and Isla grinned at them before she turned to Jack again and moved into his embrace for a warm hug.

After the blessing of their union in the Kirk, they danced down the village and celebrated with the locals who had organized a village feast for them.

Jack did not let Isla out of his sight even one for second as they danced. She was with Moira when they neared the Castle and they both performed an old traditional Celtic dance that involved hopping and switching positions while the drums thundered high into the air.

The celebrations continued until late that night. Many lairds were in attendance, and Isla had never seen a crowd dance and feast this much before. She was elated through most of it, and she forgot to breathe each time Jack glanced in her direction and winked at her.

“To our Laird and his bonnie Lady,” Jamie toasted when it was past midnight.

Their guests chorused the same words, then drank from their quaich before the dancing continued. She watched the

performers for a while until Jack put a hand on hers, then leaned close to her, and whispered, “Do ye want to go to our chamber, My Wife?”

Her cheeks heated up at the suggestion and desire burned a hot spot in the pit of her stomach. She knew she could not refuse him even if she tried to, so she did not re-think her reply.

Isla nodded, and Jack rose to his feet, took her hand, then led her out of the Great Hall where the feast took place.

When they arrived his chamber, he locked the door, then faced her. They stood in silence for a while, and she felt the heat of his gaze drift down her body slowly before he closed the gap between them and took her lips for a hot kiss.

One hand cupped the back of her neck, and the other tilted her chin so she met his lips with the same fierceness that he used in kissing her.

Isla forgot to breathe, but that did not last long as he toyed with her tongue then pressed her body closer to his so that they were merged as one.

In the next second, he lifted her off the floor and carried her to their bed. Once her back touched the sheets, her thighs parted for him, and he nestled himself in between her legs.

Jack’s hands moved down the curves of her body. He whispered heated words she didn’t hear at first, then nibbled on her lower lip, lifted his head, and said, “I am yers and ye are mine... all I want is yer touch tonight.”

Isla did not need words. She wanted to use her body to show him how much pleasure he brought her.

While he kissed every inch of her skin and peeled her clothes away, she learned the feel of his muscles and indulged in the sensations that racked through her each time he groaned.

His lips took over one nipple and he flickered the tip of his tongue over the erect bud while his hands kneaded her breasts.

Jack's erection pressed into her abdomen, and he did not shy away from her touch when she stroked him with her hands, then lifted her hips off the bed to reach him again.

"Dinnae make me lose control," he growled and grabbed her hands when she kept stroking him through his kilt. Isla wanted to be rid of all his clothes so they could touch skin to skin.

She craved the heat from his body, wanted to feel his hard thighs press into her hers, and his hard muscles jump beneath her curious fingers.

"I want you to lose control," she whispered back, then whimpered when he rocked his hips into hers. "I want you right now, Jack. I do not want to hold back."

They had a lifetime to explore each other's bodies, but for tonight, Isla just wanted to be ravished by him.

Their gazes met, another loud growl escaped his lips, and he pinned her hands above her head on the bed.

Isla met his gaze without flinching, he slowly looked at the full length of her body again before moving off to take off all his clothes.

When he returned to the bed, she wrapped her legs around his waist and lifted her hips to meet his full thrust. He moved in and out of her slowly, like he wanted to feel every inch of her core. Isla loved it because she got to feel every part of his erection. She grew wetter with each thrust and edged toward her completion.

Jack's length stroked her, the tip pushed in until he filled her to the hilt, and she wriggled her hips on the bed, wanting more of him and hungrily wanting to feel him deep inside her until he spilled all of his seed.

Their breaths mingled as their bodies slid over one another's on the bed. The night's air filled with Isla's cries and moans of pleasure, and there was nothing better than having him take her like this with all of his passion.

When they reached their climax, they tumbled over the edge together, and let their passion flow. Jack collapsed on top her but stayed only a second before he rolled to the free side of the bed and gathered her in his arms.

"I love ye, Isla," he murmured as he stroked her hair and back. His fingers spread over her bottom, and he squeezed her into him.

Isla felt his body turn rock solid again, and he began kissing the side of her neck before she draped one leg over his and invitingly thrust herself against his body.

She knew their passion would last a lifetime, and nothing else mattered in that moment but the promise of their long life ahead.

The End?

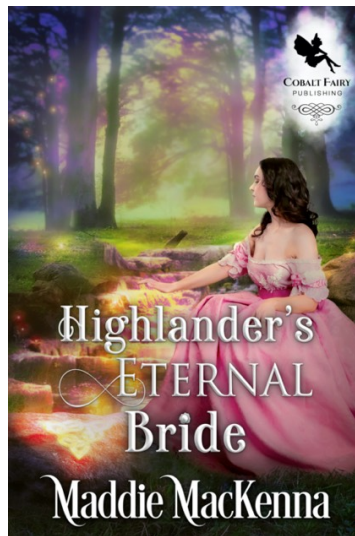
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PREVIEW: RETURNING TO HER
HIGHLAND WARRIOR

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“*W*hy are you still awake and reading, Camellia?” Henry MacPherson asked his daughter as he shuffled past her. “You’re going to tire your eyes out.”

“And you’re going to tire your lungs, walking around like that. Get back to bed.” The daughter was twenty-one years old, fresh out of University, but she spoke with authority befitting a woman twice her age, or at least so she’d been told.

He placed his hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “You should sleep.”

Camellia knew that her father only ever wanted the best for her, but now was not the time for his beloved and well-meaning interference. “I can’t stop. I found this book in the University’s library, and—”

Henry slowly made his way around the living room sofa so that he stood in front of her, the television flickering in the background. The news was running, Richard Baker giving a reminder of how as of one week ago Britain had officially stopped food rationing. It was the last broadcast of the night.

Camellia wasn’t paying attention to it, though. She had flicked it on as background noise, just as she would the radio. Unlike most people, she preferred a little noise in the background when she read. She found that it helped her focus. Her dear departed mother, Anne, had been the same way, and probably was where she picked up the habit.

She felt it as her father peeked over her book, trying to read it upside down, and sighed. “Another medical botany book, is it?”

Cammie, my love, you aren't a nurse. Let the doctors do their jobs."

"The doctors *arenae* doing their jobs, Dad," Camellia replied. When she glanced up at him, she hoped he didn't notice what she had been doing in the bathroom mirror an hour ago: that her eyes were red and circled with dark bruise-like indications of her tiredness. They made her big brown eyes, the eyes she'd inherited from her mother, look dark as pitch.

Not that he looked any better. Henry put on a brave face, but Camellia could see her father's deterioration every day. His once bright auburn hair that he had passed on to her had turned dull, the streaks of gray more prominent than they had ever been. His eyes were permanently sunken, his cheeks gaunt, his posture stooped. There was a rasp to his voice there had never been before.

"*Arenae?*" he repeated with a small smile, wincing as he spoke. He kept his hands steady, but Camellia knew that his chest was paining him again, no matter how much he probably hoped she couldn't see. "Have all your elocution lessons been for nothing? Remember, Mum wanted you to learn to talk politely."

"They *aren't* doing their jobs, then," Camellia corrected with a tired sigh. Her gaze returned to her book, and, though she didn't want to be impolite to her father, she made it very clear that she was ready to become absorbed once again.

And honestly, who wouldn't be? The book was a faithfully reprinted manuscript from some time in the seventeenth century, illuminated, hand-written, and almost lost. Even if it wasn't for the fact she was sure it contained the cure to her father's ills, she would have been lost in it.

Henry reached out and placed a finger under her chin, gently pushing upward so that she had to look at him again. "They're trying their best, poppet," he told her softly. "But you need to rest. How can I get better when I'm worried about you? You need to stop fretting about your old dad so much."

Camellia smiled faintly at him. "I'll stop worrying when you're well. Until then, goodnight, Dad. Please get some

sleep; you know the doctors say you need to not be up and wandering around.”

With that, she returned to her book, and a sigh from her father let her know that he knew he was defeated. He *was* exhausted, even if he tried to deny it. And so, with one last concerned look at his precious child, he turned and trudged along the hallway toward his bedroom. Camellia didn't start reading again until she heard his bedroom door close behind him.

Sleep, Dad. I'm going to fix this.

At first, they'd thought it a cancer, but all the best doctors had confirmed that, though they didn't know exactly what was wrong with Henry's lungs, it wasn't that. When they'd first heard that, it seemed like a blessing that her father wasn't ill with the same disease that had prematurely stolen her mother away, but as it turned out, it was a curse. The thing was that *nobody* could tell exactly what his illness really was.

Camellia had taken him to every doctor available, even traveling to England and Wales and a few doctors overseas for help, but nobody had any answers. His symptoms were too varied. One day it was a fever, the next a hacking cough, the next a loss of taste and smell. Some days were better than others; days like today he could walk around, but other days he was barely lucid. His chest rattled with borrowed breath, borrowed time.

But it wasn't over. Not if Camellia could help it. Perhaps, though, she could rest her eyes for just one moment—



Camellia only slept for an hour, startled awake by the familiar dream. She scowled, rubbing her eyes. She *had* proven that officer wrong—not only securing her degree but becoming one of the youngest women accepted into the Botanical Society and securing a job at the Gardens. But still, to this day, it bothered her.

Brushing the thought aside, she reached for the book again. The sun was filtering through the window and she was about

to give up hope when she found it—at last, what she'd been looking for.

'The Lady suffered terribly from a weakness of the lungs, and it seemed like she hadn't a hope remaining to her. But then, when all hope was lost, a miracle happened. The wild black cherries which so eased her cough were mixed into a potion with four of the rarest ingredients, and soon she was cured.'

She stared at the page, barely able to believe what she was reading. It seemed too perfect, and yet—

Camellia flipped through the pages a little impatiently, hoping to find some more information. Unfortunately, there was nothing.

Breathe. First things first.

Wild black cherries were rare, the kind of plant that couldn't be cultivated without ruining their effect. She could go to gather them, but they certainly didn't grow anywhere near her. They were a Highland plant, the kind that grew around the broad lochs of the upper country. Camellia remembered being very small and traveling north with her mother.

"Where are we, Mum?" she'd asked, staring out at the stunning loch before her, transfixed on how the setting sun shone and sparkled on the water.

"This is Loch Morag, pet," her mother had replied. "Look, see the plant life that grows around here? Your grandmother used to bring me here, and her grandmother before her. You'd be surprised at what you can find."

It was a fond memory, one which brought bittersweet tears to Camellia's eyes. It had been so long since she'd seen her mother. She'd only been eight years old the day that cancer had won its grim battle and she'd returned from school to learn it had taken her mother away forever.

She could not lose her father too.

Camellia checked the clock on her bedside table. It was almost time to start the day. Her eyes itched and she longed to sleep, but there was no time for that now. She was on the opening shift at work, and with her father so unwell, it was more

important than ever that she bring home a fair wage to support them both.

Yawning, trying to ignore her stiff bones, Camellia got out of bed and headed straight to her father's room to check on him. He was still asleep, thankfully—the more rest he could get the better. She then went to the living room and picked up the landline, dialing a number from memory.

Rosalind answered on the fourth ring. “Hello?”

“Roz? It's Camellia. I just wanted to call to make sure that you were going to make it on time today?”

Rosalind was the caretaker they'd recently hired to take care of Camellia's father while she was at work or otherwise outside of the house. She wasn't a nurse, but she had cared for her own brother through a long illness, and she didn't charge much to help out.

It was a sensible choice. They'd known her already, which made things more comfortable. She was also around forty, only a few years younger than Camellia's father, and it meant she made a great companion.

“I'll be there at eight, sweetheart,” Rosalind replied. “I just need to finish getting Gary prepared for the day—you know teenagers!—and then I'll be right there.”

After the phone call, Camellia hurried to get dressed. It would be half an hour between her leaving and Rosalind arriving, so Camellia took a moment to leave some water, medicine, and a cold breakfast in her father's room in case he woke up before Rosalind arrived. With a final kiss to her sleeping dad's forehead, Camellia sped off to catch the bus. It wouldn't do to be late again.

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Usually, Camellia loved her job in the Botanical Gardens. She loved tending to the plants and adored it when people asked her questions, especially when young children showed an interest. She liked the atmosphere, liked her coworkers, even liked the dirty work. But today, she couldn't focus. Today, she was lost in distraction, remembering the story she'd read in that book.

"Are you all right, Cammie?"

She turned from the plant she'd been watering to see Gary watching her. Rosalind's son was sixteen years old and fresh out of school; he'd elected not to stay the extra two years in favor of taking an apprenticeship with a local plumbing business. Until the apprenticeship started in a few weeks, Camellia had secured him a small job helping her out at the Gardens.

"I'm fine," she told him, but even she was unconvinced by her tone. Trying again, she repeated, "I'm fine. Honestly. I just didn't sleep much last night."

"Worrying about your dad again, huh?" Gary asked. He looked troubled, which wasn't surprising. Before he got sick, Camellia's father had led a football club for kids Gary's age on weekends, and Gary looked up to him a lot.

Camellia didn't see the point in lying to him. "Yeah, I am." She hesitated for a moment, then said, "But, you know, I think there might be something I can do."

Gary perked up. "What? You mean a new doctor?"

She shook her head, gesturing at the plants around them. “Modern medicine is amazing, but people forget where it started. These living things around us...if we know how to tame them, to work with them, we can heal so much. And I think I’ve found a way that I might be able to help my father.”

Gary’s eyes widened like saucers. “Here? In the Gardens?”

She shook her head, tiredness seeping through her bones. She’d hoped that here, where so many transplanted wild plants could bloom, she might be able to find what she was looking for. “No. The cherries only grow up north, in the Highlands. I’d have to go get them.”

“So go.”

“It’s not that easy, is it? I can’t just leave Dad alone. I’m all he has.”

Gary seemed to think about it for a moment, then put his hand out to touch her shoulder. “You’re not all he has,” he said gently. “Me and Mum, we’ll look after him. I promise. I’ll cover for you here in the Gardens too if you like; I’ll think of something. Just...do what you have to do.”

Camellia stared at the young man, the wisdom from his lips more than she expected from him. He was right. There were no two ways about this, this was what she *had* to do.

And so, Camellia nodded. “I’ll go. I’ll find a way to help him, Gar, I swear.”

Gary smiled faintly. “I know you will.”



Camellia packed a bag that night and, leaving a note for her father, slipped out of the door early the next morning. It was an hour’s journey by bus to reach Princes Street and arrive at Edinburgh Waverley train station in time for the first steam train to Inverness. From there, she’d catch a connecting train that would take her further north toward Loch Morag.

When the train pulled out of the station, Camellia had already fallen asleep. The journey before her would take more than ten hours, and she knew that she needed the rest. A few hours later, though, she opened her eyes to a completely different world.

Outside of the train window was a massive contrast to the cobblestone and concrete city she'd left behind. Though there was a squall of rain hammering against the window, the sky was still mysteriously blue, the sun shining, and yes, even the beginnings of a rainbow in the far distance.

On the horizon, she could see huge mountains with caps of snow even now in early May, and the train wound along its tracks, bringing her closer to them. It was overwhelming as they passed through the valleys, the gorse bushes and moss-covered rocks of the mountains mixed with wild heather like a painting more than something in real life.

The tracks twisted halfway up the mountain, and Camellia witnessed a deep loch, stretching out, not as grand as Loch Morag or Loch Lomond but filled with just as much mystery. On the banks, she watched as the deer ventured from the forests, their coats shining in the afternoon sunlight.

Camellia loved Edinburgh, but this, here, was Scotland. This, here, was home.



She checked into her Bed and Breakfast on the shores of Loch Morag and wanted nothing more than to rest, but there was no time for it. Instead, she placed her things in her room, took a quick bite to eat, and headed out again to the banks of the loch.

The ruins of Forrester Castle decorated the scene on the horizon, a short journey away from where Camellia walked, surrounded by a forest that seemed to rise out of the loch itself. She imagined it must have been an imposing building once, and she wondered what kind of people must have lived there. A great Laird, no doubt, and his Lady perhaps, so many centuries ago.

*Perhaps I will visit the museum later and learn about them.
Once I've succeeded in my mission.*

She continued to walk toward it, heading toward the forest. She seemed to remember a cave right where the water met the trees, and it had been there that her mother showed her the cherries so long ago, curling on the outside of it.

Sure enough, there it was—a cave surrounded by vines. She hurried to it, kneeling on the ground and searching through the grass and the vines, peering around everywhere. In her urgency, she tore a few leaves off other plants, but she couldn't worry about that now.

There was nothing.

“This can't be right,” Camellia muttered to herself. She stood up, expanding her search, looking desperately around to see if she'd missed something.

Could she have come all this way and the cherries were no longer here? Could all of this had been for nothing?

No. I can't accept that. I won't accept it.

Camellia moved closer to the cave, peering inside of it in case there was a plant inside or something like it, then paused. There was something there...something scratched into the wall. Was that writing?

It isn't in English, or even any Gaelic I know. They're more like...runes.

She knew that she had to focus on her search, but the writing called to her. It almost seemed like she could hear singing echoing through the cave, beckoning her to come closer. Entranced, Camellia raised her hand, gently tracing the runes with one finger. The whispering grew louder, more eager, until she was finished.

Suddenly, a loud roaring in her ears almost deafened her. Her vision blurred as the world began to spin, and the very ground shook beneath her feet. She tried to cry out, but her scream was voiceless, and no air was reaching her lungs.

Help. Help!

Her head pounded, her stomach roiled, and the world spun and spun around her, faster, sharper, completely overwhelming her. She couldn't think, couldn't breathe, and it wasn't long before she felt herself falling.

Falling.

Falling.

And then blackness.

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*B*raonan did not know what to make of the sight before him. A woman lay at his feet, fallen from the entrance of Morag Cave. Her auburn hair lay fanned around her head like a halo, her freckled skin pale, but the strangest thing about her was her clothing.

“What is she wearing?” Lachlan asked. Braonan’s man-at-arms and best friend was peering down from his horse at the woman, surprise blatant on his face.

It was a casual dress if the materials were anything to judge by, but the skirt was flared out and there were no sleeves to speak of. The colors were abnormally bright and arranged in strange patterns all down the cloth, which was cinched at the waist with a black belt of some sort. Her shoes were even odder; they were purple like a royal’s, with blocky heels, and made of a strange material that might have been leather.

“Ye’d better nae let Myra see,” Lachlan continued with a laugh. “She’ll be runnin’ about in this kind of oddness before we ken it.”

One of the other two men out of the four total chuckled at the image of their Laird’s younger sister in such outlandish clothing, but Braonan’s focus was only on the woman. She did not look injured, but he was worried that she might have hurt her head. Who was she? How had she ended up on his land without anyone seeing her, and what had happened to bring her here?

He slid down from his horse and crouched down beside her. She didn't stir. He reached out a hand, brushing a few errant strands of hair from her face, and was surprised when she groaned. He reeled back, and the lass' eyes fluttered open. They were wide and brown as the soil surrounding them, just as brimming with life.

The woman sat up, her hand rubbing the back of her head and confusion evident in her features as she took in the sights around her. "The Castle—" she whispered. "How—?"

Braonan cleared his throat, getting to his feet. "Are ye hurt, Lass?"

She blinked, turning her gaze upward to meet his, obviously confused. "I...no, I—"

She spoke strangely. Her accent had lilt of Scots within it, but her words were spoken with the prim exactness of the English. Neither seemed to fit her well, unless perhaps she was from the borders. There was also the possibility that she was foreign; people from other countries who were fluent often spoke with unusual accents.

"Why are ye here?"

"I—"

A little irritably now, suspicions rising, he repeated himself. "Why are ye here, Lass?"

Something crossed her expression. She got to her feet and folded her arms. "It's none of your business why I'm here, as far as I can see," she replied. "Why are all of *you* here, dressed like that, with all those horses?"

"*Ye* are commenting on how *we're* dressed?" Lachlan commented disbelievingly, laughing again. He stopped when Braonan shot him a look. Braonan didn't find any of this funny.

"I think ye'll find it *is* me business," he told her sharply. "Ye're on *me* Castle grounds, an' trespassing in *our* clan."

The woman blinked rapidly then, unbelievably, she started to giggle. "Oh, *your* Castle, is it?" She shook her head. "What,

do you think yourself some sort of Laird? People don't own Castles, not anymore. And I'm pretty sure that we don't have 'clans' anymore, not the way you mean."

Mystified by her response, Braonan looked behind him at his men. They all looked as confused as he felt, and Lachlan just shrugged.

He turned back to her. "Are ye quite sure ye dinnae hit yer head?"

She seemed irritated. "Did you hit *your* head?"

Braonan was beginning to get angry too. He rested his hand on the pommel of his sword, and he noticed her eyes flicker to it. Good. He had wanted her to notice. "Enough of this."

"Is that a *sword*?! Seriously?!"

He ignored her. "I want to ken who ye are and what ye want. Ye'll tell me yer name, Lass. Now."

The woman folded her arms, looking indignant. "Camellia," she said finally.

It sounded odd to his ear. "Amelia?"

"*Camellia*," she corrected, obviously even more annoyed now. Perhaps it was a mistake she'd heard more than once.

"That isnae a name I've ever heard of."

"I'm named for a flower."

He shook his head. "It isnae any flower I've ever heard of, either. What are you, French?" But that wasn't right, he knew it as soon as he asked. The French had a particular way of speaking and, strange as this lass was, it wasn't that.

"I'm not French."

"English, then. From the borders."

Camellia looked truly offended now. "What? No! I'm not *English*. I'm from *Edinburgh*."

Now Braonan was even more confused. "Even the Lowlanders daenae sound like ye. What game are ye playin' here? Ye arenae one of the ladies of the king, are ye? The Merry

Monarch hasnae made a habit of sending his women this far north, but who kens what happens in the heads of kings.”

Her confusion seemed only to grow. “The Merry—you mean Charles the Second?”

Braonan tilted his head. “Who else would I mean? We’ve only got one king these days, ever since old Liz gave James the throne of England, more or less anyway. Ye must ken that, at least.”

Camellia stumbled, her hand going out to steady herself against a stone wall. “What...what year is it?”

Now Braonan was *really* concerned that the lass had hit her head when she fell. “It’s the year of our Lord, 1673,” he replied.

The air seemed to freeze in a crystalline silence. Then, to Braonan’s absolute shock, Camellia began to laugh. It wasn’t a cheerful laugh—she sounded almost scared, maybe even terrified. She bent over, her hands on her knees as she wheezed, almost as if she was struggling to get air.

“Lass? Camellia?” Braonan took a few steps forward, hand reached out though he didn’t actually touch her. “What—?”

“1673!” she gasped hysterically, and then her laughter turned into sobs, huge, chest-heaving sobs that rocked her whole body. She sank to the ground, her legs giving way below her. “I didn’t even get the damned cherries!”

“Cherries? What—”

“Tell me this is a joke,” Camellia wept. “Tell me you’re lying.”

Braonan didn’t know what to say. “I—”

“Me Laird, the Lass clearly isnae right. Maybe we need to take her to a physicker,” one of the men said. “Or at least one of the healers.”

“Laird!” Camellia exclaimed, and her laughter started afresh. “It’s true then. It’s all true. I’ll never see home again.”

And then she slumped forward, her face on the cold ground as unconsciousness took her once more.

Braonan moved forward, crouching down beside the lass once more. *Camellia*. He wondered if the herbalists would know that name, but it certainly didn't ring any bells with him. He touched her shoulder, shaking her gently, but she didn't move.

"She isnae waking," he reported to his watching men.

For the first time since their arrival, the second-youngest member of the party spoke. "What should we do? Do we take her with us?" asked Diarmad, Braonan's younger brother.

Braonan nodded distractedly. "Aye, well. I am nae too fond of the idea of bringing a stranger an' probably a foreigner into Forrester Castle, but it doesnae seem like we have much of a choice." He considered the unconscious figure for a moment. "Diarmad, ride back to the Castle an' let them ken we're on our way, will ye? Tell Maisie to be ready for a patient. Rory, go wi' him."

Diarmad nodded, as did the red-haired man next to him. Diarmad gave his brother and the still figure one last look, then he and Rory spurred their horses into a turn and rode off back along the short road to the Castle. Braonan watched them go.

With a low whistle, Lachlan dismounted his horse and moved to Braonan's side. "Wee bit of a surprise, all this."

"Ye're telling me," Braonan muttered. Lachlan moved to help him, but Braonan brushed him away; the Laird didn't need help to lift this slim young woman into his arms. He carried her over to his horse, only accepting Lachlan's help to position her properly so that she didn't fall off during the ride.

Lachlan mounted again, and the two of them started the ride back to the Castle, Braonan's mind spinning. Something very, very strange was going on here. And this lass with her odd clothing and purple shoes was at the center of it all.

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maddie McKenna had always been passionate about Scotland. It all started with an old picture of her grandfather wearing a kilt and a sporran. She used to look at that picture and imagine stories taking place in the mysterious Highlands...

When she visited Scotland for the very first time, it was love at first sight. Both the country's breathtaking landscape, and the warmth and liveliness of the locals made her realize why her distinctive red hair was not the only thing that made her blend with them. She took her motherland's memories back home to Minnesota, holding them forever in her heart while using them as an inspiration for her novels.

Maddie McKenna has a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. She started writing articles for travel magazines but soon the romance world won her over. When she isn't writing, Maddie loves painting and taking long walks with her hubby.

Join Maddie in the unforgettable world of brave Highlanders and their bonnie lasses—a world full of passion, intrigues and steamy lovemaking, that will make you feel like you are part of the story yourself!

Maddie is part of **Cobalt Fairy's** team of authors! Visit cobaltfairy.com for new, bargain and free deals for every dedicated bookworm there is out there!



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