

HIS
DISTRUSTFUL
LASS

ALISA ADAMS



HIS DISTRUSTFUL LASS

ALISA ADAMS

CONTENTS

A Free Thank You Gift

The Legend of the Campbell Clan

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

The Legend of the Campbell Clan

Highlander's Lionheart

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

A Free Thank You Gift

Also by the author

A FREE THANK YOU GIFT

Thank you a lot for purchasing my book.

As a thank you gift I wrote a full length novel for you called
Rescuing The Highlander.

[Click here to get you FREE book](#)

Or use this link directly in your browser.

alisaadams.com/free

THE LEGEND OF THE CAMPBELL CLAN

Book #1

The Niece of His Highland Enemy

Book #2

The Return of the Lost Highlander

Book #3

Awaiting the Wolf Killer Highlander

Book #4

Highlander's False Betrothal

Book #5

Reclaiming Her Highland Home

Book #6

Highlander's Adopted Daughter

Book #7

Seducing a Highland Rebel

Book #8

Inheriting a Highland Bride

Book #9

Highlander's Thunderous Desire

Book #10

Highlander's Second Betrothed

Book #11

Defying his Highland Duty.

Book #12

For the Heart of a Highland Widow

Book #13

Highlander's Defiant Lass

Book #14

Betrayed by a Highland Spy.

Book #15 (this book)

His Distrustful Lass

PROLOGUE

The rift in the Dewar Clan had grown too wide for Lyall Dewar to ignore.

For a long time, the ground beneath her feet had felt solid and reliable – as much as the actual ground she was treading now, walking amid the wild flowers on the hillsides near Castle Dewar. She picked them idly as she mused, stringing some into chains to wear around her neck and threading others into her raven black hair. The alliance with the Campbell Clan had made them strong, and allowed them to rebuild and recover their previously meager resources. In the absence of Sam Campbell, Lyall’s father Arran had been appointed steward over the clan; and he was a largely respected man among his fellow clansmen, so the decision was generally met with approval.

Then, in the past two years, the previously-reliable ground under them had begun to rumble and tremble slightly. Before they’d had a chance to fully complete their recovery, they’d been assailed by raids carried out on behalf of Laird Geoffrey MacGillivray – known to his enemies as “The Adder,” for his ability to strike swiftly and lethally before slithering off into the grass once more. Geoffrey’s men were well-armed and well-trained; their thick black armor was covered with horrid barbs, their helms bore gruesome visages, and their weapons were heavy enough to crush the shields and plates of the Dewar soldiers.

The Dewars were no strangers to violence or strife; but this efficient savagery was on a level they could barely comprehend.

That was when the earth beneath them began to show deep cracks.

There were those who said that the Campbells were too slow to respond to this threat, and that the protection they offered was inadequate. As such, people loudly and stridently demanded to know why such an alliance was worth preserving, particularly when the Campbells had never truly allowed the Dewars to rule themselves since the alliance began.

As more and more Dewar warriors fell in skirmishes with the Adder's raiders, Geoffrey himself petitioned to speak with Arran Dewar under a white flag of truce. It seemed a peculiar request given the circumstances, not to mention a suspicious one – for how could they truly know whether a vile invader such as Geoffrey would adhere to the terms of the parlay, or if he might break them and use it as an opportunity to commit additional slaughter?

Nevertheless, Arran agreed to it, and met with Geoffrey on a hilltop halfway between their two strongholds. Both men came with a contingent of soldiers, naturally.

As it turned out, though, Geoffrey kept his word that day. He explained – in a tone that was reasonable and even polite to the point of absurdity, in light of the butchery he had committed – that the attacks would continue, for the Dewars had land and resources which the Adder coveted and that was simply the way of things: The strong prey upon the weak, and in doing so, they grow stronger.

“Things need not remain so bloody between us, however,” Geoffrey had continued. His genteel demeanor clashed with his fearsome appearance – for he was a bald and heavily-scarred man, missing an eye, an ear, and part of his lower lip (which hence always appeared to be twisted down in a snarl). Indeed, his composure almost seemed a vicious mockery of all

the lives he'd stolen. "You need only renounce your oath to the Campbells and swear fealty to me instead. Then your people and lands shall be spared in exchange for a regularly-collected tribute."

"Would that not dishonor us?" Arran had replied wearily. "To renege on our loyalty to our friends, in favor of bowing to our enemies?"

Geoffrey shrugged indifferently. "Think it over if you wish, and when you send a messenger to deliver your answer, I swear that he shall return unharmed regardless of the message's contents. There, you see? First I abide by a peaceful negotiation; then I make a reasonable offer; and then I give you ample time to consider, and I vouchsafe the return of your rider. Perhaps I am not quite the serpent you and your people paint me as, eh?" He chortled. "As to the matter of honor, that is entirely your affair, Steward. You may condemn your people to die honorably down to the last mewling child, or you can save them by rejecting your alliance with the very people who have failed to save you up until now. The decision is wholly yours. However, if you wish a bit of free advice, take it from a man who has always made sure his own people are well-fed: Promises of honor matter little when weighed against living bodies with full bellies." He went to leave, then turned and added, "incidentally, if you ally yourself with me, I can promise you this: You will continue to rule over your people, not as a steward, but as a laird. I am not so stingy with such titles as Sam Campbell, you will find."

Lyall had heard all of this from her father upon his return, as he recounted it to her miserably. "I must do as he says, it seems," he said in a broken voice. "Else our people will continue to suffer and die. And as steward, is it not my task to prevent such a thing at all costs?"

"But the Campbells have never betrayed us," Lyall insisted. "Just because their fighting men are currently spread thin and they cannot afford to send more, is that cause enough for us to betray them entirely? To throw in our lot with those who have murdered our people, and would take our lands by

force? You have always taught me how important it is to do the right thing. Is this, then, the right thing to do?"

"*Saving our clan* is the right thing to do!" Arran moaned pitifully. "Saving it no matter what! If Laird Sam is incapable of finding a solution that will achieve that, then it falls to me, regardless of what oaths we've made to him before!"

Lyall could not quite work up the nerve to ask her father the question that was foremost on her mind: Whether part of his desire to make this pact with the Adder was due to his personal wish to be a laird, rather than a steward. She knew his answer would be no, and she wished she could entirely believe such a response if it was given.

But she couldn't.

It had been a difficult thing for him, being placed in charge of the clan without having any real power over it, or a suitable title to bequeath to an heir. She knew that he had often lamented it, and wished that there were some way he could bring greater independence to the Dewars.

Lyall wished to believe the best of her father whenever possible, so she chose a different question instead. "What if you were to reach out to Laird Sam one last time before making your decision? To let him know what dire straits we find ourselves in, and see if he might have some idea of how we might stay alive without kneeling before a bully and a villain?"

Arran looked stricken, but he nodded slowly. "Very well, daughter. If that is what you think is best."

So Arran had written just such a letter.

And when the response came over a week later, Lyall had found him in his study, looking deeply pensive.

"Well, father?" she'd asked. "What is our course of action?"

He had turned to her, his expression stoic, his gray eyes unreadable. "I must support an alliance with the Adder. I

simply must.”

Arran spoke out, telling the Dewars that their best course of action was to throw in their lot with the Adder.

That, finally, was when the cracks in the ground beneath them widened into a rift. One which swiftly grew into a black and yawning chasm.

The clan effectively split in half, with one part determined to remain faithful to the Campbells and the other certain that an alliance with the Adder was the only way to save them all. There was a tremendous amount of in-fighting among the Dewars from that point forward – loud arguments and scuffles in the streets and taverns; angry speeches ringing in the town squares; and people flat-out abandoning their homes to either run off and join the Campbells, or to beg some other clan to take them in. A few of the more ambitious and bloodthirsty among them even went to become raiders for the Adder, deciding that they would prefer to be on the side of the conquerors than the conquered.

It was a kind of chaos the clan had never experienced before – so much so, in fact, that Lyall had begun to wonder whether that had been the Adder’s goal all along. Why destroy the clan from the outside when he could provoke them into doing it themselves from within?

Things had been like this for months now, to the point where Lyall’s father had cautioned her against taking these walks on the hillsides. When she insisted on continuing to do so, he had pleaded with her to bring guardsmen along with her, and she had refused that as well. She was not generally a rebellious daughter – she adored her father dearly, and even when she disagreed with him, she generally did as he asked.

This was her one exception, for these walks alone were precious to her. They were the final element of her life which made her feel as though she could cling to the simpler times of her childhood, even as she was being dragged into the messy and bloody world that her father presided over.

Was there a hint of danger to it? Perhaps. In some ways, maybe it was the vague thrill of that which enticed her as well.

Mostly, though, she enjoyed the peace and quiet – the chance to be alone with her thoughts.

She felt a few raindrops pat the top of her head, and wistfully headed back to the castle. Perhaps, the rain would subside later, she thought, and she might go out once more before night fell so she could enjoy the smell of it in the air.

When she entered the castle, she went directly to her father's study, for that was her habit after taking such strolls, so that he might see she was alive and unhurt. Even though she insisted on venturing out alone, she had no genuine desire to worry him unnecessarily.

She opened the door to the room, prepared to greet him – but the words died in her throat.

Arran Dewar was sprawled over his desk, a dagger protruding from his back. His lifeblood oozed from the wound and onto the papers beneath him, and more of it trickled from his open mouth. His eyes were open and glassy, staring at her but seeing nothing.

Lyall screamed.

She didn't stop crying for the rest of the night, and well into the morning.

“So, who do we believe the culprit to be, then?”

The words had been spoken by Rowan Campbell, who was riding to Castle Dewar alongside Cillian. The two men had been dispatched by Laird Sam Campbell to investigate the killing of the clan’s steward, along with four other Campbell guardsmen. Word of the tragedy had come to them indirectly, as news of it spread across the towns and taverns between the lands of the two clans. As soon as Laird Sam had heard of it, he had not waited to write to the Dewars and inform them of the coming of Cillian and Rowan. He had merely sent them at once – for the Dewars were still under the protection of the Campbells, and so such an outrage merited immediate investigation.

Cillian shrugged. “Seems like the Adder is the most likely to have done it, doesn’t it?”

Rowan – a cousin of the laird, and one of his most trusted advisors due to his cleverness and loyalty – shook his head. “But what sense would that make? From what we’ve heard, the steward had been publicly showing support for the Adder. It would hardly benefit Geoffrey, then, to murder the very man who was attempting to sway the people in his direction.”

“He had issued an ultimatum, though, hadn’t he?” Cillian pointed out. “That was what the previous letter from Arran Dewar had said, at any rate, according to the laird. It’s entirely

possible that the Adder might have grown impatient and chosen to take matters into his own hands.”

“By inserting some hidden assassin to do the deed?” Rowan’s tone was growing more doubtful by the moment. “That hardly seems like the man’s style, now does it?”

Cillian wrinkled his nose. “We’re attributing ‘style’ to a man who rides around with a pack of murderous thugs, looking like a nightmare and smelling like a dungheap?”

“First of all, the most dangerous thing a fellow can do is underestimate his opponent,” Rowan observed. “I am, frankly, somewhat surprised at your for forgetting that. The Adder may be crude, but no one can deny his tactics are effective. He frightens and terrorizes those he targets, and in doing so, he has managed to hugely undermine the Dewar Clan... to say nothing of all the clans he’s preyed upon before now. The ones we took little notice of, for they were not allied with us.” He shook his head. “That was a bad bed we made, to be sure. We ought to have kept a closer eye on him before things got to this point.”

“We have more than enough worries to concern ourselves with without seeking new ones, it seems to me,” Cillian grumbled. “And since you said ‘first of all,’ may I woefully assume you have other tedious points to share as well?”

Rowan smirked, for he was used to Cillian’s mocking tone whenever Rowan used his famed intellect. He was known to be a talented fighter, but his mind was at least as agile as his blade – which, indeed, was the primary reason he’d been sent upon this errand.

“Second,” he pressed on, “aye, for all his rough edges, Geoffrey MacGillivray has a manner of doing things just like everyone else. He is a robber and a raider. Those are his strengths, not subterfuge and stealth.”

“To the best of our knowledge,” Cillian corrected. “For all we know, he might be relying on numerous shadowy spies, saboteurs, and cutthroats without our knowledge. After all,

that is how such people tend to operate, isn't it? Surreptitiously?"

"You have a point there," Rowan admitted. "Even so, I find it far more likely that he would rely upon the spectacle of another all-out attack to change the steward's mind for him, and to remind him that his answer has been held in reserve for far too long. To me, that seems as though it would achieve far better results than killing the man who was already leaning in his direction, and opening the clan up to even more in-fighting about it. Not to mention the scrabble for power that this death has surely created among the nobles of the clan."

"Very well," Cillian sighed impatiently, "then why don't you tell me who you think might have done it? You obviously have some theory already in place."

"It makes me unhappy to say so," Rowan replied slowly, "but if I were forced to speak my thoughts on the matter aloud..."

"Let us assume you are!" Cillian blurted, exasperated. "Let us assume my sword is drawn and at your throat to prevent you from blathering further to get to your point, for in another moment or two this shall become a reality!"

Rowan's smile widened. He was used to such things from the people around him, especially born fighters like Cillian. They generally did not value patience and thoroughness the way he did. They often drew their swords first and formed questions afterward.

But that had never been his way. With his slow and steady manner of thinking things through – and waiting to act until he had all the answers he required – Rowan had earned the nickname of "The Tortoise."

True, it was in no way as exciting a moniker as *The Adder*, and Rowan was well aware it was meant to be mocking; still, he had chosen to wear it proudly, even commissioning a small decorative metal turtle from the blacksmith so that he might pin it to his tunic. Turtles had thick shells, after all, didn't

they? So he was determined to as well, that such comments would not affect him.

Also, those who had found themselves at the wrong end of Rowan's sword over the years had learned that the nickname had a double meaning – for like his armored namesake, he was *incredibly* hard to kill.

“It seems to me,” Rowan went on, “that the likeliest suspect is someone loyal to our side of things.”

Cillian balked. “Do you mean to say you think his killing was done in our name?”

“In a manner of speaking. A member of the Dewar Clan who remains loyal to us in the face of such a seeming betrayal might act accordingly. He would be close enough, certainly, to achieve it without an overabundance of trouble. He would be more inclined to handle matters that way, I think, than a vicious blowhard like Geoffrey.”

“But to do it without asking our blessing first?”

“I know that neither of us wishes to believe such a thing would be possible,” Rowan answered, “but for the moment, we must seriously consider it. If we allow our own loyalties to act as a blind spot, we will find ourselves no closer to solving this mystery.”

“A mystery we have not been invited to solve, I'd point out,” Cillian said sullenly. “Who's to say they will even want our aid? Who's to say we'll be welcomed there at all anymore, given the turn things have taken?”

Now it was Rowan's turn to shrug. “No one can say. If we only dealt in certainties, it would make our jobs far easier, wouldn't it? Alas, the world does not seem to work that way.”

“Aye, well, that's quite the philosophical approach for a man who might be walking into a great many drawn swords!”

“As a matter of fact,” Rowan quipped, “I had rather planned to walk around them.”

None of what had passed between them, however, had centered in on what made Rowan the most uncomfortable about this whole matter – something that Cillian was aware of as well, though he, too, had been unwilling to broach the subject:

The steward's previous "outspoken support" of the Adder had been a ruse... in theory, at least.

Arran had been corresponding with Laird Sam since he'd first seen that a significant number of the clan's members were beginning to side with MacGillivray. He had told Sam that his true loyalties were still to the Campbells – but that he intended to pretend otherwise, in order to get closer to MacGillivray and betray him.

Laird Sam had been uneasy about this arrangement. He'd pointed out that in doing so, Arran could well end up influencing more people to join the Adder. Privately, he'd also fretted that Arran's true loyalties might be with the Adder after all. Still, Arran had continued to send secret messages to him, updating him with useful information about MacGillivray whenever possible – and with each letter, confirming that he remained true to the Campbells.

Now he was dead. And if it had been a Campbell loyalist who'd done the deed... well, then that would have been a damnable mess, a death by misunderstanding.

One which had left his daughter an orphan.

As Rowan pondered these heavy subjects, there was a whistling sound from the nearby tree line – and an arrow buried itself in the shoulder of one of the guardsmen. He let out a loud yowl of pain.

Cillian and Rowan searched the trees, wide-eyed, as they drew their swords. The guardsmen nocked arrows in their own longbows and crossbows – though the wounded man had great difficulty doing so.

Another arrow flew from the wooded area, and another. One of the horses was struck in the flank and shrieked, rearing

up. Another guardsman was hit, this time in the thigh. He hissed with pain, breaking off the arrow's shaft halfway down. The Campbells returned fire, but it was impossible for them to properly aim when they could not see their targets.

“Ride!” Rowan called out. “We must get to safety!”

The Campbells rode hard to get past the trees, and as they did, several more arrows followed them – including one which managed to glance off Rowan's forearm. It was a surface wound, but it bled freely just the same.

There was no way of knowing how many men had fired at them. However, as the Campbells put some distance between themselves and the tree line, the assault abated, indicating that it had only been a handful of attackers confined to a specific section of the woods.

“What the devil do you suppose that was all about?!” Cillian exclaimed.

“Not bandits, surely,” Rowan replied, “for they would have emerged and tried to stop us more fully, so they might loot us. No, it's...” His voice trailed off raggedly.

“What?” Cillian prompted.

Rowan shook his head, trying to clear it. However, his thoughts – normally as clear as glass – were suddenly running together in a muddy slurry. He had trouble remembering the words he'd meant to say, and his skin was strangely hot and prickly as though he was running a fever.

“...it's probably... people in league with... with the man who... who killed...”

“Good God, Rowan!” Cillian cried. “What is happening to you?!”

A horrible thought occurred to Rowan, and he glanced over at the guardsman who'd been struck in the shoulder first. He was sagging in his saddle. Likewise, the second man who'd taken an arrow to the leg looked as though he was having trouble keeping his eyes open – his face was flushed,

and drenched in sweat. Even the horse that had been shot was faltering now.

“P-Poison,” Rowan rasped, fighting to stay conscious. “Arrows... poison...”

Cillian’s eyes widened and he called out to the others, alarmed.

“The tips were envenomed! We must make haste to Castle Dewar and its healers, or they will die!”

The guardsman on the wounded horse dismounted at once and gave the creature’s face one final, wistful stroke. Then, he went to one of the wounded men and climbed up on the unharmed horse behind him, taking the reins for himself. “Let go, Angus,” he murmured to his comrade. “I have you.”

The injured guard slumped, losing consciousness.

Likewise, the other uninjured guard took control of his companion’s horse, making sure the wounded man stayed on top of it as he took the horse’s reins and rode it alongside his own.

Even in his impaired condition, Rowan knew that the odds of their arrival in time were not good. With several of the horses weighed down by two men, they would be too heavy to move as swiftly as they needed to.

Was this it, then, he wondered? Was this where his life would come to its end... on horseback in a strange land, with fire burning in his veins and his senses bleeding away into a gray oblivion?

It was the last thought that crossed his mind before he sank forward and lost consciousness.

It had been a week since the death of Lyall's father, and already things within the clan had gone from bad to worse.

The "rift" between the factions of the clan was now such a wide and distant gulf that the two sides may as well have been mountaintops apart from each other, their individual geographies no longer conforming to any pattern which might have indicated they were once united.

The vacuum of power that his death had created was filled with squabbling nobles, advisors, and military commanders – each with their own complicated loyalties, each with their own grand ideas regarding what direction the clan should take, and each determined to seize control at any cost. There were Campbell loyalists, still fierce in their devotion to that storied clan (and secure in their beliefs that ultimately, it would be that very devotion that would save them). There were those who believed now more than ever that only capitulation to the Adder could possibly save them from a terrible fate. There were even those who believed that neither option was agreeable... that they should simply establish themselves as an independent clan once more, and tell both the Campbells and Geoffrey to go hang.

This last faction was the smallest, to be sure. Given the shortage of soldiers – and food, and money, and a dozen other things that such independence would require – it was ludicrous to believe that the Dewars could stand on their own against Geoffrey, let alone the Campbells.

Still, enough people were enamored of the idea of being freed from the yoke of any outside clan that they joined this faction just the same, screaming senselessly for independence at any price. They refused to be reasoned with. Their anger was too great and had overcome their common sense entirely.

And for her part, Lyall was largely consigned to helplessly watch the entire thing play out.

As the daughter of a dead steward, no one was especially eager to hear anything she had to say about the direction the clan ought to go in. The most she could do under the circumstances was see to the running of the castle itself – supervising the servants and making sure the entire place did not fall apart from lack of attention and care.

The guards on the ramparts were another matter entirely. She likewise tried to check in on them whenever possible – to ensure that they remained at their posts, and to try to determine their individual loyalties wherever she could. All of them showed her a measure of deference out of respect for her father; even so, few were genuinely inclined to share their allegiances with her, or to do as she asked. There were frequent fights between the soldiers and sentries regarding their thoughts on what was to be done about the Dewar Clan and its enemies.

There were more and more desertions. More men who looked around and chosen not to remain in this place of chaos and uncertainty. More fighters who chose to pledge their swords and axes to the Adder.

And Geoffrey himself?

He had made no further effort to conquer the Dewar lands since his parlay with Arran. There were times when Lyall's mind conjured vivid images of the disfigured monster sitting back and laughing himself hoarse at all the confusion and squabbling going on in his name. If he waited a bit longer, he wouldn't need to do anything to bring the Dewar Clan down – he could simply wait for it to destroy itself, then pick up the pieces.

Meanwhile, Lyall had begun to suspect that Geoffrey himself had nothing to do with her father's death. At least, not directly.

She, too, felt it would have been a peculiar thing for a man known for such brutish tactics to employ stealth instead. However, she knew that the Campbells had plenty of warriors and agents who were more known for their ability to get in and out of places without being detected – and to wreak bloody havoc while they were inside. Finesse of this sort was something she was more likely to accuse them of, and why not? Had her father not been openly speaking on behalf of the Adder's interests, attempting to sway the clan members in that direction?

Was it so inconceivable, then, that some Campbell loyalist among the Dewars might have received instructions to silence him?

She had shared these concerns with Ewan Stewart, who had been her trusted friend since they were children together. His father, Hamish, was one of the Dewar soldiers' most respected commanders, and Hamish was also one of the few among them who continued to advocate for the clan's independence. She had tried to convince Ewan many times over that his father's position was folly, but Ewan had only shrugged and said that he remained loyal to the man regardless.

As one who had adored her own father – and recently lost him – she supposed she could not precisely fault him for that, though it was frustrating indeed.

When she had put forth her theory about the Campbells being responsible for the steward's death, Ewan had nodded, agreeing that it was the most likely answer and sharing her rage at them for having taken such a drastic and horrible step.

“No doubt in doing so,” he added, “they had hoped people *would* assume Geoffrey was behind it, so that they might turn the tide of public opinion in their favor.”

But Lyall was not accustomed to politics, and so these ideas twisted her brain into knots until her head ached beyond measure. Too many double – and triple – betrayals to consider, and all while her father was dead in his grave. It made her want to collapse to the floor and scream all over again.

Ewan had ventured out today with several of the men who were loyal to him. As he left, he'd told her that they only intended to do a bit of hunting in the woods – but as he'd said it, there had been a crafty gleam in his eye.

One that Lyall hadn't much liked the look of.

Still, there wasn't much to be done about it. She couldn't follow him and keep an eye on him, nor was she in any position to order him around or demand more information from him. Indeed, it was all she could do to keep the pantries full, the rooms clean, and the general business of the castle moving forward as it normally would.

Suddenly, there was a commotion at the front gates.

Lyall ran out to investigate and found the sentries on the ramparts arguing loudly with each other.

“I'll not let them in!” one man insisted. “Let them perish knocking at our walls for all I care!”

“But they remain our allies!” another cried out. “We swore an oath to them, and until that oath is rescinded, where is the honor in denying them entry? Where is the honor in allowing them to die upon our very doorstep?!”

Those last words alarmed Lyall considerably, and she strode across the ramparts toward the men. “What is the meaning of this? What is happening?”

She knew that they were not particularly obliged to answer her questions – however, she hoped that if she kept her tone sharp and authoritative enough, she might at the very least get their attention and get to the bottom of this.

“Campbells, my lady!” the first guard sneered. “They claim they were attacked, and that their wounds are poisoned!”

They say they will die forthwith unless we allow them access to our healers. I say what business is that of ours, eh? We don't need to allow their scum inside our walls, do we?"

"If we do not, then our honor and reputation will suffer!" the second fretted. "And with so many of our men and resources gone, what do we have *left* to us except these things?"

Lyall still harbored her strong suspicions that the Campbells had somehow been involved in the death of her father, and so she was not especially moved by notions of oaths and loyalties.

However, when she looked down and saw the men below – some among them struggling and gasping for breath, others deathly pale and blue-lipped in the throes of the venom which had afflicted them – she felt something wrench deep in her stomach and knew that she could not forgive herself for letting men die under such wretched conditions. If there was punishment in store for them, she thought, let it be later, when they were well enough to be dealt with fairly.

Besides, how could she possibly learn the truth about her father's murder unless she looked into it more closely? And how could she do that without finding out at much as she could from these unexpected "visitors?"

No, better to let them in now. If worst came to worst and her suspicions were confirmed, justice could be meted out subsequently. There were certainly more than enough men at the castle who would be eager to deal it out.

She cleared her throat and mustered her most commanding voice: "We need to let them in at once."

The first guard's eyebrows went up so quickly, they nearly leaped off his head. "You cannot be serious! Let them in here? What if we cannot trust them?!"

"We ought not to trust them, and you may guard them personally if that is what you feel is best," she replied primly. "And if it turns out that they are our enemies, we shall deal

with them accordingly. Until that is established, however, we will not allow them to gasp their final breaths knowing we might have saved them from that. We are Dewars, and we are better than that. My father would certainly have said so, don't you agree?"

The guard was beginning to look somewhat ashamed of himself, and she was glad of that – for if he had stood his ground, there would have been nothing left for her to do but turn around, return to her own pursuits, and leave him to it.

“Very well,” he grunted, signaling for the others to open the gates. “Bring them inside and take them to the healers, but do not let them out of your sight even for a moment! Remain vigilant in their presence at all times, do you hear? I will not be known as the guard who opened up our castle to those who caused trouble once within it!”

The other men did as they were told, ushering the Campbells inside.

As they did, Lyall wondered whether she might have just made the worst mistake of her life.

Lyall went inside, and met the group of guards escorting the Campbells to the healers' chambers. Two of the armored Campbell soldiers needed to be lifted and carried, for they were entirely unconscious. The third...

Lyall found herself staring at the man as she walked alongside the rest.

He had a lithe and athletic frame, with wide shoulders and a V-shaped waist. His hair was a coppery red; his face was clean-shaven, with strong cheekbones and a high forehead; and his eyelids were twitching like butterfly wings, but she caught glimpses of vivid blue eyes, so dark they were almost cobalt. His companion was keeping him upright (barely), muttering encouragements into his ear as they went. The red-haired man stumbled and slumped, but he continued to put one foot in front of the other, his strength and determination shining through, even as he was almost unable to stand.

He was so striking that she could not tear her eyes away from his countenance. She'd never seen anyone quite like him before – and she had to remind herself that the man was a Campbell, and as such, not to be trusted lightly.

All three of the men had arrow wounds... and based on their pallor and perspiration, not to mention their shallow breathing, the tips of those arrows had indeed been envenomed. There were dots of blood upon their blue lips.

But that was not the only thing that struck her.

It was that she recognized the effects of this specific poison – and witnessing them once more triggered an old memory. One she had never forgotten, though she'd often wished that she had.

When she and Ewan Stewart were children, he and several of his friends (mostly a pack of bullies and braggarts) had gone hunting in the woods with their bows and arrows. They had invited her to come along with them – not to hunt herself, of course, but so they could show off for her. She had agreed to accompany them, out of boredom more than anything else.

Within a couple of hours, they had tracked and found a deer; and so naturally, the boys were immensely pleased with themselves. Ewan had taken the shot, and the arrow had hit the deer's haunch. It had darted off at once, and Lyall had teased Ewan about his poor aim.

Ewan gave her a smug smirk in return and told her that he'd not taken as much care as some might have with his aim because it would not matter where the arrow struck the deer. She'd been confused, and he had taken her by the hand and led her deeper into the woods while the others sniggered and whispered.

They had known what was coming. She had not.

Eventually, she'd heard a pitiful mewling sound coming from the underbrush... and there was the deer, on its side, its breath shallow as it coughed up blood. The arrow still protruded from its flesh; its eyes were bloodshot and rolling, and its lips were blue. Its sides were soaked with sweat.

Ewan pointed at it triumphantly, boasting about the poison he had used to taint his arrows – so that even if he missed, it would be a kill. He even pointed out the toadstools he'd harvested so that he could carefully grind them into powder, and mix with a bit of water to create the deadly toxin.

Lyall had been appalled. She had run the entire way back to the village and told Ewan's father immediately.

Hamish had been so incensed with the boys – and especially his own – that flames had practically poured forth from his flaring nostrils. He'd whipped Ewan soundly and said he was ashamed of him; not just for senselessly hunting an animal which could not then be consumed for fear of ingesting the very poison that had killed it, but also for engaging in such a cheap and cowardly act as using poison at all.

"It brings dishonor upon you," Hamish had bellowed mightily, *"and it brings dishonor upon me, and upon this whole bloody house! You ought to be ashamed, lad!"*

When it was over, Ewan had promised never to use poisoned weapons again. Even so, for the crime of telling his father on him, Ewan had sullenly refused to speak a word to Lyall for the better part of a year.

What had stuck with her through the years, though, was watching that poor deer die so needlessly and cruelly. The precise hallmarks of the substance that killed it had never left her mind, and now here they were before her again.

So now, it seemed, she had a chance to save their lives a second time over: By identifying the type of poison to the healers, so they would have a better chance of reversing its effects.

But would she?

The question arose in her so suddenly and unexpectedly that it shocked her somewhat. Yes, she could intervene once more. Would it be worth it, though, if she was right about a Campbell loyalist – or, more likely, a Campbell agent – having killed her father?

These men had not announced that they were planning to travel to Dewar Castle. They had simply shown up. Why? To admire their handiwork, watching the clan destroy itself after they had ordered the death of its steward? To rendezvous with their assassin, perhaps, and give him new orders to follow?

She had already let them in, hadn't she? Did that not fulfill the obligation her honor – her *conscience* – demanded? Her

decision not to inform the healers of the type of poison she suspected (*just* suspected, after all... how could she really even be all that sure?) would not necessarily result in the death of those men. The healers might figure it out on their own. And even then, it would not be certain whether they would succeed in saving them or not.

Why should she invest herself any deeper in this, then? Why should she not simply back away and allow things to play out as they would?

There was something else to consider as well: She had already stuck her neck out rather openly in hectoring the guards to let these men inside. That would not make her popular among those who despised the Campbells (ironic, to be sure, since she currently found herself one of their number). That could make things difficult for her indeed.

She didn't have her father around to protect her anymore. In the newness of her grief, it was far too easy for her to forget that.

In her mind's eye, though, the dying deer and the red-haired man were merged into one – a creature suffering and dying from a grossly craven act, and without even understanding why.

And if he lives, she added mentally, he might well yield answers to all sorts of questions, if I am able to extract them from him. He'll be weakened, and he'll owe me his life.

He is more valuable alive than dead, at least for the moment. I must do what it takes to keep him that way.

She tried to tell himself that it was these thoroughly pragmatic matters – and not the fairness of his features – that was leading her to this decision.

She almost managed to convince herself, in fact.

The door to the chambers opened and Greta the healer poked her head out. She had an oval face, with twinkling light blue eyes and deep laugh-lines around her eyes and mouth.

When she saw the three men, her brow furrowed with concern, and she gestured for them to be brought in at once.

“Poisoned arrows?” she scoffed. “My God, what sort of vicious little twit would do such a thing?!”

Lyall was afraid she knew the answer all too well.

“There is a venomous blue toadstool that grows in the woods near here,” Lyall told Greta.

“Aye, I’m familiar enough with it,” Greta affirmed. “Is that what’s been used upon these fellows?”

“It has, you can be sure of it,” Lyall informed her. “Do you have what it will take to treat them for it?”

“I do indeed, but I shall have to work quickly.”

“Then do so,” Lyall urged. “For all our sakes. These men’s lives must be spared.”

Greta nodded and went to work immediately, choosing a variety of small bottles and pouches from her shelves so she could grind and mix the appropriate antidote.

As Lyall turned to leave, the man who had been propping up the redhead stopped her. He looked exhausted and haunted, but unhurt. “I am Cillian Campbell,” he announced. “Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

“Lyall Dewar.” She almost curtsied, then thought better of it when she remembered the sight of her father’s corpse sprawled upon his desktop.

“We owe you a great debt of gratitude,” Cillian went on. “We came as soon as we heard about your father, the steward. Perhaps we... ought to have communicated our travel plans in advance.”

“Yes, perhaps,” she agreed haughtily. “The Campbells are not nearly so welcome in these lands as they once were.”

“Aye, so I’ve bloody noticed,” he chuckled humorlessly. “I know that relations between our clans are a wee bit strained at

the moment, but to be fired upon... and with envenomed arrows, no less...!”

“We do not know who fired those arrows at you, sir,” she reminded him coldly. “It could well have been the Adder’s men, or common roadside thieves.”

“So you have no knowledge of who attacked us, then?”

“None whatsoever.”

He leaned in closer, his eyes blazing and insistent. “*Then how did you know what kind of poison it was, lass?*”

She did her best to keep her expression neutral. “It was a mere guess, based on something I saw once as a child. Now, I understand that you might not be in the most trusting of moods at the present moment. However, given that I am the reason your comrades are receiving our healers’ ministrations rather than gagging out their deaths against our outer walls, I will thank you to remember your manners. If you will excuse me, I have other matters to attend to. Once you have had ample opportunity to calm down, I shall return later to check on your people.”

With that, Lyall turned and departed – knowing that she had never been an accomplished liar, hoping that this Cillian had not seen through her deception.

Now she needed to have an extremely difficult discussion with her childhood friend, and she had no idea what she would say to him. How could she accuse him of something like this? What if he denied it? How far was she prepared to press the point?

Could she look him in the face and call him a liar, if it came to that?

Even though it had been years ago, she still had bad memories of that year during which they had been estranged. He could be obnoxious back then, but he’d still been her best friend, and it had hurt her deeply when they had not been on speaking terms.

This time, she knew it might be far worse.

L yall rapped loudly on the door of Hamish Stewart's house, and one of his servants answered, ushering her in – for she had been there many times before, and those who worked there knew she was generally to be considered welcome at all times.

It was an austere old place, one of the largest and finest in the Dewar lands. The Stewarts had always been a wealthy and influential family, and so the place was filled with fine furniture, tapestries, and amenities, plus the stables and servants' quarters. The only larger home in that area of the country was the Dewar Castle itself.

And now that the steward was gone and the alliance with the Campbells was tenuous, there were rumors aplenty that old Hamish had set his sights on that very place to be his next home.

The thought of it gave her a shudder, though she could not imagine why. She'd known Hamish Stewart her entire life. He was a gruff man, and set in his ways – and she wished he would not speak his foolish notions of independence for the Dewar Clan without the proper might to back them up – but she believed he had a good heart beneath it all.

“What can I do for you, lass?” he inquired. “Is it true what I've heard? That a pack of Campbell jackals has arrived at the castle?”

“Word travels quickly, it seems,” she answered curtly, “for they only just arrived less than an hour ago. No jackals, however. Just men, and some among them wounded.”

“Aye, well, you have a kind and lovely heart, lass... ‘tis one of the many things my son adores about you,” Hamish grunted. “But if it were me, I’d have left them outside to die. And I still hope they do.”

“You may well get your wish, based on what I saw of them. Tell me, sir, is your son about? I would have a word with him.”

“Then your timing is impeccable,” Ewan said, stepping into the room with a broad grin, “for here I am. And look what I have brought!” He produced a bluebell, offering it to her. He was of medium height, just an inch or two shorter than Lyall, with an elfin face and a head of thick curly brown hair. More of that hair tended to peek out from his sleeves and collar, making him look like some pagan god of mischief and revelry.

She accepted it with a smile. It was an old tradition of theirs that whenever he ventured into the woods, he picked a bluebell and brought it back to her.

“So you have been in the woods today, then,” she challenged, arching an eyebrow.

“Ah, whatever your squabble is, I’ll leave you to it,” Hamish huffed, withdrawing from the room. “The bickering of the young gives me a damned headache.”

Once he was out of earshot, Ewan drew closer, looking concerned. “Have I done something to displease you, Lyall?”

“I don’t know, have you?” She folded her arms over her chest. “For example, have you been picking any other wild things from the forest? Toadstools, perhaps?”

“As a matter of fact, I have,” he admitted with a lopsided grin. “But how have you found out about it?”

“Because the Campbells you shot with your damned poisoned arrows are currently in Greta’s chambers, you

ninny!”

His face fell. “You let them into the castle? You let them see the healers? Why would you do such a thing?!”

“How can you possibly have the gall to ask me that?!” she balked. “For heaven’s sake, Ewan, why would you do something as reckless, stupid, and wholly uncalled-for as *fire arrows at a bunch of Campbells*? They are still our allies! Have you gone mad?!”

“Some allies, then, if they ordered the death of your father!” He jutted a finger at her. “You were the one who said they had, remember?”

“I said I thought they had! That is not at all the same thing!”

“*Well, you sounded sure enough when you said it!*” he countered.

“Do you even *begin* to understand the trouble you may have gotten us all in? If Laird Sam finds out...!”

Ewan shrugged. “Who says he needs to find out? If those Campbells never leave the healers’ chambers alive, then no one need know what transpired here at all.”

“Except they might very well survive your silly attack.”

“Then what if something else befell them in those chambers? Later tonight, perhaps, when Greta has retired? Something they would surely not survive?”

Lyll could scarcely believe her ears. “First you use those damned poisoned arrows... which you promised never to do again, by the way, because poison is the loathsome weapon of a slithering snake...”

“That was a promise made as a child!” he protested.

“...and then you suggest murdering defenseless men in their sickbeds?” She scowled at him scornfully. “Is that the sort of man you have grown into, Ewan?”

“Do you wish to know the kind of man I have grown into?” His tone was fervent, almost pleading. “The kind of man who understands that the vows of children fade into nothingness when held up against the prospect of independence for our people... from Campbells, from the Adder, from all the rest. The kind of man who sees that in order for that to happen, we must sometimes commit ugly deeds for a good cause.” He slowly got down on one knee, his eyes never leaving hers. “The kind of man who wants nothing more than to keep you safe, now that your father is gone. Lyall, you know how I feel about you. How I’ve *always* felt. Won’t you be my wife?”

“Ewan, I care for you as well,” she replied tactfully, “but how do you expect me to respond to such a proposal when what you and your father espouse will bring about the ruination of our clan?”

“By believing in us,” he insisted. “In me. There are things you cannot know about yet, but they will bring about the outcome we seek, if only we are patient and persevere. Things that will honor your father’s legacy of wise leadership, and allow continuity between it and the new order of things. The Dewars *will* rule themselves once more, Lyall. And you will be part of that, if only you will say aye.”

Lyall sighed heavily.

Some part of her had always known this day would come – and she’d dreaded it, hoping to put it off for as long as possible, or to find some way before it happened to let him know that she did not harbor such feelings for him as he did for her.

Ever since they were children, Lyall had never failed to notice the look in his eyes whenever he glanced her way – the wistful longing in them, the secret plans to one day make her his bride. She had found it somewhat touching, for she had always enjoyed his company, and counted him her closest friend.

But their fathers had long worked side by side on behalf of the clan, and as such, she had come to see him as a brother. Nothing more than that bloomed in her heart for Ewan, and she felt certain that nothing would.

What good would it do to say such things to him, though? He would only protest, would he not? He'd insist that she would develop other feelings for him in the fullness of time, and continue to profess his devotion to her.

Perhaps, at some other time, she might have been in a better position to reason with him about it.

For now, though, she felt entirely depleted, and not just from the excitement earlier that day. Everything that had happened over the past several months – and especially her father's demise – weighed upon her so heavily that she now felt like that red-haired man when he'd been brought into the castle... reeling, barely able to stand.

"I am deeply touched by your proposal, Ewan," she told him gently. "You are a worthy man, and as such, it is worthy of serious consideration. However, for the moment, I am not in any position to devote the full attention to it that it deserves."

His face fell. "But..."

"Once I have determined who was responsible for my father's death, and avenged him accordingly, I will be far more able to weigh your offer and give you a proper response. Until then, we *must not* do anything to confuse or escalate matters, Ewan. Our situation here is sticky enough, with too many problems on too many sides. We have too many men trying to wrangle control of this clan between each other like some monstrous tug-of-war. We need to stem the chaos, not add to it. Is that understood?"

Ewan nodded. He was still kneeling, which made him look somewhat ludicrous and childlike. If she hadn't been so bloody exhausted, she might have had to stifle a giggle.

"Good," she finished. "Thank you. I know your heart is in the right place, and that means a great deal to me."

He suddenly realized his position and stood up once more. "I understand completely. But soon, Lyall, you will see that I was right... that the future of our clan will be in our own hands once more."

"I look forward to the day when you are proven right," she replied diplomatically. What else could she say? Now that she had (hopefully) made her point, she had no real wish to discourage him or make him angry.

"In that case, I'd best return to the castle and look in on our new friends," she added. "I hope I can convince them that no one from this clan is responsible for their wounds, and then find out what, if anything, they know about my father's death. I do not anticipate either of those things will be especially easy."

"Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help," he intoned solemnly, kissing her hand.

As she made her way back to the castle, she wondered what else could possibly go wrong. She had a sinking feeling she would be finding out soon enough.

When Rowan Campbell's eyelids fluttered open, he immediately squinted against the harsh light.

"Careful there, lad," a soft voice spoke close to his ear. "The light will hit your eyes fierce for a while yet, but you may be thankful you're alive enough to feel that. I don't believe I've ever had quite so near a case as yours before in all my years."

He turned to look at the speaker... but instead of the wizened and scowling face of the Campbell healer, he saw someone with a far softer and more encouraging visage. This confused him greatly for a few moments until he was able to pull his thoughts together enough to remember all that had come before: The mission imparted to him by Laird Sam; the journey toward the Dewar lands; and the cowardly attack from the trees.

He supposed these were the chambers of the Dewar healers.

Rowan's mouth was so dry that it felt as though speaking might split the roof of it in half. "The others," he croaked. "How are they?"

Cillian appeared at his other side, his face pale and drawn from prolonged worry. "We lost MacGregor," he said sadly. "The others are fine."

Rowan's stomach lurched, and for a moment he thought he might be violently ill. The room swam around him, and he

closed his eyes again. The men who'd come along on this mission had trusted him to keep them safe. He was known more as an advisor than a soldier, but he'd been assigned to lead them into danger nonetheless.

Now one of them was dead, and no matter who fired the arrows, Rowan felt that he himself was responsible.

"You shall feel weak for quite some time," the oval-faced healer informed him. "You will lack appetite, and perhaps you might even have trouble keeping food in your stomach once it's put there, *but you will have to try to eat nevertheless* so your body can recover from its ordeal. You're fortunate indeed that we were told which poison was on those arrows, rather than fumbling around trying to find the right antidote." She turned to Cillian. "You may look after him, but don't over-tax him. He ought to try to remain calm as much as possible. His heart has been damaged somewhat, and will have to recover."

"Thank you, Greta," Cillian said. "The care you have given these men has been excellent."

"I heal all who are brought to me" she replied humbly, "no matter which tartan they wear." And with that, she went to the other guardsman who had been shot so she could minister to him further.

"Thank heaven you survived," Cillian told him. "Though given how stubborn you are as a rule, I suppose I should not have been the least bit surprised."

"I wish I could summon a joke to counter yours," Rowan replied shakily, "but in truth, I feel as though the Reaper's scythe is buried in my breast, and every breath is agony. The healer said she was told which poison was used? Told by whom?"

"Aye, that's a mystery of sorts," Cillian said darkly. "One I've been sitting here trying to solve while waiting for you to awaken. I don't suppose you remember much from when we first arrived?"

Rowan shook his head, which felt roughly as heavy as a boulder on his neck. “I do not remember arriving here at all. Or anything, really, after the arrow struck me.”

“We begged to be let in, but the guardsmen out front nearly turned us away.”

Rowan’s eyes widened. “What?! But we are allies to this clan! How could they even have entertained the idea of refusing us entry, especially when gravely wounded?”

“From what I’ve gathered, Rowan, the situation here is much worse than we’ve been told,” Cillian informed him. “The divide between those loyal to us and those who support an alliance with the Adder has grown dangerously wide. Our side might soon be outnumbered if things continue as they have been. There are even those who believe we were responsible for the steward’s murder.”

“That is grim news indeed,” Rowan agreed. “Are we to believe, then, that it was Dewars who shot at us on the road?”

“The woman who ordered the guards to let us in...”

“Wait,” Rowan interjected, putting up a hand to stop him. He wasn’t certain whether it was simply because the poison was still affecting his brain, but it seemed to him that this was becoming enormously complicated, even for a man of his intellect. “She’s the reason we were allowed in? Why did she speak up for us? Who is she?”

“The daughter of the slain steward, it would seem,” Cillian said. “Her name is Lyall. And that’s not all; she appeared to know precisely which poison was used upon the arrows.”

“That’s rather suspicious, wouldn’t you say?” Rowan quipped with a faint laugh. His chest felt as though someone had caved it in with a massive hammer, but he tried not to let it show.

“I tried to find out how she would have known that,” Cillian went on, “but she would give me no answer, save that she did not know who was responsible.”

“Do you believe she was behind it, then?” Rowan asked.

Cillian shrugged. “I am stymied, to be honest. If she arranged the attack, then why the devil would she have had the guards let us in?”

Rowan put his formidable brain to work, though the instrument was feeling slow and rusty after the ordeal it had been through. “It could be that the attack did not go as she ordered, and so she was forced to improvise after. Perhaps it was meant to kill all of us, and when only a few were hit, she needed to make us believe she was not behind it by letting us in and seeing to it that our wounds were treated. Perhaps I was the intended target and did not die as quickly or easily as she thought I would. Perhaps I was the only one *not* meant to be shot and killed, so that she could try to extract more information from me later... and that is still her plan, now that I have been brought here.” He sighed. “Or it could be that she wasn’t behind it at all.”

“Ah, the dizzying intellect of Rowan Campbell at work once more,” Cillian said sourly. “A joy to behold, as always. Your suppositions have left us no wiser than we were a moment ago.”

“I’m not bloody omniscient,” Rowan snapped. “Merely weighing the possibilities aloud to see if any of them seem more likely than the rest.”

“And do they?”

“For the moment, no,” Rowan admitted. “Then again, thanks to the venom on that arrow, my head is aching so loudly it drowns out all thought.”

“Then perhaps Greta might be able to give you something for the pain,” a woman’s voice spoke up from the doorway.

Rowan looked at the voice’s owner – and was instantly stunned by her beauty.

She had long, straight hair, as black and shiny as the feathers of a raven. It cascaded down over her porcelain-white shoulders. Her beauty was exquisite, yet not ostentatious; she

seemed down-to-earth, and from the dark circles under her eyes, she had clearly endured much hardship of late. Her eyes were gray as a stormy sky, and she wore a lavender-colored dress which was clearly meant to be more functional than stylish – denoting her to be more elevated than a commoner, but somewhat less well-positioned than a member of a true ruling family.

Which made her identity clear enough, at least to Rowan.

“You are Lyall?” he asked.

She nodded.

Good heavens, Cillian, Rowan thought, why did you not tell me the woman in question was so perfectly gorgeous? Why did you not prepare me?

Her loveliness stole the breath from his lungs more sharply than the poison had, and he caught himself staring at her openly.

“You seem as though you are still rather dazed from the effects of the poison, sir,” she noted. “How do you fare?”

“Alive, at least,” he answered. “Which, sadly, is more than can be said of our comrade MacGregor, it seems.”

“I am sorry that such a dreadful thing occurred,” she informed him stoically. She seemed to be studying his face as well, though he couldn’t be sure of the reason. Was that suspicion in her eyes, or something else? She appeared to be gifted at hiding her emotions.

“Shall I take your apology to mean that it was your people who were behind the attack?” he asked slyly.

She folded her arms obstinately. “I was expressing sympathy, sir, not culpability. As I told your companion here, I have no idea who shot those arrows. Nor can I take much responsibility for anything ‘my people’ have or have not done.”

“Why not?” Cillian demanded. “You lead them now, don’t you? Since your father’s death? That would seem to be the

correct way of things, at least while waiting for us to come and appoint another steward.”

“The ‘correct way of things’ abandoned this place some time ago, with the encroachment of the Adder,” she shot back. “Once my father was gone, his comrades were too busy fighting among each other over who would take over to listen to anything I had to say. They have... not been interested in an orderly succession, to put it mildly.”

Rowan’s head was spinning. He sat up slowly, bracing himself – then, with considerable effort, managed to stand. He felt as though his body was as weightless and clumsy as a straw-stuffed scarecrow released from its stake, but he did all he could to prevent her from seeing it. He needed to appear strong and decisive now as much as possible, since he was in a place filled with hazard and uncertainty.

And he needed answers from this lass. Real ones.

“Lady Lyall...” he began.

She shook her head. “Merely Lyall. I am not a noblewoman, just the daughter of a simple steward now in his grave.”

“Merely Lyall, then,” Rowan agreed. “Might we adjourn to someplace more private, so that we may speak?”

“We are speaking now,” she responded flatly. “To be frank, I am not overly eager to place myself alone in a room with a Campbell, when I have no real way of knowing whether your people were responsible for my father’s murder.”

“We were not involved in the slightest...”

“Precisely what I would expect the culprit of such an act to say.”

“...but more to the point,” Rowan pressed on, “it would be the height of foolishness for me to harm you while standing in the middle of Dewar Castle, surrounded by your clan’s people... at least half of whom already despise me, from what I’ve come to understand. If I attempted anything untoward, I

am well aware I would not make it out of here alive. Certainly not in my current condition.”

Lyall considered his point, and nodded. “Very well. Follow me, then.”

Rowan followed her out of the healers' chambers, motioning for Cillian to remain behind and continue to look after the remaining wounded guard. Cillian gave him a tight nod, but he looked extremely worried.

Rowan supposed he couldn't blame Cillian for that, given how weak Rowan still was from the poison. It was darkly funny to him that Lyall had been concerned for her own safety while alone with him, when he doubted he could properly draw his sword at that point, let alone use it.

"Did your healer happen to mention how long it would take for me to recover my full faculties?" Rowan inquired. He kept a hand on the wall at all times to steady himself.

"Greta said it's nothing short of miraculous that you're alive at all," Lyall retorted. "The fact that you are able to stand and walk is unbelievable."

"I have a strong constitution."

"Oh?" She glanced over her shoulder at him, her eyebrow raised. "Is that what you're known for where you come from, then? Are you one of the Campbells' strongest warriors?"

He shrugged. "Not especially. I can hold my own, certainly, when the occasion demands it. For the most part, though, I am known to be one of the laird's most trusted advisors. That is why he sent me to find out what happened to your father... and to pass along our sincere condolences, of course."

“You may keep your condolences to yourself,” she shot back, “for I have heard enough of them, and at least half have been disingenuous. As for what happened to him, that is no great mystery. He was stabbed in the back by someone who was able to gain admittance to his study, and it was likely because he was a vocal supporter of our clan allying itself with the Adder.”

“I see.”

“But you knew all about that, no doubt?” she added harshly. “That he had been speaking out in that regard, and that his loyalty to your clan was waning?”

“We had heard rumors of such things, aye. We had hoped to speak with him about them. Unfortunately, someone deprived us of that chance.”

She led him to a door on the second floor of the castle and opened it, revealing a study. Rowan was relieved to see that they had reached their destination – his strength was almost entirely depleted after taking the stairs, and he felt sure that if he did not sit down in the next few moments, he would fall down. It was taking every scrap of his strength and self-control to keep from showing his fatigue, for he did not want to show any additional weakness in front of this woman.

Her harsh and bitter tone stung him, for he hated to hear them emanate from someone he found so beautiful. He did find himself admiring her demeanor, though. There was iron in her, that was certain. She’d just lost her father, yet here she was, facing off against someone she suspected might be responsible. He saw a glimmer of fear at the corners of her eyes, and was all the more impressed with her for overcoming it to confront him.

Rowan went to one of the chairs in the room and sat down heavily. Lyall remained standing in front of the desk.

“Was this your father’s study?” he asked.

“No.” Her retort was like a thrown rock. “I have not been able to bring myself to enter that room again. Not after

discovering him in it.”

“So you were the one who first found the body, then,” Rowan noted.

Her eyes blazed with fury. “Surely you have not come here to interrogate me about my own father’s death, as though you suspect me of being involved in it?!”

He held up a hand to placate her, and was mildly distressed to see that it only seemed to aggravate her more. “We needn’t jump to those sorts of notions just yet. More than anything else, I seek to collect as much information about the state of things here as possible, so that I may report back to Laird Sam and find out what he wishes to do about the situation.”

“And what might his decision be?” she challenged. “To ride in here with his soldiers and retake our clan by force, so that your position as our masters may be solidified?”

“I do not believe there is a single member of the Campbell Clan who see themselves as ‘your masters’,” he responded. He still admired her determination, but given his depleted condition, it was also starting to wear on him greatly. “Is there any way we might speak a bit more calmly, without all sorts of wild accusations? I doubt those will help either of us in getting to the bottom of this.”

“Answer me this,” she went on, ignoring his previous comment. “Why did you not send a messenger in advance, to warn us of your coming? Why simply show up unannounced?”

“By the time a messenger had arrived, *we* might have arrived just as easily,” he replied reasonably. “We did not think you would object to our presence. Is *that* why we were shot at, do you think? Because we were not expected by your people, and so they mistook our intentions to be hostile?”

“As I have said several times now,” she reminded him, “I have no knowledge of who shot you, or why.”

She did all she could to keep her body language and expression neutral, but Rowan was almost positive she was not telling the truth. He didn’t necessarily get the impression that

she had ordered the attack – her anger seemed to come from her grief at her father’s passing, but not from any sort of violence or malice – but even so, he would have staked money on the notion that she was hiding something from him.

“It seems to me,” he said in his most soothing tone, “that you have decided we are your enemies in this situation. More than anything else, I have been sent here to assure you that we are not. Anything we can do to calm things and re-establish order, we will.”

“Then do it, and leave me out of it,” she retorted wearily.

“I had hoped you might be of some assistance in that regard, actually.”

“Ah, yes, *good!*” she exploded sardonically. “*More* expectations to be placed upon me, which I cannot possibly begin to live up to! It is not nearly enough that I have lost my father, or that I am expected to order the servants around so the daily demands of this castle do not go ignored! No, on top of that, I am now supposed to help you solve this mystery and make all the bickering nobles of the clan fall into line!”

He appeared remorseful. “I did not mean to add to the pressures you currently face, I assure you. I only thought you might be more aware of everyone involved in the matter, and might therefore guide me as I do what I must. Surely you can see that if my people had anything to do with your father’s death, they wouldn’t have sent me here to find out what happened?”

“I know that I cannot trust you,” she spat. “I cannot trust anyone anymore, except myself. I am surrounded on all sides by chaos and in-fighting. It is destroying the clan, and it is destroying me along with it!”

“Then what can I do to help?” he asked. “How may I demonstrate that I mean you no harm, and gain your trust? Say the word, and I will do all that I can to achieve it!”

“For the moment,” she answered, tears gleaming in her eyes, “you may get out of my sight. Go down to the chambers

to be with your people. I will tell the servants to come and collect you shortly, so that you and the others of your party may be shown to your guest rooms.”

Rowan wanted to protest, to insist that there must be something more immediate he could do to try to find common ground with her – but his body was still fighting off the effects of the poison, and he decided he would have a far better chance of convincing her once he got some proper rest and recovered a bit.

He struggled to stand, then managed a bow without falling over. “Very well, then. I shall take my leave, and hope our next encounter is somewhat less combative.”

He left the study and made his way back down to the healers’ chambers, where Cillian was waiting for him.

“Any progress?” Cillian asked hopefully.

Rowan shook his head, sighing. “I feel as though I have more questions now than I did before.”

Before he could continue, a servant appeared – a plump young woman with short brown hair and a sullen expression. “You are to come with me,” she informed them.

Cillian helped Rowan along again, and together they followed the servant up the steps to the corridor where the guest rooms were located. The unwounded soldiers followed close behind, and were shown to chambers where they were instructed to share in groups of two.

“We haven’t nearly as much room here as you might have in your grand and fancy Campbell Castle,” the servant sniffed, “so you’ll have to make do.” Likewise, she showed Cillian and Rowan to a single room with a pair of narrow beds.

“This will be perfectly fine, thank you,” Rowan assured her.

She gave them one final glare, then left and shut the door behind her. The way things had been going, Rowan almost expected to hear the sound of them being locked in.

“I feel as though we’ve stumbled into some strange world where everything is backwards,” Cillian confessed. “These people were our allies. We have always endeavored to treat them with respect, and to see to it that their needs have been met.”

“Not quite,” Rowan corrected him. “Our intentions have been good, this is true. But these people needed more adequate protection from the Adder than we were able to provide, and so their ire is understandable, to say the least.”

“Even so, can their memories truly be so short?” Cillian protested. “To turn on us so dreadfully over such a thing as that?”

“It is no small thing at all. Laird Sam had believed that these people could hold out until we were able to send more men to defend them. Clearly, he was gravely mistaken.”

“How can that woman honestly think we were at fault for her father’s demise? That we would work with assassins to undermine her clan in such a way?”

Rowan pondered this for a moment, replaying his conversation with her in his mind. “I do not believe she is truly convinced of our involvement. I think she is simply exhausted, overwhelmed, and consumed by grief, and so she is confused and pointing fingers wildly. If only I can find some way to gain her trust...”

““We.””

Rowan tilted his head. “I beg your pardon?”

“You said *you* needed to gain her trust, but *we* need to.”

“Ah. Aye. Of course.”

Except that Rowan specifically wanted to be the one who found his way behind her defenses – and though he wished he could lie to himself, he had to admit that his reasons for wanting to do so were not only tied to his mission here.

He found himself entirely fascinated with her. His heart went out to her for what she had been through, and he wanted

more than anything to find some way to allay her emotional agony. He could not remember the last time he'd felt so strongly about anyone he'd just met.

He only hoped that he would be able to keep those feelings contained so he might remain focused on his purpose here.

“**A**nd that was all they said?” Lyall pressed.

The plump and downcast servant girl who had led the men to their rooms, Lara, nodded. “After that, they mostly busied themselves with preparing for bed. They were exhausted from their journey... and that smaller one with the red hair, he’s a lot more affected by the poison on that arrow than he wants to let on. He’s afraid of looking weak with so many potential enemies around.” She swallowed hard. “Yourself among them, apparently.”

“You stayed at their door long enough to make sure they were asleep? Nothing more could have passed between them after you left?”

“I stayed as long as I could without being noticed!” Lara protested. “I couldn’t very well stand there in the corridor for hours at a time, could I?”

“I told you to listen to them as long as it took to get me some answers!” Lyall snapped.

Lara flinched, and looked as though she might cry.

Lyall’s expression softened. “There, there, it’s all right. You did as well as you could under the circumstances, and you’re the very last person I ought to be taking such a harsh tone with. I am sorry, Lara. You must understand how terribly confusing and upsetting all of this has been for me.”

“Begging your pardon,” Lara ventured, “and knowing that you’ve lost your father while the rest of us mostly haven’t... but it’s been hard for all of us. We were living well under the Campbells for a while, and now to have all that peace and prosperity snatched out from under us? There’s plenty who have lost their loved ones during the Adder’s raids early on, and for those of us who have, the thought of going on to bend the knee to them and serve them...” She shuddered. “I know your father thought it would be the best thing for the clan, but ‘tis a prospect a great many of us find ghastly.”

“I can understand that all too well, Lara, but what is the alternative? The Campbells failed us when we needed them most. And given that my father was an outspoken supporter of the MacGillivrays, it still stands to reason that someone loyal to them did him in.”

“Supposing that were the case,” Lara mused, “then do you believe these Campbell men who are staying with us know anything about it? If they did not, then perhaps they’d be as appalled over it as you are. Perhaps it could make them powerful allies to your cause.”

Lyll groaned helplessly. “And what ‘cause’ is that? At the moment, my only two causes are running the castle itself as best I can – and doing a woeful job of that, it seems, since even the guardsmen cannot seem to decide whom they serve – and doing all I can to survive these sudden and awful sea changes around here. If the pressure of it all continues to weigh upon me as it has, I fear it will drive me mad.” She closed her eyes, rubbing her temples to stave off the headache she felt coming on. “As for whether these men know whether their fellow Campbells ordered the death of my father, who can say? Their clan is vast, and its alliances are many. It could be entirely possible that the one hand does not know what the other is doing. But how am I supposed to find out one way or the other?”

“I do not know,” Lara answered, “but I will do all that I can to support you. On that, you have my word. Now, may I at

least bring you a bit of supper? You haven't eaten all day from what I've seen, and you must be starving!"

"I am not hungry in the slightest, but thank you for offering," she said demurely. "You have been a great help to me, Lara. I am glad to know that I can count on you. Now go and try to rest a bit. You've certainly earned it."

Lara appeared to be pleased by these words of praise, and she withdrew.

Lyall sat on her bed, thinking as hard as she could.

Based on what Lara had overheard and related to her, it seemed that no, these two men had no idea what had happened to her father (or, indeed, what was going on at all). She had no reason to think they would be anything but truthful about that among each other.

Unless they believed they were being listened to, a voice within her fretted quietly. I must remember that these are not ordinary people I am dealing with here. They are Campbell warriors, and that makes them more cunning and dangerous than most. They might have assumed someone was eavesdropping. They might even have seen the shadow of Lara under the door, or heard her breathing outside, and chosen to prevaricate until they could be sure she was gone.

In which case, I seem to be back at the beginning of this horrid maze all over again.

Her mind's eye kept presenting her with images of Rowan. He had such a handsome and guileless face, and the way those dark blue eyes peered at her so intently made her feel as though no one had ever truly seen her before. His comrade Cillian had looked at her with intense suspicion ever since their arrival, but Rowan's eyes held something else – genuine curiosity, and a genuine desire to become better acquainted with whatever was in her head and heart. The sympathy she saw in them regarding the loss of her father seemed quite real.

But how could she be sure? How, when there was so much at stake and he could just as easily be extraordinarily gifted at

deception?

She bitterly wished she had managed to keep her composure with him. She'd been doing so damned well at first, but eventually, his questioning had made her explode at him – confessing her own damned frustration and angst at all she'd been dealing with, and plainly displaying that she was completely overwhelmed by it all. She was ashamed of herself. Her father would never have let any of that slip if he'd been in the same situation. He'd have remained stoic to the last.

Then again, she highly doubted that he would have had the same problems when confronted with this Rowan fellow. He wouldn't have had nearly so much trouble keeping himself from getting lost in those cobalt eyes.

No, she did not wish to believe this man had had anything to do with her father's death. She was less sure of his comrade, but then again, why would either of them bother to feign ignorance having accomplished the deed? Why would they not simply have taken advantage of the confusion and dissension among the ranks of the Dewars by showing up in force and taking things over fully?

Because if they couldn't afford the number of men it would have taken to protect us from the Adder to begin with, then they likely couldn't send as many warriors as it would take to subjugate us all at once, she thought. It's the likely reason why they've sent someone as crafty as Rowan... to manipulate us more subtly in that regard, and thus clear the way for a far easier sort of invasion.

Lyall collapsed backward into the bed, her eyes filling with tears.

The closest she had ever come to feeling this sort of helpless horror was when her mother had died. It was several years ago, and it had been sudden – a sickness that had moved upon her as swiftly as a hawk swooping down from the sky. She'd been healthy upon awakening; by early afternoon, she'd been coughing blood and fainting; and by the time the sun set,

the healers had pronounced her dead. They'd tried everything they could think of, but the mysterious malady had consumed her all too quickly.

Lyall had been entirely unable to accept it for a long time. Her mind had rebelled entirely at the notion that someone she loved could be swept away from her so instantly and horribly. In her young mind, illnesses were things that lingered at least a day or two... giving loved ones the chance to say their goodbyes and prepare for mourning, if nothing else.

It felt as though the ground had been pulled out from under her. As though she could not rely upon any natural law anymore, nor could she trust in anything she had previously believed to be true.

Eventually, she recovered from it as best she could. Now, though, she realized that she had committed the cardinal sin of forgetting that a parent could be stolen from her so suddenly, and it had happened again.

Except this time, she was truly alone. No parents left to comfort or console her. No one remaining for her to rely upon in her time of greatest need.

Under normal circumstances, she would have thought that at the very least, she could depend upon her lifelong friend Ewan. But to learn that he had taken a group of men into the woods to fire poisoned arrows at approaching Campbells?

To learn that he was poisoning his arrows at *all*, after what had happened when they were children?

She did not feel that the promise he'd made back then had been silly, or that it ought to have been abandoned with age. Such behavior was despicable, and she had thought it to be beneath him – she thought she'd known him well enough to know what he was capable of, and to consider him to be a decent and honorable man.

Now images of Rowan's blue, blood-speckled lips haunted her, and brought back vivid and unwelcome memories of that

day with the deer. How could Ewan carry out such a cowardly attack?

She tried to tell herself it was because he was committed to the clan's independence, and as such, he was willing to do whatever it took to achieve that goal. She did all she could to convince herself that his intentions had been noble, and that he had clearly felt they justified his methods. Perhaps, in his own mind, he was even doing this for her – indeed, it had certainly seemed that way when he'd been on one knee before her, promising her a freed clan.

But she would never have asked or expected such a thing of him – to lower himself to using envenomed weapons, and worse, using them to carry out a sneak attack against men who had no idea they were walking into an ambush.

It was shameful. It was disgraceful. It made the tears flow freely from her eyes, and she buried her face in her pillow, sobbing.

If only she could have Ewan to rely on now. Instead, he was plotting his own schemes and keeping the details from her. Like everyone else around her, from the look of it. There was Lara, at least; but Lara was not known for her intelligence, and for that matter, Lyall couldn't be wholly certain she could be counted on for her discretion either. By now, every other servant in the castle might have heard every word of what Lara had told her, and the gossip-mongering would surely be fierce.

Then what? Would those in favor of the Campbells act on it?

Would those who were loyal to the Adder do so as well?

In truth, Lyall could not even be sure that her words to Ewan had had any effect whatsoever. As she squeezed her eyes shut, she could easily picture him returning to those same woods with his men creeping behind him – all of them brandishing weapons painted with that same damnable venom, all of them waiting for more Campbells to show themselves.

No, she could not count on Ewan's loyalty or honesty. Not when he had committed himself so fully to his cause.

Was there any part of her that felt confident he might accomplish what he said? Could Ewan somehow find a way to make the Dewars independent again? She could think of no way for him to see that through, but then, she had no idea of what hidden machinations he (and his father, for that matter) might be engaging in to ensure that outcome.

It was a noble goal, to be sure. One most members of the clan could not argue with in principle, even if they believed it was impossible in practice. Could Ewan get enough of them to follow him?

And if so, who would lead the clan then? Would Hamish be laird?

Would he be a good one?

These questions screeched and flapped around Lyall's mind like a flock of bats, and she was suddenly seized by the irrational urge to go down to the guest rooms and listen at Rowan's door. She knew how ludicrous it was to imagine that the two men knew they were being listened to, and that they reserved their more private conversation for after Lara's departure – but now that the notion was in her head, she found that she simply could not purge it.

Just a quick jaunt downstairs, to prove herself wrong. That was all. Once she'd done it and heard nothing, she could count herself a proper fool and return to bed with fewer paranoid concerns taking up space in her head.

She dried her eyes and ventured out into the hallway, making her way to the stone steps which led down to the guest rooms. As she did, she peered around herself furtively, wanting to ensure that no one saw her doing anything so silly as this. She knew that at this hour, most of the servants had retired for the night – and since things had fallen into ruin, it was unlikely that any of them would be inclined to work longer hours.

Still, she needed to be careful. She needed to be sure. She couldn't expect to keep control over the castle's staff while making herself an object of ridicule.

She found the right door and crept up to it, pressing her ear against it carefully. She felt utterly ridiculous, like a little girl trying to eavesdrop on her parents while they were fighting. She had numerous memories of that very scenario, as a matter of fact, though she wished she did not. Her parents had loved each other in their way, but they had also rarely seen eye-to-eye.

Particularly when it had come to the Campbells, now that she thought of it. Her mother had always believed that the Campbells had the clan's best interests at heart, while her father had frequently insisted otherwise. He had long supported the notion of the Dewars being independent as they had been before, and it had led them to many bitter arguments. Lyall had always imagined that was the reason he had come to vocally support the Adder later on.

She listened carefully, but she could hear nothing but light snoring coming from within the room.

“Lyall?”

Lyall nearly jumped out of her skin at the voice behind her. She turned and saw Lara, looking at her curiously.

“Is everything all right?” Lara asked.

Lyall nodded furiously, not wanting her voice to be heard within... for she was almost certain she'd heard a pause in the snoring when Lara had spoken up.

Had she been caught spying? She felt more idiotic than ever for having done so!

Lyall waved Lara away and ran back to her own room, slamming the door behind her. She threw herself on the bed and cried all the harder, having failed at even this small attempt to gain more information.

She had never felt so hopeless in all her life.

Rowan spent an uneasy night in the guest room.

There were several elements which kept him from getting much rest. The first was Cillian's damnable snoring. It was like trying to sleep next to a wild boar, and no matter how Rowan pressed his pillows to the sides of his head, it still cut into his slumber horrendously. There wasn't anything he could do about it – he knew Cillian needed his rest too, and even if he woke Cillian up, it wouldn't quiet him down once he settled back into sleep again.

When Rowan *was* finally able to drift into a fitful sleep, he had feverish and outlandish nightmares – for his body was still fighting off the last of the poison from the arrow, and so his blood boiled and his brain burned with frightful images.

In his dreams, he saw flames spring up from behind the ramparts of the Dewar Castle, leaping miles into the sky and igniting the very clouds themselves with roiling red ether. The people of the clan were shrieking and howling, and at first, Rowan assumed that they would be running away from the blaze in a panic.

Instead, though, when he looked more closely, he saw that the clan members were too busy attacking each other to flee. Swords were clashing against shields; war hammers and morningstars crashed against helmets and breastplates; the figures were framed by fire and bathed in blood, screeching like demons in the deepest pits of hell.

Rowan tried to cry out to them – to warn them that if they did not get away from the flames and the ruined castle, they would surely perish. But when he opened his mouth, he found his voice was gone.

Then he looked up, and in the window of the highest tower, he saw Lyall flailing helplessly.

He was seized by the urge to try to rescue her, for the thought of her soft skin and lovely hair burning to cinders was more than he could bear.

The fire roared all around him as he darted through the gates and across the courtyard. Blades were swinging on all sides, forcing him to duck and dodge around them. One or two of them managed to draw blood just the same, and from the wounds poured thick black poison that made him dizzy and light-headed... but he pressed on nonetheless, refusing to be daunted.

The tower steps were impossibly steep, and felt as though they were shifting beneath his feet. Was the tower itself collapsing? It certainly seemed that way – it teetered crazily around him, and jagged stones fell from above. The stairs went on infinitely, and there were even times when the more he hurried, the more sure he was that he was going down instead of up.

At last, though, he came to the room at the very top and saw Lyall standing at the window.

You must come with me at once! His voice was still gone, yet somehow, the words were heard and understood by her. *The tower is about to collapse! I'll get you to safety!*

But she shook her head. Her grey eyes were filled with alarm – but there was suspicion and hatred in them as well. “I cannot trust you!” she screamed. “You are the reason for all of this! You have brought the destruction of my clan!”

And before he could stop her, she leaped from the window, her shriek lost in the roar of the flames.

Rowan sat bolt upright in bed, his sheets drenched in sweat. It took a few moments of listening to his comrade's snoring for him to remember where he was, and try to calm himself.

Ordinarily, Rowan wasn't one who put much stock in dreams and their obscure symbolism. This time, however, the meaning was too clear to be ignored: He had to get Lyall to trust him, so that together, they could prevent the clan from tearing itself apart completely.

He stayed awake until dawn, trying to come up with a proper way to approach her. The idea he came up with seemed like a shaky prospect, but it was better than nothing. When Cillian awoke, Rowan shared the idea with him – and likewise, Cillian was uneasy with it.

“Can you think of any other way?” Cillian asked. “How can we trust her enough for this?”

“Those who want trust must earn trust,” Rowan replied. “At any rate, I wasn't able to think of anything better to get her on our side. Can you?”

Cillian considered it, then shook his head. “No, I suppose not.”

Breakfast was brought to their room – though the fare was decidedly meager, leading Rowan to wonder whether it was because the Campbells were not as welcome here as they used to be, or if it was simply because conditions in the castle had gone so far downhill since the death of the steward.

When he found Lyall a short while later, he put the question to her. She responded with annoyance. “I am sorry if our hospitality falls short of your expectations, sir.”

“I did not mean to be rude or critical in making the observation,” he assured her. “If anything, I was expressing concern. Are your pantries and sculleries poorly stocked?”

She looked away, clearly ashamed. “Since my father's death, all of this in-fighting has led to a breakdown in the way things are run. I have been doing all I can to keep up, but the

taxes haven't been collected, the food and supplies here are running dry..."

"Then perhaps you'll let me assist you with these things."

Lyall blinked at him, confused. "How would you propose to do that?"

"Well, for starters, my people and I can accompany you with horses and carts, so that tribute can be properly collected from the clan members this very day," he suggested. "With your larders full again and your servants properly paid, at least the castle will run more smoothly, eh? That will be one less thing for you to concern yourself with during this difficult time."

"And... you would do that for me?" Her tone was suspicious, and so was her gaze.

He supposed he couldn't blame her much for that, after everything she'd been through. "Why not? The guardsmen came along to make sure we got here safely. Now that they've done so, there's not much left for them to do except remain in their chambers to avoid the harsh glares of your people, given how unpopular we Campbells seem to be here at the moment. It will give them a bit of exercise, and it will give us a chance to talk."

She thought it over for a long moment, then nodded warily. "Very well. I shall arrange for the horses and carts, and meet you in the courtyard in one hour."

Sure enough, an hour later, Rowan and his guards found Lyall standing in the courtyard with three large carts hitched to horses. The group ventured out together, visiting the clan's farms and homes to collect what had been owed to them over the past few months. Some of the commoners grumbled a bit, and there were a few who didn't have enough to cover their debt and needed to make arrangements to pay it off in installments.

Overall, though, the excursion was a tremendous success – and Rowan saw Lyall visibly relax, until by the time they were

on their way back to the castle (the carts heavily laden with food, coin, and other forms of payment), she seemed like a different person entirely. When she looked at him, the suspicion was gone from her eyes, replaced with relief and gratitude.

“You cannot begin to imagine how much this has helped me,” she told him. “Thank you. I... am sorry I was so difficult before.”

He shook his head. “No apologies are necessary. You have been under terrible strain, especially after the unfortunate passing of your father. If anything, I am the one who ought to apologize to you for having appeared here unannounced. If I’d had my manners about me when we first met, I would have done so.”

Lyall smiled – and the effect it had on Rowan was astonishing, for it made his heart unfurl marvelously, like a rosebud that had suddenly chosen to bloom. He had admired her beauty before, but seeing her face soften with mirth transformed her in his eyes into the most gorgeous woman on earth.

“You cannot be faulted for forgetting your manners a bit, given that you had been shot with a poisoned arrow,” she observed merrily. “If anything, the fact that you were coherent at all was nothing short of a miracle. You seem to be entirely healed from it now, though?”

“It would appear so.” Rowan reflexively touched the spot where the arrow had plunged into him and winced. “I doubt I’ll have full strength in that limb for a while yet, but it could have been a good deal worse.” He paused, then added, “There are other things I ought to have mentioned to you during our first encounter. Things I had hoped we might discuss now.”

A wary shadow passed over her face again. “Very well. What are they?”

“Your father had been a full-throated supporter of the Adder during his final months. Everyone knows this.” He

lowered his voice slightly. “What is not widely known, however, is that he had secretly pledged his loyalties to us.”

Lyall frowned. “Do you mean to say that he was insincere in his support for the McGillivrays?”

“The arrangement, as it had been worked out between your father and Laird Sam, was for him to gain the Adder’s trust so that he might spy on him, learn his plans, and relay them to us. There... were some among us who were unclear where his true loyalties might have been, toward the end of things.”

“You seem to be telling me that my father was spying on the MacGillivrays for you... and at the same time, you suspected him of spying on *you* for the MacGillivrays?”

“I did not *personally* believe that his loyalties to us were compromised,” Rowan rushed to add. “Other advisors to Laird Sam entertained those suspicions, though. And Laird Sam, being prudent, could not exactly ignore them. That is a large part of why we were sent here, Lyall: To try to determine who your father was truly loyal to in the end, so that we might better understand who killed him. With that in mind, anything you might be able to tell me that could clarify all of this...”

“I wish I could help you in that regard,” she answered, sounding sincere. “To my knowledge, my father supported the Adder... though I could never understand why he should do so, since the Campbells were our sworn allies while the Adder had carried out raids against us. I tried to ask him about it, but he insisted that there were things going on which I was too young and innocent to understand. Perhaps in saying so, he was alluding to your arrangement with him. I do not know.”

“Is there any way you might be able to find out? Anyone else he might have confided in more closely?”

She gave it some thought, her lovely brow slightly furrowed. Finally, she said, “There are no people I feel I could trust enough to ask at this point... not with everyone at each other’s throats. However, there might be some evidence of it in his study. If I can bring myself to look there.”

“Is that where his body was discovered?”

“It was where *I* discovered his body, yes,” she affirmed in a quiet, haunted tone.

“I can plainly see why you have been hesitant to venture into that room since then,” Rowan replied in a comforting tone. “If you’d like, I can explore it on my own to save you the grief of it.”

She gave him a wan yet genuine smile. “It’s most kind of you to offer. However, I believe it would be best if I confronted that room on my own. Particularly since I will know all of the best places to look.”

“If you say so,” he agreed. “But if you change your mind, the offer will remain. Meanwhile, I shall try to assemble all of the relevant parties here so that we might begin to consider how this clan will go forward without its steward.”

Then Rowan did something that surprised even himself. He reached out and took her hand in his, squeezing it. Her touch was soft and warm, and she did not pull her hand away – in fact, she gripped his tightly in return, and the connection that passed between them in that moment could not be expressed in mere words.

They silently wished each other luck... and their hands remained clasped for several moments before Rowan could find the strength to let go.

As Lyall climbed the steps to her father's study, she expected to be gripped by grief and dread. Whenever she had previously contemplated entering that room again, she had imagined that her legs would feel as though they were weighted down by chains, and her heart would slam against her ribs at the memory of the last time she had visited that chamber.

She was surprised to discover that it was far easier than she ever would have expected.

She felt strangely bolstered by the purpose behind it. Rowan had questions which needed to be answered, in order for the clan to properly heal and move forward – and since she wanted to help him achieve that goal more than anything, she knew she had no choice but to confront her previous fears about that room and the dreadful memories associated with it. She couldn't let Rowan down, not when the stakes were so high.

Not when she had come to think so highly of him.

Yes, she found herself oddly (but profoundly) embarrassed by the way she had treated him before. She had thought of him as an intruder, someone whose presence would only complicate things further – perhaps even an outright enemy, given the suspicions that the Campbells might have had something to do with her father's death. She'd done all she could to keep him at arm's length since his arrival. God help

her, she had even caught herself feeling vaguely glad that he had been poisoned, since it might make him a less formidable opponent if things came to that.

She'd been wholly astonished at his offer to help her collect the taxes from the people of the clan. When he'd proposed it, part of her had almost declined, thinking that he would be unnecessarily rough or bellicose in exacting those payments from the Dewars – but he had been kind and gentle with each of them, showing them tremendous respect and deference given his station.

Some had been hostile to him, which was to be expected, since the clan had been so bitterly divided of late. But to her amazement, Rowan hadn't allowed that to dissuade him or affect his mood outwardly in any way. He'd been patient and understanding, and he had encouraged his guardsmen not to bristle (which was a formidable task, since the sight of Campbell guardsmen on Dewar lands had initially provoked some dread among the people of the clan).

Many of them had had stories of hardship, which had often been presented as accusations thrown at him as a Campbell. He had listened to these stories politely, addressed their concerns concisely, and ended up befriending them more often than not.

The whole thing had been astounding to watch.

Could it all have been some ruse to earn her trust? Perhaps, but she had a hard time believing there had been anything disingenuous about his words and deeds, given their apparent earnestness.

Or perhaps she simply wanted to believe in his actions because she so desperately needed to trust someone.

Lyll knew that Rowan's status as an outsider should have made him less trustworthy, not more. But he hadn't been ensnared in all of the convoluted intrigue which had made Dewar Castle feel like a giant, sticky, hideous spider's web

over the previous months. That might mean he had no real reason to deceive her.

She had become convinced that he had not been involved in her father's murder, which was a strong indicator that his laird hadn't either. Was that enough, then, for her to rely on him?

She wasn't sure. She hoped that any clue she might unearth in her father's study would give her firmer answers to these questions.

Now she found herself standing in front of the door to the study, and she had to remind herself there was no need to knock anymore. She took a deep breath, braced herself, and entered.

Some silly part of her had almost expected to see her father's corpse still slumped over the desk, just as it had been the last time she was in this room – complete with blood stains all over the walls and floor, perhaps from a struggle before he slouched at the desk and succumbed to his wound.

But no. Every trace of the ghastly scene had been meticulously cleaned. The surface of the desk looked much as it always had – though Lyall found that if she stared at it hard enough, she could make out a vague pink circle where the blood had taken hold too deeply in the wood to come out entirely.

That unsettled her, to be sure. Still, she forced herself to take a step into the room, and then another.

Her clan was depending on her. So was Rowan's, for that matter – for if this entire situation did not come to a peaceful conclusion soon, there might well be war between the Campbells and whoever ended up seizing control of the Dewars.

Things were awful and chaotic enough. She couldn't bear the thought that they might become worse still.

Lyall began by carefully going through all the papers and letters she could find in her father's desk. Part of her imagined

that this would be a futile exercise, since any number of people involved with this fiasco might well have broken in and removed anything of value before now. This felt especially likely given the hypothesis that her father's killer had been known to him, which was how he'd been able to easily gain access to this study and slip the knife in from behind.

Even so, she knew she had to be thorough.

Sure enough, she found little of interest. There were land titles and ledgers detailing taxes and payments, not to mention piles of personal correspondence. There were no letters to or from Laird Sam, however; and their absence seemed conspicuous to her, since as a matter of course, a steward like her father would have kept in close contact with the laird of the clan his stewardship was on behalf of.

There it was, then. Someone *had* come in and stolen some of her father's papers, and she had no way of knowing who that could have been. She leaned against the wall, feeling deeply frustrated. Had all of this been a miserable waste of time?

Then she remembered the secret drawer.

It wasn't something she had thought about for several years. When she was a little girl, her father had had a hidden drawer built into his desk just for her – so that he could leave notes and small gifts in there for her, and she could do likewise for him. It had been a lovely little secret between them. One day she might find a shiny green apple waiting for her inside; another day, she might leave a daisy chain for him there.

It was unlikely that she'd find anything there now which would be relevant to the matter at hand – but even so, she had to try.

Her hand slid around the side of the desk, searching for the small button which would cause the drawer to pop open. Sure enough, her fingertip found it and she pressed it, releasing the tiny drawer. It was funny; she remembered the drawer's

dimensions as being larger, but of course, she had been ever so much smaller the last time she'd looked upon it.

Inside, she found a folded piece of paper.

For a strange moment, she almost expected it to be addressed to her, just like all the other little notes he'd left for her all those years ago. But when she unfolded it, she saw that it was an unfinished message addressed to Laird Sam Campbell – and that it was dated the day of her father's death.

Lyall held the letter with trembling hands, reading:

Laird Sam,

As ever, I remain loyal to the Campbell Clan – which has made it increasingly difficult for me to publicly pretend at supporting that vile serpent MacGillivray, though I continue to do so at every opportunity. If my performance is unconvincing, then I might find myself suspected of spying on your behalf, and as such, I would be in grave peril; contrarily, if I am not convincing enough, my very life might be in danger.

So far, the Adder's allies have not taken me into their confidence, but I remain hopeful that

Here the letter ended abruptly, no doubt due to someone knocking on the door and her father hastily hiding the missive in the drawer before allowing him entry.

It was not difficult for Lyall to imagine what had happened next, though the thought of it sent a horrible shudder through her.

So there was the proof of it, then, it seemed. Her father had been on the side of the Campbells all along. He had genuinely believed that the Dewars' continued loyalty to the Campbells would save them from the Adder.

And he'd been killed for it.

But by whom?

Lyall took the letter and left the room, closing the door behind her. Would this evidence be proof enough to the other

clan members that they should fully side with the Campbells against the MacGillivrays?

She fervently hoped so.

She went in search of Rowan, and when she found him, she was astonished by her own deep sense of relief in his presence. He smiled upon seeing her, and her heart leaped in her chest like a deer frolicking in the woods.

“I have been able to get all of the people involved to agree to meet this evening,” he told her. “With any luck, we’ll be able to make them work out some kind of arrangement that will keep this clan from being torn apart completely. You know all of them better than I... do you feel it might be possible?”

Lyall thought it over. “I wish I could say for certain. Ewan can be reasoned with, but his father is less agreeable... and some of the others will be even more difficult to manage. Still, we must try.”

“Were you able to find anything that might help us sway them?” he asked hopefully. “At this point, I’ll gladly take any advantage I can get!”

She produced the letter and showed it to him. He read through it quickly. “So you see I was telling you the truth, then. Your father was loyal to us.”

Lyall nodded. “I am sorry I doubted you at first...”

“No, no, you were wise to wait to trust me until you found the proof for yourself.” He peered at her intently. “You have tremendous intelligence for one so young. Perhaps this clan would be best with you as its leader.”

She laughed uncertainly. “It is kind of you to say so, but we both know that would never happen. Indeed, I would venture to guess that it is the one principle every man sitting at that table will agree upon completely.”

He shrugged, smiling. “Then perhaps we should start off with that proposal, eh? Just to get them all on the same side?”

Lyall laughed again, and she was grateful to him for his humor, knowing that he was doing his best to put her at ease after the ordeal of entering her father's study.

"You have done well," he added. "I am greatly in your debt. Together, I hope we can put your clan back in order. Now come, let's prepare to meet all of these fellows and hear their bickering. If that healer of yours has a good powder for headaches, I suggest we avail ourselves of it beforehand."

An hour later, there were several Dewar Clan members seated around the long table of the Dining Hall. Rowan, Cillian, and Lyall took their position at one end of the table, since they meant to preside over the meeting – when Hamish and Ewan arrived, they immediately claimed the other end, forcing everyone who came subsequently to sit at positions of lesser importance.

So even this meeting will be an exercise in jockeying for authority and respect, Rowan thought wearily. I had hoped this would have a more promising start, but I suppose that was silly of me.

Still, at least everyone who'd been invited had chosen to show up. He'd wondered whether that would be the case, or whether some among them would choose to display their contempt for the proceedings by avoiding them altogether.

“Thank you all for coming,” Rowan began. “It is my hope that together, we can come to some sensible agreement regarding the future of this clan...”

“Before we get into all that,” Hamish interrupted loudly, standing up, “I believe we ought to address how comfortable you seem, standing at the head of the table and telling us how things will be... given that *you*, sir, are no Dewar!”

There were grunts of agreement from some of the others in attendance.

“You speak of ‘the future of this clan?’” Hamish went on derisively. “Who are you to preside over such a discussion? Why should we not be left to decide such matters on our own?”

“To begin with,” Cillian observed, “your clan swore an oath of loyalty and service to our own. As such, we hold you to your word... and therefore, it is for *us* to dictate which path you should be on.”

Rowan winced. That was precisely the last approach he would have recommended when dealing with a table full of men as stubborn as these.

“Look around you, lad,” Hamish retorted in a menacing tone. “Of the men here, fewer than half continue to support the Campbell claims of rule over our people.”

“Does that mean, then, that the clan as a whole intends to break their vow to us?” Cillian inquired. “That you renounce our arrangement completely? If so, then I suppose that concludes our involvement in this matter... in which case, we will leave at once, and instruct our people to provide no further coin, aid, or resources to your clan.”

“We will not be doing that,” Rowan spoke up firmly, casting a baleful glance at Cillian. “We have no intention of abandoning our responsibility to this clan, even if there are those among you who feel you no longer have need of our alliance. A divided clan is a weakened one... and a weakened clan would be easy for the Adder to gain control of. That would be bad for all involved.”

“Who’s to say?” A burly older man with a long red mustache stood up – Barlas, a wealthy merchant and outspoken supporter of the Adder. “The Dewar Clan might well prosper under MacGillivray’s leadership. And why do you insist on referring to him by that infantile name? Clearly, you seek to prejudice us against him unfairly from the start!”

“What amazes me, Barlas, is that you would not be prejudiced against the Adder to begin with.” This time the

speaker was Harrower, a thin and reedy Campbell loyalist with watery blue eyes and receding blonde hair. “Have you already forgotten how he robbed your coaches? Stole your money and merchandise? Killed the men you hired to guard them? How can you champion him as a potential leader for us after what he’s taken from you?”

“Because I saw his actions for what they were,” Barlas shot back. “Shows of strength! Demonstrations that those who pledged themselves to keep us safe could not make good on those promises, and that the time has come to replace them with one whose commanding might will restore us to our former glory!”

“A bloodthirsty monster like the Adder, and you would bend the knee to him?” Harrower balked. “You would put our fate in his hands?!”

“As usual, we have lost the point of it all,” Hamish insisted, “which is that *no* outsider – MacGillivray or Campbell – should be in charge of our clan’s destiny! We must rule over ourselves once more, instead of pitifully insisting that others control us!”

“You and your son have shouted such things until you’re blue in the bloody face,” Harrower sneered. “And every time you’re asked how we can possibly rule ourselves, you are able to give no sensible answer. We remain depleted of sufficient resources and soldiers to fight off even the Adder, let alone the combined might of the Campbells and their allies! Our choice is clearly to throw in our lot with either one or the other! To reject both would seal our doom, particularly since we would be wholly unable to fight off both at the same time! Your position comes from foolish pride, nothing more!”

“Before that comment is answered, I want to make one thing perfectly clear,” Rowan interjected. “If the Dewar Clan renounces their alliance with the Campbells, we will indeed be upset... however, that in itself will not be reason enough for us to go to war with you.”

“No, you will simply wait until we’ve pledged ourselves to MacGillivray, and *then* you will call us your enemies and come to kill us,” Barlas countered with a smirk.

“If you ride beneath his banner and threaten our clan as he has, then yes, you would – regrettably – become our enemies,” Cillian conceded. “We do not want that to be the outcome here. It is why we have come to this place, and why we have called this meeting. We fervently hope that all of this may be resolved without any further bloodletting.”

“Oh, but there *shall* be blood here, one way or the other,” Harrower pointed out in a sinister tone. “We choose the MacGillivrays, and we shall fight the Campbells for them... we choose the Campbells, and the reverse will end up true.”

“Which is why, once again, I insist that we submit to neither of them!” Hamish roared. “We have the Campbells’ assurance that if we reject their rule, they will not make war on us over it. Then we need only stand up for ourselves against the Adder, and we shall be free of them both! As long as we all stand united...”

“Ah, but that is a rather weighty presumption, isn’t it?” Harrower spoke up. “There could be those among us who would continue to show loyalty to the Adder in secret, and undermine us from within... until in the end, we’ll be at that monster’s mercy.”

“Aye, just as there could easily be those who quietly work to destabilize us from within on behalf of the Campbells,” Barlas responded. “They say that if we throw off their yoke, they will leave us to it. But how can we trust them to keep their word?”

“We Campbells have always been upstanding and honorable,” Cillian said forcefully. “Our history and reputation speak for themselves, and anyone who claims otherwise is a damned liar.”

“There’s no need for us to start shouting ‘liar’ at each other across the table,” Rowan cut in. “Rather, I propose this: All of

the men sitting here supported Arran Dewar when he was steward, did you not?"

"We did, aye," Harrower answered cautiously. "Before all of this business with the Adder, at least. When he spoke publicly in support of that butcher, I thought he had gone quite mad!"

"As it turns out, he had not," Lyall said.

Barlas, Harrower, and Hamish all turned their eyes to her as though they had entirely forgotten she was in the room. For that matter, Cillian looked somewhat surprised as well.

"What on earth is that supposed to mean?" Hamish demanded. "We heard his words with our own damned ears!"

Lyall produced the unfinished letter from her father, allowing it to be passed around the table. "Rowan has informed me that my father was secretly working with the Campbells the entire time. His apparent newfound loyalty to the Adder was meant as a ruse, so that he could gain the enemy's trust and collect information about him to relate to Laird Sam. I went to my father's study to find some proof of it, and discovered this among his possessions."

As she said these words, Lyall carefully studied the faces of the men there – for she was sure that one of them had been involved with her father's death, and as such, might show added surprise that he had missed such a letter when ransacking the study.

But none of their faces betrayed any such thing.

"What is this nonsense supposed to prove?" Hamish thundered. "It might be a counterfeit, it might have been planted...!"

"I recognize my father's handwriting, and so will you, if you examine it closely enough," Lyall insisted. "Not only that, but I found it in a place that no one else knew of... a secret compartment that my father and I shared while he was alive. The letter is entirely genuine. It plainly shows that if the steward of this clan were still here, he would urge us to trust in

the Campbells. The last thing he would want any of us to do is to bend the knee to the Adder.”

“No, what it ‘plainly shows’ is that your father was a liar and a spy,” Barlas spoke up. “He hid his true motivations from us all while he lived, and continued to bow and scrape before the leaders of a clan that did *nothing* to prevent MacGillivray’s encroachment to begin with. I, for one, care not what such a man would have to say if he were here with us now! If anything, it only shows that he was unfit to be our steward!”

“Down with all stewards, I say!” Hamish slammed his fist upon the table. “It is time for this clan to have a laird of its own once more!”

“And no doubt you would nominate yourself for such a lofty position?” Barlas asked mockingly.

Hamish shook his head. “I am old, and whichever direction this clan must proceed in, it ought to have a young man’s hands upon the reins. My son Ewan would make a fine laird. He has our people’s best interests at heart, and he has the strength and wit to achieve such things on their behalf. Most of all, he has the determination to stand up to the Campbells, and the wit to seek a sustainable peace with MacGillivray.”

There was general consternation at this. “How do you propose to negotiate peace with a brute like the Adder?!” Harrower demanded. “He has shown no interest in anything but our conquest!”

“Perhaps he has simply not been approached properly,” Ewan replied with a shrug. “Perhaps in that regard, I might succeed where the rest of you have failed.”

“Aye, and perhaps the pigs my neighbor raises will walk on their hind legs and speak in rhyme, but it’s not an outcome I’d bet my future on!” Harrower spat.

The men began to argue and curse amongst themselves again, and Rowan sighed, holding up a hand to silence them. “I can see that we have encountered an impasse tonight,” he said, “and so I would suggest that we all retire for the evening,

and reconvene tomorrow in the hope that cooler heads might prevail.”

As Harrower, Barlas, and Ewan and his father withdrew from the room, Rowan collapsed in his chair and put his head in his hands ruefully. “Well, that was a rather dreadful waste of time, wasn’t it?”

“I do wish you hadn’t kept contradicting me,” Cillian said fussily. “I might have been able to make a bit more progress with them.”

“All you were doing was incensing them further,” Rowan pointed out. “We couldn’t have them thinking that the Campbells will ride in here with swords drawn if they choose not to be allied with us anymore. That would only deepen the hatred and resentment of those who see themselves as our enemies.”

“That seemed to rather resemble what just transpired!” Cillian shot back, turning to Lyall. “And you might have warned me that she was planning to speak at all, let alone that she held such a thing as that letter! When did you find out about it?”

“Directly before this meeting,” Rowan answered stonily, “and since this is Lyall’s clan, and her father was its steward, I see no reason why she cannot speak as she likes. It is certainly not for me to restrain her, particularly when she made an extremely valid point.”

“A point that they all chose to ignore,” she observed bitterly. “For the life of me, I cannot believe that they would all be so... cold and indifferent when shown proof of my father’s true loyalties.”

“That he was operating in secret was, naturally, not something they were prepared to hear,” Cillian said. “I can

understand their dismissal of the letter on that score.”

“To think that these were the same men whom he counted among his friends and trusted comrades in life!” Lyall protested. “When I remember all the times they smiled in his face, all the times they claimed to trust his leadership... and the very moment he is gone, they turn on each other like a pack of animals, snarling and clawing and tearing the clan to pieces! What hope can there be for any of us, if one of them is meant to lead us?”

“All is not settled yet,” Rowan reminded her. “We will continue to do all that we can to make them see reason.”

“What if they choose not to ally themselves with us any longer?” Cillian prodded. “Are we to simply ride off again, leave them to it, and hope it all turns out for the best?”

“In that event, I honestly do not see what else we could conceivably do,” Rowan admitted. “We are not brutes and conquerors like the Adder. It is not for us to impose ourselves upon this clan as its rulers if we are not wanted or accepted by them.”

“And then we simply wait until they ally themselves with the Adder come for us next?” Cillian balked. “Surely that cannot be your plan!”

Rowan looked at him sternly. “We do not wage proactive wars, Cillian. That has never been who we are. If the Dewars choose to make themselves our enemies, we will respond in kind, to defend our lands and our people. Until then, we will do nothing to provoke them, nor will we immediately consider them our adversaries. Besides, it is possible – however unlikely – that Ewan and his father will prevail, and that the clan will rule over itself once more. If that happens, perhaps things might settle down a bit, and we will find ourselves in a better position to re-establish a relationship with them.”

“That’s a powerful big ‘if’ to gamble upon, just as that Harrower fellow said,” Cillian replied dubiously.

“For now, it is all we have,” Rowan answered.

“Aye, that and an empty stomach,” Cillian grumbled. “I was upset at first that the servants brought nothing for us to eat, only now I imagine those men would have only ended up hurling it at each other. And us. I’m off to our chambers.” He turned to Lyall again. “And if it wouldn’t be too much trouble, might you ask a servant to send up a bit of nourishment? As I understand it, Rowan helped you collect some food from the farms earlier today. Surely you can spare a few plates of it for us and our guardsmen?”

“Of course,” she agreed softly. “I’ll attend to it at once.”

Cillian glanced at Rowan, then back at her again – as though he felt suddenly apprehensive about leaving the two of them alone together. But he was too tired to remark upon it, so he left the room (shaking his head gently at how poorly things had gone with the meeting).

Rowan looked at the Great Hall, with its high vaulted ceilings and carved stone visages of the great men who had led the clan before – all of them larger than life, mutely standing shoulder to shoulder and scowling like the noble warriors they once were. Now, not only had that line been broken, but even the steward who had been appointed to keep the peace had been slaughtered in his own study.

Such violence. Such lawlessness and chaos. Were any of the men who’d been at the meeting worthy of leadership? Could any of those squabbling lot summon the strength to unite their people?

He could not say for sure, but he gravely doubted it. And meanwhile, the Great Hall seemed so vast and vacant around the two of them that it gave an eerie impression of insignificance, as though they were naught but a pair of motes floating in the uncaring expanse of eternity.

Lyall closed her eyes and lowered her head. “It all seems more hopeless now than it did before. If the Campbells were to be rejected entirely by our clan, would you truly ride off, never to return?”

“At that point, there is little else I could do,” Rowan admitted. “Though it might not be ‘never.’ Not if peaceful relations are established, or...” He stopped short.

“Or if you were forced to return to war,” she finished for him bleakly.

“That... is another potential outcome, aye. One I would do everything in my power to prevent.”

Her grey eyes opened again, and she turned away from him. “It’s funny, in a way. I have always thought of this place, these people, as my home... why would I not, when this clan is all I’ve ever known? I have never even traveled beyond its borders. I thought I had friends here, like Ewan... people I had counted as friends my entire life. Now that everything around me is in tatters, I realize that other than my mother and father – both gone now – I have never truly had anything here to rely upon. I thought I knew Ewan like a brother, but I never could have imagined what he has done, nor what he is prepared to do.”

Rowan’s eyes softened, and he cupped her face in his hands, forcing her to meet his gaze. “When you say ‘what he has done’... you mean that he is the one who fired upon us with poisoned arrows, don’t you? No, do not be alarmed,” he added quickly as her eyes widened. “I am not angry with you about it, and whatever you tell me will remain between us, you have my word. There is no need to throw more kindling on an already-raging fire. You kept it secret from me as anyone in your position would, for as you’ve said, you have known him your entire life while I was a stranger to you. No one could blame you for that. I merely ask because I must know the sorts of men I am sitting across the table from. Surely you must understand that.”

Lyall’s lower lip quivered, and her eyes glistened with tears. It made them look like a pair of diamonds shining up from the bottom of a dark ocean, and his heart went out to her all the more. The way the light from the high, narrow windows of the hall shone down in shafts illuminated her hair, giving

her a sort of halo and making her look as though she might be some downcast angel. “You are right, of course. I felt sure that if I confided in you, it would lead to war between our clans.”

“It does not need to,” he assured her. “What Ewan did was clearly not on behalf of ‘the clan’ in any real way, since the clan has been splintered so grievously. I see no reason why Laird Sam has to know about it... if you think you might be able to make him see reason, so that he will not continue to fire envenomed shafts at my people.”

“I wish I could make good on such a promise,” Lyall sobbed. “I fear that even if he gave me such assurances, he might not necessarily abide by them. I believe I am not nearly so acquainted with his true nature as I once believed. He did not even tell me what his father was planning to reveal tonight... that Ewan is to be laird if they succeed in their goals...!”

“Would it suit him ill?”

“I honestly have no idea.” She blinked at him, the tears spilling down her cheeks. He took a napkin from the table and gently dabbed them away. “I would like to put my faith in him as the man I once knew, but...” She looked away. “Tell me, Rowan, on the day you leave this place, might I come along with you?”

Rowan blinked, surprised. “Why would you wish to come with us?”

“To pledge my loyalty to the Campbell Clan.” She hesitated, and her next words seemed to come with tremendous effort. “To... share all I know of my own clan and its inner workings to facilitate their subjugation of it, if that is what it would take for them to accept me.”

“I am sure that no one would ask you to make such a compromise if you chose to seek refuge with us,” Rowan told her earnestly. “But why would you make an offer like that so freely?”

“Because I no longer know who here is my friend and who is my enemy,” she sniffled. “I do not know who murdered my father, but I believe that you and your people had no part in it... and that makes me trust in you, more than I do my own clansmen.” She reached out, taking his hands in hers. “I do not want to remain and witness the destruction of my clan. I would prefer to go and make a new life elsewhere.”

“And who would manage the affairs of the castle?”

She shrugged, letting out a mirthless chuckle. “Who cares for the castle, when the lands all around it are bloody and burning?”

Her choice of words stunned him, for they so perfectly recalled the imagery of his nightmare. In that moment, it seemed as though she was standing inside his very heart.

“Would you, then?” she whispered. “Would you deliver me from this place?”

“I would, aye, if that is what you wish. I would take you away with me.”

Rowan’s heart stirred for this lass as it never had before. In that moment, he would have given anything in the world to put his arms around her and protect her from all of the threats that seemed to circle around her like sharks. He wanted nothing more than to lift her up and carry her away from all of this strife forever – he wanted to do whatever it took to bring joy to those gorgeous eyes, to see those perfect lips form a genuine smile.

His own feelings stunned him. Had he ever allowed himself to feel such adoration as this? And now that he had, how could he do anything but act upon it?

Before he knew what he was doing, his lips were pressed against hers.

Her honeyed breath tickled the roof of his mouth, and as his tongue sought out hers, the very core of him felt as though it had been struck by lightning. Everything inside of him crackled and hummed, and the hairs on his arms stood up.

He wanted more – but just as he had begun to surrender to his feelings, she pulled away from him, blushing and casting her eyes downward.

“We shouldn’t,” she said in a tiny voice. “This isn’t... it’s not...”

Before he could say a word, she stood, gathered the hem of her dress, and ran from the room.

As she hurried up to her bedchamber, her mind whirled. Too many things had assailed it over the past week, and now she found that her rampaging thoughts and feelings were so wild that they might tear her to shreds like a pack of hungry wolves.

She had no reason in the world to trust this man, particularly when he continued to demand it from her. Indeed, in the wake of her father’s death, she had felt like a woman shipwrecked – clinging to a solitary piece of driftwood, bobbing up and down with nothing but flat and lonely in an ocean extending to eternity in every direction. Adrift and hopeless, with no sign of rescue and the tide tugging her ever downward into a black and watery abyss.

For a moment, down in the Great Hall, though, it seemed that her deliverance had come at last.

For she did trust him, no matter how she kept trying to talk herself out of it. Even though he had come from nowhere with a suspicious and dubious mission, when she was with him and he looked into her eyes, it was as if she had somehow known him her entire life.

She could not continue as she had been – isolated and terrified, jumping at shadows and unable to rely on anyone around her. If she tried, she feared she would go mad from the sheer strain of it. Her father had been more than her parent, she realized now; he'd been her best friend and confidante, and now that he was gone, the loneliness that consumed her threatened to snuff her out with the dark finality of a candle on a stormy night.

Well, if you need someone to cling to, you'd best look elsewhere, a voice inside her muttered sullenly. *For you nearly forgot just now that your duty to your clan supercedes that of your own heart. You almost allowed yourself to give yourself to a man who, for all you know, might end up being the ruination of the Dewars. You need to control yourself more fully, Lyall. For your father's sake, if nothing else.*

Even so, she bitterly regretted pulling away from him. If she had not, they might still be kissing even now.

Kissing, or perhaps even more.

The brazenness of this thought shamed her – and just then, there was a knock on her door and she jumped, startled, as though it might be the very ghost of her father come to chastise her for her wantonness and lack of self-control. She felt herself blush a deep crimson, and wished that she could will the color off her face as she went to answer the door.

When she opened it, Rowan stood in the hallway, and the sudden sight of him almost made her knees give out from under her. Her already-unbearable embarrassment at what had just happened between them increased tenfold.

“I am... exceedingly sorry for my complete lack of propriety,” he said, his expression unreadable. “It was wholly unacceptable, and you had every right to rebuff it. I came here asking for your trust so that we might help your clan together, and now I fear I have breached that trust rather grievously and – quite rightly – offended you.”

“No, I... Well, please, come in,” she interrupted herself, not wanting to conduct such a discussion in the hall where others might hear.

He tilted his head. “Is that the wisest idea?”

Lyall let out a short laugh. “With no living parent, who is left to call such things inappropriate?”

Rowan gave her a bemused smile. “You have a point there, I suppose.”

He stepped across the threshold, and Lyall’s heart hopped within her breast at having him so close to her again. She was suddenly acutely aware that she had made a terrible mistake downstairs, and that now she had the chance to swiftly and utterly erase it.

He was right there. He was inches away, hers for the taking. And she knew he would not reject her, for had he not been the one to kiss her?

She needed this. She *needed* it, or her loneliness and distrust would surely wash away her sanity like a rushing river.

Her hands went to his chest and she pulled him close to her – his mouth was barely able to issue a sound before it was pressed against hers, and then her warm body was up against his, undulating hungrily.

Rowan surrendered fully – not caring why she had pulled away from him downstairs, only that she clearly had not wished to and was rectifying that now. His arms encircled her, his hands sliding across her back and pulling her even closer to him. The thick sunshine scent of her hair filled his nostrils, and he nuzzled her chin, kissing the indentation at the base of her

throat. Her breath stirred his hair like a summer breeze through a field. Her bed stood in the corner, waiting, beckoning.

He had never felt such rapture as this before...

...or such a complete loss of control.

What the blazes was he doing?!

They were unmarried, and he'd been prepared to sully her honor in a fashion wholly unbecoming a Campbell emissary! Was this why he had been dispatched to this place? To treat the steward's daughter as though she had as little honor as a tavern wench? How could he do such a thing to her? Steal her maidenhead and besmirch her reputation?

He was here to serve Laird Sam! To discover who was behind the killing of the steward, and try to calm the aggrieved parties involved! It would not be an easier task to carry out if he became romantically involved with the murdered man's daughter!

Could he even really be sure that she was not in league with the killer?

It was a terribly ugly thought, and he hated himself for entertaining it, even for the briefest of moments – but he had been sent here as an investigator first and foremost, and that meant he had to maintain a list of likely suspects in his head. How could he rule her out entirely, when she might have her own hidden agenda in all of this? When she might have produced the letter herself, claiming knowledge of her father's handwriting because *she* was the one who had forged it?

Yes, all of those were valid questions. Mostly because they pointed to the biggest question of all – the one he wanted more than anything to ignore, though he knew full well that he could not.

What if she was seducing him so that he would be less inclined to suspect her?

He pulled away from her, and when he saw the disappointment in her eyes, he wanted more than anything to

believe that it was genuine. His suspicions had poisoned him, though – spreading through his veins with every pump of his heart, just like the venom from the arrows had.

“We cannot do this,” he said in a flat, dull voice.

“Why not?” she demanded. “I am not promised to anyone. Are you?”

“No.” His voice was hoarse, and he cleared his throat uncomfortably. “But I have been sent here for a purpose. I have a mission, and I cannot allow it to become muddled with these sorts of... personal entanglements.” He bowed his head. “I am sorry.”

Before she could say another word, he was gone from the room.

Lyall crumpled onto her bed, putting her head on her pillow and weeping. She had reached out to him, trusted him – and he had toyed with her emotions when she’d been the most vulnerable. He had promised to take her away from all of this, and then...

How could she believe in him, when his behavior was so calculated and mercurial? He had extracted the information from her about Ewan, dangled his affections in front of her, and then withdrawn.

And why not? she thought bitterly. *He’s right, after all... he came here with a mission, and gaining my trust to get to the bottom of things was part of it. I confided in him like an idiot, and he took full advantage of it.*

Can I believe him, then, when he claims that he won’t use this information to start a war between our clans?

He used me. He used me, and that’s the truth of it.

She did not bother to speak to any of the servants about sending food to their rooms, for she found she could not care less about whether any of them went to bed hungry.

Not after the indignity she had just suffered.

The worst part of it, though, was that she had ached to go further with him – that she *still* did, and hated herself for it. In that moment, she would gladly have given him anything he asked for, and more. She had almost given herself completely to a man who could not be trusted, and all while her father was barely cold in his grave.

If pressed, Ewan Stewart could not have said exactly why he'd chosen to remain behind and lurk in the doorway of the Dining Hall.

His father Hamish had gruffly told him to come along back to the manor, but Ewan had quietly said he'd be along shortly – and he had crept back to the door, found it ajar, and decided to peer through it and see if he could obtain any additional information which might prove useful.

He had been gravely disappointed by the outcome of the meeting. He had genuinely believed that his father's fiery rhetoric might call the other clan members to their cause – but instead, he had seen those damned Campbell men act as though they were the ones to rule on the fate of the Dewars.

And worse than that, he'd seen his beloved Lyall at Rowan's side.

He'd noted her amorous glances in Rowan's direction. She had certainly never looked at Ewan that way – not in all these years of closeness, not after all the times Ewan had prayed that she might notice how much he adored her, not even when he had poured his heart out to her previously.

No. Not until some stranger, some dreary *Campbell upstart* made an appearance... not until *then* were her passions stirred.

Had Ewan not fired a poisoned arrow into this man? How could he possibly have summoned the strength to survive such a thing?! It should have been impossible! Yet there he was,

mocking Ewan with his every smug breath, talking about how the future of the Dewar Clan ought to play out.

During the meeting, Ewan had wanted nothing more than to seize the moment by hopping up onto the table, charging toward Rowan, and lopping off that Campbell swine's head... aye, and that of his companion Cillian, too, for that matter.

He'd have warranted that it would have been enough to accomplish their goals. It would have sent a message to the Campbells and their loyalists, showing how serious the Stewarts were about taking control of the Dewar Clan. It would have been a display of raw force that would have shoved the other Dewar clansmen into line.

But he didn't dare go through with it, as much as he'd wanted to, for he'd known that it would have angered his father, who had warned him to proceed with caution.

This was different, though. This was the collection of valuable information. Perhaps his father would frown upon it, call it craven and underhanded... but Ewan did not care. He was determined to find any advantage he could against the Campbells. His father would thank him later for his seemingly "dishonorable" tactics, just as he had with the poisoned arrows that had been launched at the Campbell intruders.

Ewan pressed his back to the wall next to the Dining Hall, keeping to the shadows completely. As he did, he managed to overhear everything that went on between Lyall and Rowan.

When he heard her admit to him that Ewan had fired the poisoned arrows, his face flushed with fury and his hands curled into fists. He could think of no greater betrayal from her than that – he was gobsmacked by the notion that she would sell him out to an outsider, and in doing so, risk all-out war between their clans. What in blazes had gotten into her? How could he have misjudged her character so fully?!

Then he saw her submit to Rowan's kiss, and it took all of his self-control to keep himself from springing out of the shadows and throttling that Campbell scum then and there.

That was it, then. The slattern was willing to open her legs for Rowan, but not for the man who had been there for her, her entire life... the man who had adored her from the start, who would gladly make her the lady of the clan if she would only trust him.

Had Ewan not doted upon her enough all these years? What could he have done differently to win her love? He did not know, but he was horrified and insulted at the sight of her giving it away to another – and one she had only known for a few days!

It was not fair. He simply refused to accept it.

Lyall would be his – there could be no other outcome. If it meant that he had to slaughter these Campbell interlopers, so be it. If he had to convince her to marry him at the point of a knife, he would do that as well. She would thank him later, when she realized that he had done them both a favor with his insistence.

She had left him with no choice, that was all there was to it. She had forced his hand. Anything that happened from that point forward would be her fault, not his.

He waited for Rowan to leave, and then he skulked off and went home to the manor, where his father was waiting for him. “Well?” Hamish demanded. “What have you been up to?”

Ewan told him everything that he had seen and heard. When he had finished, Hamish sighed heavily and slumped down into his chair next to the crackling hearth. “I should not have settled for her father... I see that now. I should have killed them both that very night.”

Ewan frowned. “Father? What do you mean?”

“Have you not figured it out for yourself yet, you stupid boy?!” Hamish snapped. “By God, do I have to make everything clear for you? I was the one who ended the life of Arran Dewar!”

His son staggered backward, clutching his chest in shock. “*You* did it?! How could you, after the two of you had known

each other for so long?!”

“Our clan deserved a damned laird,” Hamish thundered, “and you deserved that title! I believed that if I dispatched Arran and made it look as though a Campbell might have been at fault, the others might rally around the notion of making you our leader! And then you would make peace with the Adder, and all would be well!”

“But father, how can you possibly claim to know whether I might have any success in bargaining with the Adder?”

“Because I already had!”

The words echoed in the air between them, leaving Ewan utterly bewildered. “What the devil do you mean by that?”

Hamish’s face was bright red, and his hands clenched and unclenched helplessly. “I met with MacGillivray, lad. Before all of this started. We struck a bargain, he and I. I would kill Arran, and propose independence for our clan... and he would give us the appearance of it, as long as I privately swore fealty to him.”

“Then... it was all some obscene lie?” Ewan demanded. “We were never going to be free? We were always going to be the puppets of the Adder?” He paused, stunned. “Is *that* why you ordered me to go through Arran’s study after his body was carried off? To dispose of any evidence which might have damned you?!”

“No, no, my son!” Hamish protested. “We would have been free, *and* we would never have had to worry about the MacGillivrays or the Campbells again, and you would have been laird into the bargain! As for having you search the man’s study... I only hoped that in doing so, you might locate some scrap of evidence that might help our overall cause! I sought victory for us both, my son! I sought a triumph in our goals which would have been best for the clan as a whole! And all of those things can still transpire, lad, if you will only allow them to! We must rid ourselves of these Campbells, to rally the rest

behind us... and we must deal with that whore Lyall, so that she cannot continue to plot against us in her father's name!"

"We cannot kill her!" Ewan insisted. "I will not let it happen! I have always loved her, and I have always known that she was destined to be my wife! If I can find some way to convince her to marry me, then that might serve to unite the others behind us!"

"We cannot risk that!" his father bellowed. "We cannot take the chance! How can you still want her, knowing that she covets a member of the Campbell Clan instead of you? How can you value her life so precious, when she has betrayed you so completely?"

"Because I am determined to make her mine, no matter what! Give me the chance to make the attempt, at the very least! She means the world to me, father, and I will not have her murdered if there may yet be some way to persuade her to take our side. We may do as we please with the Campbells, but her life must be spared."

Hamish scowled at him. "Do you have some plan to win her over? Or is this mere hope on your part?"

"I will come up with something," Ewan assured him. "She told him she could trust no one, even me... but then he ran off and left her hanging, didn't he? So perhaps her faith in him might be shaken. Perhaps she might turn back to me after all. Let me make the attempt. If I fail, she can still be killed."

"Very well," Hamish agreed grudgingly. "For tomorrow night, the food served to the Campbells will be poisoned."

"You ought not use that method," Ewan said sharply.

His father raised a bushy eyebrow. "Oh? Why not?"

"They have already come to associate us with poison, haven't they? Thanks to Lyall, they know we have a history of such things. It will make it far too easy to trace the source of it."

“I suppose you would ask me to leave the method of their killing up to you as well, eh?” Hamish sneered.

“If you trust me enough to be laird of this clan? Aye, I would expect you to allow me to prove myself in this manner.”

“You ask much of me,” Hamish grumbled.

“You ask much of *me*,” Ewan countered, “so let me show you that I am worthy of it.”

Hamish put his hands on Ewan’s shoulders, peering into his eyes closely. “You know that we will only have one chance at this. If you have any doubt at all that you will be able to achieve it, speak now. We cannot afford to fail, or our heads will end up side by side upon the chopping block.”

“I shall not fail,” his son insisted.

They shared a drink then, and solemnly toasted their impending success.

But when Ewan went to bed, he could not sleep – for he wondered whether he had promised his father more than he could ever hope to deliver.

The next morning, Ewan got up early and went in search of Lyall. Having known her for so long – and as such, having become so familiar with her duties around the castle – he had no trouble finding her. She was helping the servants get ready for the day, and particularly those in the scullery and kitchens, who had the task of preparing the morning meal for everyone.

As he did, his thoughts whirled around in his head like autumn leaves in the wind. He had managed to convince his father not to kill Lyall – for the moment, at least. Likewise, he'd gotten Hamish to agree to let Ewan handle the killing of the others, which had bought him some time.

But he had no idea how he would accomplish any of it. If he couldn't convince Lyall to marry him, then how could he dissuade his father from going ahead with his initial plan?

And how could he convince her, when she'd already put the question off?

He didn't know, but he was committed to try. He couldn't stand the idea of anything bad happening to her – even if she had rejected his advances in the past, even if she'd treated him as nothing but a brother, he still knew that she did not deserve to die.

That Campbell swine she was kissing was another story entirely, though. Ewan bitterly wished that he could poison his sword this time, and shove it through Rowan's stomach so that

he might die as slowly and painfully as possible. He still could not shake off his disgust and disappointment that such an outsider could come in and sweep Lyall off her feet so effortlessly.

Even then, however, Ewan knew that engaging in such behavior wouldn't win Lyall's affections. It would only harden Lyall's heart toward him all the more.

All he knew for sure was that he needed to come up with a plan, and not just so that he and Lyall might somehow end up together. He could see the unrest all around them coming to a head; the arguments of neighbors were turning violent more frequently as people harshly questioned each other's loyalties. If he couldn't think of some way to assume control over the whole thing as their new laird, the clan would fall to pieces.

His father Hamish had, therefore, placed the entire fate of the Dewars on Ewan's narrow shoulders.

Was it a weight he was fit to bear?

Again, he didn't know. He only knew that the effort was crucial, and needed to be made with all haste.

"Be wary when taking breakfast up to those Campbells," Lyall warned. "They didn't get supper last night, and they might be a bit out of sorts as a result."

"Ah, so there it is, then!" Ewan called out in a joking tone. "Your true loyalties stand revealed: You are not only against these Campbells, but you have opted to starve them out!"

She shot him a baleful glance. "I am not in an especially jovial mood this morning, Ewan. Particularly not where you are concerned."

He spread his hands innocently. "Why? What could I possibly have done to earn your ire?"

Lyall stared him down coldly. "When, exactly, had you planned to tell me of your father's scheme?"

These words startled him – for in a moment of confusion, he thought that somehow, Lyall had found out what Hamish

had done to her father, and the reason behind it. “I-I don’t know what you mean,” he stammered, preparing to deny everything.

“How can you not know when you were standing right next to him as he said it?” she scoffed. “He means for you to be the laird of this clan, and you never said a thing about it to me!”

He was taken aback, but relieved to learn precisely what she’d meant. “I thought you’d be pleased at the news! You and I have known each other our entire lives, after all. I imagined you would think me a worthy enough fellow for the job. You *do* trust me, don’t you?” Those last words were especially pointed, as he thought about the exchange he had overheard between her and Rowan after the meeting.

He knew she didn’t trust him at all, and it hurt him as deeply as though a spear had been thrust into his side and impaled his heart.

“I thought that I could,” she countered. “Now I find it impossible to trust anyone.”

Well, you seemed to trust that Campbell well enough when your lips were all over his, Ewan wanted to shoot back nastily.

Instead, he held his composure as best he could and took a step closer to her. “Lyall, we have been close companions our entire lives. Aye, I understand that certain things I have done lately have... not met with your approval.”

“To put it mildly!” she interjected.

“Still,” he continued, “you must know me well enough to believe me when I tell you that everything I’ve done – including the things I’ve kept secret from you – has been for the good of the clan. Someone needs to step up and lead. Someone who was born and raised here, someone who knows what this place and its people really need.”

“Someone foolish enough to believe he can antagonize the Campbells while standing up to the MacGillivrays,” Lyall cut in. “This isn’t like you, Ewan! It’s madness!”

Oh, how he wished he could allay her fears in that moment by telling her the whole truth of it – that if all went according to plan, neither the Campbells nor the MacGillivrays would trouble the Dewars ever again.

But he was prudent enough to know that the details of it would not make her happy at all. Even if he withheld the truth about her father's death and who was responsible, she would still call him dishonest and dishonorable for secretly dealing with the Adder.

“What you feel is madness now will make tremendous sense later on, after you've seen the results of it,” he assured her, struggling for words that would sound convincing enough. “You must trust me, Lyall. As a friend.”

She sighed wearily. “I am finding it immensely difficult to conjure that sort of trust for you.”

“Then what if you trusted me as a husband? What if, in taking our vows, I promised to tell and show you everything you'll need to know to see the wisdom of all this... as long as you will agree to show the loyalty of a wife, and keep it secret from everyone else until the time is right?”

She stared at him in disbelief. “Ewan, we talked about this a few days ago...”

“Aye, we did,” he interrupted insistently, “but things have changed since then. Important things, which you could be a large part of. There is peace and independence to be had here, Lyall. I know you want those things for the Dewar Clan as much as I do. You could help make them happen. Most of all, once I am laird, you would become the lady of the clan. There would be no more supervising the servants, no more bother and anxiety. You would finally have the life of happiness and luxury you have always deserved!”

“I have never wanted such things for myself,” she reminded him. “Wealth and status mean nothing to me. Much of my happiness was tied to my father... and now that I have been horribly robbed of him, I suppose I must seek it

elsewhere.” Her eyes grew misty for a moment, and Ewan wondered whether it was grief for her father – or her feelings toward that damned Campbell.

He supposed there was one way left for him to find out.

If he couldn't persuade her to marry him under those terms, then he had one last thing to try – not on behalf of his father, but for himself and the woman he loved. He could not allow his failure to result in her death. He was simply not that person, and he knew it.

If it meant disobeying his father – ruining Hamish's plans completely – then he was prepared to do exactly that.

“If you will not be my lady here among our people,” he insisted, “then run away from all of this with me, and we shall be married that way. We will build a new life for ourselves, far away from the strife and violence here... both of which are sure to end up burning the whole clan to the ground. We can be happy together, Lyall. I swear to you that I would do all it takes to bring you the joy you ought to have in this life. I will dedicate myself to your contentment. I will work as a farmer or guardsman under some other clan, I will...”

“Enough!” she stopped him sharply. “Where is all of this coming from? Mere moments ago you were prepared to do all it took to become laird and save the clan from itself... and now you speak of abandoning it completely on a whim?”

“Not on a whim,” he protested. “For *you*. For *us*. I *do* want to save this clan, Lyall, and do what my father asks of me like any dutiful son... but that means nothing to me compared to the prospect of being with you, and keeping you safe from the bloodshed which might be imminent. There is nothing in this world more important to me than you, don't you understand? Nothing else matters to me nearly so much as that!”

She peered at him carefully, as though seeing him with new eyes. Then she put a hand on his upper arm, and for a single beautiful moment, he was sure that she would accept his proposal.

Her expression was not one of love, however, but deep concern.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you like this before, Ewan,” she commented quietly.

“No, you have not!” he affirmed. “For never has such passion run through my veins, never has my heart...”

She shook her head. “That is not what I mean. I have never seen you so genuinely frightened in your life. What is truly transpiring here, Ewan? What haven’t you told me yet? What is it that grips you with this sort of terror, when you have always been one of the bravest men I know?”

His heart ached, and in that moment, he was prepared to tell her everything if only it would win her favor. “If I tell you,” he replied, slowly and uncertainly, “would... would you promise to marry me then?”

“I cannot make that promise honestly,” she said. “For either of our sakes. I do not harbor those sorts of feelings for you, no matter how much you might wish me to. If we were married, neither of us would be happy. However, you ought to tell me what you know for the sake of our friendship, Ewan. For all of the years we’ve known each other. If you *truly* value me – beyond merely coveting me as you would prefer to possess me – then you will do so.”

Ewan wanted to, and not just in hope of earning her love at last. He remembered what she had said to Rowan Campbell the previous night, about how lonely it was to be unable to trust anyone – and he felt the same pang, knowing that he could tell no one what his father had done (and still planned to do).

He shook his head. “Nothing has frightened me as you say, Lyall. Rather, I am exhilarated by the prospect of what is to come. If you want no part of that bright future, so be it... but then perhaps, when the Campbells leave, you ought to go with them.”

His words were poorly chosen, and he regretted them as soon as they left his mouth.

She frowned sharply. “What would make you say such a thing? What would give you the notion that I would want to go with them?”

Certainly not the fact that I was spying on you last night, Ewan groaned inwardly.

Aloud, he said, “My only thought is for your safety and comfort. If things are to become bloody here, it seems to me like the most secure place for you would be with them. They certainly don’t seem to mean you any harm. The same cannot be said for some of the people here, I would think.”

“Damn you, Ewan, why do you insist on speaking to me in these riddles?!” she demanded. “Why can you not tell me what I need to know?”

“I *have* told you what you need to know,” he answered, hating the petulant tone in his own voice. “I have told you that I love you, that I would be a worthy husband to you, and that marrying me would ensure you remain untouched by the chaos to come. If none of that appeals to you, then there is no more I can say.”

He turned and walked away, feeling as though his heart was dragging on the ground behind him.

When Ewan returned to the manor, he found Hamish waiting for him with a sneer. “So, then. You did all you could to persuade the lass to join us, and from the look on your face, it’s plain to see that she put you off once more. Which was a predictable outcome for such a thick-headed girl as her, though I can scarcely blame you for making the attempt. We’ve all been in love before, after all, and so we know how stupid it can make us.”

“Even so, I suppose I ought to have known better,” Ewan grumbled. It felt bizarre to him – standing in front of his father so brazenly, as though he hadn’t tried to run off with Lyall just

minutes before. He felt guilty about it, and also ashamed that he hadn't been able to persuade her.

“Have you seen the error of your ways, then?” Hamish chuckled. “Shall I go ahead with my own plans for Lyall and the Campbells?”

Ewan frowned, deep in thought – and then, slowly, his lips pulled back into a predatory grin. “No, father, not yet. I believe there is one more thing I might try, to bring us closer to our goals.” He started toward the door again.

“Where are you going now?” Hamish challenged.

“Out to the woods,” Ewan replied airily, stopping near the door to pick up a thick sack.

Rowan and Cillian wandered the Dewar castle and lands for the better part of the day – speaking with as many people as they could, in order to get some sense of which way the clan was generally leaning.

Unfortunately for them, it seemed as though every member of the Dewars had his or her own ideas about how things ought to proceed – and a great many of them had no interest in speaking to the Campbells beyond a few gruff and dismissive phrases. The distrust in their eyes was as cold and hard as black stone. A few among them even began to reach for the handles of their weapons when they saw the Campbells drawing closer.

“Perhaps we ought to have brought the guardsmen along with us for this errand,” Cillian muttered darkly after the third man’s hand had wavered near the sword at his hip.

“There is no need for that,” Rowan assured him. “It would only frighten and upset them more, and make them convinced we mean to intimidate them into supporting us. I wish to win them over with words, rather than weapons.”

“How poetic of you,” Cillian answered with a smirk. “I can only hope that one such meeting of the minds will not end with you run through.”

“I trust you to intervene on my behalf.”

“Then you have an overly high estimation of my fondness for you,” Cillian quipped.

And so they continued on, introducing themselves to the Dewars as humbly as possible and pressing them for a few meager answers to questions about whom they wished to see lead the clan.

The more immediate answers were always “the Campbells,” but it was easy to see that at least half of those answers came from fear that the person in question might be struck down for saying otherwise. Rowan was able to put a few of those at rest, prompting them to admit that their true desire would be for the clan to rule itself as it did in days of old. Rowan assured them that he understood that desire completely, and asked a few mild follow-up questions regarding whether they felt that in ruling over themselves, they would be able to fight off the Adder.

This was where things became a bit more tricky, it seemed.

There were those who had a strange sort of faith in Ewan’s potential as a laird, and thought that he might indeed be able to negotiate peace with the MacGillivrays where Arran had failed. Many among them had great respect for Hamish, and they’d watched his son grow up; they believed he’d do well as their ruler, and that he might possess certain subtleties which Arran had lacked as steward.

Others among them were less sure that Ewan would make for a capable laird, and felt that although the clan certainly ought to be independent, the question of who ought to lead them remained open. They said that Ewan was unlikely to make peace with the Adder, but that there were others who might have a better chance of doing so. “A proper show of strength!” one of them insisted. “*That’s* what it will take to make the Adder back down, and *that’s* what Ewan won’t be capable of!” (There were even a handful of men who specifically stated that they wished to be considered for the position, and that if Ewan attempted to take it automatically, they would gladly fight him for it. Most of these men seemed young and callow, and Rowan observed that their boasting was likely little more than posturing.)

Then there were those who only wanted the clan to be independent, and did not much care who led it or what happened next so long as the Campbell banner flew over their people no more. The general consensus among these people seemed to be that if the Adder destroyed their clan in battle, so be it – at least they’d die proudly as Dewars fighting for their own lands. Such pronouncements had a bleak tone to them, and were largely espoused by the clan’s older members, who had seen their share of dark times before and were not afraid of more.

Of course, there were those who genuinely seemed to wish for the Campbells to remain. They felt that the Dewars were nowhere near ready to take proper care of themselves – not when many of the farms were struggling, and there were too few men of proper age to defend them from the Adder and other outsiders. A couple of them even begged Rowan and Cillian to stay, saying that it would be the height of cruelty to cut the Dewars loose from the aid which had sustained them.

Finally, there were those who were unapologetically – even defiantly – supporters of the Adder.

They claimed that the Adder’s swift and decisive brutality was precisely what this clan had needed for far too long. They said that too many of the Dewars’ previous leaders were too soft and weak, and that a clan which had once been fierce warriors and conquerors had become as weak and helpless as a pup at its mother’s teat. They longed to ride beneath the banner of a real ruler again, and to see dread in the eyes of all who opposed them.

As they said these things, they looked at Rowan and Cillian as though it was taking all of their self-control not to openly spit on the two Campbells.

Those interviews were the shortest by far.

“Well?” Cillian asked at last. “What has been accomplished by all of this, other than my feet aching from all this damned walking about?”

“We’ve managed to get a clearer picture of what these people really want.”

“How can you say that, when no one seems to agree with anyone else on the subject?”

Rowan raised an eyebrow at him. “I believe, Cillian, that you may have spent too much time listening to their words, and not nearly enough listening to their meaning.”

Cillian rolled his eyes. “Wonderful. More self-congratulatory puzzles from the world’s worst traveling companion.”

“Oh, surely not the worst,” Rowan protested lightly, grinning. “Have you taken a trip with the laird? Have you heard him snore during his naps?”

“So? I snore as well.”

Rowan winced. “Let me tactfully clarify, then, that Laird Sam has a rather unfortunate tendency to snore from both ends. There have been many times when I’ve thanked heaven the windows in his carriage can be opened.”

“Well, let’s have it, then!” Cillian said impatiently. “How, precisely, was I too stupid to learn what you so clearly know?”

“We could both tell which supposed ‘Campbell supporters’ were lying to us,” Rowan began, ticking the points off on his fingers. “Either because they feared us, or because their true loyalties were to the Adder. Those can be dismissed. From there, the vast majority of the people seemed to want their independence... both from us, and from MacGillivray if possible. Even those who supported our clan or the Adder’s mostly seemed to do so because they felt that the third option was not realistic or safe for them to contemplate. What, then, if we could give them what they would need to have their independence?”

“What do you mean?”

“If we allowed them to rule over themselves, while still offering to give them the bare minimum of aid they might

require to fight off the Adder and re-establish their own armies and resources. We could be valuable allies to them, while allowing them to march beneath their own banners as they did years ago. If this could be done, then those who would willingly pledge their fealty to the Adder would become a minority... and even if they ran off to join his forces, it would not affect the rest of the clan all that much.”

“It still seems incredibly risky, from several angles,” Cillian pointed out. “Firstly, it might be difficult to persuade Laird Sam to provide such aid without insisting upon continued control over their clan.”

“I believe I could make him see reason,” Rowan replied. “He trusts my judgment, and besides, I believe once he hears additional details of what has gone on in this place, he will take it seriously enough to act on my advice. It is the smarter move by far, when the alternative would seem to be abandoning them to the Adder completely... and in doing so, making the MacGillivrays all the stronger once they’ve conquered the Dewars. Would we wish to see Dewar men riding against us beneath that monster’s banner?”

“No,” Cillian observed casually. “Nor would we want poor Lyall to be caught in the middle of all that, now would we?”

Rowan’s eyebrows went up. “What of her?”

Cillian snickered. “I know you don’t think much of my powers of observation, my friend, but even I couldn’t fail to see the way the two of you have been looking at each other... particularly when you’ve both thought no one else was watching. Can you honestly look me in the eye and claim that you did not offer to take her with us when we leave, in order to keep her safe? And, perhaps, to woo her more freely once she’s come to Castle Campbell?”

“She appears to be a good woman with no one here to trust or rely upon,” Rowan answered stiffly, “and so yes, offering her a chance to come back with us seemed like the right thing to do. As for anything else...” He trailed off bitterly. “I believe

I made that end of things rather more difficult last night, after forgetting myself while I was in her company.”

““Forgetting yourself?!”” Cillian balked. “You do not mean to say that you and she...?”

“No, of course not!” Rowan cut in sharply. “I have retained my honor, and so has she. We merely shared a brief kiss. One that I cut short, knowing it could be detrimental to our purpose here.”

Cillian shrugged. “Not especially. Not if she plans to come with us. And besides, it’s not as though she has a father who’d become angry with you if you stepped over the line, now is it?”

“That,” Rowan informed him archly, “is not amusing in the slightest.”

“No, what’s ‘amusing’ is that now I know why she did not choose to send up any food to us after the meeting. Do you think perhaps you might find some occasion to mend things with her this evening before we retire? If only for the sake of my stomach? All of this walking around has given me quite an appetite.”

However, when Rowan tried to find Lyall so that he might speak with her about what he'd learned from the Dewars that day, she was nowhere to be found. There were times here and there when he was sure he smelled her lovely scent behind him (daisy chains, mostly, along with the soap she bathed with), but whenever he turned, she wasn't there.

Was she avoiding him on purpose? Had her trust in him evaporated when he'd made the mistake of kissing her?

He asked the servants if they might direct him to her, but all of the ones he spoke to claimed they had no idea where Lyall was. He was practiced at detecting lies, and so it was easy for him to discern that they had been specifically instructed not to tell him where Lyall was.

Defeated in this purpose, he asked them for plates of food which he might bring up to his comrades, and they assisted him in transporting them. When that was done, he thanked them warmly and dismissed them.

"Thank God, we are fed at last!" Cillian crowed, grabbing his plate eagerly. "At this point, I do not even care all that much whether some Adder loyalist in the kitchen might have poisoned the stuff. I shall eat every last bite just the same!"

"Jesting aside, we may want to keep our tongues keen for any sign that it's been tainted," Rowan warned sensibly –

though as he took his first bite from a leaf of cabbage, it seemed fine enough to him.

“No luck with Lyall, I take it?” Cillian guessed.

Rowan shook his head, continuing to eat. “I believe she has been purposefully evading me.”

“That bad at kissing, are you?” his comrade chortled. “I always suspected as much.”

“That you would have given the matter any thought at all concerns me, particularly with regard to sharing chambers with you.” He took a drink of water from a goblet, and found it to be likewise unpoisoned. Now that he was sure the food and drink were safe, he consumed them all the more eagerly – for, like Cillian, he had been enormously hungry all day. “At any rate, my own feelings for her aside...”

“Feelings which still merit quite a bit of discussion,” Cillian interjected mischievously.

“...she has been our greatest asset by far since our arrival here. There has been no one else for us to rely on.”

“Aye, but how reliable has she been really? Hiding the identity of the man who shot those damned arrows at us... and her finding the letter didn’t much seem to rally the others behind her, now did it? That Ewan fellow and his father seem like the biggest obstacles, and she hasn’t been able to help us manage them at all, even though she’s known them both her whole life. Why, when it was announced that Ewan would be the clan’s laird, she seemed every bit as surprised by it as we were!”

“Even so, she’s made much effort on our part, which is more than can be said of anyone else here. Besides, her usefulness may yet reveal itself.”

“If she ever speaks to you again, you mean.”

Rowan sighed, finishing his food and putting the plate aside. “Aye, if that. Now that my belly is full, I believe I would try to sleep. Unless you’re going to insist on

questioning me further about my feelings for Lyall, so we can continue to gossip into the night like a pair of lovesick lasses?”

“Tempting though that prospect is,” Cillian laughed, settling back onto his bed, “I am too fatigued to bother you further tonight. Perhaps some new solution will come to light tomorrow. Or if not, perhaps we’ll at least be rested enough to face whatever *does* come.”

“Wisest words you’ve ever spoken, my friend.” Rowan likewise reclined, blowing out the candle which had been lighting the room.

The two men lay in darkness for almost half an hour – both silently thinking their separate thoughts about the future of the Dewar Clan, and what part the Campbells might play in it.

Just as Rowan was beginning to drift off, he heard an odd hissing sound.

At first, he believed the sound was coming from his companion’s nostrils – that it was merely a previously-unheard precursor to his snores, a sign that he had succumbed to sleep before Rowan had.

But no. The hissing was coming from near the doorway.

And Cillian was audibly holding his breath.

“Rowan?” Cillian whispered urgently. “Do you hear that?”

“I do, aye.” Rowan sat up in bed slowly, peering around the chamber. There wasn’t much moonlight coming through the window, and so he could barely make anything out – just shadows.

Except that some of those shadows appeared to break off from the darkness, sliding toward the beds of the two men like long, thin, daggers which had somehow come to life.

“Serpents,” Rowan observed quietly.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Cillian sit up sharply. “God save us, Rowan!” he uttered in a choked gasp – for he

had always harbored an irrational and paralyzing fright of the creatures. “What are we to do?”

“We cannot save ourselves from what we cannot see.” Rowan spoke slowly and deliberately. “You must keep your eyes upon them in order to keep track of them, while I reach for my tinder and light the candle. I cannot do both at once, or I will fumble, and we will lose valuable time. Do you understand?”

“Aye, of course,” Cillian croaked. “Just do it!”

Rowan tore his gaze away from the snakes, reaching for the bag with the tinder in it. The bag was draped over the back of a nearby chair, and so Rowan had to extend his arm as far as it would go, all with that damnable hissing filling his ears.

“Hurry, Rowan,” Cillian gulped. “They’re drawing closer!”

Rowan did not pause to reply. He simply struck a light and touched it to the candle, filling the room with more light.

Now the serpents were halfway across the room, and in plain sight. Mercifully, there were only two of them.

As Rowan and Cillian took hold of their weapons, the screams began from the chambers next to theirs – the voices of the Campbell guardsmen: “*Serpents! Serpents! Help! They are everywhere!*”

“Damn!” Rowan snarled, drawing his sword. He carefully positioned himself on the bed, hoping he might stab down at the infernal reptiles while making it harder for them to reach him.

He saw that Cillian was doing the same thing, and together, they hacked at the snakes. At one point, Rowan seized his own boot from the floor and used that in concert with the blade – bludgeoning them to stun them and break their backs, then cutting them to pieces when they could not move as easily.

It was extremely difficult work, though; for the serpents were quick and deadly, baring their hooked fangs and forked tongues threateningly. The shrieks and cries from the next room did not aid in the process either... particularly when several of those voices had abruptly cut off, or been twisted into strangled grunts.

At last, the snakes that had been unleashed upon Cillian and Rowan ceased twitching, and the two men darted out of the room so that they could help their comrades.

Unfortunately, they discovered that one of those comrades was dead – another appeared to be struggling against the poison, while the third was backed into a corner with his sword drawn. One snake was dead, and two others were advancing on the terrified guard.

Rowan stepped up quickly, cutting one of the serpents in half. Its parts kept slithering and spasming across the floor, leaving streaks of blood.

The other serpent kept its focus on the guardsman, rearing back as if to strike.

There was no time to hesitate.

Rowan firmly seized the snake by the back of its small triangular head. Its tail whipped around ferociously and its mouth remained open, clear venom oozing forth from it. Rowan's heart thundered in his chest as he slammed the snake down on the stone floor and swiftly cut its head off.

Satisfied that there were no more intact snakes in the room, Rowan went to the living guard who'd been bitten and lifted him off the ground. The man was exceedingly heavy, but the sharp fear and panic Rowan had felt drove him to carry the man down to the healer's chambers. He kicked upon the door until Greta opened it, blinking blearily.

"This man was bitten by a serpent in his room," Rowan panted, depositing the guard onto one of the narrow beds in the chamber. "He requires your immediate attention."

“What sort of snake was it?” she inquired, examining the man’s wound carefully. He was pale and sweating – his eyelids fluttered, and he mumbled incoherently.

“It was long and thick,” Cillian told her, “and its scales had a black and white pattern to them.”

“Ah, I see.” Greta went to her shelves, selecting the proper roots and herbs to create an antidote. “Then from the sound of it, it was an adder.”

Cillian and Rowan exchanged dark looks.

Harrower's fist slammed down upon the surface of the table. "This is outrageous! We cannot continue to sit here dithering amongst ourselves while deadly serpents are hidden in our chambers!" From his shocked and horrified tone, one might easily have imagined that *he* was the one who had found such nasty reptiles in his bedroom.

"For once, Harrower, you and I would appear to be in agreement," Barlas spoke up. "Clearly, we are taking too long in our deliberations, and MacGillivray is growing impatient. He has sent us a warning... and for the moment, that warning has been confined to the chambers of the Campbells. I have little doubt that if we put him off any longer, the rest of us will be checking under our beds and nervously peeking into our wardrobes day and night."

"Your concern for our wounded and murdered countrymen is indeed touching," Cillian commented dryly.

"I would not wish such a death on any man," Barlas countered, "but it's plain to see that the whole pack of you brought it upon yourselves by coming here! This is a Dewar matter, and should have been handled as such from the beginning!"

"Your clan is allied with ours..." Rowan began.

"You mean it's been under the *control* of yours," Ewan corrected him hotly. "Let's call things as they are, shall we? If we'd had our independence from the start, we could have

negotiated a peace with the MacGillivrays. We *still* can, if we act quickly and seize the reins of our own destiny.”

“I am shocked to find that I concur with the damned Stewarts,” Barlas growled. “I care not what form such a settlement with the Adder may take... whether we join them as bonded allies, or simply come to some understanding that will result in a cessation of hostilities. But one way or the other, it seems to me that we are far better off throwing our lot in with MacGillivray than continuing as we have with the Campbells.”

Rowan glanced over at Lyall, who stood in the corner. Her face was pale and pinched, and her mouth was set in a tight line. When she saw that he was looking at her, she tilted her face away pointedly – making Rowan wonder if he had managed to entirely alienate the one ally he’d been able to find in the whole place since their arrival.

He had a sinking feeling that this was the case, and he found that his sadness and anxiety at that prospect were not only tied to her ability to help him carry out his mission here. Rather, he loathed the idea that he’d met such a lovely and compelling woman only to inadvertently ruin his chances at getting to know her better.

He wasn’t overly happy with himself for entertaining such thoughts. Then again, he wasn’t happy with himself for having allowed himself to kiss her earlier either. He was starting to believe that the other men at the table had a point, and that coming here had done more harm than good.

Still, he had a duty to carry out, and he intended to do his level best to achieve it before returning to Laird Sam and admitting failure.

“I cannot believe my ears!” Cillian cried out. “Listen to yourselves, for God’s sake! The Campbells have treated you with respect and decency since our alliance began... our only sin has been that our response to the Adder’s raids on your lands was slower than any of us might have liked! Now we are here to make up for it, and you are prepared to kiss

MacGillivray's hand and take whatever form of peace he promises you? You are willing to believe the promises of a man who previously ordered your villages raided? Who has his spies sneak about hiding snakes in the rooms of your very castle... the act of a coward and a monster! How can this possibly make any sense to you?!"

Before any of the others could provide a heated response (which all of them looked like they were about to do), Rowan raised a hand to silence them. "I understand it, Cillian. These men are afraid, and with good reason... for the fate of everything they hold dear is at stake, and there's no denying that. All men may feel fear at such times, just as all men may discover that the grip of it may drag them away from what is reasonable and just in favor of what seems expedient."

"It is easy enough for you to talk about 'reason' and 'justice,'" Hamish sneered, "since you can turn tail and ride back to Castle Campbell any time it bloody well suits you! We are the ones who will have to deal with whatever comes next."

"See here!" Harrower interjected sharply. "These are the men whom someone attempted to murder! These are the men who lost another of their comrades to poison and death since arriving! To think that any of this has been 'easy' for them...!"

"If you're so intent on keeping your nose in their arses, Harrower, then why do you not ride back with them as well?" Barlas sneered. "You, and all the others who continue to value the Campbells over their own kinsmen? We have no need of you here! We can look after our own affairs without the aid of any who would be loyal to Campbells!"

"There's no need for that sort of talk," Ewan observed quietly.

The rest of the room fell silent, as everyone – including his own father Hamish – stared at him. He appeared pensive – his brow was furrowed, his fingers were steepled in front of him, and he looked as though he was performing a difficult series of mental calculations.

“What... what are you...?” Barlas sputtered. “I thought you of all people, with your talk of independence for our clan... I thought you’d welcome the chance to be rid of all Campbell supporters! Your father certainly hasn’t had any kind words to say about them!”

“My father is a good man, but he has put me forth to be this clan’s laird, and he does not speak for me.” Ewan stood up slowly and began to pace around the room. As he did, he cast frequent glances in Lyall’s direction – though she did not seem any more inclined to meet his gaze than she had been Rowan’s. “Part of wanting our clan to rule over itself is understanding that every one of its members’ matters, even when they do not presently agree with our point of view. We wish for everyone to come *together* to face these problems as a single clan. If we begin to cast away those whose ideas do not match our own, we will only weaken ourselves all the more. And in doing so, we’ll drive wedges between families, friends, neighbors... we must unite now at this crucial moment, not divide ourselves even further.”

“But what are we to do, then, if such unity is deemed impossible?” Harrower demanded. “The longer we bicker, the more we seal our own fates... and no one at this table seems any closer to reaching an accord with anyone else! To say nothing of the fact that if those of us who are loyal to the Campbells remain, our safety cannot be guaranteed at all. Last night it was adders in bedchambers. Tomorrow, who knows? We might awaken to find knives at our throats, wielded by followers of people sitting at this very table!”

“For the record, I had nothing to do with those damned snakes,” Barlas said firmly. “That is not the sort of thing I condone, nor does anyone who follows me.”

“You cannot speak for everyone who supports your side,” Harrower challenged. “And since you have pledged loyalty to the Adder, do you really mean for us to believe you would not do such a thing if he ordered you to? If you were to disobey, you’d find yourself on his wrong side just as surely as we have!”

“Once again,” Cillian pointed out through clenched teeth, “I wish to make the point that the only people we know did not engage in such an assassination attempt were Campbells. The fact that the other side can be suspected of this act should be all the proof you people need that one side is virtuous and worthy of aligning yourselves with, while the other is not.”

“For all we know, it was a Campbell or a Campbell supporter who put those snakes in the chambers!” Barlas insisted.

“*What?!*” Rowan roared, finally losing his temper at the senselessness of these deliberations. “How the hell could you even think such an idiotic thing, let alone say it aloud when one of our men was killed and another is on the brink of death?!”

“Because who knows what you Campbells are capable of when it comes to getting what you want?” Barlas spat. “You might endanger or even kill your own people to appear blameless and manipulate others!”

Rowan was angry enough to nearly launch himself across the table at the man, but this time Cillian proved to have the cooler head, gesturing for him to calm himself. “Perhaps we all ought to step away for the moment and take a few deep breaths.”

“As you say,” Ewan replied, “but if we take too many more steps away from this table, I fear we shall not have any breaths left to us, deep or otherwise. We must settle this, and soon. Shall we make another attempt at it this evening?”

“Aye,” Rowan uttered gruffly.

The men filed out of the room, and Lyall started to follow – but Rowan stopped her. “Might we have a word in private?”

She stared him down coldly. “I do not feel we have anything to talk about. Certainly, nothing that would require secrecy from the others who were at this table. If anything, I believe it could make matters considerably worse to converse so with you.”

He blinked, stunned. “How?”

“The others may believe I have some hidden loyalty to you, and seek to punish me for it.”

“I would protect you from such things.”

Lyall laughed humorlessly. “Ah, the famed Campbell protection. You are quite the convincing fellow, Rowan. I have no doubt that Laird Sam does whatever you tell him to.”

Rowan’s eyes narrowed. “Laird Sam’s mind is his own. I merely present him with as many options as I can think of, just as any capable advisor would.”

“Oh?” She arched an eyebrow doubtfully. “You never encourage him in one direction or the other?”

“Well, certainly I suggest to him which course of action I feel would be best.”

“You strongly suggest to him, I would imagine. For you know that if he makes an incorrect decision, it will harm the entire clan... and you are too intelligent a man, I believe, to ever say or even think that ‘any decision the laird makes must, by definition, be a correct one.’”

Rowan managed a shy smile, sensing the potential to win her over. “I flatter myself that such is the case, aye. And because my counsel is always well-thought-out and sensible, it always leads to the best results.”

“Because he always does as you suggest.”

“Precisely.”

Her lovely white face twisted into a scowl. “So you freely admit yourself to be a manipulating bastard, then.”

Rowan was so taken aback that he recoiled as though he'd been struck. "What on earth do you mean by saying such a thing?!"

"I should have known what sort of man you were from the start," she growled. "The sort who thinks that brains and good looks are fit substitutes for honor and decency! The sort who uses kind acts as callous tools to falsely gain the trust of others!"

"You speak of the... moment we shared," he observed solemnly. "You think it was calculated, is that it? You believe I have feigned affection for you in order to bend you to my will?"

She scoffed. His expression and tone both seemed so earnest and guileless, but that only enraged her all the more – convincing her that he meant to confuse her on purpose. "How can I believe otherwise, when you have come here with such a certain purpose, and your behavior has been so damned mercurial? You have shown yourself to be a cunning and tricky man in every regard."

"I do not think you genuinely believe these things you say." His words were slow and measured.

Her temper brewed and boiled within her all the more. "How dare you presume to tell me what I do and do not believe?! You, who have come here as a stranger to make me your puppet!"

Rowan shook his head, and it appeared as though he was gaining more certainty by the moment. “No. You are attempting to convince yourself, because you want to believe in me. You know that you ought not to, that you should harden your heart to me... but your instinct tells you that I am your ally, not your enemy. That these... feelings we share for each other are real, no matter how sudden and improbable they seem. I beg you to trust those instincts, Lyall. Not just for my sake, not just because you sense – as I do – that we could be together. But for the sake of your entire clan.”

Lyall’s hands went to her head – her eyes squeezed shut and her mouth contorted in helpless horror. “This castle has turned into a madhouse, and I cannot stand it anymore! No one speaks sense, and all truth is stood upon its head! I feel as though I am being torn apart by some terrible storm! Nothing is safe, and no one is who they seem!”

“Lyall, you do not have to face all of this alone...” Rowan protested – but Lyall turned and ran out of the room.

Her pulse pounded in her ears as she pelted up the steps to her bedchamber, and hot tears streamed down her cheeks. Just as she reached the top of the steps, she ran into someone so suddenly that the impact made her overbalance.

Lyall’s foot skidded out from under her, and she fell backward.

Her breath caught in her throat, stifling her scream and making her light-headed with sheer glassy panic. In the split-second that followed, her mind was filled with the vivid and gruesome image of her skull cracking against the steps, her neck twisting and snapping...

...and then Ewan reached out and swiftly seized her by the hand, pulling her forward again. She stumbled up onto the top step awkwardly, then stood staring at Ewan for several seconds as she tried to catch her breath.

“There, you see?” Ewan said softly in a mildly joking tone. His voice was strangely hoarse, and his eyes appeared small

and haunted. “That Campbell will make you weep, while I will not.”

“Thank you,” Lyall said breathlessly. “I do believe you may have just saved my life.”

“Perhaps I did.” Given the fact that he was the reason she had lost her balance, though, it seemed to Lyall that he was still standing awfully close to her. Hovering, really, in a way that unnerved her tremendously.

“Perhaps,” he went on, “I would save your life again, if only you will allow me to.”

She frowned at him, bewildered. “Ewan, I beseech you, do not speak to me in riddles. I have neither the wit nor the patience for them, not when it seems that all is falling to pieces around me.”

“That is truer than you know.” His hand still held hers firmly.

“Perhaps, now that I am no longer in peril, you might do me the favor of releasing me?” She went to withdraw her hand – but his grip tightened all the more.

“Ewan, you are hurting me!” she gasped. “Let go!”

He shook his head urgently. “No. Not until I’ve had a chance to speak my piece.”

Before she knew what was happening, Ewan was dragging her into one of the vacant guest chambers on that floor. She tried to wrench herself free, but his hold was like iron, and he slammed the door behind them.

Lyall shuddered violently, desperately attempting to twist her hand out of his. Her mind reeled with potential horrors. She knew he had always desired her. She knew that he had grown far more erratic and unstable of late. She knew that he was jealous of Rowan Campbell.

What was he about to do to her?

His expression was utterly frenzied, his teeth bared like those of a wolf in a snare. “I will let go now,” he whispered, “but before you leave, you *must* hear what I have to say. If you’ve ever cared about me, if you’ve ever trusted me, if you’ve ever called me ‘friend,’ *please*, hear me.”

SHE NODDED. Her fear was so intense at that point that she was willing to agree to almost anything in order to keep herself safe.

He took a deep breath and let go of her hand, but she couldn’t help noticing that he also subtly positioned himself between her and the door. When he saw that she’d noticed the gesture, his shoulders slumped and he winced apologetically. “I want to trust you, Lyall. I want to more than anything in the world, but... everything has become so confusing and awful. You feel it too, don’t you? As though we’ve both been caught up in some hideous maelstrom, one that will surely drag us to the bottom of a black and terrible ocean? As though the very forces of it all mean to rend us asunder?!”

“You know I have.” Her voice was barely audible, and her eyes were as wide as saucers.

His head bobbed up and down, and she was shocked to find that his eyes filled with tears of relief. “There, you see? I feel it too! But neither of us needs to be alone anymore, Lyall! We don’t have to remain at the mercy of these ghastly tempests, holding on for dear life and praying in vain that we might survive! We can take control of our own destinies together!”

She sighed impatiently. “Ewan, I have heard you speak of our clan controlling its own destiny before...”

“No!” He shook his head urgently. “Not the clan! Us! You and me! We can still get away from all of this, Lyall! We can ride off together as man and wife, and let the rest of these fools fight over who gets to lord over the scraps which remain!”

“You spoke of the good of the clan less than an hour ago!” she spat. “How can every man in this entire castle be so bloody inconsistent? So dishonest? Lord above, is it any wonder that I cannot trust any one of you?!”

“I do care about the clan, and my father, and all of that... more deeply than you can possibly imagine,” he insisted. “The only thing in this entire world that I could possibly love more than those things is you. I will take you away from all of this.”

“Ewan, stop! How many times must you force me to be cruel to you? I know your love for me, but I cannot return it! And I refuse to enter into such a marriage!”

“Yet you’ve known that Campbell for no time at all, and I’d wager you’d marry him in a heartbeat if he asked you to!” Ewan’s voice cracked pitifully, and his eyes looked more starved of hope than ever before.

“This is *not* about him,” she informed Ewan. “You and I are simply not meant to be united in wedlock, Ewan, and you will simply have to accept that. For you to continue to torment me over it is unbearable, especially when I already have so many woes to contend with. And what the devil did you mean earlier, about saving my life?”

HE GESTURED AROUND THEM. “Surely you cannot tell me that you feel safe here? What if someone were to put adders in *your* bedchamber tonight, or... or something worse?”

Lyall’s blood turned to ice. “Ewan,” she asked tremulously, “that was not a threat, was it?”

Ewan fell to his knees before her, clasping his shaking hands in front of him as though in prayer. The movement was so sudden and desperate that it scared her, making her doubt her old friend’s sanity more than ever. “No, Lyall, it’s a plea! If you will not marry me, then... then run away yourself! Do it at once, before tragedy strikes!”

Lyall summoned all of her courage and took a step toward him. She gingerly laid a hand on his shoulder, hoping that he would not become wild and seize her again or worse. Here, though, she felt that a gesture of trust was essential to keeping him calm – and keeping him talking.

For his words were making her more terrified by the second.

“It is only the two of us in this room together,” she said softly. “No one else needs to know the words that we speak to each other. Why don’t you tell me what tragedy you speak of? Speak it to me plainly, as one friend to another. Then what you say will be true: We will, neither of us, be alone in the matter. Perhaps we might even find some way of avoiding tragedy altogether.”

He wiped his tears away, looking up at her hopefully. “You mean it? It will remain between us, no matter what?”

“I give you my word, Ewan. As long as you are honest with me.”

“Very well.” He got to his feet again and went to the bed in the room, motioning for her to sit next to him. She did so, trying to hide how uneasy it made her.

“My father has spoken with certainty of reaching an accord with the Adder,” Ewan continued. “That is because he already has.”

“*What?!*” she reacted, startled.

“Shhh!” he begged. “No one must overhear us now! MacGillivray has assured us that we will remain lairds of our own clan in name, so long as we privately swear fealty to the Adder.”

“More treachery and deceit.” Lyall shook her head mournfully. “Where will it all end?”

“I will tell you where,” he replied. “It will end soon. It will end when we Stewarts seize control of the clan, and hold it until MacGillivray’s reinforcements arrive.”

“There will surely be fighting!” she protested. “Campbell loyalists like Harrower will not stand for it! People will die! *Rowan and Cillian* will likely die, or be taken prisoner and tortured by the Adder! Oh, Ewan, you must persuade your father not to go through with this!”

“There will be no persuading him!” Ewan snapped. “The deal is already done, don’t you see? It cannot be undone! Everything has been set in motion, and there is nothing you or I can do to stop it now.”

“I shall tell Rowan! If he can get word to Laird Sam in time...”

Now Ewan did seize Lyall by the shoulders, scaring her badly again. “No! You told me that all of this would be between us! You said it would not leave this room!”

“After what you have just told me, and the needless bloodshed it will bring, how can you honestly expect me to keep such secrets on your behalf?!” she demanded, horrified. “How can you hang those lost lives upon my conscience?”

“I am your friend! I am your clansman! You gave me your word! So aye, I do expect you to show loyalty for your own clan above another! I do not believe that is such an unreasonable thing to ask! If you would save yourself from what is to come, Lyall, then for the love of all that’s holy, flee immediately on your own... but do not betray my father’s plan to the Campbells! Do not interfere! I have already compromised my loyalties for you dreadfully. Do not make me regret it!”

“But why?” she pleaded. “Why must this happen?”

“Because it is the only way our clan shall ever truly be free.”

She balked. “How in blazes can we be ‘free’ if we simply trade one master for another?”

“*Think*, Lyall!” He was still gripping her tightly, and she was sure it would leave bruises on her shoulders. She was also all too aware of how easy it would be for those hands to slide

onto her neck if she gave him reason to do so. “Which yoke would ultimately be easier for us to shake loose? The Adder’s, or the Campbells’?”

“I understand. Very well, Ewan. Thank you for telling me. I will leave at once, as you suggest.”

His pathetic relief at her half-truth was almost enough to make her change her mind about what had to be done – but she knew she could not. Her duty to her clan was greater than her duty to her friend.

Even if it meant she’d have to rely on the Campbells after all.

Rowan's brow furrowed – and despite the seriousness of everything she had just related to him, she could not help but note that it only served to make his countenance all the more handsome and intense. “Did he say how soon the reinforcements would arrive, or how many?”

She shook his head. “He was quite deranged.”

“Aye, so you’ve said.” Cillian paced around their chambers, his suspicious eyes never leaving her. “And yet he seemed perfectly composed down in the Great Hall, when we were discussing matters less than an hour before. He was reasonable, lucid... even persuasive.”

“We may now know the reason why,” Rowan mused. “It could be that he presented a stoic demeanor in a final attempt to unite these factions and prevent bloodshed when the MacGillivrays arrive.”

“No doubt you are correct,” she answered, “but I could not stand back and chance that he might fail at it. Not with so many lives on the line, and not when I know full well how stubborn Harrower and Barlas will be about it.”

“Then it seems we haven’t a moment to lose,” Cillian said decisively. “We cannot remain here a moment longer... not when the Stewarts might spring some trap to seize power. Not when we know that each passing moment might bring the Adder’s men all the closer. For all we know, even the meeting

planned for later this evening might be a ruse to overpower us.”

“Agreed,” Rowan intoned. “It’s a strange thing, though. I wouldn’t have thought they would risk such a bold move as to directly deliver us into the hands of the Adder. That would be an act of all-out war, and our clan is allied to many others. We could overpower them swiftly.”

“You mean those who would avenge us could,” Cillian corrected tightly, “as we would likely be dead already. Small comfort, Rowan, if you see what I mean. I have no desire to make the acquaintance of any more serpents. I will gather our men – those of them who are left, at any rate – and arrange for our carriage to be behind the stables within the hour.”

“And if anyone tries to stop us?” Rowan questioned. “We aren’t precisely in the best position to fight back, certainly not if we’re badly outnumbered.”

“I do not believe that they would openly prevent you from leaving,” Lyall observed. “They seem to prefer to keep their machinations as secretive as possible.”

“Aye, that would be especially true after Ewan’s little performance earlier,” Rowan agreed. “He wouldn’t want to be seen shoving sacks over the heads of Campbells when he’d just talked about their supporters coming together with his own. Even so, we must make haste, before they find other ways to curtail our departure. We must leave too suddenly for anyone to object.”

“May I go with you?” Lyall inquired, looking down at the floor.

Rowan didn’t hesitate for an instant. “Of course. Castle Campbell will be the safest place for you while the rest of this is dealt with. If Ewan believes you to be in genuine danger, then that’s the only thing he’s said that I’d genuinely be inclined to believe.”

Lyall beamed. “Do you mean it? I thought that after what transpired between us earlier...”

“We will have a long carriage ride to sort all of that out,” Rowan interjected with a grin, “not to mention the weeks you’ll be staying with us. I have every confidence that we’ll have you back here by then... if, that is, you choose to return here rather than remain at Castle Campbell. We can be rather charming hosts, you know.”

Lyall actually managed a small laugh, though she was still pale and fearful at what she’d gone through with Ewan. “Thank you. I will go to my room at once and get my things.”

“As little as you can,” Cillian cut in sharply. “We cannot tarry in the courtyard surrounded by potential assassins while you dither upon which dresses to bring. Remember, we have plenty of tailors at our disposal, and anything else that might be required from a woman who still maintains a pulse and an earthly temperature.”

Rowan shot Cillian a tight look of annoyance.

If Lyall noticed Cillian’s sardonic tone, she gave no sign. “Have no fear on that score, for my possessions are few. I will meet you behind the stables at the appointed time.” She curtsied and withdrew quickly.

“I remain stymied by the Adder’s tactics, Cillian,” Rowan pondered. “Why would they move against us, when they appear to be so overpowered? What shadowy alliances have they forged without our knowledge?”

“Your tactics are the ones which stymie me,” Cillian countered.

Rowan raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“That you would readily believe all she has told you,” Cillian began, ticking the points off on his fingers. “That you would not imagine, even for a moment, that she might be involved in some plot against us, and deceiving us in this fashion could be part of it. That you instantly agreed to let her come along with us, when we still cannot be sure which side she is on.”

“Given the rather sizable show of trust she’s just presented by breaking her friend’s confidence, I would say that she deserves asylum, and that it’s no great thing for us to offer. There are plenty of rooms in Castle Campbell, after all.”

“Aye, and I’m sure you’d like to ‘make her acquaintance’ in each and every one of them, if you take my meaning.”

Rowan glowered at him. “No, I’m not entirely sure I do.”

“You have fallen in love with this lass, and it may be impeding your judgment.” Cillian folded his arms over his massive chest. “That’s as clear as I can put it to you.”

“What would her purpose be in telling us all of these things?” Rowan demanded. “To get us to meet behind the stables? She wouldn’t need to conjure nearly so elaborate a deception in order to lure us there, so what would be the point?”

“I do not know,” Cillian admitted through gritted teeth, “but just because I do not *have* an answer does not mean there *isn’t* one. You said it yourself, Rowan! She seemed to despise you when you spoke to her earlier, and now she’s willing to betray her lifelong friend for you? And she asks to come along, so she can sow seeds of temptation within you, making you imagine how sweet things might be for the two of you if you’re given a proper chance...”

Rowan held up a hand to stop him. “Very well. I concede that you may be right, and we shall proceed with caution. But we shall proceed nonetheless. Having been told such a thing, we would be fools to simply remain in place and hope nothing comes of it.”

Cillian agreed – but as he left to gather the men and prepare the horses, Rowan could tell that he remained uneasy just the same. He couldn’t blame his old friend one bit. This castle had become a place of utter lunacy, and he had no idea what might happen next if they stayed.

He only knew he wanted to take Lyall away from all of it as quickly as possible. Though he loathed to admit it, Cillian

had been right, and Rowan had known it. He was caught up in the myriad chances he would have to woo Lyall, if he could remove her from this place of snakes and lies.

Well, they needed to leave at once, and so did Lyall, so that was an end to it. If they could accomplish all of it while likewise rescuing her from the threats which loomed all around her, Rowan was determined to do so. He felt sure that his actions would ultimately be vindicated, despite Cillian's unfortunate paranoia.

He hoped so, at any rate. If Cillian was right about Lyall...

...but no. He would not even allow himself to entertain that thought. He had meant what he'd said earlier, for though his comment had been born from ego, it was nonetheless correct: His advice to Laird Sam *was* unerring. His judgment was sound. He knew what he was doing here.

That was what Rowan kept inwardly insisting to himself, at least.

Meanwhile, Lyall's thoughts – about the possibilities which might exist between her and Rowan, now that she'd be living at Castle Campbell for a while – were quite similar to Rowan's. She realized that she had no idea what to expect from such a sudden and significant change in setting. She'd never left Dewar lands, and since her father's death, she'd done nothing but labor for the good of the clan from morning to night and beyond.

What would it feel like to simply exist for a while? To rediscover the pleasures of reading, or wandering the hillsides in search of flowers?

What would it be like to take such scenic strolls with Rowan?

The two of them had met with so much pressure and distrust pushing in on them from all sides – they'd started off barking and snapping at each other, and their acquaintance had hardly unfolded naturally since then either. She was a Dewar,

he was a Campbell, and all within a castle where such factions were at each other's throats every waking moment.

What, then, might transpire between them in a place where she could simply be a lass, and he could be a proper suitor?

As she wondered what such a thing might be like, she giggled at the thought of him presenting her with flowers, or wearing a daisy chain she'd made for him. But why not? Every man had a hidden tender side. What might his look like, once they'd had some time to get to know each other better?

While she considered such curiosities, she heard a knock at the door and thought it might be Cillian, impatiently demanding that she come along. She found she didn't much like him (and she had the strong impression that the feeling was mutual), but she supposed the same was true of him: That under different circumstances, they might have been friends.

Well, perhaps she'd have a chance to find out.

She opened the door... and saw Ewan standing there, looking stricken and furious.

L yall recoiled from Ewan – she couldn’t help it, given the strangeness of his appearance.

His clothing and hair were askew. His face was flushed, and his eyes were red and angry. He was breathing hard, his shoulders and chest heaving. He looked like the agonized survivor of some great shipwreck.

“Ah, so,” he snarled, “a lifetime of friendship, and now you shrink away from me? Have you so easily forgotten all we have been through together? All the confidences we shared?”

“Ewan, what...?”

Before she could get another word out, Ewan’s hand darted forward as swiftly as the head of a striking viper. His hand clamped around her wrist, and she felt a small pinprick on her skin. She drew her hand back quickly, backing away from him.

As he stepped across the threshold and into her room, she opened her mouth to protest, to call out for help – but she found that her lips and tongue had gone numb. Likewise, her legs felt as though they were being tickled and jabbed by the tips of a hundred daggers, and her face felt flushed and heavy.

She looked down at her wrist and saw that indeed, something tiny and sharp had broken the skin.

Ewan held up his hand, revealing that the underside of the ring he wore had a wicked point upon it. “You know how fond I’ve always been of poisons,” he said raggedly, shutting the

door behind him. “How I’ve always enjoyed going out into nature to collect things that crawl and hop and slither, so I could study the effects of their various types of venom. You used to go on those walks through the woods with me once. We were happy then. All I wanted was for us to be happy together again... but you simply wouldn’t let me!”

Lyall stumbled. Her legs went out from under her, and she tried to steady herself by reaching out for the bedside table – but her hand was so benumbed that it almost seemed to pass through it in a ghostly fashion rather than bracing against it. Her limbs went as limp as those of a marionette with its strings cut, and she tumbled to the floor in a heap. Her mouth opened and closed like that of a fish pulled from a stream, but no sound came out.

A chill settled deep into her veins as she felt her heartbeat become hideously slow. It was as though she had been plunged into an icy lake, and was slowly, helplessly sinking to the bottoms of its black and watery depths.

Ewan’s face hung over her, as pale and alien as the moon itself. It was as though she had never truly seen him before.

Her breath caught in her throat like a fish bone. Had he murdered her?

“I can see from the terror in your eyes that you suspect I’ve given you a lethal dose,” he said, shaking his head sadly. “Did you ever really know me at all? How could you ever imagine that I would kill you, or even harm you? This light administration of the toad’s toxin is only meant to paralyze you for a time, Lyall. I am doing this for your own good.”

He began to pace around her fretfully as she forced herself to keep breathing.

“How long did it take you to decide to betray me to the Campbells?” he demanded. “A minute? Five? Ten? Did you even bother to deliberate on the matter at all, or had you already made up your mind to betray me when you promised to keep my secret? You said that there was nothing between

you and that damned red-haired Campbell, but you ran to him immediately to break your oath to an old and dear friend! One who loves you, one who has always loved you and tried to do what is best for you! Have you no heart, Lyall? How could you do such a thing? What did I ever do to you that would earn such deceit?"

Needless to say, Lyall could make no answer. Her back arched and she flopped a bit, but she could neither move nor speak.

"I cannot allow you and your new Campbell friends to ruin our grand plans," Ewan went on. "Not when we are so close to victory. Not when I can still forge a new and wonderful future for the Dewars. I am going to take you someplace where you will be safe from it all, Lyall. I wish I could keep you at my home, but my father cannot know that I told you this, nor can he believe you escaped with such information to use against us. But there are places within this castle that most people do not know about, and I know one such place where you may be held for a time without being seen or heard. Do not worry, for I shall take very good care of you until the time of our independence is at hand."

Ewan crouched down beside her, stroking her cheek softly. A single tear spilled down, and he wiped it away with surprising tenderness. "I wish you would believe in me, Lyall. I wish I could have persuaded you to trust that all would turn out well for us in the end, and that my love for you is greater than anything that can be offered by Rowan Campbell. But when it is all over... when we have triumphed... you will see that I was right all along, and that I did it all for you. Just as my father will see that killing you would have been a callous and unnecessary act. And *then* you will marry me, Lyall. *Then* you will love me, you'll see."

A SHORT WHILE LATER, Rowan and Cillian waited behind the Dewar stables with their remaining guardsmen. There had been no way for them to secure their horses and saddles

without alerting the stable's watchman, an old and lame fellow with wispy white hair who had staggered off in the direction of the castle and left them to it.

Now they stood uneasily, exchanging nervous glances.

"Do you think that old man will tell anyone that we mean to leave?" Cillian asked.

Rowan nodded. "I imagine so. The only questions at hand are who he would tell, and how quickly word might spread to those we'd prefer didn't know. I would be surprised if we did not find ourselves confronted by Adder loyalists quite soon." He paused, then added, "Or our own loyalists, begging us not to leave. By God, what a tangle of brambles we've become ensnared in here. I'll be relieved when we're able to take Lyall away from this disastrous place."

"That assumes, once more, that she is a friend rather than an enemy. For all we know, she might have already told our foes that we intend to depart, and they're mobilizing to stop us now."

"What makes you so certain that she is not as she seems?" Rowan meant for it to be a simple query, but it came out in a more accusatory and defensive tone than he had intended.

"I am not certain at all," Cillian answered quickly. "I am merely concerned by the fact that you seem so certain that she is. I am well-acquainted with the look of the lovesick, my friend, and it is the look that has been in your eyes since the moment you met her. Such a thing can be dangerous indeed when we are up to our necks in spies, deceivers, and assassins, and men whose true loyalties cannot be assumed based upon their speech. I wish I could believe as surely as you do that Lyall has our best interests at heart. As it is, she ought to have been here by now, which makes me anxious indeed... and more convinced than ever that she might mean to betray us."

"She will be here," Rowan assured Cillian, "and she will come along with us, you will see."

“Well, it had better happen soon. We cannot afford to loiter here much longer. Every moment we remain puts us at greater risk of...”

Suddenly, both men heard the same sound at once: Hoofbeats, drawing nearer by the moment.

They looked in the direction of the castle and saw four armed men in dark cloaks and hoods riding toward them.

“There, Rowan, you see?” Cillian cried out. “We are betrayed after all! We must ride at once!”

At the sight of the riders, Rowan’s heart felt like an egg cracked against the side of a frying pan. He had been so sure that Lyall would come, that he would bring her to safety... and now this nightmare was rapidly approaching instead.

Had they been warned by her, or by the stable’s watchman?

In that moment, it did not matter. Escape was the only thought in Rowan’s frenzied mind, particularly since this trip had already cost the lives of too many Campbell guardsmen. He did not want to be responsible for the deaths of any more of them.

Rowan mounted his horse, and he and the others rode off with the cloaked men pursuing them.

The Campbells pushed their steeds to their limits, spurring them on and whipping the reins fiercely. Every time Rowan risked a glance over his shoulder, the black riders appeared to be closer than they’d been before. The pursuers looked like scraps of living shadow, their cloaks unfurling behind them and flapping with the fury of giant bat wings. They seemed like demons from the lowest pits of hell, chasing down wayward souls to be dragged back screaming and in fiery chains.

None of that, Rowan told himself sharply as he faced forward again. They’re men, that’s all. Men on horses, who can be outraced by capable riders.

He did not need to ask himself whether these riders had been dispatched by the MacGillivrays or the Stewarts. From what Lyall had told them, there was no longer any real difference between the two.

He desperately wished that Lyall were on the horse along with him... but he knew that wish was foolish, for then the horse would be too weighted down for them to make their escape.

Still, he hated that every moment was carrying him farther away from her when he had no way of knowing why she hadn't shown up at the appointed time. Had she betrayed them as Cillian believed? Or had she merely been running late? Would she be devastated when she saw that they had already left without her?

He had no time for such questions now, and he knew it. He had to keep riding.

The chase continued for over an hour, across wide fields and steep hillsides. The Campbells began to gain some distance from their pursuers... and finally, the dark riders brought their horses up short and turned back, for it was clear that they would be unable to catch up.

Cillian and Rowan exchanged a look, breathing a mutual sigh of relief.

Even so, they both knew that their troubles with the Dewar Clan had only just begun.

Once the Campbells had reached a safe enough distance from Dewar Castle, they stopped long enough to let their horses rest before continuing the rest of the way home. Despite his usual calm demeanor, Rowan found that his hands were trembling, and it took a tremendous effort on his part to get them to cease.

If Cillian noticed, he gave no sign. Rowan knew what Cillian was thinking – that it had all further served to prove his own hypothesis regarding Lyall’s loyalties. However, the man was tactful enough to understand that at that moment, it was the last thing Rowan needed to hear.

As it was, Rowan – and the others – were already unsettled enough, and not merely because they had been chased for so long. Rather, they found themselves too near to the wooded area of this region for comfort; and they still harbored the bitter memories of the envenomed arrows which had shot forth from the tree line the last time they’d been there. All of them nervously peered in the direction of the forest, their shoulders tensed as though they expected to be shot down by shafts at any moment.

They were not attacked, though, and so after the horses had recovered they rode off again. They did not push their steeds to the brink as they had when trying to escape capture, but they still made haste, for they knew that they were racing against time.

Had the MacGillivray takeover of the Dewars already begun? Had the Adder sent his soldiers from his own stronghold to support his people at Dewar Castle?

There was no way of knowing for sure. And if there was one thing Rowan hated above all, it was when information was unavailable to him upon his immediate need for it. He thrived on knowledge, he accumulated it obsessively, he weighed it against all other facts he'd managed to absorb, and in doing so, he was able to make the best decisions for his clan and its laird.

Now there were simply too many unknowns for him, and it was driving him mad.

They reached Castle Campbell shortly after nightfall, and as soon as they identified themselves, the gates swung open. As they rode into the courtyard, Laird Sam came to greet them, his brow furrowed with concern.

“I had thought that I would receive a written message from you regarding your progress,” Sam remarked. “As it stands, you seem to have returned rather quickly from your errand. And what happened to the rest of you, for heaven’s sake?”

Rowan promised to tell his laird everything that had transpired, and they were ushered inside for food and drink. As the stable hands stepped in to take their horses, Rowan called back over his shoulder: “Keep the saddles fixed upon them, for we might be riding out again at once!”

“Surely that cannot be true!” Sam exclaimed. “What dire situation occurs at the Dewar Castle, that would force you to return here so frantically and then ride back so soon?”

As they went to the Dining Hall for refreshments, Cillian and Rowan told their laird everything that had happened since their journey to the Dewar lands. (Rowan did not mention his more private and affectionate moments with Lyall, and Cillian did not feel the need to bring these things up either.)

Laird Sam stood at the head of the table and listened closely, his hands laced behind his back. His expression grew

increasingly grave, and when they had finished, he shook his head slowly. “What a dreadful bloody mess. We ought never to have entered into such a relationship with those damned Dewars in the first place. We should have allowed them to rule themselves, and that should have been that. Still, I suppose there’s not much point in lamenting such things now, is there? What’s done is done, and now we are left with a difficult choice. Will we intervene, or sit back and wait to see how things come out?”

“We still have loyalists there, Laird Sam,” Cillian pointed out. “Do we not owe it to them to liberate them, if they are currently at the mercy of the Stewarts and the Adder? Have they not kept their oath to us all along, despite enormous opposition?”

“They may be loyal to us, but they remain members of another clan just the same,” Sam replied. “If they wish to leave the Dewars and be accepted into the fold as true Campbells, that is another matter entirely. I would have no trouble welcoming them. But as long as they are Dewars, they are not for us to ‘liberate’.”

“It is entirely probable that none of them would be given the chance to leave and come join us,” Cillian observed. “Indeed, it is far more likely that they will be imprisoned or put to the sword for not having stood with the Adder to begin with.”

“I do not believe that will be the case,” Rowan spoke up.

“Oh?” Sam’s eyebrows went up. “And why is that? You believe in the forbearance and mercy of the Adder, do you?”

“Not at all,” Rowan answered. “Rather, I believe that Ewan – having seized power – would not allow it, for it would not serve his stated purpose. As he said to all of us, if he is to rule over a clan, he will require that clan to remain as intact as possible.”

“He might have been lying about all that!” Cillian snapped, exasperated. “He almost surely was!”

“Then why would he try to do right by Lyall?” Rowan challenged. “Why give her a chance to save herself? No, I think he is a man being pulled in several directions at once, and I think it has surely affected his judgment badly... but overall, I think he genuinely wishes to prove himself a good laird to the Dewars, and I do not think presiding over the public executions of innocents would achieve that goal for him.”

“Then you feel that the correct course of action in this case would be for us to remain uninvolved?” Sam prodded. “To bide our time and see how things turn out, rather than sending soldiers off to fight a battle that is not truly ours?”

“No, Laird Sam, I do not feel that is the best thing to do here at all. In fact, I would demand that you send an army there at once, and send me along with them as well.” He tossed a smirk at Cillian. “Cillian can come too, I suppose, since he’s been known to swing a sword and hit the mark from time to time.”

Cillian rolled his eyes, but allowed the comment to pass.

“If you do not believe our loyalists are in danger,” Sam asked, “then why would you feel it is imperative for us to ride to the rescue of the Dewar Clan? Particularly since so many of them no longer seem to want our aid or involvement in their affairs.”

“This is not about any of that,” Rowan insisted. “The MacGillivrays are a raging flame, burning across the countryside and destroying all they touch. Even when not scorched directly by their fire, those in their path are still inevitably poisoned and dirtied by the fringes of their evil smoke. We know that they consider us enemies. We know that eventually, that wildfire will spread to our lands. Why not take this opportunity to slow that spread, rather than allow them to consume even more fuel?”

“A colorful metaphor,” Sam remarked dryly.

“But an apt one just the same,” Rowan countered. “We can fight MacGillivrays now, or we can wait a month or two and fight MacGillivrays with hundreds of conscripted Dewars at their side. To me, the choice seems a fairly simple one. To say nothing of the fact that no matter how confused and directionless the Dewars might be at the moment, their oath of loyalty to us has yet to be formally withdrawn. We are honor-bound to respond to this.”

“How many men do you feel we ought to send?” Sam inquired, tilting his head. “You have seen the state of things there, while I have not. What sort of resistance are they inclined to encounter?”

Rowan shook his head. “Difficult to say for certain. If it were a simple matter of gauging us against the men of the Stewarts and the Adder, then I would say a hundred men ought to do it. However, it will mostly depend on whether the MacGillivrays’ reinforcements get there before we do, and how many there might be. I do know, however, that we must rally our forces and send them immediately. The longer we wait, the more likely it will be that the Adder has already surrounded the place with his soldiers, and the harder it will be for us to prevail from that vantage.”

Sam turned to Cillian. “And you? What are your thoughts on the matter?”

“Unsurprisingly, Rowan makes good sense and I agree with him,” Cillian responded. “I will come along as well, thanks in no small part to his bit of flattery regarding my swordsmanship.”

Sam nodded briskly. “Very well. I shall raise an army of two hundred at once, and have them ready to ride at midnight. I hope that you might be able to rest a bit between now and then, if only to improve your chances of prevailing in this conflict rather than succumbing to your own fatigue.”

As Cillian and Rowan left the Great Hall, Cillian murmured: “Tell me, Rowan... if it were not for the fact that

Lyall's fate is uncertain, would you be nearly so certain that riding back to face the MacGillivrays is the right thing to do?"

The question seemed to be a largely hypothetical one. Rowan was glad of it, for he was alarmed to discover that he had no good answer to give.

He only knew that he needed to see Lyall again... and that if any harm had come to her, the one responsible would suffer and die at Rowan's hand.

The room that Ewan had placed Lyall in had been hewn at the end of a natural stone corridor beneath even the dungeons – a place so narrow and thick with encroaching sediment that one needed to turn and walk sideways to fit into it. The cell was small, with rounded corners and a low ceiling. Based upon the ancient carvings upon the walls, it seemed as though it might have been some monastic druid's chamber, its construction long predating even that of the castle itself.

Ewan appeared to have put some effort into making it habitable for her, though. The ages of dust and cobwebs had been cleared away, and certain areas which had obviously previously dripped with dampness and mold had been scrubbed clean and patched over where possible. There was a lit torch set into the wall, and Lyall saw none of the rats, spiders, or other foul creatures that one might expect to encounter in such a place. He had even furnished a simple bedroll for her, and – she noted with dark amusement – he'd placed a short stack of her favorite books beside it.

The sharper effects of the poison had, mercifully, also been the most temporary. She had regained control of her body, though she still felt sluggish and drowsy, and there were light needling sensations at her extremities.

Most of all, she was stunned and heartsick by how rapidly things had gone terribly wrong.

She had been so sure that everything in her life was about to change for the better: That she would run away to a place that was not wracked with the strife and horror that had haunted the Dewar Castle for far too long; that her homeland would be restored to its former glory with the aid of the mighty Campbells; and that in the interim, she would be free to explore a courtship with Rowan.

All of it had been snatched away from her at once, when Ewan seized her wrist.

She had, of course, tried the door as soon as she'd regained consciousness and found it bolted from the outside. Now, though, she heard the bolt being moved. She forced herself to her feet. She knew that she could not possibly overpower Ewan, and that she would be foolish to try – but even so, she did not want him to see her on the floor. She wanted to face him proudly and defiantly.

The door opened, and Ewan entered, carrying a tray of food. There was an apple, a bunch of grapes, some bread and cheese, and a compact and fatty slice of roasted beef. “You oughtn’t try to stand yet,” he suggested, walking over to her. “There may yet be a bit of the poison in your body.”

“It’s a strange thing,” she retorted, “for an admitted poisoner to bring his prisoner food, and expect her to trust it.”

He grinned sheepishly. In another setting, the expression would have appeared shy and boyish – but down here, in the flicker of the torch, it made him look vaguely demented. “I hope that soon, you will, at last, come to understand that I could never harm you. I know you must be vexed indeed that I placed you down here against your will, but it will only be for a very short time, until things are safe up there. Our people are already in position, and when the MacGillivrays arrive, the independence of the Dewar Clan shall be confirmed!”

“There is still time to stop this, Ewan,” she said in a quiet and level tone. She did not wish to provoke him. If anything, she hoped that there was some part of her old friend still within him, and that she might get him to listen to reason.

“There is still time to do the right thing. Welcome the Campbells when they come, and resist the Adder. It is the only way to keep our clan from ruination!”

He shook his head slowly, a pitying look on his face – as though he were trying to reason with someone, only to discover that they had lost their wits entirely. “You still do not understand. That is all right, though. You will soon, and then you will see the kind of man I truly am.”

“I do know what kind of man you truly are, Ewan, for I have known you all your life. You are not a poisoner and kidnapper. You do not need to do these things.”

He left the tray of food and started for the door.

“Wait!” she cried out. “At least tell me how long I have been down here!”

A ghost of a smile played across Ewan’s lips. “Long enough that one way or another, all will be decided within a few short hours.”

Then he took his leave, bolting the door and squeezing his way out of the stone corridor.

As he made his way up to the dungeons and the castle beyond, he tried to banish her words from his mind – telling himself over and over that all was well, that she would forgive him for everything in the end, that her fickle heart would at last be won over when he was laird and the clan was at peace.

He’d have everything he ever wanted in the palm of his hand.

No, he corrected himself sharply, taking the stone steps two at a time. This is not about my personal glory, or what I feel is owed to me. This is about what is best for the clan as a whole. Only I can deliver them from these violent divisions, this in-fighting and petty squabbling. I can be a ruler with a singular vision, and I can deliver results which will make us stand strong for generations to come.

Given a chance to help me do so, how could she possibly refuse? When the dust settles and all are united, how could she choose to be anything but my wife?

He wanted to believe that more than anything.

However, the look in her eyes down in the stone cell had shaken him to his core.

He'd done all he could to keep his smile in place and his confidence intact – but as she'd said, they had known each other all their lives, and he had never seen a look of such profound disappointment on her face. He had never seen such a mixture of pity and contempt when she'd looked at him, and he was beginning to doubt that she would ever forgive him, let alone love him.

She had called him a poisoner and kidnapper.

How could he deny such charges even to himself, given these awful things he'd been forced to do?

As he reached the top of the dungeon's steps and squinted against the sunlight, he heard a commotion from outside the castle – men yelling, and the thunder of hoofbeats. He darted up to the ramparts immediately, running to one of the sentries who were loyal to him.

“What is happening?”

“‘Tis the Campbells, sir!” the sentry answered, pointing to the horizon. “They have sent their armies!”

Ewan peered in that direction, and as he did, Hamish joined him upon the wall. Together, they watched as the Campbell banners surged toward them. Ewan hastily estimated roughly two hundred enemy soldiers on horseback, roaring and drawing their swords as they advanced.

“Any sign of the Adder's men?” Hamish asked.

The sentry looked confused and vaguely stricken by the question – which made sense, since he wasn't privy to the overall plan and had no idea why they might expect

MacGillivrays on top of everything else. “No, sir! Should there be?”

Hamish ignored the question, turning to Ewan. “Here it is, lad. Our moment to show the world what we think of these damned Campbells ruling over us!”

Ewan could think of no fit response – but as he tried to come up with one, he saw that two of the Dewar guardsmen were positioning themselves to open the gates.

“You two!” Ewan thundered. “Get away from there!”

The men scowled at him defiantly... and began to work the mechanism anyway.

“Campbell loyalists,” Hamish growled. He scanned the ramparts for men he knew were loyal to the Stewarts, and motioned to one of them. “You! Come with me! We cannot let them open the damned gates!”

Hamish and the other men drew their swords and set upon the Campbell-aligned guardsmen. Ewan frantically ran around the wall in search of more Stewart men, and as he found them, he barked orders for them to find and mobilize as many others as they could.

“If you see any of our people who have spoken loyalty to the Adder, like Barlas,” he told them, “make sure they understand that for the moment, at least, we must unite against the invading Campbells!”

As he spoke the order, he bitterly cursed how many of his own people would just as readily fight each other as the Campbells. Could he truly bring them together after all this, or was it hopeless?

Then the Campbell armies banged upon the gates like rolling waves, and he began to wonder whether he would even live to see an “after this.”

He saw his father grappling with the men at the gate, tugging the levers back and forth between each other like children fighting over a toy. He looked down into the

courtyard and saw his own countrymen at each other's throats, grappling in the dirt or cutting each other to pieces with swords.

Ewan Stewart had been holding tightly to a vision of heaven.

NOW HE FOUND himself hopelessly mired in a singular hell, and suddenly understood what Lyall had been trying to tell him: All of this plotting and wickedness in the name of a "greater good" had been for naught. That due to the choices he'd made, he was about to watch his clan rip its own guts out, while two other clans howled for their blood.

At that precise moment, he heard the jagged and terrible sounds of fife and drum coming from afar. He looked in that direction, and his heart sank into his stomach as he saw a dark horde riding hard for Dewar Castle. Their banners – black and white serpents coiled over crimson shields – was unmistakable.

The MacGillivrays were about to join the fray.

The Campbell armies – headed by Rowan and Cillian – had made great haste after setting off. Even so, due to the distance, they did not arrive at the Dewar Castle until the sun had almost started to set.

They might have lost far more time if they had done the sensible thing and avoided the area where they'd previously been ambushed with Ewan's arrows. As it was, however, time was of the essence, and so they were forced to take that dreadful risk. Thankfully, they were not attacked, and Rowan breathed a great sigh of relief.

No doubt, Ewan has chosen to remain behind the walls of the castle in advance of our coming, so that he might gather his defenses, Rowan thought grimly. I wonder what sort of resistance we'll face? I know there are those among the Dewars who are our allies, but I also know that they are outnumbered, and would doubtless suffer heavy losses if they chose to aid us from within.

No matter how all of this comes out, it seems there will be terrible bloodshed. Where is Lyall? Someplace where she'll be safe from what is to come? Or in the middle of it all, trying to hold the clan together as it tears her apart?

Rowan wished it all hadn't come to this. He'd wanted so badly to help mend the wounds of the Dewar Clan, and to resolve all issues peacefully through reasonable discourse. The last thing he had anticipated was some show of strength.

Now he was armored and riding to battle with two hundred Campbell fighters at his back, not knowing what dreadful opposition might await them.

The gates remained closed as they approached, and there appeared to be much confusion and consternation upon the ramparts.

“We have come here with no wish for combat!” Rowan called out to the Dewar sentries. “We have heard of a plot by the Adder to topple the Dewars from within, and we have come to help you defend your clan! Let us in, and we will be your allies as we have always been!”

“Away with ye, bastard sons of whores!” a Dewar guardsman spat. “Ye’ll not control us anymore!”

“Well, thus perishes diplomacy,” Cillian commented dryly.

“If we try to force our way in,” Rowan muttered, “they make use Lyall as a hostage...”

“Rowan, listen to me!” Cillian snapped. “We are here, we are armed, and we face a barricaded foe with more enemies on the way. I know how you care for the lass, but if we want these men we’ve brought along to survive this fight, then Lyall must be the *last* thing on your mind at present, lad! We have no wings to fly over that damned wall, so we must do all we can to break through before the Adder’s men come and we’re stuck outside with them!”

“Aye, you’re right, I know it!” Rowan conceded. Still, in his heart, he was horrified by what perils Lyall might be facing.

Cillian turned to the other Campbells, raising his voice: “*Break it down, men!*”

A roar of assent went up from the soldiers, and a battering ram the size of a large tree trunk was produced and brought to the fore. With a dozen strong men holding the handles on each side, the ram smashed against the metal gates, again and again, making them shudder and spark.

“Keep at it, lads!” Cillian yelled.

That was when they heard the pipes and drums of war echoing through the nearby valleys, along with the terrible thunder of hooves approaching.

“MacGillivrays,” Cillian breathed, growing pale. “And far too many of them, from the sound of it.”

“Faster!” Rowan bellowed fiercely. “They’ll be on us any moment now!”

The battering ram reared back again... but before it could strike once more, the gates began to open of their own accord. The sounds of violence poured out from the courtyard within, as the Dewars fought against each other.

The Campbell soldiers rode through the gates – they were welcomed with ragged cheers by those Dewars who were loyal to them, and a pair of the Dewar sentries went to Rowan and bowed.

“We had some trouble getting the gate open for you, sir,” one of them said with a wry grin. There was a deep gash on his forehead, and blood between his teeth as well. “But we managed. Over half of the fellows on the wall were with us, thankfully... though the ones who weren’t have now gone to join their comrades within, so you may get a bit of a fight there.”

“Close the gates behind us,” Cillian replied, “and let’s worry more about those approaching MacGillivrays. Our men will help yours hold the castle against them. We have plenty of archers with us to keep them at bay.”

“I’ll take a few of your men with me to clean up any opposition inside the castle,” Rowan said to the sentry.

He knew that Cillian was aware of what he truly meant by that – that he needed to go in search of Lyall. He expected Cillian to object, especially when the man put a hand on Rowan’s shoulder.

Instead, he simply said, “Be careful in there.”

Rowan nodded and proceeded with the Campbell loyalists toward the main entrance of the castle.

As they went through the halls, the sentries recognized those who shared their loyalties – and their numbers steadily grew as they went from room to room, overpowering those who were loyal to the Adder.

By the time they had cleared out nearly the entire castle, however, the Campbell-aligned legions were so many in number that most of the remaining Adder loyalists surrendered to them without a struggle.

Still, Rowan couldn't help but wonder: *Where are those loyal to the Stewarts? Why have I seen none of them so far?*

As if in answer, the door to the Great Hall swung open... and Ewan Stewart stepped out.

Rowan lunged forward and seized him instantly, pinning him to the wall. *“Where is your father? Where are all the other Stewarts?! Answer me, damn you!”*

Ewan put his hands up in surrender. “My father has gathered all of his men in the dungeons and barricaded them! He's gathering strength so that he can burst forth and attack your people from behind while you are guarding the ramparts against the Adder!”

“And is it true what Lyall told us?” Rowan demanded. “That you and Hamish were in league with the Adder the whole time? That the two of you plotted the overthrow of this clan?”

“I did not know what he had done until recently!” Ewan insisted. “By then it was too late for me to do anything but go along, but you don't understand... right now, the only thing that matters is getting to Lyall before he finds her!”

“What the devil are you talking about? What do you mean ‘before he finds her’?!”

“I put her someplace where I thought she'd be safe.” Ewan almost seemed to be on the verge of tears now. “A secret

room, down below the dungeons. I didn't think my father and his men would go down there! If they happen to go down the wrong passage... if they find her... my father loathes her, he already killed her father! He'll slaughter her without thinking twice! If you care for her as much as I do, then we *must* do something!"

Rowan's lip curled with scorn, and in that moment he wanted nothing more than to smack Ewan in the mouth – but there was no time. "You say he's barricaded himself. Do you know another way in?"

"I might know of one, aye. But if we run into his people..."

"If we do, then you had better pray you can make your father see reason and surrender, or neither of you will live to see the sunrise. Now come, show me."

Ewan nodded. "God help me for what I've done, Rowan. Follow me."

He led them to the scullery, where he moved a dusty old shelf in one corner to reveal a steep and narrow stone shaft. Rowan bristled as he stared down into the darkness, and the cogs of his mind whirled, trying to decide whether it was safe to trust this man.

But he could see no other choice. Not when Lyall's life was at stake.

He motioned for the men who were with him to remain behind, knowing that the sound of so many men clanking their swords and armor against the stones would draw too much attention. Stealth would have to be their ally now, not numbers or brute force.

"How do you know about this way into the dungeons?" Rowan whispered. "From how stale the air is here, I can't imagine it's been used regularly for many years."

"It was closed off before I was born," Ewan answered furtively. "When I was a small boy and left to my own devices here in the castle, Lyall and I would frequently go exploring so

we might learn and share the deepest secrets of the place. We discovered its mortared entrance, and we often snuck back into the kitchen to quietly chip and chisel at it... always taking great care to replace the shelf in front of it, so that it would remain hidden from everyone else. Eventually, we exposed the shaft and climbed down.” He chuckled, and Rowan could hear the warmth of the memory in his voice. “There was one point when she lost her balance, and I was certain she’d hurt herself and we’d both be in terrible trouble. But she was strong enough to hold out her arms and keep herself from falling, and she was clever enough to find another foothold, and another. I was sure that she’d be too frightened to continue downward, but a moment later the top of her head had disappeared down into the shadows, and I had no choice but to follow.”

“You have been in love with her all along, haven’t you?” Rowan grunted, lowering himself down a particularly steep length of the shaft.

“Aye. I always have, and always will. But she has never cared for me in that way... and after what I’ve done here, I’m sure she’ll be glad never to see me again. That’s if she doesn’t order me hanged, which is what I bloody deserve.”

“See here, Ewan,” Rowan said gruffly. “So far, it seems to me you’ve done nothing which cannot yet be undone. We’ll discuss what to do with you when all of this is over. Until then, however, we have no time for your damned self-pity, is that understood?”

Ewan braced himself and nodded, and the two of them continued to make their way down the shaft.

Once the ground beneath them leveled out, Ewan hunkered down in the shadows and moved forward, motioning for Rowan to join him. Rowan did, though he could barely make out Ewan’s shape in the gloom – the only illumination came through a few tiny gaps in the stone near the ceiling, letting in all-too-narrow shards of pale sunlight.

There were sounds of murmuring and shuffling to the right, and the glow of torches emanated from the mouth of a

corridor. Ewan gestured for Rowan to stay low and follow him quickly. They scuttled across, and as they did, Rowan could make out the shapes of Hamish and several of his men. They were conferring too quietly for him to make out their words. Thankfully, though, none of them seemed to hear his footfalls, and so he continued to follow Ewan.

Ewan led him down ever-tighter passageways for what seemed like a maddeningly long time, with many sharp twists and turns. There were gaps in the floor which could easily have injured Rowan if Ewan hadn't pointed them out – which strengthened Rowan's belief that Ewan had truly switched sides after all.

It suddenly struck Rowan that despite Ewan's previous bad acts (and there were certainly many), it must have taken tremendous strength of will for him to turn on his own father in the end, especially in favor of the Campbells. It made him wonder whether the pensive and patient young man he had seen at the bargaining table before might constitute more of Ewan's true nature than he'd previously considered.

Perhaps there was genuine nobility to be found within the lad.

At last, they reached a corridor of natural stone, so narrow that it seemed to Rowan as though only a skeleton could pass through it properly. But Ewan managed, and sure enough, there was a hidden door at the end of it. He unbolted it, and when it opened, Rowan's heart nearly leaped from his chest.

The sputtering light from a torch set into the wall of a small stone chamber revealed Lyall, alive and well. When she saw Rowan there, her eyes went from Ewan to Rowan and back again, confused.

"Has he taken you as well?" she asked Rowan.

"*He*' has come to his senses at last," Ewan cut in with a wan smile, "and if we all manage to get out of this alive, 'he' will have much to answer for. For now, though, we must get you out of there before my father finds us."

“Oh, it’s a wee bit late for that, laddie,” a voice growled from the shadows behind them.

Rowan and Ewan turned – and saw Hamish standing at the mouth of the narrow corridor, with well over a dozen armed men.

“How revolting,” Hamish said, shaking his head. “That I should find my own damned son to be a liar and a traitor.”

“It seems to me as though he inherited those traits, Hamish,” Rowan snarled. “After all, you were the one who killed the steward of your own clan, were you not?”

Lyall’s eyes widened. “Hamish, can this be true? Did you murder my father?!”

“He did,” Ewan confirmed sadly. “He admitted as much to me, and said that he meant to do the same to you as well. I should have told you when I first learned of it, Lyall... it’s one more thing I’m horribly sorry for. But how could I confess his crimes, and see him hanged for them? He was my father!”

“Aye, and I still am,” Hamish rumbled. “Which is why I’ll give you one last chance to regain your bloody sanity, lad, before this ugly business of betrayal goes further than either of us wants it to. Kill her. Now. Leave the Campbell whelp to me. Once both are dead, then all will be forgiven, and we can make this a strong and independent clan again!”

“It was never going to be an ‘independent clan,’ though, was it, father?” Ewan retorted coldly.

“Of course it was!” Hamish blurted. “Stop talking nonsense this instant! All I’ve ever done is advocate for our people’s freedom from the oppression of clans like these high-and-mighty Campbells!”

“You have advocated for that, and loudly,” Lyall spoke up. “And all the while, you’d already made a pact with the Adder.”

There was an uncomfortable stirring among Hamish’s men. “That cannot be true, can it, sir?” one of them asked.

“No, it’s not bloody true!” Hamish roared. “They’re lying to save their own skins, that’s all there is to it!”

“It *is* true,” Ewan said stonily. “He confessed it to me himself. He made a deal with MacGillivray. I would be laird in name only, while the Adder secretly controlled us. I am ashamed that I did not strike him down then and there.”

“Thankfully,” Rowan added, drawing his sword, “that is a mistake which can now be rectified.”

“Are you daft?” Hamish laughed cruelly, turning to his men. “Kill him, and the girl too! Leave my son alive, that I might teach him a lesson or two.”

His soldiers exchanged nervous glances. None of them drew their weapons.

“Well?!” Hamish bellowed at them. “Get on with it!”

“We believed in you,” one of them said. “You made us think that our clan would have its pride back, after bowing to the Campbells for so long... and you were prepared to deliver us directly into the hands of another ruler.”

“One who sacked our villages,” another soldier pointed out angrily. “Burned our people’s farms. Put our comrades to the sword.”

“You deceived us, eh?” a third one chimed in. “Told us whatever you thought we wanted to hear, and all so your son could be called ‘laird.’”

“What?” Hamish sputtered. “How can you believe this... this rubbish? Come on, damn you, draw your swords and kill them! You swore oaths to me, all of you! Oaths of fealty!”

“Aye, and you swore to us that you would free us from tyranny!” one of the soldiers shouted. “Liar!”

Now they began to draw their weapons, and Hamish took a step backward, faltering. “It... It was for the good of the clan, don’t you see?” he protested. “Once we’d used the Adder to help us drive off the Campbells, then we could see to the MacGillivrays as well and have our independence! We *still* can, if only you’ll follow me!”

“We’ve all followed you long enough,” Ewan informed him stonily. “*You* are the tyrant. *You* are the one who has manipulated our clan for long enough. *You* are the one who must go.”

“You ungrateful wee piglet!” Hamish’s face was turning bright red. “I gave you everything! I was going to give you this entire clan, *and this is how you repay me?!*”

“The clan is not yours to give, Hamish,” Lyall said. “It never was, any more than it was my father’s, or even the Campbells’. It belongs to the people. The ones you’ve betrayed by siding with the man who threatened our ruination.”

Hamish drew his sword, and its blade jittered fiercely in his trembling hands. “Stay back, all of you! Keep away from me!”

He hovered uncertainly for a long moment before the rows of swords advancing upon him... and then he suddenly turned and fled for his life, his footsteps echoing through the catacombs.

Rowan breathed a sigh of relief and ran to Lyall, taking her in his arms. “Thank God you’re alive! I was so worried!”

“I gave you every reason to worry, I fear,” Ewan admitted. “Lyall, you were right in everything you said about me. I was a jealous fool and a coward, and I would give anything in the world to take it all back.”

She released herself from Rowan’s embrace and went to Ewan, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Your sins have been

grievous indeed, Ewan. But you have redeemed them by aiding Rowan with my rescue, and by revealing the truth about your father. I meant what I said before... those terrible deeds were not carried out by the real you. Not the Ewan I've known my whole life."

He nodded, blushing fiercely.

"We are still not out of danger," Rowan observed. "The Adder's forces are at the walls, and we cannot be certain whether our soldiers will be enough to drive them off."

"Then I suppose we ought to lend a hand!" one of the Stewart men chuckled, turning to his comrades. "Eh, boys?"

A cheer went up among them, so loud that it seemed to make the very walls of the place tremble. They ran out of the tunnels – Ewan followed them closely, while Rowan lingered, putting his arms around Lyall again.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly.

"I am now," she replied breathlessly, "for whatever comes next, I'll know that you came back for me. That is all that matters."

"I adore you, Lyall." His voice trembled, and his grip on her tightened. "I could not bear the thought of any harm befalling you. I should not have let you out of my sight, not even for a moment."

She beamed at him, tears shining in her eyes. "Well, now you shall have to, in order to save whatever is left of this clan. Go."

"But... how will I know you are safe?"

She took a few steps backward until she was inside the stone cell again, still smiling. "This still seems like the safest place in the castle, doesn't it? I'll be here waiting for you."

Rowan wanted to protest, but he knew she was right. Dragging her into the fray just so he could keep an eye on her seemed the height of foolishness, while having her wait in her own bedchamber would hardly be much safer while there still

might be hostile Dewars about. More than that, he knew that every moment he hesitated would keep him away from the battle where he was needed.

As he gazed into her eyes, Rowan wondered how things might have been between them if they hadn't met in the midst of all this chaos and uncertainty. Had it been the pressure which had pressed them together so tightly and immediately, like two pieces of glowing hot metal hammered together in a roaring forge? Or might they have come together all the more swiftly and strongly if not for the heavy distrust which had hung between them at first?

WHAT WOULD a proper courtship between them have looked like, he pondered? He tried to imagine leading her through the gardens of Castle Campbell, pointing out the delicate blooms he counted among his personal favorites (and perhaps plucking one for her to wear in her hair). Would they have gone on long walks over the hills and valleys of the Campbell lands? Had picnics, skipped through festivals, danced together at celebrations?

He did not know. Now, though, they were surrounded by frenzy and terror – and all he knew, with a certainty that filled his entire heart, was that they had always been meant for each other. In peace or in strife, they'd always been destined to find each other.

And if he believed that, then he had to believe that this would not be the end for them – that he would return safely and see her again, that he would take her in his arms and keep her there until the end of time.

He kissed her then, for luck – and as her warm breath filled his mouth, it seemed to him that her very spirit was filling his body, making him bold enough to face whatever lay ahead. As he broke away from her and ran to join the others, it seemed as though he was still carrying her with him, and that made him feel strong enough to face a thousand men.

When he emerged from the castle, he saw that the fighting between Dewars had subsided – but there was still much commotion outside the walls, as the MacGillivrays did all they could to breach the gates. The Campbell archers rained down arrows, but their numbers were still too few, and it looked as though the Adder’s men would triumph. If their forces spilled into the courtyard and castle, what then? Would the combined Dewars and Campbells be able to fight them off sword to sword and axe to axe, or would the place be overrun and conquered?

As Rowan took his place on the ramparts, he saw that the Stewart men were standing shoulder to shoulder with the Campbells – and with their added might, the black-armored invaders were indeed being driven back from the walls! Too many of their comrades were falling to shafts fired from above, and with their forces so diminished, their chances of breaching the gates dwindled by the moment!

Suddenly, there was a sharp rattle of drums from the MacGillivrays... a signal to retreat.

The Adder’s soldiers turned and fled, and a rousing cheer rose up from the ramparts as the Dewars and Campbells watched them depart.

Rowan found Cillian and embraced him. The large man was covered in blood and sweat, but he was laughing fit to burst. “We did it!” he yelled triumphantly.

“Aye, we did,” Rowan agreed, his eyes seeking out Ewan, “but not alone.”

When Rowan found the lad, Ewan bent to one knee, offering up his sword to Rowan. “I have no excuse for my actions, sir. I surrender to you, and will submit to any punishment you see fit.”

“There will be time for all that later,” Rowan assured him, motioning for him to rise and keep his sword. “For now, though, you did well in the end, and we could not have won the day without you. I know how hard it must have been for

you to go against your father, and your courage is greatly appreciated.”

Ewan blinked, surprised. His mouth opened and closed for several moments without words. Finally, he said, “Thank you, sir.”

Rowan nodded briskly, then went back down to the dungeons so he could let Lyall know that a miracle had transpired, and the threat was gone.

When he did, she laughed joyously and threw herself into his arms, showering him with kisses.

“Dear God,” Ewan breathed. “What appalling evil did I welcome onto our lands?”

AS HE SAID IT, he stood on a hillside overlooking the Dewar territories alongside Cillian, Lyall, and Rowan. His shoulders were slumped, and he looked as though his very soul had been snatched from his body.

The Adder’s men had retreated from the castle walls... but as they had, they’d rampaged through the towns and farms mercilessly, setting fire to many homes and fields. Crops which had already struggled to thrive were now burned to cinders.

Not only that, but the dead from the conflict were being arranged in rows outside the ramparts so that their loved ones could identify them and see to their proper burial. There were hundreds of them, and there were many Dewar clansmen hard at work digging graves upon their lands that day. The sounds of grief and lamentation drifted on the wind as surely as the smoke and ash.

“So much death and devastation,” Ewan went on, “and so much of it inflicted by Dewars upon their own damned neighbors. We had only just begun to recover from the previous horrors that ravaged our clan, and now we’ll be starting all over again. Defenseless from too many soldiers dead. Starved from too few crops to harvest. Scrabbling for

scraps of wood and stone to rebuild homes and shops. And all my fault.”

“It was your father who struck a bargain with that devil MacGillivray, not you,” Cillian said.

“Even so, I should have seen through his plan from the start,” Ewan insisted, “for who was closer to him than I? I should have been paying more attention to his machinations, rather than being distracted by my foolish pride and my infatuation. And once he revealed them to me, I should have given him up then and there.”

“He was a domineering man with a strong will,” Lyall reminded him. “No one can fault you for hesitating in defying your own father.”

Ewan blinked at her, his face so pale it was almost green. “When I think of how I treated you... how I allowed my madness to overtake me...”

“As I said before, Ewan; I know that was not your true self. You were manipulated by a man who was supposed to love and protect you as a father. He sought to twist you into a version of himself, so that you would forget the goodness of your own heart in favor of power. He clearly underestimated your sense of honor, and your strength of character. For myself, I am simply pleased to have my dear friend back.”

He gave her a grateful smile, though he did not seem especially convinced himself. Then he turned to Cillian and Rowan. “I suppose this goes without saying, but even so, The Dewar Clan is at your mercy, and our oath of service to the Campbells is renewed. Those among us who once condemned your clan now largely see you as our saviors... myself included, of course. Still, for our prior crimes and those of the Adder’s sympathizers, you may do with us as you will. You may cut us loose to fend for ourselves for having given you so much trouble, or you may remain our rulers and appoint a steward to lead in your stead. The Adder loyalists may be banished, or hang at your will.”

“The first thing I believe we ought to do with the former Adder loyalists,” Cillian remarked, “is to sit them down and speak with them. They have very likely changed their tune, and if this clan is to rebuild, their contrition may earn their forgiveness so that they may contribute to the new peace and unity.”

“Then you have resolved to remain our masters.” Ewan nodded. “It’s probably just as well, for without your clan’s aid, we’d likely die off within a year. Or be seized by the Adder, and properly this time. I understand how foolish it would be for us to expect your support without your rule. I would offer a list of worthy fellows who might serve as steward, if I thought for a moment that you would trust me to compose it. As it is, on the subject of my own clan: I would only ask that if you feel death is required to pay for the transgressions of the Stewarts, you accept my life and spare those of my kinsmen.”

“Your kinsmen were the deciding factor in driving away the MacGillivrays,” Rowan pointed out wryly. “It would hardly seem proper to reward their valor with banishment or death, now would it? Besides, they too will be required to help with the clan’s recovery. You’ll need as many fighters as you can muster, and builders too, for that matter. With regard to your punishment, Ewan Stewart, I fear that it shall be far more grave than hanging or beheading. Rather, you are sentenced to life as laird of the Dewar Clan.”

Ewan’s jaw dropped, and he stammered. “I beg your pardon?”

“As well you should after the things you’ve done,” Rowan retorted with a half-smile, “but this burden should suffice as proper penance.”

“You... You cannot *possibly* believe that I would be fit to lead this clan?” Ewan protested.

“Lyall has spoken of your true nature,” Rowan told him, “and for myself, I have seen enough of it to judge that you would be more fit to rule over these people than anyone. You spoke from your heart of independence for your people and

they chose to listen, even knowing that the odds would be against them and that they might have to fight two different foes to achieve it. You roused them nevertheless, Ewan. You inspired them. Your father's words were lies, but yours were not. You are familiar with this clan and its people, and if anyone can heal the wounds of this day, it will be you."

"Then I do not understand," Ewan stuttered. "Are you saying that the Campbell Clan intends to wash its hands of us after all?"

"Not at all," Cillian said. "We will be your allies, and your protectors while you rebuild. When the Dewars flourish once more, then we can work out some contract for repayment. However, I believe this has taught us that cooperation is far more preferable to control, as the latter can create seething resentments and fractured loyalties. We shall be your friends, Ewan, not your masters." He raised an eyebrow. "If such an arrangement would be agreeable to you, of course?"

"Certainly it would," Ewan answered, "but are you certain that I am the man to be laird?"

Lyall put a hand on his arm, giving him a gentle smile. "Ewan, it must be you, for it is the debt you owe... to this clan, and to yourself. You seek redemption? This is the only path to it."

Ewan smiled slowly, and he nodded. "Very well. Then from this point forward, I swear that the Dewars shall ever after be friends and allies to the Campbells... just as I forswear the use of poisons and other such cowardly methods for the rest of my days. I shall strive to be the man that you have always believed me to be. If I can achieve even a small fraction of that, then perhaps I will find myself up to the task."

Rowan clasped Ewan's hand happily. "As a longtime advisor to a laird, I shall be delighted to provide counsel whenever you ask for it."

"That would be most appreciated!" Ewan beamed.

“Has there been any sign of your father, by any chance?” Cillian inquired casually. “There *is* still the unpleasant question of what to do about him, after all.”

Ewan shook his head. “No one has seen him since he fled from the tunnels. I know that he ought to pay for his misdeeds, but I do hope wherever he’s gone, he doesn’t return. If he does, though, I shall do my duty to your people and have him executed,” he added quickly, “have no fear about that.”

Rowan gave him a sympathetic smile. “Ewan, you are laird now, and Hamish is your father. If he does turn up again, how you choose to deal with him will be entirely up to you. His death is not owed to us, and only *you* can decide what is owed to your clan.”

Ewan gave him a small smile of gratitude. “Thank you for that. Still, I pray he never shows his face here again, so that I may not be forced with such a choice.”

Hamish had not been able to call himself a young man in a very long time indeed.

A veteran of more battles than he could count, his joints had an annoying tendency to creak and groan. His knees were not what they used to be, nor was his back, or his endurance altogether. Oh, he'd still have trusted his skills with a sword against nearly any man who felt like testing them – he'd always imagined he had many more years of fight in him, no matter how his body complained in between such contests.

It was not the remaining strength in his stout and barrel-shaped body, however, that had allowed him to make it to the Dewar borders and beyond on foot, running all the way.

Initially, the fuel which had sustained him during that arduous trek had been fear. He had never before felt the kind of abject terror he'd experienced in those tunnels beneath the dungeons... seeing his own men look at him with loathing and disgust, seeing his own son condemn him and turn on him. He was used to seeing hatred burn in the eyes of his enemies, but his own people? His own child? It was as though the ground had dropped out from beneath him and sent him tumbling upside-down into a hell he could never have conceived of.

No one had tried to stop him from fleeing. The Dewars and Campbells were too focused on fighting off the MacGillivrays, who in turn were too intent on breaching the gates. As Hamish

looked back at this sight, he'd stumbled, a sob catching in his throat.

This was the castle of his clan, and these black-armored brutes were the ones he'd tried to sell his own people to – smashing at its walls and doors, prepared to butcher all they found within.

The next several miles, he was propelled, not by fear, but by shame.

The words his son had spoken began to dig into his mind and heart, and he knew that he'd been wrong in what he'd done. He dimly remembered that day so many years ago, when Lyall had come to him and told him about how Ewan had used a poisoned arrow to kill a deer. (And *why* had Lyall come to him? Because she had trusted him. She had believed in his sense of decency. Had he truly ordered her death just minutes before? Had he plunged a dagger into her father's back?)

He tried to recall the words he'd spoken to young Ewan that day, chiding him for employing such cruel and cowardly methods. He'd talked of honor, and of how a man ought to behave, how important it was not to be craven and underhanded.

Lord, what sort of villain had he curdled into? How could he possibly justify such gruesome deeds now that he'd borne witness to their gory conclusions?

He stumbled and fell then, and started to cry, pounding his fists against the stony ground and begging the forgiveness of his late wife. He had turned into something more beast than man, and worse, he'd done so in the name of improving their son's station. He had brought down their once-noble house, forever tarnished their legacy – and it had amounted to nothing. He hid his face against the soil, wishing he would never have to bear the embarrassment of showing it to the world again.

But then night fell, and a chill dug into his flesh, and the wolves began to howl upon the moors.

And when he lurched to his feet again and forced himself forward – past the borders of the Dewar lands and far, far beyond; up dark hills so steep that they were nearly mountains, and through forests tangled with dense and unforgiving briars – he was fueled by something new:

Hatred.

Pure, black, burning hatred, like something forged on the devil's own anvil.

No, he did not lament his own actions, for *they would have worked*. They *should* have worked, they were *meant* to. He'd been prepared to sell his own soul with evil and treacherous acts so that his son could have a better life than Hamish had... well, wasn't that the sacred duty of every parent? To put aside their own glory and honor, to hide all the awful and shameful parts from their offspring whenever possible so that their children would reap the rewards without ever having to carry the burdens of knowing how they were attained?

He'd been willing to grind himself down to nothing in order to place his son on a pedestal, and that was how it should have turned out – if it weren't for that haughty lass Lyall, and those wretched bloody Campbells sticking their beaks in.

They were the reason for all of those corpses, all of that blood and flame. *Them*, not Hamish.

By this point, Hamish – bloodied from the thorns, his clothes torn, his hair messy with dirt and leaves – had begun to laugh hysterically, shrieks and cackles that carried across the hillsides for miles in every direction. He was entirely unaware that he was doing this, though the sound of it scared off the birds and animals.

How many days did it take for him to reach the stronghold of Geoffrey MacGillivray? How many grasses, strange berries, and dubious toadstools did Hamish shove into his gibbering mouth for sustenance along the way? By the time he showed up at the obsidian arch of the Adder's stronghold, he was

soiled and babbling, and the black-garbed soldiers took him to the Great Hall at once.

Hamish fell to his knees pitifully in front of the Adder, suddenly realizing where he was from the serpent banners hanging from the walls. “My life...” Hamish mumbled. “My life... for you...”

One of the guardsmen stepped forward, drawing his blade. “Shall I dispatch him for you, Laird Geoffrey?”

The Adder’s eyes narrowed, and the leather and steel of his right gauntlet creaked ominously as it clenched.

“No,” he intoned. “Take him to a cell. He may yet be of use to us.”

Several days later – once the immediate aftermath of the attempted invasion had been cleaned up, the damages had been assessed, and the repairs had begun in earnest – Cillian and Rowan prepared to return to Castle Campbell. A large garrison of Campbell soldiers were ordered to remain and protect the Dewars in case the Adder should attack again.

The rest, however, were heading home.

“And you are certain you must go with them?” Ewan asked Lyall. “Can you not remain here with me?” She opened her mouth to answer, but he held up a hand, clarifying, “I ask only as a friend, one who would value your counsel in the days to come. You have always been the cleverest person I know, and if there’s anyone who can keep me from making an utter fool of myself, it’ll be you.”

She smiled at him. “I will always be your friend, Ewan, as long as you walk the path of goodness that we both know runs wide through you. And I am sorry that I will not be able to help you guide the rebuilding of the clan... not right away, at least.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Then you mean to return?”

“Someday, most likely,” she assured him. “This is still the only home I’ve ever known, and I would not leave my father’s

grave unvisited. First, though, I must learn who I might be outside of this place... for I have allowed it to define me too narrowly for my own good, I feel. The Campbells have invited me to be their guest for a while, and I am eager to see their legendary castle! Perhaps I might even have a chance to tour the Fortress of Dunscaith!”

Ewan laughed. “We did always talk about doing so when we were children, didn’t we? Well, perhaps I shall have to find some occasion to come and visit, then... if you would allow me?”

“Of course, Ewan.” She embraced him warmly. “I hope you will.”

“And I hope more than anything that you will find some peace and happiness there,” he replied. “You deserve the best of life.”

It looked as though there was more he wanted to say – but instead, he closed his mouth and bowed, walking away briskly. As he crossed the courtyard, she saw him break up an argument between two Dewars, one a former Campbell loyalist and the other a Stewart.

He spoke to them both patiently but firmly, and in that moment, Lyall saw a glimpse of the future... of the leader he would become. Her vision of it shimmered and sparkled over him like sunlight on the surface of a lake, and she smiled, knowing that her home would be in good hands.

“Are you ready to leave?”

Rowan had walked up behind her without her realizing it, and she let out a startled giggle. “Yes, I believe I am.”

“Before we depart,” he said, blushing slightly, “there is one other matter I thought we might discuss.”

“Oh?” She tilted her head.

“AYE.” He shifted his weight uncomfortably. “You see, when you did not arrive in time to leave with us before... when I

thought that you might have been hurt, or worse... I realized that I would have felt utterly bereft without you, and that I was willing to do anything in the world to get you back. I counseled my laird to let me return with an army, and I still do not know if I did so because it was the prudent thing to do... or merely because I could not bear to leave you in peril.”

“Rowan, what are you saying?” she asked softly.

He lowered himself to one knee before her, taking her hand in his. “Lyall, I never want to spend another day of my life without you. Will you be my bride?”

She nodded slowly, her eyes filling with tears of joy. “Yes, Rowan, you wonderful man... of course I will.”

He stood and grabbed her, kissing her passionately and promising her she would never regret it.

As it turned out, Ewan did not have to wait long for an excuse to visit the Campbell lands. The wedding was set for a month later, and it was to take place at Castle Campbell.

When he arrived, Lyall was delighted to greet him, and Rowan clasped his hand as if they were old comrades in arms. As they both showed him around the castle and the villages and farms surrounding it, he could plainly see how utterly devoted they were to each other.

It was a funny thing – all during the previous month, he had fretted that it might pain him to see her with him, and particularly at the altar. He had nursed his infatuation with her for so many years that he found he scarcely knew who he was without it, any more than he did now that his father was gone.

He had defined himself by all the wrong things for most of his life, he realized now. But overseeing the rebuilding of the clan was slowly helping him to learn more about who he truly was. The answers were not always easy, but he tried to be as patient with himself as he knew Lyall would have been with him if she were there.

Indeed, he still found it hard to think of himself as a “laird,” no matter how many people addressed him by that title. During those days, he was simply a man doing all he could to help, from the time he awoke until the time he went to bed. He cut lumber and hewed stone and carried bales

alongside the other clansmen, and they respected him all the more for it.

Still, through it all, he was distracted by the question of whether his heart could bear seeing Lyall happy with another.

Now that he was with them, he was amazed to discover that not only could he bear it, it filled him with joy.

He had never seen her smile that way before – he'd never seen her eyes shine with such unguarded adoration. He'd never seen her skip and dance the way she did as she walked alongside Rowan. It was as though she'd been beautifully renewed, and he saw her through Rowan's eyes, just as he saw Rowan through hers.

The man was worthy of her, there was no question about it.

Ewan nodded to himself as he took his seat at the wedding ceremony, delighted beyond words for his dear friend and her new husband.

Lyall's heart fluttered with nervous ecstasy as the music began to play and she walked down the aisle, escorted by Laird Sam. She'd found him to be extremely kind and welcoming, and he told her how much he had admired and trusted Arran.

"I know I can never replace him," Sam whispered as they neared the altar, "but I am glad that I could be here in his stead, and I shall do all that I can to be a father to you now that you have joined our family."

Lyall squeezed his arm gratefully, gazing upon her groom in his fine tunic and tartan. He was looking at her with genuine wonder, as though she were some angel lowered on a cloud from heaven.

He continued to gaze upon her all through the vows, and when the time came for them to kiss, he seized her and did it with such fierce joy that she never wanted him to let go.

Yes, the Dewar Clan was the only home she had ever known. Now, though, she knew with a feeling like sunlight on

her soul that from that point on, “home” would be wherever he was.

The celebration was an affair befitting the grandeur of the Campbells, with guests from a dozen different clans. Amid the dancing and drinking, Laird Sam took care to spend the better part of the evening at Ewan’s side – listening to his concerns carefully, offering suggestions and wisdom as needed, and most of all, introducing him to a great many nobles and lairds from other clans. Many of them were able to offer additional advice, and a few of them even proposed various arrangements which might allow the Dewars to recover more quickly and fully. Hands were clasped, and promises of further discussion were issued.

“You seem to be well on your way to success as a laird,” Cillian commented to Ewan dryly. “Shaking all the right hands, making all the right promises, kissing all the right arses. There’s only one thing left for you to do now.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“Find yourself a wife and start making heirs. Here,” Cillian added, handing him two goblets of wine. “One for you, and one for... whomever.” With that, he withdrew into the crowd before Ewan could stop him.

And all the while – through the merriment and music, the feasting and carousing – all Rowan could do was look at his new bride, marveling at the fact that she was the only thing in the world that had ever made him ignore his mind in favor of his heart.

He’d never have thought it possible that anyone could make him so delirious with desire. Yet there she was, beaming at him, making him feel like the only man in the world.

As the festivities drew to a close and the guests began to make their way to their rooms, Lyall threw her arms around Rowan’s neck and they ascended the steps to their bedchamber.

She was so nervous that her insides were twanging and vibrating like the strings of a lute, and her knees felt weak. She had imagined his touch between her legs so many times over that now the muscles in her inner thighs twitched with anticipation. She did all she could to keep her breathing normal, but she knew that its forced rhythm and shallowness betrayed her just the same. Her pulse pounded in her ears as though she were holding seashells up to them.

Rowan's arm tightened around her waist, and when she looked up into his face, she saw tenderness and reassurance in his eyes.

He would never hurt her. She was as sure of that as she was that the sun would rise the next day.

When they reached the door, he opened it – and before she knew what was happened, he had swept her up into his arms, carrying her in. She squirmed playfully in his embrace as though pretending to struggle, then pressed the back of her wrist to her forehead dramatically and went limp: “It seems I am at your mercy! Do with me what you will!”

“Aye, I had rather intended to,” he replied with a mischievous wink.

He kicked the door closed behind them, then carried her to the bed and set her down gently. One by one, he undid the ribbons of her wedding dress and opened it, revealing the snow-white underclothes beneath. Goosebumps rippled across her skin, and her eyes were wide with excitement. Her bosom rose and fell, and he freed her breasts, kissing them delicately and relishing the sharp gasps he drew from her.

Lyall's fingers clutched the blankets beneath her as his intense kisses progressed from her nipples to her belly and still lower... until he had parted her legs so that he could gently press his lips to her delicate folds. She was slick with desire, and with each stroke of his tongue down there, she felt bolts of white lightning travel up and down her spine until she was sure she could take no more. Her legs spasmed and shook, and

the bedclothes beneath her were soaked through. How could a body stand so much pleasure without bursting apart?

He slipped a finger inside of her, and she almost felt embarrassed by her wetness. Was this how it was supposed to be? Would he recoil from it?

Then his touch found places inside of her that she never knew were there, plucking and playing them like harp strings until their chords became a divine and rising choir which threatened to shatter her into exquisite shards.

Rowan slipped out of his tartan, revealing his firm and quivering manhood. She reached down to brush her fingertips against it, just for the briefest instant – amazed at how warm it was to the touch, how hard and soft it was all at once.

She felt it enter her and she inhaled sharply, kissing him and biting his lip.

He began to thrust deeper and deeper inside of her – he hadn't removed his tunic, and she relished how the rough fabric of it scraped against her nipples, making them sing. His thickness coaxed her wider and wider, until she felt as though she might split in two. Yet if there was a silvery trickle of pain to it, it was engulfed in the ocean of pleasure which consumed her from within, its waves crashing against her core over and over as her climax came. She could feel his as well, a river of its own flowing into the vast sea of their shared bliss.

It was that very sea which rocked them both to sleep, still clinging to each other.



I hope you loved my book! If you can [leave an Amazon review](#) it would mean a lot to me.

I have a complimentary short story for you with the lovely couple. Also you will get an extra novel for free!

[**Simply TAP HERE to read it for FREE!**](#)

Or use this link directly in your browser.

<http://www.alisaadams.com/b69ep>

I guarantee you, that you won't be disappointed.

Also, flip the page for another amazing story!

THE LEGEND OF THE CAMPBELL CLAN

Book #1

The Niece of His Highland Enemy

Book #2

The Return of the Lost Highlander

Book #3

Awaiting the Wolf Killer Highlander

Book #4

Highlander's False Betrothal

Book #5

Reclaiming Her Highland Home

Book #6

Highlander's Adopted Daughter

Book #7

Seducing a Highland Rebel

Book #8

Inheriting a Highland Bride

Book #9

Highlander's Thunderous Desire

Book #10

Highlander's Second Betrothed

Book #11

Defying his Highland Duty.

Book #12

For the Heart of a Highland Widow

Book #13

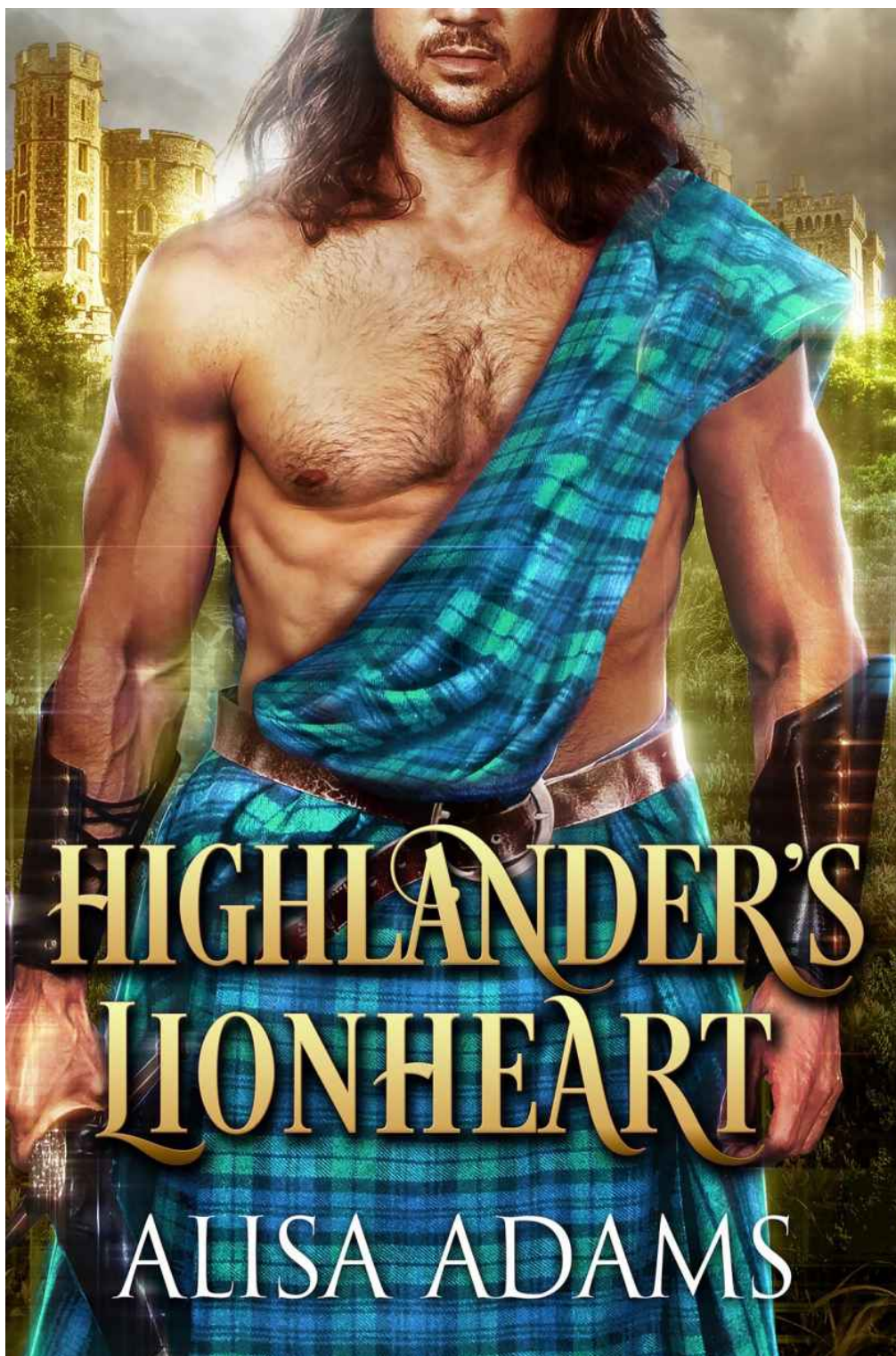
Highlander's Defiant Lass

Book #14

Betrayed by a Highland Spy.

Book #15 (this book)

His Distrustful Lass



CHAPTER 1

The Scottish Highlands in the late 1700's

Godet Ross sat wearily upon her giant of a horse, her hips swaying with the big draft horses' walk as her clan's tartan blew over her shoulder in the wind. Her long, black, and unruly curls streamed out behind her as well. It had come loose from a hastily put up braid this morning. She knew it would have been wiser to put the horse in harness to pull the cumbersome and heavy traveling coach that was lumbering along behind her at some distance, but she had left quickly. If the slow-moving coach was overtaken and they lost their trunks full of their belongings, so be it. She was not going to chance leaving her horse behind nor her sisters, her aunt, or the other large draft horses her clan was known for.

Mungan Ross had everything now. But not her. Not her sisters. Not the horses.

Godet looked ahead along the winding dirt road that weaved endlessly through the grassy Highlands, its path disappearing behind hills and climbing up craggy barren peaks only to be seen again in an open view of more grass. Endless, endless grass dotted with sheep. How she had come to hate sheep.

"I dinnae see nothing but mauchit sheep!"

Godet looked down from her big horse and smiled wearily at the tiny, older lady on the small Highland pony beside her.

Her Aunt Hextilda spat at the ground as she glared at all the sheep.

“Aye, Aunt Hexy, Mungan thinks he is being canny clearing out our clansmen and using the land for sheep. He dinnae agree with me that he is naught but a blootered skiver!” She sighed tiredly, remembering her fierce argument with her drunken uncle when he had cleared her clan out of their homes, all to make a larger profit off of sheep. She winced as she pushed the wild, dark curls away from the side of her face, “I’m gaunnie work on it, aunt. There isnae much I can dae until I get the MacDonell’s help.”

“I know, dearie. But ‘tis fair puggled and puckled I am,” her aunt said with a harrumphing noise.

“Aye, aunt, me too,” Godet replied quietly as she looked back at her three sisters on the other big draft horses straggling behind her. “I am sure we are all weary. Why dinnae ye and the girls go ride in the coach. ‘Tis a bit more comfortable fer ye perhaps?”

“Nonsense that is, I can still ride. I dinnae need to be closed up in yon carriage where I cannae be smelling my braw highlands and heather and gorse.” Aunt Hextilda looked up at the eldest of her nieces. Noting the weariness on her young face. She had the weight of her clan on her shoulders. Ever since her parents had died and that skiver Mungan had come to Castle Fionnaghall, declaring himself Laird and joining in the Clearances to sweep out crofters and clans-men in lieu of the profit from sheep.

Aunt Hextilda studied Godet with wise old eyes that peered up at her niece from her hooded cloak. Godet was such a bonny young lass and her three sisters were as bonny as she, each so very different. Godet had dark hair that blew wild and free as the winds in the Highlands, her eyes were the silvery, blue-gray color of a stormy Highland sky. The muted red plaid of the Ross clan was proudly worn on her gown and the tartan she had wrapped around her shoulders. She should have

married by now and had the protection of a man. Then none of this would have been necessary.

“We will be arriving in MacDonell lands soon, aunt. Then we can rest.” Godet looked down at her aunt. “Ye sure that ye sent the message? I just dinnae understand why I wasnae told about this betrothal between myself and Gordon...”

“Och and sure I am that yer dear parents died before they could tell ye. But Gordon and his parents will remember the pact to be sure. Ye’ll see. Dinnae ye fash noo,” Aunt Hextilda added quickly, looking away from her niece.

“I think Aunt Hexy is up to something as usual Godet,” her sister Flori said as she came riding up on her own big draft horse.

“I agree,” Ceena added as she too caught up with Godet on her draft. “Where has he been? Why hasnae he come to claim ye before this?”

“In the tales, he would have come riding up just as Uncle Mungan was yelling and putting up sich a fright!” Ina, the youngest sister exclaimed in her dramatic voice as she rode up on her draft mare. “With Mungan tossing out the poor, weeping crofters into the cold as ye stood between him and their poor burning crofts. He would have swept ye up onto his magnificent horse and carried ye away before Uncle Mungan could strike ye again...”

Godet rolled her eyes. “Dae ye ken that is the stuff of fairy tales, Ina?”

Ina looked down at her hands where she held the reins of her horse. “Mither told me tales like that, it could happen,” she said adamantly.

Aunt Hextilda smiled indulgently up at Ina from her pony. Neither she nor her pony seemed bothered at being surrounded by the huge draft horses. They were used to it. Though her pony puffed up and pranced a bit in their presence, letting them know that he was big too.

Godet stared at her sisters. She loved them more than anything. She would do what she had to in order to keep them safe. If that meant showing up at Castle Conall and demanding Gordon MacDonell marry her according to some old betrothal from when they were children, then she would put aside her pride and do that. Then she would find a way to get her clansman's homes back and hopefully, Castle Fionnaghall as well.

Her sister Flori reached over and put her hand on Godet's, looking mournfully at her face. "It's a crumbling pile of stone," Flori told her in a sad, serious tone. "Let Mungan have it, Godet. There's naught there for us anymore."

"But the clan..." Godet began, her voice thick with frustration and sadness as she stared back at her sister.

"Clan means family, isn't that right? Family is the people, not the place," Flori said sorrowfully.

Godet turned her hand up and squeezed her sister's hand.

"We have each other and Aunt Hexy," Ina said bravely, her blonde curls blowing around her face.

"Plus, we saved the Clydesdale stallion and mares!" Ceena laughed happily as she patted her horse.

Godet smiled and patted her big stallion as she looked at her sisters.

Flori was ever the pragmatist. She was dark-haired like Godet, but somehow, her face was a bolder more dramatic version of her own. She kept Godet from overthinking things. But now, she was always sad, always serious. Mungan was responsible for that. He had killed Flori's beloved on the eve before their wedding. Flori had witnessed it herself and Godet had come upon Flori in hysterics with Mungan's soldiers surrounding her. Mungan was raising his hand over her where she knelt on the ground over her beloved's body. Flori had never said what had happened and didn't say if Mungan had struck her for disobeying him. But Godet had stopped him

from hurting Flori in that moment. He had happily beaten Godet instead since she was the eldest.

Ceena was always playful. She loved the horses and it was her idea to ride the breeding horses away from the castle. This line of Clydesdales had been in their family clan going back generations and were highly prized for field work, carriage pulling, and in old times, riding into battle. They were theirs, not Mungan's, just as Ceena had stated. Ceena had striking green eyes and their father's tawny, brown hair alongside his merry disposition. She could train and ride any type of horse. She lived and breathed horses.

Little Ina being the youngest still lived on dreams and fairy tales. She looked like a tiny angel with her dark blonde hair and clear blue eyes.

Godet knew that if her parents were still alive, she and her sisters would all most probably be married by now, except perhaps for Ina. Within a year, she too would have been married. Mungan being the greedy skiver that he was had been working on the best and most advantageous betrothals he could find. Flori's betrothed was not his choice, and the marriage did not bring him any advantages, so he got rid of him. It was another reason that Godet had agreed to her aunt's scheme to leave for the MacDonell's castle immediately after her last skirmish with Uncle Mungan. He had hit her again, badly that time, for trying to intervene between his soldiers and her crofters whose huts they were burning. Mungan was proving that he was dangerous as well as violent.

She was praying that the MacDonells were as she remembered them: wealthy, civilized, and strong in their family bonds. Their own mother had been a MacDonell. As for Gordon MacDonell, she only had brief memories of him from clan games in the summers: a thin boy who teased her and pulled her hair.

If Gordon would not marry her, she would appeal to the clan Laird for help and protection until she knew what to dae.

CHAPTER 2

Gordon MacDonell set a grueling pace. He had to intercept her. Godet Ross betrothed to himself? His parents had never mentioned it! Though he knew they were very close to the Ross' and they had always met up with them at the summer games. But a betrothal?

He could not have Godet Ross showing up at Conall Castle claiming to be his betrothed. He was already betrothed! Brigda was at his castle right now, planning their wedding. With Brigda's temper, who knew what would happen? She was a fiery lass and had led him quite the chase, but she had just recently agreed to be his wife.

His brother Tristan rode beside him. That grin had not left his face since the moment the message had arrived and they had ridden out of the castle. He was vastly amused by this turn of events. Gordon knew that Tristan did not like Brigda, not one bit.

Neither did his other men that were traveling with them. All his men knew that Castle Conall was for training soldiers. It was no place for women, in fact, women were not welcome. Brigda had proven to be... difficult. Gordon was surly and his temper was rising with each bit of ground they covered.

He spotted them after noon and breathed a sigh of relief. He was in time to stop Godet and turn her back. He urged his horse on faster with his brother right behind him. He galloped

full speed up to the small traveling group and spun his horse to a stop in front of them.

The girl in the front on the huge Clydesdale stopped her horse and turned him sideways, blocking the others. She pulled out a small dirk and was staring at him fiercely, the knife pointed directly at him. “Dinnae ye move a step closer to me or my sisters, I’m giving ye fair warning!” she called out to him. Her voice was clear and lilting.

Gordon studied the vision before him, trying to control his shock. He remembered the big Clydesdale horses the Ross clan was known for breeding. This was definitely Godet. How could he have forgotten those long, silky, black curls of hers? Her hair fell to a tiny waist that curved out to the gentle swell of her hips. But it was her eyes that brought back the memories with their strange but eerily beautiful silver-blue color. She had the longest dark lashes he had ever seen which were sweeping over those bewitching eyes. Those eyes had always mesmerized him, even as a young boy.

She wore the Ross plaid in her skirts that billowed out over her horses back. The lace that was at her wrists and was also peering out of the tight bodice she wore made her look impossibly more feminine as she sat on the giant of a horse. She looked at him bravely, not showing even a hint of fear in that upraised chin of hers. Yet, he noted the slight tremble of her slender, delicate hand on the reins of her horse. Gordon frowned. She was impossibly lovely. The young girl he remembered with the strange eyes had a grown into a stunningly beautiful woman. And she was a problem he didn’t need nor want. She was possibly even more beautiful than the buxom, red-haired Brigda waiting to marry him back at Castle Conall.

“Put that silly dirk away, lass. ‘Tis I, Gordon MacDonell, and I mean ye no harm,” he greeted a little irritably.

Godet frowned back at the man who was staring at her so brutishly and who was clearly annoyed. “Ye are Gordon?” Her eyes quickly traveled over his form. This was no skinny young

boy. This was a man—a very large, very muscular man. Dark, wavy hair curled down from his head to touch the collar of his billowy white linen shirt. He had on a kilt in the dark blue and green of the MacDonell clan. The dark blue and green made his emerald eyes shine brilliantly as he stared so brazenly at her. His chin was square and firm, his nose was straight, and his lips were full, though they were now thinned in irritation. He clearly was not happy to see her.

Godet's eyes traveled further down in her study of the man before her. She could not miss the big, muscular thighs and tall, black boots gripping the large black stallion he controlled so effortlessly. No man in her clan could carry off the wearing of the kilt like the warriors of old, but this man did. She swallowed and turned her eyes away, knowing she was blushing hotly. Gordon MacDonell had certainly grown up well.

She put her dirk back into her belt and continued her study of Gordon and the men who were beside him. All were on big, black horses—almost as big as the horses she and her sisters rode. Her horses were giants, she knew no other horses could match their size or strength, but these big men rode horses fit for their size. They were big, muscular, powerful and intimidating. She met Gordon's brutish stare. Keeping her chin up, Godet refused to break the contact that his eyes held on hers.

She wasn't aware that her sisters had come forward and were flanking her. All were staring at the men in front of them, except Ceena who was studying the black horses, of course, not the men on them.

Aunt Hextilda pushed her way in between the large draft horses and peered up at Gordon MacDonell. "Weel noo, if ye dinnae grow up to be quite the man!" Aunt Hextilda said appreciatively.

"Aunt Hextilda? Is that ye?" Gordon exclaimed as he looked down on the incongruously little woman riding the

pony in the midst of the young women on the huge draft horses. “Ye are still alive old woman?” He laughed.

“Shame on ye, young Gordon, such haiver ye be talkin. I’ll outlive all ye foolish young’uns. Besides, I cannae leave this Earth without seeing me poor nieces safely wed, noo ken I?”

Godet let out a soft groan of embarrassment.

“Aunt Hexy, please,” implored a girl that looked a bit like Godet, but darker, bolder in figure, not as delicate as Godet.

“I’d marry any man that rode a horse as fine as those big blacks...” This was spoken by a girl with hair reminiscent of the color of corn and wheat in the autumn fields. She smiled unabashedly as she stared at the horses. Her eyes were a bright, crystal green and had a slant to them that made them look like they were always smiling or laughing.

“Ye see, Godet, look at him. He wears a kilt like a warrior. He will save us all, just like in the stories,” the smallest of girls stated. Gordon heard Godet groan again. He stared at the tiny, slip of a girl who had spoken. She was all golden and delicate like a small angel.

Gordon turned to Godet who was blushing hotly. Bright spots of pink were shown on her creamy cheeks. “I take it these are yer sisters?” he asked, watching her closely. Her lips were lush and pink and he had trouble looking away from her. She was too beautiful. In fact, each of these girls was a beauty. *But Godet... no one could compare to her beauty,* he thought. He wondered why she had brought them all. A simple maidservant and her aunt as a chaperone would have sufficed. *What did the little blonde one mean by ‘he would save them all’?*

“Aye, they are,” she answered him quietly but firmly. “Our traveling coach with our luggage and some servants are a ways back. The coach is slower. We found it more comfortable to ride our horses,” she explained.

“Ye ride a stallion?”

“Aye, I dae,” she answered, raising her chin again.

He looked to the others.

“Ours are mares,” Ceena answered, and added with a smile, “All in foal to Godets’ stallion. We couldnae leave them behind, dae ye ken?”

Gordon frowned. His irritation at the predicament he was in passing to his own stallion who clearly did not like the huge stallion Godet sat on and started to prance. Gordon stilled him and opened his mouth to tell her she had to turn around when the sound of galloping horses caught his attention. His stallion and Godets snorted and spun toward the sound. A small group of soldiers came over a ridge, heading straight toward them. They wore what looked like the Ross plaid. He relaxed thinking that some of their clansmen were going to stop them and bring them back, that this was all a mistake.

Godet’s face, however, turned white with fear and her hands trembled on the reins. She shortened them and held them tighter. Godet looked back at her sisters and saw Flori’s eyes widen in stark fear. “Flori, stay strong for me now, I beg ye!”

“But ‘tis Mungan’s soldiers again, Godet,” Flori muttered, her voice raw with memories and anxiousness.

“Dae not fear, Flori. We are with ye. Just stay behind me. Aunt Hexy! Ceena! Ina! Get behind me!” She rode forward and stopped her horse again, turning the horse’s huge body to block her sisters and aunt from the soldiers’ view.

Gordon rode up beside her as the soldiers came closer. He gave an invisible signal to his men to surround the women.

“Dae ye have any weapons on ye?” she asked him urgently in a hushed tone.

Gordon grunted and then growled in his deep voice. “What dae ye take me for?”

“Weel noo, where be they? Under that kilt of yours?” she quipped with a quick look at him and one brow raised before turning back to watch the approaching riders.

She heard his short laugh and then the whistle of steel leaving its scabbard. She saw out of the side of her eye that he had pulled a long sword out of the scabbard on his saddle and had settled it into place at his belt where it was in full view. She grimaced, hoping there would be no need for it, but she touched her dirk reassuringly where it rested in her belt.

Godet recognized the first soldier leading the others. It was Mungan's man. She and her sisters had left while Mungan was away hunting. In reality, she knew he was thieving. Mungan's man had been too bloated with whiskey to be aware they had gone—until now.

He rode directly up to her and sneered at her. “Ye dinnae have permission to leave ye cheeky gallus girl! Git yerselves back to the castle!”

“I willnae,” Godet's voice trembled even as she spoke quietly but firmly. “And I am *Lady* Godet to ye. I am fulfilling my parents' betrothal agreement to Gordon of the MacDonell clan. Ye cannae have anything to say about it.”

“Yer parents are dead! Ye answer to Mungan now and he says ye willnae be marrying a MacDonell!” He looked over at Flori and the other sisters and grinned evilly. “In fact, he says ye'll be marrying *him!*” he sneered at her and laughed. “And perhaps I'll be having my choice from the rest of ye.”

Godet reeled back at the news that Mungan planned on marrying her. Her face went ashen and she clutched at her stomach as a terrible feeling of fear swept over her. She could hear Flori whimper.

Gordon watched quietly. He did not know that the Ross' had died. He did know who Mungan was, however. His lips formed a thin line as he stared with steely eyes at the soldier sneering at Godet who was visibly shaking now.

“I willnae!” she said in a fervent whisper. “And ye willnae touch any of me sisters ever again either!”

The soldier rode his horse forward, pushing his horse roughly into hers, and struck her hard across the face. Godet

fell sideways from the force of the blow and started to come off her horse. Gordon caught her instantly, pulling her effortlessly onto his horse and onto his lap.

“Dae not ever dare to touch this woman or any of her kin ever again!” Gordon spat in a steely, deep voice. He held Godet tightly to his chest.

“The Ross’ dae not take orders from a MacDonell soldier,” sneered the man again, this time at Gordon.

“Then take orders from the Laird of Clan MacDonell, ye swine!” Gordon’s voice thundered at him in fury. A wind blew down from the craggy hills, sweeping his plaid out behind him and whipping his hair back in the wind as well. He raised his voice to a mighty roar as if taking power from the winds off the mountains. “This woman is under my protection as the Laird of Clan MacDonell! Touch her and face death. *Dae ye ken?*” he barked in a harsh, commanding voice. His voice was strong, dominating—a voice that was used to issuing commands and being obeyed.

The soldier shrank back at his words, staring aghast at Gordon. “I dinnae know ‘twas ye, Laird! I was just following orders! I have no quarrel with ye, Laird!”

“Orders to strike a woman? Only a weak coward such as yerself or Mungan strikes women!” Gordon growled, his deep voice going down an octave in his disgust at the man before him.

The soldier’s feigned deference to the Laird of Clan MacDonell melted off his face and he sneered again. “Mungan will hear of this! Ye havenae heard the last of him!” he warned and wheeled his horse around and rode away. The other soldiers that came with him quickly fell in beside him.

Gordon watched them ride away with his jaw tight and his eyes narrowed into green slits as he held the fragrant bundle of trembling woman against his chest. Her firm round buttocks fit perfectly in his lap between his thighs, driving his heartbeat up

several notches. He willed his body to ignore what he was feeling.

“Weel now, brother, ‘tis a fine dither ye have to sort out here ‘tishn’t it?” Tristan teased with laughter in his voice.

Gordon looked down to see Godet staring up at him. Her beautiful eyes looked confused and her full luscious lips were open slightly as she stared. He fought off the urge to bend down and kiss her. It would only take a slight tilting of his head for their lips to meet. He started to lower his head, his fingers lifting her chin up, just enough so that he could position her mouth where he wanted her against his own mouth, but her words stopped him cold.

“Laird? Ye are Laird of the Clan MacDonell?”

“Aye,” he answered gruffly. Hadn’t she known? Isn’t this why she had come to him? Hadn’t she wanted to demand he carry on with the betrothal because he was the Laird of the powerful Clan MacDonell?

Gordon stared down at those tempting lips and those hauntingly, beautiful eyes. He heard a voice over the rushing of his blood pounding through his body, it was the voice of her youngest sister.

“‘Tis just like the fairy tale, isnae it?” said Ina with a big smile.



Thank you for reading the preview! Excited?

[Click Here to read "Highlander's Lionheart."](#)

A FREE THANK YOU GIFT

Thank you a lot for purchasing my book.

As a thank you gift I wrote a full length novel for you called
Rescuing The Highlander.

[Click here to get you FREE book](#)

Or use this link directly in your browser.

alisaadams.com/free

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

Looking for your next book?

[Click here to check my full bibliography.](#)

Thank you for allowing me to keep doing what I love!

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Copyright Alisa Adams Publications © 2021

This book may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form without the written permission of the publisher. In no way is it legal to reproduce, duplicate, or transmit any part of this document in either electronic means or in printed format. Recording of this publication is strictly prohibited and any storage of this document is not allowed unless with written permission from the publisher.

Amazon: Alisa Adams

DISCLAIMER:

This book is a work of fiction. Some of the characters are real historical figures, but the others exist only in the imagination of the author. All events in this book are fictional and for entertainment purposes only.