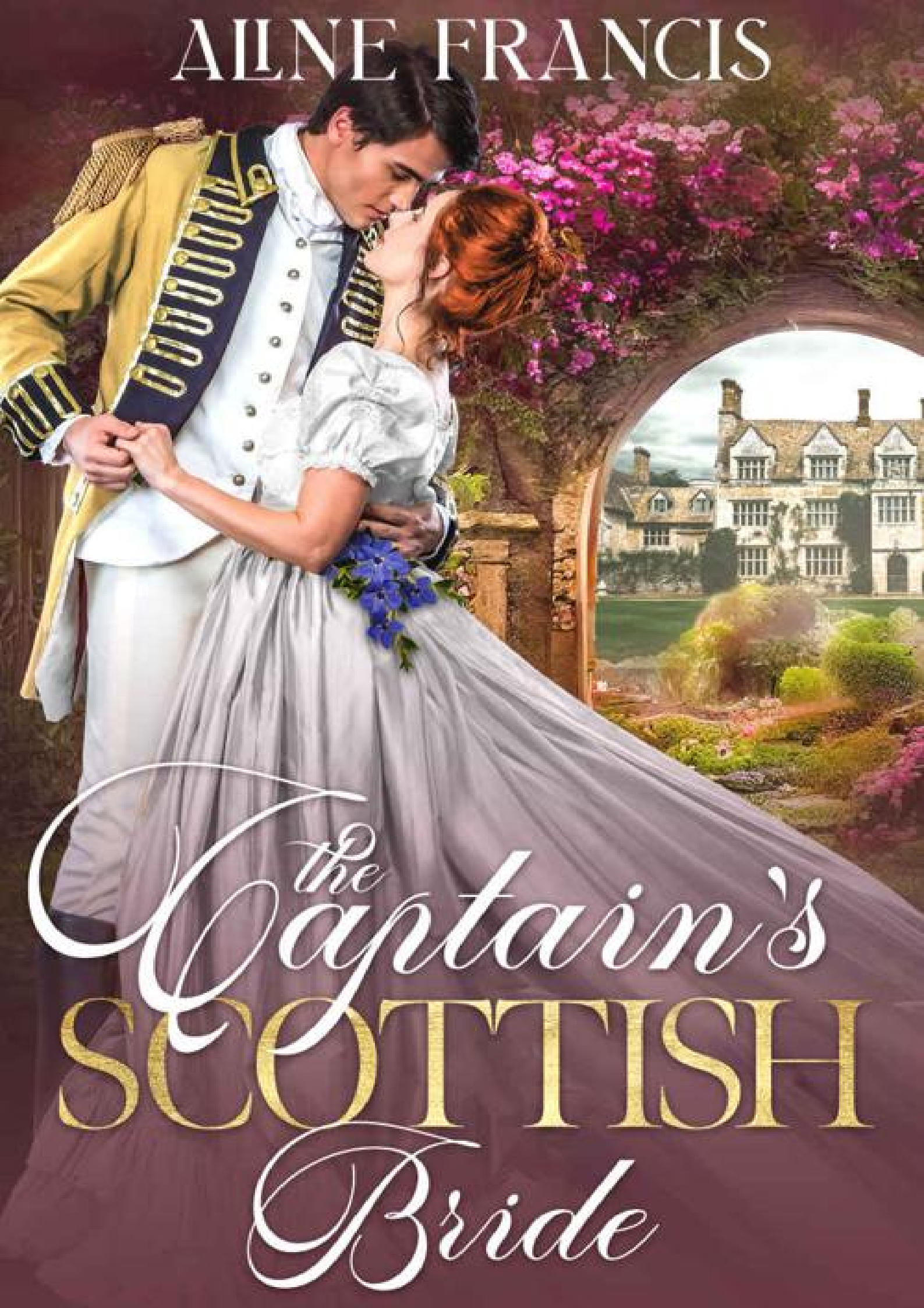


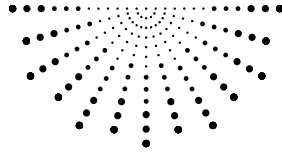
ALNE FRANCIS



*The* Captain's  
SCOTTISH  
*Bride*

# THE CAPTAIN'S SCOTTISH BRIDE

A FORBIDDEN ROMANCE



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ALINE FRANCIS

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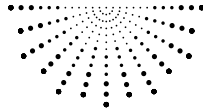
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# SOMEWHERE NEW



*England, 1652 | Spring*

**E**merald hills that were as familiar to Freyja as her family hut. A breeze gently caressing the grass in waves to make the land look much like the sea. The forest, an extension of her home and family that raised her. Tall pines and oaks that towered over head and provided the cover needed for Freyja and her family to forage for herbs and plants in secret. She could smell the soil and heavy aroma of foliage and flowers as the images passed through her.

---

Then, Freyja layed in the field behind her house, looking up at the blue sky with large, bulbous clouds providing her some shade from the sunlight. There was no urgency to clean or to prep elixirs or potions. It was a beautiful Spring day with the sounds of her village, Kilmar, living and breathing behind her. Birds and livestock chattering, the sound of women beating rugs, and the clattering of wood on wood as fathers trained their teenage boys to sword fight.

She could lay there forever and drink in the mild weather, listening to the distant lives of all those she loved.

A cloud moved away from the sun, and Freyja had to close her eyes to block out the intense rays. But as she blinked, she realized that the light was too intense and too hot. What was going on? The noises of her village were growing into rumbles and angry chattering. Her vision slowly adjusted.

*No longer was she laying in the field under the clouds and sun. She was looking down at all the people of Kilnmar. They were wearing scowls with hatred burning in their eyes. Freyja's eyes frantically searched the crowd for her family. Even though she couldn't see their faces, she recognized them. They were wearing black cloaks with the hoods pulled over their heads and hanging low on their faces. She tried to reach out to them but realized she couldn't move. Her wrists strained against the abrasive texture of rope. The light, which had blinded her, was the torches that the townsfolk were holding. Peering down, she realized that she was above them because of the pile of wood and hay she was standing on, her body tied to a pole.*

*"Purify our land!" the crowd shouted.*

*"Rid us of the witch!"*

*"Nay! Nay!" Freyja cried. "I've cared for ye all. Please, donnae do this. I'm one of ye!"*

*"A witch cannae be one of us!" someone in the town hollered.*

*Torches were lowered to her pyre, and Freyja screamed for help. Flames licked the soles of her feet—*

---

Freyja jerked awake, a cold sweat beaded on her forehead and her eyes rounded as she sat up in the bed. Her mind couldn't make sense of the world around her for a moment, the vibrant colors and various textures muddled together in her fragile state. But as she came out of the frightful dream, the world settled around her and she remembered where she was. A manor in England. Scotland and the very place may have been on the same mass of land, but it felt like a whole other world. Everything was so starkly different from her humble abode back in Kilnmar. The windows were massive, dominating the far wall with their thick curtains of lavish emerald fabric embroidered with swirls and flowers. Paintings of landscapes and portraits of nobility lined the walls, framed in polished



gold frames. Nothing was even remotely similar to her modest hut of wood walls, functional windows, and cots for beds. Thomas's family estate was a stark difference from the simple peasant village she called home.

She had arrived to the family home of Thomas, her dear forbidden love, a British Captain, and her savior. Had he not smuggled her into England days ago, her nightmare could have become a reality. Freyja still felt shaken from the events that had taken place, it all happened so suddenly, and here she was in a place she never imagined she'd ever be.

Trying to shake off the images of trauma, she got out of bed. She hadn't so much as planted both feet on the ground when a young woman slipped into the room with a massive pile of cloth draped over her arms. She looked as though she was hardly eighteen. "I'm here to help you dress, Miss," the woman informed her.

Freyja shifted uncomfortably and crossed her arms. "Uh, sorry...who are ye?" she asked quietly.

"I'm Anne, your lady-in-waiting," she explained with a polite smile. Her skin was freckled and lightly tanned, matching her mousy blonde hair and light brown eyes in their subtlety. Freyja didn't say anything, but her confusion was likely given away by her expression. Anne added, "Think of me as your personal servant."

"I...I donnae need a servant," Freyja stammered as her cheeks heated into a blush.

Anne gave her a sympathetic smile. "I understand, but based upon your current garb, if I may say, I think you'll need help dressing." Her arms lifted to emphasize the clothing in her arms. "The Countess has offered her attire for you to wear until your own is made by the local seamstress."

"Oh," Freyja breathed. "I see...very well, then."

The two worked together to undress Freyja and began the arduous process of putting on all the layers of proper English dress. She couldn't make sense of the garments as they were draped over her head and tied into place. It was a dizzying

affair that only ended when Anne moved her over to a small table with a mirror and stool. Freyja blinked at her reflection as Anne busied herself with taming Freyja's curls into an updo.

The fabrics she was wearing were a strange yellow, darker in shade than the blossoms of biting stonecrop, and the undercoats were cream-colored, the embroidery on the outer skirt in a darker yellow than the fabric itself. She felt so...odd. The dress was so large, yet the bodice tightened to the point where she wasn't sure she could take a deep breath—the material felt so expensive and luxurious. She grimaced from the sensation of the shoes placed on her feet, they were too narrow and hard, pinching her toes slightly. Once Anne braided her hair and pulled it back into a bun, she looked regal, or at least what she assumed regal looked.

Anne guided her out of the room and down the stairs, showing her where the dining room was, assuring her that breakfast would be served promptly. Freyja wasn't sure if it was part of Anne's job to escort her everywhere, and she found the formality to be silly. When she was standing before the grand, polished dining table and a gorgeous view of the garden from the window, her eyes fell to the only face in the room.

Thomas.

It seemed impossible that every time she saw him, it was just like the first time—but there she was, admiring him just the same. His earthy brown eyes were illuminated by the morning rays pouring in from the window, his wavy brown hair perfectly in place and gathered into a small ponytail at the nape of his neck. Thomas's precious lips pulled into a charming smile as he sauntered over to her.

"You are absolutely radiant," he breathed as he loomed overhead. "It's quite strange to see you in British attire, you wear it well." He then took her hand and raised her arm above her head, twirling her around with flourish.

Freyja wasn't sure how well her red, curly hair, pale complexion, and deep blue eyes matched the yellow gown, but

she was grateful for his approval. It was foreign for her to pay mind to such a thing, as she had never before cared how clothing looked with her features. It earned a giggle and blush from her before she could reply in agreement, “I feel very strange. There’s so many layers and fastenings.”

Thomas chuckled and held her at arm’s length to admire her for a moment more. “The English have a habit of...being a bit over-the-top.” His smile was reaching his eyes as he queried further. “I trust you slept well?”

“Rather well, actually,” she admitted. “The bedding is very comfortable. Though...” She bit her lip, debating her next words before deciding to proceed. “I imagine I would have slept more soundly with your company.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you,” he purred.

Their grinning faces and flushed cheeks neared one another as they both leaned in for a kiss. Before their lips could brush, there was a loud throat clear from across the room, and the pair moved apart instantly. There in the entrance was Thomas’s mother, the Countess of Hertford. There was a startling elegance about her that made Freyja feel as though she wasn’t even worthy of being in her presence. And yet, she offered a small but genuine smile. “Good morning to you both,” she greeted as she paced into the room.

She walked as though there were a stick up the back of her dress, her posture perfectly straight and shoulders pinned back. As she settled into the chair next to the head of the table, she gestured for the pair of them to sit. Freyja’s eyes shifted to Thomas, who only offered a weak grin of his own before he pulled out a chair for Freyja to have a seat.

It proved to be a challenge to sit down with all the fabric hanging off her body, and she hoped that the routine would be something she quickly adjusted to. Thomas tucked in her chair before moving around the table and taking the place across from her. Before anything else could be said, servants filed into the room and filled the table with platters of breads, meats, and eggs, and little dishes of jam, sugar, and cream with a large pot of tea. It was an absurd amount of food for the

three of them, and Freyja wondered to herself if more people would be joining them. She couldn't help but wonder what happened to the food they didn't finish. At the very least, she hoped that the leftovers were given to the swine.

Her mind wandered to the notion that being served breakfast in Kilnmar was a sign that she had overslept and hadn't been up in time to help her family with the preparations. She wasn't sure she could ever get used to the feeling of being served. In fact, she preferred the peasant tradition of cooking, farming, and foraging for herself and her loved ones.

Freyja noticed the Countess bowing her head, as did Thomas. She then awkwardly followed suit. Only after his mother uttered the word "amen" did they raise their faces. Still unsure of how to appear polite, Freyja waited, watching as they each served themselves from the dishes in the middle of the table, before she grabbed anything for herself. She was busying her hands with buttering a piece of bread when the Countess cleared her throat again and said, "So, Freyja, how did you find your accommodations?"

Freyja nodded a little too eagerly, "The room is wonderful, ma'am. Thank ye for yer hospitality." She wasn't sure what to call Catherine, and ma'am felt like a safe bet. She didn't think it wise to casually address such a lady.

The Countess blinked, and Freyja couldn't tell if she was holding back from responding or if she hadn't understood what she said. Instead, Catherine swiftly turned her attention to Thomas with her face warming as soon as her eyes found him. "It's so good to have you home, dear."

"It's good to be home," Thomas replied meekly. "Though I'm unsure how long it will last."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves and spoil the present with the uncertainty of the future," his mother advised, her eyes twinkling as she studied Thomas.

"I think that wise," a new voice added. Freyja hesitantly looked over to see Thomas's father waltzing in with his chin

lifted. “As you never know what the present holds for you and how it shall mold your future.”

He walked behind Freyja and Catherine before taking his spot at the head of the table. There was an obvious weight to his words that loomed over the room as he settled in. Thomas was the first to speak after the ominous statement. “It sounds as though you know something I don’t, Father.”

“Quite,” the Earl remarked plainly as he motioned for a servant to pour his coffee and butter his bread. Only once the servant had left the room did the Earl speak again. “I could discuss what such matters are, however I don’t believe it to be wise whilst in mixed company.”

It was apparent he was referring to Freyja, although his eyes never once flickered into her direction, nor did he mention her name. She studied Thomas’s face and noticed the annoyance and uncertainty as it moved through him. “As I made clear, Freyja is to be my bride. She has no connection to the Scottish militias. She is loyal to me.”

“We shall see about that,” the Earl mused before he took his time sipping his coffee and sampling his food. He still didn’t seem to acknowledge Freyja’s presence outside of the vague implication of what it could mean for his well-kept secrets. “I suppose I *can* speak openly, as it is not as though what I must say involves the foul blackguard of the North—at least, not directly.” Freyja’s nose scrunched at his verbiage, not fully understanding what he meant but assuming he wasn’t exactly speaking fondly of the Scottish.

A phantom of a grin appeared on the Earl’s lips, further twisting Freyja’s stomach. “And, if what I speak of is to get past the walls of this home, I do suppose we will know the source of the leaky faucet, won’t we?”

“Go on,” Thomas pressed, his tone making it clear that he was hardly able to contain his frustration at that point.

His father wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin and sat up straight before locking eyes with Thomas. “It would not be out of the question, nor ludicrous for one to assume that I have utilized my status to pull your platoon, in particular, back from

the North. I've ensured it will be my son who holds the sword in the final defeat of the parliament's traitors."

Feeling completely frozen by the news that Thomas would once again be thrust into battle, Freyja had a difficult time digesting what the Earl was trying to convey. Did he mean that *he* was the one who had ordered Thomas back from Scotland? She didn't know how to feel about it, if it were the truth. After all, she was sure death would have come for her if escaping to England hadn't been an option. Her throat tightened at the memory of the torches the witch hunters held as they moved through her village and the fright she felt as Thomas readied her father's horse to escape in the cover of night.

"You had no right," Thomas barked at his father. "Why must you meddle in my life? Do you have such little respect for me?"

"My respect for you has nothing to do with the equation," the Earl retorted, though he sounded more bored than he did defensive. "I do so hope that this newfound boldness to speak to me in such a flagrant manner is only the lasting stench of spending time amongst the Scots. Need I remind you of your role not only at this table, but in this family?"

The words were so sharp and pointed that even Freyja felt the sting of them. While she hadn't been made privy to how their relationship was before her arrival, she could gather from the Earl's words alone that Thomas had never made a habit of speaking to his father in such an honest way. Nervously, she shifted her gaze to Thomas and found him clearly ruminating to himself.

The earl adjusted his posture and cleared his throat before continuing. "It's only logical, Thomas. It is the duty of this Earldom to put our efforts on the Homefront. After all, isn't it a waste of time to exert our reign over the North if our own home isn't in order?" The Earl scoffed and shook his head. "This country is nearing disarray without a King at the throne. The bloody Parliament speak of ridding England of the monarchy and should all be hung. Absolute nonsense, it is. It will do us good to ensure our family name is tied to the recovery of the Crown. You really must consider your future

heirs, Thomas. It'll give them a better leg to stand on than you yourself."

"What exactly do you plan for me here? You wish me once more to fight a battle just for the sake of prestige?" Thomas queried, his eyes narrowed at his father.

Something about Thomas's words clearly struck a nerve in the Earl, and his nostrils flared and face reddened. In an instant, the Countess interrupted them both. "Please, my dears. Let us speak of nicer things at breakfast. It's the beginning of the day, no need to get off on the wrong foot. And there certainly isn't any need to talk about the dreadful war during a meal. So many Ladies, losing husbands and sons. It's enough to spoil my appetite even thinking about it. I prefer not to discuss it." There was a silence for a few long moments that paid homage to the respect granted to the Countess as the two men simmered and turned their faces to their meals. Catherine then recovered from the grave expression that had gone over her face and smiled whilst she looked at each of them. "I have some wonderful news to brighten you up. Your sister Jane will visit this afternoon. She has long awaited your arrival home, Thomas."

Freyja blinked. she hadn't known that Thomas had any siblings. Peering at him, she noticed an apologetic look on his face. Intuitively she felt that the expression offered wasn't because he hadn't made her privy to the information beforehand but rather, what the visit would entail. She kept her composure polite and soft though her stomach sank just a little further. A visit from family no doubt meant that Freyja would need to play her role as an elegant bride-to-be. Her vision flickered to the window, hoping that time would allow her to explore the beautiful grounds before Jane arrived.

Even if she had to wear all those ridiculous layers and keep quiet in fear of upsetting the balance of the Landrake home, Freyja hoped that nature would serve her as it always had. A friend, a family member, her greatest comfort. If she could commune with the plants and sky, she felt confident that she could face any of the challenges that England held for her.

Then again, there was the possibility that even Jane wouldn't accept her. Freyja really wasn't quite sure how she would feel if that happened. It was already clear to her by the way the Earl wouldn't so much as look in her direction that she didn't fit in. She was not who they had imagined their daughter-in-law to be. The resentment they held for her penetrated her usually strong aura and churned in her stomach. Knowing their disdain was due to her being Scottish, she wondered how much worse it would be if they ever discovered she was a wise woman.

It was in that moment at the table that Freyja realized the true magnitude of the position she was in, and she felt sick to her stomach. What if she couldn't adjust? What if she *never* fit in? What would come of her? Swallowing the lump of emotion collecting in her throat, Freyja's only refuge was to cling to her faith. Even if the odds felt stacked against her, she had to stay strong. Although her mind was racing, spirit comforted her. She had been guided here, and she had to believe in the fate of hers and Thomas's love.

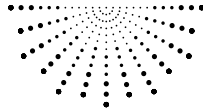
Her time in England would be a true test of just how strong she could be.

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# BUSINESS AS USUAL



The tension from the meal lingered over Thomas's conscience. He hated that Freyja's first full day at his familial home was off to such a rocky start. He wanted to make it up to her, and after noticing her gaze continuously turning outside, Thomas hoped that taking her for a tour of the grounds would be just what she needed to feel acquainted with her new environment.

Waiting until after his mother and father had left the table, Thomas stood and gestured for Freyja to follow him. Just as they approached the door way, he felt eyes on the side of his head. Reluctantly, he raised his gaze and found his father waiting for him in the corridor.

"Ready yourself for a meeting, Thomas," Richard, his father, announced. "We must be in attendance at once."

There was no one alive who could stoke the coals of Thomas's rage like his father did. "Could you not have forewarned me?" he asked, attempting to sound polite although he knew each syllable had an edge of agitation.

"This *is* the forewarning," his father scoffed. "The coach is ready for us both."

"Go on ahead. I'll take a horse on my own," Thomas replied flatly. When his father gave him an inquisitive look, Thomas easily came up with an explanation that didn't involve admitting to him that he would rather chew off his right arm than be stuck in a carriage with him alone. "I want to see to it that Freyja has all she needs before I leave her unattended."

His father stiffly blinked. "See to it that you leave shortly. Mustn't be late." With that, the old man pivoted and headed for the door.

It irritated Thomas to no end that Richard wouldn't acknowledge Freyja nor spare her as much as a glance. Once he was out of the foyer, Thomas turned to Freyja and stroked her cheek. How lucky he was, to have a woman as earnest and beautiful as Freyja promised to him. He knew the difficulty posed by their union, that she was the perceived enemy to his family, and he, the enemy to hers, but nothing would make him happier than the day Freyja would become his wife.

And how unlikely it all was. Just weeks ago, Thomas hated her for being what he thought to be a foul temptress who had bewitched him to sabotage his own mission. Nonetheless, she still saved him when he was left for dead by Scottish warriors who ambushed him during a prisoner exchange. His body had been broken and he was gasping away from passing on to the afterlife when Freyja came along and healed him with her very hands. Freyja had not only freed him from pain and the clutches of death during those weeks spent in a secluded hut in the Highlands, she freed him from his prejudice and contempt. If the rest of England had known of her true nature, they may have labeled her as an evil witch, but he would forever know the truth of her kind, healing spirit.

Breaking from his thoughts, he sighed and gave a sheepish smile. "I assume that my sister will arrive before I return. She's kind, though she might be a little...excited. Stay strong," he remarked with a humorous twinkle in his eye.

She gave a light laugh and nodded. "I'm sure it'll be fine. Be safe, ay?"

"Ay," he echoed with a nod. However, he could see just how uneasy she was. He would never pity her, but his heart broke seeing the position she was in. While he had also been to a foreign land, he had a literal army behind him, a platoon of men to make him feel at home even when his surroundings were unfamiliar. With a gentle touch, he brushed her cheek and added words of comfort, "Things will be challenging, but it'll all be worth it in the end, as long as we are together."

Her eyes brightened, and the nervous smile on her lips lifted, appearing more at ease. Shifting his gaze all around, he dared to give her a brief kiss. How tender and sweet her lips were, filling his heart and mind with every line of poetry that he had heard throughout his years. None had ever made sense to him until he met Freyja. Something else he could thank her for.

Reluctantly, Thomas headed on. Outside, he found the horse his father had ordered for him. With a sigh, knowing there was nothing else holding him back from the journey ahead, he mounted the horse and galloped down the path. It wasn't long until he approached his father's carriage. While he could have plodded behind to ensure he ended up in the right place, Thomas pushed ahead. Soon, their small community that sat on the outskirts of London faded away behind him.

He arrived at a meeting hall adjacent to the East wing of the royal palace, constructed of limestone. While some marveled at the beauty and sheer size of such establishments, Thomas always found them to be elegant prisons. Despite the intricate adornments and large windows, those cold stone buildings made him feel trapped anytime he was inside their walls.

Leaving his horse with a peasant attendant, Thomas made his way within and soothed his hair as he sauntered down the vast corridor. Men in military jackets with shiny metals and ceremonial cords identified him and guided him in the right direction, and he took a seat at a collection of tables while other officers and politicians filled the room. Thomas recognized some faces, and their dress made him aware that there were no men of lower rank in attendance. Typical to have meetings of what to do with the lives of lesser men, wasn't it?

Once the doors were closed and voices fell to a hush, a man he knew to be General Hoskins stood at the center of the room. "Welcome all, thank you for attending this meeting in such short notice..." His voice waned on with general introductions and formalities, and Thomas tuned out for a while. He only focused once again when the general arrived at

the meat of the meeting. “This collision of ideologies within our borders has gone on long enough. And I fear that we have amused those who oppose the tradition of the monarchy too long. We have now obtained information that the Parliament-loyalists are planning to storm Royal Palace in the coming weeks.”

A rumble rippled through the room. Thomas able to pick apart voices of some, people murmuring *‘the nerve of it all’*, *‘blimey bastards’*, and words of such nature. General Hoskins spoke again, projecting his voice even louder to cut through the noise. “We have done our best to damper their attacks whilst fighting them in the public arena of politics. However, we cannot stand for them to threaten the palace. We must put our best men on the front line to stamp out this ill-minded ruse of theirs. We must prove once and for all to the opponents of the Crown and the people of England that we will not allow them to change our culture! We will stand for the ways of the English! We will withstand the pressure of our own!”

The room erupted in applause and cheers, the General clearly skilled at motivating his army. Thomas didn’t join in but rather took to studying the faces and reactions of those around the room. When the bombardment of approval settled, the conversation bled into military strategy.

His eyes glazed over, waiting for it to end so that he could return to Freyja. At that very moment, he could have been strolling through the garden with her, discussing their future, and helping her settle into her new life. In his mind’s eye, he imagined drinking in Freyja’s joyful expression as she plucked unfamiliar herbs from the dirt.

And yet, as much as he longed to be with her, he knew he belonged at that meeting. Duty and loyalty had been woven into the fabric of his mind from a young age. He knew the glory to be had in victory, glory that could exist beyond the nobility that ran through his veins. Glory that would make him a man of his own, rather than simply being the son of his father.

“We need to make sure the men are prepared for true battle,” someone voiced gravely. “The Civil War has seen

many a stir, but nothing as bloody and intense as this will be.”

“Captain Thomas Landrake can,” his father loudly proclaimed, inserting his voice into the conversation. Thomas’s face darkened as he made eye contact with his father. “He was at the Battle of Kilmar last autumn and has seen his fair share of bloodshed.”

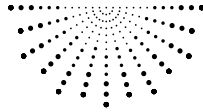
“Very well,” the General retorted after a long pause. “Thomas, you shall lead the preparations here at the palace. Time is of the essence, as we believe they plan to strike the first day of summer, which is in just two weeks.”

Thomas couldn’t get over the irritating feeling that this wasn’t because his father believed in his ability to ready men for battle, but his obsession with the family’s status of loyalty and prestige. There was always a motive with his father, and it never paid mind to Thomas’s true feelings or wishes.

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## YOUR NEW FAMILY



Thankfully, there didn't seem to be any pressing matters to busy Freyja after Thomas left. The Countess proceeded on with her own structured schedule, and Freyja was left to her own devices. Naturally, she found her way out to the garden that she'd had her eyes on all morning. Stepping outside, she took a deep breath, welcoming the fresh air of the morning chill, carrying with it the heavy scent of soil and greenery.

As she strolled toward the garden, she hoped that the relief she was feeling in that moment was a sign of hope for her future there. If she could find moments in time to sneak away and be with nature, Freyja knew that she could get by no matter the circumstances.

It was an overcast day, but that was no matter. Spring was in full swing, and summer was on the horizon. Her eyes were illuminated with wonder and fascination as she made her way through the little rows and paths of the garden, inspecting each plant with sincerity and curiosity. Many of the flowers and foliage were ones she recognized, even if it was just from studying her family's medicine journals. Her eyes captured violets, amaryllises, and the most stunning pale pink freesias she had ever seen.

When she came across a darling little plant with fuzzy, delicate buds of white, she was aglow with excitement. Pussy willow, a wonderful woody plant that could be used to treat fever and pain. Freyja bit her cheek and tossed her gaze around the garden, making sure no one was coming near. She knew for certain she needed to keep her identity as a wise



woman a secret, yet her instinct to harvest the plant and her burning desire to do *something* to feel herself were proving to be too strong. What would the harm be, anyway, if she plucked just a few stems of the plant and took them to her room? No one would be the wiser, surely.

The conversation from breakfast that morning flashed back into Freyja's mind, particularly Catherine's words about how bloody the war had been so far. It made her skin prickle and her heart race. She couldn't be sure to what extent the war would reach the quiet Landrake manor, but Freyja knew she needed to be prepared in case it did. Even with the danger of being exposed as a healer, she knew in her heart of hearts she would throw all caution to the wind if someone was hurt and needed her help.

All too quickly, Freyja carefully removed a few sprigs of the pussy willow by hand and used a long blade of grass to bundle them together before she slipped them into one of the fabric folds of her skirt. She assured herself it was all she would take, as she didn't want to go through the house with the risk of her dress overflowing with herbs. She would need to take stock of the decoctions in her trunk that she had smuggled with her from Scotland and take account of all she needed to prepare. Perhaps the kitchen would have some little bottles and solvents such as oil or vinegar that she could make away with without anyone noticing. A panic trembled in her chest at the thought of getting caught stealing in England. It would make her out to be the criminal that Thomas's father thought all Scots were. And worse, she would surely be hung.

Clearing the troubling thoughts from her head, she refocused her attention on the external rather than the internal. There was no telling how long she had before she would be called back, and she wanted to enjoy every moment she had in the garden.

However, Freyja soon came all too aware of how her shoes pinched her feet and how at a moment such as this, back at home, she would have nothing blocking her from curling her toes into the moss and soil. There was something so primal, so natural about having one's feet on the earth, and there were

few better ways she could think of to connect to her surroundings.

With another glance around to ensure no one was near, Freyja made another daring move. *It would only be for a minute*, she told herself as she stepped out of the shoes the Countess had loaned her. Reaching down, she also removed the stockings from her calves and feet so that she could fully feel the ground beneath her. Freyja stood up straight, her face toward the sky and her eyes closed as she drank in the feeling of the sun. The dew had gone from the morning, but the chill of it was evident in the grass and soil. It was as refreshing to her as a cold splash of water on the face or a drink of wine or tea after an arduous journey. Everything around her in England felt so...*constructed*, so fabricated. But that feeling, the soil, pebbles, and grass pressed to the skin of her feet? That was bliss, it was constructed by no one but the creator. She then felt emotional, knowing that even though miles separated them, she was still standing on the very land that her family was also on.

A sharp snicker from nearby ripped her from the meditative state. Her eyes opened and her head whipped around to see a cluster of people standing several paces away. One of them was the Countess. There were two other women and one man.

“*That’s* the bride to Lord Thomas?” one of the women whispered, though it was loud enough for Freyja to make out. “Did he fetch her from the wilderness?”

“Don’t be a bell end,” said another women, who looked just a few years younger than Freyja herself, warning the first.

“Jane,” Catherine enunciated in a warning of her own as she peered at Freyja. “Don’t use such foul language. Now everyone, let’s go in for tea in the parlor. Join us, won’t you, Freyja?”

“Ay,” Freyja replied meekly. Her heart was pattering anxiously and her cheeks burned from embarrassment as she waited for them all to turn away and move toward the house before she reached for her stockings. Tears stung her eyes, and

she cursed herself internally for allowing such a comment to get to her. It wasn't that she expected people of such noble stature in England to understand her, but rather, she was simply embarrassed for being caught in the first private moment she had allowed herself to *be* herself and was made fun of for it.

Once more there was a shuffle behind her, and Freyja looked to see the woman who had come to her defense approaching. She was a beautiful young Lady, her face pale and free of blemishes, with brown eyes so big that they almost seemed unnatural. She donned a light blue dress that made them appear even darker. The Lady offered Freyja an apologetic smile as she closed in. "I must apologize on behalf of my cousin. She's never been one to know when to hold her tongue."

"It's all right," Freyja replied meekly.

"It shouldn't have to be," the woman urged softly. She then bent over and assisted Freyja with her stockings and shoes, causing Freyja's cheeks to redden even more. While she knew it was customary in England for servants to help Ladies dress, it wasn't typical for nobility to help someone put on clothing. Freyja murmured a 'thank you', and the young woman batted the words away with a hand before bending into a brief curtsy. "Jane, Thomas's sister."

She should have known it was his sister from the resemblance they shared. Freyja smiled and returned the curtsy. "It's a pleasure to meet ye."

Jane's nose crinkled as her smile grew. "Don't tell my father, but I quite like your accent." The two shared a nervous, shy laugh before they headed toward the house. Jane cleared her throat and spoke again as her pace slowed even more. "Listen, I am not one to pass judgment. I too have a love of nature. I can't tell you how many times I've longed to do what you've just done, with taking off your shoes." Her eyes held Freyja's with warmth and understanding though there was a glint of something sadder within them. "However, it's not customary here in England. And while I always think it's best to be true to one's self...you have an uphill battle to climb if

you truly wish to marry my brother. Our father and family will have to accept you. Which means not doing things like...*that*.”

If Freyja’s face could have darkened any more than it already was, it would have in that moment. “Ye’re right. I should nae have done such a thing. Nature calms me nerves.”

“I understand, I really do,” Jane said with a slightly too enthusiastic nod. Freyja could tell that the woman next to her was doing her best to ensure that Freyja didn’t think she was casting any sort of negative judgment upon her. And for that, she was grateful. “Perhaps, if you are comfortable with it, I could help you adjust to the ways of British ladyship? I know I would be lost if I hadn’t gone through so much teaching and training as a child, if someone just plopped me down in England and expected me to know how to behave.”

Freyja’s heart squeezed, so touched that Thomas’s sister was being so kind and welcoming to her. It was a breath of fresh air in comparison to the tension that seemed to always linger in the air when she was around their parents. Be that as it may, though, Freyja also felt herself crumble a little inside. She didn’t want to learn to be a British woman. After all, she had escaped Scotland and the witch hunts there so that she could continue to be herself.

But there were caveats to being there, of that she was well aware. And if she ever hoped to gain the approval of Thomas’s family so that they could marry in peace, she needed to play the role set before her. A proper British Lady who was worthy of a man such as Thomas Landrake.

“Thank ye, Jane,” Freyja breathed. “I would be honored to have yer help.”

“It’s no bother,” Jane replied, a brilliant smile stretching across her lips. “After all, we will soon be sisters.”

Freyja’s smile grew genuine then. While she had never thought of having another sister outside of Cadha, she quite liked the idea of having one here in England. It would mean someone to have her back, and hopefully a confidante as well. Jane seemed wonderful enough already, but Freyja would need

to get to know her truly before she trusted her with any of her secrets.

Back inside, Jane guided her to the parlor, and Freyja's mind couldn't decide whether to digest the lavish interior of the room or the faces staring at her first. The walls were cream-colored, with massive, ornate oil paintings hanging in plethora on each of them. They were framed in brass, and all the little dishes and trinkets about the room matched. The women before her, and gentleman, were all standing and peering in her direction. Her mind didn't bother with the details of their massive dresses and accessorized suit, as she was too busy analyzing their expressions.

The Countess moved a few paces in her direction before pivoting and gesturing to the others. "Freyja, this is Jane's husband, Raphe Wendron, and cousins on my husband's side, Christabell and Diana."

"Charmed," the two women said in unison and gave a curtsy. Freyja wasn't naïve to the niceties they were attempting to present. She could tell by the way their lips strained and their eyes narrowed that they were rather far from *charmed* to meet her. Still, she returned the curtsy and gave another to Raphe as he bowed before her.

Thankfully, that was the extent of the interaction before they were all gestured to take their seats about the room. A couple of servants came in to make them each a cup of tea, served on a plate so tiny that Freyja couldn't help but wonder what the purpose of it was. Perhaps to catch any splatters when setting the cup down?

Freyja was sat next to Jane, her husband on the other side of Jane, and that was a great comfort to Freyja. At least she knew that the one person who truly wanted to get to know her and help her was at her side. Though, it didn't do much in sparing her the discomfort of the lingering gazes of Christabell and Diana.

The group erupted in talks about the local gossip, policy changes, and another cousin who was soon to marry. None of it really interested Freyja, and even less of it made sense to

her, but at least the visit was an opportunity to observe how noblewomen carried themselves. She took note of all their straight postures, not a single one of the ladies leaning comfortably back on the cushioned couches. Their elbows also all seemed to stick out as though they were locked arms with someone to their side, and their chins were all held up and out. Freyja noticed each time one of them started to relax a little too much and had to correct their stance.

It all reminded her of the way animals acted in the forest. How male birds would approach a female from the side, his chest puffed out but his hops gradual so that he both impressed his potential mate and avoided scaring her away. Everything about them seemed so polished and rehearsed, as though they all worried that the slightest sign of relaxation or visual annoyance would cause the others to attack.

*Exhausting* is what it all seemed. Freyja couldn't imagine what they were like around other people if they were so stiff and practiced around their own family. Even the way they spoke seemed so formal and precise, each word enunciated to its fullest. Was that an appearance thing, or perhaps an educational one? Freyja wasn't sure, and she definitely didn't want to ask and risk making herself look even more beneath them than some of them already felt.

She wasn't sure if it was because of her thoughts or her instinct setting in, but she noticed eyes on her again. Carefully lifting her gaze, she found one of the cousins, Christabell, staring at Freyja's hands as they rested on her knees. Her mind couldn't begin to piece together the focus on her hands until she peered down at her own, and then Jane's next to her.

Dirt lined the inside of Freyja's nails from her morning spent in the garden. It was something so common to Freyja because of her foraging and farming that she had never paid it any mind. But Jane's nails, along with all the others in attendance, were perfectly white and trimmed. Even Raphe had clean hands, looking as though he had never so much as touched the ground with how immaculate they were.

A heat came over her cheeks, and she tucked her hands under her legs to hide the embarrassment. It was something

small, but it was a stark reminder of how very different she was from those she was in the company of.

“Tell us, Freyja,” Catherine said, gaining Freyja’s attention back from the depths of her thoughts. “Does your family attend church?”

She bit the inside of her cheek and debated on what the best way to answer would be. Freyja wasn’t a liar, and if her family had any say in it, she was an awful one at that. But she also didn’t want to alienate herself or make his family feel as though she were some sort of heathen.

*They probably already do, Frey.*

Clearing her throat, she thought as quickly as she could to come up with an answer that was truthful but wouldn’t cast her in such a negative light. “The church hadnae quite reached me village before I left Scotland. They were in the process of building one, though. And I believe me family intends to attend the services with the neighbors.”

Catherine nodded, though Freyja couldn’t tell if it was one of approval or polite acknowledgement. “Did you understand a *word* she said?” Christabell whispered to her sister which, again, wasn’t a whisper since Freyja could hear it from across the room. She was starting to piece together that the cousins were women who put on appearances of being nice so they couldn’t be called out for their behavior but certainly wanted their harsh opinions to be known.

“Not a word,” Diana replied with the same mock whisper and a shake of her head.

Before anything else could be said, the sound of the front door opening perked them all up. Freyja’s heart skipped a beat, hoping that it was Thomas. However, after a few long moments, only the Earl appeared in the entryway. “Good day to you all,” he greeted and gave his daughter an affectionate smile. “Always a fine day when I have my daughter home.”

Jane rose and hugged her father. Freyja sat patiently, waiting for Thomas to join them. But as the Earl settled in next to his wife and the conversation carried on, it became clear to

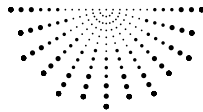
her that he wasn't yet back. She found herself praying for his return. While she assumed he wasn't in any danger at a meeting, Freyja would just feel better with him by her side.

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## HOME AT LAST



Thomas couldn't decide if he was more fatigued or irritated by the time he finally escaped the meeting and made his journey back to the family home. All of those feelings were put aside, however, when he walked into the foyer and heard the commotion of a dinner taking place in the dining room. Freyja. He could finally spend a bit of time with her, show her the grounds, and drink in the calming radiance of her presence.

As he neared the dining room, he spotted servants filtering out of the room with dishes. The meal must be over. Out of hope to avoid more drawn-out conversations with his father, Thomas slid into the entryway of the library and watched carefully for Freyja to come out. His cousins came out first, and he mentally cursed them, not needing to be present to know that they'd no doubt treated Freyja poorly. Christabell and Diana were known for the cattiness and less than subtle dislike of others.

Jane and Raphe exited, then his mother and father. Once everyone was out of view, Thomas slipped out of the library and crossed the corridor again to meet Freyja just as she came out of the dining room. He smiled at her, though he could see the tiredness on her face. She must have had just as long of a day as him.

"You look radiant," he spoke truthfully. Even though tired lines framed her eyes and an overall fatigue slumped her a bit, Freyja looked as beautiful as ever to him. Her curly auburn hair was still perfectly in place, and she wore the British garb

so well. He doubted an onlooker would have ever thought it was her first day in such dress.

“Thomas,” she breathed, reaching her eyes. “So glad ye’re back.”

“Sorry it took me so long,” he said with a sheepish expression. “Had more matters to attend than anticipated. Now might I interest you in a tour of the house?” He offered his arm to her with a flourish.

Freyja giggled and nodded excitedly as she took hold of it. “Certainly.”

Thomas assumed that someone had showed her around at some point in the day, but it was more of an excuse to have some time together and talk than anything else. They strolled glacially down the corridors as they spoke. “How was your day? I hope not too terrible with those awful cousins about,” he queried quietly.

“They were nae...*too* terrible,” she snickered and then sighed. “It was all right, I suppose. Yer sister seems lovely.”

“Oh?” he said with a smile coming over his face. He and Jane had never really had the opportunity to be close due to the difference in their ages and the fact his father took to grooming him to take over the earldom early on. All that aside, he knew his sister was kind and patient, and it warmed his heart to know it was reaching Freyja as well.

Freyja nodded. “She has even offered to give me lessons on how to be a Lady. To impress yer parents and such.”

“How kind,” he said with a wide smile. “I hope you’ll find it useful instead of overwhelming.”

“I get the sense her and I will get along just fine.”

Making sure no one else was wandering the corridor, he paused to graze her cheek with the back of his hand and drank in her beautiful, round features. “Thank you, Freyja. I know this is a great deal of sacrifice and effort being asked of you. It brings me joy to know that you are doing so without too much pain.”

“Let’s have this conversation again once the lessons start,” she remarked shyly. He could tell she wasn’t certain that she would be able to act in the way of British Ladies, but he had faith that she would be able to do anything that she put her mind to. They started walking again before Freyja added, “And ye? What happened in yer day?”

Thomas let out a heavy sigh. “Well, at first, I thought it was just a meeting to discuss strategy on how to stomp out the rebellion going on within the country. Unfortunately, though, it led to conversation of efforts needed to protect the Royal Palace. And my father oh so wonderfully volunteered me to take the lead, as I was one of the few young officers in the room that had actually seen battle.”

Her face scrunched in confusion. “There are officers who haven’t seen battle?”

“Many men have their roles purchased for them, and if they see any action at all, it’s only long enough for someone to take note that they were there before they fall back. So that they may get the glory and recognition without any of the sacrifice,” he explained in bemusement.

“I see,” she breathed. “That makes more sense, now. That ye wanted to make a name for yerself, nae attached to yer faither.”

Thomas nodded. “I enlisted the traditional way and worked my way up. I can’t imagine a life where people call me Captain and bow and tip their hats to me because of honors they think I’ve earned when I haven’t.” He sighed again and shook his head. “But anyhow, it works out fine, I suppose. It’s aggravating that he volunteered me, but the meetings and such will be local. Meaning I get to return to you every night.” He paused, hinging on whether or not to say his next words, before he gave in. “Part of me wanted to find a way out of it, to be able to give all my time to you and this adjustment you are making. But I must be honest with myself. I feel a duty to this country. Even if it’s not perfect and I don’t agree with all the decisions, I want to do my part to end this war. And perhaps, somewhere in the mix, find glory that is my own to

have, not my father's. I *must* make a name for myself to move on, to put this chapter of my life behind me. It's silly but—”

Freyja stepped in front of him and took his cheeks in her hands. He had no choice but to look in the depths of her ocean eyes, though he wouldn't have fought it anyway. Any chance to get lost in those pools of perfect, dark water was one he treasured. “Ye are the most noble, sincere man I've ever met. Yer integrity is important to ye, and that's beautiful. Do nae think yerself silly for wanting to make something of yerself. Ye have it in ye, I've seen it before. The mercy ye had for me village, even when it was to yer own detriment.”

Her words stole his breath away, his mind sent back to those weeks when he first arrived in Kilnmar. With her influence, he had delayed military plans to build a dam to cut off communication for a nearby rebellion. For months, he blamed her for the mission being a failure, that she had manipulated him to do her own will. But enough time had passed and he could be honest with himself. He'd been having his doubts about it all before he had met Freyja. Thinking her to be an angel and her words being divine intervention was just his way to rationalize his actions.

Freyja continued, her voice lowering. “Ye will find that glory, and ye'll be free. I know it.”

Thomas was so moved, feeling the sincerity and certainty to her words that there was no denying must be her truth. And her truth was his truth. A little grin stretched over Thomas's mouth as he murmured in response, “My witch of Kilnmar, how psychic you are.”

The words were brave, as he knew how much the label *witch* had hurt her. But he said it with affection and love, wanting her to know that he was being playful and sweet beyond anything else. It was his way of showing her he didn't care how people viewed her, he knew her heart, and she was his.

They shared a tender smile and a brief kiss before they ascended the stairs together. His heart sang as the feeling of her lips simmered on his own. Things were far from simple for

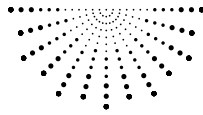
the two of them, but at least they would have stolen moments just like that to keep them going.

When they reach Freyja's bedchamber door, Thomas dared to kiss her again, unable to help himself. He wanted so badly to have more than just those mild kisses, to hold her in the way a man should, to feel her body against his. It was too risky though, and he knew that the day would soon come that he could ravish and cherish her in all the ways of husbandry without worry. Just a little while longer.

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## FRIENDS IN UNFAMILIAR PLACES



It felt as if no time had passed before morning had arrived once again and Freyja opened her bedchamber door to find Thomas waiting to greet her. He quickly wrapped her up in his arms and gave her a deep hug before explaining he would leave early that morning to begin his military duties at the royal palace. Freya felt charmed that Thomas had the patience to wait for her morning dressing ritual to see her off before he left. He had barely pulled back from her to peer into her eyes before a twinkly voice ripped through him, “Oh, Tommy! It warms me to finally have you home!”

Thomas turned to see Jane fast approaching, a grin dominating her mousy face. He forced a smile onto his lips and gave a brief nod. His sister embraced him, and he returned the hug before they separated. “It’s good to see you, Jane.”

“As it is you,” she beamed. “I know it’s only been a couple of years, but it’s felt like a lifetime. Are you doing all right? Was your time in Scotland fair?”

“It was just fine, as am I,” he assured her. “And how have you been?”

Jane nodded and said she too had been fine, then the two simply stared at one another, awkwardly waiting for the other to say something more. They might love one another, but their lack of closeness growing up made things a bit...difficult. The want to be close was there, but they were practically strangers to one another. Beyond asking how one another was, neither of them knew where to begin.



Jane cleared her throat before stepping toward Freyja and linking arms with her. “Well, if you will excuse us, Freyja and I are due for a lesson in ladyship following breakfast. Raphe and I will be staying here for the next little while so that I can help her adjust. I heard that Diana and Christabell will be staying as well, though I can’t begin to posit why.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Thomas said as genuinely as he could, and didn’t make comment on his cousins staying put. He was grateful for it and glad that someone would be there to keep Freyja company while he was away with the military, but in that moment, he wished Jane would go away. He wanted to say goodbye to Freyja and share another kiss.

Freyja found herself taking a deep breath when she and Jane remained the only two in the dining room after breakfast. It wasn’t exactly that she was grateful to be away from Catherine and the cousins, she was merely relieved to be doing anything more than sitting around, sipping tea, and listening to the gossip between the other women.

They did so, so enthusiastically, and she couldn’t understand it. It wasn’t as though gossip was a new concept for her, but back at home, town news and speculation was made while doing chores or *something* with their hands. Just sitting there with nothing to do was driving her a bit mad.

Jane, at least, seemed to be understanding of it. She shot Freyja a sympathetic smile as they sat in the vast room and waited for the servants to clear and reset the table.

A servant brought out the makings of two new place settings, and the two women sat side by side. “This is all going to seem rather silly, and it’s going to feel like a lot, but it’s little things like table manners that will go far in impressing my parents,” Jane explained before launching into the lesson.

It all did seem silly. There were rules about what forks to use for what food, how to chew, how to hold her head and posture, and the list seemed endless. She wanted to think of it like a dance, as she knew that they were a bit ritualistic, with specific steps and orders to them. But dancing was freeing and joyous, the table manners were rehearsed and tedious.

Jane was so very patient though, re-explaining anything that Freyja struggled with. The conversation stayed only on table manners, but it still felt like a bonding experience to be with Jane on her own. She was such a calming person to be with, a smile rarely not on her face, her voice sweet and low, and her demeanor never wavering from friendly and nurturing.

They must have been in there for an hour before Jane finally rested her hands over Freyja's and gave one of those brilliant, warm smiles of hers. "I think that's enough of spoons and polite conversation for now, don't you?"

Even though Freyja didn't want to have her time with Jane come to an end, she did think that if she tried to cram anymore of those rules into her mind right then, her head would explode. "I think so," Freyja agreed with a weak smile.

Jane nodded and patted her hands before standing. "I could use some tea. Let's get back to the others. We can resume in a little while—though I promise no more table manners for today."

"Thank ye," Freyja replied with a little chuckle. As they moved to the doorway, though, she felt a bit of dread settle in her stomach at the thought of more time spent sitting idly in the parlor. When the smell of roasting vegetables wafted down the hall, Freyja knew that the kitchen had to have been close. Oh, how she would have rather spent her days with the servants, cooking and running the kitchen instead sitting on her hands.

On impulse, Freyja cleared her throat and told Jane she had to use the powder room and that she would join them soon. Once Jane was on her way back to the parlor, Freyja slinked down the corridor and followed the smells coming from the kitchen. When she approached the door, there was no doubt about it being the kitchen, not only because of the aroma but the warmth radiating through the door.

Slowly, she pushed through and peered around and marveled at the sight before her. Never in her life had she seen so many stoves, ovens, and things that she couldn't recognize. Joy dominated her expression as she wandered in carefully. As

soon as one of the cooks noticed her, there was something whispered amongst them and all of their postures stiffened.

“Miss,” the one cook greeted as she brushed her hands on her apron. “Wha...do you need something, Miss?”

Freyja raised her hands, as though in surrender. “I do nae need anything. I...” She took note of all of the stress on their faces and knew she needed to get to the point that she didn’t want to be seen as a lady of the house. “I’m nae noble or any such thing. I was hoping to just...lend a hand, or at least watch ye all at work?”

There was a tense pause, and the kitchen staff all looked amongst one another, leaning in and whispering. At last, the one who had spoken before, a short and stout woman with graying hair pulled up to a tight bun, nodded. “Very well, come along. We will get you an apron.”

As she tied the white linen around her back, she hurried over to the woman’s side. She introduced herself as Abigail and then introduced everyone else. “You’re Scottish,” Abigail stated, not asking. “My grandfather was too, though don’t you tell the Earl,” she said with a wink.

Freyja nodded and gave a sheepish grin. “I’ve gathered he’s nae fond of Scots.”

The cook’s laugh was full and hearty. “That’s to put it lightly. Come now, let’s satisfy your curiosities.”

Just like that, Freyja felt a little bit more at home in the manor. Abigail took her around the kitchen, explaining all of the dishes they were making and all the equipment that Freyja wasn’t accustomed to. Even though it felt a bit wrong, Freyja found herself scanning the shelves and any open drawers for jars or anything else she could use in crafting her potions. Nothing grabbed her attention, but she was sure that there had to be something around that she could utilize.

She watched with utter fascination as they used wired utensils to beat eggs into a stiff peak as a topping for a pie they were working on for dessert. Never had she seen eggs become so voluminous and cloud-like.

Then Abigail's head whipped around, her eyes focused as she visibly sniffed the air. "Is the bread not baking yet?" she asked the others. It was clear in a matter of moments that no one had started the bread, not even the dough. "Bloody hell, as if I don't have enough things to do before dinnertime," Abigail hissed under her breath.

"I could make some," Freyja offered with a huge grin. "I know a recipe that rises in nay time."

"You would do that?" Abigail blinked. "You don't have to miss, you're here—"

Freyja carefully touched the cook's arm and tenderly interrupted, "I'm here to help."

The cook sighed heavily and gave a little nod. "It would be a load off my shoulders, but if the Earl or Countess come in here, I will not hide what I know ."

"Understood," Freyja replied with a little giggle, though it sounded a bit nervous even to her own ears. Would it really be such a bad thing if the family found out she was making bread?

"Grab that bowl down there, you silly thing," Abigail commented with a snort as she pointed down to a low shelf. Freyja bent over to grab one of the bowls from the stack when she felt something slip from her pocket. Peering down, she saw the little bundle of feverfew sprigs she had taken from the garden that morning prior to breakfast. They were good for treating headaches and fever.

Abigail bent down and handed it back to Freyja, then lowered her voice to a whisper. "I know what that's used for, dear. You best not let anyone see you with that sort of stuff. Do you understand?"

There was a gravity to her words that brought Freyja to near tears. She knew that she needed to keep her practices a secret, that wasn't what got to her. It was the fact that the woman before her, who she hadn't known an hour, was warning her with such conviction. And the fact that someone else knew of healing ways. Freyja couldn't help but wonder if

it had something to do with Abigail's Scottish lineage that made her familiar with herbs and their medicinal practices.

The pair of them stood back up, and Freyja got busy mixing ingredients together to form a bread dough. As she kneaded it, she felt a hand on her hip. Peering at her side, she witnessed Abigail slipping into her pocket a couple of empty spice containers and a couple with liquid within them. She gave Freyja a wink, and Freyja's heart felt as though it could burst with appreciation as she mouthed *'thank ye'* to her. It was just a little gesture, but it made Freyja certain that she had an ally in Abigail. And that was worth more to her than any jar or ingredient.

"Freyja? Freyja!" a bright voice called from the door. She peered up to see Jane heading in with a look of confusion on her features. "What are you doing in here, dear? We must get back to our lessons."

"Sorry, I was only lending a hand," Freyja explained with a heat coming over her cheeks. Why was she embarrassed to admit she was helping the staff? But another thought crossed her mind, and she looked back to Jane in a bit of a panic. "Nae that they cannae handle it, nor did they ask. I wanted to... missed baking with my mom."

"Ah, I understand," Jane said gently and patted her shoulder. "But this really isn't a place for you, Freyja. Not that I mind, but my mother certainly would. Come along now."

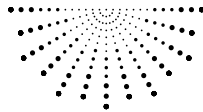
Freyja looked down to her half-kneaded dough and then to Abigail. The cook gave her a firm nod, silently assuring her that she would have it from there. Unfastening the apron, Freyja handed it back to Abigail and followed Jane out of the kitchen. Each step made her heart pang a little, wishing to stay and spend her day in there. Not only to cook and feel a little more herself in such tasks, but to also get to know Abigail and her background.

Peering back just as the door started to close behind her, Freyja reminded herself that it was alright. She would have plenty of time to get to know Abigail so long as she could figure out how to sneak back into the kitchen.

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# UNWANTED AUDIENCE



The way her stomach flipped and twisted in on itself the moment Freyja passed the threshold to the library and saw the cousins sat on one of the far couches, she needed no more evidence to know that they were women to be leery of. It was as though something *murky* exuded from their auras that could and would contaminate any who got caught in their orbit. She wanted no part of it and would surely make a point to avoid them as much as she possibly could.

Jane acted as not only a buffer between Freyja and the cousins, but a ray of sunshine. It didn't seem possible to wear a frown for long when around her. Even as she had Freyja stood in the middle of the room and forced her shoulders back and chin up, there was just an air about the youngest Landrake.

“Feel as though there is a string...or a cord, perhaps, that's sturdier? A cord, running through the center of your being. And it's pulling you upward! Keeping you straight as a board,” she rambled as she lifted her arms above her head in emphasis, her fingertips stretched toward the ceiling.

*How would a cord running through me pull my shoulders back?*

Freyja did her best to mimic the posture that Jane was exhibiting, which was easy enough, but holding it was the issue. Jane started talking about the events they would potentially go to together and how Freyja needed to portray herself. For the most part, it was clear to her that she needed to keep quiet and still while maintaining enough engagement with her gaze alone to prove that she was actively listening to



any conversation going on about her. Easy enough, even if it was utterly boring and annoying.

Then, when they got to balls, she was expected to move in a very particular way. “And a mindful way as well. Wouldn’t want any Lords to think that you’re showing interest in anyone but my brother,” Jane explained with a playful smirk. She went over how long it was appropriate to hold eye contact, how to curtsy, and so on.

Eventually, the lesson led to dancing and Freyja’s spirits lifted a bit more. Jane took the lead and appeared to be absolutely buzzing with excitement about it. With flourish, she removed an imaginary hat before bowing and placing the invisible thing back on her head, and gestured for Freyja to curtsy. Then they stood side by side with Freyja’s hands placed carefully on Jane’s, and she talked her through the meticulous steps. It was a rather dull dance, taking steps in a sort of box shape and then pacing forward, moving in a loop about the room. Jane, however, had that magic about her that made it entertaining.

She would speak to invisible party guests, tip her imaginary hat in their direction, and never once corrected Freyja in a way that made her embarrassed or self-conscious. However, any time that Freyja took a misstep, there would be a burst of giggling coming from the cousins. She didn’t bother to look in their direction though she knew their eyes were glued to her.

“I say, Diana, do you think Scots are born with two left feet?” Christabell commented loudly when Freyja stumbled a bit.

“Heavens, I’m not sure! It would certainly appear so,” Diana snickered.

“Ignore them, you’re doing great,” Jane whispered to her.

Freyja forced a smile and gave a little nod, but she was yearning to get out of there. She hadn’t any idea why the cousins had opted to stay at the Landrake manor, and all that Freyja could collect from it was that they wanted to be around to make fun of her.

They hadn't so much as finished their lap around the library before Christabell queried, "Freyja, do you mind telling us how you and our dear cousin Thomas came to be betrothed?"

Freyja's mind went blank for a moment, not having anticipated such a question. She and Thomas had discussed the fact that they would pass her off as a war bride, but she hadn't thought to have a story rehearsed. "My hand was offered to Thomas as a sign of good will when the British occupied my village," she explained softly.

"Oh? When was that? How long exactly have you been betrothed?" Christabell pressed further.

"Nae long," she murmured.

"It just doesn't make sense to me. You see, I had heard that my cousin's occupation in a Scottish village ended in battle and failure. How is it that your union lasted *that*?"

A good question, a very good question that Freyja didn't have an answer for. Her mind reeled as she attempted to find a resolution. Thankfully, however, Jane came to the rescue. "Stop pestering the poor girl. Can't you see we are busy, Christabell?"

"Busy with what? Because pray tell, I can't decide if the two of you are dancing or having an awkward stroll."

"Enough of your mouth," Jane fired back, her voice full of warning.

When Freyja dared to look over to Christabell, she saw the woman's eyes narrowed with fury and determination. "What are you going to do to silence me, Jane? Pray tell."

It was as though gunpowder and embers swirled in the air around them, ready to ignite at any given moment. Freyja wasn't sure what would come of a fight between the cousins, but it made her stomach ache to know that she was at the root of it. No part of her wanted to cause tension within the family, even if Christabell was particularly unbearable.

Jane took hold of Freyja's arm, surprisingly gently considering the harsh expression etched onto her face. And

then she murmured, “Come Freyja, we shall continue our lessons elsewhere. Free of a chatty audience.”

The two women made their way out of the library while giggles and chattering erupted behind them. Really, Freyja hadn’t any idea why the two girls were so horrible to not just her but Jane as well. Perhaps there was a bit of jealousy to them though Freyja couldn’t imagine what they could be jealous over.

“Miserable women,” Jane murmured under her breath as they headed down the corridor. “I know it’s hard and I should take my own advice, Freyja, but truly try not to pay them any mind. They are lonely and bored. I have no doubt in my mind that they are staying here only to strike up drama and discourse surrounding your marriage. Not because they dislike you, they don’t bloody know you. They are envious, old bats —” Jane looked to Freyja, a dark shade of pink coming over her cheeks. The cousins were around Freyja’s age, perhaps a year or so younger. “Sorry, not that your age is inappropriate to—”

Freyja cut her off with a kind smile and a pat on the back of her hand. “All is well. Nae offense taken.” The two shared a silent exchange of appreciation for one another through grins and a brief embrace.

It couldn’t have been later than half past three o’ clock when they wrapped up the lessons. As they again walked together past the foyer, the door opening captured their attention. Freyja was overjoyed that Thomas had returned, though as she hurried toward him, she could see the strain in his expression. She couldn’t begin to imagine how his day had gone, but she hoped she could at least make it better.

“Good day, Brother,” Jane greeted him. “I shall leave the two of you for now. We shall catch up later.”

Without another word, Jane departed them, and Freyja looked to Thomas again. He looked exhausted, but his eyes drank her in and an easy smile came over his lips. “Would you care to go on a walk through the garden? I could use some air,” he offered.

“Of course,” she replied excitedly as she took hold of his arm.

The pair made their way out of the house and began a slow stroll through the garden. At first, there was a silent peace between them as they unpacked all their thoughts from the troublesome day. After a little while, Thomas posed the question, “How has your day gone?”

“Oh, all right, I suppose,” she murmured.

“Doesn’t sound so,” Thomas pressed with a cheeky grin. “Come now, be honest with me.”

Freyja shook her head defiantly. “I shall be, but what about yer day? Ye look like ye’ve had a rough one.”

“I have, but it’ll be easier knowing how you’re doing,” Thomas retorted.

Freyja debated for a long moment and then sighed. “I’m struggling, if I’m honest. It’s difficult adapting to all these changes. Just being here is hard enough, but the way I’m meant to act as a lady here...it’s suffocating and leaves me feeling restless. All the sitting around, having to be so still and stiff. Makes me miss Scotland more and more with every hour. And yer cousins certainly do nothing but make me miss it more.”

“They are certainly...a chore, to say the least,” he agreed with a small nod. When they reached the end of the garden path, he stepped over a flower bed and held out a hand to help her over it as well. They continued on their walk away from the estate. Freyja was curious as to where they were headed but didn’t question it. “Thank you for all the effort you’re putting in. I know it’s not easy, but just know this role you’re having to play, it isn’t forever.”

“It’s been two days, and it’s already felt like an eternity,” she admitted, her tone dipping to a bit of a sulk.

“I know,” he breathed and dared to drop her arm, only to wrap his around her waist. “I wish I could tell you when it’ll be over. But soon enough, you’ll be my bride. We’ll have a home of our own, and you can live as you wish.”

Freyja gave a weak smile and a little shrug then. “I hope so, but...I have my doubts. I donnae think that yer family is accepting me.”

“Not yet, but they will,” he said with certainty.

She noticed they were starting into the tree line then, and her heart skipped a beat from joy. “Ye sound so sure,” Freyja replied, though her eyes were darting all around the forest. Oh, how she had missed the trees. She couldn’t resist reaching out and running her fingertips along the bark. The aroma of the soil and foliage filled her chest with a nostalgia that didn’t have a specific time or place but was just as real as the air she breathed.

“I am,” he said. “As I know how hard it is not to love you, even when you don’t want to.”

Their mouths matched with the wide grins that dominated both of their faces. It was true, Thomas had wanted to hate her after the mission failure, but with just a little time together, he had softened entirely. She could only hope that she could have the same effect on his parents, but she wouldn’t be holding her breath.

When he stopped walking, they were standing in a small forest clearing. The oaks and pines blocked out the view of the garden and all else beyond it. There was moss under their feet and wildflowers and ferns sprouted at the base of the trees. It was beautiful and took her breath away completely. Carefully, Thomas helped her sit down, and he next to her. His fingers brushed through the curls that hung down her back.

“And yer day?” she questioned. “What has ye looking so tired?”

“Oh, just military nonsense. Meetings that last too long. Men who talk so much that it must be only to hear themselves.” Thomas huffed and shook his head. “But, nothing more. Just a tiring day of talking and listening. All worth it, though, since I get to come home to you.”

The tenderness in his eyes couldn’t be matched by anything else. Not a caressing wind on a hot day, nor a fire in

the hearth first thing on a brisk morning, nor the gentle song of a bird keeping one company on their walk home. Moved by the adoration pouring from him, Freyja leaned in and pressed her mouth to his.

He returned the kiss with passion and love. Over the past few days, their affection had been brief and fleeting—but here in the woods, it could overflow. And so it did. Their lips parted for tongues to caress one another, and their hands gripped one another's bodies. A warm wave of tingles moved through her, something that she had only ever experienced when alone with Thomas.

The layers of her dress that were intricate and still didn't quite make sense to her were easily pulled away so that their bodies could connect. It was a dizzying affair, how quickly they could go from speaking about their days to enraptured in physical affection. Their breaths mingled together as their clothes were shed away and there was nothing but skin and moss.

Thomas was so gentle and yet precise, his touch between her legs enough to make her head buzz and her heart soar. Once their bodies became one, however, there was nothing else like it. It wasn't lust nor simple pleasure, it was spiritual. As though their bodies could have a conversation that their mouths couldn't find the words for. Acceptance, passion, longing, protectiveness, loyalty—it spilled out of them with every kiss and thrust.

How perfect it was that a forest, the same entity that had brought them together, was their safe haven as well. A place to be with one another without fear of judgement or speculation. That forest could have been anywhere. England, Scotland, the Americas, it would have all been the same to her. It was *their* place. A place for their love and passion to be unbridled.

Her legs snaked around his back, and her head arched back into the moss as he brought out peaks of ecstasy with his hips. His breath traveled along the length of her neck, whispering sweet words of love and care upon her skin as her body trembled under his touch.

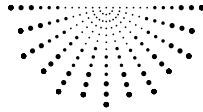
She called his name into the wind before her body relaxed, and his on top of her own. They laid there, pecking and holding one another. The unspoken truth was that they would have to return to the manor soon, but for the moment, she wanted to just lie there and pretend there was nothing else they needed to do. Their only obligation was to be with one another.

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## NEVER BE LIKE HIM



He walk home felt more like floating than anything else. His head was clouded with sweet, sappy love for the woman on his arm. Not a word was said between them, and any time they looked at one another, they would break out in a little fit of laughter. He felt giddy and almost childlike with the joy that overwhelmed him when he was with her. It was like nothing else he had ever experienced, and he wouldn't trade anything in the world for it.

The moment they stepped into the foyer, however, the bubble of delight they were in popped. It was that instantaneous. Before him was his father, waiting with his hands clasped behind his back and eyes narrowed.

“Evening, Thomas,” his father greeted. “I'd like to speak to you. *Alone.*”

The final word was sharp, but his eyes didn't so much as flicker in Freyja's direction. It was as though she didn't exist to him. As much as that annoyed him and he longed to call him out on it, he knew better than to start a fight with his father right then.

“Very well,” he mumbled and turned to Freyja. He dared a kiss on her cheek before nodding for her to go up to her bedchamber. Her ocean eyes hesitated on him before she did just that, slinking her way up the stairs. Turning back to his father, he followed behind him as they made their way into his lower level study (yes, his father had *two* studies; the one upstairs was considered a private retreat, and the one downstairs one for more official business).

He shut the door behind him and slowly trailed behind his father as they made their way over to his desk. More likely out of habit than a peace offering, Richard poured drinks for Thomas and himself from the decanter on his desk, sliding the glass across the table as he locked eyes with Thomas much like two bulls.

They sipped their drinks in silence, and Thomas waited it out. He didn't want to ask what it was about. Clearly his father dragged him in there, so he needed to be the one to put it into words. After all, the silence was a strategy of Richard's. He liked to make his supposed opponent stir in awkwardness, bring them to a point of stress where they felt forced to break it themselves. It was a constant mind game with the Earl of Hertford, and there wasn't always a clear point to it. As far as Thomas could tell, he just liked to feel superior—even in the means of little games that the other didn't even know they were playing, let alone the rules.

At last, his father broke the silence as he clasped his hands in his lap. "There is no need for simple pleasantries or small talk of any sort. I'll get right to it." Clearing his throat, his father went dull behind the eyes as he made his announcement, "I'm banishing that Scot from the house. After this meeting, I'll be informing the staff to ready her and her belongings to leave by morning."

Thomas's face fell. He knew better than to wait for laughter, as though his father was the joking type. It was merely a state of shock. While he knew that his father was stubborn and had a strong distaste for the Scottish, he wouldn't have guessed that his father would be so callous or cruel. Going through a wave of emotions and gauging his reaction, Thomas couldn't seem to keep all the spite and hatred out of his voice.

"*That Scot* has a name. Her name is Freyja," Thomas corrected, venom oozing into each syllable except for her name. "And you aren't banishing her, father. She's my bride-to-be."

The Earl laughed, the notes sharp and cold. "That, I can assure you, she is not. No son of mine will marry a bloody

Scot.”

“Then I suppose I’m not your son,” Thomas snapped and stood to his feet. “And if that’s the case, I suppose we have nothing more to say to one another.”

“You’ve always been dramatic, haven’t you? Take after your mother, I’m sure,” he sneered.

Thomas glared over his shoulder. “I’m not dramatic, I’m being serious.”

“The mark of a true thespian,” his father went on. When Thomas didn’t reply, his father sighed and shook his head. “Come Thomas, what will you do if you’re no longer my son? Hm? Where will you go? What will you live off of?”

He spun around and jabbed a finger in his direction., “It doesn’t bloody matter! Don’t you see? Must I spell it out for you? Banishing my betrothed is banishing *me*, as my loyalty is to her above all else. I’d rather be a beggar on the street than be without her.”

“You’re infatuated—”

“*I’m in love!*” Thomas corrected, his voice growing to a scream. Rubbing his face, he shook his head and narrowed his eyes at his father. “Do not undermine my emotions for Freyja. *Freyja*. Won’t you say her name before you throw her to the streets? Or are you repelled by anything pure and kind?”

“Don’t speak to me in such a way,” his father bit out. “I don’t know what it is about that woman which has emboldened you so, but it is clear to me more than ever that she isn’t a good influence on you! She must go!”

“Then I must go as well! Farewell!” Thomas hollered and headed for the door.

“Again, what will you do?” his father queried in a low tone. “You are still in contract with the military, but I know that your salary isn’t enough for a home of your own. At least not without the backing of your inheritance that you’re attempting to walk away from. After all, the same account has been where you’ve squirreled your money away to, isn’t it?”

“I’ll go abroad,” Thomas huffed, his back still to his father, though he again stopped walking.

“Ah! Commit treason. Jolly good,” he sarcastically remarked. “Abandoning your post as Captain, that is treason—is it not? I wonder what will ever happen if you find yourself in a British Colony or Territory and they discover who you are. After all, I’ve heard of a Lieutenant or two hung in the Americas for much less than what you’re saying you’ll do.”

Thomas’s mind was reeling, trying to come up with a solution, a place they could go. Before he could even rule out his available options, his father added ominously, “I wonder if anyone will ask any questions about this *war bride* of yours. And if you’ll have answers for it...I’ve been meaning to ask you, dear son. How is it that General Radcliffe doesn’t know of your bride? Surely you didn’t smuggle her into the country — that would be reckless and foolish.”

Thomas’s breath caught in his throat. Of course his father had asked the General who oversaw his stint in Scotland. He really hadn’t thought all of it through, bringing Freyja to England. But the details hadn’t mattered to him at the time, only her safety.

Slowly turning around, he stared his father down, hating the smug victory that was on his face. “What is it you want? Do you want to see me hung? Is that what this is? Am I such a disappointment to you because I’ve decided to be my own man rather than your obedient dog?”

The Earl stared at him for a long moment, picking up his drink and downing the rest of the amber liquor. The glass connecting with the table again emphasized the beginning of his words. “You haven’t become your own man, Thomas. All you’ve done is sulk, run off, and make a fool of yourself. With failing your missions, and with breaking so many laws by bringing that woman back with you.” His father wiped his mouth and headed around the desk. Once he was leaning against the front of it, he smirked once more. “Very well, Thomas. Seeing as you are *so* adamant to be with this woman of yours, I’ll tell you what. She may stay for now, whilst you see to this mission we are embarking on. Make a name for

yourself, and you may keep her.” His eyes darkened. “Do not mistake me, I’ll never approve of a marriage between my son and a Scot, she will be tolerated in this family as a kept woman. You may bed the Scottish pig all you like, but be aware that none of her produced heirs shall be considered legitimate.”

Thomas’s teeth clenched with rage. It was so utterly disgusting to hear his father speak of Freyja as though she were nothing more than a piece of property. Then again, he supposed that was all that women were to him.

He took a deep breath, trying to think it through. As much as he hated to admit it, Thomas didn’t see a better way out of it. If he left that night with Freyja, he was certain that his father would be petty enough to send out word that he had abandoned his post and that Freyja was a smuggled bride—no doubt he would make her out to be some sort of criminal.

At least if he agreed to his father right then, he would know that Freyja was safe and have a chance to convince his family to accept her, or for them to be together outside of the family with the means to survive. He didn’t like it, but for right then, Thomas had to accept.

“Very well. But if I catch a single word of you being cruel to her,” Thomas warned with his nostrils flared, “I swear to you, you’ll never see me again.”

“Understood,” the Earl mused. “And so you know, there was a decision made after you left today. We leave for the palace day after tomorrow. We’ll likely be gone a fortnight at least.”

Thomas turned and at last left the study. His head was swirling as he made his way down the corridor and up the stairs. He couldn’t believe that the day had taken such a turn, or that his father could be so horrible. Perhaps it shouldn’t have come as such a shock, but it did. Richard could be rude, stubborn, and irritable, but never would Thomas have thought that he would toss a woman out onto the streets in a country foreign to her without any means to care for herself. And without any concern for Thomas’s feelings for her.

At the top of the stairs, he hesitated. For a moment, he thought of going to Freyja's bedchamber to tell her all that had just happened, but he didn't think it wise. She was already so nervous and stressed about his family accepting her, and the last thing he wanted to do was to cement all those worries.

For the time being, he needed to keep it to himself. With his head hung and shoulders slumped, Thomas dragged himself to his own room. He doubted he would sleep that night or do much of anything but lie there and contemplate how to get them out of that mess. That was, when he could pierce through the veil of hatred for his father.

He was laying in his bed, but he didn't recall coming into the room or pacing across the floor. Staring up at the ceiling, he found himself wondering how in the world he could have come from a man like Richard Landrake. And as his thought dissolved into a murky puddle of confusion, hurt, and anger, he promised himself that he would never, *ever* allow himself to act like his father. Freyja deserved far, far better than a man like that.

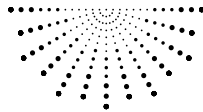
Thomas was only sorry that she would one day have to have Richard as a father-in-law. That was, if Thomas returned from battle. His heart ached at the thought, worried what would come of Freyja if something did happen to him. He dreaded telling her that he was leaving, knowing that it would crush her. But he supposed that if their love had taught him anything thus far, it was that it would always, *always* bring them back together.

Even from war.

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## BECOMING A BRITISH LADY



Freyja's heart pattered away as she followed Jane's lead into the carriage outside of the home. They were going into town to get Freyja some dresses and shoes made custom to her so that she wouldn't have to keep borrowing the Countess's attire. While she was looking forward to no longer wearing shoes that pinched her toes, she was a bit nervous to leave the home. Being in the town would mean being among other people, and while none of their comments would get to her, the thought of their judgment wore her out.

"You will love the dressmaker, Freyja," Jane beamed as they settled into the lavish coach. "She's this darling older woman named Matilda. A miracle worker with needle and thread, and quite the conversationalist."

Forcing a smile and a nod, Freyja folded her hands in her lap and took a deep breath. She shouldn't be so nervous; after all, she had Jane by her side, and Jane was truly wonderful. Trying to change her internal tune about the endeavor, she peered to Jane and queried, "Where is it ye live, Jane? Is it far from here?"

"Oh, not too awfully far. My dear Raphe is a baron just an earldom over. Though, it is just far enough to prevent me from wanting to take a carriage here every day. Too much time would be spent in this rickety thing," Jane explained with a light giggle. And so it launched windy tales about the countryside between there and Jane's marital home. Freyja listened in earnest to the young woman recount all the scenery of fields of sheep and wheat and how she would often quiz



Raphe on lines of poetry to pass the time. She drank it all in, Jane's descriptions allowing her to paint such beautiful imagery in her mind's eye.

Jane's stories carried them right into the heart of town, where they then stopped right outside of a little shop with a seafoam green awning that had the lettering embroidered on the front *'Matilda's Dress Shoppe'*. Jane practically leapt from the carriage as soon as they stopped. When Freyja followed after her, Jane took hold of her arm and hurried toward the door, where a servant opened it for them.

"Now, I want you to pick colors and such you like. Think of nothing but ensuring you love the gowns. Mathilda will be sure they fit perfectly."

Freyja nodded and gazed about the shop as they entered. It smelled of pastries, tea, and wool, and the walls were lined with neat stacks of fabrics in every color Freyja could imagine. Among the room were tables with rows upon rows of colored thread and containers filled with buttons of every shape, size, and color. It was a little overwhelming, if she were honest. Never had there been so many intricate options for her to consider for each garment.

Matilda approached them, and she was just as wonderful as Jane described. An older woman with brassy gray hair pulled back into a braid and a smile that illuminated her brown eyes. The three of them walked together along the store, looking at fabrics and admiring sketches of different styles of gown.

The dressmaker and Jane kept what could otherwise be a dull occasion rather lively. They quipped about the absurdity of the fashion of imposing shades of vibrant orange and blue, and while they quite enjoyed the styling of large, puffy sleeves, they thought that some of the Duchesses had taken the trend to rather outlandish extremes.

When Freyja couldn't decide on a design, Matilda and her staff made quick work of putting her into one of her premade gowns which she kept about the shop for such an occasion. They were much larger than the dresses Catherine had been

allowing her to borrow, which apparently were a bit out of fashion.

Standing in the three-panel mirror, she took in her reflection and the elaborate dress. The emerald gown had a shine to it, and the bodice was an ever so slightly darker green, the sleeves a beige white. The neckline was straight across her collarbones, leaving her shoulders exposed.

“Oh, Freyja, you’re an absolute vision,” Jane praised, standing next to her and squeezing to her side.

“Ye donnae think it’s a wee bit much?” Freyja questioned with a slight blush coming over her cheeks.

“Fits you like a glove, it does,” Matilda added, eyeing her with a smile. “You may borrow that one until I finish with your others.”

“Oh, are ye sure? I donnae want to cause any trouble,” Freyja murmured. While the ladies had done a wonderful job to keep the occasion joyous, Freyja still didn’t feel *right* in British garb. She felt as though she stuck out like a sore thumb, like all those she passed would know she were better suited for a kilt and think her a fool for trying to pass herself off as a British Lady.

“Nonsense. It’s better served on you than in my stockroom,” Matilda remarked as she started walking away. “Now let me go fetch my ledger. We need measurements for your gowns and underdresses.”

Freyja looked back to the mirror and slightly twirled and watched the heavy layers shift stiffly. “You really do look fantastic, Freyja,” Jane said, cutting through her thoughts. When their gazes met in the reflection, Thomas’s sister brought her closer to her, arm around her shoulder. “I know you aren’t quite comfortable, and I understand that. So many changes, so quickly...but trust me when I say looking and playing the part is the way to my father’s heart.” She then picked up Freyja’s chin and held her gaze sternly. “They say that the man is the head of the family and the woman the neck, the one who turns the head. But in this family, my father is both. Get him on your side, and everyone else will follow.

Once we have a King again, I'm certain that even he would follow my father's approval."

She gave a weak laugh, and Freyja joined in, though it was a little forced. Jane held her at arm's length, and her kind face radiated a warm smile. "Give it time and just a little faith, and it'll all come together."

Freyja's heart squeezed, and without a thought, she pulled Jane into a hug. "Thank ye, Jane. I...I needed to hear that."

She hugged Freyja back and looked a bit teary eyed herself before she turned and started listing things off for Matilda to make. The rest of their appointment passed in a blur, Freyja's heart full from Jane's perfectly timed words of comfort. Once done at the dress shoppe, they headed to the cobbler and then a little store which sold jewelry, hats, and other various accessories. It was all a bit over her head, but she had such a wonderful time watching Jane shop on her behalf. And the conversation between them flowed, Jane asking about life back in Scotland and giving little tips and lessons on life in England. It was rather blissful, causing her homesickness to fade away for the time being. Even though Freyja wasn't sure that she would ever earn their father's approval, at least she already had Jane's.

Some hours passed before the pair finally returned to the Landrake manor. Much to her chagrin, though, Thomas wasn't home yet. That was no trouble, Freyja supposed, as she could do with a little nap after such a long day out of the house. Jane seemed to be of the same mind, yawning as she too climbed the stairs. "Quite the day we've had," she commented as they reached the second floor. "Thank you for being such a treat, can't tell you the last time I had such a fantastic time out."

"Thank ye for being so very kind," Freyja replied. "I had a wonderful time."

The two said their goodbyes and parted ways to rest before dinner. Freyja had a small smile still lingering on her lips as she approached her bedchamber, her heart rather full after the day the two of them had together. It felt like being with her

sister again in many ways, and that was a comfort that was greater than she could put into words.

All of that slipped away within an instant as Freyja pushed open the door and found Christabell standing in the middle of her room. For a moment, she thought she must have been mistaken, that she walked into the wrong bedchamber. But all the art and furnishings were the same, and her personal trunks were squirreled away in the corner, having arrived just the evening before.

Blinking, her gaze returned to Christabell, who was standing there, a smirk on her face and her hands clasped at her waist. “Good day, Christabell,” Freyja murmured. “Can... can I help ye?”

“Sorry to invade. Was just looking for you, forgot you were out with Jane. But...never mind,” Christabell remarked, the smirk still painted on her lips as she slowly strolled past Freyja.

“Are ye sure? Do ye need something?” Freyja queried. She didn’t know why she was offering to spend a moment more with Christabell, other than the pattering in her chest compelled her to keep her there. But why? Something just wasn’t right about her being there, but there was nothing Freyja could think of on the spot to hold her there.

“The funniest thing is, I forgot what I came looking for you about as soon as I saw you. Don’t you hate when that happens?” the cousin replied as she sauntered out of the room, never breaking her stride.

The door shut behind her, and Freyja stared at the painted wood. What in the world just happened, and why had it left her feeling so...*strange*? Panning around the room, Freyja could just sense something in the air, an upset. She had never been quite practiced in sensing emotions or the stains they left behind, but something about those cousins was so pungent that she could without trying. Whatever it was that was left in Christabell’s wake, the most prevalent thing that weighed on Freyja’s heart was the simple statement: *Christabell’s intentions here were not pure.*

Her eyes whipped around, trying to understand what she could have been doing in there if not looking for her. When her eyes fell onto her trunk, her stomach flipped in that telling way. Surely Freyja was simply being paranoid—she didn't want to think so ill of one of Thomas's family members.

Before she reached the trunk, she turned herself away. It didn't feel right to assume that Christabell was some sort of thief, and so she wasn't going to take stock. Besides, if she was worried about thievery or being found out, Freyja simply needed to find a way to store her items discreetly. Finally allowing herself to approach the trunk, she tugged on the handle and dragged it across the floor until she managed to wedge it underneath the tall bed. It wasn't the most secure of hiding places, but it would have to do for the time being until she could figure out where else to put it. After all, it wasn't like back home when she wouldn't look out of place while digging a hole to hide something or wandering far out into the woods to secure it under some debris. Her every move was watched there.

Freyja's eyes lingered on the chest before she lowered the blanket over it. Even though she didn't want to believe that Christabell would steal from her, something didn't feel right. That cousin knew something, and Freyja feared what it could be.

*So much for resting before supper.*

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It was with a heavy heart that Freyja found herself retiring to bed that evening, as Thomas hadn't yet returned from his military duty. The Earl had been at dinner, but Freyja hadn't had the courage to inquire about what was holding Thomas up, and Jane and Catherine were content with the answer that he was finishing up with the others. What could have kept him, though, that didn't keep the Earl? Freyja wasn't naïve enough to think she understood how war worked, let alone the armies of countries outside of Scotland, but contemplation on it all caused sleep to elude her for some time.

When slumber did take her, there were no dreams, and her body tossed and turned from dissatisfaction. A hand caressed her cheek, and for a moment she thought it was sleep finally coming to pull her into a deeper, darker place. But the touch was warm and her heart skipped a beat. Without opening her eyes, she knew it was her beloved Thomas. A smile stretched across her lips as she blinked and took in his face, bathed in moonlight.

“Thomas, you’re home,” she breathed.

“I am,” he nodded, though there was a tightness to his voice that roused her from her sleep that much more.

“Is everything all right?” she queried, hoping that her tired mind was merely playing tricks on her. After all, he had only uttered two syllables—but there had to be a reason that he was in her bedchamber at all, let alone at such an hour.

“I’m afraid I’ve come with—” His voice broke momentarily, a sigh escaping him before he continued. “With unfavorable news.”

“What is it?” Freyja questioned, sitting up, her brows drawing together with worry.

His arm wrapped around her back and his gaze fell to the ground. Freyja could see the exhaustion and sorrow etched into the finer details of his face and swimming in the depths of his brown eyes even though he wasn’t looking in her direction. When she reached and touched his chin, Thomas reluctantly peered over to her. “I leave in the morning,” he confessed in a whisper. “It’s a mission that should take at least two weeks, maybe more. There’s a...a rebellion at the Royal Palace, and I’ve been tasked to overseeing that the tides don’t turn in favor of the rebels.”

Her heart flooded with panic and worry, her bottom lip daring to tremble. “It’s dangerous, isn’t it?” she queried, her voice little more than a whisper.

“It is,” he admitted, swallowing a lump in his throat and lifting his gaze to return to hers. “While I have hope in my heart for the future, nothing is certain right now.”

It was his gentle and careful way of telling her that he wasn't sure if he was going to return—*alive*. Freyja longed to caress him and assure him that she felt in the spirits and her heart that their story was far from done, but any and all words died in her throat before they were properly formed. Even if *her* beliefs gave her comfort that he would return to her, she didn't wish to give what would be empty platitudes to his ears.

Unable to find the words, Freyja resorted to expressing her care and affection for him with her lips. Pressing hers carefully to his, she felt as though they both melted into the kiss. Only, as the kiss deepened and their hands explored one another ferociously, she recognized there was a different sort of heat behind it. It was one of life and death, as though their last kiss then could truly be their last, and they were doing all they could to put off finding where that final kiss would remain.

Even if her soul felt certain she would see him again, Freyja was easily swept up in the moment and the taste of uncertainty on his tongue. Tears stung her eyes as her fingers combed through his hair and her body lured him down into her blankets. In a familiar blur of discarded garb, their bodies found one another and Freyja spent her time etching every dip and freckle of his form into her memory. Memorizing the way his lips felt against her skin, the chills and shivers that would run through her with every stroke of his hand.

Something in the blistery heat of that night made her realize something so simple but pure: Thomas was her home. It was no wonder she had followed him to England with such little resistance and that she was swept up in the emotions of him potentially not returning just as easily. If he didn't return, she would be without a future, without a home.

Her hands squeezed him closer, and her lips covered even more of his skin. She would do all she could to make this night go on just a little longer, to hold him just a moment more, to feel his breath, alive and warm on her neck.

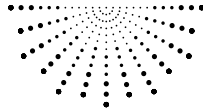
There was no room for prayer or reflection of the situation. It was only him and her. It was only *them*, even if it was only for the time being.

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## A GRIM BATTLE



Thomas's mind was heavily clouded and twisted in vines of uncertainty and fear, sleep completely evading him that night. Even though being with Freyja brought him peace and comfort, that particular day it also brought him pain. What if it was the last time that he would ever lie with her? Would it be the final time his arms held her sweet, supple form?

He couldn't decide whether it was an act of self-preservation or mercy, but either way, Thomas found himself crawling out of her bed before she stirred and slinking away with caution so as not to disturb her. The part of him which thought it an act of mercy believed that it was best not to provoke the sleeping and that it would make the transition easier on her, as though she could play pretend that he had merely gone as he had every day if she didn't watch him leave and believe that he would be back that evening.

And the bit that knew that what he was doing at least had a semblance of selfishness to it caught him at the door and urged him to look back at her as she slept so soundly. The last rays of moonlight were captured in her auburn hair, much like the very first night he saw her, bathing in its silver rays as she was blotted against the emerald expanse. Thomas drank her in, praying to a God he so rarely spoke to that it wouldn't be the last time he would see her.

And the selfishness which had led him to that moment, kept him from disturbing her as he crept out of the room. It was easier to not have the tearful goodbyes, to let their last

kisses and sweet nothings in the dead of the night be what carried them onward until they reached one another again.

His mind continued debating it all, whether he had chosen the right path by leaving her there, as he prepared to leave that morning. With fresh breeches, blouse, and vest on and his stomach full of nothing but black coffee and tobacco smoke—Thomas wasn't much of a smoker, but on mornings quite like that, it helped settle his nerves and stop his stomach from cramping with physical hunger since he had no appetite.

All too soon, there was nothing left for Thomas to do but go outside and prepare his horse. A little to his surprise, his mother and father were already outside, talking quietly amongst each other as servants packed various items into his carriage. Thomas sucked in a deep breath and pulled on his Captain's hat.

*"Wait!"* a voice cried from behind. Thomas spun around to see Freyja hurrying in his direction, gown bunched into her hands, her pale legs visible as she made her way down the stairs, barefoot and wide-eyed. He hardly had time to register it all and open his arms before she collided with him. His throat immediately tightened around words of apology, knowing it must have hurt her to catch him leaving without a goodbye.

"Take this with ye," she whispered into his neck, causing his brow to furrow. He had expected her to be upset with his lack of goodbye, to perhaps woefully scorn him for it. Peering down, he watched as her hand slipped into the pocket of his vest. He could feel something press into the fabric, a slight weight pulling down at his pocket. "It will help keep ye safe."

He nodded and waited for her to pull back. Without care if his parents saw, Thomas stole a kiss on her cheek, unable to help himself. "Be good. I'll return to you soon," he said in a throaty whisper.

"Is that a promise?" Freyja asked, something sunny and lovely to her tone.

Thomas wasn't a man that would ever make a promise that he couldn't keep, it was something he would steadfast in.

However, staring down into her sparkling ocean eyes and slight smile to her rosy lips, it didn't feel like a vow he couldn't keep. "It is," he purred and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I will return home, I will return to you. You have my word."

She nodded and stood still as he moved reluctantly away from her and mounted his horse. It was only up there that he peered into his vest pocket. There was a bundle of dried herbs, both vegetal and floral in aroma, along with a gold shilling and little bell tied around it with a bit of twine. He hadn't any idea what each element represented or did, but just looking at it and feeling it in his pocket brought him comfort. It was a little piece of the woman he loved, that he could take with him and think of her until his return.

While there was still time, Thomas turned around and looked back at the family he was leaving behind. It warmed his heart in ways he hadn't anticipated to see his mother approaching Freyja, putting an arm around her. It wasn't always clear on the surface if his mother was all that accepting of her, but he knew with that little glimpse into his mother's behavior without his father looming over that she did. And the Countess, he knew in his heart then, would look out for his beloved while he was gone.

With that peace of mind, Thomas rode hard through town and toward the military settlement that had been erected in the past couple of days for men to train and prepare for battle. But the camp which had taken a great amount of manpower and time to build would be packed away, stowed, and ready to head for the Royal Palace.

Formations were already in place by the time Thomas rode through the field and made it to the front of the crowds. His father hadn't arrived yet, of course, but neither had many of the higher-ranking officers. Not that it mattered, as Thomas was the one who would order them to ride.

As he slowed his horse to a trot, he reached into his pocket and gave the little bundle that Freyja had made him a gentle squeeze. She said it would protect him, and he was of a mind to believe her. What she didn't know was that her love for him

filled him with confidence. With a heart filled with determination and love, he looked over the rows upon rows of men in uniform with muskets and bayonets held to their sides.

“Gentlemen,” he announced, projecting his voice so that the back rows could hear. “Today, we are not fighting for ourselves or for our families. Today, we fight for the traditions of our fathers, and their fathers before them. We are Englishmen, and English this country shall stay. Protect the Crown!”

“Protect the Crown!” the men echoed.

With that, Thomas pivoted and rode ahead, leading the men to march forward. It would be a rather long morning of marching, but it would pass in the blink of an eye. The excitement and nervousness would carry them there just as much as their feet did.

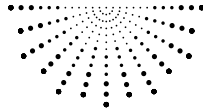
Love would be the other thing propelling Thomas forward; his hand clutched the little creation in his pocket again.

*Once step closer to being together forever, my Freyja.*

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# FAMILY ABROAD



## *A Few Days Later*

It had been difficult for Freyja to leave her bedchamber other than the odd meal in the days following Thomas's departure. While she was certain he would return safely, it didn't prevent her from worrying or missing him terribly. He would return to her, but what if he was maimed in some way? What if he became riddled with infection?

It was then, when the worry of infection overtook her, that she finally left her room for anything other than a meal. With a small pair of scissors and a ball of twine, Freyja found her way to the garden and began her preparation for treatments. There was no telling when or if someone would show up there, injured or ill from war and in need of help. She wasn't sure what the chances of that were, but she would be prepared just in case.

Though, being in the garden brought back other memories of Thomas. The morning he left, she had noticed he was leaving and dug through her trunk to bundle together dill, lavender, and coriander—herbs of luck, protection, and immortality; the coin had been for good fortune, and the bell for clarity. Her heart pattered away as she thought of it, hoping that he still had it on him and didn't lose it. She too carried a couple of coins in her pocket, hoping it would aid in their fate as well.

She had managed to collect elderflowers and lemon balm before she heard a voice beckoning her from nearby. "Freyja? Are you out here?"

It was Jane. While she didn't feel anxious about her approaching, Freyja still acted quickly to tuck away the herbs into the folds of her dress just in case. "Over here," she replied as they rested within her pockets.

Jane approached with a kind smile and tender eyes. "There you are. My mother and I are heading into town to see a play and have a bite to eat. Would you care to join us?"

"Oh," Freyja breathed. Even though she longed to stay there in the garden and continue to prepare her potions, she also didn't want to say no to the Countess. Besides, she had always wanted to see a play. She and her sister used to make up plays and perform them for their family, but they had never been to a proper performance. "Very well. Let me just freshen up."

"We will be waiting in the foyer," Jane grinned and hurried away.

Freyja moved swiftly through the manor and back to her bedchamber so that she could secure her herbs and supplies before heading out. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror hanging in her bedchamber before exiting. She was well put together, a stylish orange gown with puffed sleeves, and her head crowned with thin braids taming the curly hair which hung down her back. The only thing that Freyja couldn't hide was the dark circles around her eyes from the lack of sleep. Oh well.

At the bottom of the stairs, she joined Catherine and Jane, who then headed outside and into a coach. "So glad you joined us, Freyja," Catherine commented as they settled in. "Everyone should experience British theatre. It's really quite the treat."

Freyja nodded and then peered around sheepishly. "Are Diana and Christabell joining us?"

"No, no. I wanted it to be just us," Catherine assured her.

Freyja didn't ask why that was, but she was grateful for it. If she were honest with herself, they had been a motivation to staying in her bedchamber. With her head all full of worry, the



last thing she wanted was to be exposed to the tension and pressure she felt when around the cousins.

They had a light lunch at a café before the show, the little shop smelling of sweetened tea and bread and furnished with oak tables and floral paintings. Jane and Catherine chatted casually about the typical things—other family members expecting children, their plans for the summer if the Civil War ended promptly, and so on. While Freyja had no input to anything being said, she found the chatter rather soothing. It wasn't so focused on gossip as it was back at the house. She found herself admiring the Countess as the meal went on. She didn't look as worn from the stress as Freyja did, and it made her wonder just how often her husband and son had gone off to war. Was this something routine to her, or was she simply stronger than Freyja?

The three of them left the café and headed to an oval-shaped building. Freyja was in awe with how many people fit inside it. They were guided by one of the staff to a set of stairs, and they climbed two floors before they were finally at their seats. Freyja gaped at the view. They were on a second row of balcony boxes, and beneath them were rows upon rows of seats surrounding the stage. Heavy blue curtains hung on the stage, blocking out whatever awaited for them. And all the people, they were all so wonderfully dressed. There were women with ridiculously large dresses with high collars that fanned out like peacock tails, men with feathered hats, and so many jewels hanging around the necks and wrists of the attendants that their glimmering in the light made it appear like a stained-glass window.

The show started, and Freyja was immediately enthralled. The costumes were vibrant and elaborate, the voices adorning strange accents even for Englishmen, and the acting was over the top. She managed to follow the story, a dramatic tale of a disgraced emperor who was fighting his way back to the top after being exiled by his people. Freyja couldn't take her eyes off the stage, other than a couple of brief glances to Jane and Catherine to see if they were just as invested as she was. Thankfully, it appeared as though they were.

The show ended in a standing ovation, and then they were guided out of the theatre before the masses were released to flood the corridors and sidewalk. “What a wonderful show,” Catherine stated as they climbed into the carriage. “Freyja, did you enjoy yourself?”

“Very much,” she answered immediately with an excited nod of her head. “I’ve never been to a play before. It was wonderful.”

The smile on the Countess’s face was so radiant then. “Good, I am glad to hear it. Perhaps we can go again soon. After all, it’s so important to keep your mind busy at times like this.”

Freyja’s heart squeezed, realizing then that she had only wanted it to be them because they were the ones waiting for their men to return from war. It wasn’t about spending time as a family, it was about occupying themselves so that they didn’t waste away in the manor.

Before she could come up with anything to say, Catherine looked to her with her grin growing sheepish and small. “I must admit, Freyja, that I have been hesitant to be close to you because of my husband. He isn’t agreeable to the Scottish, I suppose for good reason. But I can tell from the time you’ve been here that you truly care for my son and you’re a gentle, kind soul. For those reasons, you have my approval and welcome to our home.”

Freyja blushed and placed a hand on her chest to calm her beating heart. “That means a lot to me, Countess. Thank ye.”

“No need for thanks,” Catherine stated with a wave of her hand. “My son choosing a pleasant young lady to be with is comfort enough.” The rest of the ride home was in relative silence. When they stopped, Catherine spoke up again before anyone else. “Well now, I shall be getting to bed. I look forward to you both joining me at church tomorrow.”

The Countess exited as Freyja’s heart plummeted to her stomach. *Church?* Freyja hadn’t intended on going to church...*ever*. She might be willing to dress as a British Lady

and learn their manners and customs, but church felt like it was crossing the line.

A hand rested on hers, making her flinch. Jane was peering over to her with concerned eyes and a sad sort of smile. “I... I...” Freyja stammered. “I donnae know if I can do this,” she whispered. “My family... I...”

“I understand,” Jane pressed. “This isn’t within your culture. But you must remember, church is a very important part of British life.” When Freyja still didn’t relax, Jane added, “Think of it as...as observing another culture! No one is expecting you to worship like we do, but just follow the lead and join in song. It will mean so much to my parents, I just know it.”

She was right—going to church didn’t mean that she was abandoning her own religion or ways of life. She nodded to Jane, who gave her a hug and then led the way inside. Freyja returned to her bedchamber but couldn’t bring herself to lay down. Pacing around the room, she repeated Jane’s words to herself internally. It really wasn’t such a big deal—but why did it *feel* like one?

What was going on back in Kilmar? Had the church been built? Was her family attending it now? Had they abandoned their ways like they planned, or had they experienced a change of heart? If they did, what did that mean for them? Had they been witch-hunted? If so, what did that mean for Cadha’s baby? Were they alright?

The walls of the expansive room suddenly started to feel as though they were closing in on her. Her bodice felt too tight, causing her breathing to grow ragged and uneven. The room was *hot*—had it always been so hot in there? What was going on with her?

By the time the rest of the manor had fallen silent and still, Freyja knew that she had to get out of there. It wasn’t as though she were running away, but she needed *out*. Hurrying through the house with footsteps as light as she could manage, she slipped out of the manor and around the side of the house. She didn’t quite know where she was going, nor did she give it

much thought, as her mind was busied with concentrating on pulling in large, deep breaths to soothe her edged nerves.

It was without thought that she found herself nearing the stables. Perhaps it was a need to be with animals again, having always found them to be particularly centering. When she spotted the familiar jet-black horse with the white spot on his forehead, she pondered if it had been this horse, her father's horse, luring her there. Tears stung her eyes as she watched him graze in his stall. Thomas had picked out this horse at her father's insistence when they were leaving Kilnmar, but they'd had to leave it with the men traveling on foot while they'd taken the ship. When had he arrived? Today? The day before? Oh, it didn't matter, she was just grateful to see him.

*Tartan, a friend away from home.*

"Miss? Is everything all right?" the stable worker questioned her, stepping into her view of Tartan.

"A-ay," she muttered and looked him over. He was a young thing, perhaps not even a man yet. "I would like to take that horse for a ride," she told him as confidently as she could, pointing to Tartan.

The young boy looked between her and the horse. "Don't think I'm meant to allow that, Miss. Horses are meant to stay in the stable after sunset."

Freyja bit her lip and tried to think of what to do. She felt so desperate to have some time with Tartan, thinking it would give her a moment to feel herself again rather than the person that Thomas's family was urging her to turn into. Feeling the coins she had kept in her pocket since Thomas left, she withdrew one and offered it to the boy. "Would this change yer mind?"

It felt wrong to bribe someone, but it was worth a gold shilling to be with her family horse. The boy looked down at the gold coin and back up to her with brilliant eyes. "Yes, ma'am," he said and opened the gate for her. He went about putting a saddle on him as Freyja approached the horse and stroked his snout.

Oh, she could weep. Tartan leaned into her touch, and she laid her cheek against his snout. Even though she had never considered the horses siblings, right then it felt like being reunited with a brother. “It’s good to see ye, Tartan,” she whispered to him.

“All ready, Miss,” the boy said. Freyja pulled back from Tartan and noticed he was saddled and had a blanket underneath it to keep the chill off him. “The Countess and all else should be asleep by now, so you’re welcome to take your time. Just be sure to stay within the grounds.”

Freyja nodded and managed to mount the horse herself. The stableboy guided her out of the building, and as soon as she was out in the dark of night, Freyja hugged his neck. “I cannae tell ye how good it is to see ye,” she whispered.

After having her moment, she gave him a gentle nudge with her heel to urge him into motion. Within moments, they were soaring over the emerald hills. The moon, still nearly full but not quite, guided their journey. The wind whipped across her cheeks and blew her hair all around. The crisp evening air filled her lungs, and her eyes feasted on the starry sky and beautiful trees and hills.

There, with Tartan, in the dark of the night, Freyja could make believe rather easily that she were back in Scotland. She felt *herself* for the first time in weeks. Wild, free, and one with her surroundings. It was absolutely glorious, lifting her heart from the depths of discontent it had been in that evening. For the time being, nothing else existed in that moment. It was just herself, Tartan, and the countryside that she pretended to be Scotland.

It was the best remedy she could have ever thought of for her aching heart. She wanted the night to never end, to ride around with Tartan until Thomas’s safe return, to make believe she was back in Scotland for as long as possible.

Yet, her make-believe world was short-lived after all. As she came to an overlook, she was reminded that she was in England, living with Thomas’s family. The manor was in sight, not a single candle or fire lit within. It was there she

would have to continue to stuff herself inside massive dresses and hold her shoulders back and chin in such a way so that she appeared elegant and polite yet not at all imposing. And would attend the Church of the religion which had run her out of her home for no other reason but to win favor with Thomas's parents.

It all felt too much, too much to ask and to sacrifice. For a moment, she longed to take Tartan's reins and follow the northern star back home. How long would it take her? Did it even matter? At least back there, she could run into her family's arms and hold them tightly one more time, sip tea made from herbs from their own garden, and spend her days with her toes in the moss without shame. Not to mention heal with her hands—

No, she wouldn't be able to. Back home was facing the same sort of religious restrictions as she was here. Nothing at all would be different if she were at home, other than she would be plagued with wonder if she had done the right thing by letting Thomas get away again. She would be idle, playing a role that she didn't believe in, and thinking of her love still.

It was a strange, bittersweet moment. Once again, Freyja felt sure in where she was and what she was doing. Even if it didn't feel right in that moment, she had to trust that it would eventually work out.

With a great deal of sadness and reluctance, Freyja made her way back toward the stable. She trotted along, in no rush to return Tartan. Even if she had managed to clear her head and get the perspective she had been so desperate for, it didn't make her any more prepared to part ways with her beloved horse right then.

It was quite some time later when she finally peeled herself away from Tartan and made her way back to the manor. At last, she felt as though she could breathe evenly and could feel the exhaustion of the day starting to creep up on her.

She pattered her way down the corridor, heading for the foyer. Before she could turn the corner, however, a voice

suddenly sounded and made her nearly jump out of her skin. “Out for a midnight stroll, Freyja?”

The young woman didn’t have to turn and face the person to place the voice as that belonging to Christabell, the more unsavory of the cousins. “Just...getting some air,” Freyja murmured, standing perfectly still.

“Don’t you know, dear girl? It’s incredibly un-ladylike to go out after dark, particularly alone,” Christabell informed her, her footsteps growing ever closer as she spoke. “Then again, you aren’t exactly a *lady*, are you? How can I hold you to such a standard?”

There was something about the way she said *lady* that made Freyja think that she wasn’t only referring to her class.

“Better hurry along now, Freyja. Before people find you out of place...”

She didn’t bother hesitating to rush forward, moving for the stairs. There was something so insidious and ominous about Christabell’s tone, and it wasn’t something that Freyja was willing to shake as her misreading the situation. No, that interaction, no matter how brief it might have been, was purposeful. Not only was Christabell awake at such an hour, but it was clear that she had been lying in wait for Freyja. After all, why was she on the first floor? And without any candle to guide her way?

The bedchamber door shut behind her, and Freyja’s eyes frantically searched about the dim room. Something didn’t feel right, it was as though she could *feel* that Christabell had been in there again. She just *knew* she had.

Without wasting another moment, Freyja hurried toward her bed and flipped up the blankets hanging off the side of the bed to pull out her family trunk. She rifled through the items, unsure of what she was looking for but just knew something had to have been out of place or missing.

*Missing.*

It only took but a couple of minutes for Freyja to realize that from her collection of journals, passed down from

matriarch to matriarch within her family, one was missing. There had always been eight in her trunk, but now there was only seven. She counted them again and again until she was sure to drive herself insane if she were to count them one more time. Seven. There were only seven.

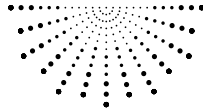
One of her grandmother's precious journals, detailing all the remedies, practices, and beliefs of the ways of Cailleach women, was gone.

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## WHAT'S THE POINT OF WAR



Thomas flattened his back against one of the stone walls and allowed himself to slowly sink down it as his breath rattled in his throat. Cannons and muskets could be heard from all around, but for right then, Thomas was in no better place for a Captain to be.

His eyes fell on the throne. It had to have been at least six yards away, but his proximity to it didn't matter. All that mattered was that he and dear Edmund had managed to break through the rebellion line defending the throne room, and together they were holding the location until more reinforcements could join them. There was a bit of ceiling missing, no doubt from a stray cannonball, but it let in a glorious ray of light which illuminated the tufted, polished chair.

It was a moment just like this which he thought would have flooded him with satisfaction and patriotism, that it would have seemed as though his entire life were snapping into focus because at last, he had done something worthwhile. And yet, as he studied the carved arm rests and immaculate fabric to the cushions adorned on the throne, he felt...the same. The same as he had before they overwhelmed the final guard to the throne room, the same as when they first arrived in Whitehall, and the same as when he first rode away from his family home. It was all just another step closer in getting him back to Freyja and another stepping stone on their journey to a long life together.

“You’re awfully quiet,” Edmund commented. Thomas peered up to see him biting open a pouch of gunpowder before pouring it down the barrel of his musket.

“A lot on my mind,” Thomas mused and began to reload his own weapon. “What of you? Haven’t heard you say much today either.”

“Well, when I’m not getting shot at or a blade swung in my face,” Edmund began with a humorous tone while he used the ramrod to secure the little tuff of cotton needed for the firearm, “I’m thinking of my Cecilia.”

Thomas cracked a smile then, looking over to his friend, who had a face smeared with gunpowder and soot, an arm bandaged from a graze of shrapnel, and teeth stained with wine as it was all they were down to at that point in the mission. Cecilia, as Thomas had learned, was a young woman that Edmund had grown fond of during their short time back in England. A woman he had promised to marry if he returned from that mission.

“Really going to make an honest man out of yourself?” Thomas queried with a light chuckle.

“For her, of course,” Edmund grinned. “And what about you? When are you going to tie your *war bride* down?”

Thomas wasn’t sure whether he should smile or frown at the question. If he had it his way, he would marry Freyja as soon as he returned home. However, he knew it wasn’t that simple because of his ridiculous father. And if his father was ever to be won over, Thomas had to do more than just take the throne room.

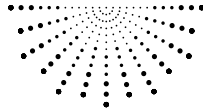
“As soon as possible,” he replied and then got to his feet. “Come now, there’s more to do.”

“Like what?” Edmund snorted.

Thomas stood at a window and aimed his barrel down to the gates of the palace, ready to fire at a man not in royal uniform. “A battle to win, Ed.”

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## BETRAYED



Attending church certainly didn't bother Freyja as much as she initially thought it would. But it wasn't because of the welcoming smiles or uplifting songs. Rather, it was because she simply couldn't pay attention even if her life depended on it. Her entire mind was consumed by worry about her grandmother's journal and whether or not Christabell truly had it. There didn't seem to be another logical explanation for it missing in Freyja's mind, but it also felt rather awful to be so sure that Christabell had taken it without any proof. And Freyja didn't want to know what would happen if Christabell of all people found out she was a Cailleach woman.

"What a beautiful sermon," Catherine cooed as they returned to the manor after. "So wonderful, that priest of ours. I'm quite fond of his messages of love and kinship. Much different than the priest when you were just a girl, Jane. That man was all fire and brimstone. Was a rather large damper on a Sunday, if I do say so myself."

The Countess then paused and turned to Freyja with a warm smile that could have melted even the steeliest of hearts. "It truly means the world to me, dear Freyja, that you attended church today. Does my heart good to know that you are open to all aspects of British life, even if they are out of custom for you. And I hope, in time, I am able to repay the kindness."

Freyja blinked, completely caught off guard by the sentiment. Even if she had been prepared for something so heartfelt, she didn't think there would have ever been a circumstance that she would have been ready to hear such

words from the Countess. It had never once occurred to her that the Landrakes could be interested in her culture, and it went without saying that it would have to be expressed ‘one day’ because of the Earl.

“I would love to show ye the worship of my people,” she said as evenly as she could.

Catherine leaned in and gave each of Freyja’s cheeks a peck before she and Jane both went upstairs for a rest. It was something else of British Ladies that she didn’t quite understand, how they always seemed so tired after doing so little. Unable to cope with the thought of being locked away in her bedchamber with nothing more than her thoughts, Freyja headed outside to the garden. There she could enjoy the fresh air and continue her preparations for potions and healing teas for if anyone wounded from war arrived at the Landrake manor.

Sadly, however, not even the fresh herbs and bright blue sky were enough to comfort Freyja. She felt like pulling her hair out from the worry over what could have possibly come of her grandmother’s journal. And worse of all, she kept thinking back to when she had caught Christabell in her bedchamber and how she had wanted to look for missing things right then. What if the journal had been gone that entire time? No, no...that couldn’t be. Surely if she did take it, it had been the night before. Right?

Freyja wanted to weep, to scream, to do anything but stay locked inside those awful thoughts of hers. They were so bloody cyclical at that point that they were making her nauseous. And every so often, disrupting the rhythm of her thoughts would be worry for Thomas. What was going on at the Royal Palace? Was he well? And there, in the garden, for the first time since he left, Freyja found herself wondering what would come of her if he *didn’t* return. She felt so certain in his safety that she had never allowed herself to entertain such a concept, but with her grandmother’s journal gone... well, nothing quite seemed right. Not even her own beliefs.

“In the garden again, I see,” Christabell said as she neared Freyja. Her blood ran cold within an instant, but her gaze

didn't lift from the leaves of the plant she was inspecting, nor did she acknowledge Christabell vocally. "Always sneaking about, doing things you wish to do rather than what's expected of you...it's in your nature, isn't it?"

Freyja looked up, though perhaps *glared* would have been a better word to describe it. Christabell was smiling a wry smile that was too thin and too wide for her liking. "After all, that is the nature of a witch, isn't it?" Christabell queried. In the next moment, her hands moved from behind her back and sure enough, she was holding Freyja's family journal. "Missing this, aren't you?"

Freyja blinked away angry tears that dared to spring into her eyes and cleared her throat. "I beseech ye to return that to me. It's my property," she stated as sternly as she could.

"It sure is. I won't attest that," Christabell replied with a little giggle. "But wouldn't my aunt and uncle be *so* very fascinated to read the private writings of the woman whom has stolen my cousin's heart?" With flourish, Christabell opened the journal and began to rifle through the pages. Knowing the oils from her fingertips were on the same pages that her family had studied and worshiped much like a bible of their own, made Freyja violently nauseous. "Because you did *steal* it, didn't you? With one of your spells? Now, much of this is in a language I do not recognize—Gaelic, I'm guessing. But, the later pages...yes, those are rather clear, even despite the poor penmanship. Talk of herbs, vinegars, and even some bloods. All concocted to do your bidding."

Freyja shook her head side to side vehemently. "Please, do nae misunderstand. That book, and my family...we're healers. We are nae witches. All we do is use the land and our religion to bring relief and recovery to those around us."

"Save your explanations for the Earl," Christabell retorted with a bitter laughter. "Then again, I suppose your secret could be safe with me...on one condition."

Her stomach flipped, twisted, knotted, and any other motion it could. "What is that?"

Christabell wagged the book around, pacing in front of Freyja. “You see, Freyja, unlike my aunt and uncle, I don’t look down upon witchcraft. I don’t believe it to be *solely* the work of the devil. Rather, it can be done by those merely led astray—and my religion has taught me much about how people such as that can repent and be forgiven by God.” She was smirking then, her arms crossed with the journal dangling off her side. “Perhaps we can repent together, dear Freyja. After you help me with a little...issue I’m having.”

“What is yer price?” Freyja queried. “Please, tell me what it is ye want. Do nae drag this out any longer.”

“Very well, Freyja,” she nodded and stood right in front of her. “I will not show this to my Aunt and Uncle, nor breathe a word of it to anyone, so long as you make me a love potion to give to my dear Michael. He’s a marquis that I’m absolutely in love with, but I can’t be certain if he’s ever spared me more than a second glance. Once the battle is over with my uncle and cousin, I’m sure there will be festivities and it is there I will be able to slip him something to guarantee his affection—with your help, of course.”

She couldn’t believe that Christabell was so immature and conniving! Blackmailing her to get the love of a man that hardly knew she existed! Freyja did her best to tamper her frustrations as she pleaded with her. “Please understand, Christabell, I donae do *that* sort of magic. Like I said before, I’m a healer—”

“Oh, please, Freyja,” she snorted and shook her head. “You’re a witch, there’s no denying that.” She waved the journal around for emphasis. “And witches have love potions. So do not try and deny me. But if you do, that is your decision. You have until my uncle’s return to make such a decision. For as soon as he returns, I’ll be showing him what I found in your bedchamber. And even if he isn’t certain with just this...say, do you think you could actually hide that entire trunk? With all those vials of things and other journals? And get away with it, of course—because, I have my doubts.”

Freyja turned her back to Christabell so that she couldn’t see the tears falling from her eyes as the woman cruelly

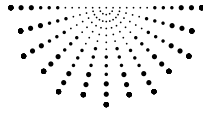


laughed, told her to think about it, and walked away. Freyja was in hot water; perhaps she and Thomas had been the King and Queen of fools to think that they could escape a witch hunt by running to England.

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# END OF BATTLE, BEGINNING OF THE FIGHT



## *A Week Later*

Ownership of the palace had been a give-and-take, it seemed, as some days it felt as though victory was right in Thomas's grasp and the next day defeat would seem imminent. It was maddening, disheartening, and ridiculous all at once.

At last, nearly an entire fortnight into battle, things appeared to be dying down. Cannons hadn't fired in hours, and it had been quite a while since he had seen anyone outside of the Royal Navy uniform move toward the palace.

With a signal from a scout by the gate, Thomas knew that it was over. The others had either retreated out of the Royal city or they had surrendered. With gusto filling his chest and glee consuming him knowing that it meant he could finally return home, Thomas hurried out of his lookout atop the castle and made his way through the building to find Edmund and other officers.

"We bloody did it!" some men shouted as he passed.

"Time to get the hell out of here!" another cheered.

"Yeah, unless you get stuck on the detail to make sure they don't come back," said another.

Thomas winced at the words and prayed his father wouldn't be so cruel as to force him to do such a detail. Then again, with how much the man hated Freyja, Thomas could see him doing just such a thing. Out on the steps of the palace, he waved down Edmund, who was across the way, and panned his gaze around. He wanted to groan when he saw his father

already approaching a line of carriages by the gate. Part of him wanted to avoid him altogether, as he had done most of the mission, but if he was going to find out that he was going to be stuck in Whitehall for another number of weeks, he wanted the news to come right from his father.

However, as he started down the stairs, he noticed a commotion by the gate. The world slowed at once, and it felt as though he saw every fraction of a second in great detail. The man in peasant garb raising his gun, the curses bubbling up his throat, taking aim at the first officer he saw in Navy uniform, and his father falling to the cobblestone path.

“No!” he shouted.

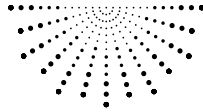
The world hadn’t sped back up as Thomas ran toward his father. Edmund and others were swarming the lone actor to arrest him, but all Thomas could truly see was the crimson color pooling on his father’s chest. It had been close-range musket fire to the chest. Hunching over his father’s form, he was horrified to see the scared look burning in the Earl’s eyes. No, not scared—*petrified*.

Examining the damage, Thomas felt a small flicker of hope that his father would make it. It might have been to the torso, but it hadn’t been the chest like he thought. It was his right side, just under the crook of his arm. He screamed for a medic, but he knew they wouldn’t do much but help him slow the bleeding.

No, what they needed to do was get him back to the family estate as soon as possible. Something in Thomas’s gut told him that Freyja would be his father’s only hope of recovering from the injury.

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## JUSTICE AND RELIEF



She couldn't wait any longer to confront Christabell. Every day for the past week, the woman had tortured Freyja with being on the cusp of telling Catherine *something*—whether it be telling her that Freyja was a witch or showing her the journal. Freyja couldn't even tell if Christabell was doing it solely to torment her or if it was her own unique way of applying pressure so that Freyja would fold and give in.

Either way, Freyja had had enough. No longer was she going to sit by and simply allow Christabell to torment her. If she wanted to see just what Freyja could do, then so be it.

As she approached the library, where Christabell was reading all alone after breakfast that morning, Freyja turned the vial in her hand round and round. A concoction of dandelion, licorice root, chamomile, and oil should set Christabell right. Well, at the very least, it would give her such a violent passage that she would know never to treat Freyja like that again.

“Christabell?” she called as she pattered forward. The cousin looked up from her book, her sharp nose angled downward and brow lowered. “I’ve given it some thought... yer offer. And...” Without another word, she showed her the little vial.

In a heartbeat, Christabell was on her feet and flying across the room and plucking the vial from her hands. “Really? Is this really it?”

Freyja nodded. “Ye can drink some now and every day leading up to seeing him. Then, if ye still wish to...influence him...” Her words were drawn out as she tried not to laugh. “Slip a drop into his drink.”

Christabell’s brow furrowed again. “Why do I have to drink it? I thought it was a love potion for *him*?”

It took all of her strength to maintain a straight face as she leveled her gaze with Christabell’s and replied, “It will allow what is within ye, to flow free.”

*Won’t be able to get off the pot for a couple hours after you drink even a swallow of this, poor girl.*

The cousin studied her closely and slowly nodded in understanding. “Wonderful, how absolutely wonderful,” she grinned. “I knew you would come around.”

Freyja nodded and cleared her throat. “Ay, well, I suppose I did. Now, if I could just get the journal—”

Christabell laughed sharply and loudly. “Oh, Freyja, you sweet, naïve thing. You’ll only get it back once I’m sure this potion works.”

“But—”

Christabell headed out of the library, vial in her grasp. Well, at least her being so awful and unable to be trusted at her word took the sting out of what Freyja should have been feeling right then. She had never been one for pranks and certainly never one to use an elixir for misdeeds, but she couldn’t help but feel as though Christabell had somewhat earned her so-called love potion that was actually a laxative.

When she caught herself giggling in the wake of the exchange, she shook her head and sat down for a moment. What in the world was coming over her? Was England turning her into someone that would use her knowledge of herbs and medicine for evil? *Was it evil?* Her head was hurting, and she just wanted it all to end, for *something* to be simple. For Thomas—

An excited screech perked Freyja up.

“A carriage is approaching! A carriage is approaching!” the Countess squealed.

Without a moment of hesitation, Freyja was on her feet and hurrying for the front door. Sure enough, there was a single carriage coming down the path. She didn't care to ask if it could really be them, as she had been around long enough to know what the Earl's carriage looked like.

When it parked and Thomas stepped out, Freyja nearly rushed forward to throw herself at him. However, she only got a step toward him before the pain in his face deflated her.

“Tom? What's going on?” the Countess urged and rushed ahead of Freyja. Something was very, very wrong. Freyja could sense it like the birds could the rain. Someone was hurt, and it wasn't Thomas.

In the next moment, the Countess wailed and a number of men emerged, carrying the Earl on a stretcher. Freyja's hand covered her mouth and looked to Thomas. Slowly, she approached and walked next to him as he explained to them both, “Father was shot right after the battle ended, some lone gunmen who had too much fight left in him I suppose. It's not looking well. He...he hasn't awoken since it happened.”

“I must call for the priest,” his mother cried and hurried up the stairs.

Freyja had more questions, though. “How long ago was he shot?”

“Two days. Took a day to get him stable enough to transport at all and another day to get here, since we couldn't rush about. Didn't want to jostle the old man too much,” he murmured. “And even if none of us can be of any help, I figured he at least deserved to die at home—”

His voice cracked, and that was all Freyja needed to hear to throw all care to the wind and wrap her arms around him. Thomas hugged her tightly, and she could feel his nostrils breathe in deeply atop her head. “I wanted this to be different,” he whispered. “Coming home to you.”



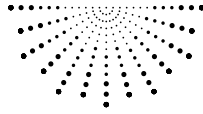
“It’s all right,” Freyja replied, her own voice weakened from emotion. Pulling back, she caressed his cheek. “We have a lifetime together. Go, be with your family.”

Thomas leaned forward and pressed a brief kiss to her lips, and then on he went up the stairs, following after the men tending to his father. Freyja waited a moment and then went to her bedchamber. Even though there should have been some sort of internal debate about what to do, Freyja knew the moment she learned that Richard was injured she was going to heal him. At that point, it was all a matter of waiting for the right time to do it. She would need a bit of privacy, though she would risk her safety and status if it meant that she healed him.

Perhaps it could all be coincidence or just an overabundance of caution, but Freyja couldn’t help but feel as though all the preparing she had done for the wounded was intuition guiding her to that moment, to healing him. It was fate—she could only hope that fate, as it were, was on her side.

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## HELP THY OPPONET



It was well into the night before Freyja could hear those who had come to pray with the family and the men tending to the Earl filter out of the house. Stepping out into the corridor of her room, she saw the Countess and Thomas coming down the stairs from the third floor, Thomas talking to her softly about getting her to eat something, even if she were upset. It was time—*now or never*.

Freyja, with her little satchel of elixirs and teas, hurried toward the next flight of stairs to make her way up to the Earl. She kept her footsteps light as she could but prioritized speed more than anything. There was no telling how long she would have before someone else went to visit the Earl, and she was going to need all the time possible to heal his wounds to the best of her abilities.

She had never been up to the third floor, but it was obvious based upon the flowers by the door which one Richard resided in. Taking a deep breath, she hesitated only for a moment before pressing her way in. Freyja knew crossing that threshold meant there was no coming back from her decision. She would heal him and risk being found out.

Closing the door quietly behind her, she took in the sight of the Earl laying in his bed. Never had she thought of the Earl as frail. He was large with a bit of a belly on him and had the most intense eyes Freyja thought she had ever seen. But there, laying so still and looking as pale as parchment, she was reminded of how mortal they all were. Even the terrifying Earl himself.

Sitting down in the wooden chair next to the bed, Freyja cleared her throat and spoke softly. “Good evening, Earl...I know ye may nae like me, but I’m here to help. I promise helping is all I am here to do. I’m going to get started now.”

Some might have found it strange to talk to the unconscious, but not her. It was more bizarre for her to heal someone without ever having addressed them first. It felt so impersonal to do such a thing. Clearing her thoughts, she gradually moved his sheets so she could get a good look at the wounds. It was a gnarly sight, and she had been right to prepare elixirs for pain relief and fever. Putting a little glass vial to his lips, she poured it into his mouth and carefully rubbed the front of his throat to get his body to swallow it. Once it was down, Freyja rolled up her sleeves and got to work.

It had been a few weeks since she had last healed anyone, and it felt like a lifetime ago, but it came to her so naturally. Freyja’s eyes closed, and her hands rested very gingerly on his wound. Clearing her head of everything else, she found her center and allowed herself to become one with the spirits and prayer. Her ancestors were all around her, the breath of the Earth moved through her, and the healing heat of light traveled down her arms and into her hands. Every so often, her hands would shift, but they only left him once she could sense the wounds were starting to close and she needed to rub an antiseptic ointment into his skin—then, she continued.

It could have been minutes or hours that she remained there, it was all the same to her. Even though it was rarely a joyous occasion for her to heal someone, the practice itself was something like a ‘happy place’ to her. It was serene and where she felt the most true to herself.

Then, there was a little groan. Freyja blinked and withdrew her hands quickly and dropped her satchel beneath her chair. With wide eyes, she watched as the Earl slowly stirred, and then his own eyes opened. At first, he peered about, dazed and confused, as though he wasn’t sure where he was. When he looked to Freyja, he became alarmed.

“What in God’s name—”

Those were all the words he got out. Freyja watched as he smacked his lips, clearly tasting something on his tongue. His brow furrowed, and he started to sit up. Freyja jolted her hands out to stop him, not wanting him to injure himself. The Earl looked down, seeing his gunshot wounds. They were still red, but they were closed and likely weren't hurting him nearly as badly.

"Healed...nearly," he murmured and rubbed his chin. "Judging by my shave, I doubt I've been out for more than a day or so..."

His gaze returned to her, and Freyja only stared back him. Not a word was said between them, as Freyja hadn't any clue what to say at a time like that. But there was a tension to the air and a gleam in Richard's brown eyes that Freyja couldn't shake. He was piecing it all together. He knew what she had done, he somehow knew what she was, and all she could do was wait for his judgement to cast down upon her.

After what felt like a millennium, Richard spoke again, his eyes locked onto hers firmly. "Don't breathe a word of what happened here to anyone. Do I make myself clear?" Freyja nodded, and he did too. "Good girl. Now, go on before someone comes."

He settled back into the mattress, and Freyja ensured he was comfortable before she grabbed her satchel and went on her way. She hadn't so much as made it to the staircase before she heard a hissed, "*You!*"

Turning, she witnessed a sweat-coated Christabell standing on the other side of the hall, her round eyes fixed on Freyja. She had to bite down on the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. It was clear from the greenish tint to her skin and all the sweat that Freyja's laxative treatment had, in fact, worked.

"You lied to me! You tricked me!" she hissed.

Freyja shook her head. "Nay. I said what I gave ye would help what was inside flow free."

"Now you're getting cheeky?!" Christabell shrieked.

“Please, keep it down,” Freyja urged. “Yer uncle is resting just down the hall.”

“He shan’t be resting much longer,” Christabell huffed. “I’m showing him your bloody journal and telling him what you’ve done—”

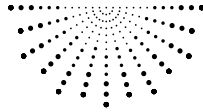
Freyja didn’t bother to waste her breath on explaining to Christabell the Earl was weak and needed his rest. If she dared to disturb him, the Earl was just well enough to put her in her place. “Then do it,” Freyja snapped. “Go on. Tell him.”

She pivoted on her heel and headed down the stairs, leaving Christabell standing there, gobsmacked. Her heart was thumping against the walls of her chest with every step she took, but she felt good. For the first time since her arrival, Freyja was confident in her place within the manor.

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## MORNING REJOICE



Thomas's heart was practically bursting at the seams the following morning. Joy and glee wafted through the Landrake manor for what felt like the first time in his life. The Earl was awake and even well enough to sit up in his bed and have a meal of porridge. He had seen it for himself though hadn't waited around long enough to speak with his father. His mother was so overjoyed and hadn't seen him in weeks, so it felt only right to give them a bit of privacy. Besides, he had other business to attend to.

Rapping on Freyja's bedchamber door briefly, he allowed himself in and closed it behind him. She was across the room, sat in an armchair, looking through a journal of hers. With a smile on his face, he approached and extended a gift box in her direction. "I have something for you."

Freyja looked up and narrowed her eyes at him before taking the box. "Ye didnae have to get me a thing. Ye were at war, ye know."

"I know," he chuckled. "Go on, open it."

Freyja pulled at the twine and unfolded the brown paper to reveal a journal of her own. Her jaw dropped and face lifted to him.

"I figured it is past time for you to start adding to that collection of yours."

Freyja stood and threw her arms around his neck, and they shared a deep, passionate kiss—the kiss which he had been



thinking of giving her since the moment he left. “That’s too kind,” she breathed. “Thank ye.”

“I think it’s I who should be thinking you,” Thomas said as she pulled away to look at her journal. “Or am I to think it was another angel who healed my father enough in the course of one night that he’s up and eating breakfast?”

Freyja gave a little shrug and shot him a playful glance. “I’m afraid I’ve been told nae to say a word.”

“Very well,” he grinned. He was just about to pull her in for another kiss when there was a knock at the door. He stood apart from her and called to the person. It was a servant, and they were both being summoned by his father.

With Freyja on his arm, they moved through the house together and reached his father’s bedchamber to find him sat up, smiling and holding his wife’s hand. “Thomas,” his father greeted. “It’s good to see you.”

“Father,” he replied with a bow of his head.

The Earl cleared his throat. “Now, I want to get right to the point, as I know these sort of things are uncomfortable for us both. But...I...well...” He cleared his throat again and lifted his gaze to meet Thomas’s. “I want you to know I’m proud of you. You’re not just a bloody good soldier or Captain, you’re a good son too. And I’m sorry for the ill way I’ve treated you... to you *both*.”

Thomas was gobsmacked, rendered completely silent by the sheer shock of the words. He supposed that a near-death experience could alter even the most stubborn of men, but he hadn’t expected his father’s profound change of heart. “Thank you, Father,” he said in a breath, as it was all he could muster.

“No need to thank me,” he replied, batting away the kind words. “I shall arrange this wedding of yours to happen next Sunday. That is, if you are both ready for such a step? The priest will arrive later, and we shall set it in motion.”

Thomas felt the urge to have Freyja pinch him because he had to be dreaming, but if he was, he didn’t want to wake. “Of...of course,” Thomas blanched and looked to Freyja, who

gave an excited nod. “I have to say, Father, I’m a little speechless. You weren’t at all in agreement with our union—”

“A dying man may change his mind,” the Earl interjected sternly. “Don’t question it, boy. Just accept it.”

Thomas smiled back and nodded, his heart all aflutter. “This is fantastic news. I’m sure that Jane and my cousins will be eager to lend a hand in the preparations. You as well, mother?”

“Of course,” the Countess grinned. “I couldn’t be more thrilled.”

“I’m certain Jane will share the enthusiasm, but your cousins will not be attending the wedding. In fact, they’ve been ordered to leave this very morn and not return,” the Earl informed them.

“Pray tell why?” Thomas asked. He was happy to hear such a thing, as the pair had always been a headache, but he’d been under the impression his father felt differently.

“I’m in no mood for busybodies spreading rumors,” the Earl said. “Which reminds me, I believe this belongs to your betrothed.”

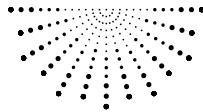
He held out a journal, and it only took a glance for Thomas to recognize it as one of Freyja’s family books. It had the same cow-hide cover and single band of leather keeping it closed. His eyes widened as he reached out to take it. The father and son held a long, long gaze.

The Earl was aware that Freyja was a ‘witch’, but not only was he accepting, he was willing to protect her. Thomas wasn’t sure exactly what had transpired or how his father obtained the journal, but he knew his cousins were involved and his father had taken *Freyja’s side*.

His father gave them both the most pure smile Thomas had ever seen on his father’s lips. “Go on now, you have a wedding to plan.”

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# VOWS AND VIOLINS



## *A Week Later*

“**Y**ou look like a vision,” Jane whispered to Freyja as she finished braiding the final stands of hair that completed her updo.

For the first time since she started wearing English garb, Freyja felt herself. The gown they had made for her wedding day was emerald with fitted sleeves and a straight neckline that went shoulder to shoulder. And most wonderfully of all, Matilda had worked pieces of tartan fabric into the bodice. It felt like a touch of home in the new identity she would soon assume.

*Lady Freyja Landrake.* How very peculiar, yet wonderful.

The two women hugged and held one another at arm’s length as they drank in the moment. It was bittersweet to be there with Jane. She was so honored to be gaining Jane as a sister, but she so wished Cadha and her mother were there with her to help her ready for the wedding. But that was alright. She was sure one day she and Thomas would travel back to Scotland, and they could have a celebration with her own family as well.

And just like that, they were on their way to the ceremony. The wedding was at the Landrake estate, and the guests and altar were situated in the garden—Freyja couldn’t think of a better place for it to be.

Richard was waiting by the door to the garden, a kind smile on his face. It was so good to see him up and moving

around but even better to be looked at with kindness by him. “I know I’m not your father,” he said with a clearing of his throat. “But I thought it appropriate to offer you my arm to walk down the aisle.”

Freyja felt a wave of emotion come over her, so touched by the gesture. While she knew that she had only won his favor because of her healing, that didn’t matter. All that mattered was he was willing to let her be with Thomas, and he was even content with the decision.

“I’d be honored,” she breathed in reply.

Giving Jane a shy glance, the young woman nodded excitedly and passed her on to the Earl. With a look between the two of them and a confirming nod, they walked through and headed for the garden. The sweet waning of a violin carried in the breeze just as the smell of heather and lavender.

The crowd came into view, and a deep blush started to set into Freyja’s cheeks, but then her gaze fell on Thomas. There, standing with the priest, was her beloved, dressed in cream breeches and blouse with an emerald vest that matched her dress. He was watching her with glistening eyes and a tender smile. Locking eyes with him, it was as though she floated the rest of the way. Her mind hardly registered the exchange of hands from Richard to Thomas, her entire mind consumed with her beloved. Her throat ran dry when she noticed that his cravat was tartan—to honor her and where she came from.

The priest gave the sermon and then talked them through their vows, and Freyja spoke when directed, but the rest of the time was spent lost in his chocolate eyes. How wonderful it was to be so in love with a man that it took the sting out of everything else. Being married in a religion she didn’t believe in, being so far from home, all of it. None of it bothered her as she stood there, hand in hand with Thomas, and exchanged rings and solemn promises.

Then, Thomas kissed her, more sweet and beautifully than he’d ever had. She could feel the pride in his lips and his knowing that he was the only man to ever lock lips with her and would remain the only one until their dying days. The

crowd cheered, and Thomas guided her down the aisle and toward the house. Her heart was beating and singing all at once.

Never would she have thought her wedding would have been such a lavish affair. Weddings back home were a simple event, filled with dancing, food, ale, and not much else. But there were fresh flowers overflowing at every table in the ballroom of the Landrake manor, an entire band in attendance to play just for them, ribbons, tapestries, and so much more decorating every pillar and entryway. And the food and wine! They could feed the entire town with all that was there!

It was a blissful blur to Freyja, as she had even allowed herself just a little too much wine so that it took the edge off her nerves so she could fully enjoy herself. Then again, it was impossible to wear anything but a smile as she danced the day away with her beloved Thomas—*her husband*. It had been only an hour ago that the priest had made them man and wife, but Freyja was almost certain that it would never feel real to her that she was married to her British Captain. The man of her dreams.

Even that boring-as-could-be dance Jane had taught her some time ago was a lively affair with Thomas, as she couldn't get enough of his smile or his touch. "I think you're a better dancer than I," he said in her ear as they finally stepped off the dance floor.

"Ye have Jane to thank for that," she giggled.

People approached them in droves, congratulating them, hugging, and kissing cheeks. When she saw Edmund and a woman on his arm approach, Freyja thought she couldn't be more pleased to see anyone else in attendance—besides her own family, of course. After all, Edmund had helped smuggle her into the country and been a true confidante to Thomas during that time.

The woman on his arm was introduced as his betrothed, Cecilia. The blonde gave a wide smile and tossed her arms around Freyja in an enthusiastic hug. "Congratulations, dear Freyja!" she cheered. Then she kissed both of Freyja's cheeks.

Just before she pulled away, Freyja heard her whisper, “I know what you are.”

The smile that had been a permanent fixture on Freyja’s face the past week faltered slightly. What...what had she meant by that? But she hadn’t any time to think on it, as she was pulled away to meet more cousins, aunts, and uncles. The words burned in the back of her head.

And yet, when Thomas looked in her eyes and requested another dance, it all vanished. Once again, the connection she shared with her beloved allowed her a feeling of deep peace that nothing or no one could take away. As if she could forever rest in his arms.

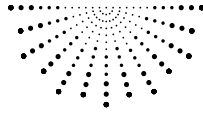
THE END

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