



THE
SECOND
RULE OF
TIME
TRAVEL



IT'S
NOT
FOR THE
TIMID

From the author of *Kaitlyn* and *the Highlander*

DIANA KNIGHTLEY

*The Second Rule of Time
Travel*

IT'S NOT FOR THE TIMID

THE RULES OF TIME TRAVEL

BOOK TWO

DIANA KNIGHTLEY

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 Created with Vellum

*For my ancestors who fought and survived and loved... so I
could make up stories about fighting and survival and deep,
deep love*

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Chapter 1 - Livvy



Nor's voice in my head, *I love ye, Livvy.*
I love you too, Your Grace.

Are ye well?

Wait—

Nor wasn't here, this was... I had just jumped.

Ugh.

Was I well?

I checked in with my feet and my fingers. All there.

The sun was beating down on me, brutally, a bit of sweat rolled down my temple. I groaned and with monumental effort, flipped over. Yep, I was on a beach, now I was staring up at a blinding sun.

I twisted to look around, wallowing in the sand, until I saw the lump of my brother. "Charlie?"

He groaned. "What the hell was that?"

"Told you."

He pulled up to sitting and brushed sand from his hair. "It's hot as hell out here, where are we?" His gaze looked unfocused as he looked around. "We're on the same beach, this is good."

I pulled myself up to look around. "Yeah, but the weather is different."

"...and why aren't Lou and Junior here?"

We both looked around at the horizon. I stared blankly, barely computing the ocean, sky, sand.

He reached for his phone, groaning. “It hurts, everything freaking hurts.”

“Yep.”

He looked down at the screen blinking. “Okay, wait, it says that it’s... hold on.” He shook it. “It’s got nothing.” He held the phone up to his ear.

“Damn it, I don’t think... we are not in the right...” I looked left and right. “The beach house is there, same beach house, but look, Charlie, the big mansion isn’t there.”

“Well, either something terrible has happened, or we are in the wrong time.” He shook his phone again and pressed his finger to the screen. “We must be in the past, because my phone is useless.”

I pulled my phone from my pocket to corroborate, it was doing nothing: no date, no time, nothing. I put it up to my ear too, as if that would somehow help. It didn’t. There was no sound.

I pulled my notebook from my bag and made a few stupid notes:

Weather is hot.

Mansion is gone.

We are in Fernandina but have no idea what day it is.

Phone doesn’t work.

Charlie said, “To state the obvious. We are not when Lou and Junior are supposed to pick us up.”

“Yep. We have done something wrong.”

He lumbered up and staggered to the dunes and stood there scanning the landscape. “No walkway either, this whole place looks much older.”

“What do we do? I mean, we need to...” I tried to focus, my brain roared — I had taken Charlie time-traveling and had

somehow screwed it up. What were we going to do?

I stood and brushed sand off my pants, my shirt, my hair.

Charlie and I dragged our gear over the dunes and into the shade of a small tree, basically a bush. I plucked the front of my shirt off my damp skin. “So freaking hot.”

He said, “We need to walk to the corner store, figure out what the date is.”

“Do you think it’s there? Wait... don’t answer that... that’s too freaky.”

We left our stuff there in the shade and began the trudge of two miles to the convenience store on the corner of Fletcher and A1A.



A line of cars passed heading north. Charlie said, “I don’t like the looks of those cars, they look like Burt Reynolds would drive them in one of those old movies on TNT, those are classics. We’re in the time of classics.”

I was so irritated and upset I could barely feign concern. “*Or* there’s a vintage car show.”

He scoffed. “Look around, brainiac, this is the olden days. At least ten years ago.”

“Shhhh, I know, I see it, I just don’t want to admit it.”

“We can get back though, right? I mean we have the portal. Yeah, of course, of course we can.”

When I didn’t answer he said again, “Right?”

I said, “Yeah, right, of course, we have the portal. I just got the numbers wrong, somehow.”

We were bedraggled when we came upon the store, the windows boarded up, a bunch of vintage cars and trucks out front, a line out the door.

The vehicles looked packed up, like everyone was going on a trip.

We got into line, and waited to go in. I whispered, “Ask that guy what the date is.”

Charlie whispered back, “I will, I just can’t think of a good way to ask it. Why the heck are so many people shopping at this... uh oh.” A dude walked out with two cases of beer. Another guy walked out with a case of beer, two bags of ice on his shoulder.

He said, “It’s almost like hurricane prep, wonder what’s going on? Can you think of a way to ask someone?”

“Not without sounding like an idiot.”

We made it into the packed store.

I looked for a newspaper while Charlie beelined toward the snacks, saying, “I’m grabbing some packages for collectibles.” Then muttering, “Man, this sucks, they’ve been picked through.”

He rifled through the candy bars and chip bags selecting from what was left. Then calling out, “Ooooh, look! Action figures!” He wandered over to the gift section and called over to me, “We should go to a toy store, we could make a fortune.”

I grabbed the top newspaper off a pile and asked the lady. “Is this the current, *today’s* newspaper?”

Her eyes narrowed. “That’s the NewsLeader, comes out on Wednesday.”

“So this is... how many days old?”

She huffed. “Today, came out today.”

I counted. Then asked, “So today is September 20, 1989?”

She grunted. “Yeah, of course.”

Charlie pushed ahead of line and put an armful of stuff on the counter. “Sorry, hold on, my arms are full, I’ll wait my turn, let me grab more — you got your wallet, Livvy?”

I whispered, “No cards, right?”

“Oh right, yeah, cash... I have a little.”

“Good, but don’t you think we ought to be cautious? We don’t, um... know how long it needs to last. And look...” I pointed at the front page, at the story about Hurricane Hugo bearing down on the coast.

“Oh, crap. Shit, right. Yeah.” He looked over the pile and plucked out two things. “I can come back for these when we get this figured out.”

Three more people went through the line, then the woman began ringing us up. Charlie pulled out his wallet.

He opened it and showed me and mouthed, “New bills.”

I said, “Uh oh.”

He said to the cashier, “I just realized I forgot my cash,” he shoved the stuff to the side. “Just ring up this bottle of New Coke.”

She asked, “You’re here on vacation? Not evacuating? Landfall is expected tomorrow, better batten down the hatches.”

I mumbled, “Yeah, vacation, just... battening them down.”



We left the store, my fear rising.

It wasn’t that I was afraid of the surroundings, the world looked modern enough. I understood everything, thankfully, but we had the wrong cash... What if the cashier had noticed the wrong date on the money? I could have been busted for counterfeiting.

How did I get the numbers so wrong? And could we get back?

As we trudged along the side of the road I thought of how much could have gone wrong, *what if we had landed in Hugo’s path?*

We wouldn't even have known what hit us before we — I gulped.

I looked around at the sky, high and blue, little bits of tufts of white clouds to the south. “Man, we were lucky the weather was good. We could have drowned in a storm surge.”

Charlie asked, “So given the date, what do you think you did wrong?”

I shook my head. “Exactly, that's what's freaking me out, what do I think I did wrong? I can't time-jump with my little brother and not get the dates right. I would never forgive myself if something went really wrong.”

“Yep. Should have checked the numbers.”

“I did, I thought I did. I checked and rechecked the numbers, and as you know I got them wrong. If you have the wrong hypothesis you know that you can check all you want; until you get data, it's still wrong.”

“So what's your new data?”

I sighed. “Pretty sure I got the numbers wrong.”

He said, “Well... at least we're in the right place. Not *all* your numbers were wrong.”

I said, “...and at least we weren't greeted by dinosaurs.”

“Good news abounds as Birdie would say.”

“It's hard to believe any of this is good news.”

We crossed the road, headed toward the beach. Charlie asked, “How old is Lou right now, you think?”

“Shoot, about forty-five, right? It would be fun to see him and Birdie, Mom and Dad would be about twenty-five? Not sure I want to meet mom at the same age as me.”

“Like Back to the Future.”

I sighed. “I thought that story was supposed to be fiction.”

We came to the sand, crossed the dunes, and sat down in the shade by our gear. I opened the cooler and passed us each a drink. Charlie fussily put his bottle of New Coke into the cooler, laughing, “I wanted to get a bunch of collectibles and all I got was this one bottle of New Coke. Don’t break it, it’s going to be my moneymaker.”

“We should have bought lotto tickets.”

“With no research at all, it would be just a dude buying lotto tickets with the change in his pockets. How the hell did anyone get anything done back here in the dark ages without Google?”

“Now that I’ve actually *been* in the dark ages this is not so bad, at least there are cars and—”

“There are no phones, Livvy, it’s effed up.”

I pulled my small notebook from my bag and flipped to the page with my deliberations on it. “Okay, let’s see this is...” I looked at the string of numbers and then wrote down the current date.

Charlie watched over my shoulder as I wrote. He said, “Oh, I see what you did — you got that number turned around.”

I nodded. “*Possibly*, but why is it in the middle of the code and what does this triangle mean? Do you know? This thing that looks like a square, why is it there? How did that small mistake mean we’re twenty-three years out of time? That doesn’t seem right.”

“Makes this *way* more dangerous.”

“So dangerous. We’re hours away from Hugo landfall. But what if the hurricane had been full-force, right here?”

“Or what if we had landed in the middle of a crowded Spring Break?”

“Or surrounded by murderous assholes with guns? Or what if someone had stolen our portal before we even woke... my stomach hurts, what were we thinking?”

“You think someone could have come up while we were unconscious...?”

“Yeah, every jump Nor and I have done so far involved a murderous asshole there to greet us.”

He grinned. “Then we were lucky.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, suppose you’re right, but how long will our luck hold out?”

He shifted his backpack closer to his feet. “Junior and Lou will be there when we get back. The important question now is *can* we get back?”

I made some changes in the symbols on the portal and looked back and forth at the guide chart I had made. I showed him my calculations. “This seems right, doesn’t it?”

He looked at it. “I mean yeah, it does, but what do I know? And you didn’t answer me, we can get back, right?”

“I hope so, I don’t want to be stuck here the same age as mom and dad.”

He said, “Yeah, me neither, I don’t want to jump again but I want to get the hell out of here.”

I dug through our bag for some vitamin-C packs and tossed one to him. “Let’s drink some vitamins and rest first, then we’ll try.”

Chapter 2 - the Duke



SOME TIME IN THE 22ND CENTURY
RIAGHALBANE

I had landed again from a jump and was pullin' m'self up from the agonizing stupor, and tryin' tae raise m'soul up from the mortal despair. How would I escape from Johnne's torment when I dinna ken the date?

The land looked much like Scotland.

I was accompanied by soldiers, by military vehicles, and a great many weapons. Johnne Cambell stood above me, sneering down. "Yer Grace decided tae awaken?"

I grunted.

Then I lumbered tae m'feet and stood before him.

He looked different, his hair was long and filthy. His uniform unkempt, he looked like a man who was losin'. And there was an apprehension in his eyes.

I set my jaw, and glared down intae his eyes. "Where are we?"

He huffed.

"I am hungry and growin' weak."

He shrugged, barked an order at one of the men, who crossed toward us and brusquely thrust bread toward me.

I snatched it, dropped down tae sit on a boulder, shoved a hunk of bread into my mouth, and chewed ravenously. I was famished — *how long had I been without?*

"How many times did we jump? Ye look like hell, yer clothes are different."

He was digging through items strewn about the back of the vehicle, looking frantic.

“Many times.”

While I ate I kept m’eye on his dirk, twas close enough... with a lunge I could own it... but there were his soldiers tae battle. I would die in the act.

I choked down the dry bread, brushing the crumbs off m’hands. “What time are ye from, Johnne?”

“The early sixteenth century.” He tossed clothing out over his shoulder and continued digging.

“What are ye looking for?”

“...something I need, we have a timeline out of order...”

“Out of order?”

“Aye, it has been altered and is causing difficulties—”

“How did ye alter the timeline?”

He pulled a shirt up and looked it over, tossed it over his shoulder and continued digging, “Somehow, I daena ken, I hae circled back, or overridden a historical fact, or changed time, I daena ken, but... stop askin’ me questions, Duke. Ye are weak, ye ken what I want tae do tae weak men?”

I chuckled. “I daena ken, ye are a Christian man, I assume. Ye might offer him a bit more bread, some wine tae wash it down, and stop tormentin’ him with yer demonic ways.”

“Nae, I want tae kick him.” He pulled out a uniform coat and held it up. He had a sweat going, his hair was wild, his eyes, crazed. He brushed off the front of the coat and then sniffed the pits. “Found it!”

I ignored him and used his distraction tae try tae glean more information. “How did ye become a time traveler from the sixteenth century, how are you gaining power?”

His expression turned tae pride. “I am conquering a kingdom. Tis not difficult with the element of surprise. I hae riches, weapons, an army, and a great deal of power.”

I glanced around. "It looks like ye hae about ten men."

He smiled a slithery smile. "These men are m'inner circle."

"I hae been watchin' yer inner circle, the men daena hold ye in respect. They would desert ye, given a better offer."

"The only thing that matters is that they fear me."

He glanced over at a man standing near one of the vehicles. "Get down on yer knees, Miller." Miller got down on his knees and put his hands on his head.

"See, he respects me, he respects I am a man tae be feared and that he must obey. I will kill him. I never waver."

"Och nae, ye are a madman, losin' control of yer wits, ye are goin' tae fail."

"And ye are a weak man, out of time."

"I am a duke, head of one of the most powerful families in all of Scotland, ye need tae address me with more respect."

"Fine, fine." He gestured tae Miller that he could rise and tossed me the coat. "Put this on."

"Why?"

He waved the gun at me. "Just do it."

I shoved my arms in and pulled it on. Twas tight on m'shoulders, I stretched the sleeves tae pull it down tae m'wrists. "It daena fit."

He said, "How good a fighter are ye, Yer Grace?"

"I hae won a fair share, why?"

"Ye are likely tae hae tae fight yer way free in a moment, so I want tae make sure ye survive it."

"Ye worried on me, Johnny? I dinna think ye cared."

He pulled a map out and spread it on the hood of the vehicle. "I care for what ye will hae in yer possession once ye steal it." His finger ran across the map, followin' a path.

"Ye are turnin' me intae a thief?"

“I am havin’ ye gather what is mine, returnin’ it tae me, the rightful owner.”

“If ye are the rightful owner how come ye daena ask for it back? Who are we stealing from, who am I fighting?”

“The royal guard and... I am not answerin’ ye! Why must ye talk on and on and argue about everything?”

I chuckled. “Och, I see what the answer is, we are stealin’ somethin’ from a king. This is who I am fightin’ — a *king*. Are ye sure ye’re capable of pullin’ this off, Johnne the Frantic? Ye are right now looking at a map as if ye are unsure of yer plan.”

He angrily folded the map again. “I know my plan! Stop talking! The king inna there, ye will be fightin’ the guards — if they trouble ye. Ye will nae speak, ye will nae speak tae anyone!” He was a man driven tae the edge and I enjoyed his frenzy. He would make a mistake, twas certain.

I bent my arms, tryin’ tae stretch the sleeves. “M’coat is too small, I daena hae freedom of movement, and I daena hae a weapon.”

“I will give ye a weapon if ye need one and only then..”

I said, “As is yer right, but a word of advice for ye: a man is likely tae die without a weapon.”

“Stop talkin’ or I will kill ye m’self.”

“Would ye? Seems unlikely.”

He glared.

I looked away, pretendin’ tae be bored.



He tied a cloth around my eyes so that I wouldna see the route. I was pushed intae the back seat of a vehicle. The drive lasted for a long time and we rode in silence.

Then I heard Johnne say, “We are nearin’ the gate, take off his blinder.”

The blind was pulled from my eyes as we slowed in front of a gatehouse. The soldier beside me opened our window. Johnne commanded me, “Nod.”

I nodded.

The guard patted the side of the vehicle and gestured us through the gate as it slid open.

How was it my nod gained us access?

I looked around trying tae ascertain where we were, there was a large half-built castle structure ahead, being built with machines. Large dirt-covered grounds spread around it as if a forest had been cleared for the purpose. Beyond, mountains I recognized. We were near Loch Tay.

We passed the castle’s grand steps and pulled up along a side door. Johnne spoke over his arm, “I repeat, daena speak tae anyone, I will do all the speakin’. Nod, if ye must, ye will follow me closely.”

Soldiers stepped from the vehicle and gestured for me tae follow, leaving two men tae guard our vehicle.

As I followed Johnne into the castle his soldiers fell in around me.

We strode down an unadorned, newly built passage. A group of guards looked confused, but bowed their heads as we passed.

I couldna tell who they were showing deference tae. Was I the one?

The soldiers stood sentry at the doors of a small room as Johnne shoved me inside, brusquely picked up my hand, and pressed m’palm against a pad.

A light flashed.

He commanded, “Open yer eyes, face ahead.”

A light shone on m’face. A moment later a door slid open.

He shoved me in causing me tae stumble. I held on tae the railing on the wall tae steady m’self as m’stomach dropped.

Johnne chuckled. “Never been in an elevator before?”

I looked straight ahead.

The feeling of descent ended, we turned around, Johnne picked up my hand, shoved it against another pad, and new doors slid open.

We entered an armory. There were weapons of all kinds, swords and axes and knives and guns in cases along the room and hangin’ on the walls in rows. He cautioned, “Daena touch anything! If ye want tae survive daena try tae flee.”

“Ye keep telling me this, but I daena see how ye can deliver — if I pick up that sword there and begin tae fight... I might win, but what if I lose? I begin tae wonder, would ye be able tae leave this armory without my assistance?”

“You speak like a man who has not considered how I know where his family lives. Which family would ye want me tae visit first? Yer new family in Florida again? Or the one in the castle on the edge of—”

“None, I will do what ye ask, daena visit any of them.”

“Of course, I winna need tae. If ye help me, I leave them alone. Ye hae my word.”

Across the room there was another door. He gestured tae the pad and I pressed my hand tae it. We entered a smaller room, empty except for a few wooden crates.

He clasped his hands taegether and rubbed them excitedly.

I asked, “How does the door open tae my hand?”

“Life is a mystery, Nor, time is not a straight line, and the ancestors and descendants of a weak man can build castles, but weak men forget tae strengthen their vaults. Let this be a lesson, Your Highness, vaults ought tae be strong.”

He walked tae a crate, lifted the lid, and pulled out two portals. He stuffed them into a bag he wore across his chest. He opened another crate and pulled out two more.

He picked up an ornate red box. “Place yer hand here on the lid.”

I pressed and the lock clicked open. He looked down inside. "Och, she is a beauty." He closed it and placed it intae his bag. Then he led me back tae the elevator doors. I pressed my hand, we entered, we rose up, somehow, and the doors opened in the first room where we had left the soldiers.

Johnne's expression was almost gleeful.

We walked as a group down the passageway, when a woman going the other way asked, "Normond?"

Her face was older, but twas the face of m'sister, Claray. "Normond, what are ye doin' here? Ye are supposed tae—"

Johnne gripped m'arm, diggin' his fingers in. He whispered, "Daena open yer mouth or she will die." The soldiers around us had their fingers itchin' beside their guns.

Johnne said, "Madame, we canna stop, we are attending Normond tae—"

"Normond, who are these men? Ye look altered—" I gave her a look that meant, *wheesht, Claray*.

She faltered and was pushed tae the wall as I was forced past her down the passageway.

Behind us Claray sounded the alarm, "Help, help! Guards—!"

We began tae run. Guards chased us.

Johnne set his shoulder against the door, shoved hard, and we were through tae the outdoors. There was gunfire, approaching vehicles coming across the lawn at high speeds, shooting at our waiting vehicle. A loud voice came from a circling helicopter, "Hold your fire!"

The gunfire ended as we jumped intae the waiting vehicle and sped away, careening across the grounds, chased by cars, a helicopter hanging overhead, a projected voice, commanding, "Attention! This is the castle guard of the Kingdom of Riaghalbane. You in the vehicle, stop immediately! You are

under arrest for kidnapping. Failure to comply will result in further legal action. Surrender peacefully now.”

Johnne said, “Hold on! We are goin’ tae jump!”

A storm grew above us.

I held on tae the seat as our vehicle was buffeted by winds and castle guards chased us, as we carried treasures stolen from an unknown king, and there had been Claray... had she been the mistress of the house? Was this how I gained access?

The storm buffeted the sides of the vehicle, swinging it side tae side, then we lifted, pain and agony as if m’limbs were torn from m’body, and I left one unknown for another.

Chapter 3 - the Duke



BRIDGING TIME
IN AN UNKNOWN PLACE

The first thing I was conscious of was the sound of a vehicle door openin'. My head lolled as I tried tae look around. A soldier spilled from the vehicle ontae his hands and knees and vomited on the ground.

A man beside me had the stillness and pallor of death. I nudged him, my elbow coming away wet with blood, *Och nae*.

I was pained all over so I felt around, checking for wounds, relieved tae be intact — I lay down, shoved off the seat, and dropped hands-first tae the ground.

I rolled ontae my back and looked up at the sky. “Where are we?”

Nae one answered.

It wasna much tae go on but the darkness and the muffled sounds made me think we were in an older time. I watched a bird swoop and soar on the wind, it made a shriekin' noise that I heard through the roar of m'own breathing — time seemed stilled.

Johnne knelt beside me, “Well done, Nor, I see our alliance is verra good.”

He grasped my hand.

I struggled tae pull away from his grip, tae keep from being moved against m'will, but he twisted my arm unnaturally, wrenchin' m'shoulder and forcibly pressin' my palm tae the ornate red chest we had stolen.

The lid clicked open.

He shoved my hand away, dropped tae his arse and pulled from his bag an auld worn book. His expression looked full of greed.

I pushed myself up tae sitting, catching a glimpse of the writing on the pages. “This is yer book?”

“Aye.” He turned his shoulder so I couldna read. He glanced from the page tae the interior of the chest, then pressed his thumb inside. He paused, then looked disappointed.

“Give me yer thumb.”

“Nae, not unless ye tell me why.”

He glared. “Ye need tae give me yer thumb, or I will cut it from yer body.”

I said, “How much longer will ye force me tae be yer abettor? How much longer will I hae tae suffer yer assault upon m’good nature?”

He said, “Until I hae used ye for what I need.”

“Tis the warmth of my palm print that opens yer doors, tis my thumb that presses intae yer treasure, when I escape ye will hae a difficult time without me — why?”

He lashed out, gripped my wrist, but I pulled free and grabbed at his dirk. We struggled for a moment as I tried tae unsheathe it. But he got free and clambered away, dumpin’ the chest tae the side.

He pulled his dirk and lunged forward, aimin’ it at my throat.

“Ye tryin’ tae raise m’fury, Duke?”

“Nae, but ye ought not kill me, ye need me.”

He shoved me away, picked up the chest, and dusted it off, tenderly.

I brushed myself off. “What is inside the chest?”

“It’s called the Drochaid, it bridges rivers of time, we hae mishandled the timeline and...” His voice trailed off. He

grabbed my wrist, wrenched my arm, and forcibly jabbed my thumb down on tae what looked like a black river rock.

The rock-form was hard and unyieldin' for a moment, but then it turned liquid, molding around m'thumb, drawing it within. Then it released, turnin' tae stone once more.

I pulled my hand free and shoved Johnne hard tae the ground. He lay on his back asking, with a look of desperation, "Did it work? Did we fix the timeline?"

"What was it supposed tae do?"

He ignored me, sat up, and began leafin' through pages of the book.

After a time he closed it. "I must jump again."

Chapter 4 - The Duke



I woke up later lying in a field, surrounded by temporary military structures, the largest had a flag with a royal insignia fluttering above it. I lay there unable to understand — had I jumped one time or many? My memories were murky. I was confused by what had transpired.

I pulled myself up with a groan. Johnne was seated at a table covered with a cloth, fine china placed in front of him a wine glass at his fingers. He looked older, his hair cropped short once more. He said, “Ah, ye hae awakened, good, we hae a battle about to commence, ye ought to get off the field.”

“Did we jump? Where are we?”

He ignored me, looking me over, chuckling. “Ye seem so weak, Nor, are ye losin’ yer strength? Only a few days hae past, ye ought to rally, think of yer future — I wouldna want ye to die, to change time that much, but... that *would* leave me free to do what *I* want. It would be good to get ye out of the way, and think of what it would settle to remove yer son and grandson from history. Things would be much improved, I think.”

My head felt fogged, it was difficult to understand what he was saying. “What are ye speaking on? Ye are actin’ as if —”

He carved a fine piece of steak and daintily placed it in his mouth, his manner makin’ him look even more dangerous — as if his measured civility was masking a true evil.

“Address me as Yer Majesty—”

I groaned. “When did this happen?”

“While ye were sleeping I built myself a kingdom. The battlefield before ye is about tae be a final war.”

I swayed a bit and put out a hand tae hold m’self steady. “I daena understand.”

“I hae used m’mastery of time tae become a king.”

He dabbed at his close-clipped beard with a napkin. I counted the soldiers around, there were fifteen within m’sight, they were wearing better uniforms, the weapons on their belts were more dangerous looking.

A rumble grew in the distance becoming an earth-shakin’ roar.

“That is the sound of m’war machine buildin’ momentum. I’m tryin’ tae decide whether I want ye tae ride intae battle under m’sandard or tae hae ye sit weakly by and wait... the one ye might be a hero, possibly, that would be unfortunate, but the other makes ye weak — I am decided, that was an easier decision than I thought, ye will go tae that barrack and sit and listen tae the war I wage.”

He took a sip of wine.

I opened m’mouth tae speak.

He said, “Daena say a word, Nor. I am savin’ yer life by putting ye in a barrack instead of forcin’ ye tae the front lines. Dost ye want tae die on this battlefield?”

“Nae.”

“Ye must say, ‘Nae, Yer Majesty’.”

I clamped my mouth shut and glared.

He raised his arm and pointed toward a barrack, dismissing me.

I strode toward it, with soldiers around me, attemptin’ tae keep m’head high, trying tae calculate how tae escape from this camp.

Above me a machine flew through the sky, roaring over our camp, headed intae the distance. These were machines I hadna seen before. I was far intae the future; if I ran I would need a portal tae get home.



I was dreadfully hungry and thirsty, but distracted by the sound of a war ragin' in the hills beyond. I sat on a cot, my elbows on m'knees. Through the walls I heard the yellin' of men, the rumble of machines, guns and artillery firing. The sounds were so loud I heard them in m'soul instead of through m'ears.

At one loud explosion, I jumped tae my feet, and went tae the door, pushed it open and looked out.

I was commanded tae return inside, but had caught a glimpse — a quick view of the horizon. The air was full of thick smoke, the hills were aflame, yet the soldiers around the barracks were at ease. This signified that we were winnin' the war.

I thought 'we' because I was physically held on Johnne's side, but if I was nae captive I would oppose Johnne Cambell with every last breath I had within me.

The war was roaring, there was a window that looked out on nothing, but there was smoke driftin' by. Two soldiers murmured just outside. I stilled and listened. I heard one of them say Normond. It sounded as if he said, 'Normond the First.' There was a chuckle.

I returned tae the cot and knelt in front of it, my elbows upon it, and as a madman waged a war outside, I prayed tae God tae help me find a way tae escape, tae get back home.

I prayed all night until I fell intae a fitful sleep.



In the morn I was brusquely yanked up by the hair and forced tae my knees in front of Johnne. He stood there, in his ugly visage, his chin high. “Told ye I would be a king.”

I shrugged m’soulders. “I daena care. That was a miserable win. Twas not noble tae win a war with machines that deliver hell on earth. Ye canna be proud of it. I respect the rules of war — a front line of warriors plannin’ tae meet on a battlefield, man against man at a chosen time. That would be impressive, not this madness ye waged.”

He huffed. “What do ye ken? Ye are a barbarian.”

I scoffed. “Ye are calling *Normond* a barbarian? I daena think ye are usin’ the words right, Mad King Johnne.”

Fury rose on his face. “Ye want tae see a Mad King, ye keep bein’ insolent.”

I laughed.

He glared, then narrowed his eyes. “I want tae see how far back the Tempus Omegas will travel. They originated in 1557. I suspect they canna go farther back because I hae sent men beyond the date and never heard from them again. I will send ye back in time and see if ye can live through tae report how far back ye hae gone.”

I leveled a look right intae his eyes. “Ye will give me a portal tae test? I look forward tae it.”

“Ye think ye will steal it and try tae go home? I warn ye, yer wife is a modern woman, she inna waiting for ye, she will declare ye dead and remarry—”

“Ye daena speak on m’wife.” I lunged at him, knockin’ him tae the ground, raining blows on him before soldiers dragged me off.

He got tae his feet, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and dabbed at his lip. “Och, ye still hae a fire in ye, Nor, but I am sure the dungeon at Balloch will dampen it.”

The soldier bound my wrists behind me. I refused tae drop my eyes, which made Johnne furious.

I was pushed from the barrack. “Ye goin’ tae tell me where and when ye are sendin’ me?”

Nae one spoke.

The portal was placed in my hands, a sword was drawn, aimed at my head.

“Twist it, Nor.”

“Och nae.” I twisted it, and the horrible, searing pain began.

Chapter 5 - the Duke



SOME TIME IN OCTOBER 1557
BALLOCH CASTLE

I woke up in the dirt and heard a man laugh.

I turned over tae see I was surrounded by three very disgusting brutish men. One of them said, “Ye gettin’ up?”

One spit upon me, the other kicked m’side. I curled up in pain. “Where am I?”

The men laughed.

Everything ached. I had had m’arse kicked for days and had jumped over and over. I dinna ken when or where I was.

I pulled m’self up, though twas nae easy with my hands bound behind me.

From the looks and stench of the men around me, the world was medieval again. They were lookin’ down on somethin’, conferrin’. We were on the side of a hill. I looked around at the landscape and recognized the mountains. I was southeast of Balloch castle.

Which meant Finlarig was tae the west.

I could see Loch Tay, and I kent the River Tay lay tae the north because of the dark shadow snakin’ through the trees.

I realized they were arguin’.

Then it dawned on me they might be arguing over the portal. *Where was the portal?*

I writhed around, looking behind and under myself.

It wasna here. I asked, “What do ye hae there?”

One of the men growled.

I asked, “What is the date?”

Another said, “Daena ken, but we found this message on ye.” He shoved the paper in front of m’face.

I read tae myself: This man is a criminal, put him in the dungeons at Balloch until I come for him, on November 1, 1557.

One of the men asked, “What does it say? we canna decipher it.”

“I winna say, tis for me, tis private.”

He kicked me in m’side again then they continued trying tae decipher the note.

My hands were bound, I was without a horse, food, a weapon, or gold, I was weakened, and even if I could run, I would never get home from this time. I needed tae fight Johnne and get a portal from him. I needed tae be alive tae do it. I dinna want tae go tae Balloch.

I had tae get away from these men.

I jumped up, stumbled from the clearing, and raced down through the forest, the tree limbs whipping my face because my hands were bound and useless. Behind me I heard the men making chase. I tried tae go faster, but the men gained on me — one man grasped the rope and yanked me back, down off my feet. I crashed intae a bush, branches scraped at m’flesh.

“We arna lettin’ ye get away.”

One of the men said, “Let’s take him tae Balloch.” I was pulled tae my feet and shoved down the hill ahead of them, staggering down a path tae the valley and the castle beyond.

Balloch castle had not yet been built tae its full glory, it was only a stone buildin’ with a thatched roof, the surroundin’ walls incomplete, one of them still being wood. The other three walls were built of stone, but they were not high enough,

not protective enough. I could see four ways tae take the castle and I had only just arrived.

The road leading up tae the castle was busy with villagers and castle inhabitants — from the look of their dress, the verra full bags of harvest on their carts, and the changin' color of the trees, I guessed it tae be late September or perhaps early October.

Everyone stared at me as I passed, a shirtless prisoner, filthy, but wearing fine boots from the New World. I was brought through the gate, where men leered and jeered, and led through the courtyard toward a door near the storerooms off the kitchen. I was pushed down a stair leading intae the ground.

The outcome I hadna wanted.

I was shoved intae a cell and m'bindings cut. "I need food."

The guard grunted. "Ye will hae food when we give ye food."

"I was told that Johnne Cambell wants me tae be here when he comes for me, ye ought tae give me—"

"Who is Johnne Cambell?"

"He is not yer laird?"

"Ye mean Johnne the Crook'd-pate? He is nothin', just one of the castle men." The guard malevolently chuckled. "He inna our *laird*. I wouldna trust him tae hold m'ale, he is dishonest as the night is long." He left my dungeon door.

I lay in the cell thinkin' on how Johnne Cambell had used the portals tae become a king, how he had once been beneath a lowly dungeon guard, and had grown so powerful.

Did this mean I was before the portals were discovered?

I was the test.

And if it were truly 1557, I was many long years before my life. How would I ever get back tae it — if there were nae

sign of Johnne Cambell, how would I get m'hands on a portal?

Chapter 6 - Livvy



JUMPING TO MAY 18, 2012
AMELIA ISLAND

I rolled out my neck, cracked my knuckles, and did some jumping jacks. Charlie laughed. Then he shrugged and did some jumping jacks along with me.

We did jumping jacks until we were out of breath. “Now, adrenaline pumping, let’s do this thing.” I picked up the portal and I looked down at it. “We’re sure, this is right?”

His eyes went down to it and then back at me. “Nope, but it’s our best bet, so yep. Do it. We are not going to die today.”

I shook my head. “And hopefully not tomorrow either, or twenty-five years from now.”

I put out an arm, he grabbed it. I twisted the portal and felt the searing, ripping tear go up my arms.



It was cold. I spit sand from my mouth.

It was pitch black. The sound of waves crashing nearby. I raised my head and looked around, Charlie groaned. “Did we do it?”

I looked toward the dunes, where two men were running down the boardwalk, with a flashlight, heading toward us, Lou and Junior.

They rushed up. Lou was yelling, “That storm was fierce! Thank the lord you were at the bottom of it and not monsters!”

We were heaved up to our feet, and Junior began lugging our stuff to the truck. Lou said, “We’ve been waiting here since early this morning, got anyway to pick the time of day?”

“No, and though it seems like we did this right, we messed up the first time. We’ve been in the year 1989.”

He said, “Wow, that was probably fun. You didn’t check in on me, did you? Not sure I would want to meet my future grandchildren. I might get freaked out and move to a cabin in the middle of nowhere.”

“Nah, didn’t check in. It was actually really frightening, we were in the wrong time, by mistake, anything could have...”

We climbed into the truck.

Charlie said, “We basically were there for a couple of hours, figured out the date, and bought one bottle of New Coke for a collectible!”

“Then we jumped again. Made it back. Luckily.” I strapped on my seatbelt.

Lou said, “So you have the code figured out?”

I muttered, “Maybe,” as Junior pulled the truck from the space and drove out onto the road.

Lou said, “...and what about the time of day? We waited for hours.”

Ugh, so much could have gone wrong.

I shook my head. “No options, just put in a code and jump.”

Lou said, “A twenty-four hour day is a pretty long time to have no control over.”

Junior said, “Lot can happen in twenty four hours.”

I said, “There is a *lot* about this that is up to faith.”

Lou said, “I know you hate that. There *must* be a pattern, like, what about time zones, or leap years? Possibly the time of day *there* corresponds to the time of day *here*, depending on

the...” He continued rambling, flipping pages in his notebook, until he said, “We just gotta test.”

Charlie had his head back on the headrest, his eyes closed. “Testing takes a shit ton of effort.”

I was watching the dunes go by, mailboxes, and signs in the dark, a bit of a glow to the ocean beyond.

Then we turned away from the beach to the highway, toward home.

I finally said, without it being attached to the conversation. “I don’t know how to set the time of day, I don’t know how to get anywhere else. And I think I have the dates figured out. *Maybe*. But not really. I hate trying to figure this out, that was really...”

Charlie said, “You’re spooked, I’ve never heard you so spooked.”

“Yeah, I thought I could figure it out, science it, but that last jump was a leap of faith and I do not like putting my body on the line for faith. Or yours.”

“Yeah, and I’m too beat to try it again. I need to rest and collect my thoughts first. Give me a week.”

I sighed. “Like Nor says, time travel is not for the timid.”

“This is true. I’ll go again, just have to build my confidence.”

“Yeah, me too, and I need to figure out how to go places. I don’t want to jump without at least...”

I added, “Lou, did we mention that when we landed they were expecting a hurricane the next day?”

He twisted to look at me from the front seat. “What year?”

“September 1989.”

Junior said, “September 1989, was that Hugo?”

I nodded.

Lou said, “Jeez, I don’t like the sound of that at all. What if Hugo had hit Fernandina, what if you had landed during the

middle of it?”

“Exactly.”

Lou said, “Well we need to understand more before I’m comfortable with you kids doing it again.”

I watched the trees slide by. There was the hum of the engine, the occasional conversation between Junior and Lou, the click-click of the blinker when Junior passed a car, and I was lulled into quiet thoughts and considerations for a long time.

Until finally I said, “One of the issues is that I feel like I’m not *any* closer to rescuing Nor. We took a whole couple of days, you stayed overnight at a hotel, it took four of us, it took so much brain power from all of us, plus danger, and all I figured out was how to go forward a day.”

Charlie said, “Yeah, knowing we could wake up in a hurricane makes me feel pretty stupid, except buying that bottle. That was smart.” He shifted his cap back, scratched his head and pulled it back down.

Junior said, “It’ll be worth something someday, and you didn’t die. Look on the bright side.”

Charlie said, “Yeah, but I wanted a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle comic book and action figures.”

“No worries, you can do it again.”

“Nah, Junior, you didn’t feel it, it’s not that easy, it hurts like shit.”

Lou said, “Watch your mouth boy.”

“Sorry, Lou, it hurts tremendously, as if you are going to poop your pants. We might need to wear diapers next time.”

Lou said, “Like an astronaut, to cross time and space, sometimes ya gotta wear a diaper. Just a fact. Men shit.”

Charlie said, “Lou, watch your mouth!”

I sighed, “I really truly hoped we would know more.”

Lou said, “You said you knew you’d have to jump over and over for the data, you knew it would take more than once.”

“I talk a good talk, Lou. I thought I could figure it out.”

Charlie said, “You figured out how to accidentally go back twenty-three years and how to go forward one day.”

“Four steps back, one step forward.”

Lou said, “You learned something, that’s the important thing. You missed the hurricane, a very good thing. Now we have to figure out how to go somewhere else. I have some ideas on that, when we get home we can do the...”

He talked for a while later, but I had a huge headache from all that jumping. I pulled at the collar of my shirt to get it from my throat as I thought tears might well up.

Charlie looked at me from the corner of his eye, then whispered, “Buck up, we survived.”

“I know. And I’m not crying.” I wiped my eyes with my sleeve, then leaned my head on the window. I slowly fell asleep, only waking up a little bit later to the sound of Lou snoring.

Junior bit his lip, suppressing a laugh because Lou sounded like a chainsaw.

I muttered, “How long’s he been snoring?”

Charlie said, “The whole freaking ride.”

“I was out.”

We went through the now heavily guarded front gate, Lou waved at one of our new security guards, stationed there day and night, as Junior drove us up to the main house. “Everyone out, I got sleep to get to.”

“What time is it?”

“Two a.m.”

Chapter 7 - Livvy



MAY 19, 2012
LOU-MOO RANCH

I woke up the next morning and stared long at the ceiling thinking about Nor and how I needed to rescue him, and what I could try next. I was going to go after him. Definitely. But where would I look? It was like knowing someone was lost in the vast woods and I needed to fly a helicopter to rescue them. I didn't know how to fly the helicopter.

And time jumping hurt like shit.

And I was very frustrated by this whole thing.

I knew that I had succeeded on paper — I had time jumped. That was a success. *How many people in the world had time-jumped?*

Barely anyone.

But, I was nowhere closer to finding Nor. And a cold grip of fear had settled in my heart.

I was the only person who *could* rescue him.

I turned on my side and fluffed my pillow. It was too early to get up. I lay there and looked at my fingers and spun my wedding ring.

I missed him so much, so so so much. My husband was lost in time.

I flung my covers off and got up to brush my teeth and go downstairs. I had to keep trying. What if there were an

anomaly, something I would notice in history?

I filled my coffee mug and sat down in front of my laptop. What if this time I looked on Wikipedia and there was a new entry about Nor? *What if...?*

I sipped from my mug and researched.

I read the history of Finlarig castle which I knew was involved with Nor's family. *I remembered the name, right?* It was a ruin but I spent time sipping my coffee and wondering what it had been like to live there and then I went off on a tangent — how big was Scotland? I found a place that said from top to bottom it was 274 miles long and 154 miles across. Didn't that seem small?

Then I ended up on a website called map-fight that compared the sizes of countries. I looked up the comparison of Scotland in Florida, not even the biggest state and realized that the State of Florida was actually 2.17 times bigger than Scotland. The whole of the United States was 124 times bigger. I leaned back in my chair. *Wow, that was crazy.*

Mom entered the kitchen and put a basket of eggs on the counter. "Good, you're up, I wanted to talk to you. Whatcha doing?"

I pushed the laptop away, "I've been up researching. You've been at the coops?"

"Yes, I went for my morning walk with Lou, filled the bird feeders, met Birdie at the coops, checked in on the hens, that rooster is being a real ass." She poured coffee in the mug that she and Birdie would argue over when she visited, 'World's Most Badass Mom,' and sat down beside me at the table. "Lou told me about your adventure."

"It was insane, not at all happy about that. Did he tell you that Charlie and I almost landed in Hugo's path?"

She nodded, sipped her coffee, then shrugged. "We, all of us, almost landed in Hugo's path, Livvy. It's part of life, we

live through stuff, sometimes it scares us. But you survived, and here you are.”

“Yeah. Good point. I guess I shouldn’t allow myself to get carried away by fear.”

“You should allow yourself the right level of fear for the situation. You’re scared, rightly so, and you went and jumped and got frightened there too, because you’re powerless. Powerful people have control and therefore find courage in the face of fear.”

“I am powerless. How do I get my power back? It’s time travel, Mom, and I don’t know what I’m doing. I have no idea where he is. I don’t control anything.”

“What do I know, I’m just the world’s most badass mom.” She pointed at her mug. “But seems to me like you need to take control of everything else in your life. Batten down the hatches, you know? Like being a military wife — while your dad was away I made sure I was in control of this part of our life together.”

I dropped my head back on the ladder-back chair. “My life is totally out of control. I quit my job, but I need to go up and pack up my house and where am I going to put it—”

Mom pulled a brochure out of the back pocket of her jeans and put it down in front of me. “Birdie and I had an idea, Lou called TP Dunhoe over at Mobile World and he’s got two in stock. I circled them. Pick which one you want and we’ll have it here by the weekend.”

“Really? That is so nice, you guys would do that for me?”

“Of course, your dad and I talked it over, we want to do it for you. We get you home? Of course we will do it.”

“...and this is where Nor will come back to, so it makes sense. So I ought to go up to North Carolina and get my stuff.”

“Uncle Junior will drive me and you up in the truck, tomorrow morning.”

“When did you plan all this?”

“While you and Charlie were planning your experimental time-jump I was worried. To get my mind off it, I planned. I’m trying to be a good role-model.”

“You’re an excellent role-model. Thank you. And maybe while I’m doing that work I’ll come up with some ideas, that’s usually how I think.”

“That’s my girl.” She patted me on my arm. “Nothing like packing up your life and lugging those boxes across state lines to clear your head and get your mental juices flowing.” She pulled her phone from her pocket and checked the time. “I promised Birdie I would go to the store. Pick the house you want. Tell Lou and he’ll get it going for you.”



I read over the brochure, opened up the laptop, researching manufactured homes, then Charlie texted me:

Dusty is saddled, get your ass down to the stables.

I huffed. And texted back:

I’m researching.

Charlie:

Tell me what, exactly. I’ve been up for hours, working, what exactly are you working on?

Me:

Did you know that Scotland can fit inside the US of A 125 times? Also that the manufactured home called the Farmhouse 694 has 100 extra square feet over the Ranch 21?

Charlie:

Cool.

While I was typing this:

Also, that the castle of Finlarig had a hanging tree, or a beheading stone that was for Campbell dudes to take their angst out on the men they didn't like and—

He sent this:

But still, get your ass down here. Dusty needs a ride.

I erased the text about Finlarig and texted:

Fine.

Then I texted:

On my way.



I rode Dusty for a little while all around the ranch, passing my uncles' houses, talking for a bit with one of our ranch hands, riding past the gates that now had an armed security detail guarding them. It was an interesting juxtaposition: the old ranch, comfortable and familiar, where riding set my mind at ease. And the new amped up security, guards at the gates, who nodded as I passed, motion detectors along lanes, video cameras pointing at the paths. All unsettling reminders that Nor had been kidnapped and there hadn't been a thing we could do to stop it.

Lou was never going to let that happen again.

I spent the afternoon being busy, picking which manufactured home I wanted to live in with Nor, and planning my trip to NC in the morning to move.



That night Charlie came by, knocked on the door, came in, and sat at the dining table. I was bleary eyed from staring at the laptop since dinner.

I said, “You’re leaving for school?”

“Yep, got class in the morning. You headed to North Carolina? You might want to get some sleep, that’s a long drive.”

“We both know Junior is not going to let me drive, I can sleep all the way up.”

“When do you want to try again? Just so I can get my head straight on it.”

“I don’t know, not sure... Maybe don’t think about it? Concentrate on your finals.”

He nodded. “Yeah, when I get back. I have a list of places and shops. I was thinking I could drain my bank account, go buy some lotto tickets, some baseball cards.”

I stared into space. “I’ll have a plan. Definitely, by the time you get back.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Man, you got spooked.”

“You did too. I just, I’ve been staring at this damn computer, and I can’t figure out what I’m looking for, and we need to jump again, to test the numbers, for what? How is it helping me find Nor? Are we going to jump just for some baseball cards? What if we get lost? Like *really* lost... I’m the only person who can rescue him, and I have no idea where to start.”

I pulled my small notebook from my pocket, almost full, flipped to the most important page, packed with writing, and looked it over. “I think I’ve worked it out, but I don’t know —

what if the bad guy sees our storms? And speaking of storms, we have to know about the weather before we jump.” I flipped two pages, then flipped back three. “We almost jumped into a hurricane, that’s a whole ‘nother level of information we need to know *beyond* the date and...” I shook my head.

“Wasn’t your job to look at past weather data?”

“Yeah and I was wondering about that, what if... we pick a date to jump to, right?”

I pulled the notebook close, flipped to a page that had room, and wrote a string of numbers out. “Then I look at that date and location, the string of numbers, and I move them around a bit. I look up what the weather is on those dates in that place for all those combinations... how many combinations would there be?”

He scoffed. “With four numbers that’s like ten thousand combos, and this is like... more.”

“That’s disappointing.”

“Yeah, instead though, why don’t we make sure we get the dates and the location right. No more screw ups.”

I closed my notebook. “Yeah, right, absolutely.”

He said, “I have to drive back to school, you good?”

I nodded. “I’m going to pick a date for us to try again and I will check the weather, maybe I’ll check the weather for a few combos.”

He laughed. “Well, you’ve got a time machine, you’ve got all the time in the world if you only knew how to use it.”

Chapter 8 - Livvy



MAY 20-JUNE 1
LOU-MOO RANCH

I packed up my house, while mom dealt with utilities, and Junior moved boxes out to the truck. It took a day and a half. I did not think during it. It did not get my mental juices flowing. It just exhausted me.

We spent the night, woke up at dawn, put the bed and couch in the truck and then drove all my stuff down to the ranch.

We pulled up in front of my new freshly installed house. Workers were still there making sure the plumbing and electrical were set up.

The next morning everyone helped me move into my new house. I started thinking about the code and the variables. Mom had been right, I needed to control something in my life to clear my brain, and it applied to everyone, everyone was thinking about it.

Junior passed me, carrying a box of my books. “Do you think you ought to talk to NASA?”

Uncle Tim overheard and asked, “Hell no. What if she walks into NASA headquarters and asks about the time travel and they ask ‘what about the time travel?’ *Then* what is she going to do?”

Uncle Dan, holding a box of pots and pans, did the moonwalk out of the room, joking, “Oh, sorry, never mind, forget I was here?”

Uncle Tim said, “We do not want the government involved.”

Junior said, “Or you know, what about asking Stephen Hawking about it? He’d probably have an idea.”

I dropped my box on the table.

“I don’t think we should talk about time travel outside of our family. We don’t want any idiots or bad guys ruining the history of the world.”

Uncle Dan tapped his temple. “Our niece is thinkin’, Brother, gotta keep this under wraps, the government gets their hands on it and...” He gestured and made a bomb noise, like an explosion.

The next morning, at the crack of dawn, Dad came by, pulling up in his truck, banging on the door, asking for a cup of coffee. I joked, standing in my pajamas, pouring water into my new coffee maker, “Are you always going to visit this early?”

“Yep, I voted for having your house installed halfway down from my house to the back forty. That way I can stop for a cup of coffee right when I want one.”

I laughed, poured coffee grounds into the paper cup and pushed the button on the machine.

“Your morning coffee only lasts to right here?”

“Your mom makes it weak. She thinks it’s too much caffeine for me.”

I opened up the box, pulled two mugs out, and put them on the counter. “I think she’s onto you, she bought me some decaf and put it in my cabinet.” I opened the cabinet door and showed him.

He grimaced. “I won’t tell her if you don’t.”

“Never.”

Dad said, “Your mom and I were talking, I discussed it with Lou, and I’m here to assign you some chores.”

I joked, “I just agreed to keep a secret for you!”

“Yep, I waited until after you agreed, too late to back out now.”

I incredulously waved at the boxes all around me. “...and I haven’t even unpacked!”

“You will be, by tomorrow. I’ve known you your whole life, you’re going to handle these boxes by nightfall, and then you’ll need something to do so you aren’t getting all up in your head. Starting tomorrow you’ll be mucking.”

“You’re cruel.” I poured coffee in his mug. “Fine, I love mucking, actually, and it will keep my mind off the endlessly twirling question: What should I do?”

He leaned against the kitchen counter and said, “Show me what you’re thinking so far.”

I pulled my small notebook out, flipping through pages. Every page was packed with notations, some scratched out, some circled, arrows, a few exclamation points. I found the one I wanted, jam-packed with writing.

He said, “Hoo-wie, now that is an example of what happens when you get all up in your head. What’s going on here?”

“This is my um... notes and it’s kind of a mess, yeah.”

“It looks like the scribbling of a madman. What I want you to do is, tomorrow, after mucking, I want you to get a notebook, put your thoughts down in an orderly fashion, let’s make it so that if one of us needs to check your notes we can read it.”

“Fine, yes... you’re right.”

“So, where’s your mind on it these days?”

“I want to test going forward three days. Once Charlie gets back.”

He nodded.

“But here’s what I’m worried about, so that would be this string of numbers, right?” I drew my finger across a string that

I had written down when I had been driving in the truck up to North Carolina. “If I mix those around, accidentally, we could end up in the year 1269, or the year 621, or the year 6...”

“The possibilities are endless, that’s why you can’t make a mistake.”

I looked down on the list. “Yeah, that’s basically what Charlie said.”

“And that’s why you concentrate on your win: these are the numbers you used to get back home, right?” He ran his finger along a string of numbers that were hard to read.

I nodded.

“Write those out fresh. That’s a win. When you look in your notebook, your win should be right there. Focus on that. Just do that again, and while you’re waiting for Charlie to get back from school, muck the stables. Got me?”

I said, “Yes sir.”

He grinned. “You’ll jump on June ninth. A Saturday. A little over a week from now. Perfect. You’re one step closer. Mind if I take the mug?”

“No, but don’t let Mom see it or she’ll figure out your plan to have me as your personal caffeinated-coffee barista.” He headed toward the door.

“Thanks Dad, I appreciate all of this.”

“No problem, Livvy, your Mom and I are so glad you’re here. And we’ll get Nor home. I’ve met your boyfriends. I never thought we’d get lucky with such a good son-in-law, I want him back.”

He left, started up his truck, and drove down the lane toward the fields.

I finished my coffee, staring down at my calculations, and sighed. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t tried to jump again. I felt ashamed that I wasn’t doing something.

I unpacked the coffee cups and plates, collapsed the box, threw it on a pile, then unpacked the box of pots and pans. I tossed that empty carton on the pile. I had started on the glasses when I got hungry and made scrambled eggs in my new kitchen.

I unpacked the books. Added to the pile. Whenever my mind went to Nor and how I was likely a widow, I pushed it down and unpacked more things.

I put nice towels up in the bathroom, thinking, *I'm not a widow, right?*

I googled: 'how long can someone be gone before they are gone gone,' but the truth was, I could only mourn that he was gone, not that he was dead, because he wasn't dead.

I knew it. He was alive.

He was just gone.

I was stacking linens in the closet when mom brought lunch.

And by nightfall I was, as Dad had told me, close to fully unpacked. The pile of cardboard was a satisfying sight.

I ate pizza for dinner and watched tv, while unpacking the last tchotchkes for the end tables. I dusted them off, wished I could show them to Nor. Alas.

By the time I went to bed I was looking forward to the morning. Mucking out the stables would be good.

It was all my brain could do.

It was all my heart could bear.



Charlie came home for the weekend and leaned up against the wall of the stable.

I asked, "Gonna help?"

“Nope, did my chores already, besides I’m in school. I get the scholar pass.”

I grumbled, mockingly mimicking him, “I get the scholar pass.” I added, “Your grades better be good,” as I pitched a forkful of hay.

He grunted, “Maybe you didn’t hear the word ‘scholar’. Of course they’re good, straight Bs.” Then he asked, “You still planning our next jump? What’s the date?”

“June ninth — we’re going to jump three days ahead. Lou will drop us off, Tim said he’d pick us up. I decided there was no sense in having them wait in a hotel. Sounds good?”

“Yeah, school will be out. This is my final week. Oh man, my professors are kicking my ass. Sure we can’t celebrate my finals being over by going back in time and buying a lotto ticket?”

“I’m not sure we’re up to that level of difficulty yet, we’re still testing my hypothesis.”

“Which is...?”

“That the numbers I’ve got won’t kill us.”

He joked, “I’m terrifically glad you’re waiting for me to go along on this insane trip.”

I leaned on the pitchfork. “Where is he?”

Charlie shrugged. “We need international time-travel police.”

“Yep, yes we do. But since we don’t have that it’s up to us. We don’t have that, right?”

“It would totally suck if we had international time-travel police but they were so secretive we didn’t know.”

“Yeah. How can we be the only people who have the ability to time-travel? I am out of my comfort zone. I was looking at a map the other day — it was frightening to think about where it would be safe. What if we landed in the ocean? What if a dinosaur ate us?”

“I can swim but I draw the line at dinosaurs, that’s whackadoo.”

“I know, and it’s just one mistake away, apparently.”

“I wish I could help you figure this out, Livvy. Maybe you need to pray.”

“Yeah, I could pray that someone who’s good at this will help. I’ll pray that someone with time-travel experience will *please* rescue him.”

“There are worse ideas. But yeah, let me finish out the semester, and next weekend we’ll test your hypothesis.”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”



That night I was watching an episode of Friends, but my eyes kept drawing to the calendar pinned to the wall. I took it down and brought it to the couch. I put it on the coffee table, picked up a pen and circled June ninth. I put an exclamation point on it. I wrote JUMP. It looked shaky.

I ran my pen over and over the exclamation point, making it dark and forceful.

That was what I would do. A test on June ninth. I would return on the twelfth.

I wrote. BACK!

Then, if it worked...

Then!

I circled another date, June seventeenth. I wrote: Go To Kilchurn!

I would jump again, all the way to Kilchurn, 1670. A really long distance, all by myself.

I was certain his brother Aenghus would greet me. I would check in, ask if they had seen him, find out if he had any knowledge of Nor’s whereabouts.

Yeah, that's what I would do, that would be good.

It was up to me. I had to do something.

Nor wasn't trained to solve these kinds of problems, he was trained to be diplomatic until it was time to draw his sword. Then he was trained to be as barbaric as necessary.

I drank a sip of wine and leaned back on the couch.

We were a good team.

I just needed to get him home. My eyes focused on that circle, on that date.

But... What if a bad guy were there to greet me? Then they would know that we, I meant, *I* have a portal.

I leaned back in the couch cushions, thinking about Nor, about how I was the only one in the world who could save him. I would need to gather my courage and my data and just go.

But, while I was waiting for Charlie, I could try what he suggested and pray.

I knelt in front of the coffee table in my brand new manufactured home and closed my eyes and prayed for help finding Nor, some kind of divine intervention and guidance to help him, and help in keeping Charlie safe as we experimented with time travel.

After a long time lost in prayer I said amen and got back up on the couch. I turned my attention back to Friends: Phoebe, Rachel and Joey were in the coffee shop. I only looked at the calendar occasionally.

It all hinged on the test this weekend actually working.

Chapter 9 - the Duke



NOVEMBER 1, 1557
BALLOCH CASTLE DUNGEON

I had been imprisoned for days. I asked tae speak tae Johnne, but was told he wasna there. I told them, “I am the Duke of Awe.”

The guard looked me over. “I never heard of him.”

“Tis true, I live at Kilchurn castle, on the shore of Loch Awe.” I couldna think of what tae do but try tae talk m’way free. “I demand tae speak tae the laird.”

He said, “Sir Colin inna here. He is at his other castle, Kilchurn, on Loch Awe, this is how I ken ye are lyin’. If there were a Duke of Awe, we would ken as we are the Campbells from those parts.”

I was losin’ my ability tae think. Twas confusing tae beg for yer life from people who could nae care what happened tae ye. “I am his cousin, will ye tell him I am here? Send a messenger, tell him I am in the dungeons of his castle?”

“Once he returns I will.”



I asked every day. I marked the wall.

I lay on the ground and moaned about the pain in m’stomach, being tossed food and ravenously shovin’ it down, nae more than a hound, livin’ for scraps.

One night there was a great deal of commotion in the castle above. The guard grew curious and opened the dungeon

door at the top of the stairs. I could hear the guardsmen on the walls go on alert, their calls traveling down the walls.

I asked, “What is happenin’?”

The guard said, “Guards are headed out.”

I heard the gates open, the thunder of horse hooves. Then the guard was gone so I couldna ask what was happening.

I waited, m’body tensed, wishin’ tae see the moon, tae breathe the fresh night air. I longed for it, wanted it all. I missed m’freedom desperately. I missed all the duties and work of the castle. Twas nae in m’nature tae be idle like this, tae lie hungry. I was meant tae work, tae rule, tae ride and hunt, tae feed m’family, tae protect them. And I missed Livvy. She was m’wife and I had been on the cusp of a life with her.

Och, I even missed the danger of a castle in the night, strangers approaching. Twas always a difficult time, but tae call out tae yer guard, tae ken they were well practiced and ready tae battle if it came tae it, tae ken the guards would protect the castle walls. Twas a relief tae be protected, tae protect, as compared tae being caged.

I heard more commotion. Men were drawing closer tae the dungeons. A man was yelling belligerently, his voice coming closer. “Let go of me, where are ye takin’ me? Unhand me!”

There were sounds of a scuffle down the dungeon steps and then a door next tae mine opened, and from the sound of it, a man was thrown intae another cell.

Footsteps as his captors left the dungeons.

The new prisoner muttered, “Those dank-bawbag laden sacks of shite—”

I called, loud enough for him tae hear, “Who are ye?”

He exclaimed, “Och nae! Och, ye gave me a start, I thought I was alone. Who are ye... ? Is there a man, flesh and blood, or is this god-forsaken dungeon speaking inside my

mind promising the torment that will come if m'brothers daena rescue me?"

I moaned, as a cramp of hunger hit m'stomach. "I am flesh and blood but nae for long, I fear I will die in this god-forsaken dungeon."

"What are ye in it for?"

"The crime of havin' crossed a man named Johnne Cambell."

"Och, I hae heard of him, he is an arse."

"Aye, ye haena met him though?"

"Nae."

"Ye arna missin' anything."

He chuckled. "Ye must hae done something tae get the dungeon, how'd ye cross him?"

"I found something valuable that belonged tae him."

He was quiet for a moment, then he asked, "What is yer name?"

"M' name is Nor... Normond, I am the Duke of Awe."

He said, "Och nae, ye daena say... ye are from a different time?"

I moaned weakly, "Aye."

The guard said, "Stop talkin', ye leave each other alone. I need peace tae hear what is happenin'."

The man next tae me said tae the guard, "M' name is Lochinvar and ye daena get tae tell me what tae do, auld man, I will run ye over with a truck. Ye daena ken what a truck is, but I will go get one, twill be a great deal of trouble, and I will bring a truck right up tae the walls of the castle and then I will run ye over with it."

He sounded modern, not unlike one of Livvy's uncles.

The guard said, "Wheesht, I hae had enough of yer endless ___"

Lochinvar continued, “I am a warrior and the brother of a king, ye best open m’ door, guard, because he is goin’ tae come retrieve me and ye are goin’ tae regret that ye left me here talking—”

The guard said, “I already regret that ye are talkin’.”

Lochinvar said, “Ye daena ken the half of it. I can go all night. The battle is ragin’, I need tae get back out there and help m’brothers.”

I heard the guard go closer tae his door. “What dost ye mean, battle?”

“There is a battle taking place, yer men from the castle are gettin’ their arses kicked by my brothers, a much smaller army, but we are lethal. There will be nae one left, not a’one of ye standin’ by the time we are through with ye. But if ye go check on the battle, make sure ye open this door first.”

“I am tryin’ tae listen, daena make me kill ye.”

Lochinvar said, “Ye couldna, I have killed so many men — I hae killed kings. I hae killed with a blade and with a—”

The guard said, “Ye winna be stilled?”

“Ye could open m’ door, come in, and *see* if ye can shut me up.”

I chuckled.

A moment later Lochinvar said, “Come on, come on auld man, come open it.”

The guard said, “Ye are goin’ tae get an arse whippin’.”

Lochinvar said, “Aye, ye might think that, auld man, because I am in a dungeon cell and ye are on the outside of the door, but I hae brothers who are goin’ tae come look for me and they are big and brutal and they will kill ye for standing in their way when they rescue me.”

The guard scoffed but was silent. Then he said, “Yer brothers are dead.”

Lochinvar said, “Nae, they arna dead, they are goin’ tae show up here, ransack this castle, kill the men, and open

m'door. I am warnin' ye, fair: Open m'door. Let me go. Or ye can draw yer sword when they come, but twill be yer last unsheathing."

The guard said, "I am nae openin' yer door."

"Ye hae been warned."

The dungeon fell quiet for a time then Lochinvar said tae me, "Ye said yer name was Normond?"

"Aye, if yer brothers do come for ye, can ye ask them tae open my door as well?"

"Aye, when they come m'brother Magnus will want ye freed. He will open yer door."

We were quiet then, there was another group of men leavin' through the gate. After a time he said, "Did ye hear it?"

I said, "More men are leavin' the castle."

"Aye," his voice comin' through the darkness, "It means m'brothers are winning." Then he yelled tae the guardsman, "Ye hear that, auld man, m'brothers are winnin'! Tis not too late tae open m'door."

The guard said, "Ye quiet yerself." We heard his footsteps retreat as he went up the stairs from the dungeon.

Lochinvar chuckled. "Where ye think he's goin'?"

"Tae check on the castle, ye rattled him."

"Och, he will be so rattled when he meets Magnus and Fraoch, ye just wait."

He quieted again. The sound of motors rose in the air, growin' louder, comin' closer.

Lochinvar said, "Will ye be able tae rise, Normond, once they get here?"

"I am verra weak. I will try tae gather m'strength."

"Aye, m'head is pained, I am lyin' prone on the ground, I daena like tae hae m'brothers carry me but I might hae tae ask for their help."

“Ye were just tellin’ the guard that ye were goin’ tae fight him.”

“I am full of bluster, I would beat him easily, most days, I hae fought in arenas, and killed men who would be kings, but alas I am injured and weak. M’brothers say m’bluster is one of m’most endearing traits.”

Outside there were yells along the walls.

He said, “Ye hear that? Tis the last men callin’ tae each other.”

“Aye, it sounds as if they ken they hae lost.”

I drifted in and out of consciousness until there was a sound, a bellowin’ voice, projected, “Put down your arms! Put yer hands on yer heads!”

Lochinvar said, “Och, they are comin’.”

Louder he called, “Told ye, Auld Man!”

The guard sounded frightened. “Who is that? What is the voice?”

“That is m’brothers, I told ye, they are goin’ tae make ye afraid for yer life. What ought ye tae do?”

“Stay here in the corner and daena bother them?”

“Aye, stay there in the corner and daena bother them.”

The guard began tae pray.

I asked, “Are ye sure tis them? It could be Johnne Cambell, how can we be sure?”

“Just be quiet, I am sure tis them, but aye, be quiet.”

I heard them, big men by their footsteps, coming down the stairs, their puffin’ breaths, grunts from the effort, clompin’ boots on the steps. A man came tae m’door, slid the drawbar away, and shoved the door open, scraping across the dirt floor.

I raised my hands as a bright light shone in m'eyes, blindin' me.

The man's voice called, "This is nae Lochie!"

Lochinvar called, "Here!"

The man with the light moved tae the cell beside mine and opened the door. Gunfire sounded from the castle grounds above, the loud ominous voice saying, "Put down your arms! Hands in the air!"

Noise that sounded like they hoisted Lochinvar up; they were preparin' tae leave. I felt desperate — m'door was unlocked. I struggled tae stand when I heard Lochinvar say, "Help the other man out! Ye need tae help him, Og Maggy! His name is Nor!"

Another man asked, "Nor? As in Normond?"

"Aye! Ye ken — ye hae tae get him free."

"Och nae." A big man returned tae my cell, his light bright in m'eyes, blindin' me. "Ye are Normond? What are ye in here for?" He threw a shoulder under my arm and hefted me up. He dragged me unceremoniously from the cell.

I explained I had been nabbed by Johnne Cambell and that m'name was Nor, that I was the Duke of Awe.

The man said, "Och nae," and asked me as he lifted me up the stairs, "Where were ye when ye were kidnapped?"

"Florida... with m'wife."



There were three men rescuin' us. They heaved Lochinvar and me up from the dungeons, then carried me through the courtyard and down a tunnel. The cool night air hit me with a blast. The fresh breeze was invigoratin' tae me after long weeks imprisoned. I was dragged intae the woods where horses awaited them and dropped unceremoniously tae the dirt.

I asked, “Who are ye?”

“M’name is Magnus, ye ken Lochinvar, Fraoch is there, and James. Dost ye ken where ye need tae go?”

My words escaped my throat with a croak as I told him all I knew, “Amelia Island... the month of May, I daena remember the day, 2012. I got married.”

Fraoch said, “Congratulations, but ye daena ken the date? Ye ought not let yer wife hear it.”

Magnus pulled a portal from his pocket and worked on it. “Ye must always ken the date. Ye canna go back on that same day, or ye will loop and ye daena want tae loop. Ye ought tae give yerself at least three days, for travel time. Ye need tae ken the calendar.”

I wanted tae ask what he was doing, where he had gotten the portal, how he used the machine, but I was so weak it was hard tae focus.

He said, “I am sending ye back in June, tae make sure ye are safe. If something goes wrong ye might need a do-over.”

Fraoch said, “Never underestimate the importance of a do-over.”

Magnus shoved the portal against m’chest. “Daena come back here tae this time, this is too dangerous. Dost ye understand?”

“Aye.”

“And daena mess with me. I live on Amelia Island. Ye leave me and m’family alone, nae contact, nae incursions intae my lands, or I winna be as friendly. Dost ye understand?”

“Aye, I understand, thank ye.”

“Twist it once we hae gone.”

Magnus, Fraoch and James mounted their horses and turned tae go, but Lochinvar remained for a moment longer.

“I told ye that we were goin’ tae get out of there — dinna m’brothers come, Nor, just as I said?”

I nodded. “Aye, ye are a man of yer word, thank ye.”

He asked, “Do ye need nourishment?” He dug through a bag on the side of one of the horses. “Here, I hae a sandwich, made by Chef Zach — peanut butter and jelly, one of m’favorites.” He passed food in a shiny bag tae me. “Eat slowly, I hae been in yer condition afore, ye need tae keep it down.”

He looked in another bag for a moment as if tryin’ tae decide. “Here are some cookies, ye can hae them, I can get more.” He held them out, seemed tae draw them away, then gave them tae me. “Tis fine, I hae more.”

He passed me a bottle, much like the one that Livvy used. “This inna water, tis vitamin juice. It needs whisky, but Zach assures me that I ought tae get used tae drinkin’ something that is healthful for me sometimes.”

One of the other men said, “We hae tae go.”

Lochinvar said, “Aye.” He tossed me a small knife in a sheath. “For yer protection.”

“Thank ye.”

He said, “I will see ye around, Nor, except, ye ken, listen tae Og Maggy on it — ye daena want tae be around us, we are a complication for ye, and ye daena ever want tae loop.”

He turned his horse and followed them away.

I was left wondering, *What does he mean by loop? How are these men a complication?*

I almost faded out of consciousness, but pulled m’self from it — *ye canna sleep Nor, ye arna safe, get tae Florida.* I glanced down at the portal, took it in m’hands, twas too dark tae see the numbers, even with the sun beginning tae dawn. I would hae tae rely on the men who had freed me, trust that the man named Magnus wanted tae send me somewhere safe, and so I had tae just turn the ends of the portal and draw the storm and go...

Chapter 10 - the Duke



JUNE 7, 2012
A SPRING IN NORTH FLORIDA

When I shifted, m'feet splashed in water. I fell back unconscious, but then groaned. I was partially submerged... I found the will tae pull myself up a muddy, grassy bank. I had been expectin' a beach and here I was in sodden grass.

There was a loud splash behind me.

I looked tae m'left tae see a monstrous brute pull itself up from the water and crash upon the shore. Twas a dragon. I couldna remember what Livvy had named them, except that his name would be George.

I mumbled, "George, I am sorry tae be on yer bank, but I will move along, good friend, I daena want tae be a bother."

I kept m'eye on him as I looked around for m'food, the knife, the bottle, and the portal, gathered them intae m'arms and began tae crawl, verra slowly. Nae startlin' moves in front of the monster.

At a safe distance, I scrambled tae my feet and raced tae the only building in sight, and collapsed halfway up the steps with m'top half on the porch.

Gratefully, George the Dragon dinna move. But he was eyein' me like a suspicious dragon full of mistrust and anger.

I called out, "George, ye stay down there, ye hear me? Ye daena move tae me or I will fight ye!"

I hoped he would believe me, but I kent I wasna frightenin' just lyin' prone on the wood planks of a porch. I

craned my head up tae look around, there wasna anyone here, it seemed as if the building was empty.

I flipped tae my back, ripped open the bag, and pulled out the food Lochinvar had given me, slices of bread filled with peanut butter and a type of fruit jelly. “George! Ye canna hae any, ye must eat yer chickens and let me eat in peace, daena even look at it!”

I chewed a big bite and swallowed. “Och tis terrible, it needs meat and less sweetness.” I put the other half down on my stomach, for m’bite had eaten most of it at once. I rested for a moment, chewin’ it down.

I breathed. *Och my middle hurt from the lack of food then a lump of it going down.*

I unscrewed the bottle lid, took a swig, and grimaced.

I said tae the dragon, “George, I ken I just met ye, but this is terrible— tis a horrible drink, ugh, ye daena want it, stay down there in the loch.”

I could see the bag of cookies laying in the mud near him. I eyed them forlornly. I wanted them and I wanted a drink of the water. Twas so close yet so far. “Could I come near, George? Could I come drink of yer water?”

The monster raised up on his legs and then dropped down again with a muddy splash. Twas as if tae say, ‘Nae, keep tae yerself.’

I took another swig of the sweet nectar drink, grimaced, then lay m’head back, looking up at the roof. I was beginnin’ tae find some strength. I pulled m’self up, dragged my bottom half up the steps, across the porch, and sat leaning against a wooden column, facin’ in the direction of the dragon. “I am keepin’ m’eyes on ye.”

I finished the food in two more bites. Then I washed it down with more of the syrup drink. *Och nae, tis awful.* The man, Lochinvar, was correct in it, it needed some whisky.

I sat there for a long time, as the food and drink filled down tae m’limbs and fingers, givin’ a spark of fire tae my will.

I pulled m'self up and peered through the window at the interior. There was a sink inside, I kent twould hae water, safer than the water near the dragon. If I could only get tae it.

I jiggled the window and thought I could pry it open with the blade. I worked it until it finally opened, and usin' all the strength I had, pulled m'self up and through, fallin' upon the sink, slidin' over it, and tumblin' tae the ground.

I lay there, staring at the ceilin' and said, "I wonder if George is capable of followin' me in?"

I climbed tae my feet and closed the window.

The inside of the building was hot and musty. There was a layer of dust upon everything and it looked as if it had been closed for a time.

I found a cup in the cabinet and turned on the faucet. It was dry. I twisted the handle back and forth and nothin' came out. In a cabinet I found large containers with what looked like water inside. I unscrewed the lid and, because it was too heavy tae lift, tipped it tae the side, spilling much of it on the ground but managing tae fill m'glass. I drank and it dinna satisfy my thirst. I filled the glass and drank again.

The room was dark. I flicked the switch upon the wall but nae lights would go on. I opened the door on the cold box and twas dark and empty. The buildin' dinna hae the hum of energy that I knew from Lou Muller's ranch.

On the side table stood a device, the same that Livvy had used tae summon the voice of her family. If I ever saw her again, I would need tae ask her tae teach me how tae use it. I noticed a large map on the far wall, the corner of it hangin' down. I studied it — an endless land, with dots of lakes and water

upon it. I couldna make sense of it, except I found the name Live Oak, I had heard it mentioned before.

But there were no marks on the map that led me tae understand where I was.

I explored the shelves and drawers looking for anything tae give me a sense of where I was, but any papers I found or books were confusin', I couldna make out what I was looking upon. How would I ken?

I was too tired tae think on it and I could see from the light that the sun was goin' down. I collapsed ontae the settee, in a puff of dust. A scent of must and animal, dampness and mold, wafted throughout the room. I needed tae rest before I could begin tae walk. I fell asleep facin' the door and the window as I wasna sure what the dragon would be capable of.

I wouldna be able tae fight him off in m'weakened condition.

Twasa fitful night.



At dawn I rose. I cleaned as best I could, usin' some of the water on a worn towel tae scrub a bit at m'face and hands, filled my bottle with water, and found a small cloth bag with handles tae put the portal and my bottle inside. Then I followed the road, oriented m'self with the sunrise, and headed west. I had considered all possibilities, and west seemed the most likely.

I had a growin', gnawing hunger in m'stomach.

I walked for a long time on the edge of the road, with cars and trucks roarin' past me, until one verra large truck pulled tae the edge of the road ahead of me.

I wasna sure what tae do but it sat hummin' and I would hae tae walk intae the ditch tae go around. I looked left and

right and then there was an arm wavin' from the driver's side window.

I uneasily approached the truck from the other side away from the road, and through the open window the driver asked, "Where you headed?"

"I am nae sure, tae Live Oak?"

"You aren't from round here?"

"Nae, from Scotland."

"You're a long way from Scotland."

"Aye." I wasna sure what tae say.

"What business you got in Live Oak?"

"I am expected at the Lou-Moo ranch."

He narrowed his eyes. "What business you got there?"

"I'm Lou's grandson-in-law."

He looked at me for a moment then said, "Climb in."

"Och, ye are offerin' me a ride, ye ken where tis?"

"Yep, I know where Lou-Moo ranch is. Funny that you don't, it's west of Live Oak by a long mile, many long miles from here. You thought you were going to walk all the way there?"

I tried tae figure out how tae pull on the only thing that looked like a handle, but couldna work the mechanics of it — he leaned over and pushed the door open.

I climbed in and looked around the verra large space, with a wide front window for seeing through.

He said, "Close the damn door, I don't have all day."

"Aye, I ken, my apologies." I pulled the door closed.

He drove the truck on tae the road.

There was an intermittent chirp.

"Put your blasted seat belt on, boy!"

“M’apologies, master.” It took me a moment tae get the belt out, verra far and then tae aim it for the place it was tae go. I hadna paid attention when Livvy had done it for me.

He drove faster. Our view was wide-ranging and thrilling.

He put his hand in a bag, pulled up some food, shoved it in his mouth, and chewed. I tried tae look away, but my hunger was drivin’ me tae distraction.

He pushed the bag toward me. “Want some chips?”

I nodded, plucked it up, dove my hand in, shoved chips’ in m’mouth, chewed, swallowed, and then grabbed for more.

“Jesus Christ, son, when was the last time you ate?”

“I canna remember full well, yesterday I had bread with peanut butter and jelly, but afore that I suffered from a prolonged lack.”

“Where you been that you didn’t get fed?”

“A dungeon.” I tipped the bag intae m’mouth, pourin’ in the last crumbs. I chewed. My mouth was dry — I was so parched. I opened m’bottle and swigged until it was dry.

“Where the hell is a dungeon?”

“Twas in Balloch castle, Scotland.”

He chuckled. “Damn boy, You must think I was born yesterday.”

“Nae, ye were born many years earlier, but I was in a dungeon in Scotland, twas bleak, but finally I was freed.”

He laughed again. Then he looked at his watch and said, “Tell you what, I was going to drop you in Live Oak town proper and let you walk to the ranch, but seeing as how you have so many fanciful tales I’ll take you straight to Lou’s house, see if he does know you, or if you’re some kind of bullshit artist.”

I put my head back on the wall behind m’seat. “Not a bullshit artist, I am actually a duke, m’name is Nor, Duke of Awe.”

“Well Duke of Awe, I’m Roy Forsyth, Trucker.”

He put his hand out and we shook.

“My apologies, Master Roy Forsyth, Trucker, my fingers are filthy, but I am verra grateful for the fare and the ride.

He said, “That’s fine, Nor, the Duke, it’ll be about forty-five minutes before we arrive.”

As we went I realized we did indeed go west. I would hae neared the ranch eventually, though it would hae taken me days tae walk it, and I would hae needed tae stop and hunt en route. I would hae grown verra hungry over time.

As we drew near I recognized some of the area, the shops along a road told me we had drawn close, then I recognized the turn, though I wondered how I would hae found it. He passed the main gate, larger than I remembered it, with an armed guard behind it, and instead drove down the dirt road beside the property. He pulled the truck up at a large gate at the south end of the ranch. He said, “This here is the trucker gate.”

A guard with a gun strapped across his chest approached the truck and spoke tae Roy Forsyth, who was explaining, “I have a passenger who says he lives here—” as the guard eyed me suspiciously.

But then Tim came around the corner from behind a barn, scratchin’ his head. He realized it was me. “Nor!” He called tae the guard, “Let them through!”

Roy Forsyth, the trucker, pulled his truck through the gate and up tae the barn. “Well I’ll be damned, they *do* know you.”

I clawed at the door trying tae get it opened.

Roy said, “Pull, gently, then push.”

I got the door open and slid out tae the ground.

Tim ran up, “Nor! You got away? We are so glad you’re back, it’s been... weeks!”

I said, “Has it been so long? Och nae.”

Dan rushed up. “Nor! You’re thin, they didn’t feed you?”

I said, “Nae, I barely survived it.”

Roy said, “Holy shit, this is all true.”

Tim stepped away, “I’m calling Livvy. Hold on.”

I faced the direction of the house, waiting for Livvy tae come.

She was running across the fields.

Chapter 11 - Livvy



JUNE 8, 2012
LOU-MOO RANCH

Tim called. “Nor’s here, just drove up in a—”
“Nor! Oh my goodness, Nor!”

I raced out of my house barefoot, still with the phone to my ear. “Nor! Nor is here! Where?”

Tim was laughing in my ear. “Down at the truck gate.”

I skidded to a stop, u-turned, and bounded across the fields toward the truck gate. The barns came into view and beyond, a huge white eighteen-wheeler, and in front of it, Nor!

I picked up speed, tearing through the fields, and then thud thud thud as I raced up the path. He was weaving on his feet as I collided into his arms— “Nor!”

“Livvy!”

—with a slam. Our arms around each other he lifted me up from the earth and held me tight. “Och, I dinna think I would see ye again.” Then his knees buckled, he dropped me as he crumpled to the ground.

He was down in the dirt.

“What’s happening?”

“Och, I am fadin’—”

“What do you need?”

“Food, water, a rest. I daena ken in what order, perhaps all at once.”

I said, “Junior just went for the truck, we’ll drive you up to the main house. Cool?”

“Aye.”

I said, “Let’s get you in the shade.”

I tried to help him crawl about ten feet over to the shadow of a big oak where we got him sitting with his back against the tree.

He sheepishly said, “Did yer uncles see me fall?”

“No, they didn’t even notice.” I straightened his shirt on his shoulders, fussing with him because I was frightened. He was thin and gaunt, terribly weak, shaking. He was filthy and smelled horrible and I was desperately worried about him. I looked around for Junior coming. *Where was he with that truck?*

Tim said goodbye to the man who had brought Nor, then rushed over. “Man, you hit the dirt, you okay?”

Nor groaned.

I said, “Junior’s not back yet, what’s taking him so long?”

“We left the truck in the back field, need water? I got the barn sink.”

I glanced up and down the road, then saw the plume of dust from behind Junior’s truck

“I think he’s on his way. It’s fine — can you wait, Nor?”

He nodded, with his eyes closed.

“We’ll wait.”

I stood beside Nor watching down the road as Junior’s truck raced towards us.



Tim and I helped Nor into the front seat of the truck. I climbed in after him, and Junior drove us bouncing and careening up to the main house. The Duke was wedged between me and Junior, a pale hand gripping the dashboard. His head was lolling.

Birdie and Lou were out on the porch, Birdie yelled, “What is it?”

Then Lou yelled, “Nor!”

I pushed the truck door open, jumped out, and Nor weakly slid out behind me. He stood swaying on his feet.

Lou rushed down the steps and he and Tim each put a shoulder under Nor’s arms. Nor tried to wave them away, but Lou said, “No, son, we’re getting you up to the house.”

Birdie said, “Well come on, bring him then!”

They dragged him through to the family room and dropped him onto the couch.

I started to rush into the kitchen for water, but Birdie said, “I’ll get it! I’ll get it! Go sit down.”

My hands shook as I went and sat beside him.

He put his head back on the couch cushions with his eyes closed. “M’apologies, Livvy, I was recovered, the plan was I would walk in victoriously, but I am verra much more weakened than I thought.”

I placed my head gently on his shoulder. “It’s okay, you crossed the finish line, that’s where you collapse.”

Birdie brought in a glass of water with ice. “What do you need, Nor?”

His hand shook as he brought the glass to his lips.

I reached out to help steady it.

He dribbled water down his front.

Birdie had her hands on her hips.

Lou shook his head. “I see there is a big important story here that needs to be told. But first we have to get you strong enough to tell it. I figure you need some nourishment. What sounds good?”

“Nothin’ but I am feelin’ a mortal hunger that is worrisome.”

Lou said, “He looks like he’s home from war, this young man needs a steak — can you whip up some gravy too, Birdie?”

“Of course I can whip up gravy, what kind of question is that?” Birdie stalked away to the kitchen for some food, yelling, “I’m starting the grill!”

Junior said, “He needs electrolytes.”

Lou grabbed the water glass and passed it to Junior. “Get him some electrolytes. Also a stout beer from the garage.”

We all waited. Lou sat down on the chair and we were quiet.

Then Junior rushed back. He opened a bottle of Gatorade and put it in front of Nor. “You’ll probably hate this, just drink a sip or two. Here’s a beer.” He opened it, dark and with a thick head. “You’ll love this, but go slow. Don’t fill up, save room for the steak.”

We waited a bit longer, then Birdie brought in a plate and a small tub of yogurt. She placed the plate of steak and gravy in front of Nor and pulled a fork, spoon, and steak knife from her pocket and put them in on the edge of the plate. She sighed as Nor weakly leaned forward, picked up the knife and fork, carved a bite of steak, and with a shaking hand placed it in his mouth.

He nodded. “Och, this is good.”

“Good, when you’re done, eat the strawberry yogurt, full of fat, it’s a good dessert. and I’m setting my clock, in one hour I’m bringing you a protein shake.”

Lou stood up. “We are goin’ to leave you to eat, call if you need anything. In a bit we’ll come back to hear the tale.”

Nor nodded.

Lou said, “It’s good to have you home, son.”

Nor said, “Thank ye, Master Lou.”

Lou and Junior and Birdie left the room. I sat beside Nor waiting for him to carve and eat a few more bites of steak. Then he took a sip of stout beer, “Och my stomach is finally feeling comfortable, this is verra good.” He leaned back on the couch. “Hae ye been terribly worried about me?”

I nodded.

“How long hae I been gone?”

“A few weeks.”

He took my hand in his and squeezed it.

I grabbed a tissue from the box and dabbed at my eyes. “I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to look for you, but I didn’t know how or when. Charlie and I jumped on Amelia Island, testing the portal. And that’s a whole long story, mistakes were made, it was unsettling and we weren’t any closer to finding you. Our next attempt was going to be tomorrow, but... we didn’t know what to do next. I feel so ashamed, I wasn’t looking for you every day, there were just too many options. The world is too big, time is too long. We had nowhere to look.”

He nodded. “The world is verra big, Livvy, but tis small as well. I hae been warned tae stay away from Amelia Island. I was told that the island is too close tae other time travelers and for us tae nae go there anymore.”

“Did Johnne Cambell tell you that?”

“Nae, the men who rescued me. Their leader, a man named Magnus, told me tae stay away.”

I looked off into space. “So there are more time travelers than Johnne and they rescued you?”

He nodded.

“You’re right, knowing that makes the world feel bigger and a whole lot smaller now too.”

While I was talking, he grew really quiet, sleepily quiet. He nodded again weakly and a minute later was fast asleep. I nudged his arm and whispered, “Nor?”

He smiled and nodded with his eyes closed.

“You’re good?”

He nodded again.

“Promise me you’ll tell me if you’re not okay.”

Another nod. I held his hand for a moment, being watchful. Then I got up and stacked pillows at one end of the couch for his head, and leaned him over. I untied and pulled off the boots we had given him when he was last here. The stench was horrible, he hadn’t bathed or washed in weeks by the smell of it.

Birdie rushed in with a stack of towels, a sheet and a blanket. I put a towel on the end of the couch, washed his feet with a rag as best I could, then covered him over with a sheet and a blanket, and tucked him in.

I was so freaking relieved he was home... now we just needed to wait for him to wake up.

We waited.

An hour later Birdie came in with more steak and a protein shake.

I nudged him awake. He ate some bites, hungrily, sipped from the shake, stumbled into the bathroom to piss, then returned, lay back down on the couch, and fell back asleep.

Birdie said, “Good, very good, he’s had enough liquid and calories for a bit. I’ll set my alarm for three hours for his next meal.” She grabbed his dirty plates to take to the kitchen.

Nor just slept and slept, basically the whole day, shifting occasionally.

Then he awoke in the evening, ate chicken with gravy and biscuits, a bit of stout beer, went to the bathroom, and fell back asleep.

I barely moved, waiting in the chair beside him. I turned on the tv, found some reruns of Friends, and watched with the volume way low.

Birdie brought us dinner. I said, “Is it that time already?”

Birdie said, “Yep, you’ve had these curtains drawn in this cave all day.”

I nudged Nor awake to eat something before bed.

He was groggy, and ate a few bites, barely speaking except to be grateful for the food and to be home. Then he stared at the tv for a few minutes, his brow drawn down, then next time I looked at him, he was asleep again.

Before Birdie went to bed she checked on us: refilled his drink, took dirty plates away and brought in a bowl of ice cream for my dessert. “When he wakes, he’s gonna be all turned around in the middle of the night — if you need anything, just holler.”

“I think if he needs food in the middle of the night I’ll manage it, thank you for all your help.”

“No problem, you needed to be at his bedside, I don’t mind. If you need me, holler, and I’ll rush down.” She climbed the stairs for her room.

Mom came in, “Are you okay? I’m headed home to bed.”

“Yeah, he’s going to wake up any minute now and be ready for the day. I probably should have slept while he was

sleeping.”

“You’re going to be wiped out. In the morning I’ll go to the stables for you.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

She squeezed my shoulder and left for her house.

Chapter 12 - Livvy



I watched him sleep then watched some more shows sitting in Lou's favorite recliner with my laptop, checking Facebook, until I must have fallen asleep, because in the middle of the night, I heard Nor's voice, "Livvy... Livvy?"

I was startled and confused, stretching, unsure where I was. "Hmmm? What...?"

Nor was looking at me from the couch.

"Oh! Hey, you're awake again." I pushed my laptop to the side, climbed off the recliner and crawled across the floor to sit beside the couch, shoving the coffee table out of my way. "This is the first time you woke up without me nudging you awake."

I knelt beside his head, and whispered, "Hey, my love, how are you?"

He was lying on his side, his face smooshed in the pillow. "I hae been better." He chuckled, one side of his face going up.

I pushed the hair back from his face. "That was epic sleeping, so much sleeping. I... I am so glad you're home with me."

"I am verra relieved... and am I here? I wonder if I hae wasted away tae nothingness."

"No you're here, want more food? Want a drink?"

"Aye, I would like more food, the steak was good and I would love another beer."

I kissed his temple. “Back in a minute.”

I rushed into the kitchen. On the top shelf of the refrigerator was a Tupperware with a note on it: Nor’s steaks.

I forked one onto a plate, spooned gravy on it, placed it in the microwave, and turned it on.

Then I got out another dark beer and popped the top off. I got myself a beer too. The microwave dinged. I balanced the two bottles, the plate, and the utensils, to the family room where Nor was sitting up, waiting.

His hair was mussed and sticking up all over.

I placed the plate in his hands and the beer in front of him.

He said, “More gravy, och aye, delicious.”

I sat down facing him, cross-legged on the couch, drank a swig of beer, and watched him carve his steak and eat. The most welcome sight in the world.

I said, “It’s a sign that Birdie loves you already that she has allowed you to sleep on her couch in your state.”

He chuckled. “I am grateful, I daena hae the strength tae change m’clothes.”

“You need to build your strength because you must bathe, very soon.”

He smiled. There was a crease on his face from the pillow, and his matted hair stuck up in the back. “Now ye mentioned it, I think I need tae bathe, the stench is botherin’ me.”

I brushed my hand across my forehead. “Phew, now that’s a relief, a first sign of recovery.”

He put his beer down and heaved himself up.

I followed him to the adjoining bathroom where Birdie had put a pile of men’s pajamas, a man’s robe, a couple of towels, and a washcloth on the counter for him.

I turned on the water, and adjusted the temperature while he pulled his shirt off over his head. It landed heavily on the

floor, having grown thick with sweat and dirt.

I grimaced, “Yikes, you, my love, are filthy.”

He looked down. “Och aye, twas a sin not tae clean m’self earlier. I will need tae make amends tae Birdie.”

“Yes sir, and I think the temperature is good.”

He dropped his kilt, giving me an epic glimpse of his hot body, for like, only the second time in our marriage, but I would have to wait for any fair play because he was absolutely foul.

He climbed in. “Too hot.”

I adjusted the temperature to warm and introduced him to the different soaps, passed him a clean washcloth, and told him to stay in there until the water ran clear.

I leaned against the sink while he washed, enjoying the view, until it grew so steamy I couldn’t see anymore. I returned to the family room to put some new towels and sheets over the couch, then I went back to the bathroom in time to pass him towels when he finished washing.

He was lean, his ribs showed, he was still hot, but thinner than before.

I helped him dress. It felt intimate and familiar. I held out the pajama bottoms and he stepped in and I pulled them up to his waist. I had barely been married to him and here I was nursing him back to health. It was like jumping ahead in one way, and yet, stepping back in another. I felt familiar with his body, health, his presence, but awkward about our love — we had been interrupted so profoundly, so desperately, that just the act of kissing him felt strange.

I sighed while I patted his skin on his stomach with the towel.

He glanced at my face. “I ken, Madame Livvy, we feel many miles apart.”

I nodded and felt overcome.

He put his arm around my head, pulled me to his chest, and held on. It was an embrace of two people who were married strangers, with big things to say, stories to tell, and yet...

We had to get through to morning first.

Chapter 13 - Livvy



O n our way to the couch he asked, “Should we go tae the bedroom, so ye might sleep in a bed?”

I said, “I don’t think so, this is closer to the kitchen, I think you need food and drink still, this is the best place for now.”

He lay on the couch again and I sat down on the floor beside him. I held his hand on his chest and passed him his half-finished beer.

He sniffed the sheet. “Ye put clean sheets upon the couch?”

“Yep, the last ones were ripe, this whole place smells *so* much better—”

He gently pulled my hand across his chest to pull me above him. He took my face in his hands and kissed me. It was sweet and sexy, a spark of flame in my heart. He looked up in my eyes and said, “We are going to get through this, Livvy, we will. I promise ye.”

“And one thing I’ve learned is you always keep your promises. You said you were coming home and you did.”

The corner of his mouth went up. “Aye, I mean tae. Ye can keep that in yer heart, my Livvy, if I promise ye, I mean it.”

I slid off him to the side and took another swig of my beer. “What happened to you?”

“As ye ken, Johnne Cambell took me.”

I nodded.

“Dost ye remember when we saw him first, at m’ castle?”

“Yes, he had on the modern boots and—”

“Yet he looked as if he came from the past, ye ken? I think he was at the beginnin’ of his travels, near the beginnin’.”

“And when he came here to the farm he looked modern.”

He watched me as I spoke. “Were ye frightened?”

“So frightened.” I took another swig of beer. “What did he have you do?”

“We jumped many times, I couldna tell where or when I was, how long we had been together and I couldna get free. I grew confused because he grew older and then would be young again, and it seemed as if we were repeatin’, but I couldna be sure of the time. It looked as if he was gainin’ power through me, by some means.” He took a deep breath. “Once he was waging war — there was a deafening roar of his machines, I still hear it, Livvy. He made me steal and...” His eyes went back and forth on the ceiling. “I was in a castle and was stealin’ something from a safe and was confronted by Claray, but—”

“Claray, your *sister*, Claray?”

“Aye, but she was aulder. She was frightened and... she recognized me, though it seemed as if twas a dream. She was in a castle, with all the portals and some other machines, but we were allowed access tae them and I stole them for Johnne’s use.” His eyes continued traveling across the ceiling. “Twas my hand that opened the locks upon the door. Is this a way tae do it? Johnne pressed m’hand upon the door.”

“Yes, that’s a way, it sounds like it was your castle. Was it Kilchurn?”

“Nae, twas nae a past castle, twas a castle bein’ built with machines.”

I chewed my lip, “So you have a castle in the future.”

“Or at least I did, I might hae changed the fact by interferin’, but I saw Claray in that castle and I hae had a recurrin’ worry, m’family is caught up in this danger...”

I nodded. The room was dark, the hum of the air-conditioning kicked on, but it was just us, whispering in the middle of the night, serious things, like nightmares, except they were true...

“During the war I saw a mountain aflame, the men said...” He shook his head. “I daena ken — they said ‘Normond the First,’ but they might hae meant anyone, right?”

I said, “Yeah, I suppose they might have.”

“Then Johnne declared that he was a king. He grew even more unstable. He is verra dangerous now. He can drop in and out of time with ease. But he seemed tae want tae get me out of his way so he sent me back in time tae before the portals originated. Does that make sense tae ye, Livvy?”

I shook my head. “No, not at all.”

“He told me the portals originated on November 1, 1557 and he wasna sure if time travelers could go farther back than that date. He sent me past it tae see if I could survive and was goin’ tae come get me the followin’ day.”

“Sounds like he was experimenting. This is good to know — he doesn’t understand everything about these machines. Plus, though it doesn’t really make sense, we know not to go back past 1557.”

“Aye, when I landed, m’portal was gone, I was surrounded by highwaymen. They dragged me intae the dungeon at Balloch castle, where I spent day after day in misery.”

I clutched his hand. “That is terrible.”

“Aye, I feel threadbare from it.”

“How did you get free?”

He sat long then answered, “I daena truly understand it, except that m’prayers were answered. A man by the name of Lochinvar was brought tae the dungeon. He had been battlin’ against the men of the castle and had been captured. But he

told me that his brothers would win the battle and... they won. His brothers rescued him from the dungeons, and they freed me as well.” He looked in my eyes. “They almost seemed tae recognize me, Livvy, though I dinna ken them — they told me tae stay away from their family and gave me a time travel device.”

“Where is it now?”

His head shot up. “Did I come with bags? Where is m’bag?”

I glanced around and saw a small cloth bag near the door. “Is that it?” I jumped up, grabbed it, and peered inside. “Yes, a portal and a modern water bottle. A man gave you this in 1557?”

“Aye.”

“So those men were definitely time travelers. And this means my prayers were answered, too.”

“Aye, I believe that moment was the origin of the portals: the battle near Balloch in the middle of the night in 1557. Johnne lived in that castle. He became involved. The men who rescued me were from a different time, they were coming back tae fight for the portals.”

“So you believe it happened in one night, just like...” I snapped my fingers.

“Aye, if a battle can be considered that easy. Aye. In one day the world went from being God’s creation tae a world that could be disrupted by man. Johnne Cambell took the opportunity and went from a mere mortal tae become a powerful king.”

“I hate that he was the one to find them, he’s a dick. But you think the portals just appeared?”

Nor nodded. “I mulled it over a great deal, I believe I was captive before the portals existed. After the battle, there were time travelers. November 1, 1557 was the dawn of time travel. I daena ken how or why but—the portals daena exist before that moment.”

“That’s good to know, not past that random, unexplainable date.”

“Aye, there is a limit, daena push against it, there inna any hope for rescue.”

I rested my head against his chest. “So there was really a group of men, Brothers, who were time travelers? It might be good to locate them and ask—”

“Nae, we canna. The man Magnus warned me not tae cross them. He told me tae stay well away. He said his home was on Amelia Island and for me tae not step foot there.”

I said, “He sounds like an ass. I take back what I said about wanting to find them.”

“He saved m’life.”

“Yeah, sorry about that, I just... we need some advice, you know? The idea that someone might have this figured out and doesn’t want to tell us makes me crazy. Sorry, I’m eternally grateful to him for saving your life.”

“...and it must be dangerous tae hae different time travelers runnin’ across each other in history, there would be a great deal that could go wrong.”

“As Junior says, ‘everyone needs to stay in their own lane.’”

“What does that mean?”

“Like you have a path, stick to it.”

“Aye, stick yer wheels tae the ruts, or ye will upturn the cart.”

“Exactly. And he specifically told you not to go to Amelia Island? Because Charlie and I went to Amelia Island, we jumped from there.”

“Where did ye go?”

“Same place. We tried to go a few days earlier, but our first try we went years into the past.”

His head came up and his eyes wide. “Och nae! That is so dangerous, what if somethin’ had happened tae ye?”

“Well, it didn’t.” I exhaled. “Luckily, I ended up being fine. Sore from the jumping. I might have figured out how to put time in the portal equation, so that’s a win. It just wasn’t a big win and I couldn’t bring myself to test it again. I was too apprehensive.”

He watched me intently as I spoke, then pulled my hand up and clutched it to his heart. “I was verra worried on ye.”

“I was very worried about you too.”

We looked steadily at each other.

“I wondered if ye would still be here when I returned.”

“What do you mean, like, you wondered if I would still exist?”

He shook his head, slowly, then took a deep staggering breath. “Nae, I wondered if ye would still be m’wife. If ye had become a widow. If I might hae lost ye.”

I pouted. “How would that work? You mean, you thought I would... what would I do? We are married. I think we are married forever.”

“Aye, but I daena truly understand the meaning of forever anymore.”

“Oh no, my love, that is bleak. So while you were captive you were worried about losing me, like I might move on and *remarry*?”

“While I was captive I felt concerned that perhaps I haena understood the rules of yer world. Johnne Cambell said—”

“Johnne Cambell was a torturer and a madman, you can’t believe a word he said.”

He quietly said, “I ken it.”

“But even so...?”

“Aye, but even so... we are new tae each other, Livvy, and we hae made a promise, but... we are also in a war between

time travelers, caught and—”

“And we promised to love each other to the end of time.”

“Aye.” He looked into my eyes. “Aye, we did.”

I took his hand, clutched it against my breast, and rubbed it on my lips. But I wasn’t close enough. I needed closer. I climbed over him and with some fidgeting got between his side and the back of the couch. “Is this okay, I’m not hurting you?”

“This daena hurt.”

“Good, because I need to be close when I say this.” I drew in a breath, my cheek tucked against his chest, my head on his shoulder, our hands clasped over his heart. “I know we are new. But oaths haven’t changed in all these centuries. I promised to love you to the end of my days. I am your wife, I will be waiting for you.”

“What if I had died, Livvy?” He smoothed my hair down. “Ye wouldna ken. How long would ye be willing tae wait tae ken for certain? Forever?”

I thought about it for a moment. “I truly don’t know. But women have often lost husbands to foreign wars or long crusades, how have they ever dealt with it? Sea captains’ wives had something called a widow’s walk up on the roof of their homes, so they could look out over the ocean waiting for their love to return.... I will wait for you, forever, if that’s what it takes.”

“Twould be a melancholy existence. Mourning is difficult enough with yer loved one buried in hallowed ground beside the church ye visit every Sunday.”

I tightened my grip on his fingers. “I truly believe, Nor, that you and I would know. I knew you were alive and that you were coming home. Did you know I was alive?”

“Aye, I kent ye were alive.”

“Then you came home. And I, for as long as I can feel you alive, will be here waiting for you.”

“I did hae some verra dark moments, times where I was unsure ye were waiting. What if ye ken I am lost forever? What if I died and ye couldna recover m’body? What if ye dinna ken for certain?”

Tears were welling up so I frowned to push them down and then I squiggled up to press my lips to his. I pressed my lips there, against his soft waiting mouth, with my eyes clenched tight. It wasn’t a kiss of passion or love, more like a hard press of ‘this is too big and frightening to use our words.’

He seemed to understand.

We lay there, our bodies pressed together, mine strong and his weakened, but with my lips pressed to his, we stilled and felt that closeness. It was like a full-stop on our conversation.

Finally I broke away. “I’m not sure what you want me to say, Nor.”

“If I were gone, if I were lost, would ye still wait?”

“Forever.”

He brought my head closer, raised his head and placed the sweetest kiss on my lips. This one was the promise.

He sighed. “I ken, tis nae fair tae speak on Mary tae ye, but I think I hae a guilt in my heart, a shame that I promised her tae love her tae the end of m’days, and I couldna keep the promise.”

“Oh.”

I adjusted myself on my elbow, so I was looking down on his face. “So you feel shame, and it feels like it’s too much to ask of me?”

He nodded, his eyes cast down.

“I love you. You are a man of honor and strength and you did not seek me out. You weren’t looking for a second wife. You weren’t trying to marry a second time, but you found me, we fell in love, and you married me — have you considered that maybe God put me in your path? That perhaps your Mary had been looking down on you, saddened with grief, and maybe she asked God to find someone to look after you?”

He nodded.

“I’m a forever for you, Nor. I don’t understand what lays ahead of us with this time travel—”

“I believe twill be a great deal of danger and turmoil. We must yell, ‘Le misneach! Cruachan!’ tae give us the strength tae do it.”

“‘Le misneach, Cruachan!’ What does that mean?”

“It is the roar of courage that m’brothers and I would yell, running through the hills and across the fields before a battle.”

“Pretend battles or real?”

“Both.”

I nodded. “Okay, we will yell ‘Le misneach! Cruachan!’ and it will give us courage before facing this pain, torture, destruction—”

“Tis what gave me strength while facin’ the future war and I would yell it before takin’ a shite in the corner of a dungeon.”

I frowned, deeply. “Dearest, that is harrowing.”

“Aye...” He yawned.

“You’re ready to sleep more?”

“I am turned upside down, tis near dawn and aye, I am ready tae sleep.”

I lifted the edge of the curtain and looked out the window. It was dark. I couldn’t make out that dawn was coming. “Is it?”

“Aye, trust me Livvy, the dawn is coming. I will keep ye safe.”

“This is good, I do trust you, Your Grace. And trust me, I will pull on my big girl underpants and—”

He raised his head and looked down on my face. “Did ye just say yer big under... dost ye mean big undergarments? Nae, not big undergarments!”

“Wow, you sound almost distressed, I said, big girl underpants, it means I will be brave.”

“Och, tis a relief! I thought for a moment ye meant ye were goin’ tae throw on some vast undergarments, I do prefer the wee bits of cloth ye were wearin’ on our wedding night.”

“It’s just an expression, I promise.” I sighed, comically. “Our wedding night seems like a long long time ago.”

“Tis so long, if I were nae weakened I would give ye some of the ol’ ruttin’ ram, alas, m’horn needs tae rest first.”

I giggled, “Did you just compare yourself to a sheep?”

His breathing had slowed, his eyes closed, a smile at the edge of his lips — he opened one eye. “Aye, though m’phallus is much closer in size tae the phallus of a horse, as ye ken.” He yawned again.

“Oh I ken, Your Grace, I ken.”

His mouth drew up in a full smile but he was drifting off to sleep.

I tucked my head to his chest and went to sleep too.

Chapter 14 - Livvy



The next morning, Birdie strolled in and was clearing our dishes from the coffee table when she cleared her throat.

“Well, good morning you two!”

Nor woke with a start, “Och nae!” twisted to his side, tossing the blanket.

I giggled because he had been tenting the covers spectacularly.

Birdie left saying, “Now don’t mind me, sorry to interrupt.”

He groaned.

I glanced down. “Well, you’re rested now.”

He looked down. “I suppose I am. He is majestic in form, is he nae?”

I neighed like a horse.

He chuckled. “Alas, we are in a public part of yer house.”

“That we are. We are actually in my grandparents’ house. We have our own house now, down the lane, want to go?”

He got up with a groan and held his head in his hands for a moment. Then he looked off into space. “I canna believe I am sayin’ it, but I need sustenance first.”

“Let me get you some food.”



Nor ate and drank and rested and slept. We talked about my time travel experiment and his captivity. He and I camped out in the family room, on the couch, he had another shower and smelled even better, and as evening came rolling around, everyone came and filled the room to hear his tales.

Charlie, sitting kicked back in the recliner, said, “So, you barely made it back.”

“Aye, twas a travail.”

Charlie leaned forward, grabbed a tub of yogurt off the tray, picked up a spoon, popped off the lid, and dug his spoon in.

Dad said, “Son, that’s Nor’s full-fat feel-better Greek yogurt. Birdie got it for him special.”

“But all the best snacks are in here, why does Nor get everything good?” He took a bite, grimaced, and checked the ingredients. “Plain? Why plain yogurt?”

I said, “Because he didn’t want sweet, but you have to finish it because you started it, rules.”

He continued eating. “Oh, wanted you to know, Livvy, that zippo lighter we were going to buy when we time traveled? It would be worth ten times what I was going to spend. Huge disappointment. We need to make a plan and go back on a real spree. Lotto tickets, collectibles, buy some stocks — the works.” He was punctuating the air with his spoon.

I said, “I think we have bigger things to deal with besides looting the past.”

“Looting is usually the first thing a time traveler does, building wealth is part of the power.”

Nor said, “Tis true, but first I must go tae the past. I hae tae confirm that m’family is safe. I am worried about them.”

Charlie put down the tub and spoon and furrowed his brow. “Danger still? You didn’t kill that guy when you got

away?”

“Nae, and as he held me captive he grew stronger. Ye are correct about time travelers seeking power and wealth. He has become a king.”

“What a nightmare.”

Lou said, “I want you to know, Nor, that I have heightened security here on the ranch, there are guards at the gates, we have motion detectors and video cameras at all the fence lines. That maniac won’t be able to get access again. You and Livvy are absolutely safe here.”

Nor nodded. “Good, thank ye, Master Lou.”

Dad asked, “What did you learn, Nor, did you learn anything new about the time travel?”

I said, “Yes, great question, Dad. He’s been telling me the story, but let’s get down to the lessons learned.”

Lou said, “We ought to write it down.” He grabbed a pad off the stand beside his recliner and a pen and flipped the pad over to a clean page. “Go.”

Nor looked thoughtful. “What did I learn? Well... the biggest lesson was we canna go farther back than 1557, and really not even most of 1557.”

Lou said, “Hot damn, that does seem important. Good. What else, did you learn anything about Johnne?”

“I learned he is keepin’ a book, where he is writing everything he knows.”

Charlie rubbed his hands together. “Man, I want that book.”

Nor said, “I do as well. The knowledge he gained has helped him build a kingdom. But I also learned he daena ken everything about the devices. There was this one time, where he was frantic about alterin’ the timeline—”

Lou’s pen scratched on the page. He looked up. “What did he say exactly?”

“I canna remember fully, twas something about how he mishandled the timeline, and needed tae fix it.”

Charlie said, “Like he screwed up the history of the world?”

“Aye, he was distressed about it and he had me steal something for him. It was a box, about this big.” He gestured that it was as big as a shoebox.

Lou asked, “Any idea what it was called?”

“I think it was called a... Drachoid, ye ken the word? It means bridge.”

I said, “Oh, so he messed up the timelines and then he wanted to Bridge them again?”

Nor nodded, then continued, “The Bridge opened tae my palm, and inside was a machine I dinna understand, I was forced tae press m’thumb tae a solid form, and it turned malleable, it pulled m’thumb within then released it. It happened verra fast, then Johnne was excited and kept asking, ‘Did it work?’”

Charlie said, “*Did* it work?”

“I daena ken, but the next time I was speakin’ tae him he was about tae be crowned king.”

Lou finished writing. “Do you know the name of the kingdom, the... and I know it sounds crazy to ask, the year he was crowned king?”

“I daena, but it seemed far in the future.”

Nor added, “I did learn something else, I dinna learn it, I sort of gathered it, I suspect it... ye ken? I daena ken if it is true but it might be.”

Lou said, “Out with it.”

“I think, in the future, *I* am a king.”

There was a long beat where we all stared at him.

Mom said, “Well all things are possible. And you are already a time-traveling Duke from the past, it’s not that

improbable that you're also a king from the future. It just hasn't happened yet, so what do we know?"

Lou said, "I'm writing it down anyway as something we think we know."

"I was also told, by another group of time travelers, the ones who saved my life, tae stay away from Amelia Island and not interfere with them."

Lou looked at Nor with his brow drawn, then he said, "Suppose I'll go up there first thing and take down my weather station, not gonna interfere with a man who saved my grandson-in-law's life. Gonna stay out of his way."

He dotted the period at the end of the sentence and said, "Long list, anything else?"

"One more thing I daena completely understand. Lochinvar, one of the men who saved m'life, told me, 'Ye daena want tae loop,' what dost ye think that means?"

Charlie said, "Like go back and forth in time? That would be weird, isn't that the whole point of time travel?"

Mom said, "Maybe they mean, to not do it too fast, like maybe don't go back and forth in one day or something...?"

I said, "We kinda already know that because picking the time of day is a mystery, we don't seem to get to decide that part. I guess if we tried to jump away and come back on the same day we might overlap — oh, maybe that's what he meant... don't go back in time and overlap on yourself, you know? To try and meet yourself — I get it, how would that even work? Two of you at once?"

Lou said, "That's probably right, Livvy Bear, we are God's creation and each unique, to have two versions of ourselves in the same place does not seem wise. I'm putting it on the list. No overlapping or looping on yourself. Seems a sure way to break something." He looked proudly at the list.

Mom said, "All these lessons learned, we must be safer."

Lou placed the pad down to the side and slammed the pen on top. "We are, we're definitely safer, all of this and the new

tightened security. This is the safest place in the world for you and Livvy. As soon as you're on your feet, Nor, I'll show you all we've implemented."

Junior said, "Forewarned is forearmed."

Tim said, "We got this. It won't happen again."

Nor said, "But m'family hasna had a forewarning."

Tim asked, "So you need to go warn them and take them weapons so they can protect themselves."

Nor nodded.

Lou said, "We'll load you up."

I said, "You just got back though, are you going... soon? Do you need me to go with you...?"

Nor squeezed my hand. "I daena think ye need tae go, I am goin' tae deliver a message, I winna be gone long. Daena worry on it, Livvy, we will get through this."

I found myself nodding, why? What was I agreeing to? I hadn't thought this through. He was back and now he needed to go... He was still on the couch, recuperating, I was sitting cross-legged beside him, a throw-blanket over my legs, while we discussed his going to the past again.

"Of course..." Still nodding... "...you need to warn them..." Nodding some more.

"I do."

"And we know more now... this is good." Nodding, stupidly. "I have data and research and you can... you won't jump unless we know exactly where you're going and when. *Exactly.*" Nodding, endlessly agreeable.

Nor watched my face. "I am grateful ye jumped, Livvy, ye learned about the vessel. This will assist my journey, and I must warn m'family, tae tell them tae protect themselves. And," he smiled, "I need tae tell them we hae wedded."

Lou banged his hands down on his knees. "Well, the good news is you look much healthier."

“I will be ready tae travel verra soon.”

Charlie said, “I don’t know, man, *soon*? You’re skinny, you need more food.”

As if on cue, Nor’s stomach growled. Lou hollered to Birdie who had left for the kitchen, “Birdie, Nor is hungry again!”

She called back, “Good, good! More steak, coming up!”

Nor called in, “Madame Birdie, dost ye hae more gravy for it?”

She rushed over to the doorway. “One thing to know about me, Nor, I always have gravy.” She hustled away and I heard the familiar sound of my grandmother bustling around the kitchen: plates, pots clanging, the microwave beeping.

Nor’s plate was brought. Charlie teased, “Birdie, I see how it is, Nor is your favorite grandson now, my feelings are hurt.”

She wound up the dish towel and flung it at his head.

“Child abuse! You all saw it! Birdie feeds Nor and then throws things at me!” She waved her hands at him.

I said, “She didn’t bring me anything either.”

“You both know where the microwave is. All y’all know how to work it.” She waved her hand around the room.

Charlie said, “Fine.”

Lou said, “Don’t drag me in on it, I don’t know how to work it, on principle. It’s the devil’s work.”

Birdie rolled her eyes. “The devil’s work, am I the devil? You just won’t cook for yourself.”

He tapped the side of his head. “That’s because it’s your love language Birdie.”

She laughed, “You’re going to bring that up again?”

“You made me read that whole article about how we all have different love languages and you told me yours was to

cook and when you cook for me that's how I know you love me."

Charlie said, "Birdie, what's Lou's love language?"

Birdie laughed, and wiggled her hips as she danced out of the room. "Oh we keep that one private."

Tim plugged his ears. "Do we have to hear you guys talk about love all the time, can't we have a bit of propriety?"

Nor began to dig into his plate of food.

Charlie watched for a moment then said, "Glad you're back, Nor, sorry you're worried about your family."

"Thank ye, Master Charlie, tis good tae be home and out of captivity, tis good tae hae a full meal."

"So you were *really* in a dungeon? I always wanted to know, where did you poop?"

"Right there in the corner."

"Yikes. Sounds dreadful, but I also wish I could go with you, I could use the adventure, and I'm medieval curious."

I said, "You've got chores, you can't just go on an adventure. Besides it—"

"Sucks, yeah yeah, true. But couldn't we go in one day and come back the next? Isn't that part of the fun?"

Nor carved a hunk of steak and took a big bite and moaned happily as he chewed. "Och this is verra good."

"Don't eat too fast, you'll hurt yourself."

He swallowed and said to Charlie, "There is a great deal that could go wrong. I will leave one of the portals here, if there is an emergency would ye accompany Livvy tae Kilchurn tae warn me?"

I said, "Good, that's a plan."

Charlie said, "Awesome. I hope it doesn't come to that, but if it does we will embark on a dangerous adventure. Would it hurt worse than the jump we did, Livvy?"

I groaned, "Yes, way worse."

Nor said, “But daena worry about it, Master Charlie, it winna be necessary. I will warn my family then return.”

Chapter 15 - the Duke



After dinner, we agreed I was ready tae move tae our new house. I felt steady upon m'feet, though I was still weak. I was thin and near always hungry, but Birdie put food for me intae boxes in case I was hungry during the night.

Livvy and I rode on the truck-gate, while Charlie drove us tae the house — a house that Livvy called a manufactured home.

Charlie called me the Duke of the Double-wide and thought twas verra humorous.

Livvy led me up the steps, sayin', "This is where we will live. It's going to be great. We'll fill the refrigerator with food. I'll cook for you. We can ride horses and..."

I said, "We are near the stables, I can smell them."

"You like that? Good, because it gets fresh as it gets hotter. To make ourselves feel better we call it the smell of money." She opened the door on the front entrance.

I nodded. "Tis good tae smell the ranch, there lies the wealth and power of yer family. It has a rich scent."

"Speaking of power..." She turned on the lights and swept out her arm. "What do you think?"

I cocked my head tae the side. "Ye built this?"

"No, Lou bought it and had it dragged here." She knocked on the walls. "Hear that? It's thinner than a stick-built house, but it's all we need, at least for now. I don't know... maybe we can build a house." She put her hands on her hips and looked

around. “It seems really small for you, now that I see you in it.”

I said, “It looks enough, I see a... what do ye call it?”

She led me tae the kitchen. “The fridge.”

I ran m’hand along the counter. It looked tae be made of stone, the only stone in the house, but it wasna cold like stone. It had a warmth that made me second-guess what twas.

She said, “Go ahead, look in the fridge.”

I pulled open the door, there was food upon every shelf.

“Mom and Birdie filled it for us.” She placed the containers that Birdie sent with m’grilled steak and gravy on the middle shelf.

On a shelf in the door there were beer bottles. She popped the lids off two and passed me one.

“That is a great deal of food.”

“I wasn’t sure what you would want, so there are eggs, meat, some veggies. They packed it with everything we could think of.”

We drank our beers as she showed me around. “Dad thought I would want the house to face the woods, but... I won, I love the view of the farm, that’s why the deck looks out over the lane and the fields. Because there’s more to see.”

She showed me guest rooms and the laundry room, and then she led me down the hall tae our bedchamber.

She said, “This is our room. This is your dresser.” She pulled out a drawer and brought forth a box from inside. “And here is your watch.”

“I dinna think I would see it again.” I opened the box, pulled the watch out and placed it on my wrist and admired it.

She crossed tae another dresser, where she had a jewelry box, and pulled out her watch and placed it on her wrist. “I didn’t want to wear it while you were gone, it felt... I don’t know...”

I nodded. “I ken.”

We were quiet with each other as she put paste upon m’brush and we brushed our teeth, shoulder tae shoulder, spittin’ in the sink, and findin’ it humorous. She joked, “I feel bad for you, last time we slept together on our wedding night, I undressed from my beautiful wedding dress. This time I’ve been in pajamas with you all day.”

I spit m’paste in the sink and said, “I hae been in pajamas — ‘pajamas’ is the word?”

She nodded.

I continued, “...all day as well. I winna hold it against ye, daena hold it against me.” We put our brushes down and I pulled my shirt off over m’head, and put it upon the counter, and embraced her, walkin’ her backwards intae the bedroom. We fell ontae the bed. I moaned in pleasure. “I had forgotten the softness and comfort of yer bed.”

“Yep the couch was not good enough, with the cushions splaying and your feet up on the end, this is going to be good.”

“Aye.”

She lay on her back and put out an arm.

I put m’head on her chest, “I had forgotten the softness of yer bosom.”

She laughed and shifted m’head while she pulled off her shirt and tossed it away. She stilled and I put my head back on her chest and began tae fondle and caress her breasts. My mouth went tae her throat, then my lips tae hers. “I had thought tae go slow, Livvy, but I canna, it has been too long.”

She shoved my pants down and pulled off her own.

Her breath fast, her moans wanting me, “I don’t mind... missed you...” Her hands caressin’ down m’sides and pullin’ me closer.

“Aye,” I lay full upon her and raised her hands above her head and kissed her along her jaw and throat, my knees

pressing apart her legs and with a deep exhale against the soft skin of her neck I entered her.

With her sweet, minty breaths against the corner of m'mouth she pushed against me, as I built a rhythm. Her skin grew warm and tremblin' under me, at once vulnerable tae m'force, and attemptin' tae match m'effort. Her moans growin' within m'ears until we reached the height of our ascent and roared over — I lay heavy and spent upon her.

She whispered. "That was only our third time, it was lovely."

"Aye, we are verra new tae each other." I kissed her soft lips and rolled tae the side. We lay beside each other, above the covers on the bed.

Finally she asked, "What are you thinking about?"

I said, "This is the moment where I would get up and stoke the fire, so I was thinking about how yer home is—"

"Our home. This is our home now, we've completed the act of it, just now, finally."

"Our home — how the temperature is always just right. I daena need tae cover yer arse," I smacked her arse, and she laughed, "with a blanket as soon as I am finished indulging my carnal desires."

"Indulging your carnal desires?" She grinned. "I loved having you indulge, you can indulge carnally whenever you want."

"Tis verra good tae ken, I might indulge again in a moment, I am ravenous for ye."

She kissed my cheek. "To the point about the temperature — that's because we have temperature controls." She gestured tae ward the wall.

I looked at where she gestured. "I daena understand it."

She climbed off the bed and in her naked form strode tae a small box on the wall. "You see this?"

I put my hand under my head and smiled. “I canna see anything over the sight of yer arse, tis verra fine, Livvy, can we hae ye undressed in our room all the day and night as well?”

“I truly believe, Your Grace, that you would grow bored. A month in and you would be begging me to dress.”

“That is hard tae believe, but I would not want tae grow bored of the sight of ye.”

“I will dress and then you can dream about me. But, you are distracting me from my purpose—”

“Ye were explainin’ why we can lay upon the covers, without needin’ tae stoke a fire tae warm the rooms of this castle.”

She explained, “This number here is the temperature in the room, I have it set to seventy-two degrees.” She pushed the button. “If I tell it to go higher... Listen...” There was a hummin’ sound. “That’s the heater coming on, to heat the rooms. We don’t need that, obviously, it’s hot as hell outside.” She pushed the button once more. “We need the air conditioner. That cools the rooms. Now I’ve put it down again, below seventy-two degrees, to seventy... listen again.” She paused with her hands on her hips. “Hear that rumble? It’s turning on. Sounds different, right? Now we’ll be comfortably cool.”

I raised my brow, admiring her naked form.

She joked, “Are you listening to me?”

“Tis hard tae hear ye over yer breasts.”

She laughed. “Do you prefer too cold or a bit warm?”

“I think I like it cold and drafty as a Scottish castle, else why dost we hae these comfortable blankets?”

She said, “Good answer,” and pushed buttons on the box before returnin’ tae the bed, climbin’ across the mattress, and laying long. I held her arse and directed it down, pressing upon me.

Her words, “Ready to go again?” vibratin’ against m’skin.

Aye.

Chapter 16 - Livvy



I woke up in the middle of the night and the bed was empty. I heard a noise at the wall and peered to see Nor in a stream of light from the moon. He was standing at the temperature controls.

I whispered, "Is it okay, Nor?"

"Tis verra cold and I wanted tae heat the room, and now... I haena remembered the instructions."

He poked it, then banged it.

I climbed from the bed. "Man, it is cold — the AC was cranking." I shuffled to the controls and pushed the button to turn up the temperature. "I'll show you again in the morning." I shuffled back to bed.

Nor said, "I need tae go for somethin' tae drink."

I could hear him opening cupboards in the kitchen. I thought to myself that I had forgotten tae show him where things were as I fell back to sleep.

A bit later he climbed back into bed, quietly.

I opened my eyes to see him, an arm under his head, his eyes shifting back and forth as he was looking up at the ceiling in the darkness.

At dawn I woke up to find Nor's side of the bed was empty again.

I climbed from bed and found him out on the porch, barefoot, wearing a loose shirt and a pair of sweatpants, sitting alone in the dawn air, looking out over the ranch.

The expression he wore frightened me. It was the look of someone who had decided something dire. Something that would need a long talking. I hoped it wasn't something horrible, like maybe not coming home, but that's exactly where my mind went.

I sat in the chair beside him. "Good morning."

"Good morn, Livvy."

"Everything okay, are you thinking about something?"

He took a big long breath, then said, "I was lookin' out on these foreign lands. Did ye ken, Livvy, that in m'life I hae always kent how tae stoke the fire in the night?"

"I am sorry that upset you. I'll teach you how, and we do have a fireplace. It's a gas blaze, but I'll show you how to turn that on too, and—"

He nodded, glanced at me, then went back to looking out over the fields. "Dost ye see the fog rolling in, Livvy? Tis a portend that something is coming."

I bit my lips.

He continued, "...I ken the weather pattern that a fog portends, I ken that the morn is cooler than the day and that the fog will lift soon, the day will bring warmth. I live in a time where I learned tae search the fog for the weather it would bring."

In the distance we could see a cloud of dust rising from the back of Uncle Dan's truck as he drove up to the barn.

"At Kilchurn I would go tae the walls at dawn tae watch the weather for signs of what m'tasks must be. I would count the boats at the docks. I would watch the clouds drift across the sky. I would note the color at sunrise and compare it tae the hue at sunset the night before. I would watch the flight of the birds, listen tae the insects. I would ken by the bleating of the sheep what the temperature was goin' tae be, and note the

direction of the wind and the scent of the land, tae therefore ken the day's intent. From *this* I would plan my duties for the day."

"Like a weather report."

He said, "Aye, but here, Livvy, I see the fog, I guess at the weather, I canna plan m'day because I daena understand how the world works. I canna even build a fire tae warm m'wife, I am purposeless."

I frowned, deeply.

He noted it and took my hand.

I said, "This sounds really dire, you just got home and now you're leaving. You're saying things that make it sound like you're never coming back."

"I daena mean tae frighten ye, I need tae warn them what is comin' and I hae decided ye must come with me."

"Oh?" Then I said, "Oh. I mean..." My voice trailed off and my brow drew down while I considered.

"I must go and ye are m'wife and I ken this is the safest place for ye. We could separate, but... perhaps I am bein' selfish, I daena ken — on reflection, I daena want tae leave ye."

I nodded. "But..."

"But nae, ye canna argue with me."

I joked, "I bet I can."

He smiled. "Och, I ken ye can, but ye ought not, I need ye tae come with me, and so ye must." His brow drew down. "What has ye not wantin' tae go?"

"Well, there's the uncertainty of the jump and the pain and what if we end up in the wrong time?"

"Are ye afraid? Ye hae been there before."

"I'm not afraid, not really, it's just... the lack of information. I can go if I'm needed — I will. I just don't like to go into the unknown. I need weather maps and data, I need

to know what to expect. And now that I know there are other time travelers telling us to get off their lawn, and dungeons where prisoners have to shit in the corner, and wars and a future kingdom with roaring machines — okay, scratch that, I am afraid. The more I learn the more scared I get.”

“We are goin’ tae go visit m’family at Kilchurn, we will tell them that we are wedded and make sure they are safe. Ye daena hae tae be afraid of it, tis a journey, that is all.”

“I think it’s a lot to do with my need to understand how the world works. I feel untethered, as if this doesn’t make sense. What are the rules?”

“Ye might want tae hae faith, Livvy, ye can trust that God winna give ye something too difficult tae bear. Think on it, I survived captivity. He answered our prayers.”

“True, that is the best explanation.”

“And ye ought tae hae faith that I will keep ye safe, that I will prepare for the journey and get ye tae my castle safely. Ye will be protected.”

“I do feel a lot more relaxed now that you’re home.”

“And ye need tae hae faith that there are rules, and we will learn them. Ye are a modern woman. I am from an earlier age. We will be able tae understand the rules in any century... and...” He smiled, gently.

“And what?” I relaxed my frown.

“We hae already learned so much, we ken we must not be timid, the most important of the rules.”

I nodded again. “Being brave is not a lack of fear, it’s feeling afraid and doing it anyway.”

“Precisely. We canna wallow in fear, we must... ye said it last night, pull on yer large undergarments and—”

I giggled.

The sun was higher by degrees, the fog dissipating, I said, “Let me go in and make a pot of coffee, hold that thought, okay?”

“Aye, but I am makin’ my case, winnin’ ye over. Ye must allow me tae continue when ye return.”

“I will, promise.”

I went to the kitchen and loaded the coffee machine and pushed start, then I went down the hallway to brush my teeth and run fingers through my hair. This sounded like it was going to get interesting.

Then I returned to the kitchen, poured coffee in two mugs and returned to the porch. I passed him a mug and sat down in my chair. I took a sip. I liked mine with no sugar, lots of milk, until it was almost white.

He reached over and pushed my hair behind my ear. “I am torn, because ye are frightened and daena want tae go without assurances that we will be safe. I could leave ye here, and go without and twould be as we had planned...I go see m’family, ye stay here, but... but I want ye tae come with me.” He said, his voice low, and convincing. “Ye daena hae tae worry, I would keep ye safe.”

I turned my head to face him. “I know you will.”

“Tae m’dying breath.” He took my hand in his and rubbed his thumb up and down on my finger. “Livvy, m’wife, I love ye, ye must come with me, and ye daena get tae do whatever ye want. I ken ye want tae be independent, but ye canna be in this. Ye must be dependent on me. I need ye tae come with me, this is the only way I can keep ye safe, and I daena hae the strength tae argue with ye. I need ye tae listen, and tae be agreeable, so ye will need tae say, ‘Yes, Yer Grace,’ and prepare tae travel with me as soon as I hae gathered m’srength.”

“You need me?”

“Aye.”

“Then I will go, yes, Your Grace.”

“We are settled?”

I nodded.

“Good, thank ye Livvy.” He pulled my knuckles to his lips and kissed the back of my hand.

Then he joked, “Besides ye need tae be standing beside me when I explain tae m’mother how I hae run off and married ye.”

I groaned. “Will she be pissed?”

“Pissed? Ye mean angry?”

“Yes.”

“She will be pissed, because she was not involved in the match. She will cluck around like an aggrieved hen, but ye ken, Livvy, this is part of being the Duke, I daena hae tae be bothered with her moods.”

“But you will because you are a good son.”

“Aye, I will make sure tae smooth her feathers. She will forgive ye if ye allow her tae fuss upon ye a bit.”

“I will need some clothes.”

“If ye will allow her tae organize yer dresses she will forgive us both.”

“So we are absolutely decided?”

“Aye.”

Uncle Tim’s truck drove up, Charlie was in the passenger seat. He called from the window. “Hey, Duke of the Double-wide! How’s it shaking?”

Nor laughed. “I daena ken what most of the words mean, Master Charlie, but ye called me Duke so I will accept it as an honorable address.”

I asked, “Want to come have some coffee?”

Charlie said, “Nope, got a fence to deal with.”

Nor asked, “Need help?”

“Nah, you need to concentrate on eating, that’s your job, plus you’re about to take off... What are you guys doing?”

I said, "Making decisions, I'm going to go with the Duke."

Charlie said, "Just yesterday you were sending him by himself! You had a million reasons. I swear it's hard to keep up."

Uncle Tim said, "You owe me five bucks. I knew she would, didn't I tell you she would?"

Charlie said, "Damn it." He pulled out his wallet and passed a five dollar bill to Tim. "That was a stupid bet, I see it now, I was thinking about how painful it is to jump, but forgot how handsome Nor is, of course she changed her mind."

I said, "I know, I know, he is very persuasive. But it's only for a visit. We'll be back before you even miss me."

Charlie said, "When you going?"

Nor said, "The day after taemorrow."

"Livvy you ought to tell Birdie and Mom, they'll want to pack for you, the sooner the better."

I said, "I'm going to go up to the house to tell them as soon as we have breakfast."

Charlie's face went incredulous, "You haven't had breakfast yet? The sun's been up for hours! It's literally... What time is it Uncle Tim?"

"Near 7:30."

I joked, "So late!" And raised my mug as they drove away down the lane. I said to Nor, "I know it might be silly, but I love the deck facing the lane."

Chapter 17 - Livvy



We had two coolers open on the kitchen floor and Mom brought meat in from the freezer in the garage, while Birdie loaded the other one with staples. I had a box open for my toiletries and jewelry. I joked, “How much coffee is going in there? I need like one whole cooler that just holds coffee.”

She said, “I have lots of coffee, some sugar here, salt and pepper, and some other spices.”

Birdie called from the garage. “Send vitamins!”

Mom pulled jars from the cupboard and loaded them in a box marked ‘staples’. She wiped her face on her sleeve.

“Mom, are you crying?”

“I don’t like watching you go.”

“It’s just like a vacation, you know, not that big of a deal. You’re all acting like I’m going for a long time. I’m just going to go for a few days.”

“You’re sure about that? You’re going centuries away. I don’t know, it seems like you need to be...” I pushed a box of Kleenex closer. She took one and blew her nose and wiped her eyes.

Birdie came in with a package of paper-wrapped sausages. “Joni! You’re not supposed to cry in front of the bride when she’s leaving her family home.”

I huffed. “I’m not leaving my family home, I have a new double-wide down the street.” I tried to lighten the mood. “I

just ordered a front doormat. Those are not the actions of someone leaving for good.”

I saw a look pass between them.

I said, “What’s going on, why the look?”

Mom said, “Honey, it’s just, you married a Duke, and he’s come for you. He asked you to go home with him. It’s clear, you’re leaving.”

Birdie said, “Be sensible, dear, a Duke is going to live in a double-wide down on his wife’s family’s ranch?”

My brow drew down. Then my frown.

Birdie squeezed my shoulder. Then she said, “Thing is, none of us know what’s going to happen, right?”

Mom said, “Imagine being a wife in 1845 and your husband wants to move out West—”

“Like Laura Ingalls’s Ma. I was reading *Little House in the Big Woods* to Nor on our wedding night.”

Birdie said, “Those books have always been your favorites. So it’s like that, Nor needs to go West, you need to pack up the wagon. You’ll be home once you’re settled, and you can write home in the meantime.”

“I can’t write home though, there’s no contact, it’s... that’s why it’s only for a short time. I don’t need to take all this food. I can deal with medieval food for a couple of weeks.”

Mom said, “Sure, honey, of course it is, only to visit, and this food isn’t just for you, Nor needs it. If — I mean *when* you come back, if some is left, you can pass it out as gifts.”

Nor entered from the porch.

I said, “I thought you were at the house napping?”

“I was starin’ at the ceiling, I canna sleep anymore. I feel much stronger. And yer father came by, he measured m’feet but dinna hae a big enough size, so he went tae town and bought me new boots. Twas verra kind of him.”

He put his foot out so I could admire them: a pair of cowboy-style waterproof work-boots in brown with embroidery on the shaft.

“I love, they match mine.” I put my foot out and we tapped our toes. Mine were the female equivalent of his and shorter, but with the same embroidery just with some small teal blue details. “Are they comfortable?”

“Aye, very.”

Birdie said, “Good, those are the best boots, do you need food. Nor?”

“Would it be impolite tae say, ‘aye’?”

“Not at all, let me whip something up.”

Chapter 18 - Livvy



We were packed. We had some gear, a few gifts, more weapons, and some tools. We had two chests of food, a box of my toiletries and jewelry. Nor was eating well and healthy enough to go.

He was saddened at the thought of leaving all this easy, delicious food behind but we knew we needed to go. We had sat up last night with my notebook, discussing how to work the portals. He had learned how to input the place, in theory, with a working knowledge of what the numbers meant. I had an idea of how to input the date.

I had messed it up last time, but I knew now.

I hoped I knew now.

But note, I had messed up half the times I had tried.

The next morning we all drove out on the back fields, and Nor and Charlie got out of the truck and met Tim and Dan out of their trucks, and Mom and Dad arrived, then Lou and Birdie. They piled our equipment and gear into a small stack in the middle of the field. Dusty was there too. Nor had decided we should take him.

I heard Lou say through the window, “We’ve taken more than this on a weekend camping trip.”

And Mom saying, “We didn’t have time to shop. They decided to go so fast.”

It wasn’t much, but I wondered, *could we carry all of it?*

Nor assured me though that Johnne carried armies through time, so it seemed likely. If he could do it, we could. Probably.

I remained in the truck, in the middle of the backseat, listening to the sound of my family working. There was a risk of failure, but also a chance of success. I pulled my notebook from the side pocket of my bag and looked my notes over. Nor and I had added to them. We had scratched through some, rewritten others. *These numbers were right, right?*

Mom came and leaned in. “What’s up?”

I said, “Nothing, just need to sit here, look at my notes for a minute, it’s fine, totally fine.”

Then the tailgate of the truck was closed with a slam and I was certain they were done.

Charlie walked by the truck and looked in but pretended he wasn’t checking on me.

I was wearing my clothes from the past with Claray’s plaid folded in my lap. It was too hot to put it on yet. The sun was high. Why did we decide to do this so early in the day? *We could have come after dinner. Maybe I should ask them to come after dinner. We could go up to the house and rethink all of this.*

Why?

I closed my notebook and tucked it back into my bag.

I loved Nor, we had a nice home, we had horses. A big ranch. There was no reason we truly had to time travel. I could refuse to go. I could demand he stay. We could live here. We could be happy. There was no downside.

I took a deep breath and opened my eyes to look at Claray’s plaid. Her voice, “...ye ought tae hae a finer dress... but ye are leaving, I ken tis selfish, but I daena want ye tae take my dresses away... but if ye hae taken this plaid, I will be able tae get another,” sounding just like any young woman in the modern world. Then I thought about her saying, ‘Hear that on the walls? That is my brother keeping us safe.’

Nor was Claray's brother. He kept her safe. He was going to let her choose a husband. He might be one of the only people in the world who wanted her to be happy and was going to protect her. Sweet Claray.

I put my hand on top of the folded cloth.

Nor stuck his head through the door, then he climbed in beside me, both of us on one side of the backseat of the truck.

“What are ye thinkin’ on, Livvy?”

“Your sister actually, and how important you are to her.”

He furrowed his brow and let out a long low exhale. “I hae tae go, Livvy, I must.”

“I know, she needs you, you have to go.”

“Aye, my whole family needs me. Do ye need me tae go without ye?”

I shook my head. “I’m just working through it... what if we end up somewhere awful? What if we end up in a dangerous place, with a murderous dictator, or dinosaurs? What if a dinosaur wants to eat us?”

“We are certain that we will end up in Scotland, ye ken? Do ye think there are many murderous dictators there? And what is a dinosaur?”

“These big giant beasts from the beginning of the world.”

“I daena think we can go back in time past 1557, were there dinosaurs in 1557?”

“I doubt it.”

“See, twill be perfectly safe.” He took my hand. “I will awaken as soon as we land, and protect ye until ye awake. Aenghus will come tae get us as soon as he sees the storm. If tis the wrong time we will make camp, rest, and we will try again.”

I said, “It hurts.”

“Aye, it hurts a great deal. This is why we are goin’ tae pray we hae the pattern right. So we winna hae tae keep doin’

it.”

I took a deep staggering breath and just... a little half-joking, said, “Or, you know, we could live here, we have horses and food and soft beds and temperature control and...” My voice trailed off.

He paused for a long long time, then said, “Livvy, I am a man of tradition, from a long line of tradition, the wearer of a title, the son of a duke, from a bloodline of dukes. I try tae be a man of honor, tae live up tae my title, tae wear it in a way that would make m’father proud. And I am a man of duty, I must wake up in the morn and see tae the men, watch over the castle — there are many souls who need me, nae just m’mother and my sister, but m’brother’s son, m’cousin’s nephew, my uncle’s daughter, they all need me tae protect them. I hae tae live up tae this title that I hae been given, even if it means goin’ without ye.”

“So what you’re saying is... that when you said you might be able to stay, that you could live here in Florida — you weren’t telling me the truth?”

“I dinna intend tae fabricate, I just... I believe I was caught up in the story. That I could be the modern man who marries Livvy and lives on a ranch, and that I would be fed and washed in the largesse of yer grandfather, but I am not that man. I was dishonest with m’self tae think it. I am a duke — what would ye hae me do, bring dishonor on m’name, shirk m’duties, tae live with nae tradition? Och, m’father would roll over in his grave.”

“My uncles told me. They said you wouldn’t be willing to give up your title for this.”

He nodded slowly. “If ever there were someone tae persuade me tae give it up, twould be ye, Livvy, but please daena ask it of me. I canna bear the decision.”

“I see that. You’ve explained it well, but as I listen to you, I am thinking, that by going with you, I am saying goodbye to my family, to the ranch, to... this world.”

“Tis a great deal tae ask.”

“I mean livin’ without coffee alone is almost a deal breaker,” I joked. “We’re bound to run out.”

“I will do m’best tae procure coffee for ye.”

“How?”

“I will hire a ship, I will hae it sail tae... where would it need tae go?”

“To Africa, I think.”

“I will send a ship tae Africa for a load of coffee. Ye will hae the most coffee of anyone in the old world, Livvy, Duchess of Awe.”

I sighed. “I know this is all true, I understand, I truly do, but you know, I am logical and I just want to know what this is — I am saying goodbye, right? Possibly for a long time? I just need to know the truth. I married you, we both have lives far away from each other. We were going to negotiate where we would live, but right here, right now, we are deciding. You can’t stay here, you can’t live here, you have to go home and if I am not willing to go, too afraid, then you will have to leave me?”

He looked out the window. “Aye, Livvy, the truth is, I canna be away from m’home. Perhaps I hae an overblown belief in m’own importance, tis what Aenghus would say, but I am a Duke. If I give it up, what if I change history? Dost we ken what might happen?”

“That is a good point.”

“Aye.”

“And I know you’re a duke, I’ve seen people bow to you. I understand you’re important, your brother is wrong about it, you are very very important. I’ve looked you up on Wikipedia. You exist. In the history of the world you are important enough to warrant a page on the internet in 2012.”

Another breath. He shifted in his seat. “Yer family is waiting for us.”

“Waiting to say goodbye, yes. I just had fooled myself into thinking that it was like a vacation, not a... ‘going to live with

you in your castle in Scotland' kind of goodbye.”

“Aye, ye might return, but ye ought tae assume this is a more final kind of goodbye, as ye never ken when ye will see someone again.”

I looked out the truck windows, my whole family gathered, waiting for us to finish.

I said, “Alright.”

“Alright, what, Livvy?”

“Alright, Your Grace, I love you, with all your tradition and honor and duty, all of it. I am going to gather my strength and jump with you to the unknown.”

“Tis not entirely unknown, ye hae been there before.”

“True, I know what to expect, so yes, let's go say goodbye. I don't want to get bogged down in 'what ifs' — life is meant to be lived. But you know, I'm going to say goodbye, but don't make a big fuss about the possibility we might not be right back. I think long drawn-out goodbyes would break their hearts. I will set a date that we will be back and then we will do our best.”

“Aye, we will do our best.”

I kissed him, then waved him from the truck and followed him out. I went around the group of people, hugging each, saying goodbye, my mother giving me the last instructions on the food, Lou telling us about the toolbox he had packed with our things. Junior asking again if we needed a truck. Charlie saying, ‘Don't need me, truly?’

Nor saying, “Nae, we daena need ye.” Then teasing, “What would ye do for us that I would need?”

Charlie joked, “I am great company, ask anyone.”

Nor said, “We daena need company this visit, next time we will bring ye for the company.”

I said a variation of I love you, I'll miss you, I will see you soon. We will be back at the end of the month. On this date. Don't worry, we will be living and doing things, we will

definitely be back on this date. I nervously thought, if you consider it, married people do this, go off to work and live other places... all the time.

I hugged Mom again. Birdie almost squeezed my lights out.

And then they moved away, in the trucks and on foot, leaving Nor and me in the middle of the field, a stack of boxes and a horse beside us. I wordlessly passed Nor the cloth I was still clutching and stood still in front of him while he bit his lip in concentration and wrapped the plaid around my shoulders, tucking it in at the belt. He said, "I love ye, Livvy, thank ye for comin' with me."

"You're welcome Nor, I always meant to, I just needed to work through it, so I was clear — this is the thing that I will do."

"Good," he teased, "yer mind is impressive when tis talkin' tae itself."

"I have to work the problem, but you and I are one. If you are bound by honor to your family and your title, then I am too. The decision is easy really. Simple."

Yet I trembled as he passed me the reins of my horse.

I said to Dusty, "Are you ready, boy? This is going to hurt, but I really need you."

Dusty nuzzled against my shoulder.

I wrapped my arm around one of the ratchet straps that held our boxes and bags together. Nor had learned that this was the way to bring what you wanted. We weren't absolutely sure it would work, but we were going to try anyway. I held onto the strap, clutched Dusty's reins, and pressed my head to Nor's chest.

He pulled the portal from his pocket and held it between us, then laughed, "I canna see it."

"Oh right." I drew away, put my hand on his lower arm and we both looked down on the portal. We silently checked the code. It seemed right. *Was I willing to risk my life on it?*

I looked up in his eyes.

He asked, “Ready Livvy?”

Yes.

He said, “Le Misneach! Cruachan!” And he twisted the portal and tore us from the time.

Chapter 19 - the Duke



NIGHT
AN UNKNOWN SCOTTISH FOREST

T was m'own moan that awakened me. I quickly shifted tae see our surroundings. It was dark, verra late at night. Sound was muffled. I shivered, twas oorlich, damp and chilly. I heard the breaths of Livvy's horse, Dusty, close by, a burst of steam crossing above me. Then the horse rose, shook his head, snorted, then seemed tae calm, sleepin' while standin', as if he had just gotten through it and had shaken his head of it.

But I couldna, pain ripped through my insides.

I swung m'shoulder around and checked its use, every joint feelin' stiff.

I raised tae an elbow with a jab of pain and pulled a barbed thistle from my shirt, shoved the plant away, and gazed wearily around. Twas impossible tae see but the bare outlines of our load in the light cast by a dim moon.

I patted the ground lookin' for Livvy, who was lyin' with her feet near m'middle, sprawled unconscious. I hadna considered that it might be cold when we arrived.

I crawled tae our gear, unzipped a bag and dug around for a blanket, sniffin' it — it smelled of flowers, of modern life, a scent that meant clean and civilized. I thought, "That winna last long," as I covered Livvy.

I glanced around tae see we were in a clearin' in the woods, encircled by trees.

I lumbered tae m'feet and accounted for all our gear. I was armed. The night was cold, but the sky was cloudless, we

wouldna need shelter. I tied Dusty tae a tree as I wasna sure he would stay put. Then I returned and dropped down beside Livvy.

She muttered. “Are we there?”

I sat with my knees drawn up, my arms around them. “I assume we are, but I canna be sure as tis dark as the underside of a golach.”

She mumbled, her voice coming tae me through the dark, “What is a golach?”

“The wee beasties that crawl on the ground.”

“Like a... like a squirrel?”

“Nae, without the fur, with the legs sticking out.”

“A beetle, like a bug?”

“Aye.”

“Speaking of, what’s in my—” She combed through her hair, pulled a leaf from it, then patted the ground. “What is this poky stuff?”

“We, m’love, were lying upon thistle, we are lucky twas a small patch,” I shifted her and swept the ground under us with my hand, pushing a plant tae the side, and pulling us away. “Thistle is more sharp and dangerous than welcoming, like most of Scotland. ”

She settled back down in the darkness with her head in my lap.

I told her, “There is a story of thistle, twas planted on the land of Scotland tae protect us from encroaching danger.”

“It’s acting as if I’m the danger.”

I chuckled. “We may well be, now that we hae thrown off the shackles of time. We might be the supernatural beings that myths warned our ancestors about.”

I shifted, and added, “...or we might hae just landed in thistles. They grow everywhere and they might be simply being thistly without meanin’ it personally.”

She laughed. “True.”

“But when I was wee and something had frightened me, I remember m’Mam tellin’ me that thistles would protect me from danger, as was their purpose.”

“I suppose in Florida we have the sand spurs, they do the same kind of thing. If you take off your shoes they’ll stick in your feet and make walking unbearable.”

“Aye, tae make bairns feel better about the dark we tell them twould be impossible for a foe tae sneak up on them because the ground is sharp and sticky, the foe would be moanin’ from the ache and then we can drive them through with our sword.”

She laughed again, “I’m not sure that’s a comforting story for a small child.”

“In Scotland the wee bairns prefer a story where they get tae battle their foes and win. This is a triumphant and heroic tale. What kind of tales would ye tell bairns in yer time?”

“You know, they love a princess fairytale, so yeah, you’re probably right.” Then she asked, “Is Dusty okay?”

“Aye, he is tied tae the tree, right over there.”

“Are we safe?”

“I believe we are, but I will stay up tae watch over us — ye can go back tae sleep.”

“It’s so cold.” She took the side of the blanket and draped it across my knees. We were quiet for a time.

“No one came to meet us?”

“Nae, but daena worry, Livvy, we will be able tae see in the morn.”

We hadna been met. I was unsure where we were and when. We had jumped intae the unknown and I wasna sure we had done it right or well. I had naething tae do though, but face the woods and guard until the morn.

Her tired voice, “Will you be able to stay awake?”

“Aye, I canna sleep,” I assured her, and twas true.

Chapter 20 - the Duke



DAWN
AN UNKNOWN SCOTTISH FOREST

Dawn came in a few hours. The birds were twitterin' in the trees above us, a breeze shakin' the limbs of the pine with a rush, rattlin' the limbs of the beeches farther down the hill. I kent this was a Scottish forest, I could hear it, but I needed tae explore—

Livvy spoke, “You’ve been up all night... you’re going to be so tired.”

“Aye, I am nae used tae travelin’ with all this wealth without guardsmen tae watch over it. If I were alone, I would hae brought less.”

She raised her head, looked around, and then sat up. “When we left Florida I thought we barely brought anything, now it looks like so much. We need a truck.”

I appraised the load. “Aye, we need a truck. There winna be one for centuries. We must leave it here. We will secure it and hide it from view.”

“I like it, that’s decisive, okay, good. I hope no one finds it.”

I exhaled. “They canna find it, they canna hae it. This is mine.”

She said, “You are sounding very forceful.”

“Because I am tired. And all of this is necessary, we canna do without.”

She grinned. “Even the barbecue sauce?”

“Aye, the sauce is the most important of all the things! We must give it tae m’brothers — they hae tae hae a taste of it.” I added, “...and ye are teasin’ me, ye are recovered from the jump?”

She stretched. Her hair was mussed dreadfully; she smacked her lips as she patted her hair. “I am recovered, but it’s dark and muffled, are you muffled?”

“Aye, a wee bit still.”

She nodded. “Nothing that a bit of coffee wouldn’t fix.” She glanced around at the pile of things. “We’re a few minutes into being here—”

“Many hours.” I looked at my watch. “*Long* watchful hours.”

“But we are just beginning, is what I’m saying, and we need coffee and it’s so daunting, everything is so daunting, here.” She stopped and looked in my eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“What for?”

“For bitching and moaning, for barely coming last minute, and then whining the whole time I’ve been here.”

I smiled. “Many long hours ago?”

“I just woke up, but yes, since we got here I’ve done nothing but complain, silently about the pain, a little about the not being able to hear and see very well—”

“Ye forgot about the cold.”

“Right! I complained about the cold. Brrrr.” She pulled the blanket around her shoulders. “And now I’m complaining about the coffee. I am truly sorry. And I really have to pee.” She tossed the blanket tae the side and clambered up. With her arms tight around her she looked around. “Where should I go?”

I said, “See the tree there? Twill afford ye some modesty.”

“Perfect.” She dug through one of our packs. “Do you remember where we put the toilet paper?”

“Nae.” I stood up and stretched my back.

She found a small box within our bags. “Baby wipes!”
And rushed off tae the tree tae relieve herself.

I went through the chest of food and pulled out what Birdie had called a roast beef sandwich that she had made for our trip. I ripped it down the middle and put half down for Livvy when she returned.

We sat on a chest and ate our small meal.

Chapter 21 - Livvy



UNKNOWN YEAR
NEAR CASTLE STALKER ON LOCH LINNHE

We hadn't been met by Aenghus and Nor was unsure where we were, so we decided to ride Dusty to the top of the ridge to see our surroundings. First, we pulled the boxes behind a tree and put some limbs and leaves over them. We put a rifle in a scabbard on Dusty's saddle, and we had a handgun in one of the side packs. Nor had a sword. He tied a bag of gold coins that Lou had given us to trade with to his belt. We saddled up Dusty. The Duke put his knee out for me to step on, which reminded me of the last time we were here. Then, it had been because he thought I was incompetent, but now he had seen me ride, he knew I was competent. The gesture was not judgmental at all, it was just... chivalrous and oh so romantic how he helped me up.

Then he climbed on Dusty and settled in behind me in the saddle, a rock of his hips to get me adjusted, perfectly pressed against him, not some strange Duke this time, a familiar man, my husband. I said, "I had forgotten how fun this is."

He said, "Sharin' a horse?"

"Yes, sharing a horse is hot as hell—"

"Tis hot? As hell?"

"Yes, like... you know if you're having sex with me we get warm?"

"Oh I ken, I just want tae hear m'wife explain it tae me."

I said, "First, I love talking to you while we ride together, you know?" He shifted in his seat, and yes, it was absolutely hot. "Then, when I simply think about you I get warm, or even

just look at you...” He set Dusty into a walk up a path so we could take a view over the valley.

“Ye get warm just lookin’ at me, Livvy?” He chuckled.

“Yes, so so so warm.”

“And ye think tis this warmth that makes the act of me sitting upon a horse ‘hot as hell’?”

“Not really, I suppose... That is kind of excessive to say. Not ‘hot as hell’ but still very very sinfully warm, so then it’s not that farfetched to say someone is ‘hot’ because of the way they make one feel. You make me warm, therefore you are hot, when you touch me, when you climb on the horse with your muscles rippling and...” I exhaled and leaned against him.

He kissed the side of my hair. “Aye, ye make me warm as well, I just haena heard that women think as much about warmnesses.”

“So much, a lot. And you *do* too know it. The way Ailsa looks at Aenghus, that is because she’s feeling warmnesses.”

He was quiet for a moment then said, “I believe if ye hae a warmness for yer husband ye canna compare it tae hell, or describe it as ‘sinful.’ I feel twould be more comparable tae heaven in that ye are bound in God’s wisdom tae bear him fruit. Daena ye think, Livvy, instead of yer feelings for me being ‘hot as hell,’ they might be ‘warm as the sun warming us in heaven’? Tis God’s grace that we hae a feelin’ of warm love for each other that we want tae share.”

With the gentle shifts of Dusty’s pace rocking us slowly, I said, “Yes, I think you’re right—”

He shifted in his seat once more, a definite jab against me. “Ye like it, m’Livvy?”

I fanned myself. “Oh my, I... um... I so do. Wow.”

“Ye sound almost breathless, tis all I hae tae do is this...” Another shift against me.

“Yes, yes... that’s all you... and it’s your knee, it’s right...”

“M’knee, ye hae mentioned this, but tis difficult tae believe, m’knee makes ye lose yer breath?”

I looked down at that bare knee, beside my thigh. “Yes... oh yes, and...” I took in a long deep breath and let it out. “Have I mentioned the back of your hand?”

He passed the reins to his left hand and in front of me opened and closed his hand, bound muscles, the sight of it heavy, hard, competent. “This, just m’hand?”

Yes.

He ran the hand tightly down my front, urgently, to my skirts and pressed against my pelvis and held me while he shifted again, a bit forward in the saddle. I dropped my head back on his shoulder. *Yes.*

His breath against my ear, he said, “I am learnin’ many new things about ye, m’wife.”

He released me and took the reins in both hands again. “I made ye speechless.”

“I um... wasn’t talking, was I...? Just then... what were we talking about... um?”

He laughed. “Now I ken yer love language.”

It was my time to laugh. “Did you just quote the love language article? Birdie and Lou are going to love that, they are going to laugh their asses off when I tell them...”

“Aye, yer love language is riding on the same horse with yer husband.”

“You got me... and what’s yours... let me... oh, I know, you know you’re loved when I say Your Grace.”

He said, “Tis a little like that, I ken tis against yer nature tae say it, so when ye do, I ken ye trust me, ye love me, and ye are puttin’ yerself aside tae be a part of me. Aye, tis then that I ken ye are mine.”

I sighed.

“I do love you, so so so much. And what a beautiful day it turned out to be.” I raised my face to the sunlight. “It’s a

glorious morning, in the dawn of a new day, full of hope and excitement and—”

We mounted the last rise and found a wide view.

His eyes swept the landscape. Then he turned in the saddle and looked up and down the hills and valleys. Then he looked up at the sky, the direction of the sun, and then back down at the loch lying in the cold clear day.

He said, “We arna in the right place, we are farther north... This is Loch Linnhe, I am not sure how we arrived here.”

He looked around a moment more. “We will need tae go tae the village tae find out what year it is.”

I said, “At least it’s not modern times, there aren’t any roads.”

He asked, “Do roads cover every part of yer modern world?”

“It seems that way, sometimes.”

“Ye are correct in it, this is the past, and there is a village and beyond it, a castle, and that is a bit of good fortune, Livvy.”

“You’ve seen the castle before? It’s not Kilchurn, I can tell, it’s out on an island instead of a straight.”

“Aye, I ken the castle, because it belongs tae m’cousin. We ought tae use caution approaching though, it haena always been held by the Campbells of Airds. They won it in a wager, from the Stewarts.” He growled in his chest, very low, then said, “If we are in a different time we will need tae be cautious.”

I said, “I hope that’s not the case.”

“Aye, if tis m’cousin we will hae fare and lodging.”

“I’m sure he would wonder though about your circumstances, how you are here without guardsmen...”

“I will come up with a story.”

“Then I guess we need to go see.”

“Aye and we ought tae make haste, the bed in m’cousin’s castle is beckonin’ me, I grow weary.”

He turned Dusty away from the view, and we went to organize our equipment before approaching the castle.

Chapter 22 - Livvy



We divided out some necessary gear and put it into packs on Dusty, then hid the boxes again, and continued down the mountain path toward the village on the shores of Loch Laiche. A name I loved to say. Loch Laiche was an inlet of Loch Linnhe, also fun to say.

At one point I felt Nor heavy behind me, “Are you falling asleep?”

He startled. “Nae, not at all.” He smacked his face and shook his limbs, turned the reins from one hand to the other. “I am fully awake.”

Then he said, “I ought tae dismount and walk tae get m’blood flowing.”

“Or we could stop and take a nap, I could watch over you?”

“It looks as if we hae less than an hour afore we arrive at the village, I will be able tae stay awake until then if I ken there is a bed awaitin’ me.”

He walked while I rode at a slow, comfortable pace. He was more talkative, and pointed out things along our route. Then we drew from the woods to a main road heading across a plain toward the village and the castle in the distance. There were a lot of people traveling now, many staring at us as they passed. Nor covered the scabbard with the edge of my skirt.

As we walked, the path grew crowded, most people heading the opposite direction. Nor was nudged and shoved as it became difficult to pass through them, a little like swimming

upstream. We pulled to a stop as a cart, carrying a heavy load, turned around just in front of us, creaking and swaying, and passed us going the other way.

Nor drew us off the road and looked up and down, “Tis as though we are headed one way, toward the village, while most are headed the other way, yet tis midmorn. Tis not time for the market tae be finished.”

Nor glanced up at me, “Many are takin’ notice of us, I need a cloak tae cover m’self. As do ye, m’lady.”

I raised my chin. “I would complain about the cold, but I promised I wouldn’t do that anymore.”

He dug through one of the packs and drew out a blanket reminding me of that time long ago when he had first tried to cover up my modern clothes.

He flung it open and passed it up to me. “Place it over yer head as a hood and wrap it around ye.”

I did it. “Is this for warmth or to cover me?”

“Both, and I will need tae hold the reins now.”

“Because you are my husband and I am a proper wife? So many rules.”

“Aye. There are many rules, tis hard tae ken how many ways we might be breakin’ them.”

“But you’re from here!”

“Aye, but I daena hae tae walk intae town, I hae people tae do that for me.”

“Good point.”

I sniffed the blanket. “It’s kind of disappointing that it smells modern.”

He said, “Daena be ridiculous, Madame, ye ken twill be an insult tae our senses in nae time, and we will be lamenting the loss of this sweet scent.” He inhaled. “Och it smells of yer bedding, and yer house, and yer... bedding and yer clothes and the sweet place beside yer ear.”

“Oh my, you are wanting to get to a room and a bed.”

“Aye, for many reasons.”

A cart passed, disinterestedly, as Nor drew Dusty back onto the path. He said, “Good, now we are nae gettin’ as many stares.” He stopped a man who was passing us, “Why is everyone leavin’ the village?”

“The laird has died, the market has been closed, we must return tae our crofts.” He continued on.

Nor looked pensive, biting his lip.

I glanced around. “Maybe ask someone what year it is, it all looks old, but we aren’t sure.”

“Aye, we daena ken if tis m’cousin who has deceased, it might be another. But there is a bit of danger after a laird has died, we need tae be cautious.”

He walked quietly for a moment, I watched the back of his head as he looked left and right, then he led Dusty and me across the footpath, pushing through the traveling crowd to an older farmer who had his cart parked on the side of the field. One wheel was down in the mud. He leaned on the cart, taking a breather from the work of pulling it from the ditch.

Nor nodded. “Master, what has happened tae yer cart?”

The farmer answered and kicked the wheel. Nor nodded. “Aye, tis stuck fast by the looks of it. Dost ye hae help a’comin’?”

The farmer answered, “...and waitin’ for the multitudes tae pass so we might get it free.”

Nor pulled a sandwich from his bag. It was a simple one: bread with roast beef and a slice of cheese, a smear of mayo. He unsheathed his knife, sliced off half, and shared it with the farmer. “The road is verra crowded. I heard the laird has passed and the market day is canceled, tis true?” Nor took a bite of his half and chewed.

“Aye, we hae been ordered tae remove ourselves from the village.” The farmer scowled. “Twas proclaimed we ought not continue tradin’ but many are headed up the road tae Achadh nan Darrach tae carry on, we canna leave the food tae rot, twould be a sin.”

“Aye,” Nor nodded, taking another bite of his sandwich, watching the crowds walk by while I sat on Dusty, completely useless to this conversation. “It makes sense, and how far along is the next village?”

“Tis a two hour walk.”

I saw Nor chew his lip as he calculated. He looked very weary. He said, “M’lady and I will continue on though, we hae some business tae do at the—”

“There inna any business ye can do in Portnacroish, but I wish ye the best in the attempt.”

“We need tae rest afore we can continue on.”

The farmer said, “Aye,” as he took a bite of his sandwich.

Nor asked, “The laird has passed while he was in residence here at the castle?”

“Aye, the somber banner has risen above the Stalker castle walls. The market closed, the mourning has begun.”

Nor met my eyes, seemed to consider his next question, then said, “I haena been here in a time, I hae grown hazy on the title, was this the laird who was the senior or the junior, his son?”

The farmer looked at Nor askance, “Tis the elder, ye ken, Donald nan Ord.”

Nor clenched his jaw and muttered, “Och nae, Donald of the Hammers.”

The farmer said, “Aye, though we regret the closin’ of our market, he was a good laird. His revenge on the Campbells was a fine moment in our clan’s history.”

Nor’s face clouded over and he huffed, stuffing the last of his sandwich in his mouth, chewing, and swallowing. “Could

ye remind me of the year? I am forgettin' the calendar.”

“This the year of our Lord, 1607.”

Nor took his leave, brusquely, and mounted the horse behind me.

He was quiet as he wove the horse through the crowds, headed the other way.

At one point clicking at the horse to move him faster, but Dusty balked because there were people blocking our way — Nor commanded the crowd, “Turn aside!” And once the villagers hustled out of our way, clicking Dusty faster, and going by without a glance.

I had never known him to be so annoyed.

Finally he said, “I regret sharin' the bread with the farmer, did ye hear the way he spoke on the Campbells? The man who has died, the *laird*, is a murderous Stewart, not deserving of our respect.”

“We could turn around, go back to our things, we are clearly in the wrong time.”

“Nae, I am verra weary, tis too far tae return, and there inna a place tae rest along this path. We will go tae the inn and I will exchange m'coin for some food and ale and ye and I will raise a glass tae the death of a man who is an enemy of Campbells everywhere.”

The crowd thinned as we neared the village, so he pushed Dusty to a faster pace, then drew him to a halt in front of the inn. A stable boy met us to take Dusty to the stables. Nor unbelted our packs from Dusty, and the scabbard, and slung them over his shoulders, and gestured for me to follow him in. When we entered the building it was so dark it was difficult to adjust my eyes. I stood blinking, and rubbing them while the innkeeper and Nor negotiated for a private room.

Nor ordered a meal and ale for later and I could see by his clenched jaw and clipped words that he was suffering as he spoke, exhausted and irritated, but somehow managed to

arrange it. We were led to a rickety stair, and climbed to a loft on the second floor. There were wooden plank floors that we could see through to the ground floor. We were on the underside of the thatched roof and it was close. Nor ducked and brushed the top of his head when a stick poked him.

The innkeeper pushed open the door to our room. It was small with a wee bed, a table with a pitcher and bowl for washing, a chamber pot in the corner, a basket of herbs to try to keep the stench away, and a window with wind rushing through it from the loch. The breeze had a bit of a howl.

The innkeeper left us and returned downstairs, we could hear his footsteps the whole way down and his conversation below us.

I said, half jokingly, as I wrapped the blanket tighter around my arms. “Fancy! We have a loch-view room.”

Nor joked, “Aye, tis the seat of luxury, we are grateful for the howlin’ wind bringing the scent of fresh loch inside, so we winna be trapped in here with the stench of the rarely dumped chamberpot.” He dropped our packs heavily beside the bed.

I said, “Are you already asleep?”

“Aye, m’lady.” He crawled onto the bed and lay down on his stomach and moaned, “Och nae, tis bereft of the cloud we hae on the heavenly...”

I sat on the edge of the truly uncomfortable bed and pulled his boots off his feet, sensing that he was almost asleep. I placed them quietly to the side. Then I pulled off my own boots and crawled beside him, nudging a bit so he rolled onto his side, his head on my breast, his arm wrapped around my waist.

He fell fast asleep.

Chapter 23 - Livvy



I stayed awake a bit longer, wondering if I would be able to sleep. I had slept on the forest floor after all, and the sounds, though muffled, were ever-present: birds, chickens, a cranky rooster, a cart going by, a busy street of people calling to each other, and downstairs a group of men laughing and talking rowdily, a banging shutter, somewhere, the inn sign outside, squeaking on its fasteners.

But I did fall asleep and woke up when it was growing dark outside.

My time was all screwy — *when and where was I?* And not just what time, but what year, what period, what century?

Nor was heavy and still on me, having deeply slept for hours in the exact same position.

I nudged him awake. “Nor?”

He startled, looked around dazedly, and then at my face. “How long was I asleep?”

I said, “I have no idea, it might have been a century.”

He kissed my bosom and then put his head back at my breast, and hugged me tighter, saying, “I ken we are verra hungry.”

“So hungry.”

“And yet...” He rolled onto me and pressed his mouth to my skin of my breast and whispered, “And yet, ye are m’new wife and we are in a foreign time, on an uncomfortable

bed, after a long indolent nap and..." He drew his lips up my skin, very slowly, with licks and nibbles to my throat.

I had gone from mildly pleased to hot and bothered with that one long drawn out lick up my skin, becoming breathless from the pleasure. I gasped, "And yet...?"

"Ye ken..." He pressed his mouth to my neck and whispered, his warm breath against my skin. "We might need tae consummate our marriage here. Or it dinna count."

I chuckled. "It didn't count?"

He drew his lips along my cheek and his lips beside my ear, "...nae, now that I think of it, ye are m'wife in the year 2012 we are further in the past now..."

"So we need to get married retroactively? That might get problematic if we have to get married in every time we jump to."

He drew my skirts up my legs, bunching them at my waist. "Aye, that would get problematic, but tis not the married we need tae do, we only hae tae be wedded once, as God is all knowing, he has seen it, he kens..." His voice deep and growly as he said, his hand pulling up his kilt, "But we must do the bedding... ye hae tae drive yer wife tae anticipation, so that her flesh is quiverin' in all the beds ye sleep on."

He kissed me on my mouth, his lips soft, then becoming forceful, his tongue insistent, his breaths bullish and powerful, his hand traveling across my skin and between my legs driving me to desire and then out of my mind — I clutched around his back, holding on, and gasped as he entered me and drove me, indeed, quivering, the bed and floorboards creaking, the rising wind rushing through the cracks around the window, as the day drew to night. The bed groaned under us, the cloth sack of feathers barely enough to keep us aloft, his power hard as he pushed against me, my climax roaring through me in the dusk of a medieval time.

My breath caught at the end, his mouth pressed to my neck as he finished, and... oh, how I loved him. He relaxed, spent, exhaled, and rolled off me.

“Och, now that twas more the kind I like.”

“Yes, me too.” I curled up against him.

We lay like that for a long time and then his stomach growled.
“I am goin’ tae need a meal.”

“Me too. but I hate to leave this place, this feeling...”

He wrapped his arms around me and clutched me to his chest.

“We kind of stopped talking about what you were saying... something about the time needing to know we are married?”

“I canna remember, I was out of m’mind with desire, ye canna listen tae me as I will be speaking with m’cock instead of my tongue.”

I laughed. “Well you, m’lord, can speak to me with either your cock or tongue, I am a fan of both.”

He kissed the top of my head.

I said, “But what did you mean?”

He said, “I daena ken, truly, but ye ken there are two states of bein’ wedded, the first is the ceremony, the plight and troth afore God and family, then there comes the bedding. The ceremony needs only be done once as it is an oath that we mean tae keep in our lives, as long as we are livin’, but the beddin’ part is tae begin yer time taegether. If we are in a different time I may need tae bed ye first available moment, give ye the ol’cock-n-tongue, so ye are mine in that time — it makes perfect sense.”

I chuckled. “It does make perfect sense. If we land in a different time we must consummate our marriage or the *time* doesn’t know — we know, God knows, but the time doesn’t know. Definitely. So that’s what we will do, first thing, arrive at a place, wed and bed, we gotta do the ol’cock-n-tongue, as quickly as possible.”

“Nae, slow and good, but aye, we ought tae make haste tae cock-n-tongue as slow as possible.”

I said, “Good, bedded first thing will be tradition. And I’m a very happy wife except... I am famished.”

From downstairs erupted boisterous loud laughter.

My eyes wide, I said, “Do you think they heard us?”

“Och aye, they hae heard us, if ye look over the edge of the bed ye can see through tae the downstairs.”

I sat up and looked down on the floor, there was a crack running through that was so wide I could make out a whole person down there, and see the fire flickering. Now I realized, I could smell the smoke. I groaned. “Oh my god, I am too embarrassed to go down and eat.”

“Ye canna be embarrassed, I was beddin’ m’wife, tis a part of life.”

“Fine, and when we go down there, and we must because I am so hungry. We are going to pretend like it was someone else, it was not *me* they heard.”

He growled. “Aye, if the strange men in the tavern downstairs bring it up, ye can pretend it was someone else, while I kill them for mentioning it.”

He rose from the bed. “We are hungry beasts, I ken we hae sandwiches in our bag, but a warm meal is awaitin’ us downstairs.”

We adjusted our clothes to be presentable. I splashed some water on my face, “You would really kill someone over that?”

“Nae not all men, but a Stewart, his laird bein’ a killer of Campbells? If *he* were talkin’ on m’wife? He would die and I wouldna worry a minute on it.”

I washed my filthy hands with the pitcher and bowl, while he relieved himself in the chamberpot, then I peed, asking, “But you aren’t going to start any trouble, right?”

“Nae, I winna, but I will finish it.” He grinned, “Yer brother taught me how tae say that, did I use it well?”

“Perfectly.”

We descended down the rickety stairs to the ground floor.

There we met the innkeeper's wife, Madame Mary, who beamed at us as if she was proud of what we had just accomplished. She sent us to the table near the hearth, shooing away a dog who had been warming there.

The room had looked spare when we crossed through it earlier, but now it seemed inviting. The hearth had a blazing fire to warm us. Candles flickered on every table. The scent of the coming meal was enticing. We settled on our stools, holding hands on the table, the ambience of the crack and pop of the fire beside us, the warm flames radiating heat.

Nor was so handsome in the firelight, his strong hand around mine. He had a sparkle of light on his cheek. I grinned, enjoying the overall hotness.

Mary placed two mugs of ale in front of us. "I was wonderin' when ye would be comin' down. I kent ye would need some nourishment after the liveliness in yer room." She laughed to herself as she rushed off to the other end of the tavern, returning a few moments later with one large bowl of stew and a hunk of bread to mop it up.

When she left, Nor said, "Och nae, I was promised a fortifyin' meal, I forgot tis going tae be a measly portion made denser with thick, unpleasant bread."

"Thankfully we have sandwiches up in our room, but I was really looking forward to something warm." I ripped the bread in half and passed him some. We both dipped bread in the bowl and took a first bite at the same time.

He scowled, then grumbled, "Birdie and Lou hae ruined me."

"This is fine, really, it's good." I peered into the bowl, it was difficult to make out in the dim light what the lumps were. "It's fishy. Yum. Is that a carrot?"

He swabbed the bread through the bowl, scooping up a lump, and put it in his mouth, chewing, "Might be, but tis more likely fish, and there seems tae be all the kinds of fish in it, not one kind but many kinds, which means, Madame

Livvy...” He swallowed, ripped off the corner of the bread, and dunked it in the stew, gesturing toward the big iron pot over the kitchen hearth. “It means this stew has been cookin’ there for ages. Our proprietor has been addin’ the day’s catch tae the stew for a long long time.” He grinned, jokingly, with a cheek bulging with food. “That is what makes it taste so special.”

My eyes wide I said, “What do you mean by ‘a long long time’ — like *hours*?”

He shook his head.

I asked, “Days...? Wait... not *weeks*?”

“My Livvy, I bet ye are eatin’ a stew that has been cookin’ upon that flame for months or more, tis a forever stew. Inna it delicious?” He grinned, took a bite, and jokingly kept grinning while also grimacing.

I whispered, “A year? Where in the world is the refrigerator!”

He said, “Ye daena need a fancy refrigerator if ye can just keep it stewin’, if it goes ripe ye just add some heat.”

My eyes narrowed and I looked at the bowl. I sighed, then shrugged. “I mean, I guess, as long as it’s boiled, right? We for sure need it to have been boiled, but I’m too hungry to worry about it.” I took another big bite.

“You know what that reminds me of, Nor? Did you know we figured out that all the water on this planet has always been on the planet? If you are drinking ale, as you are, the water that made it, once rained down on dinosaurs.”

He looked skeptical. “The big monstrous beasts ye mentioned?”

“Yep.”

“...and how long ago were they on the earth?”

“Long ago, almost as long ago as when Madame Mary hung the first bit of fish in that pot.”

He laughed and picked up our bowl. “I am goin’ tae ask her for more of the auld stew.” He strode across the tavern to the cooking hearth and held out the bowl for more. The men in the corner of the room were laughing and talking loudly.

Nor returned. This time the stew had two pieces of bread in it. When we were finished with the seconds, Nor leaned back and patted his stomach. “Tis not the largesse of yer home, Livvy, and m’middle is not as full as I wanted, but we did our best. Now what are we goin’ tae do?” He swigged from his drink.

“Well, Yer Grace, I was thinking, we need to figure out what we did wrong.”

He said, “I must admit, Livvy, we hae done somethin’ verra wrong.”

“Yep, we overshot somehow, got both time and place screwed up.” I tapped my fingers on my mouth, thinking. “I have some ideas, but won’t be able to look in this candlelight.”

He looked around the room. The men in the corner had been playing some kind of dice roll game, now they began to loudly and drunkenly sing. Nor glanced over and snarled. “In the meantime we are stuck on disgustin’ Stewart lands.”

I said, “My love, you cannot start anything, remember the last time?”

“I ken, Livvy, but och, look at them, they are... do ye hear the song?”

I listened, but understood nothing, and shook my head.

“This is an ode tae their prowess against the Campbells.” He listened, his finger swinging to the rhythm and said, “There, they just said, ‘the death of em.’ Och nae, I ken tae start something would be ill-advised, but oh how I wish Aenghus were here. I would enjoy a bit of a brawl.”

I said, “Even if you could win against...” I counted, “Seven men—”

“Seven *drunk* Stewart men, twould be easy, Livvy. They are glad that I am too civilized tae do it.”

“I am relieved you are too civilized.”

He looked at me seriously. “Be assured, Livvy, yer husband is not a man who will look for a fight, not when I am alone with ye tae protect. I remember well the last time we found ourselves in a brawl, and the danger ye were in. I found trouble, perhaps some might be tempted tae say ‘I learned a lesson’ but I dinna learn a lesson that day. I hae long known the lesson — a man ought tae hae his brothers around him, a Duke doubly so. Without brothers I would never start an altercation, and as a Duke I hae learned how tae end a battle afore they hae begun. I am verra good at it, usually...” He added, “All m’recent plights tae the contrary.”

I exhaled, “That was really scary when you were taken away at the castle and then again at the farm.”

He shook his head sadly. “Och ye hae seen me lose too many times, m’new wife, we must remedy that sometime soon.”

“Just not now.”

“Of course, not now. Even knowin’ that I hae the upper hand with these drunkards, as I am well-armed, and the innkeeper believes I am their better, and would chase them from the tavern before me and my gold, but I still ought tae take m’care and not cause trouble. Not now.”

Nor’s eyes drew to the men, as the chorus grew louder and they boisterously acted out the words with hip thrusting, butt smacking, and at a lyric that sounded like ‘playin’ upon m’hornpipe’ acting out something suspiciously like a blowjob and laughing uproariously. One of them said, “Wheesht, there’s a lady near.”

Madame Mary yelled, “There are two ladies near!”

They all laughed.

I said, “...And you definitely wouldn’t want to change *this* history.”

“Aye. Who would want tae change the history of the glorious and noble clan, Stewart of Appin? And tis a glorious history, the castle ye see out there, Livvy, on the island off the

coast in the loch? It will, in a few short years from now, fall intae Campbell hands.”

I finished off my ale and wiped my mouth on my arm. “You Campbells seem to take all the castles, how did you get this one, a battle or...?”

He grinned widely. “Nae, twas a wager! The Stewart of Appin line was a murderous lot, they killed nine Campbell men, and thereafter the Stewarts and Campbells feuded until one of m’cousins made a drunken wager with the chief, Duncan Stewart, over who could finish their drink first. The wager was that they would take a wherry—“

“What is a wherry?”

“A boat, and we would get the castle, and Duncan lost. The Stewarts were nae match for us, Livvy. We won the castle and became the lairds of this land.” He added, “Well, not me, but m’cousins, the Campbells of Airds.” He leaned forward, “The part that amuses me is their clan name is Stewart, Livvy, they ought tae be able tae steward their castles, daena ye think? But they couldna. The Campbell clan won. Want another ale?”

“Sure.” I passed him my mug and he stood, leaned over and said, “And I canna help but thinking, they are verra proud of themselves, perhaps they ought tae be enticed tae a wager tae give them a taste of what is tae come. Besides I need some small coins, m’gold is heavy in m’purse and winning some coins from the Stewarts of Appin would be a fine ending tae a good day.”

“A good day? Didn’t we get lost?”

“Aye, but we played at cock-n-tongue, tis hard tae call that a bad day. When I was held captive I dinna think I would get the taste of yer flesh on my tongue, so I am feelin’ verra contented.”

“Good, me too.”

Chapter 24 - Livvy



He strode across the room and Madame Mary filled our mugs from a cask. He called me over and had me sit on a stool to watch while he introduced himself as a man by ‘the name of Nor, travelin’ through with m’wife.’ He told them he was from clan Larson a great distance away, using my last name. He asked if they knew a man by the name of Lou Muller and his son, Junior. They said no, and that seemed enough for them.

They conferred and then Nor joined in their game, a form of dice tossing — they rolled the blocks, covered with marks, and cheered each other, or loudly complained when Nor won, which happened more often. They did not even assume I would play and I didn’t really want to — the men were what my modern self would call ‘rough’.

I barely understood them and had no knowledge at all of the manners in the place, playing dice while drinking might get me in deep trouble. I was pretty sure if they knew anything about me it would shock them to the core and that amused me greatly, like having a secret knowledge. I was just a bemused audience, watching my husband kick their butts in a game of chance.

At one point Nor mentioned we had just been married and they laughed heartily and clapped him on the back and called for shots of whisky to be brought round.

I applauded when his block fell on the right side. We both drank a lot. Nor filled my mug whenever I finished my ale, too often.

Then after the game's end, Nor scooped a handful of silver coins into his purse, bid the men farewell, and led me stumbling a bit, across the floor to the stairs. There I put a hand on the stair rail. "Whoa, I'm a wee bit schnockered."

He laughed. "Are ye now, Livvy? I hadna noticed when ye got up so gracefully from your stool."

I giggled, climbed two steps, forgetting to hold up the front of my skirt and next thing I knew Nor scooped me up and tossed me over his shoulder. He swayed. "Och, m'Livvy, ye are a load."

I squealed as he climbed up the stairs, my last view of the tavern with all the men and Madame Mary laughing as I was carried up.

I was tossed giggling onto the bed, and the whole bed creaked loudly. "We almost broke the bed!"

Nor jiggled the bedpost. "Aye, we must use caution, or we will be sleepin' upon the floor."

I laughed, "Our feather mattress is not covering the..." I squirmed my bottom. "...what is this, *ropes*?"

"Aye, there are ropes suspended across the rails tae hold us up in the air."

"Like a hammock? Weird."

"Ye will prefer it tae boards, when ye feel the thinness of the mattress."

"Oh, I feel the thinness of the mattress." I squirmed my bottom. "There's a spot with no feathers and a pokey bit, ouch, and... no worries, I am fixing this."

I scrambled up to my feet, dug through our bag, found a flashlight, and flicked it on. I started fluffing the mattress while Nor relieved himself with a torrent of urine in the bowl. I spread the insides of the cloth sack to cover the ropes of the bed. It was a hilarious struggle because the canvas was heavy and I was swaying a bit and also giggling.

By the end, I had to pee so bad I was dancing from one foot to the other, *got to go, got to go*, I pulled the last heavy canvas that was pretending to be the bottom sheet across the mattress, then rushed to crouch over the bowl and moaned happily as I urinated. “Oh my god, that was close. I almost peed on my boots.” I wiggled dry, then stood, and adjusted my skirts.

In the meantime Nor had taken off all of his outer clothes and was in his shirt; he climbed into bed, with the whole thing creaking. He laughed as he pulled the top piece of cloth and heavy blanket over himself. “Ye must get on the bed verra carefully, Livvy or we will be sleeping on the floor.”

“It definitely sounds that way.” I pulled off my boots and then the waist of my skirts and my belt and tossed it all down. “Cold, cold, cold!”

I climbed in after him wearing just my muslin chemise, squiggling in under the covers into his inviting arms and cuddled in.

Nor exhaled against my hair, his wide shoulders around me and keeping me warm, my face nuzzled against his neck, embracing, as we fell into a drunken sleep.



I woke at the crack of dawn, sprawled on my stomach, my favorite sleeping position, and Nor was on his side, his head against my ribs, his arm thrown across my ass. I lay there for a moment, waking slowly, enjoying the dawning light through the window, the cold air settling on me, the sounds of bagpipes wailing through the morning.

Nor pulled his arm tighter around me in a hug. I mumbled, “Good morning, my love.”

“Good morn, Livvy,” his arms went tighter. I was awakening, my senses were heightened, noticing the draft through the cracks in the window, the scent of smoke permeating the air, a cock from outside sounding off about the morning. The heady scents of must and dust and barn floating

in through the breeze mingling with the scents from the basket of fresh herbs. Also... bagpipes.

“Why the sound of bagpipes at this hour?”

“They are mourning for the laird, tis the beginning of the funeral. We hae tae leave as soon as we are up, before we get encouraged tae join in the solemnities.

“Are we up?”

“Not yet. Or rather, I am up.”

I laughed.

When his face pressed to the small of my back, he kissed my skin. “Ye cold?”

“Yes, a bit.”

He shifted beside me, the bed creaking and groaning under us, and spooned against me, drawing the covers up over our shoulders. “Better?”

I nodded as his mouth kissed the back of my neck, drawing heat up, warming my skin with his breath. His hands rubbed along me, searching and fondling and caressing me into excitement. And then he held onto me, an embrace that was tight around and entered me from behind, his breath catching in my ear. He clung to me and rocked against me as I fully awoke. I was lulled into pleasure at the touch of my husband, his hands caressing me in all the best places, his cheek rutting against my head as he brought us all the way forth, and we climaxed with moans and—

a brisk knock on the door, and we both froze when it opened. A young woman entered, her eyes averted, bowing, “Pardon me, Master, been sent tae gather yer chamber pot.” She picked it up from the floor and said, “Do ye be needin’ anythin’, Master?”

Nor said, “Nae.”

She left the room, leaving the door not quite closed enough.

Nor chuckled against my ear.

I said, “What the heck? Her timing was terrible.”

He chuckled again. “Could hae been worse, she could hae come in one minute earlier, and she would hae witnessed the act. Instead, we were able tae be quite still and quiet.” He kissed my cheek and raised up on his arm. I turned onto my back, and he looked down on me.

“She just came right in, is that common?”

“Aye, they are all around ye, running the castle, or I suppose,” he joked, looking around, “the fine inns.”

“That wouldn’t be easy to get used to.”

He questioned, “Ye daena hae servants in yer houses? I never saw them but assumed they must be there.”

“No, Birdie has a lady who comes and cleans on Fridays, she cleans Mom’s house too, but other than that we do all the work.”

“Sounds like a great deal of work without a chambermaid and a lady’s maid.”

“You really thought they were there, you just didn’t see them?”

“Aye, I daena notice them anymore, ye grow used tae the servants. They are always busy about their work while the rest of us carry on about our day, ye ken, ye hae the farmhands on the ranch, they do their work and ye do yers — this is the way it runs.”

“So if they want to come in for the chamberpot, they just can? No matter what we are doing?”

“Aye, imagine what the young lass has seen in her days of entering inn rooms for the chamber pots?”

I grimaced. “So when we get to your castle, how many servants are we talking about?”

He lay back. “Last accountin’ I had nearly a hundred servants tae run the house.”

Now it was my turn to raise up on an elbow. I looked down on him with my eyes wide. “Wait, how many? One hundred?”

Whoa! That's so many."

"Takes a great many people tae run the kitchen alone." He counted on his fingers as he made points. "...and there are the chambermaids, the lady's maids, we hae the house manager. Lady Gail believes she does most of it, but daena tell her that Auld Aymer and Madame Burnwell are more effective in the endeavor. We hae m'valet—"

"What is a valet? I only know them to park cars for us when we arrive at a restaurant or something."

He looked at me quizzically. "Tis odd, why inna it called a groom? When I pass m'horse off tae m'groom he takes it tae the stable, ye might call the valet a better name? Because my valet does all that I need for dressin' me."

I grinned. "I am for the undressing."

"Aye, as I am for yer undressing as well. Though yer lady's maid will probably do it more often."

I blinked. "I'm going to have a lady's maid?"

"Aye. Ye will hae a dressin' room with maids tae help ye dress, a fine closet of dresses. Ye will hae all the finery ye could want."

I blinked at him. Then stupidly said, "Oh."

He continued enumerating the servants, "...and we must hae some tae clean and those that attend tae what is broken, we hae gardeners, a stonemason and a blacksmith, the grooms and stable master, and then of course, Burnwell, my chamberlain. He is married tae Madame Burnwell."

"So many people! How does anyone have privacy?"

He shrugged. "Ye daena, not really." He shook his head. "I daena think on it much, there is always a servant in the room with me, I canna think about it."

"Even at night when you're sleeping — when you're... making love?"

He chuckled, apparently enjoying my incredulous questions and joked, "My lovely Livvy, how are ye goin' tae

ask for a meal after exhausting yerself with makin' love, if there is not a chambermaid in the room tae hear ye when ye hae cried out, 'Och, I am through!'? She has tae ken ye are going tae be hungry, tis how she kens tae rush away tae get yer meal for ye."

I said, "Or, and hear me out, you could say, Chambermaid, I'm busy making love to my wife; you could leave and come back in oh, thirty minutes with a snack, but knock first."

He grinned. "I see ye will make a fine household manager."

I blinked. "Holy shit."

"Aye, ye hae bitten off a verra large portion of a meal ye dinna ken ye were eatin'."

"I had no idea, what am I doing? What is happening?"

He took my hand and held it to his chest. "Ye hae bravely followed me tae my world, Livvy, I am grateful for ye, and I will make sure it goes well. I am teasin' ye, there will be a great deal tae get used tae but daena worry. I hae seen yer lands, I ken the differences—"

"Do you? You just asked me if I had servants, this is kind of freaking me out. What do you actually know about my time?"

"I am practically an expert: I ken ye hae trucks that drive ye around verra fast; yer food is too sweet and will give ye an ache in yer middle; there's a box that cooks yer food; and a magical button on yer wall heats yer house. Also the lights go on with magic instead of flame."

I teased, "You're practically an expert."

"And I expect ye will grow tae be an expert of my world as well."

The chambermaid walked right into the room, without knocking, and returned our chamberpot to its spot. "Let me ken if ye be needin' anything, Master."

"Nothin' now, thank ye."

She bowed and left.

I chuckled. “Suddenly this sounds like the hardest thing in the world. I don’t know what I was thinking, but this is so much more.”

“Aye. We hae jumped intae the life without much discussion of the life, but we are bound taegether, we must figure out how tae live within each other’s worlds.”

I kissed him. “Yes, we can do this.”

“Aye, we can do it. We will dress, gather our things and return tae our gear. Then we will jump tae m’castle.”

I sat up and brushed down my hair with my fingers. “I need to look at the portal again, what did we do wrong?”

“I hae given it a great deal of thought.” He climbed from the bed and went to the chamberpot to piss. With the strong stream rolling into the bowl, he said, “The one thing I ken, we need tae get the cipher right this time *before* we jump.”

“That we do.” I leaned off the bed, pulled the portal from our bag, and looked down on it. Then I said, “Ugh, this needs thoughtful study, but I am hungry, thirsty, and need to pee, first.”

“We will dress, gather our things, Madame Mary will give us a breakfast, then we will get Dusty and go to the jump spot.”

“Once there we will be able to take our time, I have an idea what we should try, but we need to be methodical, no more mistakes.” I added, “Are we still in danger?”

“Aye a great deal, it seems certain that danger will follow us. We must be cautious, and we must be prepared, but we are also time-travelers. We hae incredible power. We must use it well.”

“I agree.”

Chapter 25 - Livvy



We had a breakfast of porridge with milk and butter, Nor paid off our account with the innkeeper, then we left. On the path outside, the wail of bagpipes rose on the air above the mist rising over the castle out on the loch. It was very early, around us was the work of dawn, little talk, much bustling, the clanking of dishes for the morning meals. The groom brought Dusty to us and Nor was tying our bags on the saddle when a man walking by asked, “Where are ye goin’, Master? We hae been called tae the church for Laird Stewart.”

Nor kept his face expressionless. “Nae, friend, I must travel, we hae a long journey ahead of us.”

The man’s brow drew down as he continued on.

Nor said, “We are leavin’ just in time.” He helped me up on the back of Dusty and climbed up behind me, once more, the thrust of his hips pushing my ass forward as he settled into the saddle, big, strong, competent, behind me. He turned Dusty and paused looking out over the loch and the castle on the island in the middle of it.

I said, “I wish I could go see it.”

“We canna, it belongs tae another laird, for now, but someday it will belong tae m’clan — the Stewarts better be enjoyin’ it while they can.” He clicked and commanded, “Coisich!” to get Dusty to walk, and Dusty understood. We traveled up the pathway headed toward the hillside and our gear.

A little while into our walk, Nor shifted and looked behind us, then said, “Daena be worried, Livvy, daena look back, but we are being followed.”

My heart raced. “Who is it?”

He didn’t answer, his body tense, he said, “Livvy, pull the rifle from the scabbard.”

I pulled out the rifle.

Nor kept Dusty at a slow pace, looking around us at the woods. It was everything I could do to keep from looking back.

I asked, “We could go faster?”

“It might be a trap, there might be men waitin’ on us up ahead — I canna tell.”

At a bend in the path, he said, “Coisich!” and set Dusty into a gallop up an embankment into a patch of woods. He pulled us short in front of a boulder, dropped off the horse, and helped me down. He passed me Dusty’s reins. “How is yer horse with gunfire?”

“I don’t know.”

“Tie him, set up yer gun on the rock, Livvy. Aim for the man, watch yer back. If anyone comes from behind, ye shoot him.”

He jogged down the hill to intercept the man.

I tied Dusty to the tree which was not easy with shaking hands, then I moved closer and crouched behind the boulder, aiming the rifle, looking up briefly to scan the landscape, listening for sounds, any signs of someone coming from any direction. I was ready. I also felt like I might faint from the adrenaline.

Nor, below me on the path, called out, “Good morn, friend, what is yer purpose?”

The man neared Nor and I recognized him, he was from the tavern the night before. He looked rough and ornery, like a bar drunk that's been out all night, and needed to be put to bed. I would have relaxed, a wee bit, but for Nor's warning, *there might be other men up ahead.*

I scanned the wood around us, quiet, no sounds. The drunk said, "I saw ye leavin' the..." He waved behind him toward the village.

Nor said, "Ye followed me, friend, did ye miss me? Ye wanted a proper farewell?"

The drunk weaved, looking confused. "I think ye hae m'coins in yer purse."

Nor said, "Those are my coins, fair enough. I won them in a wager that ye agreed tae, friend, I think ye best be lookin' for a place tae rest. Where are yer men?"

He staggered as he looked right and left.

Nor said, "Aye, I see ye daena hae any men.... If ye turn around and return down the hill, I will forget ye followed us — seems fair does it not?"

The man yelled, incoherently, and charged Nor, who shoved him, hard. The drunk stumbled and crashed into a patch of brambles and lay there, like an overturned beetle, waving his hands in the air, yelling, "Nae, ye shtank-crusted kilt-shucklin' nob-dobbin', shinny!"

Nor picked up a large stone and placed it down on the man's kilt, not heavy enough to trap him, but a bit of a mind puzzle and he was drunk out of his mind.

Nor said, "Friend, ye owe us an apology for forcin' us tae listen tae ye carryin' on."

Nor brushed his hands off and stalked toward me, shaking his head, while behind him the drunk writhed around trying to tug his kilt free from the stone. "Come back here! I want m'pennies!"

I slid the rifle into the scabbard and Nor helped me up to Dusty's back. He climbed up behind me, and led Dusty farther along the edge of the woods, before descending to the path, out of view of the drunk. "I was going slow, but now I think we need tae step up our pace."

"I agree, every minute we waste, the more danger we could be in."

We rode in silence.

Then I asked, "Do you think anyone is there, lying in wait? I'm so nervous now."

He growled, "Are ye sayin' I might hae tae fight for the food I brought? I winna stand for it, Livvy, I need Birdie's sausages. I winna allow any scoundrel tae take them from me. This is why tis a good thing I am armed."

I laughed. "You're carrying a weapon to protect the sausages?"

He kissed my head.

"I wish I had spent some time looking at the portal before we left the inn."

Nor was quiet.

I added, "The worst that can happen, I suppose, is we end up in a different place, yet again."

Chapter 26 - Livvy



We slowly approached the clearing, being watchful and guarded. Then Nor crept up to our gear while I held my breath with my gun drawn. I regretted not having bulletproof vests, and helmets, and... I regretted not having a tank. Possibly a cannon.

No one else was there.

I nervously laughed. “*Finally* our luck has turned.”

I placed the portal on one of the chests and we looked at what we had thought was the correct code, but come to find out, hadn’t been. I used my notes and went back and forth checking them against the portal. “What date do you think it is?”

“I ken tis 1607, and I suspect tis late August, early September because of the size of the loads that were being carried, the farmer I spoke with had a cart with a basket of bilberries, and said the market day had been interrupted.” He considered, then added, “I ought tae hae asked the innkeepers — ye ken, the man who saved me, Magnus, told me, *warned* me, tae always ken the date... We could, if we had tae, go back and ask the date of someone?”

I said, “That’s good advice, but I think we’re fine. If the month is this... and the date is that... then... we got these numbers reversed.” I spoke while I turned the portal and inputted the code. I placed it down on a chest, put the notebook aside, and looked down on the portal with my hands on my hips. “This is my best guess.”

He had been checking the straps on our boxes, then joined me in looking down on it. “I daena like the idea of ‘guess’.”

“That’s just me becoming more humble. I thought I had it figured out, but that was hubris, I didn’t. Maybe I do now. I don’t...” I took a deep breath. “I’m concerned but not scared.”

He took a deep breath too. “Aye, ye ken, Livvy, we hae proven we can survive it. We hae made a mistake and it dinna kill us. Let me see yer notes, and I will give some thought tae it as well.”

I passed him my notes and he read down the page, his finger trailing my numbers.

“You can read my handwriting?”

“Aye, tis verra simple compared tae some I hae seen. Ye ought tae see some of the treatises that come upon m’desk.”

He checked my notes to the portal — quiet and thoughtful, he asked, “What did ye mean by this here?”

I looked at the numbers he was pointing at. “I um... that’s because of this here... and the year is there, and I don’t know — does it look right to you?”

He said, “Aye, I just wanted ye tae explain it so I was sure.”

“I can’t explain it. I mean, I can, but... I’d need to go back through the book.”

He exhaled. “Ye daena need tae do that, I agree, this is the way we get home.”

“So we’re going to do it? No qualms?”

“My only qualm is that I daena want tae end up afore the year 1557, *there* is where the danger lies.”

“Yeah,” I gulped, “the portal would disappear, right?”

“Aye, I daena ken where it goes, back tae November 1, 1557 somehow, and ye must survive through tae that night and fight for it tae use it again.”

I shivered. “So we’d have no way to escape?”

“Aye.”

I picked up the portal again and looked down at the code. “I can’t see anyway that this could take us before 1557.”

I passed it to Nor.

“Aye, it seems we are safe from that outcome.” He put the portal on our stack of boxes. “Ye ready tae go, Livvy?”

I nodded my head yes, while I said, “No.”

He drew Dusty closer. “But ye ken that we hae tae go tae get out of here...”

I nodded.

“And ye ken we hae tae see m’family, I must make sure they are well.” He lifted me and sat me on the stack of coolers.

I nodded. “Yeah I do know that, I—”

He pressed his lips to mine, then very close to my face said, “I ken tis hard for ye tae take the risk, my Livvy, ye want tae hae control over the situation, I ken it, ye daena like tae be powerless, but indeed, we are powerless over this, ye ken we must—”

The deep resonance of his voice, his words lulled me into a kind of calm, and so I wasn’t aware but also not surprised when the ripping sensation began to spread up my arm as our time jump began.

Chapter 27 - Livvy



I heard Nor's voice, quietly, "Livvy, wake up, Livvy."
I moaned and muttered, "Everything okay?"

"It looks tae be... we are on the edge of Barran Moor near Kilchurn. Tis just past dawn." He was crouched right over me, his eyes scanning the horizon.

"Do we know what the date—"

"We do now, Aenghus has arrived!"

He raised his hand.

Aenghus's voice calling from a distance away. "Nor! Where hae ye been? It has been a week!"

I looked up at Nor, smiling happily. He glanced down. "Och, we got the date a wee bit wrong, we wanted tae return in three days, but here it has been a full week — so much has happened in a week."

True, my love.

Chapter 28 - Livvy



A enghus and Nor hugged, then Aenghus held him out at arm's length.

“Where hae ye been, Nor, ye are altered!”

Nor said, “I gather, from yer relief tae see me that I hae been desperately needed?”

“We haena missed ye one bit, ye are inconsequential, I keep telling ye this.”

I groaned as I sat up and looked around, Aenghus had three men with him, waiting at the side of the moor.

Aenghus's brow went up. “... and Nor, ye hae arrived with Madame Livvy once more, what has happened?”

“Well Brother,” Nor put out his hand, heaved me to my feet, and put an arm around me. “I want tae introduce ye tae Olivia Campbell, the Duchess of Awe.”

Aenghus looked shocked. I felt the same way. Hearing it presented like that, with a title by my new surname, Olivia Campbell Duchess of Awe, was astonishing.

Then Aenghus recovered himself and chuckled, shaking his head. “Och nae, Nor, I canna decide if I want tae be in the room when ye tell Lady Gail or not.”

Nor said, “Brother, ye are bein' impolite tae m'wife, yer new sister, Livvy.”

Aenghus said, “M'apologies, Yer Grace.” He bowed. “Olivia, tis an honor tae see ye once more, and allow me tae be

the first tae welcome ye tae the family.” He took my hand and pressed his lips to the back of it.

I said, “You may call me Livvy, Aenghus, as all of my family does. Thank you for the welcome.”

He turned to Nor, “I still haena decided if I want tae bear witness tae the announcement.”

Nor said, “I will meet with Lady Gail independently of the rest of the family, and while I do ye canna be there anyway.”

“Why not?”

Nor’s brow lifted. “Because ye will be draggin’ all of this tae the castle while I am in the meeting with Mam.”

Aenghus groaned miserably. “I miss all the amusement! But... I ought tae warn—”

Nor looked alarmed. “What happened?”

“Nae! I dinna mean ‘warn,’ I ought tae *tell* ye, Nor, I just meant that Lady Gail has planned a grand feast and a ceilidh for the morrow.”

Nor scowled. “What has she...? Why...?”

I whispered, “What’s a ceilidh?”

Nor said, “A gathering, a feast, and dancin’.”

“I told her ye would be back in a week and...”

“What made ye say it? I dinna give ye a time that I would return!”

He shrugged. “Yer Grace ran off without telling her anythin’ so I had tae devise a story. I told her ye were goin’ tae be back in a week and here ye are, returned at the agreed upon time!”

“Ye were fortunate.”

“Aye, I will be her favorite son.” Aenghus grinned. “The moment I told her ye were gone away she began planning, all the families began arrivin’ yesterday. The castle and the village inn are crowded.”

Nor asked, “Did Malcolm come from Finlarig?”

“Nae, ye ken how tis, his wife dinna want tae travel, so he sent his regrets. He said he would come next month tae visit and welcome ye home from yer travels.”

Nor nodded

Aenghus asked, “Ye procured a new horse?”

Nor said, “Tis Livvy’s horse, Dusty.”

Aenghus looked as if he were deciphering the words, shocked, again.

Nor’s eyes swept the moor. “It has been safe, Aenghus, nae trouble?”

“I hae had a strong guard since ye left—”

“Yet ye are with only three men.”

“I believed twas enough—”

“Tis not. We must be wary.”

Aenghus clapped him on the shoulder. “I kept the guards at the castle, that is what is important, ye ken, Your Grace. The ladies of the castle are safe, the bairns, and the many cousins who hae gathered for yer feast.”

Nor nodded, looking into space. “Ye are right. I hae just been traveling with the winds of concern for so long, tis difficult tae change course.”

Aenghus nodded. “I ken, and ye hae returned with Madame Livvy. Ye went tae find her, ye hae returned with her — this must be good news, is it nae?”

Nor said, “Aye, tis, but I hae been gone for a long time, Aenghus. Ye haena seen me in seven days, yet I hae been away for long weeks, months if I think on it long enough. I was captured on my wedding night—”

“Nae!”

“Aye, by the man who once came here tae speak with me — Johnne Cambell. He brought an army of men tae the Lou-Moo Ranch—”

“The land that belongs tae Livvy’s clan?”

I nodded. “My grandparents, my parents, my uncles, my brothers, we all live there.”

Aenghus watched me talk, blinking, then he turned his attention back to Nor, “The men of her family dinna help ye? Ye were captured, Nor? Where was their guard? What happened...?”

“The men put up a fight, aye, but tae protect them I had tae volunteer tae go. I was held and driven tae perform tasks for Johnne, I will tell ye about it when we hae some time.”

“Ye are verra thin. Were ye not fed?”

“Nae, I was kept in a dungeon, I barely escaped—”

Aenghus’s eyes went wide. “How did ye — from a dungeon?”

“There was a man by the name of Lochinvar who was kept in the cell beside me, we were freed by his brothers, Magnus and Fraoch, a man named James, all Campbells I believe. They are from another time.”

His eyes narrowed. “Brother, these tales ye tell. I wouldna believe a word if it werna for ye bein’ so scrawny.”

Nor shook his head. “Now ye are callin’ me scrawny—”

He said, “Aye, ye are half the man ye were when ye left.”

Nor’s jaw clenched. “Tis true, tis also true that we need more guards and we need tae send a messenger tae Malcolm at Finlarig tae tell him that there is danger afoot. He must be on guard for strange men or storms.”

Aenghus nodded. “All right, first I will bring in yer baggage and then I will send a messenger tae Finlarig.” He asked, “What is in these chests that I will be loadin’ tae the castle?”

Nor said, “Gifts for the family, they are meant tae be a secret—”

“Secrets? Och nae, Nor, I need more tae go on. Last time ye came from Livvy’s land ye had some wonderful—”

Nor looked like he had grown short-tempered. “Will this be better? One chest is full of foods, one with weapons and tools, one with gifts. Ye will be enraptured, but ye canna ken what they are because they are for ye and Malcolm and for Claray and Ailsa—”

Aenghus complained, “This is terrible! How am I tae keep from lookin’ in the boxes and ruinin’ yer secrets?”

Nor huffed. “If ye look in the boxes perhaps I winna allow ye tae hae any of it.”

Aenghus clutched his heart. “Ye would keep it from me? What of Ailsa, ye would keep the gift from Ailsa if I look? None of this is fair.”

Nor narrowed his eyes, “Brother, I am weary from m’travels and close tae a temper, ye canna speak tae me on fair. Ye are behaving discourteously, I was in a dungeon — and where were ye? Did ye come tae liberate me?”

“Nae, I—”

“Aenghus dinna come after his brother, he left him rottin’, his flesh wracked with hunger within a dungeon — tis a travesty, I will never trust ye as m’guardsman again.”

Aenghus scowled. “*That* is not fair.”

“Aye, Brother, that inna fair, this has been a turmoil undeserv’d — there arna rules, nor security, nor calm — I hae been in captivity while ye hae had a warm bed.”

Aenghus said, “Och ye are in a mood.”

“Aye, yet I hae married Livvy. She is fairness and light and I was in a fine spirit, but yer arguin’, even good humored, has not been as welcoming as the moment warrants. Livvy and I hae brought ye gifts — will ye allow me tae go tae the castle and speak tae Mam while ye do the work of bringin’ the load? I remind ye, ye ought tae do it for me as a brother who wants tae lighten m’burden, as I hae had a real shite few months.”

Aenghus said, “Aye, Your Grace, I will bring the load tae the castle for ye, I winna argue on it any more and I will survive the drudgery, because I look forward tae the gifts, and

I am a model of decorum and civility, unlike a certain Duke I will not name.”

“Good, thank ye, Aenghus, I will send Ferguson back with a cart.”

Chapter 29 - Livvy



N or and I mounted Dusty and rode toward the castle.

I asked, “Are you okay? You were testy with Aenghus.”

“Aye, he’s a good brother, but he is also the youngest son. He forgets tae pay attention tae what others are goin’ through. I hae tae correct him and be domineerin’ sometimes. We are good though: I forgive, he forgets.”

“Good.” Then I added, “So just to be clear, we *are* going to have a difficult time explaining our marriage to Lady Gail? This is happening?”

“Aye, allow me tae handle the conversation. I will explain, then persuade, then we will give her a taste of the delicacies Birdie sent.”

“This sounds tough. I hope chocolate chip cookies are good enough.”

“Daena worry, Livvy, she ultimately daena get a say in any of it, I am the Duke. I tell her what winna and will prevail. And then tomorrow she makes me come tae her feast.”

“At least we have today to rest from that jump.”

“Aye, at least we hae that.”

“I hope she will be okay with our marriage though, I truly hope it doesn’t come down to a command from the Duke.” I sighed. “It would be good if she liked me.”

“She will.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I am in love with ye, Livvy, and ye and I are married. She will grow tae be verra fond of ye, because I am.”

I leaned back against his chest and he kissed the side of my head.

I was nervous about the coming discussion and had forgotten how imposing Kilchurn castle was, its stone walls, battlements, and towers, rising over the dramatic Scottish landscape with its flags fluttering in the wind.

We rode to the causeway, the wind whistling across the loch greeting us as Dusty’s hooves thundered up the long path.

I patted the side of Dusty’s neck, “What do you think, boy? This is where you’re going to live for a little bit.” Dusty’s steps seemed to pick up speed. The scent of fish wafted toward us from the boats on the loch. We came into the cool shadow of the high imposing walls just as the gate opened and from the castle came ten men on horses, riding in a double line out to meet their Duke. They pulled in behind us and the head guard spoke to Nor for a moment, then four men returned to the castle for a cart to take to Aenghus.

We, surrounded by Nor’s guard, rode through the high gates into the busy and crowded courtyard.

And there stood Lady Gail on the steps, her eyes leveled on us as we arrived, her hands folded together in front of her.

I had married Nor because I loved him, without thought at the time of the title and his name, but now I was a duchess. I had won a huge prize. I remembered Lady Gail asking me, directly, “Do ye hae designs on His Grace, the Duke?” And assuring her, no, I did not. Yet here I was... I was acutely aware that this looked a lot like I was one of those conniving women from history. Would I need to justify it? Feign

innocence? Would his mother suspect I had connived my way into Nor's title?

I was from a ranch in Florida. Comparatively I had grown up with so much more, but... then again, I didn't have a hundred servants. I took a long calming breath.

Nor dismounted the horse and helped me down, his big strong hands around my waist. He set my feet gently on the ground. Then he ran his hands through his hair — this whole time we were under his mother's watchful eyes.

He told the groom that the new horse was to be given a stall. I stood still with my hands folded, my eyes cast down, waiting for him to finish as he spoke to his guardsmen, and she watched us, her eyes leveled.

He turned, put out his elbow for me to clutch, and led me toward his mother. My legs trembled as I tried to look confident in the coming introduction as her new surprise daughter-in-law.

As we walked up she asked, "Your Grace, what is the meaning of...?"

"Mam, I... we must speak privately in m'office."

She glanced down and the color left her face as her eyes hesitated on the rings on our fingers. There was an intake of breath.

She bowed her head. "Aye, Your Grace. I will be there in a moment."

She swept away.

I wasn't sure where she went, but she seemed to need a moment to collect herself.



Nor led me up the stone steps to the upper floor where his chambers were. I hadn't seen them in a long time, and then I had been under duress, though I was once again, under duress. Everyone we passed averted their eyes, bowed their heads, or

curtseyed, but after we passed, their eyes followed me, and then, behind us, gathering, murmuring. The gossip began.

I couldn't blame them, I would be gossiping, too, if I were in their place.

I wondered, *Did that go well?*

His guards opened his door and we stepped in.

There was a young woman there, straightening the room, a young man building up the fire. Nor, glanced in their direction, they bowed and left the room. These were the things I hadn't noticed when I had been there last. So many servants, running the show.

Our show.

It was midmorning, so the heavy velvet curtains were pulled back to let in light from the glass window centered in the stone wall. There was a fire in the hearth to keep the chill of the stone from settling on us. I was nervous so I stared down at the floor, focusing on the thick woven rug, the design was of thistles and vines winding throughout. I thought about the meaning of thistles being protective strength and that gave me a measure of comfort.

Nor asked, "Dost ye need anything Livvy?"

"I am thirsty."

A young woman I hadn't noticed behind us, swooped over to the table and poured a deep red liquid into a glass and handed it to me.

"Perfect, wine." My hands shook as I raised it to my lips.

"Would ye like tae sit down?"

I shook my head and placed the glass down on the nearest table. My eyes went to the large tapestry on the wall, a pastoral scene with men on horseback, going to the hunt, the bottom of the weaving also had thistles. *Good, I was protected all around.*

I took a deep breath, and took in the room. Another wall held a bookcase, with leather-bound books. There was a long

table surrounded by chairs, and at the far end stood an ornately carved, heavy desk, with a pot full of quills and an inkwell, behind that a marble bust. And where we stood, by the fire in the hearth, were a settee and a couple of upholstered chairs, with pillows, where the duke and his family would relax in the evenings to talk.

To the left of the fireplace was a door, I wasn't sure where that went.

There was a knock, a man's voice, "Lady Gail is here, Yer Grace."

"Let her in, please, Master Burnwell."

He grinned. "Here we go."

Chapter 30 - Livvy



His mother bustled into the room.

She stopped in the middle, smoothed out her dress, pressed her hands together and said, "Explain this tae me, Nor."

"Would ye prefer tae sit, Mam?"

"Nae, I fear ye will make me comfortable and then tell me of news for which I should hae my feet under me."

"Dost ye think ye might need tae flee from the room?"

"Perhaps."

She kept her eyes from mine. I chewed my lip, then realized I was, and tried to stop and hold my mouth naturally, but felt a little panicked that I had forgotten how.

Nor said, "Livvy, would ye like tae sit?"

"No, thank you."

Her eyes flitted to me briefly, then she said, "Nor, ye hae been gone for a week, but ye are thin, ye look weakened, what has happened tae ye?"

"Aye, Mam, it has been a journey of much longer than seven days, I told ye of the portals, they allow me tae travel tae different times and lands beyond what ye hae dreamed of—"

She waved her hand. "This is all unnecessarily confusing and sounds much like a tale better told around the fire in the Great Hall, but here, in your chamber, I would like an explanation for the immediate and pressing matter at hand."

Her eyes went directly to his hand, the ring there on his finger.

“Ah yes, I see.”

He stepped up to her and took her hand, so he was looking down on her. “Mam, ye remember meeting Madame Livvy?”

“Aye, months ago, she visited briefly, then left — ye assured me that Madame Olivia was returning tae her lands.”

“She did, Mam, she left for her lands and I meant tae leave her be, but then I felt that I was missin’ a verra important part of m’self. I ken I dinna speak tae ye on it, I ought tae hae conferred with ye, but I was having trouble understanding how I would resolve the issue. Her lands are verra far away, but I couldna imagine m’life without her as m’wife.”

Her mouth opened and closed.

He continued, “I fought against the urge tae follow her. I dinna ken if she would accept me. I was under an abundance of turmoil... I couldna live without her, Mam, I had tae go after her.”

“Is that where ye went? Aenghus told me ye were on a hunting trip.”

He nodded. “I went tae ask Olivia Larson tae marry me, she has accepted m’offer, and we were wedded at her family’s estate.”

“Oh.”

“Aye, I ken this is a lot tae take in, all at once, but I want ye tae ken that I dinna do this in haste or without considerin’ the title or the lands or our family. This is an alliance that will build all our fortunes.”

“You did all of this, made all these decisions, without once conferring with me? I might hae been a help tae ye, Nor, I might hae been able tae guide ye!”

“I ken, Mam, I had tae act in haste or I thought I might lose her, and I kent ye would understand that I wanted ye tae be a part of our union, but the haste and the distance between our lands meant that ye couldna. I thought that once I

explained m'self, ye would see that I had tae win her, and ye would be content, knowing I had done m'best tae be a good and dutiful son."

Her lips were pursed, then she pouted. Then she put her hand against his jaw, and looked up in his eyes. "Does she bring ye contentment, Nor?"

He nodded. "She has returned joy tae m'life."

She nodded, then patted his face, matter-of-factly. "Good, that is enough for me. There are riches?"

He smiled. "Enough, not more than ours, but enough riches and power tae give prominence tae ours."

"Lovely! A verra wise choice indeed."

She turned her eyes to me, for the first time, and looked me over. "She is a beauty, I kent it the moment I laid eyes upon her. I said tae m'self, God has put her in Nor's path because she is going tae be his wife. Twas as if He were working through me."

"Yet ye continued tae put me taegether with yer own choice?"

She waved his words away. "Your Grace, I asked Madame Enid Holborne tae come from Menstrie for one purpose, tae urge ye tae take the decision up tae marry again. Tae be serious about it. If ye had not had the provocation, ye might not hae acted so confidently. If ye had not had yer mother pushing ye tae remarry, Your Grace might hae wallowed in your misery for much longer and never made the commitment. Ye might not hae even noticed the fine lady before ye. If ye think on it, this whole marriage is because of my pushing ye toward the other, much less suitable match."

He smiled. "Och aye, Mam, I do see it. Ye are the responsible party in all of this. Do ye forgive me for it?"

"What is tae forgive, Your Grace? Ye hae brought home a lovely bride and ye are perfectly contrite and will make amends like a good son. We will all be the better when ye are done."

He chuckled. “We hae also brought some food tae share from the New World.”

“See, ye are a good son.”

She turned to me and took my hands. “Olivia? But we are tae call ye Livvy, the new Duchess of Awe?”

“Yes, and what am I to call you?”

“You may call me Lady Gail or you may, as Nor’s first wife did, call me Mam.”

“That is wonderful, thank you, I will call you, Mam.”

“Good,” she said to Nor, “She is verra agreeable.”

His brow raised to me, amused.

She held out my arms and looked over my dress. Her eyes squinted. “I daena want tae overstep, Livvy, but this will not do.”

I looked down, I was filthy, and wearing a skirt and a shirt with the plaid around my shoulders. I looked like I had, once again, been through an ordeal, and wallowing in the aftermath. “I agree, but... the dresses where I come from are very different, I don’t know what or how...”

“Ye need my assistance! We will hae ye outfitted in no time, we will send tae Glasgow for Master Arran tae come fit ye in some fine dresses.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, why daena ye come and sit here and tell me all about yer family.” She drew me to the settee, where she had me sit beside her—

There was a fast knock on the door and it swung open, Claray stood there, breathing heavily. “Nor! Did ye marry Livvy?”

“Aye, Claray, but ye hae spoiled the surprise!”

She rushed over, threw her arms around my shoulders, and hugged me tight. “We are sisters?”

I nodded.

She turned to Nor. “Who were ye surprisin’?”

“You!”

“Och, I am glad the surprise was ruined. I might hae become insensible if ye had sprung it on me.”

Lady Gail said, “Who told ye?”

“Annie! She said that the groom told Auld Aymer from the kitchen that there was a ring upon the Duke’s hand.” She grasped his hand. “There is! Yer Grace! Ye are married!”

She flounced into the chair opposite me. “This is verra exciting. How did His Grace ask ye, Livvy?”

“He got down on his knees and begged me very well.”

Claray put her hands together. “So lovely! Och, for an auld man, and one with a dour mood most days, he did verra well tae get on his knees. He must like ye verra much!”

Nor said, “I do not hae a dour mood, but rarely, and I do love Livvy, verra much, this is true.”

“I am thrilled, this is amazing, inna it, Mam?”

“Tis verra satisfactory. Now Livvy was going tae tell us of her family.”

I began, “Well, I have three brothers—”

Claray leaned forward, “Are they all married?”

“My oldest brother Dylan is, he’s in grad school. Ryan is in the military, he’s not married, and Charlie—”

Claray asked, “Are Ryan and Charlie the *age* tae marry?”

Nor said, “Claray, ye need tae allow Livvy tae answer Mam, and end with yer questions about the marriageability of brothers — ye winna meet them, ye canna marry them, and tis unseemly.”

Claray folded her hands in her lap and bit her lip. “My apologies for interruptin’.”

I continued, “I have those three brothers. And three uncles.” Claray opened her mouth then clamped it closed. “...

and my parents and grandparents, we all live on a ranch in Florida.”

Lady Gail blinked and asked, “Nor, where is Florida, is it within Alba?”

“Tis verra far away, in the New World in a different time.”

“Oh, I *forgot*, Nor, ye were tellin’ me an insensible tale, one that seems tae go against the word of God and the truth of heaven and earth. I will ask ye this, Your Grace, does the tale change the matter, does her family hae a plenitude of land?”

“Aye, her family has a plenitude of land.”

She raised her chin. “Good, but not more than ours, ye said. Is there a title?”

Nor said, “Nae, not a title, but her grandfather has the respect of many men a long distance away.”

She nodded. “Verra good, ye hae married down, but not by much. This will make for a good alliance. And how are her coffers?”

She was all business, discussing our marriage as if it were a transactional matter of state.

Nor said, “Livvy’s family has an abundance of wealth, they hae a thousand head of cattle and I hae seen their orange trees, Mam, they hae ten thousand trees, and their yearly orange yield numbers four hundred thousand.”

Her eyes went wide, she appraised me. “Do they? Well, that is wondrous. Ye ken, Nor, I do hae a taste for oranges, I find them delicious.”

Claray said, “Did you bring some, Nor? I would love a taste of oranges from so far away!”

“I did bring ye some oranges, I also brought ye other gifts. Livvy selected them herself.”

Claray clapped her hands, then noticing the drawn brow of her brother, put her hands in her lap, and raised her chin looking a bit like her mother. “Thank ye, Sister. May I call ye Sister?”

“Of course.”

She smiled and said, “Thank ye, Sister.”

Nor said, “Mam, hae we answered all yer questions? I ought tae help Aenghus in gatherin’ our belongings. We will give out gifts over our family din—”

His mother rose. “Nonsense, the castle is already humming with the news, I had planned a big feast for the morrow, but I hae arranged for it tae be this evening instead. We must announce yer marriage with a fine dinner, as is expected when the Duke takes a wife. I hae seen to it!”

“Tis what ye were doin’ before ye came here?”

“Aye, as soon as I saw yer ring. Ye must present yer new bride, Nor, ye daena want anyone whispering about yer situation.”

Nor looked amused. “...and what would they say? The Duke has married? I daena ken why I hae tae feed everyone tae tell them—”

“Of course ye must ‘feed’ them, ye must announce! They will whisper and speculate, not one of them kens of the Duchess’s lands or wealth. Och, I daena ken what they would say, *something*, and doubtless twould be uncharitable — Claray do ye hae a presentable dress for the duchess? It will need tae be yer best. If we begin dressing her now...”

Nor sighed, “Mam, I thought ye might prefer a small meal, with just family. We would be better rested for the celebration on the morrow... Are ye certain?”

“Aye, I am certain, and ye must listen tae me on this, because I haena been included at all, and so this is decided.”

Claray considered, “What of my pale blue and silver gown?”

Lady Gail said, “That would be exquisite. Cannie will be her lady’s maid, I will send her tae work on the Duchess’s hair. We must begin now as we hae much tae do.” She stopped, held my hand, and said, “I welcome ye tae the family, Lady Livvy.” She bowed and I bowed in return.

I wish I could have said it wasn't awkward.

She swept from the room.

Claray stopped in front of me. "I am goin' tae get m' gown, I will bring m'lady's maid, and dress here as well, Nor, tis well done if I dress here?"

Nor nodded.

"I must rush off, we must be busy!" She rushed from the room, sounding exactly like her mother.

I looked at Nor. "Phew."

He looked at me under his brow. "Och aye, 'phew'. Twas at once more difficult than I had thought and also simpler."

"You won her over by saying that I bring you joy. I make you happy?" I asked, because that was stressful and I needed the compliments.

"Aye," he came closer and put his arms around my waist. He kissed me. "Aye, ye make me verra happy, Livvy."

"Good."

We kissed again, growing deeper and hotter, until he lamented, "Och, I would like tae take ye tae our bed..."

I breathed against his skin, "Yes, we are supposed to do that first thing."

Another kiss, his mouth pressed on mine, his tongue exploring deeply, he said, "...but my sister is returning at any moment..."

I said, "...but if we go fast..."

He lifted me up. I wrapped my legs around him, then a knock on his door and it opened, Claray's voice behind me, "Livvy! I brought yer—"

Nor dropped my feet to the floor and ran a hand through his hair.

I straightened my skirts.

There was Claray with eyes wide and two young women with their eyes cast down and a blush on their cheeks all

holding between them a big armful of exquisite cloth.

Claray awkwardly curtseyed, “M’apologies, Lady Livvy, I dinna realize ye were—”

I laughed. “That’s fine, Claray, and this is beautiful.” I admired the fabric in her arms.

Claray asked, “We are allowed tae use yer chambers, Yer Grace?”

“Aye, ye may use the bedchamber if ye like—”

“I think we would prefer this room, we hae seats near the fire as we dress.”

Nor said, “I will hae food sent up for yer meal, and station a guard so ye winna be bothered.” He kissed me. “I will leave ye tae the dressing, Livvy.”

He bowed stiffly and left the room.

Chapter 31 - Livvy



Claray teased me, “I already must be careful not tae walk in on Aenghus and Ailsa, they are always kissin’ around all the corners, and *now* I must worry on comin’ upon you and Nor as well.”

I teased her back, “It might teach you not to rush into rooms.”

She sighed. “Ye would think it, but apparently I canna learn m’lesson. I must catch m’brothers kissing all the time. What dost ye think of the gown?”

“Well it’s hard to see it, it’s so much fabric!” The fabric was sumptuous, a rich, heavy brocade in a pale dusty blue, with an intricate floral pattern woven in a silver thread. There were lilac ribbons, in accents, and the edges had lace trim. “But wow,” I said, “Are you sure you want to lend it to me? It’s got to be a favorite.”

“Ye must wear it, Livvy, I wore it once and Nor told me I looked verra handsome in it, he said it was one of his favorite colors, I hae remembered that compliment all these months later. Ye must wear it, he will love ye in it.”

I said, “Okay, it’s a deal.”

There was a knock on the door and food was brought up on trays and placed on the large table in the chamber.

We had warm rye bread, a dish of butter, some pickles and a bowl with berry preserves, with sliced lamb.

We sat and ate, the chewy bread and roasted lamb were flavorful, and I hoped Nor was being fed well. Claray asked, “Tell me again, how did he ask ye?”

I smiled, recollecting it, “He got down on his knees and begged me, he said he had loved me all along.”

Claray clapped happily. “And then ye were married?”

“Yes, in a ceremony on my family’s ranch.”

She sighed. “I can imagine it, the chapel must hae been lovely.”

I teased, “What do you think the ceremony looked like?”

She said, “Yer castle has high walls and the chapel was cold and dark and the minister was praying and Nor looked down at ye with love in his eyes and ye thought ye would swoon in his embrace.”

I laughed. “I think it was exactly like that. Sort of.”

She breathlessly asked me for all the details, the wedding, the engagement, but then after eating she said, “We hae been sitting for so long! We hae so much tae do!”

The trays were removed, Claray asked for our lady’s maids to come, and we began to dress for dinner.

I was introduced to my lady’s maid, a woman by the name of Cannie. With barely a word, after the introduction where she called me ‘Yer Grace’ she was unfastening my skirt while Claray’s maid lifted my chemise over my head.

They were all shocked by my bra. Claray tilted her head from side to side, and tugged on my shoulder strap. They had absolutely no sense of propriety, touching and poking as I explained, “This is called a bra.”

Claray said, “*Must* ye wear it, Livvy? The cut of the dress would be much better without the straps.”

“No, right, of course not.” I undid the back and wriggled it down my arms and off and stood there naked in front of them. I shivered from the chill air. Claray’s maid held the bra and

looked it over as Cannie drew a bowl close, poured water in it, and began washing me with a rag. She started with my face and worked her way down. The water was warm and had a lovely herbal scent, but as she wiped and washed and scrubbed all the way down me to my feet, she wrung the rag out in the bowl and the water was embarrassingly gross. I had been filthy.

But now that a lady's maid in the seventeenth century had intimately washed me, I was nice and clean.

Claray watched, giving me no privacy at all, but also not noticing at all, as if watching me be bathed was the most ordinary thing in the world.

Cannie finished and pulled a fresh, clean chemise over my head.

I pushed my arms into the sleeves and she tugged the hem down to the ground.

The two maids held the skirt open for me to step into. It was covered in silver-gilt embroidery.

“What is this called?”

“This is yer petticoat, Your Grace.”

They tied it in the back. It was already way more cloth than I was used to wearing at one time, but from the looks of the pile, we still had layers to go.

Claray said, “...and this is your bodice and skirt. Hold your arms out.”

I held out my arms as the maids pulled the bodice and another skirt over the last and set about tying my laces. The bodice fit snugly around my waist, drawing it in, the neckline was square, the silver-gilt lace accentuated my chest. The sleeves were voluminous, cascading layers of billowing fabric, ending just below my elbow.

The overskirt and bodice were covered with a delicate embroidery, in intricate patterns that looked like vines and flowers. “Oh, are these thistles?”

“Aye, the flower of Scotland, tis noble tae wear them on yer dress.” They pulled the front edges of the overskirt back, and secured them, exposing the petticoat beneath, the two skirts were both the same color, and broadly matched though the patterns were different, giving the dress a rich luxurious look.

I looked down, seeing the gemstones embroidered into the bodice catch the light. “Wow.”

Claray said, “Aye, I told ye twould be good.”

They wrapped a wide silk sash in a delicate green around my waist.

“What will I do about the shoes?”

Claray pulled shoes off the pile and passed them to Cannie, who knelt down and placed them beside my feet. Claray said, “Maybe?”

I tried to shove my foot in, while Cannie exerted a counter pressure.

“I don’t think it will fit, are there any bigger?”

“Yer feet are verra long, I daena think so.”

“I have these boots.” They were the brown cowboy boots with cream embroidery on the sides. I wished I had remembered to bring more shoes, I hadn’t thought about fancy dinners and luxurious dresses. “I didn’t think to bring anything else, but will the skirt cover them?”

She nodded. “Just take small steps and nae one will notice.” My maid pulled my socks onto my feet, and helped me push the boots on.

Claray circled me, judging if my boots were covered by my skirts, and declared it good. “Now ye must sit so they can fix yer hair. We had our cousin from France come tae visit and she wore her hair in a hurluberlu, hae ye heard of it, Sister?”

“No... what is a... herlie-berloo?”

“A hurluberlu, och, ye will look so regal in it, tis French, I was assured all the ladies wear their hair this way.”

Cannie finger-combed the back of my matted hair and then brought out combs carved from bone, and painfully tugged. She wrapped in ribbons and added pastes, yanking and wrestling my locks into curls at my shoulder, the crown of my hair was flat but then the sides were teased out very wide, stiffened and stuck. There was frizz in my periphery.

While this was going on with me, Claray's lady's maid helped her dress in an extravagant and exquisite brocade dress in the overall color of cream. She always looked lovely but tonight, especially so, but then her maid began working her hair, drawing it out, frizzing and curling with the same pastes and combs and picks and sticks. My eyes went wide at what they were doing to her and it distracted from what they were doing to me —

Cannie sat back and appraised my hair, then seemed to decide it must be bigger. She attacked my head and teased more, wider, pulling it out further, patting it proudly. I desperately wanted a mirror, but I had left all my toiletries with the rest of our gear and wasn't sure where any of it was.

I was pretty sure there were puffs sticking out at the sides. Claray clapped her hands, "Tis wonderful!"

I couldn't see, because there weren't any mirrors in the room, and then I saw lilac ribbons going into my hair too. And tied in knots. I shook my head a bit. It felt voluminous, like I would need to turn my head to get through doors.

Then Cannie came at my face with a brush covered in powder. Claray said, "Close yer eyes, Livvy, or twill blind ye for the night."

I clamped my eyes shut as my face was assaulted with a thick powder and the brush poked and smeared across my nose and cheeks. I coughed as it got in my throat.

"Can I open my eyes now?"

"Aye!"

I waved my hand to clear the cloud to see Claray beaming at me. "Ye look so beautiful, Livvy! Nor winna be able tae

take his eyes from ye, ye look like a Duchess and all will say ye are the most beautiful duchess in the lands of Alba.

“Thank you, Claray.”

My dress was absolutely gorgeous, I had never worn anything this extravagant. The middle hugged me tight, the skirt was wide. I looked like an ornament to put up on a shelf. When I looked down at my arms jutting from the laced up and beribboned puffy sleeves, and then my dress covered in shimmery silver threaded brocade. I was sure I must have looked beautiful and yet, when I gave my head a shake, it set my hair into a sort of wiggle and — laughter was beginning to come up from deep down. The hysterical kind. The kind that strikes when laughing is the worst thing to do.

I shook my head again, wiggle wiggle, I bit my lip.

I watched as the maids finished with Claray. She looked beautiful, like she always did, and yet, her hair, usually curly, had been attacked by the maids, as if they had been in competition to see who could get our hair bigger.

Hers was teased and curled and poofed out so so so wide. I bit my lip, harder.

Oh god, a laughing fit. My middle shook from it.

Claray declared us, “Perfect!” Her hair wiggling and jiggling around, enthusiastically. I tried to be busy looking down at my boots, when I guffawed, then I went and relieved myself in the chamberpot to try to hide my laughter, but Cannie rushed over to hold my skirts and that got me laughing even more, my whole body shaking, pissing in my modern boots in a seventeenth century dress in a chamberpot while a stranger held my skirts.

I laughed so hard, making it hard to direct the pee in the chamberpot with my thighs shaking. I gasped, “I just peed in my cowboy boots!” And giggled so that tears ran down my face. “You can dress me up, but you can’t take me out!” And then I added, to laugh even more, “Take me out, my arse out, I have my arse out in the seventeenth century!”

She asked, “Are ye cryin’, Yer Grace?”

“That’s what’s so wild, Your Grace, the what...? *I’m Your Grace...?* How is this happening?” And then I was laughing completely utterly uncontrollably.

Claray called over and said, “What are ye laughin’ at Livvy?”

“I don’t know, Claray, I just... I got married, now I’m a Duchess, and it’s... I have my hair up in something called a hurluberlu and a beautiful borrowed dress and it’s a *lot*.”

“Aye, ye are struck. I hae been struck before. I hae been struck in chapel, tis a sin, I ken, but if I get started laughing, I canna stop.”

“Yes, *exactly*.”

I took a deep breath. I shook dry and stood. Cannie smoothed down my skirts. I fanned my eyes. “I’m so sorry, everyone, I was overcome.”

Cannie looked me over. “Ye must sit, Lady Livvy, I need tae fix ye.” While she worked on my hair and makeup, *again*.

That would teach me to laugh.

The laughing fit over, I took in the room while she worked.

I wanted to look at the books on the shelf, but it felt presumptuous. I didn’t want to make myself at home without permission. I felt like a visitor.

I *was* a visitor to my husband’s life. I was in his chambers and it was all unfamiliar. Mostly. Except the timeless part, the young women making themselves pretty before going out, that was familiar, but the rest, from the stone walls and the old books, and the smell of dust, and the maids dressing us and the dress — not one thing was familiar.

In the far corner of the room was a marble bust of a woman’s head on a pedestal. It glowed pale white in the corner of the office, near Nor’s desk. The exquisite tapestry behind it in

muted colors, offsetting the paleness of the stone. “Who is that a sculpture of?”

Claray followed my eyes. “Tis Nor’s.”

My brow drew down. “That is not Nor, that is a woman.”

Claray laughed. “Nae, Livvy, I meant, tis Nor’s work. He carved it, tis of... I daena remember the likeness is of...” Her voice tapered off. She exhaled, looking down at her skirt, fluffing it out prettily. “He calls it Ceres, she is the goddess of um...” She whispered, “fertility.”

Her lady’s maid looked shocked.

Claray added, “But also harvest.”

I slow-blinked, confused by the whole thing. “Nor is a... he *carved* that?”

“Aye, he is verra good, though most of the time he carves our mantels. Ye see that one, Livvy? Tis verra fine, he carved it for our father. And he has carved a verra fine column. Ye saw the one in the Great Hall? He carved it from stone, he has a verra fine mastery.”

My mouth opened and closed. Then I said, “Tell me again... so Nor, my *husband* Nor, the Duke, carves stone?”

“He haena always been the Duke, he used tae be the Duke’s son. His tutor taught him masonry, which is a fine skill for a young man. I hae learned tae read, ye ken, and tae speak French. Our father was verra forward thinking.” She smoothed her skirt and asked, “How do I look?”

Her hair stuck out in wild curliness and ropes of curls at the bottom and her shoulders were bare and her skin powdered very pale. “I do hope I look as beautiful as ye do, Livvy.”

“You are very beautiful, Claray.”

Chapter 32 - Livvy



There was a knock on the door. Nor's voice, "Livvy, Claray, are all dressed?"

Claray called, "Aye, ye can enter, Your Grace!"

He strode in, still wearing his clothes from earlier, dusty, muddy, as if he had been working.

"Och, ye are both verra fine, I must wash and change for the meal." He ran his hand through his hair. "Will ye excuse me?" He went through the door beside the fireplace to the unknown room back there, followed by the man who I assumed was his version of a lady's maid. His valet.

I asked, "What do we do now?"

Claray said, "Now we wait until he is dressed so he can escort us downstairs to dinner."

I stared at the door. Claray was very quiet.

Finally I broke the silence. "I've never known you to be so quiet before."

"I hate waitin' on others tae be dressed, but I am trying tae be patient. Mam tells me patience is a virtue and so I must bite my tongue and not talk incessantly, Mam told me that tae talk so much will cause ye tae not like me much."

"Oh, you're being quiet on my account?"

"Aye."

"I'm being quiet on your account too, hopefully soon we can just be familiar with each other."

“Like sisters.”

“Yes, agreed.”



It didn't take long. Nor came from the door, his hair was pulled back, except for a loose lock by the left side of his face. His face had been washed. I had seen him dressed for dinner before, but it had been once and everything about this world had been so foreign, he had just looked as if he were wearing a nice suit over his kilt, like what I imagined a Duke would wear, but now he was very dressed up. He was wearing a long, finely tailored emerald green velvet coat that reached below his knees very dramatically. Under it was an exquisitely embroidered vest, with a silver thread that matched my dress, and a lacy white ruffle at his chin. He was wearing dark knee-length breeches that flared out, in a matching green, there were silver buttons on his coat. He wore a sword at his side, looking dignified and very hot.

He stopped in the middle of the room. “Och, I haena taken a moment tae see the beauty of ye, Livvy. Ye take m'breath away.”

“You like?”

“Aye, I like verra much.”

Claray said, “Nor, ye arna wearing your fine shoes.”

He put out a foot, his legs covered in pale silk stockings, jutting out of his embroidered cowboy boots. “I do prefer m'new boots, I cleaned them.”

I laughed and pulled up my skirts and put out a foot showing off my own boot, tapping our toes together. “I didn't have a chance to clean mine, I'm hoping I can keep them hidden.”

He said, “We match, good, if Mam complains I will tell her I wanted tae match m'bride.” He put out his arm. I put my arm through one side, Claray took the other. “Shall we go down tae dinner, afore Mam sends someone up tae get us?”

We swept from the room.



When we arrived at the doors of the Great Hall, Claray entered first. The doors were opened and a man said, “Lady Claray Campbell.”

She walked through a row of guards and from the brief glimpse through the open door I caught sight of the room — it was full of strangers, dressed in finery. Through the doors came the sounds, music playing, and many conversations. The doors were closed once more.

We stood waiting for our turn. Nor said, “Are ye ready, Livvy? I haena fully prepared ye, I daena think, we are about tae make ye a Duchess and—”

“I know, I’m ready.”

“I love ye, Livvy, thank ye.”

I took a deep staggering breath.

The guards opened the doors.

The announcement was made, “The Duke and Duchess of Awe.” Nor put his hand out, glanced at me, then his hand. I put my hand on his, and we strolled into the room.

Chapter 33 - Livvy



OUR WEDDING RECEPTION
THE GREAT HALL

The Great Hall was resplendent. Enormous iron chandeliers hung from the vaulted ceiling, their flickering candlelight casting a warm glow over the long tables adorned with elegant, embroidered tablecloths. Gilded tapestries lined the stone walls. People rushed toward us, queued up, and went down the reception line — introductions were made. Men bowed as their names were announced, women curtsied, all called me ‘Your Grace,’ which was a marvel. That had been Nor’s name, not mine.

Nor, to a few of the men, said, “Aye, she is the granddaughter of Sir Lou Muller of the Florida Mullers, he has twelve hundred acres, a thousand head of cattle, and ten thousand orange trees.”

The men nodded, wisely, as if that made perfect sense.

The men were all dressed much like Nor, though not quite as fine, but they, most of them, wore long, curly wigs, and a bit of rouge on their cheeks. Their shoes had squared off tips and high heels, giving their feet a diminutive look. More than one man glanced down at Nor’s boots.

I followed Nor’s expression and movements, nodding and smiling. Aenghus came over and broke in the receiving line to say, “Nor! No fair, ye arna wearin’ a wig!”

Nor smiled, “I wasna in the mood.”

“Can I be in the mood not tae put on a wig? Tis a mood we are allowed tae hae?”

“Nae, I think m’ mood can set the fashion, Aenghus, but ye must *follow* the fashion.”

“But but...”

I glanced over to see Nor’s mother watching me, seemingly judging how I handled the introductions. No pressure. I glanced around and saw Claray talking to Ailsa, also in a big wide dress, her hair teased out and curled long, a spot of rouge on her cheeks. They both were already standing near the dinner table. Her part was done, no one wanted to see the other members of the family, all wanted to see me, and be seen by Nor.

There was so much whispering and gawking, until finally we were down to the last introduction, an older woman who talked for too long, and then Nor put his hand on my back and led me through the parting crowd to our table, where a servant pulled out our chairs and I settled into the seat on his left. We were seated in the middle of the high table, set across the end of the room, nearest the fire.

Claray sat beside me because she begged to have that spot. Aenghus sat beside Nor. Ailsa and Nor’s mother sat past Claray and there was a great deal of talking and whispering coming from their end of the table. My head was swimming — I was famished.

Servants scurried about, ensuring each place setting was perfectly arranged. Wine was poured into glasses, my hand shook as I drew the glass to my lips and sipped.

Nor heard the clunk of my glass as it clumsily hit the table. He bowed his head to hide his lips. “Are ye well, Livvy?”

I looked down at my hands in my lap. “I love it when you ask me that.”

“Are ye?”

“This is just... a little overwhelming, but I’m fine.”

“Aye, I ken, it must be, this is centuries of tradition, a long heritage. Ye hae been thrust intae it, yer hair has been made in the style of the time, and it has encumbered ye, and we haena had enough food, this is true.”

I said, “I thought you liked my hair, you said I was beautiful!”

“Aye, ye are verra beautiful, ye hae taken m’breath away, yer hair though... may I speak freely upon it?”

“Yes, I have thoughts, I would love to hear yours.” I shook my head, sending it wiggling.

His mouth turned up. “It has reminded me tae breathe, I must stay conscious tae help ye manage yer hair. It seems verra heavy, I might hae tae send a cart round for the second load of the day.”

I giggled. “It *is* very heavy and... very large. It’s called a hurluberlu.”

He joked again, “Tis not so large, Livvy, I only had tae draw chair a bit away.” He pretended like he had to sit leaning away. “And ye were able tae fit the hurly-burly through the double doors, without needin’ tae turn yer head, there is plenty of space for ye in the Duke of Awe’s Great Hall.”

I laughed. “I was laughing hysterically earlier, this is something, um... else. But I match the other ladies, right?”

“Aye, ye match enough, while being much grander.” Then he smiled and stifled a laugh. “In every direction.”

We both laughed. I asked, “You prefer my hair long?”

“Aye, I love yer hair upon yer shoulder, tis one of the great delights of m’life tae see it flowin’ and want tae press m’face against yer neck and breathe ye in.”

“...and what, m’lord, does my hair smell like?”

“Yer hair has the smell of the breeze when we hae crested a hill, it carries the wildflowers and grasses of the valley, passin’ through m’lungs, like a prayer toward heaven.”

“Have I told you, m’lord, how much I love you?”

“Aye, and I love ye as well, Livvy. I am relieved ye winna hold m’teasin’ about your hair against me.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Good, because we are in this together.”

He took my hand and squeezed it, pulled me close, pushed my hair aside to gain access to my temple, and pressed his lips there and spoke, “I must stand and say a few words, so they will serve the meal, tis more tradition, but then we will sit and eat and whisper about everyone and Claray will make us laugh, and I will growl and grimace so that nae one comes tae bother us.”

“I think that’s all a good idea, except for the growling and grimacing. Everyone is watching us, talking about our marriage, you are no longer on the marriage market — there is so much gossip, you need to look like you are enjoying yourself.”

“Aye, ye are right, Livvy. I am and I will listen tae ye on it.”

He pushed his chair back and raised his glass. “On behalf of myself and my bride, we thank ye all for coming tae dine with us on this important occasion, the announcement and celebration of our marriage.” He raised his glass in my direction, “Tae m’wife, Lady Olivia, I thank ye for honoring me with yer vows, tae love and honor, through all time, until death do us part — slainte!”

The first course was placed in front of us, a salad of wild greens, and a bowl of a savory mutton broth as Nor sat down in his chair and said, “Now we can eat, I am famished.”

A man from the end of the table stood and said, “Let us pray...”

Nor’s eyes went wide, he whispered, “Och, how could I forget? Tis the hunger, it has caused me tae — ye will see, Livvy, our minister is tedious and dour.”

He hid his mouth behind his hands. “The minister daena understand — m’ mortal flesh has hollowed. Hae ye ever been so ravenous?”

I shook my head.

His eyes caught my hair wiggling back and forth. “Good, yer hair wavin’ will distract me from m’hunger.”

I giggled, quietly, behind my hand. “You, m’lord, will get me in a laughing fit again.”

The minister droned on.

Nor whispered again, “We are goin’ tae need a snack tae get through the — Livvy, do ye hae a snack in yer pockets?”

“No pockets.”

He joked, “Och, I begin tae despair.”

I kept my head down and covered my smile as a prayer continued, the minister’s voice was low, the room quiet, when Nor’s stomach growled loudly.

People all around the Great Hall whispered, and turned their heads to look.

I glanced at the side of Nor’s face, it was going red. He bit his lip.

Aenghus whispered, without looking at his brother, “Och, Nor, ye are goin’ tae break in front of everyone, ye are too weak tae hold it, ye are goin’ tae be struck...”

Nor said, “Wheesht, Brother, ye always do this tae me — I am tryin’ tae be reverent—” He glanced at me, his eyes went up to my hair as it was wiggling with suppressed laughter, and he clamped his eyes shut again, his shoulders shaking, his head bowed, trying to keep it from showing.

The minister continued on.

Nor pulled a napkin up and held it in front of his face, and tried to cover a guffaw with a cough, but finally he pushed his chair away and stood, “My deepest apologies, Father, continue, I winna interrupt again.”

The minister began again, almost as if he were starting over.

Nor took a deep steadying breath, and bowed his head, with his eyes clamped shut.

Then *finally* the prayer was over.



Nor said, “Och, I dinna hae the decorum tae get through it.”

Claray giggled.

Aenghus whispered, “It has been a long time since ye guffawed through the prayer, Nor. I used tae be able tae get ye goin’ quite regularly, but I haena seen ye behave so poorly in a long time. Ye were almost a sinful influence, *I* almost began tae laugh.”

“Och, ye never used tae break, ye were always the one tae get me started and then ye would feign innocence, while I suffered the consequence.”

Aenghus grinned. “Because I am good and dutiful and ken how tae behave.”

“Did ye hear m’middle? Och, the pains are achin’ m’insides. The fragrance of the feast was tauntin’ me, the tantalizing aromas, I couldna bear it.” He took a big slurp of his mutton broth.

He looked down the chairs at his mother, “M’apologies, Lady Gail.”

“Ye were behavin’ like an ungodly barbarian — but I am verra pleased tae see yer smile, Nor, I haena seen it in a long time.”

He raised his spoon to her and continued eating. All around us, the murmurs of conversation filled the air, mingling with the soft melody of the musician playing a lute.

I ate my soup and salad as more plates were placed in front of me. I asked Nor, “What is this?”

He said, “I rarely ken, I usually just eat what is placed in front of me, but I will ask Mam. She will love that ye took an interest.”

He cleared his throat and asked down the row, “Lady Gail, Her Grace was wonderin’ about the meal...?”

I said, "Everything looks really delicious, Mam."

Lady Gail leaned forward with a delighted smile. "Ah, Yer Grace, I am so pleased ye think so." She gestured toward her own plates. "We hae a spring chicken with spinach, here, smoked trout and poached salmon, there, and on the extra plate is a small meat pies with sweet mustard. This is the first course. Next, we will hae the roasts."

Nor said, "Och, I canna wait for the roasts!"

As soon as we were done with the first course, Nor gestured toward a man who seemed to be standing near just to receive and interpret Nor's gestures. A moment later the second course was served.

Lady Gail asked, "Should I explain the roasts, Yer Grace?"

Nor chuckled, "Nae, Mam, I can tell one roast from another." He pointed them out: capon, pheasant, turkey, and leg of lamb, all succulently roasted, complemented by tangy fruit sauces with fragrant herbs. Beside them, he pointed out, was a cased venison pie.

I ate until I was very full, pulling at the bottom of my bodice trying to make room. I needed room, because next we were served the sweets: apple, cheese, and berry tarts, and an egg custard with honeyed pears.

We ate more than we spoke, because Nor and I were so hungry, and while we ate we were watched.

There was the clinking of fine silverware against porcelain plates and the rustle of silk garments as guests moved about, and occasionally, hearty laughter filled the room from a table of boisterous men. But then Nor called over another round of wine and leaned back and patted his stomach. "Full at last. The food was wonderful, and there was plenty." He raised his glass to Lady Gail, "Well done, Mam."

She blushed, her cheeks coloring. "Thank ye, Yer Grace."

I smiled, but it was strained. Fullness had made my bodice tight. The heaviness of my hair was annoying. I looked around at the Great Hall, the entire place, foreign, all the people, strange. My head swam from the wine. The whole evening I

had been on display. It was still overwhelming, this was a lot. My mouth, of course, drew down.

Nor glanced at me, raised his brow, and looked out over the dining hall. “There are a great many things we dinna discuss, Livvy, one of the biggest is the duties of a Duchess. I imagine tis troubling tae hae it abruptly thrust upon ye, but ye will grow used tae it.”

“Everyone is watching me, I am afraid I will mess up.”

“How so... ? What would the Duchess of Awe do tae ‘mess up’?”

“I don’t know, like giggling during the prayer.”

He pushed my glass closer, “Hae more tae drink.” He raised his glass and clinked it against mine.

Then he said, “Ye saw, I believe, that *I* chuckled during the prayer and I dinna ‘mess up.’ Ye canna ‘mess up’ anything, ye are a Duchess now. If ye want tae giggle during the prayer, ye can if ye want tae, though Lady Gail would probably take issue. The minister might take issue, but he has been our minister for a verra long time and has grown auld and forgetful through the years. But even when I was a young lad he was forgivin’ of me.” He raised his glass of wine to the far end of the table, the minister nodded in return.

“So I don’t have to be stiff and formal with all these eyes on me?”

“Och nae, Livvy, of course not.”

He waved his arm for more wine. He turned his chair from the table and sprawled back casually. He hooked his foot around the leg of my chair and turned me toward him. He said, “Now lean back.”

I leaned back.

He said, “Now here is yer wine, hae a sip and look out upon the people, watch them for a moment, though ye need tae do it as if ye canna be bothered by it, but ye will see they will all begin tae lean back in their chairs as well.”

A woman near the front leaned back in her chair. I stifled a laugh.

He raised his brow.

“We must follow decorum, there is a tradition, many rules, but... and this is an important but... ye ought tae remember that I can make the rules as well. I winna change tradition, but if I daena want tae wear a wig, I daena hae tae. I am the Duke, I daena hae tae do anything I daena want tae do.”

Aenghus leaned forward. “Yet, somehow yer brother must wear the wig? This daena seem fair. Tis itchy and heavy and —”

I laughed, feeling better overall, shaking my head back and forth, pointing at it as I set all the little lilac ribbons shaking and vibrating. “Just think of what is happening up here, Aenghus.”

Nor laughed. “I think she has ye, Brother, the ladies’ hair is much more of a burden than yer own, ye might take yers off, hers will be itching beside her on her pillow all through the night.”

I laughed and groaned.

Claray leaned in. “But, Your Grace, ye do think Lady Livvy is verra fine, I heard ye say she is beautiful. Dinna he tell ye, Sister, that ye are beautiful?”

I nodded.

She said, “Och, he is verra romantic.”

Nor grinned. “Claray, I do think Lady Livvy is verra beautiful, aye, I am a romantic, but daena ye think that her hair is perhaps a *bit* too grand?”

Claray said, “Brother! Ye canna think it, the hurluberlu is French and is the perfect amount of grand!”

“Dost ye mean, Claray, grand as in good or grand as in verra verra overly large?” The corner of his mouth went up. “And I am just wonderin’, Claray, who’s idea twas tae make it stick out so far, twas yers? Ye hae taken m’beautiful bride’s

hair that once spilled down her shoulders and ye've bedeviled it."

Claray huffed, "Ye daena understand fashion, Brother."

He winked at me, and said to Claray, "Ye 'daena understand fashion, *Yer Grace*'."

Then he raised his glass, and spoke at a level that only our table could hear. "I would like tae go on the record as sayin' that m'wife is a beauty, unrivaled, and I am enraptured by her." He leaned forward and kissed me on my cheek and pressed his forehead there and spoke in the air between us. "Feel better?"

I nodded and whispered, "I so feel better. What I hear you saying is I do not have to worry about the rules so much."

He pulled away and smiled. "Perhaps, sometimes, if ye meet the Duke of Lauderdale, or even the king, ye will need tae put yer hair up and follow all the rules, but not in our Great Hall. Here ye are the Duchess and ye are the head of this family." He put out his arm, meaning everyone.

"This is all family?"

"Och aye, look at them, they are all cousins or tryin' tae become one through marriage. The clan Campbell of Awe. We would live and die for each other, a family united against our enemies."

He waved his arm to call a server over and a bit more wine was splashed into our glasses.

"Speaking of family, we brought some things to share."

He laughed, "Aye, but look at all the cousins, they will pick upon them like scavengin' birds. I like them, but not that much!"

Aenghus laughed too.

Then Nor said, "Aenghus, we will shew ye what we brought later in our rooms."

I stifled a yawn. "Or tomorrow."

A man approached the table, “Yer Grace, might we open the floor for dancing?”

“Aye.” Nor nodded.

Chapter 34 - Livvy



DANCING
THE GREAT HALL

Chairs were pulled away, an area cleared near the musician playing the lute. The music had been soft, in the background to our conversation, but now a bagpipe and a fiddle joined the lute and the music swelled into a fast danceable beat.

Aenghus took Ailsa by the hand and led her out on the dance floor.

Claray huffed.

I asked, “Who will you dance with, Claray?”

She crossed her arms with a pout. “Everyone is too apprehensive tae ask me.”

“Well that is awful, I’m sorry.”

Nor said, “Claray, ye ken there is Young Gordy of Menzies right over there, I might—”

She groaned. “Gordy of Menzies? Gordy is *verra* disagreeable.”

“I kent ye would say it, Claray, so ye ought tae look as if ye are caught up in conversation lest he notice ye looking bored and miserable and comes tae take ye from it.”

“This is my plight! I must hide from unmarried cousins?”

Nor said, “Aye, if ye daena want them tae ask ye tae dance.”

I said, “It’s not really a plight, Claray, it’s the dance of love, all the men and women of the world go through it. You

have to be available for the ones you're attracted to and unavailable for the ones you aren't. I remember those days well, it's not easy. But tell me, how is *he* disagreeable?"

"He once saw me fall down and laughed at me."

My eyes went wide.

Nor said, "And Lady Claray, pray tell Lady Livvy how old ye were."

She raised her chin. "I was five, but he laughed, Nor, he *laughed* at me."

Nor chuckled. "He daena laugh at ye anymore."

She set her jaw. "I daena care, he should hae considered his behavior."

Nor said, "Ye hae always been a model of consideration."

"I was trying tae follow them in a game, Nor! And I fell down and he thought twas funny. Tis an unsightly smudge upon his character and I am nae goin' tae ever forgive him for it."

Nor said, "This is good tae ken, I was wonderin' how ye would feel about dancin' with him, I winna grant him permission."

She clutched Nor's arm. "Did he ask ye if he could dance with me?"

"Aye, he did, but I daena want—"

"When?"

"When he was introduced durin' the reception line, he boldly asked if he 'might hope tae be able tae dance with ye,' I told him I would consider it."

She chewed the inside of her lip. Then she said to me, "Do ye see him, Livvy? There in the green coat?" I looked where she was pointing. "Dost ye think he has a fine line tae the way his coat fits?"

I glanced at Nor, his eyes twinkled with merriment.

The young man was glancing our way and then averting his eyes. “Yes, he does have a fine line, and he has a manner that seems apologetic, as if he wants your forgiveness.”

“I was noticin’ that as well.” Her eyes glazed over and she sighed.

From the corner of my eye I saw Nor gesture with his finger and the young man strode toward us.

He bowed. “Yer Grace.”

Nor said, “Young Gordon of Menzies, this is Her Grace, the Duchess of Awe.”

The young man did a sweeping bow. “Pleased tae meet ye, Yer Grace.”

Nor said, “Young Gordy, Lady Claray needs an escort tae the dance floor.”

The young man’s blush drew up his cheeks. “Aye,” he cast his eyes down and put out his hand, accidentally tipping a wine bottle. “Och nae!” He lunged forward to save it, but in the action dislodged his wig. It shifted back behind his ears. He yanked it forward. “Och nae,” he said again.

Claray rose from her seat and looked very excited, her hands clasped in front of her as she strode down one side of the table while he walked down the other side. Neither looked at each other until they got to the dance floor and joined in the dance, doing a jig and twirling around each other.

I said, “*Phew*, that was awkward.”

“Aye, terribly unfortunate tae witness, almost put me off relations altogether.”

Nor took my hand. “I would invite ye tae join their reel, m’love, but I am verra weary.”

“Me too, and... I think I will ask Ailsa for instructions, I don’t think I know how.”

Aenghus and Ailsa were very good, they bowed and stepped forward and back, twirling around each other and reeling through the room. Then I said, my eyes leveled on him,

“Speaking of relations, we have been here for hours already...”

He turned my chair a bit more so I was facing him and put my knees between his. “Aye, Livvy, I hae thought of nothing else.”

“I don’t know... you were thinking about nothing but food when we first sat down.”

“I needed food, tis insignificant now compared tae my yearnin’ for ye.”

“You yearn for me?”

“Och aye, yer...” He gestured up and down. “Ye ken, yer whole bosom and... och nae, it has given me distractin’ thoughts.”

“Has it? Good. And I was assured this was your favorite color, Your Grace?”

“Aye, tis, the blue of the sky with the silver glints of thread through it, the hues are verra fine against your skin. Ye look like the sky reflected on the loch on a summer’s day.”

“That is awesome, m’lord, and also very sweet and romantic. If I didn’t know any better I would say you are trying to talk me into going to your bedroom.”

“Ye are verra wise, my Livvy.”

I smiled. “And I assume you’re trying to help me relax in the face of all this newness.”

“I hae seen yer world, this is verra different, ye will miss home. I ken because I miss it as well, I am thinking about Madame Birdie’s tatties with the gravy upon them and the grilled steak that I can mop through it and heap a pile of it tae my mouth.” He huffed. “Now I am hungry again.”

“I thought you were only thinking of your yearning for me?”

“Now I am thinking of both, I yearn tae put a pile of mashed tatties upon yer stomach, right there in that soft place.” He ran his finger along the bottom of my bodice.

“You want to use my stomach as your plate?”

“Twould be heavenly. Tis m’ duty as a husband tae think on it.”

He gestured toward a server and mouthed a request for more food. A server rushed up with a basket of warm bread.

I sighed contentedly. “I had no idea that you yearned quite so much or that you were so set on your duties as a husband.”

He said, with his mouthful of bread, “Well, Livvy, we are verra new tae each other, and we were separated and it has taken a few days tae get m’ strength back — we haena had a lot of time tae be with each other, tae get tae ken one another. We must begin. I would like tae introduce m’ self, I am yer husband, Nor, and I yearn for ye.”

“Nice to meet you, apparently I am Olivia, the Duchess of Awe, and I yearn for you as well.”

He grinned.

I said, “But... speaking of things that I didn’t know about you... you’re a... sculptor?”

“A mason, aye, ye heard?”

“The bust upstairs is beautiful.”

He turned his glass thoughtfully on the table, “Thank ye, Livvy, I carved it a long time ago, I daena do it anymore.”

He pointed. “I carved the column in the corner there.”

“Really? It’s gorgeous, I didn’t know that... why didn’t you tell me?”

“I suppose it dinna come up and... I think twas that it is from when I was a younger man and he seems tae be a different man, one that I am unfamiliar with these days. My younger self liked tae carve stone and—”

“The bust is of your... Mary?”

“Aye, tis the Goddess of the harvest, but aye, I used the form of Mary, I couldna imagine what good would come of discussing it, so I dinna.”

I nodded. “She was really beautiful, you must have loved her a great deal.” I didn’t mean to, but my chin started to tremble.

He said, “Och nae, Livvy, tis not... that is not...”

“I think I’m just overtired and overwhelmed, and this is all... a lot.”

“I ken. I ken tis. I love ye, Livvy, ye are... och, I hae upset ye...”

He stood from his chair, his face solemn. He put out his hand. “Lady Livvy, would ye attend me upstairs?”

“You can leave? But...?”

“I told ye, Livvy, we can do whatever we want.”

He put out a hand and helped me stand, then he tucked my arm through his and said tae his mother as we passed, “Mam, we are goin’ tae our chamber, we hae had a full day of travel.”

I bowed my head.

She said, “Good night, Your Grace, rest well.”

Everyone in the party stilled and bowed, somberly, as we walked through the Great Hall and then grew raucous behind us as the music, laughter, and dancing began again when we left the room.

Chapter 35 - Livvy



We strode through a long gallery, with paintings on the walls, some tapestries and sculpture, it was impossible to make any of it out, just shapes in the darkness a bit illuminated in the moonlight. I spotted a marble statue in a bit of glow. “Is that one yours too?”

“Nae, that one is from m’head mason. He does verra fine work. On the morrow I will shew ye the room where the stone cuttin’ is done.”

“I would like that.” We passed into a corridor and as we walked it felt like going down a long passage to an uncertain future.

It all felt strange and uninviting. Nor was holding a flickering candle and yet it was still dark and briskly cold in this corridor and shapes and shadows loomed hauntingly along the edges.

There might be ghosts, haunting these rooms. Then I thought, I was a ghost of sorts, I was living in a castle centuries before my mother was even born.

I clutched Nor’s arm tighter.

Our footsteps thudded on the stone as we made it to the stair, I had no idea where we were — if Nor wasn’t here leading me, I would be lost. I held onto the stone wall as we climbed up, the worn steps caused me to stumble against his back, I pressed my forehead against the back of his arm, *what was I doing? Walking up a stair in a medieval castle? What had I done...?*

I was living in another time. Among ghosts. Nor slowed, he didn't ask questions, it was as if he knew... we waited there while I tried to gather my wits.

Finally his voice, low and rumbling from deep in the dark, dark medieval stair. "I ken ye are frightened, Livvy, I ken what ye hae left behind — I ken it, give me a chance tae make it right."

"I don't want you to think that you've done anything wrong." Both my hands were clasped around his arm, I said, "Please don't think this is about you, I love you."

"I ken ye do. Ye are m'beautiful wife, I ken ye do."

"Stop saying that."

"What, that ye are beautiful?"

"Yeah." I nodded my face up and down against his arm. "I'm not just some pretty ornament you collected on your travels. My name is Olivia Larson and I..."

He was quiet and then he said, "Aye, yer name is Olivia, and ye are from a land called Florida, and ye hae a horse named Dusty, and ye like a drink called coffee and ye are somethin' called a meteorologist and I daena understand fully what it is, but I ken it is somethin' ye studied and it is an important part of ye, and ye hae a strong family, yer father, Dave, many brothers and uncles and a grandfather named Lou and yer favorite food is," he turned and pulled me to the same step he was on and embraced me and kissed me. Then he broke our kiss and breathed beside my ear his whisper, "Yer favorite food is a thick grilled cheese, because twas the first thing ye kent how tae make for yerself when ye were wee, and ye hae a frown when ye are about tae cry, just like now, because ye are questionin' what ye are doin' here because ye were brave and ye came because I asked, and ye kent I needed ye."

I tilted my head back and looked up in his eyes.

"Thank you for seeing me."

"I do see ye, I do, I see how hard it is, but also, ye ken, the way tae become familiar with m'world is tae become familiar

with me.”

I frowned. “I didn’t even know about your statues.”

“Ye do now, and we are becomin’ more familiar with every passin’ moment, because, I must remind ye, m’love, yer name is Livvy Campbell now.”

I nodded. “Yes, Olivia Campbell, the Duchess of Awe.”

“Aye, Yer Grace, and yer husband the Duke is growin’ verra familiar with ye, but we hae forgotten somethin’ verra important—”

“To plant your post in my gardens, or something like that, I can’t remember... in this time.”

“Aye, I blame all yer frowns on the lack of a proper post plantin’ by yer husband.”

I said, smoothing down the front of the epic dress. “I believe you are right.”

“I ken I am right, I am right in everything, Livvy, the Duke is never wrong.”

“Neither is the Duchess... I’m sorry, this... I’ve got a buzz from the wine and I’m going from laughing to crying, I feel untethered — this is much harder than I thought. It’s not like I just moved into your house, you know? I went back in time to your castle. But as long as you bear with me, I’ll try and get the emotions under control. Just don’t freak out if I’m laughing one minute, frowning the next. This is a crazy experience, lots of new stuff coming at me at once.”

“But ye feel better?”

“Yes, I feel better.”

“Good, because tis cold as a witch’s knee here in the stairwell, we must climb tae our warm chamber.”

He led me up the steps to our room. “Dost ye ken the way tae our chambers yet?”

I thought for a moment. “No, actually, I don’t. I haven’t even seen our — do we have a bed?”

“Och, I see I hae been verra derelict in m’duties with the post plantin’ and aye, we hae a bed, ye are about tae be introduced tae it. And this is what ye must ken, m’chamber is on the fourth floor, and when ye arrive on the floor...” He stepped from the stairs. “If ye are in the Northeast stairwell, ye will turn this way or ye will run aground upon this stone wall.”

I chuckled. “Good point, I suppose if I come up in the Southeast stairwell, I must turn the opposite way or I will run aground on that stone wall?”

“Essentially, though that stairwell is in the Southwest, and ye could turn one of two ways.”

“Ah, that’s confusing.”

“This is why I hae brought ye up the Northeast stair, if ye use this stair ye winna get lost and because it goes from my gallery up tae the top floors and the chambers of the Duke’s family, tis much like a private stair.”

“I see.” Then I chuckled as we walked down the very dark passageway. “Actually I don’t see much at all, it’s very dark.”

He tightened his arm around me, “See up ahead? My guards are by the chamber door. They arna always there, but they will be tonight. We hae a strong guard on the walls. I am tae be notified of storms or any dangers.”

The guardsmen opened the doors and we passed into his chamber. Nor placed our candle on the table as a young man who had been stoking the fire in the hearth to a nice blaze, bowed from the room.

There was a bottle of wine and a couple of glasses on the small table in front of the fireplace. I relieved myself in the piss pot, and then asked, “How on earth do I get out of this gigantic dress?”

He took off his coat and draped it over the back of a chair. “Tis a mystery. But in one moment—”

The door opened and my lady’s maid Cannie rushed in. She bowed and called me ‘Your Grace’ as she kneeled in front

of my boots to pull them off, then had me hold out my arms while she unlaced my bodice.

Meanwhile Nor had removed his long coat and vest, had removed his boots, and had his shirt open at his throat. He sprawled in the settee by the fire watching me get undressed with a smile on his face.

“You’re enjoying this?” I asked as the bodice was removed with a struggle, like a tug-of-war to get it off and away.

He said, “Och aye, I enjoy it verra much. I might prefer tae do it m’self, but there is a pleasure in not...”

Cannie put her knee against my hip to get the back of the skirt untied.

He winced and continued, “...not putting in the effort if tis goin’ tae cause ye discomfort, I will wait m’turn.”

Finally, I stood there in my chemise, Cannie wrapped a plaid around m’shoulders. “Dost ye need anythin’ else, Your Grace?”

“No, thank you.”

She bowed out of the room.

I tilted my head, “So now what?”

“Ye come sit with me by the fire.”

I joined him on the settee. “I feel nervous.”

He smiled. “Aye, because this is our first time in this time.”

“Oh, yes, this is big. No wonder I’m nervous.”

He leaned his arm across the back of the seat and patted his chest. I leaned against him, and he blew the top of my hair and patted it down. “Och, tis too grand.”

I laughed. “I am glad you admitted it, when you told me I took your breath away and didn’t mention the hairdo, I wondered if you had lost your mind, or if this was going to be the way I had to look from now on. But I’m seeing now, lots of the older women wear simple styles, up with a few—”

He said, “Pearls or jewels.”

“Yes, you like that?”

“Aye, I do.”

“Good, me too, it looks distinguished. That’s what I’ll do most days, a hurluberlu only on special occasions. And just so you know, you can tell me I’m beautiful, I will believe it more if you are honest when my hair looks crazy. I assume my hair looks crazy.”

He said, “Speaking of, I hae this for ye.” He shifted me from his chest, dragged a box over, and put it in front of me. With only the flickering dim light of the candle, I opened the lid and peered inside. “Oh, is it my toiletries?”

“Aye, I had it brought up tae the room. I also hae something in our private chambers for ye as well.”

I said, “Ooooooh, I love surprises. Wait, do I...? Not really, but presents, I love presents.”

I noticed at the top of this box was my hand mirror. I held it up and took a long look at my hair. “Wow.”

He chuckled, “I left ye alone with my sister and came back a few hours later and this is what she did tae ye. That will teach me a lesson.”

“It certainly will.”

“Tis as if dark fae hae been bedevilin’ ye. In this instance the dark fae were m’sister and her maids.” He pulled out one of my long curls, loosened the ribbon, and pulled it from the end, allowing the curl to spring back to the tight hold it had from the paste earlier. “All the men are wearin’ their hair long, under wigs, tis fine for the men who are goin’ bald, they hae much tae gain from the trend—”

“But if you have a full head of hair like you do, what’s the point?”

“Aye, the wigs are hot and heavy, tis why I decided not tae wear it tae dinner, and now I will hae set a trend. Aenghus has probably thrown his away by now.”

I laughed. “You’re already changing history.”

“Even when I daena plan tae. I hae seen men with their heads unencumbered, I hae seen women with their locks around their shoulders. I hae been ruined.”

“Me too. And we’re going to be okay, right? We can do this?”

“Aye, because we will sit here when it gets verra hard and we will talk it through and when we need tae we will laugh at our discomfort, and tease each other, and we will come tae an understanding on it, I understand, Livvy, how spare and rough this world is, I ken it is a loss for ye.”

“It’s not, you’re worth it.”

“Tell me again in the morn when ye are without yer four cups of coffee.” He lifted my chin and kissed me.

Chapter 36 - Livvy



We kissed long and slow and sensually, raising heat through my middle to match the warmth on my skin from the fire, combining to cause me to turn in the seat and crawl onto him. With my elbows on his shoulders I settled down heavy on his lap, my lips sucking and licking the angles and planes along his jaw and down the side of his throat and finally I said, “I haven’t seen the bedroom yet.”

He grabbed my ass and heaved himself up, saying, “Wrap yer legs,” holding me as he walked me to the side door by the fireplace, he opened it up, and carried me through. From up in his arms I looked all around.

The room was dimly lit by a flickering candle on a wooden table. The fireplace was open, to both his outer chamber on one side and this private chamber on the other side, the fire and candles casting dancing shadows on the stone walls. Beside the hearth was a large four-poster bed with intricately carved wooden frames, dressed in rich tapestries all around and covered with a thick, quilted canopy. The light was so dim in the rest of the room that all I could see was that there was a large piece of furniture on the side, like a wardrobe, a couple of chairs, but the pool of dim flickering light only illuminated a few feet near the hearth.

He dropped my feet down beside the bed. “For the surprise, I had the maids cover the bed with—” Then he moaned, “Och nae,” and started laughing.

The maids had apparently not understood the task and had used a fitted sheet to cover the whole bed, tucking in the sides

around the blankets, so that the bed was just a big pile of mattresses and blankets and a couple of modern pillows with the sheet pulled over it. I started laughing, “What did you tell them to do?”

He laughed, “I daena ken, I told them the sheets were special for yer bed, and I suppose I thought twas explained well enough in that they were tae make the bed!”

“They did not understand the task.”

Nor said, “Ought I tae call them in?”

“Oh heck no, that would totally ruin the mood. No, this is just going to take some fixing...” I crawled on the bed, pulling the fitted corners off the pile, passing the pillows to Nor. He deposited all the bedding onto a chair, while I put the pillowcases on the pillows. Then Nor on one side and I on the other spread the fitted sheet over his feather mattress and tucked it under. Then I put the pillows at the head of the bed, and we laid the flat sheet over it, and then I said, “This is the best part.” I pulled a small vacuum-sealed bag from the box of linens and unzipped it, the contents expanded, becoming a king size feather-like puffy comforter. “It’s like a cloud.”

He said, “I canna wait tae get intae bed, it smells like Florida.”

We folded his prior heavy and flat bedding at the end of the bed, in case our feet grew cold and climbed into the bed, under the covers. He rolled up on his side and put a hand on my breast.

I sprawled my arms out. “See, that didn’t ruin the mood at all — just twenty minutes of work.”

“Twas totally worth it.” He drew my chemise up to expose my breast and with a hand gripping me dropped his mouth to it and suckled there until I was moaning with pleasure, he said, “Livvy, m’wife, I would like tae welcome ye tae m’bed.”

I gasped, “It’s wonderful,” and it was, his mouth licking and sucking along my skin, the fire snapping and crackling in the hearth beside us, the flicker of the candle that continued to light our room.

Because it was *our* room. By the time Nor had fully welcomed me to his bed, with caresses and kisses and sucks and nibbles and his breath by my ear as we rode together, in *our* bed in this time, as he drove me to a climax and as he lay heavy on me, his breaths bullish against my ear as he finished and settled, my arms wrapped around his neck, the fingers of my hand languidly twirling in his locks. He grew soft between my legs, a lovely relaxing and holding of him, my fingers stroking along his skin, finding the planes and angles of his muscles... We embraced and held on, as slowly the candle burned down.

I watched as the firelight flickered on his face, growing dimmer as it burned. Nor kissed me and crawled across me to climb from bed, pulling a shirt over his head that went down to his thighs. He crouched by the fire, stoked the flame, and added another log.

A few days ago, I believed the height of accomplishment was to have a thermostat to adjust our temperature, to keep it always stable and standard. Now, in the moment between wakefulness and sleep, I thought about how I had been warm and comfortable, then hot and excited and then had cooled and the blaze had dwindled, and then heroically my husband had gone out into the cold to stoke our fire.

He had brought the room back to a comfortable warmth. The flame flickered on my cheeks and spread across my skin and warmed me through as he returned to our bed, crawling across me and spooning behind me. With his arms around me, both of us facing the fire, his hands clasped around mine and I inhaled the smell of him. It mingled with the modern fragrance of the sheets combining with the scents of beeswax and smoke, musk and fire and dust. I said, "It smells like home."

He kissed my head and held me while I listened to the crackling of the fire, with occasional pops and snaps from the burning logs, and fell asleep.

Chapter 37 - Livvy



I woke up in my sprawled-on-my-stomach position on the lumpy mattress, with Nor again sleeping with his head against my side, his arm thrown across my ass. It was a luxurious position, as if he were clinging to me like a life raft, but also comfortable, familiar with each other.

I was brought to reality with the dawning realization that my period had started. I put my finger down and checked. Yep.

Damnit, this was awkward.

I said, "Good morning, my love."

"Good morn." He tightened his hold around me.

"I um... just started my period, um... I need to get up and get some of my supplies."

He was quiet. "What are ye talking on?"

"I have my period, menstruation, my time of the month. You know?"

"Aye, I ken."

He pulled away and I climbed from the bed, seeing a red spot on the new fresh sheets. "Drat."

I padded to the box of my toiletries and pulled out a tampon, thinking about how long before I would run out. I should have brought many more. I had no idea what life would be without them. I went to the chamber pot and crouched, seeing a spot of dried blood on the back of the chemise, double drat. How was I supposed to wash it? What was going to

happen? How was I supposed to handle this? I peed and inserted the tampon, all the while Nor lay on his back staring up at the canopy on the bed.

I padded over to the bed and sat on the edge, facing him. He put his hand on my knee. I asked, “What are you thinking about?”

“I am relieved we had a chance tae discharge my duties afore yer monthly time is upon ye, but I am disappointed that ye arna with child.”

I cocked my head. “We’re planning on a baby?”

He looked incredulous, “Of course we are, ye canna — what dost ye mean with the question?”

“In modern times we... it’s not important... never mind.”

His brow drew down.

I added, “We kind of discuss it first, we decide to when we are ready.”

“Och nae, ye canna, Livvy, I might be a Duke, but I am not a God. I would never deign tae decide when m’son will be born. That is for the heavens tae decide.”

“I suppose that is true.”

“Aye, tis. It would be a folly tae think ye are decidin’. We hae married.” He smiled. “I hae been ploughing yer fields—”

“Is that what we’re calling it?”

“Aye, I hae been ploughin’. Ye hae verra fine fields, my love, verra fine, I do enjoy the work.”

I laughed. “So we’re making a baby, is the point — are we?”

“Aye.”

I flounced down on the bed beside him. “Now I’m disappointed too, that I got my period, and that I got a stain on our clean sheets.” I sighed.

He kissed my cheek and climbed from the bed to relieve himself in the chamber pot.

Then he stoked the fire and began to dress.

I said, “So what does our day look like? What does the Duchess do when she arises?”

“We will send for Cannie, she will come help ye dress.” He pulled on a kilt and fastened his belt around it.

“What about duties, do I have duties?”

“Aye, but they... we will discuss them, ye only hae tae do what ye are suited for—”

“What am I suited for in the seventeenth century, I wonder?”

He smiled, “We will learn it eventually. In the meantime ye could explore the castle...”

“I’m allowed to explore?”

“Aye, ye are allowed tae do anythin’ ye want.”

I stared up at the drapes around our bed wondering about exploring, maybe Claray would go with me... “And how do I... how do I eat? When? How do I know what I’m supposed to do?”

He said, “We could ask Lady Gail tae shew ye around her duties, there is likely a great deal ye could do in her stead if she is willin’ tae relinquish the tasks—”

A younger maid then came into the room and picked up our chamberpot, a quick scowl passed across her face, rightly so, the chamber pot was disgusting. She cast a glance at me, and left.

I said, “She looked upset, weird.”

“Aye, they are all waitin’ on ye tae become with child.”

“What? But... but they just met me. They are already judging me for not giving you an heir soon enough?”

“Aye,” he was buttoning his coat, “ye canna allow it tae bother ye, Livvy, they are also judgin’ me.”

A man cleared his throat on the other side of our chamber door. “Yer Grace, do ye need me tae dress ye?”

“Not this morn.”

“Thank ye, Yer Grace.”

I continued, “So basically this whole staff will be able to see in my chamberpot what is going on with me? Yikes!”

He belted on his sword. “Ye hae tae remember, the servants will look forward tae the bairn, as it will bring them a great deal of joy. They arna judgin’ us so much as hopin’ we will fill the castle of wee lairdy lads for them tae dote on.” He leaned over the bed and kissed me. “Ye ought tae be warned, Mam will hae heard, likely already.”

“What the...? Okay, fine, I get it, no worries, and where are you going?”

He said, “I must go tae meet with Burnwell and Aenghus, I will send yer lady’s maid in tae dress ye, with the admonishment tae not do that thing she did last night with yer hair—”

I shook my head, it was wild and teased out, clumped in spots. “It’s going to take effort to get it back to its natural state.”

“Aye, ye will need tae be heroic, I am countin’ on ye — and I will have a breakfast spread for ye on the table in front of the hearth. Would ye like Claray tae join ye?”

“That would be great. Is it possible to get boiling water for the... wait, I can’t remember where I put the coffee, is it in this cooler? Drat... you know what, never mind.”

“I believe it is in the chest downstairs, I will bring it when I return, then we will gather all our family around, and share the gifts we brought.”

“Perfect.”

And it did seem perfect, until the moment he left — then there was an empty void where he had been. He had pulled open the heavy velvet curtains, exposing the small window, a sliver of sunlight penetrating the room. There was a soft breeze coming through. Every now and then, the faint sounds of distant

chatter, occasional laughter, pots and pans, a cow lowing from down below.

Somehow the lone distant sounds gave the room an air of desolation, as if he had kicked up dust that was now fluttering to the ground.

I sat up in the bed and looked around, wondering how I had come to this, alone in the medieval times, *was it medieval?* I was sure there was a cut off — *what even year was it?* 1670? I couldn't remember for sure, and now I was all alone. I didn't understand what I was supposed to do, did I have a job? I was a duchess, what were my duties? How would I perform them when I didn't even know the most basic things, like how to ask someone to boil water so I could make my own darn coffee?

I was completely dependent. What if something happened to Nor?

There was a knock and the door opened, Cannie entered, holding a pile of fabric in her arms. I climbed from the bed and put out my arms as she began to dress me, a distinctive sound of a tsk when she noticed the spot, now dried to a dark brown on the back of my chemise. It wasn't big, like the size of a nickel, but *still*. This whole thing felt not at all like a spa treatment, a whole lot more like a drudge. She had me step into a skirt, a silver fabric. And then a skirt over it in a deep blue brocade.

She pulled the front of it back and pinned it up as the door opened and Claray rushed in. "Good morn, Livvy! Yer breakfast is out on the table, ye haena eaten?"

I shook my head. "Still dressing, from the looks of it we're on the second layer... is this my casual dress?"

Claray said, "Aye, tis for yer usual day."

Cannie pulled a bodice past my arms, tugged it around my front and tightened the laces with a yank. It was made of a blue brocade that matched the overskirt and was very beautiful with lace on the edges. I inhaled and she pulled at the laces again until it wrapped me like a firm hug.

Claray said, “Nor told me I canna do yer hair, Livvy, but yer hair is...”

“I think he meant, just not quite so big, but this is... we must do *something*. It’s knotted here, there’s this ribbon stuck in the curl and I can’t get it free, and look at the front, it looks like a cowlick.”

Her eyes went wide, “A cowlick?” She laughed merrily. “Och aye, it does look as if a coo licked ye right there on the head. And he were nae a sweet coo, he were an ornery coo.”

We went into the outer chamber where the fire was nicely warming the room, daylight filtering in from the larger glass window with the velvet curtains pulled and tied back. There was a tray on a table in front of a chair with some of the food that I had brought from home, a summer sausage, a hunk of cheese, a jar of jelly, and some crackers. A cooler was beside it and on a table a steaming kettle. *That was so sweet of Nor.*

But now that I thought about it, there was a glass in the room, but no mug. I dug through the cooler, there were coffee grounds but... I wasn’t sure where the spoons were. I would have to pour coffee grounds from this big can into the small fragile glass and pour hot water on it, but would the glass crack? I looked at the lick of steam a bit forlornly.

Just imagining all the steps — there was no way I could pull it off, not while Claray watched, and look competent. Plus my dress was so firmly binding I was already breathless from the activity of bending over and looking through the cooler.

Everything was a huge pain in the ass.

I decided I didn’t want or need a cup of coffee. That would be better in the long run. I would get it set up for tomorrow, and honestly? I needed the break from the caffeine. This would be good for me, getting my period and going off caffeine in the same day.

So I sat, adjusting the bustle of fabric under and behind me, and ate. *Oh! I had been so hungry.*

Cannie stood behind me and smoothed my hair, tugged the knots, and somehow loosed the ribbon that had seemed stuck.

I made stacks of crackers, cheese, jam and sausages and passed them to Claray who chewed happily. Crumbs flew from her mouth. “Tis delicious! I ate some porridge verra quickly as I was so excited tae see ye and tell ye about dancing last eve with Master Gordy. Did ye see him? He is verra distinguished when he dances, did ye see it?”

“I did, he was excellent, I think he really liked you.”

She almost swooned into the chair. “Och, he is all that I could want, handsome and young, I do hope Nor is willing tae consider it.”

I said, “So let me get this straight — he laughed at you, years ago, but now you’ve danced with him for one night and you’re ready for Nor to give your marriage his blessing?”

She missed my incredulous tone and just said, “It is taking so long to be decided.” She sighed. “I fear if someone daena ask soon I will be passed over. I might be twenty without having been married!”

She placed her chin on her hand, thoughtfully, a little forlornly.

Cannie twisted my hair from the sides to the back, rolled it and then pinned it tight.

I said to Cannie, “Oh, wait, I have something...”

I went into my room, pulled out the hand mirror and found a box of my jewelry, inside I had some hair pins with rhinestones on them. I brought them out and Cannie added them to my hair, while I looked in the mirror. Nor was going to love it.

Cannie left us alone and I opened the cooler by my chair and pulled out an orange. Claray clapped her hands together. “I believe tis too beautiful tae eat!”

“It is so beautiful it must be eaten.” I peeled it and spread out the pieces and placed it on the tray between us.”

“May I hae one?”

“Of course, you can have all of it if you want.”

She popped a slice in her mouth and chewed happily as I asked, “You said he was handsome and young, but do you like him, does he have a good personality?”

“Och nae, his manner is dreadful. He is frightened of everything, and a bit dour and dimwitted. He dinna laugh once the entire time we danced, but he is verra handsome.” She said, “Och nae, I should nae hae spoken ill of him, tis not a good omen tae speak ill of a man before he asks for yer hand.”

“Dear me, is that where we are? I thought you just danced once!”

“Twice, a reel and a jig and both were magnificent!”

Chapter 38 - Livvy



The door opened and Lady Gail bustled in. “Claray! I dinna realize ye were here, good.” Then she folded her hands in front of her waist. “Dear, Livvy, I am so sorry tae hear ye received yer courses this morn, och nae, twill be good tae hae another bairn soon. We are all lookin’ forward tae when ye deliver a son for the Duke.”

Claray said, “Mam, where have ye been this morn?”

“I hae been in the chapel in prayer about Her Grace continuing our bloodline.”

My eyes went wide. “Over... *me?*”

Lady Gail sat primly in front of the tray of breakfast and looked longingly at a slice of orange. “Aye, ye ken, Livvy, we must pray for the deliverance of a son, tis crucial.”

I passed her the slice. She ate it, contentedly, while I put some cheese, jam and sausage on a couple of crackers, and passed her one and kept the other for myself. She took tiny bites of her stack and declared, “Och! This is verra fine!”

Claray said, “Mam, did ye see Young Gordy in the Great Hall last night? He does a verra fine reel.”

“I saw ye were dancin’ with him, Claray, but I warn ye, he is not a good fit for ye. Ye are the daughter of a Duke, the sister of the current Duke, ye canna pick a man just because he turns a pretty leg while dancing.”

Claray huffed and put her chin on her hand as there was a knock on the door and Ailsa entered.

“Livvy! I mean, Yer Grace!” She curtsyed. “I dinna hae time tae speak tae ye last night, in all the excitement of the festivities and the dancing!” She sat down on the settee and picked up a piece of orange from the tray and popped it in her mouth. “Ye married Nor! I kent ye would! I told Aenghus, the way Nor looks at her he is goin’ tae marry her...” She chewed the orange and swallowed. “M’sorrow ye hae yer courses, Livvy.”

“You heard too?”

She laughed. “The whole castle is speaking on it. They hae been dreadfully bored, with Nor in mourning for so long, ye canna blame them. He has returned with a wife. They are verra pleased.”

Lady Gail said, “The dancing last night has them all in a dither. We ought tae hae considered that when deciding tae gather and feast.” She glanced at Claray, “We perhaps should hae waited tae announce the marriage until there was a bairn comin’, then we might hae *truly* celebrated—”

Nor entered with Aenghus and they were each carrying one of our boxes. We had taken all the seats around the hearth, so they stood in front of the fire and took food from the tray.

Nor asked her, “What pray tell are ye speaking about, Mam?”

“*We* were discussing the continuation of Yer Grace’s bloodline and whether we ought tae be celebratin’ so soon when Lady Livvy has not *yet* become with-child.”

Nor playfully rolled his eyes, “How can ye question the fun of our gathering last eve?” He shook his head. “I winna accept any attempts tae ruin m’good mood. I am home tae see m’family who are all well and safe, with m’new bride, who is all that I can ask for in a wife, comely and joyous, and we hae had a feast in the Great Hall and I heard there was a great deal of gaiety and dancing, and all is well — is it not, Mam? We winna hae anymore lamenting: mirth was had by all.”

Claray sighed. “Especially by me.”

Nor joked, “Och nae, Claray! This is the *one* thing I will allow complaining on, ye are declaring ye enjoyed dancing with Young Gordy? Even after seein’ him dance the jig?” He playfully grimaced.

She looked shocked. “Nor! He was a fine figure! Full of grace and—”

“Did ye think there was a grace as he trod upon yer feet? I canna believe it, ye must be mistaken. This is the same young man ye said ye would never speak tae? The one who laughed at ye? Must be dark fae who hae bewitched ye. I saw a young man step upon yer toes and was so bashful that he barely looked upon ye.”

“He was verra fine though as he danced...” Claray’s voice trailed off, a doubtful tone emerging.

Nor said, “I suppose if ye like a young man who is painfully bashful stomping around on a maiden’s feet ye might say he was fine at it.”

He chuckled, then he leaned over and kissed me on the head.

I looked up at him. “Do you like my hair?”

“Aye, tis beautiful, I like the stones, they match yer eyes. Are ye havin’ a nice visit?”

“Very nice, missed you, though.”

“I missed ye as well, but rushed back as fast as I could tae pass out our gifts.”

“Then let’s get to it.” I stood up beside Nor as he pulled the closest box toward us and opened it.

He rubbed his hands together. “I wish Malcolm was here.”

Aenghus moved to be right behind Ailsa’s chair, so he could see better. “When will we hear back from the messenger you sent?”

Nor’s face drew down as he considered then said, “I am expectin’ him verra soon.”

Aenghus said, “Good, good. Now what did ye bring us?”

Nor laughed as he pulled out a stack of sheets and passed them to his mother. “Livvy’s mother sent these for yer bed. They are verra soft.”

The sheet set was cotton with a high thread-count, printed in an intricate floral pattern. It wasn’t new, but it had been in my grandmother’s linen closet for the guest room and was rarely used.

Lady Gail rubbed the cloth against her face. “Och, it feels lovely!” She inhaled. “It smells sweet like flowers.” She put it up to Ailsa’s face, “Inhale it, Ailsa, tis fragrant!”

Ailsa said, “Och, ye are right, tis verra lovely.”

Nor said, “Good, I am glad ye like, Mam, I do think the scent Livvy’s family has in their linens is wonderful.”

She said, “Tis, but will be gone the first time we send them down tae Auld Aymer tae be washed, our scents are not nearly as fine.”

She buried her nose in the sheets and sniffed again, then sighed and held them in her lap.

I noted to myself: *bring everyone bedding next time.*

I brought forth from the box a bottle of lavender hand lotion that I thought Ailsa would like. It had been Birdie’s and was inexpensive, but was full, barely used.

Ailsa turned it over in her hands, then I showed her how to push down on the spout to draw out the lotion and then to rub it on her arms and elbows and into her hands. The whole time she kept sniffing her arms and hands. “Och, I smell like a garden!”

Lady Gail and Claray both smelled the lotion and then they all had to put some on, too.

I beamed happily while I watched. Then I gave Claray a table mirror with a scissor arm. I put it on the table and said, “You can extend it up and down and around to see yourself from different positions,”

Claray clapped, “It’s remarkable!”

I pulled the mirror up so it was near her face. “You can see your hair when it’s done,” and turned the mirror over. “...and this side has magnification, see?”

She looked shocked. “Och nae, do I look like this?”

“No, not at all, not a bit, actually, let’s hide that again, turn it over, don’t look at the other side. Just use this side, the good side.”

“Aye, I agree, tis disagreeable tae see m’self up close.”

“It is for all of us. You are beautiful though, don’t let the mirror frighten you.”

She said, “The other side is where the dark fae magic is at work. Ye can see inside yer skin.”

“Yep, exactly.”

Next, I pulled out a stack of towels and gave them each one with a hand towel, and a washcloth. “These are for drying and washing...” They each raised the towels to their faces and inhaled the scent. I was pretty certain they wouldn’t do anything with them but keep them to smell. Another note to myself: *all future gifts ought to be scent based, I was thinking perfume and detergents and... if there was a next time.*

Aenghus said, “I see ye are all pleased with yer presents and I haena gotten one yet.”

Ailsa put up her arm toward his face. “I will let ye smell the scent upon m’arms!”

He kissed her wrist.

Nor opened the second box, and pulled out a pair of socks and a pair of cowboy-style work-boots my dad had picked up for Aenghus when he had gone on his boot run for Nor.

Aenghus held them up looking at the embroidery on the shaft. “Aye! I kent ye would give me a pair, and they are even finer than yours!”

Nor chuckled. “How do ye think it?”

“Because *look*, Yer Grace, see m’sitchin’? Tis the wings of a falcon, the noblest of birds.”

Aenghus sat on the ground, peeled off his old worn boots.

Ailsa said, "I am so pleased, Aenghus, ye needed a new pair, yers hae been causing yer feet tae ache, and I did hope ye might hae a fine pair tae match yer brother's."

He said, "Mine are finer." He tossed his stocking off to the side. Nor passed him the pair of socks. He pulled one sock on and then the other and shoved his feet in the boots and admired them.

I said, "Stand up, walk around, check them out, make sure they're comfortable." He walked around the sitting area. "Och aye, verra comfortable."

Nor looked down in the box. "I hae a pair here for Malcolm as well, I will give it tae him whence he comes."

Aenghus said, "But his are not better than mine?"

"Nae, yers are the best."

"Good."

Nor dug around in the cooler and got out the barbecue sauce and poured a bit on a plate and we dipped sliced roast beef in it. Everyone agreed it was delicious, and Nor promised, "I will pass it tae Auld Aymer and urge him tae serve it with our next dinner."

We all sat around eating barbecue sauce on roast beef, orange slices, and cracker stacks of cheese and sausages and jam. We kept smelling the fabric, and we dutifully admired the boots. Nor told them the long full story about what had happened to him when he was away.

I went to our room to pee in the chamberpot and needed to change my tampon. I stood with my hands on my hips, first considering, *what the heck should I do with the used one?*

There was a fire.

I dug through my bag for another tampon and read the package, it was all cardboard and cotton.

This would be fine right? The fire was very big and hot.

I crouched over the chamberpot and peed, changed my tampon, and then carried the used one, *not liking this at all one bit*, to the hearth and dropped it in the ash. I grabbed Nor's fireplace poker and shoved that disgusting thing deep into the hot coals at the base of the fire.

Nor was on the other side of the fireplace, he saw me moving on this side and called through the hearth, "Is everythin' alright, Livvy?"

"Yes! Just needed to um... stoke this side of the fire." The tampon lit and burned, a bit of black smoke made me panic for a hot minute, *no no no, please don't be plastic, please don't smoke out the room and smell horrible and...* After a few moments the flame died down, the tampon was all but turned to ash. I poked it to break up the last part of the shape, put the poker back and smoothed down my dress.

This sucked.

I went back to the outer chamber and joined them again. The day slid by us, I hadn't been outside the room all day. We all parted for the afternoon.

Nor checked his watch. "Come with me, Livvy, I would like tae shew ye the masonry workshop."

Chapter 39 - Livvy



Nor led me through the corridors, down the stairs, and across the courtyard to a row of low buildings up against the battlement. There was a chimney jutting up from the middle with a copious amount of black smoke pouring from it. Nor gestured to the left. “Down there is the smithy’s forge and here is the masonry workshop.” He pushed open the door and we entered.

Along the opposite wall stood large, rough-hewn blocks of stone. A massive wooden workbench ran through the center, holding chisels, hammers, and other iron tools, with a couple of wooden stools beside it. On the walls were displayed some finished sculptures and intricate architectural details, corner stones and a column, a thick slab of marble leaned on the wall, looking like a mantel in progress.

I turned, taking it all in. “Wow. This is amazing.”

“Aye, I haena been here in a while, tis good tae see what they are workin’ on.”

“Where are they?”

“I asked them tae give us the shop for the afternoon.”

Soft sunlight filtered through three small, leaded glass windows, casting warm beams on the stone surfaces. A hearth at the end on the shared wall with the foundry, a fire blazing so it was warm.

He led me toward a block of stone at one end of the room, with the edges carved. “This stone is what I had been working

on.” He placed his hand on the block. “I ought tae get back tae it.”

A big man entered and bowed, “Yer Grace, do ye need anythin’?”

“Nae, I am showin’ Her Grace around the shop.”

He bowed again, “I am pleased ye visited, it has been a long time.” He backed from the room.

I watched as Nor stroked his hand down the stone.

I ran my finger through a layer of pale dust on the table surface. “I love this room, it has a hum of energy to it, a resonance.”

Nor said, “Aye, there is a promise tae it, there will be something formed from stone here. I used tae love comin’ here as a lad tae watch it happen.”

I said, “It reminds me of the barns back home, where Uncle Tim works on the tractors. I have always loved the places where people build things. Show me.”

“What? Ye want tae see me carve?”

“I really want to see you carve, and I want you to show me how.”

He ran his hand through his hair and then took off his coat and laid it on the table. He selected a chisel and a mallet and said, “Alright, m’love, it has been a while, but I remember I wanted tae hae a rounded form here. He began to strike the chisel, bang, bang, bang, and little flakes fell away. His arms bound and tight and strong as he concentrated on the spot. Then he used a lighter touch, delicately striking the chisel, ping, ping, a chip of stone popped to the side. He brushed the spot with his arm, then applied the chisel again, strike, strike, the hand holding it firmly, then loosening and allowing it to turn — firm, strike, turn, firm hold, hard strike, graceful turn. It was mesmerizing watching him, the marble chipping away bit by bit. He asked, “Now ye want tae try?”

“I do! I really want to.” He passed me the chisel and mallet and put his arms around me. “Ye want tae strike with yer

shoulder, here...” He ran his hand across my shoulder and down my arm. “Ye will see a weakness in the stone and ye want tae push the point of the chisel tae the weakness. The stone will break away.” With his hands loosely on my elbow, I struck the stone, then again, and again, until a chip broke away. “...ye are reading the stone.”

I missed the next time, but again I struck, and another chip, he said, “Ye are doin’ it well, Livvy.”

I struck again, another chip. “I see why you like this, this is fun.” I struck again and again. He said, “I will leave ye tae it.” He left my side, selected a small hand rasp and began scraping along the other edge. The sounds of our work together, scrape and brush and file, and the clinks and pings. I concentrated on a point, really working on the area, focused, then glanced up to see Nor concentrating, his eyes met mine. A moment between us, *I know so much more of you. I love you, m’lord.*

I love ye as well, my Livvy.

We were growing familiar.

I went back to work. Finally I passed him the chisel and mallet and moved my arm back and forth, “Wow, *that’ll* build your muscles.” I held up my arm and flexed my bicep.

He held his arm up. I touched his bicep and grinned. “*This* is how you’re so hot. I want to watch you do it more.”

I sat on the stool while he began to chisel the stone again, working a different area, chipping little pieces off along an edge. I asked, “What is this going to be?”

“There will be a shoulder, here.” He struck the chisel, a divot of stone popped away. He stroked his finger along that area. “I had an idea, two years ago, but I think I hae changed m’mind. I will think on it and decide what it is to be.”

“But definitely a shoulder? I like that, shoulders are important.”

“Aye.”

“Another question, and please don’t take this the wrong way, I was wondering... did your wife, Mary, come here and

sculpt with you?”

He ran his hand along the form. “Nae, Livvy, she came down sometimes tae see what I was workin’ on, when I asked, but she was more interested in the finished piece. She did verra much like the finished bust upstairs. But nae, she dinna come sit on the stool as ye are and watch me, and she never tried tae do it. She would nae hae considered it fitting.”

“That never even crossed my mind.”

“Aye, ye are a verra different sort of wife.”

“That’s good, then I’m not replacing her, I didn’t want to replace her... it’s funny, I know I’m in the same bed and in the same rooms. I know that she was there once, and that you loved her and that it must be difficult to have me be in her spaces—”

He stroked his hand down the stone again. “Tis nae difficult, Livvy, ye are a different woman and I love ye, ye arna causin’ me difficulties.”

“Good, it’s not exactly what I meant, I know you feel that way, but I’m sure there are times where it gives you pause, to have me in all those spaces. I just want you to know that’s okay, and sometimes I have a pause too, and there was just something just now, about this, being on this stool while you carve that felt very intimate and I needed to find out if this was a moment that you have had, or does this one just belong to me.”

“This one belongs tae ye, Livvy, as ye belong tae me.” He passed me the chisel, and teased, “This is the glory of masonry work, it keeps ye from thinking too much, ye ought tae work some more.”

I stood in front of the stone and he pointed where I should chisel and he took a second chisel and worked alongside me. Occasionally instructing, but my arm grew tired so I sat on the stool while he chiseled for a while longer, saying, “Tis easy tae forget m’troubles and duties when I am cuttin’ a block. It gives me a reprieve tae chip away at the stone and tae run m’hand along the form.” It was a reprieve for me too, and this room

felt like our place. There were no lady's maids or guards, it was just Nor and I, being with each other, a lovely moment of familiarity.

He put the chisel and mallet down. "I want tae show ye something." He went to a shelf, pulled away a draped piece of cloth, and revealed the half-carved bust of a man, his hair long, his head turned to look over his shoulder, he was well-formed but emerging from a block of raw stone.

"Who is this?"

"M'father. I was carvin' it when he passed, and found m'self incapable of finishin' it." Nor placed the cloth back over it, "I daena like tae look at it." Next he picked up a piece that was about the size of a baseball, a marble sphere, heavy and perfectly formed, smooth, carved from a shimmering stone. It glowed.

He said, "This was the first piece I carved, Livvy, tae practice the curves. Ye can see I made a mistake here." His finger rubbed along the surface where there was a barely noticeable divot. "Tis not perfect, but I want ye tae hae it."

I clutched it to my chest. "For me, truly? It glows like the moon,"

"Aye, ye can keep it in the sun during the day, perhaps it will store up the light for ye, then at night it can glow on our bedside table and ye winna hae tae be afraid of the darkness."

"I love it, thank you."

Finally he said, "But speaking of light, we are losin' it, and that means tis time for our meal."

I clutched that carved piece in my left hand and wound my right hand around his arm and he walked me back up to our rooms to get dressed for dinner.

I gathered that my dress was good enough for a family dinner, but I washed up in the bowl in my room with water that

Cannie had scented with lavender.

I had brought a pearl necklace, a gift from Birdie, that I put on. And I had a fake pearl bracelet that Cannie pinned along the twist in the back of my hair. She tied ribbons along my sleeves.

I put on a wee bit of makeup. I used my hand mirror to check my look and thought I looked sophisticated and distinguished, closer to Lady Gail's look than Claray's which fit my station as the wife of the Duke.

The Duchess.

It was difficult getting used to that.

Chapter 40 - Livvy



When I entered the Great Hall, I realized something about my new family — they were prone to under-exaggerating gatherings. They told me tonight would be a family dinner, but with all the visiting cousins who hadn't yet left, there were at least forty people there, possibly more. When Nor and I walked in, another long queue formed to meet us. The Great Hall smelled of roasted meats and fish, intermingled with the rich scents of herbs and spices, and the sweet scent of freshly baked bread. Nor said, "We need tae get through this quickly, m' mouth is salivatin' with hunger."

When we arrived at the head of the table, our wine glasses were filled. After I sat down, Nor took his seat and then everyone sat down. I asked, "Every night?"

"Every night — what dost ye mean?"

"Every night you have to greet all these people in that receiving line?"

"Many nights, when there are distinguished guests, and during large celebrations with our extended family. It might seem a great deal of trouble when our stomachs are grumblin' in protest, but it makes my days less complicated. M' father told me I could hae a receiving line, or I would be bothered all the long day with endless meetings. I tell ye, Livvy, there are cousins who, once welcomed intae m' office, are reluctant tae leave. So after some long irritating, senseless meetings, this is

what I choose, a receiving line. Tis one of the duties that comes with havin' a title."

"I have learned a lot about you today. You were right, as I grow familiar with you, I understand your world... This was a good day."

He squeezed my hand. "I am glad tae hear ye say it."

I looked around the room lit with flickering candlelight, warmed with the fire in the hearth, and filled with heady earthbound scents, combining with the fragrance of the flowers in the vases, adorning the tables. I pulled the vase close and inhaled: there was lavender, a bit of fennel, grass and stalks of wheat. Even with so many people the gathering seemed intimate and informal compared to the sophisticated celebration of the night before. The food was carried out and placed in front of us. We ate and talked and laughed and were jovial.

He said, "Tell me what ye ken about m'castle."

"Ah, this will be fun. Okay," I tapped my chin. "You have your chamber on the um... you told me...?"

"Our room is on the fourth floor."

"There is always a musician in your Great Hall."

"My principal musician is Master John who we hae surreptitiously named, Master John of the One Song, ye will see, he has one proper song that he plays the whole night until I interfere by tellin' him that I remember the bard that visited three years ago and then he is driven by envy tae outperform my memory."

I laughed. "Was the visiting bard truly better?"

"Och, I canna remember, we hae had visitin' bards many times through the years, but there is one that he feels he must rise above."

He listened for a minute and then laughed, "Aye, see, he has begun the one song again."

I said, "Your kitchen is somewhere, over there..." I waved my hand in the direction I thought the kitchen was.

He took my hand and moved it left a few inches and then let go so I was waving in a new direction. He asked, “I haena shown ye the castle kitchen yet? Och nae, I haena introduced ye tae Auld Aymer? Ye are in for a treat, but we ought not go in right now, Auld Aymer is auld ye see, and excitable. The new Duchess arrivin’ in the night tae see his kitchens might send him tae the grave. I will need tae give him a warnin’ that the Duchess is comin’ so he might prepare.”

“What would he do to prepare? You mean clean? He would want to prove it is well-run? That hasn’t changed much in the centuries, all cooks clean when they are going to be inspected.”

“Nae, Auld Aymer daena clean, he believes that a kitchen holds the wealth of the castle so he will want tae display the carcasses. He is used tae me, I grew up visiting his kitchen, beggin’ for food at all hours, he daena do anythin’ special, but when Lady Gail goes down he always makes certain that there will be a butchered rabbit or fowl out on the table tae swell her pride in our castle’s largess. Be warned, he will want tae impress ye.”

“Thank you for warning me.” I shivered. “So there isn’t much I know about your castle, come to find out.”

“Aye we both hae a great deal tae learn about each other. We are still new.”

“True—”

His eyes traveling the room, stopped at Aenghus by the door, waving Nor over.

“M’apologies, Livvy, back in a moment.”

He rose and all around the Great Hall people bowed and nodded as he headed toward Aenghus.

The brothers spoke quietly together.

I looked around the room, trying not to feel awkward. It was a little like being left alone on a stage: I wasn’t sure what to do sitting in my ornate, polished chair, my back straight in a tight

bodice, taller because of the bustle of skirt fabric under my ass. Feeling like I resembled the ancient photo of my great-great grandmother. *Look natural.*

But how? I was in a Great Hall in a long ago time. I drew my goblet close and sipped the wine. I dabbed at my lips with a fine linen napkin, crisp to the touch.

I nudged my silverware into an orderly position.

When Nor returned and sank into his chair, unfurling his napkin for his lap, I asked, “What was that about?”

“The messenger haena returned, we are decidin’ what tae do.”

I stared out at the room wondering at how Nor would handle the issue... there was no one to call. No police. Something terrible could have happened, or something ordinary, he could have broken his leg. There was no hospital, no ambulance, no way to know.

“What is protocol?”

“We must go after him, find out what has happened, relay the original message tae Malcolm.”

“Oh...” I looked out over his family in the Great Hall, the tables covered in cloth, the plates and glasses, the unfamiliar people, the strange dress, and thought to ask, “By ‘we’ you mean...?”

He squeezed my hand, “Someone must go, we haena decided who yet.”



That night we slept wrapped around each other, more comfortable, as we didn’t have to make the bed first, we weren’t quite so drunk, or quite so exhausted. We were able to slide into bed and snuggle down in the bedding and wrap around each other and talk into the spaces beside each other’s ears, “How are you?”

“I am good, I love ye, Livvy,” and “I love you too.” My new marble sphere sat on the table by the bed, it did seem to glow a bit.

I asked, “Are you worried?”

“Nae, but I am certain somethin’ needs discoverin’.” His voice rumbled when he said it, lulling me into a calm state, sure that he would keep me safe.

Chapter 41 - Livvy



I n the dark stillness of the morning I felt him climb stealthily from the bed. He gathered up his things and I watched him as he quietly stoked the fire to keep me warm, then crept from the room.

I sat and thought about the dust he left behind, the coldness that blew in. The familiar room, guarded over by him, was now empty and unfamiliar. I flipped onto my back. I was being stupid. But where was he going? He wanted to let me sleep, to not worry me, but I was worried all the same. His absence worried me, what if something happened to him? What if something happened to *me*? How would I get home?

I didn't even actually know where the portal was — *was it in his desk*? I had forgotten to ask, and now... my heart raced. I climbed from the bed and pulled on my wool socks. I went to the door and stuck my head out. Cannie asked, "Yer Grace, what dost ye be needin'?"

"Where did Nor say he was going?"

Her eyes opened wide, as if it were a scandal to be discussing a man named Nor.

I said, "The Duke, His Grace, where did he go?"

"His Grace said he was goin' tae send Lady Claray tae come stay with ye while he went tae meet the messenger."

"He said — His Grace said, 'Meet the messenger'?"

"Aye, Yer Grace."

I turned for my room. I was going to dress. I would go follow him. I would go with him.

I crouched over the chamberpot and peed and changed my tampon again. Stuffed the old in the fire, nicely built by my husband.

I picked up my bodice and started to put it on, but couldn't actually dress myself. I probably wasn't allowed to go with him, I had a shitty stupid plan, but it stressed me out to think of sitting here in this room all day, with no phone, no way to call for help, no...

I called Cannie, "Could you help me dress?"

I put out my arms and she helped me pull a skirt up and slide my bodice on. She laced it while I considered what I was going to do. I was going to demand to know where he was going and tell him that I was going to go with him. I would saddle Dusty, and go wherever Nor went.

Just like how I was unused to being here alone, he was unused to taking me along. *Yeah, he had just not thought it through.*

A plaid was wrapped around my shoulders and pinned near my heart. I shoved my feet into my boots.

I pulled my leather messenger bag over my shoulder and checked inside. I had a gun, a knife, a first-aid kit and my water bottle. My fur-lined leather gloves. I also had the necessary flashlight, but couldn't use it around other people. I thanked Cannie and headed for the door.

She said, "Yer Grace, where are ye goin'? Ye ought tae hae someone accompany ye!"

"I um... I must go see Nor, before he... I mean, I must speak to the Duke."

Cannie nodded, rushed over to the wardrobe, and brought me a wool cape. "Twill be cold out, Yer Grace."

I pulled the cape around my shoulders and brought the hood up over my head. Then I opened the door to the dark

corridor outside. The guard said, “Yer Grace, where are ye...?”

I said, “I am meeting the Duke downstairs.”

I strode down the passageway as the two guardsmen fell in behind me. They carried a torch which helped me see, it was still very dark even with the coming dawn. I wanted to look as if I knew where I was going, instead of stumbling lost in the castle, but I was unsure how to get anywhere but the Great Hall. How would I get to the courtyard? I stopped and asked, “Can you lead me to the stable, please?”

One of the guards said, “Yer Grace is goin’ the wrong way.” He turned us back the other direction, down a passage I had never been in before.

I remembered what Nor had said, ‘use the northeast stair,’ but we were headed away. At the stairwell, I ran my hands along the stone as I followed the guards as they descended down fast. The steps were worn in the middle, uneven, I tried not to stumble.

We emerged on the ground level. I scrounged through my bag for my leather gloves, pulling them on as they led me across the courtyard to the stable. Ahead of us a few men were milling around. And as we approached they turned to look me over and in the middle, Aenghus nudged Nor, who turned to see me there. His brow drew down. “Your Grace, what are ye...?”

“I um...”

The guards bowed and stepped away.

I wasn’t sure what to say. The men around Nor were looking at me, their expressions, incredulous. Nor pulled me by my elbow and hustled me away from the men.

I asked, “Where are you going?”

“I told yer maid tae tell ye, I am goin’ with the men tae meet the messenger.”

“But...” I frowned, deeply. “I’m going with you.”

He whispered, “Livvy, ye canna!”

I raised my chin. “I can’t stay here, not all by myself — what if something happens to you?”

“Ye arna by yerself, *our* family is here, but also, ye canna come — what if something happens tae ye?”

“I don’t even know where the portal is, what if there was a reason I needed to get you or...”

“I hae one, I placed the other in... I hae it hidden, I will show ye where tis.”

“It’s fine, yes, you can show me, it would make me feel more comfortable, but I’m not... I’m not okay with you leaving me here. So I’m dressed to go.”

His eyes went wide as I spoke.

I continued, “I can ride. Tell the groom to saddle Dusty. I am armed, I know how to shoot. You know I can.”

He scowled, “Ye will be ridin’ with men through the night, tis nae...” He shook his head.

I said, “It’s almost morning. And you’re the Duke, I’m the Duchess, *your* duchess — aren’t we allowed to do what we want?”

He raised his brow. “Aye, I suppose we are.”

“I won’t cause any trouble. I’ll just be a good Duchess, I *promise*.”

“Fine, ye can come with us, but ye listen tae m’commands, Livvy. If I tell ye what tae do, ye do it. Dost ye understand? Ye canna argue, ye will cause me trouble if ye do.”

“Yes, Nor, thank you.” The corner of his mouth went up. I kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

We strode over to the stables. He told the groomsman to put my saddle on Dusty. Aenghus looked from me to Nor and back, “Your Grace, what’s going on?”

“Her Grace is comin’ with us, she is new tae the castle and inna comfortable being alone.”

I saw a couple of the men laugh.

I stood straight and tall and waited for Dusty to be brought to me, feeling a little guilty that he was being roused from sleep.

Aenghus shrugged. “I think the ladies are usually more comfortable in the castle than on a ride, but then again I’m not a newlywed.”

“Aye, ye are an auld married man now, with a bairn, and ye hae forgotten what tis like tae hae yer new bride meet Mam for the first time.”

“Och aye, I did forget it. Nae wonder she would rather ride through the cold air tae Finlarig.”

I pulled the cape tight in the front. It was much colder than I had expected.

The groom passed me the reins and Nor nudged me up to the saddle. He stroked his hand down Dusty’s muzzle and said, “Ye take care, Dusty. Ye are carryin’ an important load.”

“Load, like a burden?”

He chuckled, “Ye said it, Yer Grace, not I.”

“And how far away is Finlarig?”

Nor climbed onto Balach Mòr, adjusted his kilt, pulled his cloak around his shoulders, picked up the reins and held them in his strong hands. “Twill be a full day’s ride, that is why we are getting an early start.”

“Oh.” I gulped, wondering if this was the dumbest thing I ever did and trying to figure out if I could change my mind.

Chapter 42 - Livvy



We rode quietly for a time. Nor was a half a horse length ahead of me, Aenghus in front of him, a group of men behind us. They were noisy as we set out, but then quieted as the sun rose, and we spread down along the path. The sun lit the sky in glorious pinks and oranges, but there was a chill all the same. I tightened my cape around my legs, my thighs were cold even in the wool, even in the layers of skirts.

I grew very very hungry.

I grew really mentally complain-y.

I finally asked Nor's back, "Are you angry with me?"

Without turning he said, "Nae. 'Yer Grace,' I am nae angry, 'Yer Grace.'"

"My apologies, Your Grace."

Then he slowed his horse, to ride alongside me. "M'heart wants tae bring ye along, m'mind tells me that m'heart is mistaken, I am quiet while they discuss the matter."

"So you're trying to decide what to do with me, Your Grace?"

"Aye, I am considering how tae handle ye." The corner of his mouth held a smile.

I chuckled. "Dear me, handling me sounds like a chore — 'how am I tae handle m'wife?' So troublesome! But I guarantee I'm not the first woman in the seventeenth century to ride alongside her husband."

“Probably nae, I agree. Ye daena like my family?”

“I love your family, Nor, already, I do, it’s just all the other things. I don’t understand the routines: how do I get fed? Does food just miraculously appear? What if I get sick or... You said I could explore, but come to find out I’m afraid of the dark... I didn’t know that before, not really, or I would have warned you, before you... you know... got stuck with me. I’m just having trouble getting used to it, I’m clinging to you. I’m sorry.”

“I am not stuck with ye, Livvy. And I ken... I am sorry as well. There is a lot tae grow used tae, and I am all that is familiar.” He shrugged. “And we are newly married. We hae had a great deal of hardship already, aye, I see that it would be difficult tae grow used tae a castle where ye canna press a button for a blinding light. Ye, my wife, do appreciate a blinding light.”

“This is true. I also love a ride with my husband at sunrise. Can we think on this as a loving thing that I did because I wanted to go for a ride with you? I just... I don’t know if I can be the ‘kiss me on the cheek and go’ kind of bride. At least not yet. And you, Your Grace, didn’t even kiss me on the cheek.”

“Och nae, I was mistaken, Livvy, I see it now, but here ye are, and we are on a morning ride, which is about tae become a day ride intae a night ride.”

I sighed.

He asked, “Hae ye eaten?”

“No, I have a few bars in my bag, I um... I didn’t bring enough for everyone.”

He said, “We already ate our morning meal, I hae food for our lunch. Ye daena need tae worry on anyone, feed yerself.”

I pulled the bar from my bag and surreptitiously opened it in my lap hidden in my skirts to take a bite. He joked, “Is it flavored with banana and has the peanut butter?”

I nodded. “Do you want a bite, Your Grace?”

He grinned, leaned over, took a wee bite, chewed, and leaned over again, from his horse to mine and kissed me on the cheek.

I said, after swallowing my own big bite, “Thank you, Your Grace, I feel a lot better.”

He said, “Tell me that again when ye hae been on Dusty’s back for the next four hours.”

He hastened Balach Mòr and rode up beside Aenghus for a while.



Our path wound into the forest of towering ancient trees that formed a lush canopy above. Sunlight filtered down, casting dappled shadows on the forest floor. Birdsong filled the air ahead of us, stilled as we passed, then recommenced behind us, like a wave of twittering. It was all so beautiful. I looked all around at the vibrant green foliage, then leaned back to gawk up at the blue sky, then glanced to see Nor, watching, a smile on his face.

He was happy I came, I could see it in his eyes.

We emerged from the woods and our path took us up a hill, a different green, strewn with wildflowers and the purple patches of heather and thistle. I kept my eyes on Nor’s strong wide back as we reached the crest of the hill and looked back on the valley below. There was a loch ahead of us, a hawk above us, performing lazy loops in the sky.

Aenghus and Nor conferred. Nor pointed to a spot where scavenging birds had rustled the trees and then taken a circuitous flight, above. They had been unsettled by something in the forest below.

Aenghus called out, set his horse in motion, and men began following him.

Nor rode up. “We are goin’, Livvy, ye ready?”

“I really need to pee.”

Nor called out and guards doubled back. I rode Dusty to a tree as Nor asked, “Do ye need me tae help ye down?”

I shook my head, dismounted, and dug through my pack for a tampon and a baby wipe. I hid behind a tree while four medieval men and my husband, the Duke, stood guard. I peed, then pooped, taking way too long, then accidentally dropped the baby wipe in the dirt while doing it because my thighs were so exhausted from riding and now crouching, picked it up, dusted it off, and changed my tampon. Then wiped with that yucky wipe. Then wrapped it around the tampon and stuffed it under a bush.

All of this felt incredibly embarrassing, and I now understood Aenghus saying, ‘Usually the ladies prefer to stay at the castle’ — *yeah, I get it.*

I emerged from behind the tree with my chin up and the best condescending Duchess-air I could muster.

I put my foot in the stirrup and tried to mount Dusty, but my skirt got wrapped and I got stuck, with one foot halfway over. I paused, *struggle up or drop down and try again?*

I dropped down. Blinking back my tears as Nor wordlessly dismounted Balach Mòr, I tried again with his help nudging me up.

He climbed back on Balach Mòr and said, “Now we need tae catch up tae Aenghus.”

“I’m ready.”

We all urged our horses into a canter, the rhythmic thudding of their hooves thundered behind us as we rode along the ridge of the hill, and caught up with Aenghus. Then we rode down a path, branches brushing across my face, and slower along a stream where Dusty’s gait changed to cautious and slow to compensate for the river rocks all around, his hooves clicking and clacking on the rough path. We crossed a small stream at a ford.

On the other bank, Aenghus pulled us to a stop.

We quieted, some of us held back, while a few men dismounted and went to investigate on foot. Nor waited with me, his gun drawn, his horse stepping impatiently.

He looked at me, questioning — *gun?*

I nodded.

He nodded — *good.*

I held onto Dusty's reins and prayed that whatever we were about to find was going to be okay.

Chapter 43 - Livvy



Men called through the trees.

I whispered, “What did they find?”

Nor said, “We found a body. Stay here, Livvy, with the guards, ye canna see it, but I will be right over there — ye will be able tae see me through the trees.”

I nodded and held Dusty still while Nor left our side for the place where there was apparently a dead body. I really wished for a phone — *shouldn't we call the police?*

I glanced at the guards, they were each facing a different direction, intent on the surroundings, but it was quiet, my nerves on edge, listening, jumpy at sounds.

In the distance, Nor dismounted his horse and crouched, I could no longer see him. Then he mounted his horse and returned to my side. He tucked paper in the pocket of his coat.

I asked, “What happened?”

“Our messenger has been murdered.”

“Was he on the way there, or on the way back?”

“The messenger had been tae Finlarig with m’warning. He was returnin’ with a message from Malcolm — they had witnessed a storm nearby, he has grown concerned, he wants tae move his family tae Kilchurn.”

I said, “This is good news, right?”

“Aye, but he will need an escort.”

He looked up at a tree, shaking his head. “I canna believe m’brother and his family want tae flee, how can I allow Finlarig tae fall?”

“Maybe it’s not going to fall, maybe the storms are just echoes of the storms that you and I noticed, maybe it’s nothing, but it will be good to have his family back home with you.”

“Aye, I will make sure his family is protected, and he has some men, meanin’ more protection for Kilchurn.”

“That sounds like a good thing.”

“Aye, except, Livvy, there is a dead messenger.”

“So we need to ride up to Finlarig to get your brother and his family, his kids? There are kids?”

“Aye, but tae be cautious, we will send Aenghus and a couple of men tae retrieve them, we will all meet at the village near Killin. We must send men back here tae deal with the messenger—”

“It sounds like a lot.”

“Aye.”

Aenghus mounted his horse, selected some men to ride along with him, while the rest of us headed toward the edge of the loch.



We skirted the open areas, staying within the trees. The men were on high alert. We had guards riding in front, some behind, everyone was shifting and watchful.

Their tension caused my fear to grow.

Someone had just been killed in the woods. A messenger.

The more I thought about it the scarier the forest felt. The trees were closing in, it was all eerily silent.

A storm had happened near one of Nor's castles, the castle that held his brother's family. It was a storm big enough to cause unease. A storm ominous enough to cause his brother to want to leave Finlarig and come home.

I took a deep halting breath.

Would this never end?

We had taken a few days of reprieve, feeling safe, and before we had even warned the rest of his family they were already in danger.

My hands shook as I held Dusty's reins. I was used to riding, but still, my ass was sore, we had been at this for hours.

Ahead of us lay a well-worn path, and a church steeple beyond. The head guard gestured us forward, passed the path, and went into the woods. He conferred with Nor. I listened, but they spoke fast and used words I didn't understand.

We waited. Nor explained, "We are tae wait here until Aenghus returns with Malcolm's family."

"Is this a safe meeting place?"

He looked around. "Aye, I believe so, the village is verra quiet. We will be able tae see if someone is comin' from every direction." His horse stamped left and right and Nor reined him in with a pensive face, a set jaw. He added, "Livvy, dost ye see the path behind us, through the woods?"

I glanced over my shoulder, "There?"

"Aye, I believe we are safe, but if I say run, ye turn Dusty and that is the path ye will follow and ye winna stop until ye get tae the river, dost ye understand?"

"Even if I'm alone?"

"Aye, I will find ye there, but ye must go if I say tae. Can I trust ye?"

I said, "Yes, I will go if you say run, you can trust me."

His horse stamped back and forth, he said, “Good, thank ye, Livvy.”

We waited for a long time. When birds sounded the men scanned the woods. We were very quiet, and held our horses still. Then, finally, one of the lookout men rode up, calling, “They are here!”

We rode into the village, past fields and small croft buildings to the churchyard, where Aenghus was waiting with a group of about thirty people: men, women, and children. The men gathered in the churchyard and conferred.

Nor dismounted, rushed to a large man who looked a lot like him, and they hugged, spoke for a moment, and then Nor brought him over to me. He helped me down from Dusty and introduced us.

“M’wife, Livvy, the new Duchess of Awe, I would like tae introduce ye tae our brother, Malcolm.”

Malcolm bowed, and kissed my hand. “A pleasure tae meet ye, Your Grace, there is m’wife, Shona.” He pointed to a young pretty woman with two children at her skirts and a baby in her arms. He turned to Nor, “Shona has asked if she might be safer in Edinburgh, are ye sure we canna send her and the bairns there?”

“I think for the time bein’ we ought tae remain taegether. If we see a way tae move her, we will.”

Malcolm nodded, looking a great deal like a mixture of Nor and Aenghus. “That is what I told her, but she wanted tae ask ye, I will tell her that it is settled.”

Watching the three of them confer reminded me of my own brothers. They understood each other, speaking little, but as I watched, I sensed that a lot of their communication was wordless — little nods, small gestures, shifts and pauses as they discussed. They seemed to sense what was meant. Nor, Malcolm, and Aenghus all scanned the scene, quietly assessing the potential for danger.

Malcolm said, “So ye introduce me tae yer new wife as ye bring peril tae m’doorstep? I daena understand — ye say the storms I hae seen are a danger tae us? What enemies hae ye delivered tae the family of Awe?”

“This is a long story, Brother, perhaps it ought tae be shared in private...”

Malcolm nodded. “Aye, for now the day is growing long, with so many bairns we must travel by day.”

Aenghus said, “We will stay overnight here in the village.”

Nor said, “On the morrow we will return tae Kilchurn.”

They nodded and each went off to organize — as if there had been a whole planning meeting. Nor set up the guards for the village, Aenghus arranged for a stable for the horses, Malcolm arranged for shelter in a few of the farmers’ homes.

Chapter 44 - Livvy



We were shown to the croft where we would spend the night. It was a simple structure, low and stone, with a thatched roof that was old and weathered with patches of vibrant green moss growing in the crevices. We were greeted by the scents of soil mingled with the fragrance of hay and stable. There was smoke wafting from the chimney, the hearth welcoming me in the looming chilly night.

This was where I would sleep, along with Shona and her three children, her sister with her four children, and a cousin with two babies. Nor and his brothers and most of the guards would eat and rest here, but would be guarding outside through the night.

We met our host, we were welcomed, and the farmer bowed deeply as Nor stooped to get through the door.

We all crowded into the long main room, a hearth at the far end. Herbs drying in the ceiling rafters, their sweet scents were attempting to override the smell of livestock — that, from the lowing and bleating, I could tell were very close. There were cows and sheep right on the other side of the wall.

I used the chamberpot, the old, horrible chamberpot. I would have used the outdoors if it hadn't been so dark and cold. Thankfully it was in a corner of the room and the kids were making a racket at the other end to distract. I changed my tampon with as little fuss as I could, and then wrapped the

used one in a baby wipe and stuffed it into my bag. I was not comfortable with this, at all.

Then I was given the best chair, closest to the fire. A few men, resting before their turn at guard duty, sat on the floor or leaned against the walls, including Nor, who wouldn't take a chair though they insisted. I felt as if I were on a throne in the middle of the room, but no one would trade. My new sister-in-law, Shona, took a low stool with a baby in her arms, a toddler crying beside her legs. I wanted her to have the chair. I felt like an ass.

But one thing I was learning is that no one assumed I had any feelings at all. I was a Duchess, I got the chair.

The fire roared in the hearth. I played a game of peekaboo with one of the wee girls. I glanced over my shoulder to see Nor, his back against the wall, watching me.

Then there was a commotion outside, and all the men got up and went out to investigate.

I was trying to keep from crying. I was scared, surrounded by strangers, and the kids were frightened. I tried to keep a friendly relaxed smile on my face. One of the babies started crying, and of course that set off a collective wail.

One of the guards stuck his head in and said, "Wheesht."

The mothers were shushing the babies.

I glanced over at one of the young women, her eyes clamped shut, praying.

I lowered my eyes, clutched my hands and joined her, saying a silent prayer to keep everyone safe.

But then that danger passed. Nor returned and went back to his place against the wall. I watched as the farmer's wife ladled stew into a bowl. She passed it to me. I ate my share, with a small piece of crusty bread. Then Nor took my empty bowl,

she ladled another spoonful in, and gave him a small bit of bread. He ate.

I was offered the bed, but I absolutely refused. It became a bit of an argument. The old farmer's wife, who I barely understood, urged me to her bed, she would sleep on the floor. The women in our group refused to take it. In the ensuing drama I realized that if I didn't take it there wasn't anyone else, especially the adults, who *could*.

I shook my head, "No, I can't, there's no, no way..." I assured them all that the bairns could sleep there, we had about eight kids in this room, if we let them all sleep on the bed, it would be fair, right?

Nor stood and intervened with the farmer's wife and his sister-in-law. He had decided, *no arguing with the Duke*, all the bairns would take the small bed.

The women listened to him, and all the children were moved to the bed, and sweetly placed in a pile to sleep.

Nor sat back down, leaning against the wall with his head back and patted his heart, calling me over.

I moved from the chair and sat down beside him, tucking my head to his chest beside his heart. With his arm around me, I fell asleep to the snap and crackle of the fire, the lowing of the cows and sweet breaths of sleeping babies.



At dawn I was jostled awake. "We must arise, Livvy, we are goin' tae ride."

We were soon loaded up, but with so many children, the route would be slow, and we would have to double up on the horses. I had a four-year-old girl named Addie, Nor's niece, riding in front of me, sharing my horse. Nor's sister-in-law and her baby were riding with Malcolm and her little boy riding with Nor. There were women and children on all the horses, many men on foot, leading us back to Kilchurn.

This was going to be a long slow trek.

We rode down the path, the guards walking alongside us, watchful and on alert the whole time.

I wondered about this family in flight: where were their clothes? We had a few carts, but it didn't seem nearly enough. How would they manage, when they left most everything behind?

This must all be so frightening.

Castles are supposed to be safe.

Addie looked at the sky, she sweetly pointed up, "Twees."

I knew exactly what she meant and agreed, they were beautiful trees.

I tightened my hold around her. Although I had just met her, I wanted to protect her.

She was a Duke's niece and she had spent the night hiding in a village. Her father sent a messenger, who was killed along the way — what if Nor hadn't gotten to Malcolm's family on time?

What if we had ridden up to Finlarig and been ambushed and killed? What if they hadn't gotten away from the castle? This was all Johnne Cambell's doing.

And therefore ours.

My mind was so full of what-ifs, but I had to clear it to focus on this — I was holding onto the wee little girl in front of me. She was slight and sweet and perfect and I had brought danger into her life... Nor and his family would have been capable of handling the dangers of seventeenth century life. But now time travel was here. Modern drama. Extreme danger.

Nor and his young nephew rode alongside Malcolm, just in front of us. The little boy was falling asleep, his head listing against Nor's arm. The sweet way that Nor held him caused me to go a little breathless with adoration. My husband was freaking hot.

Nor asked Malcolm, "Did ye see any men?"

“Nae, only the storm, Yer Grace. Were ye certain we needed tae leave?”

“Aye, I am certain, I was captured by a man by the name of Johnne Cambell and—”

“Johnne Cambell... the man with the dark hair?”

“Ye met him?”

“There must be many, but I met a man by the name of Johnne Cambell a few weeks ago. He asked if I kent where ye were.”

Nor’s breath was bullish. “Och, he is menacin’ my family. What else?”

“He asked tae rest his horse and shared a meal. I found him tae be arrogant and domineerin’, twas unsettling because he traveled alone. He behaved as if he had the backing of a large army. I even sent guards tae scour the woods, looking for them. I was relieved when he left before I forced him tae go.”

Nor glanced back at me to see if I had heard.

I chewed my lip, worried.

Nor said, “He did that once tae me as well, he walked intae Kilchurn and addressed me as if he had nae fear of me.”

Malcolm said, “I was concerned, I am relieved ye sent the message.”

“What other men hae ye met? Hae ye met a man by the name of Gilbert Campbell? He was Johnne’s commander.”

His brother slowed his horse and rode back to confer with his men. He returned and said, “Aye, I recognized the name. He has been tae the tavern in Killin just a few days ago. He spoke with some of m’men.”

Nor nodded, considered, then rode further up the line to confer with Aenghus. More men were sent ahead and behind. I noticed all the men seemed to grow even more tense, we were quiet and the ride was not at all fun.

Chapter 45 - Livvy



It took most of the day to arrive at Kilchurn. My ass hurt and I was inexcusably pissed at Dusty for it, but he had gotten me really far away and back so I was also incredibly grateful. That was a full couple of days of medieval work for a modern Florida horse.

He was probably pissed at me too.

Addie had fallen asleep pretty early in, her head against my chest, and my arm had fallen asleep keeping her on the horse. I had sore muscles, a pained ass, and was relieved when I finally passed Addie down to her father and Nor reached up to help me dismount. I said, “Owie, owie, owie,” as I tried to get my legs to work after sitting for so long.



Claray rushed down the steps and met us at the stables. “Livvy, I was so worried!”

“I told Cannie where I was going, she didn’t tell you?”

“Nae, I mean aye, but still I worried! Ye went off intae the wild for days and days!”

I said, “It was only two days!”

“It felt as if it were so much longer.”

Claray hugged all her cousins and nieces and nephews while I rolled up into Nor’s arms and we just stood, embracing, in the courtyard, his cheek pressed to my forehead.

I held him tight for a very long time. Then we slowly let go, he took me by the hand, and led me up the stairs.



In his room we planted ourselves on the settee in front of the fire. I mumbled, “I wish I could lie down, but I’m so hungry, I don’t want to undress and then re-dress.”

He put his arm around me and I leaned against his chest.

He said, “The meal will be served in the Great Hall verra soon, we will be fed and we will think on what we do next.”

“We probably shouldn’t talk about it until we’re fed.”

“Aye, decisions are best made on a full stomach.”

“But if you had to say what we need to do, what are you thinking...?”

He picked at the fabric stretched across his knee. “I think ye need tae go home.”

My bottom lip trembled.

He continued, “We are up against a monstrous enemy, Livvy, and I daena ken how tae protect ye. Lou has fortified the ranch, it is secure, he told me ye are safe there, much more protected than here. Ye are afraid tae be here, ye are alone and frightened without me, and...”

I nodded, quietly.

He continued, explaining, as if he were talking us into something, “...ye are uncomfortable here, though I might try I canna make ye as comfortable as I would wish tae, and I canna live there, tis too unfamiliar for me, besides I hae duties here.”

My heart dropped, I put my hands over my face and sobbed. “But we are married.”

“Aye, there is a great deal of tragedy, and I am deeply concerned that I canna keep ye safe — what kind of man brings a certain death and destruction upon his wife? If he

canna protect her, he must send her away.” His voice broke while saying it.

“I keep thinking, what if something happened to you?”

“Aye, ye would be alone in the world. If I had one of the portals on me, ye would hae had tae find the other and work it. I almost left ye alone without a way tae get home. I daena ken what I was thinking.”

“You were thinking the world would make sense.”

“I canna bear the idea that ye might be alone in the past, far away from yer family.” He wiped his eye with his hand.

I dragged my bag over, dug through it, and pulled out the package of baby wipes. There were two left. I was basically out of them. I offered him one, he shook his head.

“I think I thought I... I mean, we... would be able to go back once we knew your family was okay. Now they aren’t okay.”

“Aye,” his voice was rumbling low and deep. He was pensive and brooding.

I leaned back against his chest again, with his arm around me, and wiped my eyes with the wipe, continuing to clutch it in my hand because I was sure I would keep needing it as my heart was breaking.

He said, “I hae considered it from every angle, ye must return tae Florida.”

“For how long?”

He pressed his lips to my forehead. “Until I can determine tis safe.”

His words made it seem reasonable, but the way he spoke it against my skin made it seem dire, as if there weren’t any way to make that happen.

How would we ever be safe?

And what did the ‘safe’ end goal mean?

I had proven I wasn't really up to the task. I couldn't bear to stay behind while he went somewhere. I was exhausted. From the spooky dark at night to the not knowing what the hell was going on during the day, apparently I really needed to know what I was supposed to do. It all freaked me out. I got my period, I didn't even get pregnant. Of course, I didn't know I was supposed to get pregnant, not in the first few times we were together, but that was just further proof — I didn't know what I was doing. *This was all much harder than I thought.*

He kissed me again.

I said, "I don't think I can do this."

"Would ye be able tae bear the wait if I hae tae go with an army tae wage war against Johnne?"

I shook my head.

"What if I get up in the night tae go check the walls?"

I shook my head. Then I sobbed. "I feel like a failure. Like I'm weak and lack courage."

"Ye arna a failure, Livvy, ye arna weak, and ye verra courageously came tae live here. We just dinna ken how hard it would be."

He plucked at the kilt spread across his knee as he spoke. "...what would I do if ye became ill, Livvy? In yer world I heard ye hae medicines that will cure most things, but here..." He shook his head. "I hae watched people I love die of illnesses that ye could live through in yer time. Birdie told me, ye hae learned physicians, good medicines and safe surgeries. How can I so callously risk yer life? Tis a cruelty for me tae ask it of ye."

Tears streamed down my face.

He continued, "I think I could try harder, aye, I ken, but tis a poor existence for ye, and with the evil men hounding us through time something terrible might happen. I promised ye... I made a vow tae keep ye safe, tae honor and protect ye. How can I make ye live here in the year 1670? We daena hae anything much."

“I’m sorry it feels that way.”

He ran his fingers up and down my arm. “Dost ye ken how long it took tae build this castle, Livvy? Years, and how did ye build yer house?”

I sobbed again, understanding where he was going. “I had it delivered in a day.”

“Aye, and ye hae protection and security within it, what do I hae? Thistles on the land, tis a myth tae make us feel as if we are protected. I hae stone walls, but I hae seen the war machines that can break them down. I hae weapons given tae me by yer grandfather, but if he kent how unprotected ye are, how ye are livin’ here without a way tae fight back... I made a mistake bringing ye. I thought we were able tae do this, Livvy, but tis proving intractable.”

I curled up against his side and sobbed, clutching his shirt, unable to argue, acquiescing, because yes, this had all been hard — my ass hurt, I was exhausted, I had been mood-swinging from fear and worry to embarrassed and upset. There was always love, I loved him so much, but it was so hard for me to do this.

I needed a cup of coffee.

I hadn’t had one in days. Making it had seemed insurmountable. I wanted to push a button.

And I had been on my period the whole time I was here, not at my best...

Since I had married Nor it had been nothing but drama: a kidnapping, threats, violence and fear.

I said, “So we’re saying I’m going to go home?”

“Aye.”

He then said, “I hae a duty tae ye, I must send ye home.”

“Am I never going to...?”

He kissed my forehead, then lifted my chin and kissed my lips, then he said, his lips brushing mine, “Ye ought tae wheesht, m’love, ye are goin’ tae break our hearts.”

We kissed more, holding there, kissing goodbye, knowing that an uncertain future was upon us.

Then we let go and he stood up. “Ye ken, I thought we would hae a meal first and talk of it later, but here we are.”

“Yeah...” I stood. “Where’s my portal?”

He strode over to his desk, pushed aside a chair, crouched down, and pried up a plank of wood, exposing a secret compartment in the floor. There were some gold and other coins, and a portal.

I said, “I would have never found it.”

“I ken, I was gravely mistaken in how I handled it.”

I crouched down and looked it over. I pulled out my notebook and flipped to the clean page with the codes written down, the ciphers and my guesses for places.

“I’m certain this is the code for the field at the ranch in Florida. I’m sure this is the date we told Charlie. I have no doubt.”

He nodded. “Aye, I agree. Ye will go right there.”

“And you can’t leave...” It wasn’t a question, it was a statement.

“Aye, I ought not, I hae duties. I ken I hae a duty tae protect ye, but yer brother will be there when ye arrive, he knew tae wait for ye on the date.”

I nodded. “And you’ll have the other portal, you can always come...”

I realized he wasn’t meeting my eyes, he wasn’t really looking at me at all.

The room had grown chilly, the fire burned down, the space between us, complicated.

We were saying goodbye, I was leaving, and now our conversation was all about how to make the journey easy on me.

It was devastatingly cold.

“So... I know the code to go home, and you aren't coming.” I put the portal in my bag and buckled it closed. “Will I go in the morning?”

He looked out the window. “...there is still light...”

“Yeah. It's still light.” Without thinking I put the bag across my shoulder as if I were ready to leave.

He strode into our bedroom and called out, “Do ye need yer chest?”

I thought for a moment. When I got home I would want to take a shower, and my chest had all my personal stuff and it would be a nuisance to replace it all. “Yes, I... bring it please... um...” My voice trailed off.

He returned with the box of toiletries in his arms. The light hit his face, his angular jaw, in such a way that it slammed into me — *I forgot the sphere!*

I rushed past him to our bedroom and grabbed the pale white orb from our bedside table, and clutched it with both hands to my heart. I looked around at our bed, the juxtaposition of the new bedding with the old carving and the stone wall. There was a large tapestry, a tree, its branches covered with leaves and fruit, flowers and birds, butterflies and under it, fish in a stream. I had barely looked at it. I hadn't spent enough time.

Barely enough.

What was I doing?

I came from the bedroom with the orb still clutched to my chest. “I can't believe I almost forgot it.” Tears streamed down my face.

Nor nodded, still holding my box. “We ought tae go, Livvy, then Birdie will serve ye a fine dinner when ye arrive.”

I followed him from our chamber out to the hall.

We went down the corridor to the stairwell.

As we walked down the stairs, I asked, “What will you tell your family?”

“I will tell them that I sent ye tae yer father’s house until I ken we are free from danger and ye may return,” he added, “...once tis safe.”

“Oh, I guess that is true. Yeah, except... will it ever be safe?”

He shook his head. “Ye are from the New World, I am from the Old. We hae met, Livvy, somehow... and I daena ken.”

“And I suppose they will accept your explanation as true?”

“They arna allowed tae question me, that will be the only thing that winna matter.”

We crossed to the stables and asked the groomsman to saddle up our horses again. I carefully placed the orb in my bag.

Nor put down my box and I sifted through it. I took my bag of jewelry out and put it in my messenger bag. I looked down into the box. Perfumes, shampoos, soap, razors, tampons, makeup — I hadn’t explained any of it to Claray, but it seemed cruel to take it away. It would be incredibly useful to her if she could figure out how to use it.

I said, “Actually, that’s all I needed. The rest, please give to Claray, she can have it.”

Nor nodded, closed the lid and shoved it to the side.

We stood shoulder to shoulder until the groom brought us the horses. I said to Dusty, patting his nose, “I am so sorry I had you saddled back up already, I promise it’s just a short walk, then a jump, don’t focus on it, that part is... but then we’ll be back in Florida. Won’t you like that boy?”

He whinnied and jerked his head. He actually looked kind of pissed.

I put a foot in the stirrup and Nor nudged me up. It was a simple act that reminded me about our connection, our love

story, our marriage. When I was about to do hard things he was the love that would be there and he would nudge me up, but also be present to keep me from falling back down.

Tears began to stream down my face. I wiped them on my sleeve as I followed Nor, on Balach Mòr, out the castle gate. Two guards pulled in behind us and followed us down the causeway. I looked all around, concentrating on the landscape, the sky glowing orange with sunset, blazing against the choppy surface of the dark, wind-swept loch. The smell of fish hung faintly in the air. And there was another scent, one I had grown to love, mud and moor, the freshness of a field of thick thistles and heather. Our shadows were long, cast before us on the pale yellow grass.

Towering above it all, the mountains, what Nor called the bens. I turned to see Ben Cruachan, his clan's favorite mountain — also their battle cry.

Ben Cruachan, my love, I thought, remembering the story he told me about chasing his brothers through the hills. How they would yell 'Le misneach! Cruachan!' Before they did hard things requiring courage.

I would have loved to have seen him wee, racing along the mountainsides.

I turned my gaze back to him — his strong back, stretching the fabric across his shoulders, built to carry burdens, but his burden had come with a title, significant even though it was invisible. We couldn't see the weight of duty and honor and responsibility that he bore, but it was heavy and it required a great deal of him.

I watched him, strength in his seat, power in the tendons and sinews and veins bound in his hand, honor in the straightness of his back.

Another tear rolled down my face. I swiped it away and raised my chin, we didn't speak as I rode my horse to meet my future.

Chapter 46 - Livvy



We made it to the woods and crossed down a path to the plain where I would jump. We hadn't been followed, and the guards waited for Nor in the woods while we rode closer to my jumping place.

I pulled Dusty up beside Balach Mòr, and leaned over to kiss Nor, our lips meeting across the distance. He said, his face right beside mine, speaking to my ear. "I will walk ye tae the middle."

I shook my head and kissed his cheek. "No, my love, you're going to wait here, because I don't think I can bear to say goodbye."

His lips brushed my cheek and he pulled away.

I said, "Le misneach, m'lord."

As I turned Dusty toward the jump spot, I heard Nor say, "Cruachan, Yer Grace."

I rode, just a woman with her horse, her bag, and her portal, going to jump through time.

I climbed from Dusty and pulled the portal from my bag. It crossed my mind that I might have the wrong numbers, and the light was growing dim with the sunset — the last hues of orange in the west, a deep black rising from the east. I pulled a small flashlight from my bag, holding it in my teeth so it shone down on the portal. I checked the code and checked it again.

It was right. I knew it was right. Dusty and I were going to go. I pressed my head to his muzzle and said, “Ready boy?”

I gave myself one last glance back at Nor. He raised his hand goodbye. He looked handsome and lost, strong and broken, my heart ached at the idea of leaving him. I sobbed, devastated, but without thinking about it, my hands worked independently of my heart. They twisted the portal to take me home.



I woke up in the... *where was I?*

I raised my head and looked around. The fence beside me had the gate with my grandfather’s ranch symbol on it. I was in the back field.

The storm was clearing. It was hot as hell outside, but looked, by the sky, to be nearing sunset.

There was a truck beside me, a security guard I didn’t recognize speaking into a radio. “Yes sir, she’s here, yes... Okay, I’ll just hold tight, sir.”

I sat up. In the distance I could see Charlie’s truck, careening down the dirt road toward me.

I just needed to wait.

I looked around at all the world, so familiar and comfortable like home should be. I was one of the lucky humans of the world who had such a beautiful ranch to come home to.

So lucky.

I picked up some gravel beside me and shifted it in my hands, like dice, like I was going to roll those little pebbles in a game — this is the land of my home. I will bet it all... give it up or take it all?

High rolling had never been my thing, but suddenly looking down at my palm as the rocks from home bounced and turned as I shook them, it seemed like I had become someone averse to risk, someone who was afraid — *who the hell was that person, and why?*

Charlie drove up in front of me and pulled his car to a stop. “You’re back! Where’s Nor?”

His back was to the sunset, a pink orange glow behind his head, his face dark from the shadow.

I answered, blinking the light and tears from my eyes, “I think I just made a huge mistake.”

Chapter 47 - Livvy



Charlie helped me up and we waited for a moment for a stablehand to come get Dusty. By phone, I asked mom to gather everyone at the main house.

I called for a family meeting.

And asked, a little urgently, for food.

After having Dusty unsaddled, and led off to be fed, watered, and groomed, Charlie drove me up to the main house. I clomped up the porch steps in my voluminous old fashioned dress, dragging my messenger bag and my cloak behind me, to find most of my family, including my brother, Ryan, who was home from the army.

I hugged everyone, long minutes of hugging. During it, somehow, I looked at my hand and a pimento cheese sandwich had been thrust into it. I took a big bite and moaned happily as I chewed and swallowed. “That was so necessary.”

Then I hugged Ryan. He said, “I hear there’s a lot going on in your life.”

“So freaking much, so so so much. You look great, haven’t seen you in so long.” I rubbed my hand over his short hair. “I want to hear all about your job, we haven’t talked in forever, you look buff and fit, but I’m sorry, I’m going to need some ‘focus on me now’ for a bit.”

He rolled his eyes. “Oh hold on everyone, this is new — Livvy is going to talk about her dramas, everyone gather

around!”

I took another bite of the sandwich, chewed and swallowed. “I’ve gotten married, my husband’s been kidnapped, and I’m being chased through time by an evil, batshit-crazy villain-dude.”

“Good point, but Livvy, honestly, you need to shower, it’s going to be hard to take this seriously while you’re dressed and smelling like that.”

I frowned, and huffed. “Fine.”

I took two more bites of the sandwich, swallowing it down and leaving the last crust, that part that did not have enough pimento cheese on it, on the table. “Besides, it’s freaking hot in this dress — what I want is for you to be ready for a family meeting, all y’all, when I get out of the shower. I want a beer waiting for me, ice cold, and a meal. It needs to be a big meal.”

Birdie said, “What the hell’s with the bossy tone?”

I frowned deeper. “I am so sorry Birdie. I have been getting my period in the seventeenth century and I’m so freaking hungry. There was not enough chocolate and I’m... what is the word...? *Overwrought*. I’m sorry I’m being a dick. I just really need a full warm meal and—”

Charlie said, “And a shower!”

“Yeah yeah.”

Mom squeezed my shoulder. “Go take a shower at your place, put on some comfy clothes, then come back. We’ll have a beer and a meal and a family meeting when you come back down.”

Charlie passed me the keys to his truck.

I drove myself over to my house, opening the door on its emptiness.

I ran my hand down the counter and remembered touring Nor around the rooms. I had been showing him ‘our house’, explaining things that were ‘modern’, and it had been a moment that was full of promise and hope. He would live with me, and we would have a home, but now when I looked around I realized that made no sense. He was too big to fit here, too important for these thin walls. I thought about how this counter was made of epoxy, built to look like stone. It wasn’t cool to the touch, it didn’t feel real.

Nor cut stone, he shaped it, he was real and historic.

This was such a modern place. It didn’t work. It would never work.

I had clarity — he had a duty.

I had married him and that had been my promise.

This wasn’t a negotiation.

Not really.

He couldn’t negotiate away any of his obligations.

I went down the hall to my bathroom.

The last time I was here was three days ago, I had hastily poured all my toiletries and makeup into a box that I had now left in the past... I glanced in the shower. Nothing to wash my hair with. Shit. I had left my toiletries there along with my love.

My happiness, my comfort, all my best things.

Damn it.

I pulled open the cabinet under the sink and in the back I had tossed a couple of hotel bottles of shampoo and conditioner. I would use it to lather up *everywhere*.

I turned on the water and stepped in, trying to wash away the dirt and grime from the past, but also doing some thinking... because I needed to clear away the dirt, but also clear my mind, and really consider what I had just done.

What I had chosen to do.

It hadn't really been conscious.

It had been like fleeing.

I had skipped 'fight' and gone straight to 'flight'.

Come to find out Livvy leaves when the going gets hard.

The water poured down my head and I stood there, water washing all the grime away, and I cried, letting the water wash away all the tears too.

I dressed in a pair of sweats and a t-shirt, shoved my feet into my Nikes and drove myself up the road to the main house again.

Chapter 48 - Livvy



Ryan passed me a beer as I made it up the steps. My uncles were there, Charlie and Ryan, Mom and Dad, Lou and Birdie, and thankfully there was a tray of food on the table: meats, cheeses, crackers. Birdie said, “Don’t be disappointed, this is just the hors d’oeuvre to tide you over while dinner gets finished up.”

“What’s for dinner, just so I’m ready?”

“My classic spaghetti and meatballs.”

“Perfect.” I took a deep breath. “You’re probably wondering why I gathered you all here I—”

Charlie said, “I think what we’re all wondering is where the hell is Nor — is he okay?”

I frowned. “I think I broke his heart.”

Mom said, “Aw honey, what happened?”

“So apparently I was not ready for what that was all about — did you know that they were all bothered that I got my period?”

Junior put his fingers in his ears and said, “La la la la.”

I rolled my eyes.

Mom said, “Well you weren’t... were you trying to get pregnant? How long were you gone?”

“I was there for like... four days or something, I got my period second day and the maid saw it when she poured out our chamber pot and—”

Ryan said, “Chamber pot? What the hell is going on?”

“Because I was in the seventeenth century, yes, a chamber pot. Apparently, by the time the chambermaid was finished with her chores the whole castle knew I wasn’t pregnant.” I huffed. “Nor’s mother had to go to the chapel because she was so upset and... yeah, that was the first thing. But also, not the first thing, the *first* thing was Cannie—”

Mom said, “Who is Cannie?”

“My lady’s maid. She dressed me for a big dinner with my hair curled up and teased out. It stuck out this far from my head,” I stretched my hands way out, “and... yeah, *that* was the first thing. And oh! Did you know Nor is a sculptor?”

Birdie said, “Dear me, sweetie, this story is going all over the place. I’m having trouble following you.”

Lou said, “What do you *mean* he’s a sculptor?”

“He carves stone, as like a... hobby.” I dragged my bag up from the ground, opened the flap, pulled out the marble sphere. “He carved this. He was just learning, but now he’s accomplished, he had some beautiful pieces that are...” I couldn’t put it into words. “...really beautiful.”

Lou took the sphere and ran his hands over it. “Hot damn, Livvy Bear, this is fine craftsmanship.”

Mom said, “I love how it glows like the moon.”

I nodded. “Yeah, it’s... really beautiful.”

Charlie said, “I don’t really understand, *where* is Nor?”

“We found out that his other castle, Finlarig—”

Ryan asked, “How many castles does this dude have?”

“This *Duke*, His Grace the Duke of Awe has at least three, I think, and lands from ocean to sea. By the way, here’s something that happened, people called *me* ‘Your Grace.’”

Birdie said, “Now it’s my turn to say ‘hot damn.’ That must have been exhilarating.”

“It was... what is the word — unsettling.” I chewed my lip. “I think that is basically the whole theme of my visit, I was unsettled. I had the wrong hair, the wrong demeanor, I didn’t understand the mores, had no idea what they expected of me, and then he sent a messenger to his brother’s castle to tell them to be on the watch for danger and storms and... but the messenger didn’t return. So Nor snuck out the next morning with a bunch of men to go meet the messenger and—”

Mom said, “He snuck out? He didn’t tell you where he was going?”

I considered and said, “It’s a little like needing to get up at dawn to bring in the oranges. He needed to get up really early and so he just left. He didn’t want to wake me or worry me, but of course when he was gone I was very worried so I went after him. I forced him to take me along.”

Ryan said, “Explain what you mean by go along, on Dusty?”

“Yep, I rode Dusty about thirty-five miles, seventy round trip.”

Charlie said, “No wonder he had that look in his eyes.”

“He had a great time, the weather was cold and brisk. But the point is, we found the messenger, dead in the woods. Nor’s brother, Malcolm, had been spooked by a storm. We moved them from their castle, that was a whole ordeal—” I shoved a cracker, meat, cheese stack in my mouth. “I feel like this is all I’ve eaten for days, these damn cracker stacks... where was I?”

Lou said, “Nor moved his brother and his family from his other castle... Finlarig, I think.”

“Yes, we had to make a horse train carrying all of Nor’s nieces and nephews and a whole bunch of cousins and some carts all the way to Kilchurn castle. It took all of a day, and that was after spending the night, sleeping on the floor of a hovel on a farm in a village in the middle of nowhere dark-ages Scotland.” I bit into another cracker stack.

Ryan said, “Those are wild adventures. Wow, Livvy, I didn’t know you were this...” He shrugged.

“This what?”

“This courageous.”

“Well, I will tell you, Brother, this is where that whole idea falls apart. I was absolute chicken-shit through most of it and then it got worse.”

I brushed the cracker crumbs off my hands.

Charlie said, “You were pretty scared when you left.”

“Yep, it was frightening to go. Then I got there and it was worse. Unsettling. The whole damn thing was an ordeal. I was hungry, worried, PMSing, or scared the whole time. Except when I was with Nor, you know — it wasn’t all bad. He makes me laugh. I love him so much.” I looked down at the sphere, then picked it up, and held it with both hands.

The timer dinged. Birdie said, “Stop talking until I get back! I need to drain the pasta!” She rushed to the kitchen.

Mom said, “Let’s stop there for a moment while we fill our plates, good?”

I nodded.

Charlie joked, “Okay, we have a bookmark in it here, at Livvy went to medieval times and came back without her husband — perfect place to stop.”

Ryan laughed, “We’ve been listening for twenty minutes and I still have no idea what the hell is going on.”

Chapter 49 - Livvy



I followed everyone into the kitchen and we went down the line for spaghetti and I piled my plate high. Mom carried the tray of crackers and meats back to the kitchen and we all sat down at the dining table. Mom pulled her shirt away from her sweaty skin, trying to cool off. “Thank God, we’re eating inside, it was hot as hell out there on the porch. We need the AC cranking.”

I said, “Did I tell you that Nor gets up in the night to stoke the fire? He’s always keeping the room at just the right temperature.”

Charlie narrowed his eyes. “What the heck are you talking about? What made you bring that up?”

“Mom mentioned air-conditioning, I said that Nor took good care of the temperature for me.” I took a big bite of my spaghetti and moaned happily.

Ryan said, “If he took such good care of you, why did you leave him?”

“I got scared.”

Everyone had pity in their eyes, I did not like that one bit.

“And not just me, he got scared too. We got his family safely back to Kilchurn and he took me into his chambers and told me he was sending me home to protect me, and I agreed.”

I tossed my fork down and humphed. “It was the stupidest thing I’ve ever done. What the hell was I thinking?”

They all watched me quietly.

“He said I was in danger. He said that he couldn’t protect me. I was confused and freaked out, unsettled, as I mentioned. There was a lot going on. I cried, but ultimately he picked up my ‘never unpacked’ box of toiletries, got Dusty saddled, and accompanied me to the moor. I jumped back here. I didn’t argue once. Why didn’t I argue?”

Mom said, “Sounds like ‘unsettled’ is the perfect word. You were out of your element. You didn’t know what to do. You hadn’t fully unpacked. You didn’t live there. You weren’t committed to the move. You didn’t settle down.”

“Exactly!” I picked my fork back up, spun it around in the noodles, and put a big twirled heap of it in my mouth, chewing. I swallowed. “I didn’t know what to do, it was like camping in a foreign country while having to act like a royal. I got my period, had to go to a big family dinner, washed myself in bits in a bowl—”

Charlie said, “I know, we smelled.”

“I *still* haven’t fully grasped how that works.” I drank deeply from a beer bottle. “I had to go without coffee through all of this, and it’s been *days* without a shower and... it was really so damn hard, really hard. Then Nor said he was sending me home because he couldn’t keep me safe and I just agreed. I can’t believe I just left him sitting on his horse on the edge of the moor. Like, I thought I was better than that, you know? When the going gets tough, guess who gets going home?” I took a big bite of meatball and chewed. “This girl, she goes home.”

Charlie shrugged. “I was under the impression that you lived with Nor now, isn’t *that* your home? You ran away from home. You got so frightened you left home and—”

“Ran screaming off into the woods, yep, I’m the worst.”

Birdie said, “Well dear, this is the issue — you got scared. You’re not the first bride in the history of the world to get scared, and you have plenty of reasons to, but this pity party is not going to be acceptable. Stop it. Right now.”

“Damn, Birdie, you’re going to say ‘stop it’ to your favorite granddaughter when she tells you she got so scared she came running home?”

“Damn right I’m going to say ‘stop it.’ You’ve lost your damn mind. Was running home what you set out to do?”

“I mean, kinda. I was pretty upset about leaving. I don’t... I don’t know what I was doing or thinking. I did, I lost my mind. I got all swept away by fear and forgot to follow my heart.”

Birdie said, “You promised to love and honor him all the days of your life, right there in my living room, saw it with my own eyes, and now you left him?”

I frowned.

Then I said, “I know, I can’t believe it. I freaking left him. I love him more than anything, we were going to build a life together, but... it’s in the seventeenth century, Birdie, life is really so much harder than you can even imagine.”

“I don’t think any of us are under any delusions that it would be easy.”

“We use chamber pots! The clothes are so difficult to put on we need a maid to help lace us up.”

Ryan mocked me, “Oooh, you have a maid, oooh, you have a maid to dump out your chamber pot.”

I huffed. “You don’t understand, Ryan, a maid is crucial because it’s a pain in the ass to get dressed enough to even leave our rooms. We have piss in a bowl in our rooms, thank God there’s someone to dump it outside. If I had to put on three layers of dress, including lacing up the bodice by myself and doing my own hair, I would never get around to dumping the pot.” I exhaled. “You saw that dress I was wearing when I arrived? That was my casual dress. And there is a garderobe at the other end of the hall, but the castle passageways are dark and there are guards everywhere, and it’s so cold, the wind just comes right through the holes pretending to be windows.”

Dad asked, “No glass?”

“In some of the rooms, but glassed or not, they all have thick curtains to draw over them to keep the wind from blowing right through. It’s black as night. It’s really hard. And I missed being able to just make myself a snack. I think there was a kitchen that could make me anything I asked for, but I wasn’t sure who to ask. And what could I ask for? I just didn’t know anything.”

Ryan said, “Let’s get back to the real reason you left, because my sister is not the kind of girl that leaves her husband because she wanted a snack. I won’t accept it. You left because he was kidnapped and now his brother has had to leave a castle.” His meal was finished, his plate pushed away, the fork and napkin on it. “How big is the Duke’s armory? Does he have cannons? What’s their wall height?” He looked very military the way he leaned forward, as if he were coming up with a battle plan. Dad mirrored him and I was struck by how alike they were.

“Yes, this is a big issue... he has an armory, including some of the guns we’ve given him, and a couple of cannons on the walls, but Johnne’s army is modern.”

He leaned back in his chair and said, “That sucks.”

I took another bite, chewed, swallowed and put down my fork.

“It made perfect sense when I left him to come back here — he’s worried about me and needs to protect me...”

Lou said, “I take it as an honor that he sent you here to protect you, considering I let him get his ass kidnapped off my back lawn, but... that being said, there’s a selflessness there, that he let you go.”

My chin trembled but I frowned to get control of it. “When I left here to go with him I was so frightened, worried about how it was going to work, unsure about everything, and when I got there it seemed like everything just spiraled out of control.”

Birdie said, “You got off on the wrong foot.”

I nodded, blinking, then said, “Wow... is that what it means? I don't think I ever understood it so clearly.”

“It's an expression as old as the hills because it's true. You don't want to set out on the wrong foot, it can mess up the whole trip.”

Charlie said, “Your head wasn't in the game, gotta get in the game.”

I nodded.

Ryan said, “Proper planning prevents piss poor performance, it's the truth. If you go into it in fear, then you're going to be drowning in fear most of the time.”

I chuckled and shook my head. “Yeah, I was so freaking scared of that jump and then we landed in the wrong time at first and we had to jump again — and it hurts like hell, it's awful, it sucks, but his brother Aenghus was there to meet us on the second jump. We went to the castle. There we had food and shelter, but that fear held me back all the same. And I'm, frankly, afraid of the dark.”

Mom patted my arm. “We all knew that, dear.”

“You hid it from me pretty well. There are lights everywhere, but back there it's *really* dark. I don't know how to describe it, the candles do next to nothing. It's a darkness you can't really beat back, and there won't be light enough for centuries. I know I could grow used to it, probably, but...”

Charlie shrugged. “You just needed some lanterns, Livvy. Easy.”

“Yeah. But ultimately I felt like I was going to be there, in the dark, forever, like it was final. I convinced myself, because we weren't sure how to work the portals, that we couldn't leave, that it would cost me my life to even try to come back. I thought I was stuck, but then because Nor told me to leave, I just twisted the portal and came home. Weird, right? I thought I was in a desperate situation, and then just fixed it. Easy. I woke up over on the south field, by our fence, and could see Charlie driving his truck to come pick me up. Dusty is just standing there like he didn't give a shit, like *whatever*, and it

dawned on me — if I wasn't afraid I could just come back and have a cup of coffee with Mom on Fridays.”

“If bad guys weren't chasing you through time.”

“Yeah, if bad guys weren't chasing us, I could come back whenever I ran out of toilet paper.”

Charlie said, “That is definitely a different way to think of it. Your headspace when you left was the complete opposite of that.”

“I know. I wasn't ready to go, because I wasn't sure we knew how to do it, and I thought it was forever. I was trapped in the past, and I behaved poorly. I acted like someone incapable of taking care of herself. I'm actually embarrassed now that I think about it. Nor and I were going to solve this together as a team and I let him send me home even though his heart broke doing it. Besides that, he knows the kind of food I'm eating now... you're right, Lou, it was really selfless for him to send me home. He's so freaking wonderful and perfect and I love him so much. I can't believe I did that.”

Junior said, “You sound like the human version of the animal stuck in a trap, all you could think about was that you were stuck. Now you pulled your leg free. Some animals run as far away as they can from the trap.”

I wrapped spaghetti around the tines of my fork and took a big bite. “Not me... not me at all. I escaped that trap, turned around, and realized it wasn't a trap at all. I was there with Nor, in his castle, and I came home. I could do that at any time. If you think about it, it's a shorter amount of time than the drive home from North Carolina. It hurts, but...”

Mom said, “Sounds like you're talking yourself into something.”

“I am, I'm talking myself into going home.”

She smiled.

Lou said, “Now what is your husband going to think about you going back? Didn't he tell you to come here?”

Birdie said, “Lou, Livvy is a modern girl. She doesn’t have to do anything she doesn’t want to do.”

Lou said, “That’s a shite idea, she’s part of a marriage, a team, of course she has to do some things she doesn’t want to do. I’ve gotta pick up my socks off the floor and put them in the goddamn hamper, I don’t want to do that.”

Birdie rolled her eyes.

He said, “My point is, just because Livvy has decided that she’s not afraid, and that she is brave enough to come and go as she pleases, and that she wants to go back, it doesn’t mean the danger is over. It doesn’t mean Nor will agree.”

“Yeah...” I ripped the piece of garlic bread into pieces and stuffed a chunk in my mouth, chewed and swallowed. “That’s why I need you all to help me work through this. I desperately regret leaving him. How can I make it work? How can I go back in a way that I’m brave and capable and strong? I’m not timid — how come I was acting timid? How can I help him protect his castle? I need answers.”

Ryan said, “You need equipment. You’ve got some weapons, but you also need security equipment. You gotta have a way to see what’s coming, and a way to talk to each other. I’m picturing two-way radios, some solar security cameras, and more weapons.”

“It’ll be hard to explain to Nor how to hook that all up. I’m not sure I know how... it’s not really my forte.”

Charlie said, “I’ll do it, I’ll come. I’m out of school now, let me come. I’ve got a horse, let me come, I want to come.” He folded his hands pleadingly and batted his eyes.

Mom said, “Now how safe is this, Charlie going back with you?”

I said, “Not safe at—”

“*Livvy* has survived multiple jumps. I got this.”

Dad said, “Charlie going with her might set Nor’s mind at ease. You didn’t rush right back by yourself, you brought your

brother. Nor seems like the kind of man who would respect that.”

Ryan said, “Can’t wait to meet this dude. He sounds so old fashioned and yet somehow you’re all trying to behave around him instead of pushing back. Dad, you’re going to piss Mom off and get your feminist ally card taken away.”

Mom said, “He lost the title of ‘feminist ally’ years ago, in college.”

Ryan laughed, “Do tell, what did he do?”

Dad said, “A man never tells, but it involved a can of spray paint and a box of Oreos, but I was young. I’m a better person now, albeit old fashioned, just not as old fashioned as Nor. He’s ‘Your Grace’ old fashioned, we have to take it into account.”

I said, “So I’ll go back with Charlie, security equipment, and a plan. Can you come, Ryan?”

“Nah, gotta report back to base, I mean, I suppose I could — there’s enough time with time travel, right? At least that’s what you’re telling me, but I think it’s too risky. If I didn’t make it back in time my commander is not going to believe I was held up by a dragon.”

“No dragons. But yes, no one will believe it—”

Dan said, “Needs to be said: I think it would be best to keep the military from knowing we know about time travel, we gotta keep it on the down low.”

Ryan asked, “Does the military know about time travel?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, does it? I’ve never seen anyone but me and Nor time-traveling and the bad guy Johnne that kidnapped Nor. Johnne has an army, I think, but it’s not the US military, I’m pretty sure. Nor met those other guys, what were their names — Magnus and Fraoch. A guy named Lochinvar, I think. *They* were time travelers, they helped him get away from Johnne, but... they weren’t modern, I don’t think they were. They did say to stay away from Amelia Island though.”

Ryan said, “Amelia Island, weird. Maybe we ought to go to Amelia and look around for time travelers—”

“That is the exact opposite of what they said to do!”

Ryan said, “You’re not usually the kind of person who does what others tell you to do. For example, you’re going back to your husband against his wishes.”

“Ugh!” I wailed, “Is Nor going to be okay with it? I’ve screwed up absolutely everything.”

Mom said, “Don’t listen to Ryan, Livvy. We’ve all met Nor, he adores you, and if you confidently return and take this matter in hand, he will forgive you for leaving. He will probably beg your forgiveness for telling you to go away.”

Birdie said, “If he’s begging forgiveness, get him to go down on his knees again, that was a sight to behold.” She giggled. “I’d like to be there if possible to see it.”

Ryan said, “Whoa, Birdie. Lou, you’re an old-fashioned man, you gonna let Birdie talk like that?”

Lou said, “It was a sight to behold, I think I’d like to see it again too.” They all laughed.

I said, “So I take Charlie, I take security equipment, more weapons, two-way radios.”

Lou said, “And you take lanterns, a few flashlights, and solar powered lights. I think it’s ridiculous, but if you don’t like the dark just take some lights.”

I nodded. “I think solar lanterns would be good. We could make them look old.”

Birdie said, “You should have a world class first-aid kit. All the things.”

I said, “Yeah, that’s a great idea. And... a way to make coffee, for some reason the lack of coffee really got to me. It seems like the most basic thing in the world, and not that big a deal, but on top of all the other stuff, having a mug of coffee in the morning would have made everything more bearable.”

Uncle Tim said, “When we go hunting, first one up makes the coffee, I get you.”

“If I had an iron kettle for our fire, a French press for our room, a couple of mugs, it would really change my mindset.”

Mom squeezed my arm. “So how long will it take you to gather this stuff?”

I said to Charlie, “Want to go by the end of the week?”

“Heck yeah.”

Chapter 50 - Artair



I leaned against the post on the back deck and crossed my arms. I humphed.

My mother, Una, asked, “What do ye want, Artair? This is a mood ye are setting. Ye are twenty-five years old, too old tae behave this way.” She primly leaned forward, took a bit of marmalade on a knife, and smeared it on her toast, cooked exactly as she liked it. Her red hair spilled across her shoulders. She chewed, then said, “Or rather, daena say it yet, yer father will be here momentarily.”

My father, Niall, entered just then and crossed the sprawling terrace, kissed m’mother on her cheek and took to his chair at the head of the table. He sighed. “Una, Artair, I just heard from General Sparks at the front.” He unfurled his napkin and draped it across his knees. “The battle for the eastern plains is not goin’ tae plan. Och nae, this has been for naught.”

Una said, “A strategic battle is never for *naught*, Dear. Ye are being tactical, wearing down the adversary. Ye told me this was part of our longer plan.”

“Well, tis not going tae the longer plan, nor the shorter plan. I fear we are losin’ this war, I am givin’ up hope we will win back our throne.”

The only servant we had left, Thomas, rushed onto the terrace, bustled up to the table, and placed Niall’s plate in front of him.

Without looking at me he said, “Son, I see ye are refusing tae sit, and glowering in the corner.”

“Tis not a glower, tis tedium, and I am not in the corner, I am leanin’ upon a post, tryin’ tae decide what we need tae plan next in this godforsaken eternal war. Ye just announced we are losin’, and ye want me tae say ‘Good morn, Father’?”

Una said, “Artair, ye ken yer father is simply upset — I will remind ye both, ye can be upset all ye want at Central Command, but here, at the breakfast table, ye both ought tae be in a better mood.”

Niall said, “Fine, I will be in a better mood, for the company, Artair did ye hear? Ye need less grimace tae yer expression or yer mother will send ye from the table.”

Mother said, “I will send ye *both* from the table.”

I waved my arm, “Ye canna send me from the table, I am not at the table, and I am a grown man—”

Niall said, “Aye, we are both too auld tae be ruinin’ breakfast.” He checked his watch, an ancient timepiece from centuries earlier. “We must eat, our helicopter picks us up soon.”

I sipped from my mug looking out over the landscape, lit in the dawn of the morning. “Och, I dislike goin’ tae that bunker, Central Command — tae hear all the ways we are losin’.”

Then I asked, “Remind me again, Father, how long hae we been at war, tae be losin’ still?”

“Since as long as I can remember.”

“Decades of war. Tae be losin’ still.”

Niall groaned.

Una said, “I am attempting tae enjoy this marmalade and ye are spoiling it, giving it an unpleasant bitterness.”

I said, “I hae asked this before, but Father, please allow me tae challenge Eddie tae combat in an arena. A fight tae the

death, for our kingdom. An arena battle would end the war and solve everything.”

“Artair, ye hae been home for two months and this ridiculous idea is all I hae heard. I will say it again, Eduard will not take the challenge. He daena hae tae, he has already taken our throne.”

“He will accept the duel if we promise peace if I lose. I will challenge him publicly. He would look weak if he refuses. We ken this, he is a usurper, his cause is not just. The people of Riaghalbane would—”

Niall shook his head. “Nae, Artair, nae. We hae been over and over this. Eduard will never agree. He has our throne, he winna give it up easily.”

“That’s why we need decisive action! An arena battle is the way tae do it. Our cause is just, ye are the rightful king. We demand a battle tae the death. He would be weak and cowardly not tae take it.”

Niall scowled. “Aye, Eduard is weak, but he is surrounded by warmongers, men who are enriching themselves in his cause. Ye mistake his motivations, and ascribe tae him more honor than he merits. He will not care if his subjects see him as weak. He will simply reign more brutally.”

I grunted.

Niall said, “Yer idea is too great a risk even if he *did* accept the challenge — ye might lose.”

I scoffed, “That is not a risk! I would win. I am well trained. I am lethal in battle. I would not lose...” I pulled the chair from the table and sank down in it. Thomas rushed over, placed my napkin in my lap, topped off my coffee, and adjusted the tray of toast points so I could reach them easier. I said, “Five eggs, bacon, m’usual.”

Thomas bowed away.

Una asked vaguely, “How many servants do ye think Eduard has at his breakfast?”

Niall exhaled. “Near five, I would expect.”

“Alas.” Una leaned over and tapped the back of my hand. “I do wish we had more servants for ye, son. Ye deserve yer birthright, as a prince, and before yer father called ye home yer circumstances were appalling at the Baron of Torphichen’s castle. Though I am verra grateful he was willing and capable of taking ye in and keeping ye protected—”

Niall said, “And training ye in battle.”

Una continued, “Aye, and training him, I am eternally grateful, but oh, now ye are home, I do wish we had yer father’s throne for ye.”

“I daena ken if the Baron would appreciate having his castle called ‘dire circumstances’. He was verra pleased with it and twas nae all bleak in the sixteenth century, though in comparison tae this life, of course, it would seem so. I daena hae an opinion on servants, but the food is definitely better here than in Torphichen’s Great Hall.”

Una sighed. “It *was* dire, ye canna convince me otherwise. For fifteen long years ye were hiding in that bleak age. That is all I will say on it, twas verra *verra* dire, and now ye deserve the life of a prince.”

Niall spooned a bit more jam on his toast, then spread it forcefully. “He does deserve the life of a prince. We must win our crown back—”

I leaned across the table. “Father, think of it, my plan would win yer kingdom. My challenge would announce that ye hae strength and that ye hae the true claim tae the throne. I could behead Eddie and put his head up on a pike in front of the arena—”

“What arena is this?”

“The one Eddie would build with all the money he has stolen from the royal coffers — *yer* royal coffers. After I beat him, easily, then ye would be king. Think how grateful yer subjects would be that their sons would nae hae tae die in the trenches of an endless war.”

Una said, “Ye are saying ye would want an arena built for the battle?”

“Aye, a huge arena so the fight tae the death will be shown all over the kingdom, therefore I would only need tae kill him once.”

Una asked, “What would ye say tae Eduard that would convince him?”

“I daena ken... I would tell him he is sendin’ young men tae their deaths in his stead and he ought tae be more honorable. I would offer tae fight a battle tae the death, and ask him, ‘Are ye a coward, Usurper?’ It would be easy tae rile him. Brutal men arna prone tae measured reactions.”

Niall said, “Una, daena keep discussing it. Artair is getting carried away with this ridiculous idea.” He punctuated the air with his table knife, a dollop of jam on its edge, wiggling and glistening in the morning sunlight, “That Edward is not going tae agree tae.”

I said, “But we could—”

“Nae, Artair! There is nae sense in discussing this, I am yer father! The rightful king! What I say goes! Daena forget, I could *easily* send ye back tae the Baron.” The dollop of jam plopped tae the tablecloth.

I nodded. “I would get a chance tae see Gwynedd once more.”

Niall grunted and tossed his knife down on the tablecloth. “That girl was a sixteenth century commoner—”

“Her father was a viscount.”

Una said, “Artair, do ye hear yerself? She is beneath ye!”

Niall said, “Ye are a prince, ye canna expect her tae make a good wife for a future king.”

He watched me for a moment, then added, “And ye must be more civilized, there are rules tae war. I must win, because the alternative is, God hae mercy, that I leave this life and ye must continue tae fight.”

I said, “My apologies, Father, my hubris carried me away. Tis just... ye had me raised as a barbarian, trained tae fight, and I *want* tae fight.”

Thomas delivered my plate, piled high with eggs and bacon, in front of me. I took a big hearty bite.

Una said, “We *must* win. We are the rightful rulers of Riaghalbane. I canna bear the idea of Artair spending his life at war.”

Tae ease the tension, I joked, “Ye dinna care for me much anyway, Mother. Ye sent me away tae live with the Baron for fifteen long years.”

Una said, “Artair! Nae!” She fanned herself. “We had tae put ye intae hiding! We had nae other options!”

Niall said, “Och nae, I am grown weary of discussing war and battles and — do ye remember, Una, when Artair lived with the Baron and I ate in peace?”

I huffed, then grinned. “But ye missed me.”

Una said, “Of course we missed ye, twas a tragedy tae send ye away, but we had tae, because we are time travelers. If we daena hide our sons they would never grow tae become kings, but even though we understood the ‘why,’ twas quiet and unsettling without ye here, ruining our breakfast.”

I ran a fork through my verra large pile of scrambled eggs and scooped some in m’mouth. “Living in the past was verra dire, ye ought tae be nicer tae yer long sufferin’ son.”

Niall rolled his hand. “This is the way of the Campbells, we must live like barbarians when we are young tae become kings of the future. We hae always done it. It makes the fruits of our kingdom all that much more sweeter.”

“Except we daena hae our kingdom.”

He said, “Aye, but we still hae the fruits and I will fight tae my last breath for the kingdom.”

“I wish I could save ye from it.”

“I ken, Son, but ye are wrong in this idea of a challenge. I winna agree tae it.”

I grinned, “Fine, daena, instead we will hae our pleasant breakfast and then go tae Central Command.”

I finished my breakfast then leaned forward. “What do ye ken, Father, about the time of Normond the First? He was m’great-grandfather and I haena heard much about him.”

“Aye, because he was the first king. We daena hae many records from before he ascended tae the throne.”

“How did he get the throne though, who did he take it from?”

“He took it from a man by the name of Johnne Cambell, the founder of the Tempus Omegas — Johnne used the Tempus Omegas tae amass land and riches, a great deal of power and then somehow — Normond took it all.”

I nodded, this was all that I had heard before. “How exactly did Johnne amass so much power?”

“He stole, he created armies that stole from the future and brought those weapons back and used them in the past.”

I nodded, “But I thought we weren’t supposed to interfere in the past — I canna marry Gwynedd from the past, but we are supposed tae hide our sons in the past... but not change history. There are confusing rules.”

“We arna supposed tae ruin the future or change what has been written. This is decreed.”

Una said, “But as ye ken, Dear, this is more of a suggestion than a hard rule. If ye did change history who is tae be the one tae complain about it? The Campbell kings? They are the most important men in the world, they can jump time.”

Niall directed a long exhale toward my mother. “Tis a hard rule, Una, tis decreed.”

She pertly said, “Agree tae disagree.”

He checked his watch and got up from the table. “I am off tae dress for the helicopter. Son, it will meet us at the top of the hour.”

“I will see ye then.”

He left the patio.

Chapter 51 - Artair



Una watched him go then turned tae me and with earnestness said, “I hae been worrying about exactly this.”

“What?”

“Yer father insists we canna change history, we mustn’t, but what if this man, Johnne Cambell is usin’ history against us? What if he is waging war against all the kings — what if he is helping Eduard? Could Johnne be changing history? And would we ken?”

My brow drew down. “Hae ye mentioned these concerns tae Father?”

“He winna listen tae it, he believes that he is dealing with Eduard only, not other evil men, but I hae seen and heard things that make me suspect that there is someone advising Eduard—”

“What hae ye heard?”

“I hae heard the name ‘Johnne Cambell’ whispered as if he is here in this time.”

“That is a common name.”

“Aye, that is why I haena mentioned it. But we hae been at war for yer father’s whole life, could Johnne be availing our enemies? Perhaps we canna win because yer father is playing by the rules, while our enemies are using his fairness and his desire tae keep tradition against him.”

“What are ye suggestin’?”

“That we go over yer father’s head, and change history, break tradition.” Una sat back in her chair and lifted her teacup tae take a sip and primly replaced it on her saucer. “I hae an idea, since I heard ye were coming home I hae wanted tae discuss it with ye, this seems the perfect time.”

I checked my watch, I dinna hae long afore I needed tae meet the helicopter, but this had grown important. “Go on.”

“I’ve been studying the history of the kingdom. Your father says there is not much information, but there is, he was just not understanding it. I hae been studying a great deal about Normond and Johnne’s battles, a time of deep turmoil, and hae grown tae suspect we may still be in that time. I wonder —how is Eduard so strong? How could he possibly be winning this war? How is he holding on tae the throne? How did Eduard take our throne from Maximillian? I now believe *Johnne* is the cause.”

I took a bite of bacon. “That would mean he has a great deal of power, much more than ours.”

“Aye, a great deal of power. Nor was introduced tae time travel without understanding it, while Johnne Cambell was already well ahead of him, with a large well-trained army. Normond almost died more than once. He came near losing. He was at a tremendous disadvantage.”

“If Normond was weak in comparison, how did he win?”

“That part is sketchy. His family was large, many men, his wife was from a more modern time, she brought brothers and better weapons, but Johnne had decades of practice with the Tempus Omegas. The real truth of the moment is shadowy, but it’s come tae me, within the shadows is where time travelers lurk.”

“I am not sure what ye mean — both Johnne and Normond are time-travelers, correct?”

“Aye, but Johnne knew more about using time travel than Normond. How do ye think Normond beat him?”

“Normond either outgunned him or outsmarted him...”

She nodded, pleased. “Exactly, Artair, I hae been thinking about it and I suspect that a time traveler went back and helped Normond. Perhaps Normond was losing, perhaps he was going tae lose, but someone from the future went back and helped him fight Johnne.”

I leaned back and looked up at the awning giving our table a bit of shade from the more direct sun of the midmorning and considered. “So a time traveler went back and helped Normond win the kingdom? It would be a risk, but aye, ye might be right, think of all the kings and sons of kings who descended from him, any of them would want tae help—”

“Aye, especially if Johnne is messing with their own timelines. They would hae a just reason tae go back and create an alliance with Normond tae help him battle Johnne.”

“Fight Johnne there, instead of fighting him here.”

“Aye, change history.”

We nodded at each other. Then she added, “We, for instance, would hae much tae gain from taking power from the very beginning.”

I narrowed my eyes. “So who do ye think went back in time and helped Normond?”

She said, “Well, I daena want tae put any ideas in yer head.”

I said, “Ye think twas I, Artair, son of Niall, grandson of Maximillian, descendant of Normond, who went back and helped Normond win?” I shook my head, staring up at that awning, scoffing. “There must be many other men in our long line, before or after myself, who would be suited tae the work. I am not sure why ye are focused on me.”

“I am not *focusing* upon ye, I was reading the history of the time and thought tae myself, ye ken who would probably do this? My son, Artair. He is a warrior. He is smart and courageous. His kingdom has been lost. I was sure twas ye.”

“Ye are flattering me tae further yer aims.”

“I might be, but ye ken I am right. Tis ye that did it.”

“But we are busy fighting for our kingdom, we are at war.”

“If Johnne is behind Eduard’s power, as I suspect, then we are at war with him. Ye would be attacking him on another front and ye might actually help yer father end this war — If I am wrong, then ye will help yer great-grandfather win his own war and strengthen his crown. Either way ye win.”

“Unless I lose tae Johnne.”

“Ye winna lose.” She took a quick sip of her tea. “Besides, Riaghalbane was won by a seventeenth-century Duke, how do ye think he managed the feat? Someone helped him. Who better than yerself?”

“Och nae, this sounds suspiciously like ye are telling me I must go back and live in the filth and mire of a... what year did ye say?”

“Twas the year 1670.”

“Och nae. The year sounds cruel.” It crossed my mind, though that after I had saved the kingdom, I would be free tae travel tae 1578. I could see Gwynedd. I could marry her. I kept m’face expressionless when I said, “And ye would give me a Tempus Omega for the work?”

Una narrowed her eyes. “Aye... what are ye planning?”

“Nothing...”

“Good, daena plan anythin’ else.”

I shrugged. “I could stay here instead, sit at Central Command, fetch coffee for the generals and keep m’father entertained with m’disagreeableness.”

“Aye, ye could drive yer father tae bringing ye up on charges of treason, or...” She smiled. “Or ye could be the hero. Ye could help yer ancestors and then... ye could even tell Normond tae build an arena, so future wars could be settled by arena battles, the verra thing ye were just arguing about with yer father. Would nae it be wonderful if ye could challenge Eduard tae an arena battle and the arena is already built?”

“Mother, ye are verra convincing. Eduard would hae tae agree if the arena was there on the castle grounds.” I raised my brow. “But ye ken, ye are suggestin’ that I go above m’father’s head. Ye are conspiring against him. This *is* treasonous.”

“I merely suggested that ye might tell yer great-grandfather tae build an arena. I canna see how that could be considered treason. This would simply be a great-grandson advising his great-grandfather. Everyone would do it if they could.”

“...and ye are not worried that my actions will change time disastrously?”

“If Normond is a king, and ye help him become a king sooner, or with more consolidated power, or with a better plan for his descendants’ rule, I daena see how any changes could be ‘too much’.” She sipped from her tea.

Then added, “Just be cautious though, daena overdo — ye daena want tae set history askew.”

I joked, “Ye did mention that Johnne had him overpowered. I am wonderin’ if the help he needs is a good sword, or I daena ken, possibly an armored tank...?”

Her face grew serious. “They are all at yer disposal. Your father has plenty, just perhaps... Artair, ye are goin’ tae the past, do ye think tanks are a good idea? Ye might cause suspicion?”

“Suspicion is an understatement, hae ye been tae the past?”

“On a few small visits, aye, tae the year 1865, twas a fine time in—”

“Then ye daena ken that the year 1670 is verra uncivilized — aye, a tank rolling through the Scottish highlands would raise the specter of evil spirits. I will take something else, perhaps one of the howitzers.”

“Either way, daena speak tae yer father on it.”

“Of course, he has a great deal on his mind with our endless war.”

I rubbed my hands together and stood. “This will be fun, helpin’ m’great-grandfather vanquish his enemies in the seventeenth century! I am not pleased about that last part, I just left the past, not thrilled about goin’ back, but I am lookin’ forward tae the adventure.”

I crossed the patio, turned back, and said, “Dost ye think I ought tae tell Normond he is m’great-grandfather?”

She tapped her lip. “Ye might confuse him, and... Now that I am thinking on it — ye ought not tell him before he sires your grandfather. Ye might send ripples through his relationships and cause him tae alter the course of his life.”

“Mother are ye saying that meetin’ me could interfere with his having children? Och nae, ye are not takin’ intae account m’charmin’ personality, I am what all men would dream on having in a great-grandson. If he meets me he might hae even *more* sons.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yer personality notwithstanding, tis the battling of sons that has gotten us intae this trouble. Ye ought tae be verra cautious. And I will be giving ye a Tempus Omega, do not deviate from yer cause. Ye hae been warned.”

I turned tae go.

She said tae m’departing back, “Agree with me, son, ye hae been warned.”

“Aye, I hae been warned.” I left tae prepare for m’journey, thinking about how and when I would use the Tempus Omega tae return tae Gwynedd.

Chapter 52 - the Duke



I entered the Great Hall for the meal and all eyes turned toward me, the reception line formed. Lady Gail rushed tae m'side, whisperin', "Where is the Duchess?"

I kept my eyes on the back wall of the room and kept m'face expressionless. "She is exhausted from the trip and has taken tae her bed. She sends her regrets."

"Och nae! Is she unwell?"

"There was a great deal of turmoil on our trip, she needs tae rest. Nothing more."

We greeted the gathered guests and then everyone took their seats. Malcolm and Aenghus sat tae m'left and right. Aenghus leaned in and whispered, "Tis true, what ye told Lady Gail?"

I shook my head. "Nae, but we will speak of it on the morrow. I hae sent the Duchess tae her grandfather's house tae keep her protected. Daena let Claray or Mam ken, not yet." We changed the subject and ate.

Claray rushed up after the meal. "Nor! Where is Livvy? Does she need food brought tae her room? Ought I go up and keep her company?"

"Nae Claray, ye hae yer company here in the Great Hall. I hae sent her what she needs."

She huffed. "What am I tae do? She is the best company!"

“Ye hae yer cousins, yer sister-in-law visitin’ from Finlarig. Ye hae plenty tae do.”

She went and joined Ailsa and Shona at the other end of the table.



After dinner I sat with my brothers around the hearth in m’chamber. I gave Malcolm his new boots, and then explained about how I had uncovered time travel months ago and what Livvy and I had been subjected tae since.

He looked down at his new boots and exhaled. “I daena ken if I believe any of the time travel story, but I do understand the danger. Ye ought tae hae told me when ye first returned. If something had happened tae m’family because ye kept it quiet...”

“I ken, I would hae never forgiven m’self.” Tae make him feel better I shewed him the weapons, and had some bread and cheese brought up tae m’chamber so he could try some of the barbecue sauce.

He licked his fingers after the taste. “With weapons and riches like this I am surprised ye came home.”

I nodded and said simply, “Aye.”

Aenghus said, “You seem tae be calm, seeing as ye sent yer wife away.”

My eyes traveled tae the door of my private chamber. I took a sip of whisky and said, “Aye, I haena been able tae be alone with m’thoughts on it yet. I hae been concerned about protectin’ the castle.”

Aenghus said, “We will speak tae the guardsmen, if ye need tae rest.”

I nodded, thinkin’ a rest would be necessary, but I couldna imagine going through that door tae our private chamber, alone.

I drained m'whisky and clapped m'hands on m'knees. "I think I would rather go up tae the walls and watch, would ye like tae join me?"

They agreed and that's how we ended up on the battlement, on a brisk night, lookin' out over our loch.

Chapter 53 - the Duke



A enghus asked, “What is it like, Nor, tae look up at the night in the New World in a future century?”

“Tis much the same, Brother—”

Malcolm shook his head and spoke over me. “Aenghus, I ken ye believe this time-travel tale, but I remain skeptical—”

Aenghus said, “Ye daena believe our brother, the Duke? He is right here, hearin’ ye speak it.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “And would the Duke, yer older, wiser brother, fabricate a story this outlandish, Malcolm? I think ye ought tae give him more credit.”

Malcolm said, “I am surprised that our brother, the Duke, is this good at tellin’ outlandish stories. He is making this *sound* true — it seems, at least, that *he* believes it tae be true and—”

Aenghus said, “Ye hae never known the Duke tae suffer delusions.”

“Aye, I am skeptical and yet...” He looked down on his boots, also with embroidery, but as I had promised not better than Aenghus’s boots. “Our brother is usually verra forthright and sensible. I want tae believe him, but the tale is difficult tae order with what I ken tae be true.”

I said, “Perhaps, Malcolm, ye ought tae let me, as yer brother, the *Duke*, continue tae speak on it.”

“Aye, Yer Grace,” he dropped his head back tae the wall. “I hope ye can explain the matter.”

“I wonder, do ye believe, Malcolm, that men hae gone by ship tae the New World?”

“Aye, I ken it.”

I said, “And some hae returned with riches unlike what we hae known? Ye haena seen them but...”

“I hae heard the stories.”

“Aye, ye haena visited the New World, yet still ye trust that it exists. This is the same — Livvy’s family lives in the New World. I hae traveled there, and I hae seen it with m’own eyes. Forget how I traveled there, that is difficult tae understand, and instead trust m’story because I hae given ye the boots and shared with ye the barbecue sauce.”

Malcolm nodded. “Twas verra good barbecue sauce. So I suppose I must trust yer story is true. Also, as Aenghus asked, is the night sky in the New World much different?”

“Nae, when I was there I could sit on the ground and look up at the stars and it was much the same — yer wife is leanin’ upon yer side, yer back against the wall, the rumble of life and men around ye, the snorin’ and belchin’ of...” We listened and from down the wall one of the guards was snoring.

Aenghus laughed.

I continued, “...and Livvy’s home smells of stable, just like ours. Did I tell ye, Malcolm, of their orange trees?”

“Ye did, but how many?”

“They hae hundreds of orange trees, hundreds of coos.”

Aenghus said, “I would like tae see it someday.”

I said, “I would love tae hae shown it tae ye.”

Malcolm said, “I just daena understand, she comes from a verra powerful family, aye, they can protect their lands, but ye are a Duke, ye hae men around ye, lands spread across Scotland. Ye ought tae be capable of keepin’ her protected yerself.”

“Aye, ye are right, I ought tae be able, but we arna dealin’ with the normal dangers, here, Brother. We are dealin’ with

somethin'..."

I dinna finish because I dinna want tae tell him it felt otherworldly, a man who could attack with weapons and armies of a size and violence beyond our comprehension.

My eyes scanned the horizon, then I said, "I am leavin' on the morrow. I will draw Johnne's attention away from Kilchurn by goin' tae live in—"

Aenghus said, "What are ye talking on, Nor? Ye canna leave, not alone. I will come with ye—"

I joked, "If ye came twould ruin the point of leavin' tae draw the danger away."

"I daena like the idea."

"I ken, I daena like it either, but I am at a disadvantage. I hae an adversary who is more advanced than I, he kens how tae work the portals. He kens all about m'family and how tae threaten us, and he can attack whenever he wants. I thought I could learn what I needed tae keep us all safe, but it seems as if he is tae be one step ahead of us."

Malcolm said, "Could ye return the portal tae him, perhaps then he would leave our family alone?"

"Perhaps, but also, there is a finality in that. I am not ready tae be so final. I would never hae a chance tae see Livvy again, ever. That is too grave — I canna think on it..."

Malcolm said, "I want tae voice m'opposition, Nor. Ye daena sound like yerself, ye ken who ye sound like?"

I groaned. "Daena say it."

Aenghus said, "He sounds like Father."

Malcolm said, "Aye, ye sound like Father, being safe, consultin' yer advisors, urgin' caution in everythin', och, ye remember how we would complain? 'Father will be wanting us tae be cautious'—"

Aenghus said, "Then Nor would laugh and we would do it anyway."

Malcolm said, “And Nor, our elder brother, swore an oath, he said, ‘I will never be like Father, I will hold the title like a good and proper laird.’”

“I did say that...”

“I ken ye did, ye were goin’ tae be a powerful Duke, a leader of men. Yer walls were goin’ tae be strong. I canna believe the man before me, talking of goin’ away.”

I said, sternly, “Ye daena ken what ye are speaking on, Malcolm, I hae seen this enemy and—”

“Your Grace has seen the enemy and thinks he ought tae draw him away. What does this mean? This is a sturdy castle, defensible, built on a loch. We can see our enemies approach. Where are ye goin’ tae draw him tae, a croft? The great and mighty Nor will battle him in an oat field?”

Aenghus grinned. “I forgot what twas like tae hear Malcolm call ye tae task, Nor, this is fun.”

I said, “Malcolm forgets he inna tae speak tae the Duke this way, he ought tae—”

Malcolm interrupted, “Ye daena sound like ‘the Duke’, ye sound like a lowly man who has decided tae go wage a lone battle in an oat field. I am just sayin’, with all due honor, Yer Grace, why are ye wantin’ tae wage war in an oat field? Aenghus and I will be sitting on the side yellin’, ‘Nor! Why ye tramplin’ the oats?’”

I chuckled. “Ye winna be there, Malcolm, tae harass me. Ye will be here, watchin’ over the castle.”

“So while Yer Grace is battlin’ in the oat field, I am tae remain here pretendin’ tae be the Duke? I daena want tae be the Duke.” He grimaced.

Aenghus groaned, “Here we go again — I tell ye, Malcolm, daena list all the things ye dislike about the dukedom in front of Nor. He might listen tae ye, might get himself killed in an oat field, just tae torment ye by passin’ ye the title.”

Malcolm used his fingers tae count. “One, ye must sit through endless meetings. Two, ye must handle all disputes. Three, ye hae tae feign ye are full of grace, ye canna belch and hae flatulence at the evenin’ meal, and finally, ye daena get tae do whatever ye want tae do.”

I chuckled.

He went on, “*Therefore*, ye canna die in an oat field and force me tae take up the title — och nae, I winna accept it. This all sounds like Yer Grace hasna thought it through.”

I clapped my hand on his arm. “I ken Malcolm, I am uncertain if I am followin’ the correct course, but still I must try tae draw him away, and lest ye think am being soft, I am not. The portals are verra powerful and I winna give them up. Johnne Cambell is a reekin’ bawbag, and he canna hae them. They are mine. I want tae kill him for what he’s done tae me, the fear he’s caused Livvy. I will draw his blood and watch it pour onto my lands, enrichin’ my soil. A duke always wins.”

Aenghus smiled. “This is much better, I like when ye sound like that.”

I said, “Ye like when I sound vengeful?”

“Verra much.”

Malcolm said, “Ye sound much more like yerself.”

I nodded. “But for now, I will draw Johnne away, and Malcolm, ye *will* watch over the castle, because ye are a good brother. Ye will try not tae fart at the evening meal. And Aenghus, ye will send word if anythin’ out of the ordinary happens.”

Both my brothers nodded.

Aenghus said, “I will keep ye abreast of all flatulence, great or small.”

“Good. Thank ye both for understanding.”

We all put our heads back on the wall tae watch out over our lands.



My shoulder was nudged. Aenghus's voice, "Wake up, Nor."

The cold air had settled around us. I mumbled, "How long was I asleep?" My arse hurt from sitting on the cold stone parapet.

Aenghus said, "There's a storm."

His words were like cold water splashin' my face. I awoke fully and lumbered tae m'feet. Twas dark, just before dawn, but Aenghus and Malcolm pointed tae the southeast, where, illuminated by lightning, we could make out, looming over Barran Moor, the unmistakable thunderclouds of one of our time travel storms.

I said, "Gather our horses, we hae tae go."

Chapter 54 - the Duke



Our horses' hooves thundered as we galloped up the causeway, across the fields tae the woods, then through the forest along the path that had been widened and worn over time. We arrived at the moor and our path emerged from the woods, as the first light was comin' over the trees on the far side of the stream.

Light was spreading across the plain, pushing back the shadows of the trees, and we saw the last of the puddles seeping into the ground after the storm.

Malcolm pulled his horse tae a stop. "Och nae, what is it?"

There in the middle of the moor was an unconscious man, beside him were two horses and a large gun on wheels. I said, "I believe tis a cannon from the New World, and whatever it's doin' in our moor, it inna good."

Aenghus drew his gun. "What is the plan, Yer Grace? We kill the man?"

I pulled the binoculars Livvy had left me and scanned the area. "I daena see anyone, do ye see any other men?"

"Nae, just the stranger who ought tae be dead in the mud."

I said, "I am goin' tae approach, stay a distance behind, watch for men, cover me."

I glanced at Malcolm, he was armed with a modern weapon that he had not used yet, and his eyes were wide at the sight before us. "Malcolm, ye understand the situation?"

“Nae, I daena, seems tae be some dark-magic afoot, but I ken the instructions — tae watch over m’brother as he approaches the monster.”

I checked m’gun. “Tis not a monster, tis a machine, likely driven by a monster.”

Aenghus said, “We ought tae kill him and save the trouble of another battle out here on the moor.”

Malcolm asked, “Ye hae done this before?”

Aenghus said, “I told ye, we hae had storms and moor battles against monstrous guns and aye, we hae done this before. This is dangerous.”

I said, “Malcolm ye got this?”

“Aye.”

He and Aenghus remained hidden within the treeline while I approached the stranger, still oddly unconscious. There was a portal layin’ beside him in the mud. I dismounted Balach Mòr, scooped up the portal and put it in my sporran.

The man was verra big, bearded, red haired, dressed in a kilt, lookin’ about m’same age. He carried a sword. He had the look of someone who came from a past century, but I recognized the telltale hints of a time traveler by the type of gun holstered on his belt, and the boots on his feet.

I drew m’sword and aimed the point at the weak spot at his temple. “Ye ought tae awaken.”

His eyes fluttered.

“I hae a sword trained on ye, I winna kill ye while ye sleep, ye ought tae awaken so I can dispatch ye swiftly.”

“Nae!” His eyes opened, and he flinched, raising his hands, “Nae, daena kill me.” He used his hands tae shield his eyes from the sun shining behind me. “Och, I thought I would handle the jump better if I was drunk while doin’ it, and now I hae been awoken with a sword in m’face — I regret every decision—”

I asked, “Ye hae more men with ye?”

“Nae, just me—”

“Who are ye?”

“M’name is Artair, I am a friend of the Duke.”

“Ye arna a friend of the Duke, I ken him, he has never mentioned an Artair.”

He narrowed his eyes, tryin’ tae see past the sun’s glare.
“Are ye he?”

“Keep yer hands up — whom are ye speakin’ on? What duke?”

Aenghus and Malcolm rode up the path toward us, Aenghus calling, “Nor! It daena look like anyone else is here!”

The man named Artair smiled, “Aye, ye are Nor the Duke of Awe, I recognized ye.”

“I still haena heard of ye, Artair, ye call yerself a friend, but—”

“I *am* a friend, I brought ye—”

The wind picked up. The bottom of m’kilt lifted, flapping around my legs as a gust of impossibly strong wind blasted in a whirl from a spot on the ground. I looked up at the storm clouds, roiling up through the air. “This is yer army?”

“Nae! I told ye, I came alone! Hungover and alone, och nae, we must survive another storm?” He curled on his side around his knees.

The storm winds hit me so hard that they knocked me stumbling forward. Aenghus and Malcolm turned their horses away, galloping back toward the trees with Balach Mòr galloping behind them, leavin’ me at the mercy of the storm as it bore down upon us. The eye of it was centered near the stream, but the gusting winds slammed and spun all around us. I hit the ground, my arms around my head, and tried tae wait it out.

Chapter 55 - the Duke



The storm subsided slowly, I raised my head and looked around. Farther along the banks of the stream there were new people, two horses and a cart piled high with chests.

Artair groaned. “What the hell, more people are comin’?”

I lumbered tae m’ feet and raised m’ sword tae his head. “Ye ken it, this is yer army — I said ye were a foe!”

“I am nae!” His hands went up. “I am here tae help ye fight Johnne Cambell!”

“Toss yer weapons away, now.”

I waved Aenghus and Malcolm over, while Artair removed his gun from its holster, placed it down, then unsheathed his sword and tossed it tae the side, grumbling, “Och, ye ought not disarm a man who has come tae build an alliance with ye, it daena bode well...”

I said, “Yer dirk as well.”

He pulled the dirk from its sheath and tossed it clangin’ ontae the sword. “Fine, are ye pleased? Now I am unarmed. I came tae assist ye in yer battles, yet I am unarmed.” Then he looked around. “Where is my Tempus Omega?”

“Ye mean yer portal? Tis mine now.”

He groaned. “Is that anyway tae treat yer friend in arms?”

Malcolm and Aenghus rode up and dismounted beside us. “What is going on? Who is this other group?”

“This man claims he daena ken them.”

“My name is Artair, I am a—”

Aenghus leveled his sword at him. “Wheesht. I am not as kind as His Grace, I would hae killed ye the minute I laid m’eyes on ye.”

“Twould hae been a mistake, I am the best hope yer family has against Johnne.”

Aenghus asked me, “Dost ye ken what he is talkin’ on?”

“Nae, but guard him while I go see who else has arrived.”

I strode across the moor, as I drew closer, recognizing Dusty, Livvy’s horse, and a form on the ground that looked much like — I yelled, “Livvy!” and picked up my pace.

Behind me my brothers were standing over Artair, their swords aimed, but ahead of me, Livvy was here, along with her brother, Charlie, with their two horses. They had packed for the trip, much more than we brought the first time.

And twas the multitude of chests that convinced me — she was in nae rush tae leave. She was home and meant tae stay.

Chapter 56 - Livvy



My eyes fluttered open to see, blurry and in the distance, Nor racing toward me, his voice calling out, “Livvy! Livvy!”

He was racing closer and closer then he dropped skidding to his knees beside me and drew me up in his arms. “Livvy, are ye well, are ye harmed?” He pushed the hair back from my face.

I reached up and clung around his back and spoke into his shoulder, “Yes I’m okay, I’m okay.”

“Och, Livvy, I was so worried on ye, are ye well? Is yer ranch safe?”

I nodded my head against his shoulder as he held me tight.

“Then what are ye doin’? Ye haena been gone a full day!”

“Yep, and I’m not going to be gone, I came back. You sent me away, but it didn’t stick.”

“I daena understand. I was doin’ it tae keep ye safe.”

I pulled myself free of his arms and took a long look at my husband. “You are a sight for sore eyes.” I smoothed his hair from his face and tucked a strand behind his ear. “I am safe, with *you*. I realized I was making the biggest mistake of my life, Your Grace, and I came back. I won’t leave you again. I’m not afraid—“

“Livvy, ye canna—“

“Yes, I can. This is my home. You’re my home. We’re surrounded by thistles, strong walls.”

“It was so dangerous for ye tae—“

“It wasn’t, it went perfectly.” I grinned. “And I brought Charlie.”

Charlie moaned, “What the heck is going on? Everything is muffled, it’s so freaking dark, this is a nightmare.”

Nor said, “Master Charles, welcome tae the seventeenth century, the lands of the Duke of Awe.”

“Holy shit, I can’t believe you people do this time-jumping on purpose.”

Nor said, “Do we do it on purpose? Most of the time it has been without any other options—”

I said, “We definitely do it on purpose, m’lord. I landed in Florida on purpose, and I said to myself, ‘Why did I leave him?’ I turned around, bringing a crate of coffee, weapons, a nightlight, and a trailer to drag it all to your castle. I am here to stay. On purpose.”

Nor lifted my chin and looked in my eyes. “Truly?”

“Truly. I’m not frightened. I understand now, what’s at stake. What living here means and what leaving means. I will stay, we will make it work.”

Nor kissed me. “I am verra glad ye came home, Livvy, I hae been filled with regret since ye left. It made sense, but I couldna get comfortable with the idea that I had sent ye away.”

“I think my head was just messed up. I was confused, I couldn’t think straight—”

“Aye, I felt it as well.”

“This, what we’re dealing with, is big and unprecedented, and I don’t know if we’re supposed to think in terms of ‘Are we safe?’ or ‘Are we prepared?’ I love you and I don’t want to go away. So I’m back. We will have to use our confused minds to figure out a better plan.”

“Aye, I see that now. I daena ken what our way forward is, but aye, we will come tae an agreement on it. Ye went home and came back with more coffee?”

“Yeah, I brought a way to make it, enough coffee for a month, some other presents. I also brought Charlie. My brother Ryan was home on leave, he instructed Charlie on a security plan. We have even more weapons—”

I realized Nor’s concentration had drawn to his brothers talking to a stranger, and asked, “...what’s happening over there?”

Nor said, “That man arrived just before ye. He says he is here tae help.”

Charlie leaned up on one arm. “He brought a howitzer?”

“If ye mean the cannon there, then aye, he brought one.”

“Well, now the things I brought seem kinda lame in comparison, I didn’t even think about big artillery.”

I wondered, “How’s he going to move it in the seventeenth century? There aren’t any roads.”

Charlie scanned around, “He’s got wheels, horses, and... I see a place right through there...”

Across the way Aenghus lowered his sword, the stranger sat up, their conversation looked almost friendly.

I asked, “You need to go over there?”

Nor said, “Aye, are ye ready tae rise? I must check on them.”



When we approached, Nor said, “Aenghus, ye lowered yer weapon.”

“Aye, Yer Grace, I have been speakin’ with Artair. He seems tae want tae be a help tae us.”

Nor scowled as he made quick introductions, “Master Charlie, this is m’brother Malcolm, and m’youngest brother Aenghus, who has *not* followed my direct command.”

Aenghus said, “Good tae meet ye, Master Charlie.” Then to Nor he said, “Yer Grace, tis just that this man, Artair, seems tae be in earnest.”

“Nae, Brother, this man, Artair, is a scoundrel. Ye can see it in his weapons.”

Artair asked, “Which weapon?”

“The cannon.”

“Och ye canna blame me for bringing Howie. This was me being sensible, I *considered* bringin’ a tank for yer protection.” He tapped his temple. “But, I thought, a tank is big, heavy, and slow, it’s better for breaking down walls than protecting them. Of *course*, if we decide tae advance on Johnne I will go procure a tank. It might be necessary, never say never, but for now, after consideration, I decided a Howie was what the Duke of Awe needs tae defend his walls. Trust me, ye need the defenses.”

Malcolm said, “We already hae two good cannons on the walls of Kilchurn, our father placed them there himself—”

“Not this good, this is Howie. The best artillery ever built. We will rain destruction down on the approaching army. Ye need it, Nor, I brought it for ye. Ye will thank me when ye see it work.”

Nor said, “What do ye mean by ‘the approachin’ army’?”

“The army, led by Johnne, that has been amassin’ near Finlarig, and—”

Charlie said, “Whelp, Livvy, it looks like we got here in the nick of time.”

Nor exhaled. “Artair, how dost ye ken this?”

“I am from the future and I hae a vested interest in yer winnin’ this battle against Johnne. I come armed with foreknowledge and Howie — I told ye we were friends.” He smiled a broad smile.

Nor squinted his eyes. “So ye are farther along in history than Johnne?”

“Aye, I ken a great deal more.”

Nor said, “Why should I believe ye?”

He grinned, broadly again, “Ye ought tae allow me tae help ye, Nor, because I am all ye hae. Ye daena ken how tae work the Tempus Omegas, ye daena ken how tae protect yer wife, Olivia Larson, and ye canna figure out how tae accept a gift when he is standing right in front of ye.”

“Ye are my gift?”

“Aye, I am yer gift from the future, Prince Artair, time traveler from the royal line of the Campbells of Riaghalbane. Ye need me. He has ye overpowered and ye are under defended. I, on the other hand, am a warrior, and I never lose.”

Nor moaned.

Malcolm chuckled, “He sounds like ye do, Yer Grace.”

“I ken.”

Artair said, “In my case tis true.” Then he slapped his hand on Nor’s shoulder. “All boastin’ aside, Nor, allow me tae help. I promise twill be a good thing.”

“What dost ye want in return?”

“Nothing.”

“That canna be true.”

Artair put out his hands. “What do ye want me tae say, Nor? I am further along in time; if it helps ye, it helps me. I daena think ye want tae ken anything more about it.”

Nor huffed. “So ye think ye can help me win against Johnne?”

Artair said, “I ken I can help ye, along with Howie, m’trusty, verra long and big cannon, I hae never lost a fight. I will not rest until I hae led ye tae victory.”

Nor exhaled long, looking out over the woods. “Ye said he was amassin’ an army at Finlarig. Is he plannin’ an attack?”

How long do we hae?”

Artair looked up from under his brow. “What, pray tell, is the date?”

Nor said, “I am not sure, I...”

I said, “It’s October twenty-seventh, that’s the date I put in the portal.”

Artair rubbed his temples. “I am regrettin’ the hangover I hae. If *that* is the date, ye hae three days.”

Nor said, “Och nae.” He ran his hands through his hair, pushing it back from his face.

Artair said, “Aye, there is not a lot of time, which is funny as we are in control of time and *there* is just one issue, I need m’Tempus Omega. I hae an errand tae run.”

“What kind of an errand? Ye just a moment ago told me ye wouldna rest until ye helped me win m’battle against Johnne. Where are ye goin’?”

“I need tae go find someone. I believe she thinks I am lost.”

Nor watched him for a moment, then shook his head, incredulously, “I canna believe I am asking ye this, can I trust ye?”

Artair put his hand on Nor’s shoulder. Nor cut his eyes and looked stern.

Artair said, “I am a time traveler, Nor, I had a Tempus Omega in my possession, and I came here tae help ye, first. Ye can trust me, if I wanted tae cause ye harm I would hae.”

Nor exhaled, then opened his sporran, pulled out a portal, and checked the numbers on it. “This is yer date?”

Artair said, “Aye, and this is the location.”

Nor nodded. “We were learnin’ it. Do ye see, Livvy?”

“Yep, we did good.”

Nor placed the portal in Artair’s hand. “I welcome ye tae the fight, Artair, but there must be some rules. I am the Duke,

ye must call me ‘Yer Grace’. Ye are not above me, I am the last word in all decisions. Ye serve under me, and though I appreciate yer advisements and the gift of Howie, ye are—”

Artair interrupted, “I ken. I am a braggart and a pain in yer arse. I hear it all the time, but Yer Grace, please daena worry I will win ye over.”

“And if ye hae an errand tae go find some—”

“Gwynedd.”

Nor watched his face, then said, “Tae find Gwynedd, just...”

Artair said, “I will stay and join yer fight, we will win, then I will go tae Gwynedd, ye hae m’word.”

“Thank ye, Artair.” Nor looked down at his watch. “We ought tae get the loads hitched and head tae the—”

Artair said, “Can I see yer timepiece?”

Nor held out his arm.

“Och, that is verra fine, Yer Grace, my father has one much like it.” He bowed and backed away. “Excuse me, while I hitch up Howie.



Aenghus asked, “Do ye trust him?”

Nor watched Artair stride toward the Howie. “Not at all, but... I daena ken.”

Aenghus said, “I agree, I daena trust him, but I am glad he has joined yer fight—”

Malcolm said, “I am surprised ye allowed him tae join, I thought ye were goin’ tae draw Johnne away tae that oat field ye were carryin’ on about, I canna keep yer plans straight.”

Nor nodded. “Aye, Brother, I hae given up m’dreams of an oat field battle, instead I am going tae put Howie on the walls

tae protect Kilchurn. Then I am going tae fight Johnne and beat him.”

Malcolm smiled. “How could ye not, ye are the Duke and ye always win.”

“Aye.”

Chapter 57 - Livvy



We broke up into groups, Aenghus helped Artair, while Malcolm came with us to help Charlie. We hitched Dusty and Charlie's horse, Tucker, up to our trailer, piled with the gear we had brought.

Charlie joked, "I still can't believe I didn't think of bringing a howitzer — that's the coolest way to bring control to a situation."

Nor shook his head, looking across at Artair. "I think we might hae lost control of the situation."

I said, "Are you worried about him?"

Nor watched him, with his eyes narrowed. "He seems overly confident, a braggart, too insolent and cocky, and often those are the men who cause the most trouble, *but...*" He shook his head. "Not really, nae, Livvy, he seems familiar, as if I ken him already. He reminds me of someone."

Malcolm said, "He reminds me of grandfather, it's the way he holds his mouth."

Nor said, "Aye, that might be it."

I said, "Good, I'm glad you aren't worried about him, because he sounds like he wants to help and frankly we could use it."

"Aye, I hae enough tae worry about. It daena mean I trust him though, I am just nae worried on him."

Malcolm said, "Ye must be guarded."

“Aye.”

Charlie, finished hitching the horses, nuzzled against Dusty’s withers and said, “Boy, you’ve been here before, you have to show Tucker the way it works.”

Dusty whinnied, and Charlie said, “Good boy.”



We drew our horses and trailer up behind Artair’s, and then set off on the journey, walking alongside the horses as they pulled the loads.

I watched the wheels on the trailer carrying Howie as they splashed heavily in a ditch, and the horses strained with the effort of pulling them free. “I wonder, how will you get Howie up on the walls? It looks really heavy.”

Nor, Malcolm, Aenghus, Artair, and Charlie all said, “Pulleys,” at the same time.

I said, “Oh, makes sense.”

Charlie asked, “Artair, you brought ammo for Howie?”

Artair said, “I brought enough.”

Charlie rubbed his hands together, “Good. This will be fun.”

Artair said, “Aye, it ought tae be, Master Charlie, if we can figure out how tae fire it once we get it stationed.”

Nor groaned and stopped in his tracks.

Our train of horses and trailers all came to a stop.

Charlie said, “Artair, you don’t know how to fire the Howie?”

Nor shook his head, drew his sword, and aimed it at Artair.

Artair put up his hands.

Nor said, “Ye told me, not a moment ago, Artair, that ye had won battles with Howie — did he not say that?”

All of us agreed.

Aenghus said, “I heard it fair well.”

Nor continued, his sword steady and directed toward Artair’s face. “M’brother, Aenghus, heard it fair well. How many untruths hae ye spoken since ye arrived? What trouble are ye causing?”

Artair said, “I am sorry, Yer Grace, I only meant, I hae won all my battles, tis true, I hae, I am near undefeated—”

Nor waved his sword point close to Artair’s nose. “Ye told me ye were goin’ tae help me win with Howie.”

“I am! I just... I am a prince of Riaghalbane, I daena actually get tae fire Howie, the soldiers do that, tis not somethin’ I hae had the pleasure of doin’ yet. *Yet*. This is all a misunderstanding.”

Charlie said, “I have a working knowledge of firing Howie, I can figure it out.”

Nor said, “See, Artair, I find ye arna necessary. I could dispatch ye, here, and be the owner of the biggest, longest cannon in Alba, without concern about ye at all. ”

Artair, staring down the point of Nor’s blade said, “I ken ye could, Yer Grace, but... tis not verra friendly tae raise yer sword. I hae been here for an hour and already I hae seen the point of it against my head more than once.”

“Ye came with promises and lies, askin’ me tae trust—”

“I ken things, Nor, well past the usefulness of Howie—”

“Name one thing.”

“I ken that Johnne fought a final battle for Riaghalbane in the year 2166.”

Nor asked, “Where?”

“Near Stirling, the exact date is October 14. The reason I hold it in my memory is that I ken ye were there. Normond Campbell is listed in the historical record of the battle, though he is not mentioned in the days before or just after.”

Aenghus said, “Normond Campbell is a common name, I suspect.”

Nor shook his head as he lowered his sword and put it back in its sheath. “Nae, twas I, I was there with Johnne.” He asked, “Could we return tae that field, and beat him there, before he becomes a king?”

Artair said, “That is what I am sayin’, Yer Grace, let’s use time travel tae beat him *before* he becomes a king.”

“Aye, good.”

I hadn’t actually breathed during the whole exchange, I let out a long low breath. *Phew*. We set out toward the castle again.

Charlie asked, “So how did you get Howie, a big artillery gun, that you don’t know how to use?”

“I stole it from m’father, he has plenty of them. He winna miss it. We hae been at war for a verra long time.”

Nor quietly asked, “Ye winnin’ this verra long war, Prince Artair?”

“Nae, Yer Grace.”

Nor grunted.

Artair continued, “But we *will*. And once we beat Johnne Cambell, m’father will forgive me for takin’ Howie. I just canna go home until we do.”

Nor said, “Yer father is the king, in what year? What year are ye from? I canna square yer manner with yer age, ye seem tae be from the past and the future.”

“Because I am the Prince of a royal lineage of time-travelers, but sadly, my father has been deposed... I left the year 2221, but I was raised in the castle of Laird Torphichen, hae ye heard of him?”

“Aye, the Fifth Baron Torphichen.”

“I lived with the First.”

I asked, “Why were ye raised in the past?”

“Because the bairns of time travelers must be hidden in the past, or tis unlikely they will reach adulthood.”

I gulped, holding Nor’s hand.

Artair saw my look and said, “Tis the tradeoff of the power.”

Nor said, “And ye hae foreknowledge of the comin’ battle — ye say we hae three days? We need tae get Howie upon the walls first thing, nae time tae idle.”

“Aye, first thing, Howie will make yer castle more secure, yer clan safe, but—“

Nor said, “I am thinkin’ we ought tae bring the war tae him.”

Artair rubbed his hands together as we strode. “Och aye, I like the way ye think, Yer Grace, I agree.”



Charlie was looking around all over the place as we reached the causeway to Kilchurn. “We’re going there? To that castle? What the hell, this is wild!”

I said, “Imagine doing it, like I did, without knowing I had time traveled. I thought I had gone crazy.”

Our train moved up the causeway and the people bowed as Nor and I went by. Guardsmen met us to walk alongside, helping to guide the loads. A crowd gathered, gawking at Howie, leaning over the parapet to watch our slow progress, pressing around us as we wheeled slowly past the high walls. Howie was truly an impressive sight as it was pulled through the gate.

We made it to the courtyard, where Claray yelled, “Livvy!” She ran toward me and threw her arms around me. “I was so worried on ye, ye dinna come tae dinner last night and ye were up afore dawn today, Yer Grace, I was so worried!”

Then she added, “Who is this?”

“Lady Claray, this is my brother, Charlie, Charlie Larson.”

She put out a hand.

He shook her fingers awkwardly.

She giggled.

I noted that I needed to explain all the ways he was supposed to use titles and greetings in this world.

He went back to the howitzer. The men had dragged the trailer to the wall nearest the pulley system.

Claray whispered, “He is verra handsome, Livvy. Ye said he inna married?”

“No, no he’s not.”

I glanced at Nor.

His eyes widened as we watched Claray’s eyes settle on Charlie, a blush to her cheeks.

Nor joked in a whisper, “Och nae, we will hae tae watch m’sister carefully as well as Artair and Charlie. Is there anyone here I daena hae tae watch over carefully?”

“Me? Especially now that I’m all brave and ready to handle myself...”

Nor grinned, “Actually I would like tae handle ye, myself. The men will be at raisin’ the cannon tae the wall. Malcolm and Aenghus can watch over the work. Would ye like tae go up tae our room?”

“Definitely. But can we...? It’s the middle of the day.”

“Ye forget, Yer Grace, I can do anythin’ I want tae do.”

“Then let’s, but bring that box. Wait...”

I strode over to Charlie, he was watching the activity amused.

I asked, “Whatcha doing?”

He said, “Watching a bunch of medieval dudes set about lifting this cannon up to the walls. They’re all yelling at each other, I barely understand it, but already know: that guy’s the know-it-all, and he’s the lazy one.” He pointed. “That’s the guy no one likes, this dude farts, that dude’s drunk. All the regulars at the party, just like Florida.”

I said, “I’m going to go to my rooms with the Duke, you cool?”

“Ah, and you’re the Florida chick that disappears into the back rooms with the guy who owns the house.”

“Yes, that would be me, I am Her Grace, I get to go to the back rooms. You’re cool?”

“Sure, what could go wrong? We’re going to get this Howie up on the wall without a hardhat in sight.”

“Just be careful of the men, you know, they’re pretty...”

“They ain’t pretty and they’re medieval, Livvy, I got this.”

“Because Nor got his ass kicked pretty good, just because of something I said.”

Charlie said, “Nor is pretty, of *course* they’re going to want to beat him if they can. Me, I’m just a good ol’ boy from Florida. No one’s gonna mess with me, I’m the messer.”

I rolled my eyes and looked up at the pulley rig. “So what do you think, is it going to work?”

“That? The ancient pulleys and the handmade rope? Nah, no way, I don’t believe it, but then again, look around, they built these walls, there are already cannons up there. These dudes know how to move a heavy load. Damn, it’s going to be exciting to watch.”

I glanced over at Claray, standing to the side of the courtyard watching us. She waved.

Charlie waved back.

I said, “Another warning, Claray is *Lady* Claray, and I know she is pretty—”

“She is very pretty.”

“But she really *really* wants to get married. I don’t one hundred percent understand the rules, but that wave you just gave her, that might mean you’re engaged.”

He laughed. “You’re kidding. Right? You’re kidding... right, Livvy?”

I shrugged. “Be careful, if you behave inappropriately in any way, you will be married to her in no time.”

Charlie said, “Man, I can’t imagine how pissed Nor would be.”

“Exactly, so yeah.”

“You done lecturing me? I get it, don’t fight the dudes, don’t sleep with the Duke’s sister. I can do this.”



I looked over at Nor. He was holding my box and gestured with his head, sweetly toward the stairwell.

Chapter 58 - Livvy



N or led me up the stairs, along the hall and to our room. He said tae the guardsmen. “Ye might hae heard there is a new cannon being lifted tae the walls, ye can go see tae it.”

They left and he let us intae the room and placed the box in front of our hearth.

I pulled it open and while he built the fire, I showed him the cast iron pot, and the bottle for water, explaining, “If we remember to fill this bottle and bring it up at night, we can boil water in the hearth in the morning, then pour it into this French press when we get up.” I spread it out on the table. “Everyone will line up at our chambers every morning for breakfast.”

He smiled as he picked me up. “Perfect, but perhaps not every morn.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and he carried me through to the door to our bedchamber, placing me down on our bed. He sat down on the edge and kicked off his boots. I leaned back and put my legs across his knees so he could pull off my boots. I said, “Were you lonely here last night without me?”

“I dinna sleep in the room, I couldna. I slept on the walls,”

I frowned, “I am so sorry, it breaks my heart to think you were alone for so long.”

“Twas *hours*, Livvy, I almost couldna bear it.” He wrapped his arms around me and buried his face against the bodice of

my chest and kissed the top of my breast. He buried his nose in my cleavage. “Ye smell like the New World.”

“You, m’lord, smell like the past.”

“Tis offensive tae ye?”

“Nae.”

He raised his head, to look in my eyes. “Say it again with the Scottish brogue.”

“Nae, m’lord, tis nae offensive.”

He placed his hand on his heart. “Och, ye are m’love.”

Then he trailed his fingers across my chest to my shoulders. “How long were ye gone?”

“It took me almost a week to collect what I wanted to bring, long nights without you, I am desperate.”

His fingers trailed down my bodice as he spoke. “Ye ken my heart ached. I was lonely, and I dinna get all the good food ye ate, and I haena had a chance tae dally in yer gardens in a verra long time.” He drew my skirts up my legs and bunched them around my waist. I brought my thigh up to his waist.

“My gardens?”

“Aye,” his voice rumbled against my chest, “aye, my Livvy, yer gardens. I am wantin’ tae wander within...” His hand traveled between my legs and played there, as his mouth pressed against my neck, sucking and nibbling along my skin to my mouth where we kissed deeply, pushing clothes aside, pulling fabric up, clutching each other, breathlessly, driving me wild, with his hands and his tongue, I gasped, and his voice, “Ye like that, my Livvy?”

“I do, I like it when you wander within...” He climbed on me and entered me, with a rush, his deep rumbling breath against the skin of my throat. His hips rocking and pushing against me. His lips, wet and steamy, pressed against my temple. I pressed my lips to the side of his neck, feeling that place with the thrum of his heart, his rhythm quickening, his pulse and excitement growing. I moaned with pleasure as he brought me to climax, and then we held on as he joined me,

finishing with a rush, then holding on, as we calmed and he grew heavy... my legs wrapped around his back, one hand on my ass, his other fingers entwined in my hair, holding my face pressed to his, we held on.

And we kept holding on.

Finally he said, "I let ye go, I feel ashamed, I canna believe I let ye go."

I said, in his ear, "I can't believe I left, but this is what truly happened, Nor — I needed to start over. Sometimes that happens. We are lucky we have a time travel portal so we can. I needed to come back better prepared. I am better prepared, I promise. Doesn't mean I will never be scared, but I think I needed to know that I could leave and come back. I can, if I need to, that helps immensely. I found my strength."

"Good, because it sounds as if ye will need it, something big is coming our way."

I looked up in his eyes and ran my fingers down his face.

"I love you, m'lord."

"I love ye, my Livvy."

And he rolled off me, and lay beside me, my thigh hitched to his waist, his lips pressed to my forehead. I whispered, "I forgot something, hold on, don't move one muscle."

I went into the other room and dragged my bag into our bedchamber, while he pretended to snore.

I teased, "You are not sleeping, it's mid day!"

"I can do anything I want. I haena slept for days, Livvy, and ye hae allowed me tae wander, and now I am spent and needin' tae..." He jokingly snored loudly.

I laughed and pulled the stone orb from my bag and lay it on the bedside table. "It connects us, like the moon, watching over us. Wherever we are, in any time, the moon is there." I climbed back in bed and nuzzled into the same position.

We lay there for a long time, as Nor slowly fell asleep.

And I trailed my fingers down his cheek and watched his face, strong and yet vulnerable, napping beside me. I thought about how I had moved to the past to be with him and yet, he was my future, here in this ancient castle where we were going to build a life.

I shut my eyes and pressed my forehead to his cheek and saw him, in my mind's eye, running through the hills.

I took a deep breath, realizing it wasn't a vision of Nor, it was our son, and he was yelling, *Le misneach! Cruachan!* As the wind flowed through his hair, his wee legs carrying him through the heather of his father's moor. I hadn't met him yet, but loved him already.

He was the thread, our future to our past, and I couldn't wait to meet him.

I whispered against Nor's skin, *I love you, m'lord. This is going to be good.*



A bit later, there was a knock on the outer room door. Nor startled awake. Then Claray's voice called in, "Livvy? Livvy are ye here?"

I said, "Claray, I'm in my room, don't come in. I'm a..." I pushed my skirts down.

Claray called in, "I was wonderin' if ye needed company, because Nor might want tae go see tae the men. They hae the cannon swinging on the ropes and Mam told me I canna be in the courtyard watchin' if I daena hae an escort. I asked her if Nor is in the courtyard and if Livvy is there tae look after me, might I go back, and she relented, so I am here askin' ye."

I giggled, but bit my lip.

Then it was Lady Gail's voice from the other room. "Och Claray, this is where I find ye, are ye bothering yer brother?"

"Nae Mam."

Lady Gail called in, “Your Grace, are ye ill?”

“Nae Mam, just...”

“I wanted tae ask if ye wanted a full formal dinner, since our guests, *Prince* Artair of the Campbells of Riaghalbane, wherever that is, and Master Charles Larson, will be joinin’ us? Or perhaps we ought tae feed everyone more informally — the men are raising the cannon up the walls. Tis menial work, and their odor is brutish. I daena think they will be fit for the Great Hall with our fine linen. We might need tae serve in the courtyard or their stench will overtake the castle.”

Nor called out, “The second option, Mam. Nae linen, we will hae a large meal on the morrow.”

She said, “Good, good, I will let Auld Aymer ken.”

Then Charlie’s voice, “Livvy? Cool house. You got the Duke with you?”

“Yes.”

Nor called to the other room, “What do ye need, Master Charlie?”

“Howie is being raised and no one will listen to me about where to place it. Aenghus agrees with me, but he thought you might want to come see.”

Artair’s voice came next, “Malcolm and I disagree with Master Charlie, Yer Grace. The Howie is almost up, and we need ye tae come decide on its placement. Also, when do we eat?”

Nor tucked his face against my neck and kissed there.

I chuckled and whispered, “You have a lot of duties for someone who can do anything he wants.”

“Aye.” His voice rumbled near my heart.

I looked into Nor’s eyes. “Are we ready for what comes?”

He kissed my breast and climbed from the bed. “Aye, we are ready.”

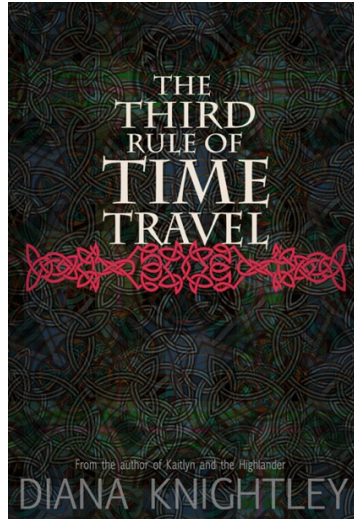


The end.

Thank you

There will be more chapters in Nor and Livvy's story.

To read The Third Rule:



[The Scottish Duke and the Rules of Time Travel Series](#)

If you need help getting through the pauses before the next books, there is a Facebook group here: [Kaitlyn and the Highlander](#) for this whole world of Scottish time travel.



Thank you for taking the time to read this book. The world is full of entertainment and I appreciate that you chose to spend some time with Nor and Livvy. I fell in love with the Duke when I was writing his story, and I hope you fell in love a little bit, too.



And now for a wee bit about me...

I write about heroes and tragedies and magical whisperings and always forever happily ever afters.

I love that scene where the two are desperate to be together but can't be because of war or apocalyptic-stuff or (scientifically sound!) time-jumping and he is begging the universe with a plead in his heart and she is distraught (yet still strong)

and somehow — through kisses and steam and hope and heaps and piles of true love, they manage to come out on the other side.

My couples so far include Beckett and Luna, who battle their fear to search for each other during an apocalypse of rising waters.

Liam and Blakely, who find each other at the edge of a trail leading to big life changes.

Karrie and Finch Mac, who find forgiveness and a second chance at true love.

Hayley and Fraoch, Quentin and Beaty, Zach and Emma, and James and Sophie who have all taken their relationships from side story in Kaitlyn and the Highlander to love story in their own rights.

Magnus and Kaitlyn, who find themselves traveling through time to build a marriage and a family together.

And now Nor and Livvy, who found each other by accident, but love happened and they brought together two big families.

I write under two pen names, this one here, Diana Knightley, and another one, H. D. Knightley, where I write books for Young Adults. (They are still romantic and fun and sometimes steamy though because love is grand at any age.)

DianaKnightley.com

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[Substack: Diana Knightley's Stories](#)



Some thoughts and research...

Characters:

Nor Campbell, the Duke of Awe. Born in 1645. Lives at Kilchurn castle.

Olivia Larson, Born in 1988. Grew up on Lou-Moo Ranch.

They got married on Sunday, May 13, 2012

Malcolm, Nor's brother

Aenghus, Nor's youngest brother

Claray, Nor's little sister

Ailsa, Aenghus's wife

Ian, Aenghus's son

Shona, Malcolm's wife

Malcolm and Shona have three kids, including *Addie*

Nor's first wife, *Mary*, and son, *Eaun*, deceased.

Lady Gail. Called Mam. Nor's mother

Lou Muller, Livvy's maternal grandfather

Birdie, Livvy's maternal grandmother

Joni, Livvy's mom

Dave Larson, Livvy's dad

Dylan and *Ryan*, Livvy's older brothers

Charlie, Livvy's younger brother

Livvy's uncles on her mother's side: *Junior, Tim, Dan*.

Johnne Cambell. Sigh, not this dude again. The Original Gangster, finder of the portals.

(Lady Mairead from the other series is not a fan of this guy.)

And introducing, *Niall* and *Una*, and their son, *Artair*



The Kings of Riaghalbane:

Johnne - ??

Normond I - 2167

Maximillian - 2196

Niall - 2221

Artair - 2249

Birk - 2276

Graeme - 2306

Donnan I - 2331

Donnan II - 2356

Magnus I - 2382

(Because of Time Travel dates and names are subject to change...)



The hurluberlu in all its glory...



Marie Maschi by Jacob Ferdinand Viet



Ideas for Livvy's dress:







Ideas for Nor's clothes:





Some **Scottish and Gaelic words** that appear within the book series:

dinna ken - didn't know

tae - to

winna - won't or will not

daena - don't

tis - it is or there is. This is most often a contraction 'tis, but it looked messy and hard to read on the page so I removed the apostrophe. For Magnus it's not a contraction, it's a word.

och nae - Oh no.

ken, kent, kens - know, knew, knows

Coisich! - command to walk

Le misneach! Cruachan! - Nor's battle cry. It means *With Courage!* and the name of the mountain that rises above the Campbell lands.

Ben - mountain

Burn - stream

Alba - Scotland

Balach Mòr - Big Boy



Locations:

Fernandina Beach on Amelia Island, Florida, present day

Lou-Moo Ranch. Near Live Oak, Florida

Kilchurn Castle - Nor's home on a rocky peninsula at the northeastern end of Loch Awe

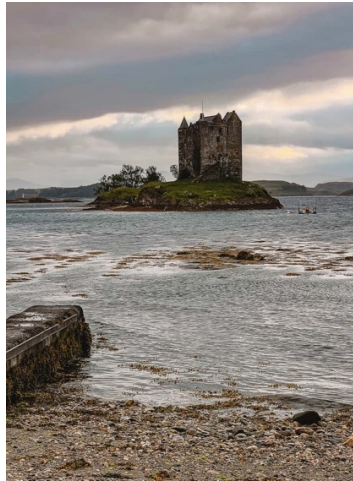
Finlarig Castle stands on a mound on a peninsula at the western head of Loch Tay

Killin village is just south of Finlarig castle

Portnacroish village is home to The Old Inn, where Nor and Livvy took lodging in 1607 (I'm not certain The Old Inn is that old, but it's very old, so...)



Castle **Stalker**



True things that happened:

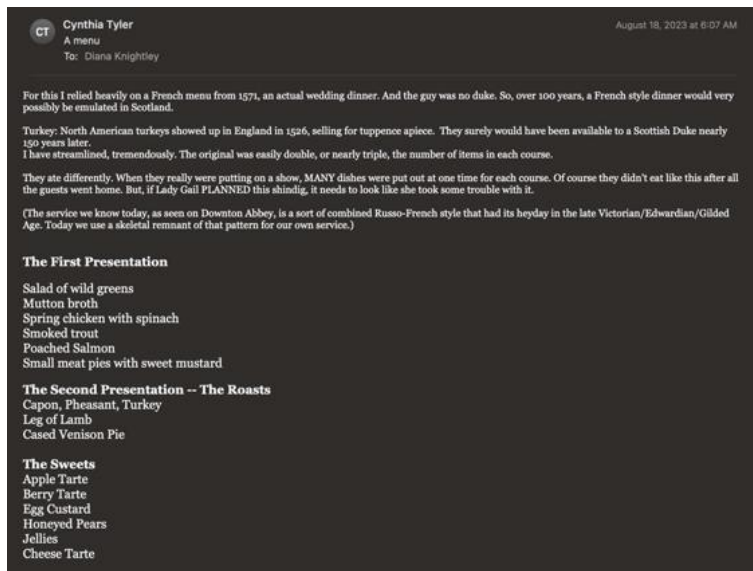
Castle Stalker was won by Campbells in a wager:

In 1544 Donald nan Ord raised the Stewarts of Appin and killed nine Campbells in revenge. He died in 1607.

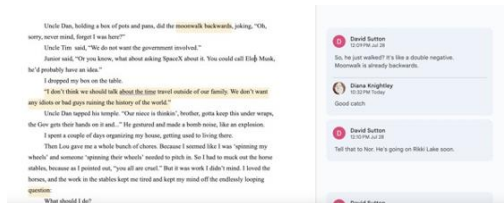
In around 1620 the castle passed into the hands of the Campbells of Airds as a result of a drunken wager by the 7th Stewart Chief, Duncan, in exchange for an eight-oared wherry.

Acknowledgments

Thank you so much Cynthia Tyler, for your bountiful notes, for reading through twice, and helping me get all those nitty-gritty details right. Your additions to the wedding announcement feast's menu were perfect, and the discussion about pulleys and ropes helped me get the last scene more realistic. And thank you for looking into the history of rope beds, dresses, thatched roofs, and sandwiches. It's always fun to see your research.



Thank you so much David Sutton for your abundant notes and helping me wrangle this story. This time was difficult because you started *long* before much of the story was set, you were lamenting Livvy's whiny moments that were removed later, so that no one will ever believe how much terrible slop you had to read — but me, I know. Thank you for helping get it right. He's a funny exchange:



Thank you to Kristen Schoenmann De Haan for your early notes, you had to read such a rough version, it was heroic. I love your note at the end:

Ps I seriously adore Charlie

Me too, thank you thank you thank you!



Thank you to Jessica Fox for your abundant notes. You have a way of finding things that none of us thought about, like:

“When Livvy returns back to Florida I appreciate her hangry tantrum but don’t buy for one second that her family would tell her to go shower without a snack to tide her over. While she was ranting I was all ‘give the poor girl a Snickers!’ That would ruin the later conversation about missing sweets but at least give her an orange, a banana, some nuts. A handful of something to ingest before her shower. It borders on torture to make her way that long.”

Birdie thrust a pimento cheese sandwich in her hand during the hugs. Thank you for taking your time to read for me after all these years.



And thank you to Jackie and Angelique for being admins of the big and growing Kaitlyn and the Highlander FB group. 8K+ members! Your energy and positivity and humor and spirit, your calm demeanor when we need it, all the things you do and say and bring to the conversation fill me with gratitude.

You've blown me away with so many things. So many awesome things. Your enthusiasm is freaking amazing.

And for helping with notes, research, thoughts, being my sounding board. And for beta-reading, thank you.



Which brings me to a huge thank you to every single member of the FB group, [Kaitlyn and the Highlander](#). If I could thank you individually I would, I do try. Thank you for every day, in every way, sharing your thoughts, joys, and loves with me. It's so amazing, thank you. You inspire me to try harder.



And for going beyond the ordinary and posting, commenting, contributing, and adding to discussions, thank you to:

Anna Fay, Dawn Underferth, Debra Bolton, Debra Walter, Nadeen Lough, Lori Balise, Tina Rox, Christine Todd Champeaux, Cheryl Rushing, Carol Stevens Owen, Bev Burns, Dianna Schmidt, Susan Sparks Klinec, Tonja Degroff, Jessica Blasek, Stacey Eddings, Melissa Kay, Lindsey Molloy, Ginger Duke, Mitzy Roberts, Irene Walker, Marisa Mitchell, Donna Jo Brown, Sue Norris-Lemmer, Sharon Crowder, Sonia Nuñez Estenoz, Barbara Baker, Crislee Anderson Moreno, Jan Werner, Maria Sammartino Woltmann, Laura Hardy, Eileen Kiehn- Dole, Karin Coll, Cynthia Tyler, Bianca Duarte, Kelley Fouraker McCade, Kalyne Connell, Kerry Mcgillivray, Lisa Whitmer, Janice Hall Lewis, Jo Clair, Michelle Ann Moricca,

JD Figueroa Diaz, Maria Sidoli, Joyce Tudor, Reney Lorditch, Dianne Snell-mustert, Michelle Lyons, Lillian Llewellyn, Tara Smith, Jennifer DeWitt, Vicky Fraser, Kelli Hawkins Dart, Jenny Thomas, Christine Natale, Ashley Justice, Linda Rose Lynch, Liz MacGregor, Harley Moore, Margot Schellhas, Julia Burch, April Bochantin, Wanda Jo Burroughs-Taylor, Enza Ciaccia, Julie Dath, Alana K Mahler, Brenda Ann, Carol Wossidlo Leslie, Joleen Ramirez, Kathleen Fullerton, Jeanne Graziano Hasal, Marie Smith, Joann Splonskowski, Sherri Hartis Hudson, Jackie Briggs, Deborah Carleton, Debbie Rouse, Diane McGroarty McGowan, Shari Burns Howe, Shannon McNamara Sellstrom, David Sutton, Amy Moore, Retha Russell Martin, Michelle Lynn Cochran, Debbie Hawkins Gammon, Nancy Sweyer, Susan Hetrick, Susan O'Neill Mottin, Sheila Wilkie, Thunda Quinn, Lisa Dupuis Barton, Denise Clements, Nancy Hensley- Decker, Helen Ramsey, Donna Lawson, Alysa Isenhower Hill, and Kim Glenn.



When I am writing and I get to a spot that needs research, I go to Facebook, ask, and my loyal readers step up to help. You come up with so many new and clever ideas... I am forever ever ever grateful.

The first was:

I need a man. He is a hero, or will be. Let's call him a Major Character we haven't met yet. He needs a good first name (Probably Scottish, but let's open it up to other names if need be, his parents are time travelers after all)

There were some great answers, and I tested them out, but ultimately decided on Artair.

Thank you, all 50+ of you who suggested names.

And I asked:

Charlie makes a short visit to a convenience store in 1985. He buys a few things to take home saying, imagine what they'll be worth someday!

What will he buy?

I had a long list of things, but learned during edits that he probably didn't have the right cash, so he put it all back and so instead we are left with a bottle of New Coke. Thank you for the idea:

Rebecca Cable

"New Coke" ..launched 1985 to try and win back market share from Pepsi. They changed the recipe!!!..

Sherrie Simpson Clark

*New Coke (epic fail) came out in 1985

Toni Plonowski

New Coke???

And thank you for helping me decide what Charlie is going back for:

JD Figueroa Diaz

Original Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles comic book.

Harley Moore

...or Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles action figures in box and good condition worth \$300 ish now.

If a certain Scottish Duke and a young woman named Livvy were to go to his lands, what gifts from 2012 would they take with them?

There were so many great answers, but ultimately Nor and Livvy went too quickly for a proper shopping trip, so instead, thank you to all who commented for inspiring some of those gifts:

Alana K Mahler, Angelique Mahfood, April Bochantin, April Paytas Graham, Becky Montie Preston, Bev Burns, Bonnie Elaine Gray, Carol Stevens Owen, Carol Wossidlo Leslie, Carolann Hunt, Christine Ann, Christine Todd Champeaux, Colette Dullighan, Cynthia Tyler, Denise Carpentier Sillon, Harley Moore, Holly Bowlby, Jackie Malecki, Jennifer Prince Reed, Julie Lynch-Allen, Kate

Geisler, Katherine Hegvold, Kathy DeGarimore Morrison, Kelley Fouraker McCade, Leah Krakowski, Lori Balise, Lyn Dallman, Maureen Woeller, Melissa Coyle Dorawa, Miranda Kratzer, Nadeen Lough, Pam Copeland, Retha Russell Martin, Sharon Holcomb Dalton, Stacey Eddings, Sylvia Guasch, Tara Luffy Moore, Tonja Townsend Owens, and Vera Bradley

And I asked,

Quick research question so I don't disrupt my writing session:

What season, month, date is it in Nor's year, 1670 in Kilchurn?

Thank you Angelique Mahfood, Christine Todd Champeaux, Kathleen Fullerton, Kathy Hansel, and Marie Smith for helping me remember.



And to everyone who helped me decide on Nor's boots, thank you.

This is what I chose for Nor:



And for Livvy:



And for Aenghus:



Thank you to *Kevin Dowdee* for being there for me in the real world as I submerge into this world to write these stories of Magnus and Kaitlyn. I appreciate you so much.

Thank you to my kids, *Ean*, *Gwynnie*, *Fiona*, and *Isobel*, for listening to me go on and on about these characters, advising me whenever you can, and accepting them as real parts of our lives. I love you.

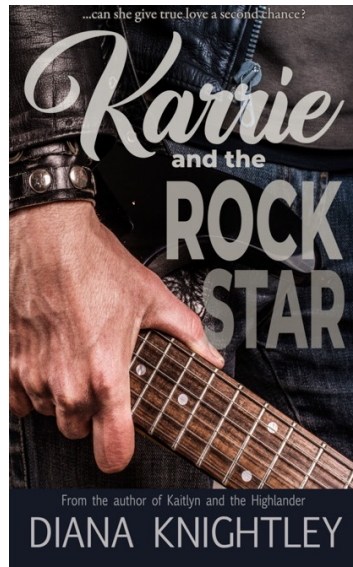
The Kaitlyn and the Highlander series



- [Kaitlyn and the Highlander \(Book 1\)](#),
[Time and Space Between Us \(Book 2\)](#)
[Warrior of My Own \(Book 3\)](#),
[Begin Where We Are \(Book 4\)](#),
[Entangled with You \(Book 5\)](#),
[Magnus and a Love Beyond Words \(Book 6\)](#),
[Under the Same Sky \(Book 7\)](#),
[Nothing But Dust \(Book 8\)](#),
[Again My Love \(Book 9\)](#),
[Our Shared Horizon \(Book 10\)](#),
[Son and Throne \(Book 11\)](#),
[The Wellspring \(Book 12\)](#),
[Lady Mairead \(Book 13\)](#),
[The Guardian \(Book 14\)](#).

Magnus the First (Book 15),
Only a Breath Away (Book 16),
Promises to Keep (Book 17),
Time is a Wheel (Book 18).

*Books in the Campbell Sons
series...*



Why would I, a successful woman, bring a date to a funeral like a psychopath?

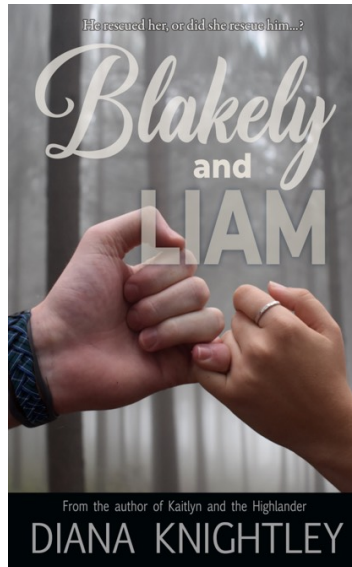
Because Finch Mac, the deliciously hot, Scottish, bearded, tattooed, incredibly famous rock star, who was once the love of my life... will be there.

And it's to signal — that I have totally moved on.

But... at some point in the last six years I went from righteous fury to... something that might involve second chances and happy endings.

Because while Finch Mac is dealing with his son, a world tour, and a custody battle, I've been learning about forgiveness and the kind of love that rises above the past.





We were so lost until we found each other.

I left my husband because he's a great big cheater, but decided to go *alone* on our big, long hike in the-middle-of-nowhere anyway. Destroyed. Wrecked. I wandered into a pub and found... Liam Campbell, hot, Scottish, a former-rugby star, now turned owner of a small-town pub and hotel.

And he found me.



My dear old dad left me this failing pub, this run down motel and now m'days are spent worrying on money and how tae no'die of boredom in this wee town.

And then Blakely walked intae the pub, needing help.

The moment I lay eyes on her I knew she would be the love of m'life.

And that's where our story begins...