

THE
THIRD
RULE OF
TIME
TRAVEL



NEVER
LOOP

From the author of *Kaitlyn and the Highlander*

DIANA KNIGHTLEY

*The Third Rule of Time
Travel*

NEVER LOOP

THE SCOTTISH DUKE AND THE RULES OF
TIME TRAVEL

DIANA KNIGHTLEY

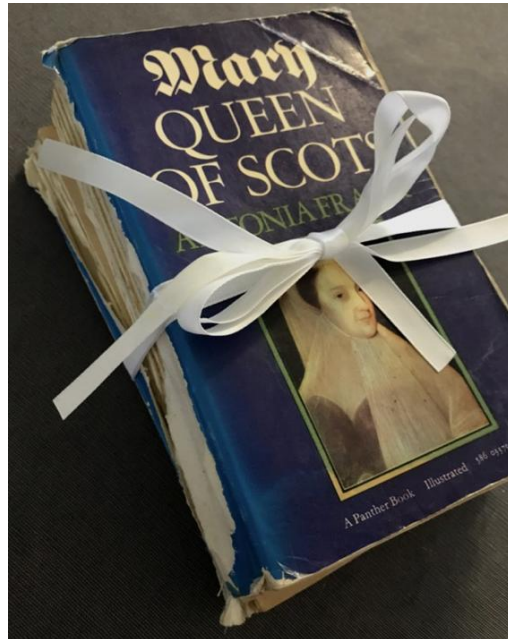
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For my mom, for giving me the book about Mary Queen of Scots for my journey, I miss you every day. Wish you could have read my stories...



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Prologue



We are about to embark on the story of Nor and Livvy, the Duke and Duchess of Awe, while they are preparing for Johnne Cambell's attack on Kilchurn castle in the year 1670...

But first!

Artair, the crown prince of Riaghalbane, has come from the future, bringing a howitzer, to help Nor protect the castle walls in his war against Johnne.

Like most time traveling kings, Artair has been raised in the past for his protection. He lived in the 16th century for many long years...

It was there that he met, Gwynedd.

This begins their story.

Chapter 1 - Artair



The day was brutally cold, it had been rainin' with a wind blowing. We thought the cruel wind would push away the rain, but the sky was thick with all the bad weather it could muster. I pulled m'fur around m'shoulders, and switched hands on the reins. Even with leather gloves, m'hands were goin' numb. I placed the freezing hand in the warm spot under m'arm for the heat.

The six of us had been riding for hours, across a terrain with little visibility. We held our horses to a steady pace, keepin' our eyes on the tail in front of us, holdin' a strong line as we traversed the landscape. We had gone out tae negotiate with Laird Colin Campbell for the return of leases and then north intae the highlands for money owed tae the laird who had sent us in his stead.

We were headed north and would be travelin' for long weeks.

We had sheltered at Stirling when the weather had turned dreich, having just begun the journey, and regrettin' not leavin' earlier. The days grew long as we waited for the storms tae clear. We argued amongst ourselves that winter was upon us, that we would hae no respite — there was nae sign of the dire weather relenting, and because I had grown bored with our stay at Stirling, I argued that we ought tae head out anyway — we were expected and I dinna want tae look weak.

Jamie, the Laird Torphichen's nephew, said, "I am almost willing tae say Aye, Artair, if it means I winna hae tae listen tae yer grumbling anymore."

I huffed, "I am irritated that Auld Graybeard Colin wouldna meet us in Stirling."

Jamie scoffed. "For our ease? Why would Auld Graybeard want tae make anything easy upon us?"

I grumbled. "I daena ken. He might think of bein' reasonable."

Jamie waved a hand. "Och nae, he is auld, he daena hae tae think on anyone."

I nodded. "But perhaps if we start early we will make up some time. The storm will end, we can make it tae the next—"

Rabbie laughed. "Tis because the maiden Alli thinks ye are marriageable, inna it, Artair? Ye are trying tae escape."

I scowled and joked, "Aye, she has wiles, she is entrappin' me." I continued, "But instead of goin' all the way tae Balloch, a couple of days trip, we could break it up, stop overnight, it winna matter if we are impeded by poor weather if we are warm in an inn."

Rabbie said, "I agree with Artair, ride tae an inn, as I am certain outside in this blisterin' wind I winna hae tae listen tae his grumbling."

Jamie looked around at the five of us men, then he said, "Fine, we will leave first thing..."

...and here we were ridin' through a large unrelenting storm.

Och, how I regretted setting out as we rode through the desolate cold. I was irritated with m'self for havin' argued, the day was not fit for men — our pace was so slow we were barely making progress...

I switched m'hands once more, placin' the other under my arm, pressing it tae warm within my fur wrap, covered by the wool cloak that was barely keepin' me dry.

Jamie slowed his horse and stopped in the path under a wide shelterin' tree. He shook his cloaked head and wiped rain from his eyes. He pulled the cloak further forward tae shield his face. "M'gloves stopped warmin' hours ago, if we had waited until the weather changed, we would be there a'ready."

I scowled. "I ken tis long and slow, but we daena ken when the weather will change, we might hae been stuck there for days, at least now we are makin' up the distance."

Rabbie grunted, "Barely."

Sam said, "I am with Artair, the storms were settled in, we might hae had tae stay a month before it cleared. At least now we are almost there, and we'll be warm and dry soon enough."

Jamie said, "Another three days at this pace. Once again Sam daena ken where he is, the village is hours yet."

Rabbie said, "I am fallin' asleep — we could turn back, Stirling was warm." He pulled a bottle from his pocket, uncorked it, and swigged.

It made me thirsty for m'own, so I fumbled it from m'pocket, difficult with stiff cold fingers. I peeled a glove off m'hand, uncorked the bottle, and swigged some warmin' whisky. I put the bottle back in my pocket, blew on my cold fingers, and pulled the glove back on.

Jamie said, "I daena want tae turn back — we need a place tae stay for the night. We could head tae Castle Gloom — the Campbells will take us in since we were meetin' their cousin."

Rabbie scowled, "Nae, I daena want tae approach the treacherous Campbells in the dark of night."

Jamie glanced at me.

I shifted in my saddle. I was a Campbell, they all knew it but dinna hold it against me as we had grown up together in the Laird Torphichen's household.

What they dinna ken was that my father was of a royal line of kings and had left me in Torphichen's care in exchange for money, land, and protection.

The men had no idea I was a powerful son. They believed I was one of them, an unimportant distant cousin, a ward protecting our laird's lands because he had nae sons. We protected him and ran his errands through the bitter cold in exchange for room and board.

I said, "We could head east from here, ask for shelter with Laird Kincardine. Twill be better than a night in a cold cramped croft."

Rabbie said, "I asked for shelter at a croft last month, and I was made tae sleep in the stables." He scowled.

Sam said, "Ye above the stables now Rabbie? Now ye hae a taste of Stirling ye too good for the stable floor?"

"Aye, I am, if I hae tae be out in the cold I want a warm bed."

Jamie said, "Och aye, I agree with Rabbie, a stable sounds bleak, but Kincardine castle is a bit farther on tae the east."

I said, "If we take the path along the ravine, we will be there by nightfall. And we ken Laird Kincardine, he is beholden tae the Torphichen, he will feed and quarter us as long as we need."

Rabbie said, "I agree, tis farther, but there is bound tae be a warm meal when we arrive."

Jamie said, "A warm meal and a bed by nightfall, sounds what we need, all who agree, say Aye."

Everyone muttered and mumbled, "Aye." Our horses stamped and stomped in the puddles, the relentless rain coming down, and Jamie led us toward our new destination.

Chapter 2 - Artair



As we approached the looming castle I heard the men calling along the walls, alertin' the guards tae our presence. The gates drew up, and then the thunder of horse hooves through the sodden mire, headed out tae meet us with the energetic pace of men who were dry, whereas we were bedraggled, wet to the bone, and ornery — though too cold through tae do much warrin' about it.

The meetin' would be dangerous, they always were.

And then they approached and it was tense, the eyein' of men, the askin' for a warm place tae sleep, our horses stood still, miserable, ready for the stable. Their horses were fresh, stamping impatiently, perhaps irritated that we had disrupted their comfort.

The men looked fierce, but finally relented, drew around us, and led us through the gates. Our horses were shown tae the stable and we were sent tae a barren room, with straw upon the floor tae rest for the night.

Rabbie grumbled, “The stables were better.”

Jamie said, “Smelled better as well.”

Rabbie farted.

All the men laughed.

Jamie said, “I am goin' tae speak with the laird, ye want tae attend me, Artair?”

“Aye, anythin' other than this flatulence-filled chamber.”

Rabbie farted once more.



Jamie and I were led down a corridor and through the doors of what must have been the Great Hall. The evening meal over, there were some last stragglers, some last remnants of food on the table, the laird, sitting in a chair. But as we entered three ladies, one a lovely young maiden, rose from their seats, their skirts rustling as they quickly walked away.

She was ginger, pink-hued, and beautiful. She cast her eyes down as she followed the older women, but not before her eyes met mine — I caught my breath, there was something in the sight of her, a directness but also a charm, and the way her look held mine, a moment of sincerity and knowledge between us — we knew each other, somehow...

She looked away and yet as she left the room I was unable to draw my eyes from her receding form, her back straight, a plump bosom, a fine wide skirt. I had gotten a glimpse of her pale white throat. A glance at her sparkling pale blue eyes. I was stopped in awe, when Jamie asked, “Did ye hear, Artair?”

“Och nae, what...?”

The laird of Kincardine repeated, “Ye canna move about the castle, we will send food to ye — nae trouble.”

I glanced at the door where the maiden had passed and nodded. “Nae, my laird, ye winna have any trouble.”

“Good.”

He and Jamie spoke about the arrangements and I reiterated that we would leave on the morrow, once the rain broke. And we were sent to the room of farts with a few servants carrying a pot with a warm brose, two baskets of bread, some cheese, and a jug of dark brown ale to warm us after our travels.



When we returned tae the room the fire was roaring in the hearth, the space had grown warm. We shared the meal between us and drank some warming ale.

With the glow of the flame warming our faces, Jamie jested, “I thought Artair was goin’ tae depart the Great Hall and follow a maiden straight tae her rooms!”

I groaned. “I thought tae, but I like m’head upon m’shoulders.”

Sam said, “Twould not be the first time we were chased from a house because Artair chased the ladies like a boor—”

Rabbie said, “Aye, tis why we are all cold, because of his conduct with the maiden Alli in Stirling.”

I said, “Twas nae m’fault, she thought I was hers though I never said as such.”

“Ye did until ye found she was the laird’s niece.”

I chuckled.

Sam said, “And remember Mistress May in Inverardoch last summer?” They laughed.

I said, “Twas time for us tae go anyway, the town had grown tiresome. I had tae cause trouble or we might still be there, married tae the insufferable ladies of the village. They werna good enough for us.”

Sam laughed. “Ye caused the trouble for our repute? Och, ye do like tae cause trouble and justify it after.”

“She was homely and had a short temper, what kind of life would it hae been tae hae her houndin’ me day and..” I shivered, “all night long?”

Jamie jested, “And what kind of life would we hae had if Artair was eternally hounded by such a homely woman, just think on it, Sam, the amount of trouble he would cause us if his wife is not comely and sweet — nae, twas a fine blessing that we were run from town as it was, never tae return—”

I said, “We were run from town, but we are allowed tae return—”

“Laird Torphichen had tae pay riches tae clear yer name.”

I shrugged. “I daena regret a moment of it, just because we come tae visit yer town daena mean ye get to force yer homely daughters upon us—”

Ian, who was one of our youngest, dimmest men, said, “I thought Mistress May was lovely.”

We all laughed.

“Ian, ye can go back for her if ye want, I changed m’mind! With yer boyish face and round form and her small lips and pinched face, ye would sire some fine lads taegether — she is a lovely lass and deservin’ of yer attentions. I tell ye, Ian, if we ever escape this deluge, ye ought tae go visit Mistress May of the pointedly lovely face, and bring her intae yer family line.”

“Dost ye think she will hae me?”

I laughed. “Of course she will, ye are a fine young man, strong of wit and character, and as ye admire her pinched face against all better judgment, she will think ye verra worthy, tis the way of it.”

I leaned back on the wall. “But, returnin’ tae the matter at hand — just because I caused trouble in Stirling daena mean I will be troublesome here in *this* castle. I will be good, nae trouble. I hae been ordered tae stay put in this reeking room with straw-covered floors and tae not wander in the castle passageways, and I will follow those orders.” I shifted tae get comfortable.

Jamie said, “Ye are goin’ tae follow orders? Artair says he inna goin’ tae start trouble — och, ye daena sound like yerself.”

I closed my eyes. “I sound just like m’self when I hae been drenched durin’ a journey and must behave properly in order tae hae a roof over m’head. I want the shelter more than I want any maiden.”

I sat quietly for a moment with m’eyes closed, then said, “Of course she is verra fine.”

Jamie groaned, “Och nae, Artair, ye canna! We daena hae any idea about the layout of the castle, ye canna go traipsin’ about — I winna allow it.”

I opened one eye, “I’d like tae see ye try tae stop me.”

He waved his hand. “There is nae talking sense tae ye — we are warm, we hae been fed, we hae had some ale, ye need tae sleep. We will leave first thing and ye ought be rested, and I will remind ye, ye are the man who urged us tae go out in the storms, tae journey the full day in the rain. Tis nae fair for ye tae pursue a lass when we hae been ridin’ all day — ye might risk our warm bed.”

“I am not a fool, Jamie, I winna risk it.”

Chapter 3 - Artair



Just then a lad came in tae bring a bundle of logs for our fire. I watched him empty it by the hearth and then scuttle towards the door, I called, “Lad!”

He stopped short. “Aye, Master?”

“There is a maiden amongst the ladies, dost ye ken her name?”

Jamie and the other men among me all groaned.

“Master, I... nae, I daena ken?”

“The maiden who was dinin’ with the laird, twas his daughter?”

“Nae he haena a daughter, tis his niece.”

“Her name?”

“I haena heard it, but I gather her father is the baron of Cleish. Might I go now, Master?”

“Aye.”

He bowed out of the room.

Jamie said, “Ye are goin’ tae ask her name — och, ye arna heedin’ my admonition, Artair!”

I said, “She is his niece, did ye see her? She was a beauty, perhaps the most beautiful I hae ever seen. And she comes from Cleish, the daughter of a baron, och this will do verra nicely.”

Jamie said, “What dost ye think, men, will we need tae string him up tae get him tae stay put in the night?”

Sam said, “Perhaps we hae tae stay up and guard him?”

Rabbie, layin’ beside him, snored.

I said, “Nae, ye daena need tae guard me, nor tie me up, ye can sleep. I will sleep. We will be well-rested for the morrow. Besides, tis too late at night for treachery and deception, the maiden is long in bed I imagine, as from the look of her she was pure and chaste and beautiful and...”

I lumbered up from m’seat on the ground, “the visage of a flawless angel here on earth.”

Jamie said, “Och nae, where are ye goin’ Artair?”

“Tae the garderober tae relieve m’self.” I strode toward the door.

Sam asked, “Jamie, ought we tae follow him?”

Jamie said, defeatedly, “Nae. Even if we try he’s bound to deceive us.....” He raised his voice, “If ye are caught and whipped in the courtyard, Artair, I will leave anyway, daena expect me tae come tae yer defense.”



None followed me, they kent twas nae use. I left the room and at the door was a guard, sleepin’ against the wall. I crept by him, heading down the corridor tae the stair and headed up, notin’ that the cold breeze sweepin’ down meant that above me were the battlements. Instead I emerged from the stairwell on the uppermost floor. I looked up and down the corridor, twas quiet, most were in their quarters for the night. I saw nae guards, so I strode, two candles on the wall lightin’ m’way.

Then as I was about tae pass a door it opened, a lady’s maid stepped out, startled tae an abrupt stop— “M’apologies, Master.”

“Nae, the apologies are all mine.” Over her shoulder the chamber was lit with a fire in the hearth, the flame high,

warmin' the convivial room, and there was a brief glimpse of the maiden — she said, "Oh!" and stepped quickly from view.

But twas too late, I had seen her with her hair down, in only her chemise, the firelight dancin' on her cheek, a bit of fear in her eyes — she was mine.

I asked the maid, "Garderobe?"

She pointed farther down the hall. "I daena ken ye are supposed tae use it here on this floor, Master—"

But I strode away, pulled the door open, stepped in and relieved m'self in the hole.

Then pushed m'way out and returned the way I had come, pausin' momentarily in front of her door tae listen.

I continued downstairs where I entered our dark room — the men were all sprawled on the floor, sleepin', except Jamie. "Did ye see her?"

"Aye, I did." I shoved Rabbie aside tae make room for m'self.

He moaned. "Did ye cause any trouble?"

"Aye, I caused all the trouble in the world."



The downpour increased.

Jamie gathered us around and we decided after much discourse and grousin' that we would need tae wait another day as our path had become near impassable. The laird gave us permission tae remain and we were allowed tae leave our chamber for the Great Hall, though the inhabitants of the castle were elusive and meant not tae cross paths with us, especially the young and fair maidens.

So after eating a meal and seein' tae m'horse, I carried an apple tae the upper colonnade and leaned against a column, attemptin' tae look disinterested, purposeless. I tossed the apple up and down in m'hand, a game of sorts tae pass the time.

It became a long wait, but worthwhile at long last as the maiden with her two escorts came strolling along the passage, stopped short, shocked tae see me, and backed from the room, but not before I got a glimpse of her bosom and the color drawing up her cheek.

Och aye, she was a beauty.

I took a bite from the apple and chewed, smilin' as I returned downstairs tae meet the other men.



Later, unoccupied, I went for a walk through the gallery beside the Great Hall. The passageway was crowded, the gallery had people comin' and goin', a meal had been served. The men and I would be served in the lower chamber, but I walked the gallery, back and forth, until she appeared.

Chapter 4 - Artair



She was looking down and hadna noticed that I was there. But then her eyes drew around the room and landed upon me. She averted them quickly, then muttered something tae the woman beside her, sendin' her on ahead, while the maiden crossed taeward a marble bust upon a pedestal against the wall, alone, as if she were studying its form.

I approached. "Madame, I daena wish tae startle ye..."

She dinna meet my eyes but raised her chin. "Ye believe ye would startle me? Ye are a giant bulk of a man, a glowering monster, stalking around the halls of my uncle's castle — ye hae a stench and walk as if ye are stompin', an oaf, angry at the floorboards. How would ye startle me? I can see ye in every room as ye are taller than everyone else, like the flag on the wall, flapping in the wind."

I laughed. "Och nae, ye are wonderful!"

She smiled, twas magical, the corner of her mouth turning up. "I hae just called ye an oaf, and accused ye of havin' a stench and ye think me wonderful?"

"Aye, I think ye are the most wonderful woman I hae ever seen, ye are a beauty, I suspect ye might be part fae as ye hae bewitched me, I canna draw my eyes from ye."

She said, "Och, ye are a scoundrel as well. As I suspected, ye are flapping in the breeze."

I laughed again. "I believe I hae never enjoyed being insulted this much, m'fair maiden, I believe I want tae marry ye."

Her eyes went wide. “Good sir, I daena think ye ken me! What mockery is this? Ye believe I am just idly awaiting yer attentions? I will hae ye ken, I am Mistress Cleish—”

“What is yer first name, if I might be so bold?”

‘Tis too bold, but I see no harm, my name is Gwynedd—”

“Gwynedd! Och, tis a bonny name, I hae just heard it and tis already etched up on my heart.”

She said, a sternness tae her voice, “My name is Mistress Cleish tae ye sir. As I am the daughter of a baron, ye ought tae keep yer space and ken yer position. I am well above yer station, tis clear by yer garb and yer circumstances.”

I exhaled low and deep. “Mistress Cleish, my name is Artair, what if I told a secret — I haena told before — I come from a long line of kings, and I am next in line for the...”

My voice trailed off as her eyes narrowed. “Ye canna be, as ye are standin’ filthy in m’uncle’s castle gallery, asking for his charitable fare and shelter while ye travel! Ye arna even the leader of yer group. This is a scandalous tale, I ought tae hae ye thrown from the castle for deceit.”

“My apologies Mistress Cleish, I would never want tae deceive ye. I am simply Artair, but I am the second in Laird Torphichen’s guard, and I am his finest warrior. I ken I might not have the status of yer father, but I assure ye I will gain a title that will ascend his — are ye promised tae marry?”

“Master, ye are overly familiar, I canna abide...”

At the door her two women who had accompanied her tae the Great Hall stood whispering as they waved her over.

“Are ye promised, Mistress Gwynedd of m’heart, tae marry another? I only ask as I need tae ken who I will hae tae battle.”

She raised her chin. “Nae, I am not promised. This daena mean ye are—”

I patted my heart. “Then we are decided.”

“Och! Ye are maddening! I insult ye, I warn ye that ye are overly familiar and yet ye continue tae be so.”

“I daena mean tae madden ye, Mistress, I mean tae tell ye that I am enraptured by yer insults, and yer admonishments only further entrance me. Och, ye hae bewitched me well, yer charms hae gained my undying adoration.”

She stamped her foot. “Och, Artair, ye are infuriating!”

I grinned.

She said, “I mean, *Master*, ye are infuriating.”

“Aye, I ken, tis m’ manner, everyone who meets me agrees, Mistress Gwynedd. I am infuriating, and I daena mean tae brag, but I might be the most infuriating in all the lands of Alba. Once I want something I will not let it rest until I hae it. And I will promise ye, I want ye — ye are my own true love, I kent it the moment I lay eyes upon ye. And ye ought tae surrender, because I canna rest until I hae gained yer heart, and I canna bear knowing that ye might spurn m’ advances.”

She shook her head. “Och nae, ye are a covered in stench and full of yer own sinful pride, my first impression of ye, that ye are a giant brute is the correct one — ye daena understand how tae make yerself pleasing tae a lady, how can ye expect a lady tae want tae join with ye? Ye ought tae pick a meek maiden from one of the local farms and tell *her* yer story about always winnin’ and being a prince, ye can win her over and leave me be.”

“Ye would send me from yer heart, Mistress, command me tae love another?”

She stamped her foot, and when I began tae chuckle, she stamped it twice more in indignation.

I said, “Ye are beautiful when ye are angry. Ye hae won me, irrevocably.”

“Ye are insolent, a braggart, and ye are plainly a scoundrel, I winna accept another moment of yer presence. I will scream. I will call the guards over and they will beat ye and place ye in m’uncle’s dungeon.”

“Please daena, Mistress Cleish,” I took a step back.

She said, “Good, I am glad ye are fearful. This is the first time I hae seen ye hae some sense.”

I bowed my head. “I am not fearful, I can beat all the guards here, perhaps at once if tis required of me. But I daena want ye tae hae tae bear witness tae it. I ken ye called me a monster when we first spoke, I would not want tae frighten ye, tae give ye cause tae be afraid, so if ye tell me tae go, I will go. I will do whatever ye tell me tae do; yer word, Mistress Cleish, is m’command.”

“Then go.”

“Aye.” I bowed, and backed away, then I turned and left.

At the door I glanced back. She had gone tae the door, but watched as I retreated. She met my eyes, then went intae the Great Hall tae dine.

Chapter 5 - Gwynedd



My young aunt looked shocked, “Who was that? Ye were in discussion with him for a verra long time! Twas unseemly!”

She waved her hands around me, fanning my skin. “Och nae, ye hae gone pink with blushing.”

“My apologies, Aunt, I... I thought I knew... I mean, he thought he knew me, he... he was mistaken.”

I raised my chin so she could fan. “Am I dreadfully red?” I blew air up my face. “Och nae, I hate when I go scarlet.”

She adjusted the shoulders of my dress and tucked a loose strand of hair away. “Ye are still verra blushed, but tis yer way, ye will just need tae calm yerself.”

I glanced over at the man as he left.

She followed my eyes. “Do ye need me tae let yer uncle ken? He could hae him sent away. He seemed verra familiar with ye, it was... *unacceptable*.”

“Nae, ye daena need tae send him away.” I quickly gathered a story. “He was wonderin’ if we had met years ago when he was young. He was aware of m’s station and verra respectful — tis not necessary tae discuss it further.”

“Sometimes when young men are too forward, they require correction.”

“He is corrected, he winna do it again.”

“Good, but tell me if he accosts ye once more. He is here as a favor from your uncle tae Laird Torphichen, he can be sent away if he causes trouble.”

I nodded. Then asked, “He is one of Torphichen’s men? Not a son?”

“Nae, Laird Torphichen has nae sons. The other man accompanying him, Jamie Sinclair, is a nephew and heir. The man ye spoke with is Torphichen’s ward, not a man of importance, just one of Torphichen’s guard.”

I nodded.

The Great Hall was lively even though the men who had arrived the night before hadn’t been invited tae dine with us. I knew their absence was meant tae shelter my young cousins and me. We were tae eat an early dinner and then go directly tae our rooms, after that the men would be fed.

My aunt’s eyes scanned the Great Hall, then she said, “I need tae go sit with yer uncle,” and she left us alone.

My older cousin, Janet whispered, “I daena understand, Gwynedd, how could that man believe he kens ye? He was verra frightening! I guessed ye would be a’tremblin’ after speakin’ tae him for so long.”

I took a big deep inhale. “He was frightening, tis true, but he meant nae harm.”

“How do ye ken?”

“Because...” I thought tae say because he professed his love, but I knew that was ridiculous. He was a scoundrel, proven — twas true. And he was nae one for me tae be thinking on. He was a brutish man, passing through my uncle’s castle. That was all. I said, “Because I told him he smelled most foul and he thought twas funny.”

My cousin’s eyes went wide, “Ye told him that?”

“Aye, and he did — he smelled like a man who had been on a four-day hunt and had been rained upon until he was drenched and then had dried while upon the back of his horse.

Twas dreadful. He thought he knew me, and I assured him I dinna ken someone so foul smelling, and he laughed. I saw that he had a good nature, so I am not afraid of him. He winna cause me any harm.”

“Good.”

We sat down at our meal and I tried tae focus on the conversation at hand, but my mind kept wandering tae the brute who had laid eyes upon me and then professed his love.

Chapter 6 - Artair



In our chamber Jamie asked, “Where were ye this afternoon?”

“Speakin’ tae the maiden, m’ future wife.”

“Och nae, Artair! She is the niece of the laird giving us shelter as an escape from the elements and ye are but a lowly ward in Laird Torphichen’s household. Och ye are aimin’ well above yer station.”

I shrugged. “Tis settled between us. She and I talked for a time, she used m’ name, she has accepted my advances—”

“Ye are barkin’ mad, Artair, this is nae true... *How?* What exactly did she say?”

“She said she would scream and call the guards over and hae me put in the dungeon—”

Jamie laughed, “Och, that does sound more likely. Then *how*, Artair, dost ye get ‘she has accepted my advances’ from a maiden threatening ye with the dungeon? We will be lucky if the laird daena throw us right *intae* the dungeon, as soon as he hears ye were waiting in the hall tae speak tae his maiden niece.”

I said, “I ken she has accepted my advances because look, Jamie, there arna guards here. She dinna tell her uncle. He haena sent me tae the dungeon. She is mine, I just hae tae make the arrangements.”

Jamie shook his head. “This daena make sense, Artair, look at ye, ye are filthy, ye hae gone after the niece of a laird

and—”

“She told me I had a stench and that I was a monster. But she dinna leave m’company. She continued tae speak tae me, she met m’eyes — och, she is mine, I must simply ask her uncle for her hand.”

“Or her father, ye ken nothin’ about her.”

“I ken enough — her father is Baron Cleish, he daena hae much land.”

“Then he will want a much better arrangement for his daughter.”

I sullenly said, “Perhaps.”

“Artair, a young man, just one of Laird Torphichen’s men, inconsequential, not even a *good* man.”

“Ye ken if ye want tae fight, I will fight ye right here.”

“I ken, ye will fight me, ye are a brave warrior, but still, just *one* of the men. How are ye goin’ tae convince Laird Cleish tae welcome ye tae his family? I took ye tae hae a wee bit of wit, Artair.”

Sam spoke up from his pallet of straw, “Are ye wantin’ tae get married, Artair? Ye usually attest tae wantin’ a life of freedom.”

“Until I met Gwynedd. Now I want her as m’wife; I will not rest.”

Jamie’s eyes went wide. “Ye ken her familiar name?”

“Aye, she told me it — ye see, she *is* mine. I just hae tae convince everyone that I am worthy of her.”

Chapter 7 - Gwynedd



My cousin, Janet, came tae m'room and said, "The good news, the man who accosted ye last night—"

"Accosted is what ye are calling it? It seemed tae be a conversation in the gallery, nae nearly so dreadful."

She continued, "The good news, he winna be here anymore. I heard from m'maid that his master, the nephew of Laird Torphichen, is gathering his men tae take their leave of the castle."

"Oh, this morn?"

"Aye, so he winna be befouling the passageways with his stench, ye will be unbothered."

I said, "Good." But I also wondered where he might be going.

My mind wandered, I stared out the window, looking out upon my uncle's lands. The rain was finally over, the clouds had parted. Kincardine was a good castle and the grounds were bright green now, it looked cold, but also fresh — without consideration I stood and smoothed down my skirts. "I need tae go for a walk, get some air."

"I ought tae come with ye?"

"Nae, tis nae necessary, as ye said, the boorish men hae gone from the castle, I want tae go and clear my head." I left for the colonnade on the floor below.

Chapter 8 - Artair



The followin' day we prepared tae leave, called for our horses, and milled around in the courtyard, preparin' our gear for the day's travel.

Then I felt eyes upon me — I glanced up tae the colonnade.

There stood Gwynedd, watching me.

I put my hand over m'heart.

She nodded and stepped into the shadows.



Jamie asked, “Ye ready tae go, Artair?”

“Aye.” I mounted m'horse.

We rode across the courtyard headed toward the gate that was bein' raised for us tae pass through — when I heard her voice, “Artair!”

I pulled m'horse sharply and turned, tae see her rushing across the courtyard toward me. She was dressed verra fine — a rich prize for a worthy man.

I dismounted from m'horse and stood holding the reins tae speak tae her while Jamie and the rest of the men waited near the gate.

She said, a little breathlessly, “I...” her eyes traveled around the courtyard, all around us people were gawking. “...I

do hope ye will hae safe travels.”

I smiled. “Aye, ye as well, Mistress Cleish. But ye will see me soon, daena be concerned, I will return for ye.”

She shook her head. “I daena understand yer meaning, Master. I simply wanted ye tae ken that I hoped yer travels were...”

“Safe? Aye, they will be.”

“That is all, and there inna any reason for us tae see each other again. Ye will hae safe travels and I will return tae m’father’s castle and...”

I nodded. “I will see ye soon.”

“Ye keep saying that, but I daena understand yer meaning. Ye are a scoundrel and ye keep saying ye are goin’ tae see me soon, but it...” Her voice trailed off and she shook her head.

“This is m’meaning, Gwynedd: I mean for ye tae be my wife. I will prove I am worthy of ye, and I will prove m’worth tae yer father. I hae things I must accomplish first, I am being sent north tae Balloch and I will be gone for a time, because I hae a duty, but I mean tae return tae Caldour Castle, where I will gather m’things and then I will ride tae Cleish castle. I will return tae ye and tell ye that I most heartily beseech ye tae be my wife.”

“Ye hardly ken me...”

“In m’heart it feels as if I hae known ye forever, Gwynedd.”

She raised her chin. “Yer insolence will be yer undoing.”

“What will ye hae me do? How can I prove m’worthiness? I promise I will return.”

“Ye will go away, ye will profess yer love tae another maiden. I bet ye hae sworn yer undying devotion tae many maidens through the years, as ye are a braggart and a fool. I winna waste one more moment of thought upon ye. And I winna wait for ye, Artair, or I would be made foolish. A lady, waiting for a warrior tae return? Ye must think I am ridiculous.”

“Nae, I daena... I am yers, Gwynedd. I will return tae yer father’s castle on the last day of Yule, and I will ask yer father for yer hand in marriage. I promise ye. I winna rest until I hae proven my love for ye.” I asked, “Are we in agreement?”

“Nae, I daena agree, because I daena believe ye.”

“Fine, ye daena hae tae believe in me, I will prove m’self tae ye. Please daena marry anyone else until I hae returned tae make m’case.”

She scoffed. “Ye are forcin’ me tae make ye a promise, ye must think I am so far beneath ye tae ask me tae promise ye.”

“Nae, I think ye are above me as the moon is above me, as Selene, guidin’ me through the darkness. M’life has been naething but dark and bleak and ye are shinin’ down upon me, Gwynedd, and I want ye tae be mine.”

“Ye believe ye ought tae own the moon, as if ye were a god? Tis verra grandiose tae believe ye get tae be the owner of a heavenly body.”

“Och,” I grinned, “I try tae compliment ye and ye twist m’words and use them against me. Mistress, ye ken, ye are the moon and I am tae be Hesperus, drivin’ yer bulls—”

“Och, ye are verra much drivin’ the bulls.”

I laughed. “I will drive yer chariot across the skies. I will be yer servant, yer champion, and yer husband, for all my days. Tis m’oath tae ye.”

Jamie called over, “Artair, we must go!”

I mounted my horse and nodded down on Gwynedd. “I will see ye on the last day of Yule. There will be a feast at yer father’s household for Twelfth Night?”

“Aye... I suppose, there usually is...”

“Good. My favorite is venison.”

I turned my horse and followed the rest of my band from the castle.

Chapter 9 - Gwynedd



It had been over six weeks since I had been at Kincardine and had met Artair. I thought about him often, because I was still so shocked by the way he had spoken tae me. I was curious about him, he dinna hae anything, nae lands, nae title, he was unimportant, but had spoken like someone assured of his position, confident in his cause.

It might hae been because he was so big, he claimed tae be a good warrior, that might hae been the reason. He was a braggart, but... he... I considered it all over, wondering about him.

I kept coming tae one thought. *I would never see him again*, and this was assuredly true.

He lived near Edinburgh, he had long forgotten me. He would marry a farmer's daughter, likely had already. We would never cross paths, though I did plan tae travel tae Edinburgh, in the spring, and wondered what it would be like tae see him, somewhere. Twould be unlikely...

But, yesterday, when Raso, our head cook, had asked me, "Mistress Cleish, what would ye like me tae serve for the feast on Twelfth Night?"

I had answered, "Would it be possible to hae venison as the main?"

"Aye, and we will hae a fine pudding, Mistress, and yer favorite tarts."

I dinna ask for it because I thought Artair would come, but simply in *case* he would come.

But why was I thinkin' about him? He was a stranger. And he wasna coming. I was certain he had been speakin' in jest, and I wished I hadna been thinking about him at all... I was too sensible for this. He wasna coming, but...

In any case the Twelfth Night feast was planned for the morrow. And Raso had likely already begun the roasting of the venison.

Even though today was the day before the feast, I had taken care tae be dressed well. I was wearing fine jewelry at my ears, a collar with lace, wrapping around the back of my neck, open at the throat, my favorite neckline. My dress today was in saffron yellow, embellished with black embroidery and lace.

Tomorrow I would wear my finest dress, in a muted blue that matched my eyes. It had elegant gold stitches and was accented with jewels and pearls.

I would take care tae be beautiful, and then when the day had come and gone, and the man, Artair, had not arrived, *then* I would ken, and I would never think of him again.



My father was strolling with his new young wife, Mary, and they stopped by my room. “I wanted ye tae ken, Gwynedd, I hae invited Laird Dudley tae dine with us for Twelfth Night.”

“Nae, ye dinna... but Father we hae a fine feast planned and he is... why did ye invite him?”

“Why did I? Because he is a verra pleasin’ conversationalist and he is recently widowed.”

“But he is verra... he has been married twice and...” I let my voice trail off, my father wouldna care about any of these opinions as he had married a woman half his age. But I couldna think of what else tae say, Laird Dudley was auld and unpleasant, I hated the thought of bein’ stuck in conversation with — my eyes widened as it dawned on me. “Did ye invite

him, because ye think he would make a good marriage for me?”

My father said, “Aye, he would, Gwynedd, I am makin’ the arrangements. He is a Baron, more land than I, he will make a fine match.”

I shook my head. “But Laird Dudley is not... “ I kent m’father would dismiss all my concerns. Once his mind was set he would only care about the contract, he had been plannin’ tae marry me tae someone with a high rank since I was verra young. I pouted, wishin’ m’mother were here, and finished, “He’s not tae m’liking.”

“He is *everything* ye could want in a husband, and daena worry that he has been married before. I myself hae had three wives, and we are verra joyous in our union, are we nae, Mary?”

She nodded demurely.

He said, “I will make the arrangements as soon as he—”

“Father, please, nae!”

He looked shocked. His young wife fanned her face, upset.

He said, “Ye must recognize, Gwynedd, ye are growin’ auld.” He turned tae his wife. “Inna she grown auld?”

“Aye, m’laird.”

“And she has an edge tae her manner that is off-putting tae many men, and the ruddy scarlet color ye turn when ye are upset... tis immodest, daena ye agree, wife?”

“Aye, m’laird.”

“As it is, Gwynedd, I will hae tae add tae yer dowry tae get Dudley tae take ye in hand, ye are causing me a great deal of trouble.”

“He is older than ye even.”

“Aye, he is verra respectable.”

I exhaled. “Ye already invited him — he is coming?”

“Aye, he has already arrived—”

“Father! Ye dinna mention it!”

“I daena hae tae tell ye anything, daughter, ye forget yerself. He arrived early this morn, and will be at the meal this evening and the feast tomorrow. Enough time for ye tae make yerself lovely and hae him make an offer for yer hand. I want ye tae make sure there is pheasant for our feast. He asked for it and I assured him we would serve it.”

“Tis too late tae change the meal, we are servin’ venison, tis already decided — we canna hae pheasant on such short notice. Where is he, what rooms?”

Mary, his young wife said, “We had him put in the East chamber. He arrived a few hours ago. If ye charm him, ye might hae a bairn by the end of summer.”

My eyes went wide at the thought. “I wish I had been told! I would hae been startled if I had come upon him in the halls unaware!”

My father shook his head and ignored my distress. “Are ye certain we canna hae pheasant? Then, I suppose, ye will hae tae be accommodatin’ in other ways — make sure ye are agreeable and welcoming, this might be yer last chance tae find a husband.”

His young wife added, “And tae hae bairns.”

I ignored her and pulled at the front of m’bodice trying tae draw in air. “Ye hae barely attempted tae marry me, father. He is one of the first men ye hae invited, och nae, ye make m’situation sound dire! I am nae sure he is our best—”

“But ye are not as young as ye once were, Gwynedd, and though ye are known tae be a beauty, ye are also known tae be vexing — tae convince him tae consider ye I had tae negotiate—”

“What did ye promise him?”

“For one, I assured him ye would accommodate yerself tae his firm hand—”

“Father! Ye dinna say it!”

“I did, much like it, I told him ye were capable of being obedient, I *assured* him. So ye must be agreeable and ye ought tae begin now by not arguin’ with yer father.” He turned tae his wife. “Perhaps we ought tae ask Raso tae change the feast from venison tae pheasant.”

She nodded. “Aye, m’laird.”

He said, “We do want Laird Dudley tae be enticed by yer charms, daughter, well-fed will work tae the purpose.”

His wife took his arm and they swept from the room.

I watched them go with my arms crossed, brooding.

I had asked for venison, then had been told that I was old and troublesome, and that a strange man had arrived and I would be havin’ a bairn by the end of summer.

Och nae, this was not what I wanted...

...but what did I want?

Not this.

Chapter 10 - Gwynedd



1578, THE DAY BEFORE THE YULE FEAST
THE KITCHENS OF CLEISH CASTLE

I wrapped a cloak around m'shoulders, and hurried from my chamber headed in the opposite direction from my father. I bustled down the stairs and rushed through the briskly cold passageways. Twas an early hour, but the light was almost gone. The days were short and there had been a snow blowing for days.

Och, I hope nae one is out in the snow.

I stopped short in the passage. *Would he be out in the snow?*

I assured m'self, *Nae.*

I was bein' insensible. *He wasna coming, he wouldna.*

I would hae tae allow myself tae be courted by this auld man m'father had chosen.

My stomach hurt at the thought, *Was this my worth?* An ugly auld baron? Laird Dudley. Was he truly the only man who wanted me?

And what of Artair? Was I acting a fool? He dinna even hae a title. He was a man from within Laird Torphichen's men, just a lowly inconsequential man... twas a verra lowborn choice.

I was allowing m'self tae be made insensible by a man with nae title, when I needed tae focus on the matter at hand — Laird Dudley had come tae meet me.

I clutched my stomach. Och nae! He had been married twice.

He had children who themselves had children.

I sighed.

I needed tae be sensible. I needed tae swallow down my concern.

But then my mind returned tae the man, Artair...

I also really wanted tae serve venison.

I continued walking, at an even faster pace, down the passage, the short stairs, across the end of the courtyard and by the time I rushed intae the kitchen, out of breath. “Raso, did the Laird Cleish come speak tae ye?”

He was stirring a pot, big twists of a large spoon, with sweat rollin’ down his face from working over the hearth. “Nae, did ye need somethin’, Mistress Cleish?”

He pulled up a spoonful of the broth, and gestured me over, holding his hand under the ladle tae catch the drips. Ever since I had been a wee lass whenever I entered his kitchen, he always offered me a bit. He urged the ladle toward me. “Taste!”

I drew closer. “I just wanted...” I tried tae catch my breath after the racing in the cold, I was panting. “Och, I just wanted tae—”

Raso was verra small, so I leaned over and quickly tested the spoon’s temperature with m’lips, then blew tae cool it, and then sipped. I smiled and nodded. “Delicious, Raso!”

“Och, ye always say it, Mistress Cleish.”

“Tis always true.”

He put the spoon back in the pot and continued stirring.

“I wanted tae tell ye, Raso, that I *really* want ye tae serve the venison as we discussed. My father might want ye tae change the feast, but please nae, we hae decided it—”

My father sauntered in with his young wife on his arm. “Gwynedd, what are ye doin’ here? I just left ye in yer chamber!”

I bowed. “Aye, father, I remembered something I needed tae tell Raso.”

My father said, “Good, I had something tae tell him as well — Raso, I hae changed m’mind, I would like ye tae serve pheasant!”

Raso looked from my face tae m’father’s, then took my side. “Sire, I hae planned venison for the meal, a hart is already on the spit, and I daena hae pheasant —” His eyes followed my father’s as he glanced toward a few pheasants hanging at the back wall.

Raso said, “But they were only brought in yesterday, m’Lord. They’ll not be ready tae prepare for another week or so, and the hart is even now turnin’ on the spit.... I assured her that we canna make any changes this late. The kitchen will be cooking all night as tis.”

My father said, “Och nae, this is unacceptable! I did promise Laird Dudley, but then... ye must prepare the feast and it must be a good feast — I suppose we will all need tae be disappointed.”

He exhaled then said, “We will go and leave ye tae the planning, Raso. Daughter, will ye come? We are headed tae the Great Hall. Laird Dudley will be meeting us there momentarily.”

“Nae, father, I must go over the last details of the food and...”

He nodded and left the kitchens.

I said, “Thank ye, Raso, it’s just... I was concerned that the laird would convince ye tae change the menu and as ye ken, venison is m’favorite—”

He shook his head. “I dinna realize it, Mistress Cleish.”

“I hae recently developed a taste for it and wanted it instead of pheasant for the feast.”

“Aye, Mistress Cleish, ye ken, I hae known ye yer whole life, I will serve what ye ask.”

“Good, thank ye, Raso, it has naething tae do with a baron or any guests or....” His eyes narrowed tryin’ tae understand m’meaning. I quickly added, “My request for venison has *naething* tae do with anyone at all.”

“I daena ken when ye decided tis yer favorite, but I will take yer side in it, Mistress Cleish as ye hae always been a warmhearted and complimentary lass—”

“I wish m’father heard ye, he thinks I am disagreeable.”

“Och nae, the lass is lovely and fair!” He scowled. “Would ye like another taste?” He spooned out a bit of stew and raised the ladle to my lips again, saying, “And the laird couldna change the feast anyway, we hae long ago decided on it. We hae venison enough for the number of people—”

His thoughts were interrupted by a sound. We hadna been expecting anyone, and yet the gates were going up. It was dark out, and snowing, and yet, there were the sounds of men calling and faintly, horse hooves coming intae the courtyard, nearing.

I asked, “Dost ye hear that?”

“Aye, someone has arrived. If ye find that they are many, if we are expectin’ more for dinner on the morrow, will ye tell me, Mistress? In that case I would need tae cook the pheasant after all...”

But I wasna listening as I was starin’ dumbly at the door, wonderin’ who had arrived in such a bleak weather, and bein’ too fearful tae go see.

Chapter 11 - Artair



It had been a long eight weeks of travel and councils. We had had terrible weather when we set out, some fine weather while we were in the highlands, but it had turned bleak toward the end of the trip. In the end we had continued on through dreich days and nights, and finally the last part of our journey had been four nights, camping in the forest, the long ride home was quiet and sullen. We had arrived in the night and gone straight tae our rooms.

I was relieved tae hae a warm bed and the promise of a familiar meal in the morn.

My room was small, I had a bed and a table with a stool and a hearth. Twas enough, much better than sleepin' in the barracks, where the younger men slept. I had earned the room through battle and work for the laird. It was a relief tae close the door on the castle and be alone with m'thoughts.

I dinna hae much time afore I was tae go get Gwynedd.

I needed tae gather m'resources tae prove m'worth tae her father.



The followin' morn, after seein' tae our horses and organizin' where our gear ought tae be stored, we ate our midday meal and then were called tae the baron's official chamber.

What followed was a long meetin', where Jamie detailed tae his uncle all that we had accomplished, we turned over bags of wealth we had collected, a stack of contracts, leases newly signed, and a few that he would need tae sign that we would return, next month.

But the laird jested, "I think ye ought tae return them on the morrow."

We all groaned.

He laughed. "I canna send ye out again, ye look thin, pale, and be-drenched. I am concluding the meeting and demandin' ye go tae the Great Hall, ye hae tae sit in front of the hearth until yer normal color returns."

Jamie said, "Aye, afore we consider going out again, we need some feastin'." The meetin' concluded, he stood tae go.

I said, "I would like tae remain and speak tae ye, Laird Torphichen, on an urgent matter."

Jamie sighed and sat back down. "Tis about the maiden, Artair?"

Laird Torphichen asked, "What maiden — did Artair find yet another maiden?"

Rabbie laughed, "Och, he has talked of nothing else!"

Laird Torphichen said, "How much is this one goin' tae cost me, Artair?"

"Naething, I dinna do anything untoward."

"This is new, Artair, nothing untoward? Out with it — a lovely lass has caught yer eye?"

Jamie said, "Laird Cleish's daughter."

Laird Torphichen said, "Och, she is well above yer station, Artair!"

They all laughed.

Jamie said, "I told him, Laird Torphichen, I warned him."

My jaw tightened as he spoke, I leaned forward. "Laird, might I speak tae ye in private?"

He watched my face, thoughtfully, then said, “Ye are serious, Artair?”

I nodded.

“Then the rest of ye men may return tae the Great Hall.”

Jamie said, “Must I go, Laird? Perhaps I ought tae hear the case Artair is making, as I am yer heir.”

Laird Torphichen said, “Nae, Jamie, I need tae speak tae Artair in private.”

All the men got up tae clear the chamber, Jamie looking over his shoulder afore he left.



Laird Torphichen waited for the door tae close behind them, then said, “Artair, so ye hae yer head turned by a beautiful maiden, outside of possibility — I urge ye tae be sensible about it.”

“I am sensible. I am goin’ tae go claim her hand.”

“She is the daughter of a baron, and ye are...?”

I raised my brow. “Ye ken who I am.”

“Aye, yer father asked me tae care for ye, he sends riches for yer care, but he haena been here in years, Artair — he said he would call ye tae come home, but he haena.”

I exhaled.

He continued, “He haena come for ye. Hae ye considered that ye might be forgotten? He was at war, ye might want tae consider that yer title is gone. Ye are of age, are ye nae?”

“Aye, past it.”

“Then why haena he come for ye? If I had a son, living in a far away land, I would get him as soon as he was able tae fight, tae help me hold m’lands.”

He watched my face. “Ye ken, yer father promised me he would assist me with m’own title, he said he would see me

elevated tae an Earl, or even a Duke. I dinna believe him at the time, but he swore an oath. Where is m'new title?

“I am sure if he gave ye a vow, he meant it. He must have a reason for the lateness of the hour.”

“He has left ye without recourse tae return home. He haena fulfilled his oath, I hae mulled it over, Artair, ye must forget about yer throne — I believe tis gone. Ye should accept that yer station is lower than it once was. But all is not lost, ye are a trusted advisor tae m'nephew, the future Baron of Torphichen, and there is a maiden here, the daughter of John Sinclair, who—”

I scowled. “She has the face of a dog.”

Laird Torphichen said, “True, she looks more like her father than her mother, but she fits yer station, Artair.” He chuckled. “Ye would just hae tae allow the candles tae burn down afore ye bed her.”

I groaned.

He continued, “Ye are aimin' above yer station, toward the bonny daughter of a baron. I did consider her for Jamie, but Cleish's barony is small, it dinna seem prudent...”

“Jamie married the daughter of an Earl, twas a good contract, ye ken ye could arrange a similar marriage for me. I am a prince—”

“Of a land nae one has ever heard of, Artair.”

“I hae wealth and a title.”

“Ye hae been deserted by yer father.”

“Yet he has filled yer coffers.”

“Artair, I think of ye like a nephew, ye are a part of m'family. Ye came tae me as a young lad and ye hae grown alongside my own nephew.”

“Aye, Laird Torphichen, tis why I am asking ye, *beggin'* ye tae assist me in arrangin' this marriage. Ye could speak tae her father in m'stead, ye could explain tae him that I am a prince and—”

“I was told explicitly not tae discuss it, or ye would be removed from m’care. And how would I prove it tae Baron Cleish? Ye want me tae give him m’word? I might be held in contempt, scorned for the deceit—”

“Tis not deceit, ye ken the—”

“I daena ken. I hae been told a tale — ye forget, Artair, that I took ye in. I hae fostered ye, based on a tale told tae me years ago. Ye expect me tae share that tale, tae base m’word on it?” He shook his head. “And even if I could, Artair, arrange for yer marriage tae the daughter of a baron, ye are going tae, with my word, take a dowry from him? Ye expect me tae stake m’reputation on gainin’ ye a maiden’s dowry? I canna, ye are nothing but the fostered ward of a baron.”

“I need ye tae speak for me. I need ye tae vouch for m’title and—”

“How will ye provide for her? What riches are ye offering?”

I leveled m’eyes. “The wealth that m’father sends.”

He chuckled. “Ye are confused, Artair, *that* wealth is mine. Yer father sends it for yer care and upkeep.”

“So ye are advisin’ me, a *prince*, tae marry lowly. How dost ye think m’father will feel about this advice?”

“Frankly, Artair, ye might want tae get used tae the fact that ye winna ever see yer father again.”

I scowled and looked away.

Chapter 12 - Artair



Laird Torphichen raised his brow. “Ye never considered it before?”

“Aye, I hae considered it.”

“The way I see it, Artair, yer father might come for ye, if ye are patient, *then* ye will be in a position tae marry well, but he might not. Until *then* ye are just a man in my household. I can vouch for ye as one of my men-at-arms, but not beyond that. If ye daena hae the patience, if ye must marry now, twill hae tae be a lowly arrangement as I canna assure a laird with a title and lands that ye are worthy with yer own wealth and a title — twould be unscrupulous. I ken it daena seem fair, and that ye are young, ye want a wife tae keep ye warm — ye ought tae find a wife, but hae her fit yer station, as all ye hae are the items ye came with.”

I scowled, “What items? I hae long outgrown m’childhood clothes. Did I hae anything else in m’possession?”

He shrugged. “Yer father left that chest, but—”

I narrowed my eyes. “What chest, where?”

“Ye ken, I hae told ye of it, years ago... I suppose ye were verra young.”

“Where is it?”

“Yer father told me ye arna tae hae it until he sends for ye. He warned me tae keep it from ye. And truly... I had almost forgotten it, it has been hidden away for years.”

“Tis mine, I want it.”

“Aye, I ken ye do, but yer father said tae give it tae ye once he sent for ye, not before. He said twould be dangerous for ye tae have it—”

I scoffed. “Dangerous? For me tae hae the things he left for me? I daena care.”

“I was given strict orders, when he sends for ye, then I will give ye yer things.”

“Ye are following orders, but ye are keeping the chest from me perhaps well past when he would want me tae hae it — if he has forgotten me, as ye suggest, what harm comes of havin’ it *now*? Ye are too keen on the rules, m’laird, I am twenty four years auld, a prince with only a few possessions tae his name. Now ye remind me there is another, ye ought tae let me hae it, as it is one of the only things I own.”

“I ken ye daena hae much, but think, Artair, I hae it safely protected...” He exhaled. “Och ye arna going tae forget it, are ye? This is why I never mentioned it, I kent as soon as ye remembered it ye would want it—”

“Aye, I winna be able tae forget it. I am of age, it belongs tae me.”

“Ye are in a vile mood, Artair, demanding and carrying on — ye need tae apply yerself tae being useful, forget the chest, find a young woman who pleases ye, have a hearty meal—”

I glared at him. “I want m’things, now, or I will tell m’father tae cut ye off as soon as he comes and he *will* come.”

He shook his head, watching me, considering. Then he said, “Fine. Artair, fine. But not because ye are ungrateful and threatening, because ye are correct: if ye hae been forgotten tis fair tae give ye the chest.”

I nodded. “Thank ye, m’laird, my apologies for threatenin’ ye, I just... I am ready tae marry Baron Cleish’s daughter and I am not inclined tae hae someone stand in m’way...”

“Even the man who has taken ye in and fed and quartered ye for many long years?”

“Aye, I am bein’ ungrateful. I regret it immensely.”

He looked me over. “Well, I had ye trained tae be a man who would fight if he needs tae, but I am displeased that ye would turn against me.” He added “And ye winna tell yer father that I gave ye the chest early? We negotiated an agreement, I wouldna want tae be accused of breaking the contract after all this time.”

“I winna tell him, and how would he ken? And I will be the next king. If m’father daena fulfill his end of yer agreement, I will award ye a better title.”

“Tis a promise, Artair?”

“Aye, m’laird, tis m’word.”

He took a deep breath. “The chest is down in the dungeon, yer father made me store it under the ground.”

I stood and he passed me to the door. I followed him from his chambers, striding down a passageway, tae a stair, then down tae the storerooms. He pulled a torch from the wall, passin’ it tae me tae carry tae light our way. He led us through the armory and down the steps that went underground to his dungeon.



He sent away the guards and wiped the stones clean on a back wall, there was a barely noticeable crack around one of the stones.

He said, “Artair, would ye pull the stone away? M’age has cause m’joints tae become sore in the cold.”

“Aye.” I passed him the torch and found a place to get my finger and exerted force upon it, sliding one edge of the stone forward, I pulled until I got my fingers in the other edge. The stone was wedged verra tightly. He held the torch over m’shoulder as I shimmied the stone while pulling, until finally I drew it clear.

He said, “I never understood why he wanted it hidden so well, but he checked it tae make sure it was secure. It has been

hidden here in the darkness for years, unnoticed and undisturbed.”

I placed the stone down beside me and reached inside the hole. I felt around until I found a wooden chest and pulled it out.

On the lid was m’family’s crest.

He said, “Replace the stone, we daena want anyone tae ken it was there in case ye need tae hide it once more.”

I shoved the stone back intae its place, rubbing over it with a handful of dirt from the floor to once more obscure the crack. Then I kicked over our footprints tae obscure them in the dirt, until I decided that our actions were hidden.

He held the torch out tae the chest, looking at the crest. “I had almost forgotten twas here, it does seem time for ye tae hae it. Tis yers. But tis locked, I daena ken where the key is —”

“I hae a small key, m’father gave it tae me on a chain. I kept it all these years and never kent what it was for.”

He said, “Well, then this is yers, and ye can determine how tae secure it from now on.”

“Good, thank ye — when was the last time ye received a payment from m’father?”

“Twas a half year ago, at the regular time.”

“How are ye given it?”

“By messenger. I haena seen yer father in many long years.” Our voices echoed in the dark underground dungeon.

“Yet the payment has been on time?”

“Aye.”

“Good, this is why ye can believe m’father, when he says he is a king and that I am a prince and that he will come for me — he just haena yet, but he will.”

“Of course, Artair. I just daena want ye tae be disappointed if he...” He let his voice trail off as we turned and walked

from the dungeon

I carried the torch in one hand and had my chest tucked under my arm.

At the castle's main stairwell he said, "I need ye tae accompany Jamie on another journey next week."

I stood. "I winna be able tae, m'laird, I will be goin' tae visit Laird Cleish."

He said, "Hae ye heard nothing I said? I thought we were in agreement!"

"I heard all ye said, but I also ken the truth — I am a prince and I hae chosen m'bride. What kind of prince would I be if I allowed a lowly baron tae talk me from m'purpose?"

He humphed. "Young men are always the same, second guessin' the elders around them."

I said, "But thank ye for allowin' me tae make m'case, m'laird. Ye are correct, tis time tae accept m'station, tae ken m'place — from now on I will."

I bowed, and with the box tucked under my arm, left him tae return tae my room.

Chapter 13 - Artair



I found the key hanging from a small nail in the wall. I hadna known what it was for, but had kept it as one of the last memories of m'mother and father and our home.

The key fit in the lock and I opened the lid and looked down upon the contents. There wasna much. Inside was a ring and a leather roll.

I picked up the ring and pushed it ontae my left ring finger, sliding it over m'knuckle intae place. Twas gold, a signet ring, and on the flat surface was m'family's crest, the Campbells of Riaghalbane. There was a golden crown at the top.

It would help m'cause.

Then I picked up the leather roll and untied the string from around the middle. Inside were pages of parchment and as I unfurled them I found they were wrapped around a small device that rolled out ontae the table and then oddly righted itself.

I picked the apparatus up. Twas the size of my palm, cylindrical, made of metal with strange markings upon it... I dinna remember it, not truly, but it seemed familiar. I had seen it as a child. I rolled it back tae the table, watched it shift and roll but then right itself again.

Twas mysterious that it had been hidden, wrapped within the pages, within a leather roll — stored within a stone wall.

I looked on it for a moment, expectin' it tae do something new, but it appeared lifeless, but as I looked it came tae me —

a flash of recognition, though I dinna ken how it had somehow carried me here.

I had faint memories. I had been sent here long ago and the Baron believed my father's throne was a long distance away, but I could remember my mother saying, "We are time travelers, son."

And that we had come here on a storm.

I flattened the scrolled pages on the desk. There were two sheets, the top edges bound intae the leather roll.

The first page held m'family's emblazoned coat of arms, with our crown and shield. I ran m'finger down the page, a thistle wound up the sides, a boar's head at the top, just under the crown, our motto: *Majestas in Virtute*.

My father's voice came tae me. *Son, ye must hide, ye canna tell anyone who ye are.*

The Baron's voice: *...yer father said twould be dangerous for ye tae have it...*

I looked down on the pages, considering whether I could use them or not.

The scroll was an odd document, it seemed verra fine, an artisan had painted it for m'father, and even though it had been locked away, hidden in the wall of a dungeon for many long years, it seemed fresh and new, as if it had just been placed there.

I flipped the page for the next, and found there hand written in an older hand, and surrounded by illuminated drawings, an introduction of me, Artair, crown prince of Riaghalbane, and then under it, a list of the kings of Riaghalbane, inscribed on a drawing of an ornate tree. And at the bottom of the list the name, Artair.

This would do for provin' my worth.

I exhaled long and low.

They were mine. I had them in my possession and they attested my claim: I was a prince. Twas time tae assert it. I wouldna allow m'self tae be sentenced tae waiting for

m'father... while he attempted tae win back our lost throne — my grandfather had been deposed, but little did this matter. My father would win the throne back, perhaps he already had. And I was not young anymore. I could fight. Nae one needed tae protect me. I dinna need tae keep secrets anymore.

I would wait for nae man. I would prove m'worth and take the maiden.

I was Artair, next in line for the throne of Riaghalbane,

That evening I packed tae leave, then carried the loads down tae the stables tae hae it readied for the morn'. Jamie found me as I was headed tae the stables with sacks and bundles upon my shoulders. "Where ye goin'?" He stopped short. "Nae... Artair, are ye goin' where I think ye are?"

"Aye, I am goin' tae get the maiden."

"Ye hae lost yer reason, I thought ye sensible!"

I laughed. "Did ye truly think it, or did ye just hope I would be? I canna think on a single sensible thing I hae ever done. A long history of seducin' and prowlin' and drinking and fightin' battles that I canna truly win, nae, sensible and Artair are not usually two words we put taegether."

He followed me as I walked. I said, "I suppose ye arna goin' tae help me carry this load?"

"I canna in good faith help ye on this mission, Artair, tis foolhardy. I must remain resolutely against it."

We made it tae the stables and I left my bags with the stable boy. He promised tae hae m'horse packed for my journey at dawn.



Then Jamie and I crossed the courtyard headin' for the evening meal in the Great Hall. He asked, "So why are ye doin' it, Artair?"

“Because I hae tae, Jamie, I hae tae get her for m’own. As soon as I set eyes upon her twas as if I saw m’future and she was a part of it.”

He watched me as I spoke, then he shook his head. “Her father winna allow it, and though ye think ye are persuasive, ye are an arse and a braggart and I feel ye are unlikely tae sway him.”

“I plan tae be on m’best behavior, perfectly considerate and gentlemanly—”

“Are ye telling me, Artair, that ye were capable of being a gentleman all this time and yet decided tae instead be a coarse brute?”

We entered the Great Hall.

I said, “Aye, this is how I kept yer spirits up, Jamie — surely ye dinna want a dull friend? Instead ye hae a mate who gives ye loads of difficulties.”

Chapter 14 - Artair



Rabbie and Sam and the other men joined us and we sat around the table in the crowded hall. Jamie raised a glass and announced to all who could hear, “Artair has just informed me that he is leaving in the morn, tae travel across Alba, tae win a maiden!”

Everyone raised their glasses and called out, “Slàinte!” It echoed through the room as everyone drank.

Rabbie asked, “How do ye intend tae win her, Artair—?”

Jamie interrupted tae say, “He is going tae persuade her father that he is the best man for a husband.”

All m’ friends laughed.

Rabbie shook his head, “Och nae, I thought twas a nightmare. I thought when we returned ye would see the folly of it, Artair. Ye canna win her! Also ye are just returned, ye want tae ride out again?”

Sam said, “We daena hae tae go with ye, do we? We just got home, the rain is still comin’ down, I am wet through, and verra cold—”

Jamie said, “Ye ought tae dry yerself, change yer clothes — ye hae come tae dinner while ye are still wet?”

Sam twisted the bottom of his kilt, a few drops on the floor. “Ye say it as if tis easy, Jamie, twas wet! I am wet through, it rained on us for days, we deserve at least a fortnight full of casks of ale and bountiful feasts afore we go on another journey. This is the *least* we need.”

Rabbie raised his glass. “Tae a warm bed, our head upon a maiden’s lap.”

We all raised our glasses. “Slàinte!”

Plates appeared before us. Sam looked down on his meal, hungrily. “Besides I am still famished from the last journey.”

I said, “Daena worry, Sam, tis my wife I am goin’ tae win, I will make the journey on m’own.”

Rabbie said, “Tis because ye like all the glory for yerself.”

“Aye, that I do. Ye ken me well.”

Jamie said, “Ye are certain, Artair? I ken we are grumblin’ but if ye need us tae ride with ye, say the word — we will ride.”

“Nae, I told her when I would be there, I must leave now tae make it on time. I canna let her down, she is countin’ on it.”

“How do ye ken it? It has been months, such a bonny maiden, she is likely married by now.”

“I ken she is waiting for me, she is going tae hae roasted venison on the table, and I will convince her father tae agree, tis determined.”

Jamie clapped me on the back. “I almost wish I could come along tae see ye make yer case.”

Rabbie said, “Ye could grab her and whisk her away—”

Jamie’s eyes went wide. “Tis a thing he—? Och nae, Artair, promise me, nae, she is the daughter of a baron! Promise me ye winna, och, ye are the ward of Laird Torphichen, I daena ken how we would extricate our good name and lofty title from the trouble ye would cause.”

“I am not goin’ tae carry her away.”

“Good.”

“Unless he winna listen tae me on it.”

I raised my glass as Jamie groaned and we all said, “Slàinte!”



The next mornin' while a snow began tae fall, I left for Cleish's castle. The trip would be cold and would last through the morrow.



I found a village inn at nightfall and procured a room. I drank a glass of whisky and had a warm bowl of stew, then I turned intae m'room, said m'prayers, and climbed under the thick covers of the bed. I was chilled through after the ride, more snow comin' down. I needed tae rest, on the morrow I wanted tae arrive afore mid-day.

I was up before dawn, got m'horse from the stables, and set out. There was a blisterin' wind, and m'pace was slow, but I was determined tae be there for the evenin' meal.



I saw lights flickering within a few small windows, and the wind blew me toward the small gate, thinking about how Cleish's walls were nae high enough tae protect the beautiful maiden within.

Chapter 15 - Artair



As I approached a guard called through the gate, the wind whipping his words away, “What business hae ye here?”

“I hae been invited tae feast by Mistress Cleish. Och, tis frigid out here, may I come within the gates while ye find out?”

A man was sent tae ask, and the guard agreed that it was too cold tae remain outside of the gates, the gate was pulled up and I was bid inside the walls.

I rushed in, my horse stamping in the chill air, the walls thankfully cutting some of the cold wind. I saw across the castle way tae the tower house, a door open tae the cold, and standing just within it, Gwynedd. The man who had been sent tae speak tae her approached, and they stood there, discussing, then the man turned and gestured, “He can enter!”

I was directed tae the stables, and as I crossed the courtyard, saw the door shut, where Gwynedd had just been standing. I dismounted and directed the stable boy, while my hands were clamped under my arms, the pain within them sharp and achin’. Snowflakes were blustering around the yard, wind whistling above the walls.

My footsteps crunched in the thin layer of frost on the ground. I noticed a few men sitting on the roof of the tower, their heads just above the parapet. *Och, I wouldna want tae be a guard tonight.*

I was joined by two men who led me across the yard. “Where are ye takin’ me?”

“Tae speak with the Baron in the Great Hall.”

I slowed, gesturing toward the door where I had seen Gwynedd. “Might we go through this door? Tis closer, and m’ride has been long — I need out of the cold.”

“Aye twould be better.” One of the guardsmen pulled that door open and the wind pushed us through, tae find Gwynedd, waiting in the shadows within.

The guardsman in front abruptly stopped. “Och nae, Mistress Cleish, our apologies, we dinna ken...”

Her eyes met mine in the dimness. Then she addressed the guard, “Where are ye takin’ the guest?”

“We are accompanyin’ him tae the Baron.”

She nodded, “I was headed that way.”

She led us, feignin’ disinterest, actin’ as if she had never laid eyes upon me before.

I kept m’eyes down, but took furtive glances at her long neck and a glimpse of fine pale skin behind her ear. She was wearin’ a wool cloak draped around her, covering a fine yellow dress.

My hands were pained from the cold. I peeled off m’gloves, and shook them tae get the blood flowin’.

At this she slowed her pace down the hall. “Are ye well, master?”

“Twas verra chill outside, m’hands are frozen from the ride.”

She nodded and we continued on.

I watched her walk, her pace short-stepped, as if she floated across the floor. The men and I had tae slow our pace tae match hers in the frigid walkway.

Would she turn? Could I get her tae turn?

She twisted her head, her breath puffin' before her, "Did ye say something, Master?"

"Nae."

"Oh." She continued to walk, we followed.

I whispered, disregardin' the men beside me, "I told ye I would come."

She nodded again as we came tae the double doors of the Great Hall. We paused and Gwynedd asked the guards tae continue on, that we needed tae speak for a moment.

They remained at the door and we turned away.

She whispered, "I dinna think ye would come."

I shrugged. "I am a man of m'word, even when it almost killed me." I held out m'hands, pink and pained looking.

She raised her hands almost tae touch mine, but quickly pulled them away and put them back under her cloak.

She raised her chin, the brisk cold givin' a high color tae her cheek. I was completely madly in love with her.

She said, "I want ye tae ken.... there is a man here—"

I said, "Did ye break yer promise?"

"Nae... though I think if ye remember, I never promised ye anything."

I raised m'brow. "So what kind of man is this that ye are warnin' me of?"

"My father's choice for me, a Baron, he is auld and ugly—"

I smiled. "Nae handsome like me?"

She scoffed. "Ye look like a bear that forgot tae hibernate, a foolish winter bear who is trudgin' around in the forest long after he ought tae hae gotten somewhere warm."

"Nae one has ever mistaken me for someone who does what he ought, Mistress Cleish."

“This ye hae made verra clear.”

I looked at her long, she made no move tae go intae the hall.

I said, “So, yer father has chosen a husband for ye, but yet ye are standin’ outside the hall, speaking privately with me?”

“Aye,” she gulped and exhaled, a shift of her face, she bit her lip, a tremulousness tae her skin, a shiver in the cold, a nervousness in her words, “I just... wanted ye tae ken, twill be a hard case for ye tae make, ye ought be warned, and perhaps ye best not try, this is... I daena want tae cause ye any trouble.”

I frowned, “Och, Gwynedd, ye arna causin’ me trouble. Aye, I was on a long wet journey, I returned home, had a day of warmth and then set out in a blizzard tae meet ye, as I promised, and aye, even with gloves m’fingers are achin’ from cold and ye hae yet tae allow me near a fire, but tis not trouble. I would gladly suffer it for the chance tae watch the shiver of yer skin, there on the edge of yer throat.”

She blushed.

I continued, “The color risin’ up yer cheek, twas worth it.”

A moment of shame crossed her face. “Och nae, I hae gone scarlet. I wish I would not, I wish I could keep from turning red.”

“Ye are beautiful.”

She flushed even more.

“I will make m’case tae yer father, I will tell him I am a bear come tae take his only... ye are his only daughter?”

“Aye.”

“Och nae.” I sighed, then shrugged, “I will say I am a bear come tae take his only daughter tae m’cave for livin’ a bear life.”

“That sounds tae be a dreadful offer.”

“Yet here ye still stand, allowin’ me tae speak tae ye on it.”

“Master, the fact that I am out in the passage speakin’ tae a scoundrel instead of goin’ intae m’father’s Great Hall tae charm a laird with lands and a title, does not speak tae m’wisdom, but rather m’lack of good judgment.”

I said, “Perhaps... but the case could be made that ye daena want tae charm the laird because that would make ye untrue tae yer husband, who ye charmed already — ye made me a promise, Gwynedd, so ye standin’ here, this, makes ye honest and forthright, wise and dutiful. Seems tae be a good case of yer judgement.”

She shook her head, meeting m’eyes. “How do ye speak tae me so...? Ye call yerself m’husband, yet we hae barely spoken tae each other and...” Her voice trailed off.

The door opened quickly and another guard put his head out, “Mistress, is he botherin’ ye? Yer father wants yer company.”

“Nae, but... aye, I will go in now.” The doors were opened. Her chin lifted, and she walked into the Great Hall.

I whispered, “Ye ken, ye feel it as well.”

I followed her intae the Great Hall.

Chapter 16 - Gwynedd



1578, THE DAY BEFORE THE YULE FEAST
THE GREAT HALL, CLEISH CASTLE

Twas a complicated moment and I wished I were the kind of lass who might swoon, and be sent tae her room for respite, but alas! I had always been the type tae keep m'feet under me. I was used tae bein' a part of the discussion, because m'father had been useless for many long years since m'mother had passed. It had become clear that she had been the person who led him tae his best decisions, now he was remarried tae someone who dinna offer good counsel, and he was untethered from sense.

I had tae arrange and plan and manage, all the while pretendin' as if I werna arrangin' and plannin'. Twas exhaustin'.

And when he did hae an idea, like the idea of my marryin' Laird Dudley, he was verra difficult tae turn. I had learned twas better tae cut him off afore he settled on an idea — like rushing tae the kitchen tae settle the menu before he had a chance.



This was the evening meal before the morrow's feast. We were serving bannocks, cheese, and a barley soup with kale and bacon. I wished I had asked for something more hearty now that we had a guest who had come in from the cold, but at least twas warm and I dinna want tae bother Raso. He was working verra hard tae get the feast done for the morrow.

I also wondered if I had dressed well enough, as I now had *two* men there at once tae ask for m'hand. Just within the door, my lady's maid pulled the cloak from m'shoulders and hurried it away. I smoothed my dress and made sure the lace of m'collar was right, taking furtive glances at the guest as he had his cloak taken to the side, leaving him in a coat over a kilt, a sword at his hip.

I then took a deep breath and crossed the room tae m'father's side, tryin' tae ignore the footsteps of Artair behind me.

I scanned the room, many familiar faces standing around the table waiting for us all tae arrive. My father with his young wife beside him, and then on his other side Laird Dudley, some threads of gray in his hair, his face pinched, expressing irritation about everything. The Durys, my cousins, a family of five, were in attendance. They had arrived three days ago, just before the snow, and would be here until mid January. M'uncle from the coast had been here all month, and my grandmother who was hard of hearin' and verra confused lived with us all the time. I swept my eyes down the table, makin' sure all the places were set. All told there would be twelve served, including Laird Dudley— My eyes settled on him and then I looked away, I dinna like the look of him.

Och, I couldna bear it.

My father stood beside his chair, and whispered, looking past me at Artair, "Good heavens, Gwynedd, ye hae been out in the hall for long moments! Ye are flushed and look overcome!"

"Nae... I am... nae. But aye, we hae a new guest, I was... seein' tae arrangements for him."

Artair bowed his head. "Laird Cleish, I am pleased—"

My father narrowed his eyes.

Artair continued, "M'name is Artair Campbell of Baron Torphichen's household."

I frowned, realizing I had not heard his clan name before.

My father narrowed his eyes even more. “What business dost ye hae—?”

I said, “Father, I promised Master Campbell he could warm his hands by the fire.”

“Of course, it seems he brought all the snows of Alba in with him.”

Artair chuckled. “Aye, Laird Cleish, and I believe I am meltin’ upon yer rug.”

My father waved him away, “Go tae the fire then.”



I watched as Artair stood at the hearth, his hands forward in the heat of the flame, warming himself, then he turned around and put his rear tae the fire and gazed around the room as if he owned it.

M’ father whispered, “What on earth is his business?” Then leaned over tae ask Laird Dudley, “Hae ye ever met him?”

Dudley, whose ruff around his throat looked too tight, seeming to be the reason for his high, pinched voice, said, “How would I hae met him, Cleish? He is one of Torphichen’s men, not certain I would invite him tae eat in my Great Hall.”

My father looked distressed.

I said, “Tis all well, father, he is here tae meet with ye, and he needs tae be fed. Tis verra cold outside.”

He nodded, “Aye that it is, but was our meeting scheduled?”

I continued on, “This is all it is — verra cold, tis all that matters, and he is a traveler who has asked for shelter and a warm meal, tis verra well that ye are sharin’ yer table with him as ye are gracious and welcomin’ tae all.”

A smile spread across m’ father’s face. “Aye, well explained, daughter. See, Dudley, what a fine hostess she is? Now, daughter, I must introduce ye tae Laird Dudley. Laird,

this is m' daughter, Mistress Gwynedd, m' only daughter, I am sure ye can see she is verra fine..."

I glanced across the way at Artair, heatin' his rear near the hearth, his brow up, a broad smile as he watched me squirm under the attention of Laird Dudley, who right then plucked his fingers through the end of his moustache, nervously.

"Aye," Laird Dudley appraised me as if I was a suckling pig at the market. "She is verra fine, bred well."

"Aye, her mother came from a good family, she passed young, a riding accident... but had many merits and was generally admired."

Heat rushed up my face, color on my cheeks. The eyes of all these cousins and relatives, on me. I bit the inside of my cheek tae keep from stamping my feet and rushin' from the room.

Laird Dudley said, "I see she blushes modestly, she will suit me well—"

Artair interrupted, clapping his hands taegether, and loudly said, "Well, I see we hae a good evening ahead of us!"

He strode toward the table. "Where will ye be seated, Mistress Cleish?"

All the women took their seats around the long table, but I wasna sure, as I usually sat beside m' father, but Laird Dudley was standing behind my chair, and gesturing at the one beside his, giving me a look that seemed tae mean, "Well, sit down lass, what is wrong with you?"

I sighed and sat in the chair so he could push it forward. He then sat down, sweeping his coat back and perching primly on his own chair.

Artair sank into the chair on my left, adjusting his sword to his side, looking verra manly.

We all bowed our heads and prayed before the meal.

I was verra conscious of Artair's shoulder just beside mine.

Chapter 17 - Gwynedd



1578, THE DAY BEFORE THE YULE FEAST
THE GREAT HALL, CLEISH CASTLE

Once the prayer was over, we waited tae be served, and Artair had a way of watching my face, intently, then sweeping his eyes around the room, alternatin' between watching me, then scanning the room, then looking back tae me, as if wanting tae learn all he could about me.

Without thinking I waved a hand in front of my face, as I was very warm.

Laird Dudley asked, "Are ye ill, Mistress Cleish?"

I shook my head.

"Good, ye are young, ye are full of health. This is verra good, portends for a fine future."

Artair said, boldly, "Och, we ought tae hae a drink, where are the drinks?"

He shifted in his seat and looked around for a servant, but as he raised his hand tae call her over, his hand brushed mine. Twas a daring move, unacceptable, but it sent a spark through me — a pewter goblet was placed in front of me, and I hurriedly drank several gulps.

Bowls with the barley soup were placed in front of us. Bannocks were on trenchers down the middle of the table. Artair held a spoon in one hand and a knife in the other. "Och this is verra fine, tis yer plannin', Mistress Cleish?"

I said, "This is just a simple meal, the feast will be much larger on the morrow."

He lifted his spoon to his lips and sipped. “Ye will make a fine wife someday.”

Laird Dudley leaned across me and asked, “Who are ye again?”

“I am Artair Campbell, dinna we meet just a moment ago? Perhaps nae.” He reached forward with his knife and speared a bannock and brought it tae his bowl and said, “I am Artair Campbell, and I ken ye are a baron, here lookin’ tae find a wife within the walls of Cleish Castle.”

“I am Laird Dudley, and ye will address me with more respect.”

“Aye, I suppose I shall, nae offense meant, I was simply statin’ what I had learned since arrivin’ in Laird Cleish’s Great Hall. I am a studier of nature, human nature.”

My father asked, “How do ye study it?”

“I am a warrior. If ye must draw a sword upon a man,” he swiped his knife through butter and began smearin’ it in animated thrusts upon his bannock, “ye first hae tae take the measure of him, but m’apologies, we are not in battle. We are havin’ a friendly meal, I forget m’self.” Then he smiled. “And as I am seated below the salt, I ought not interfere in yer conversation, I will instead converse with the cousins.”

He shifted so he was facin’ the other end of the table, and we all ate a bit in silence, until Laird Dudley addressed my father, “Yer daughter is verra fine, she would make a good wife, on the morrow I will meet ye in yer office—”

I gasped.

All eyes turned tae me, including Artair.

I pretended tae cough.

Artair raised his brow, questioning.

I took a long drink of ale tae clear m’throat.

Laird Dudley continued, “...tomorrow I will make my case.”

My father said, “Good, good, I will be awaiting yer offer.”

I wiped my mouth with a linen cloth, verra upset by the conversation.

Artair said, his eyes on my face, “It must be a verra fine offer as she is a beauty, unparalleled, I would ken as I hae traveled a great deal as one of Torphichen’s men. Did ye hear we traveled all over Alba last month for m’laird’s business? In all that time I never saw a maiden as lovely as Mistress Cleish.” He put a hunk of bannock in his mouth and chewed, grinning.

My father’s eyes narrowed. “When did ye meet my daughter?”

“At Laird Kincardine’s castle—”

“My late wife’s sister’s husband.”

“Aye, a good and welcoming man, a fine family, a strong castle — twas a verra good visit. Did ye enjoy yer visit, Mistress Cleish?”

“Aye, I had a fine time.”

Laird Dudley said tae my father, “What is the menu for the feast?”

He said, “Daughter, will ye recount the menu ye hae planned?”

My cheek grew hot as I spoke, “We will hae a fish soup served with eel pie, pigeon pie, and bannocks with butter, and then a...” I glanced at Artair, and continued, “a roast, and turnips with a few sauces, Raso has been cooking all day, and after, there will be a Twelfth Night cake served alongside wild cherry custard and quinces in sweet syrup. Raso has also promised tae serve m’favorite dessert, a light, flaky cream puff—”

Laird Dudley asked, “I am lookin’ forward tae roast pheasant.”

My father seemed tae pout. “Och nae, m’apologies, Dudley, the feast was already set for venison, I couldna change it at such a late hour.”

Artair looked directly at my face. His smile was broad.
“*Venison*, Mistress Cleish? Och, tis well done.”

Chapter 18 - Gwynedd



1578, THE DAY BEFORE THE YULE FEAST
THE GREAT HALL, CLEISH CASTLE

Artair took the last bite of his food, pushed the plate away, and continued as if he were speaking on about something and we were all waiting for him tae finish, "...and *then* after my visit tae yer brother-in-law's castle, I journeyed tae Canmore and tae Stirling, and for a time in Glasgow, but I wanted tae get home promptly, as I had an important errand I had promised tae fulfill."

He had a way of speaking, his voice low and deep, that caused all tae listen intently, tae give him their captivated attention, he looked around at the table. "Twas an important promise, does anyone want tae ken what twas?"

One of my cousins asked, "What was yer promise, Artair?"

"Och aye, a question valiantly lobbed from down below the salt. Good fellow, what is yer name?"

"I am Ian Dury."

"Well fine, Ian Dury, I will tell ye." He picked up his glass and stood, pushing his chair away. He raised his glass tae m'father's end of the table, then raised it tae me. "I promised Mistress Cleish that I would come for her."

The table erupted in commotion. My father said, "Dear God, what is this madness?"

Artair grinned.

Laird Dudley's face drained of color, he addressed m'father, "Cleish, what does this mean? Are ye... we had an arrangement! Ye told me she was unencumbered!"

I looked down at my hands.

M'father said, "She *is* unencumbered, she inna... Gwynedd! Are ye...? Did ye make a promise tae this man?"

Laird Dudley said, "She is a harlot."

Artair growled, "Ye take it back — she is m'future *wife*! Ye will speak on her with respect!"

My father said, "What is happening, Gwynedd — answer me, did ye make this man a promise?"

I shook my head.

Artair said, "Laird Cleish, permit me tae speak."

My father's wife said, "Ye haena asked for permission tae speak the entire time ye hae been here."

"Aye, Madame, I am incorrigible and I fear I am ruinin' the meal, but, please allow me tae say, nae, the Mistress Cleish did not promise me anything. She has been nothing but forthright and chaste, and dutiful tae her father in all matters, but... I promised *her*. I promised her that I would return and ask her father if I might marry her."

Laird Dudley said, "I hae already spoken for Mistress Cleish! Arrangements hae been made!"

Artair put down his goblet and put his hands out. "Did I not just hear ye say, Laird Dudley, that ye would speak tae her father in the morn — dinna I hear it?" He looked around the table.

My cousins all nodded.

My grandmother said, "What did the man say?"

My uncle whispered, "He wants tae marry yer granddaughter."

She took a sip of her soup. "Oh, good, he is a handsome lad."

Artair continued, "Thank ye, Madame, but tae continue m'case, as this is the night before the morrow, I am making my case *now*, makin' me *first*."

Laird Dudley said, “Ye are a scoundrel and a fool, ye are ill bred and lowborn.”

Artair shrugged. “I hae been called a scoundrel before, it has been true, but I bristle at the idea of bein’ called a fool, I was wise enough tae see Gwynedd and—”

My father gasped, “Ye call her by her first name?”

Artair shrugged again, “I hae promised m’self tae her, tis a liberty I hae taken as I hope she will be m’wife.”

My father said, “Daughter, what say ye? Ye spoke tae this man? Ye kent his intentions?”

I said, quietly, “He told me of them, father, but I... I dinna believe it tae be true.”

Artair said, “She had yet tae learn, I am always a man of my word.”

My father pushed his plate away, “This is verra irregular, ye are, as suggested by Dudley, a clear scoundrel, and a thief, usin’ deceit tae pull m’d daughter intae yer underworld, a demon!”

Artair said, “Och nae, daena think it, I am—”

My father, angrier than I had ever seen, pushed his chair back and stood. “Ye are a man from Laird Torphichen’s clan, yet call yerself a Campbell, ye dare tae attempt tae entice my daughter tae take up with ye?”

Artair said, “Aye, sire, but I am not as I seem—”

“Ye are a lowly man of the lowest type, ye daena hae a title, ye—”

Artair said simply, “I do.”

All the rest of us at the table were staring from Artair’s face tae m’father’s face, back and forth. The meal over, we were rapt with attention at this spectacle, and I was the object of discussion, yet I dinna hae anything tae say. I dinna understand what was happening, except Artair had come for me, just as he said he would.

And he was standin' for me, and he had a verra kind smile and a way of talkin' that commanded everyone's attention. I had come tae admire him.

My father said, "What dost ye mean, 'I *do*'?"

"First, Laird Cleish, I must speak with Mistress Cleish, I am not usually prone tae caution but as I am speaking out for her hand, I feel I ought tae be cautious, I wouldna want tae lose her in haste or boldness — Mistress Cleish, I heard that there would be venison served at the feast?"

"Aye."

"Did ye arrange it?"

I raised my chin, and spoke out. "Aye, I asked for it, specifically, as it is m'favorite."

He grinned. "Och, tis mine as well, thank ye, Mistress Cleish." He sort of shrugged, looked directly at m'father, and said, "I do hae a title. I hae been secretly livin' as a ward of Torphichen, because I must keep m'title secret as m'father's throne has many enemies—"

The table erupted with everyone speaking at once.

Laird Dudley said, "Yer father's *throne*?"

"Aye, I am the prince of Riaghalbane."

I asked him, "Ye are a prince?"

"Aye, m'lady, I am a prince — well, my kingdom has been at war over the throne, but my grandfather and m'great-grandfather were kings, tis in m'bloodline."

Laird Dudley said, "Where is Riaghalbane? Ye expect us tae believe this?"

My father said, "Do ye hae proof?"

"Aye." Artair pulled a ring from his finger, and passed it tae me. "This is the crest of m'father's throne."

I turned it around in my hands. It was gold and had a boar wearing a crown etched in the top. Then Artair pulled a small leather roll from his sporran, and passed it tae my father. My

father unwrapped the leather tie and spread it open, he pressed the edges down so it dinna furl. He read for a moment.

I looked at it upside down, there was a crown at the top, a great deal of writing, I watched my father as his finger trailed down the page. Laird Dudley beside me looked over his arm, but scowled mostly as it was difficult tae read in the waning light.

I looked back down at the ring. It was lovely, I hadna expected tae see a gold ring upon the hand of Artair.

I asked again, under m'breath, "Ye are a prince?"

"Aye, tis true."

My father rolled the pages up within the leather and wrapped the ties around it. "Ye are askin' for m'daughter's hand?"

"Aye, Laird Cleish, I offer her a throne beside mine, if we can win this infernal war, but if not, we hae riches enough, a castle with strong walls, and servants—"

Laird Dudley said, "Ye hae nae riches, ye said ye are in hiding — tis one thing tae say ye hae a throne, yet ye are deposed, living away from yer kingdom. Ye are not a prince if ye daena hae a crown, if yer father has lost yer crown."

"Tis true, I daena hae much, but I will share it with Gwynedd, and I will—"

Laird Dudley stood and said, "I am leaving."

He wiped his face and threw the cloth tae the table and began stalking away. My father ran after him, "Dudley!" They spoke in hushed voices near the door and then left the Great Hall.

Chapter 19 - Gwynedd



1578, THE DAY BEFORE THE YULE FEAST
THE GREAT HALL, CLEISH CASTLE

Artair looked around. Then he sat down in his chair, adjusted his sword, and said, “Och, I think that went as well as can be expected.”

My uncle escorted my grandmother from the room. My father’s wife stood, said, “Good night, Mistress Cleish,” and left the room.

My cousins stood and left. My cousin Marisa asked, “Dost ye need me tae stay, Lady Gwynedd?”

“Nae, my father will return and there are guards.”

She bowed her head and followed her family, leaving us mostly alone in the Great Hall except for the guards at the door and a few servants passing through, clearing the plates away.

Artair watched me as I pushed my plate away, barely finished, and put my napkin beside it.

Finally he said, “Ye hae been verra quiet, Mistress Cleish, I daena think ye are often so demure.”

“I am troubled and... wary.”

“Och nae, of yer Artair?”

I met his eyes. I nodded.

“Hae I upset ye?”

“Aye, ye hae, ye surprised me, ye hae asked for my hand in front of m’whole family, causin’ distress, and ye hae been

deceitful — ye are a prince? I feel as if the world has been upturned.”

Artair nodded.

He folded his hands on the table in front of him and studied his thumb then said, “Mistress Cleish, please forgive me for causin’ ye turmoil, my deepest regrets for any trouble I hae caused. My dearest once told me that I am like a bear, and I believe I hae been lumbering around yer Great Hall in a fit of bearishness.”

I shook my head. “And by ‘my dearest’ ye mean...?”

“Och, I meant ‘m’love’.” He teased, “Hae ye met her? She is a beauty. She has a fine wit, a spark in her eye, she inna afraid of me and will tell me when needs be, ‘Artair, ye ought tae behave!’ And I ken, then, I *must* behave because tae hae her turn her high regard from me would destroy me.”

“Och, ye are full of...” I shook my head, then asked, “This ‘m’love’, she holds ye in high regard?”

“Aye, she believes I am the best of men. I am a prince, but she believed me tae be a fine man afore she kent I was a prince. She believed I was lowborn and still provided me my favorite foods— Och, Gwynedd, how she adores me.”

I folded my hands in my lap and sighed. “Ye hae asked me tae marry ye.”

“Aye.”

“Ye are a prince?”

“There is a far away kingdom, Riaghalbane. My father is the king, Niall the First, but my cousin Eduard has usurped our throne. My father has been at war for long years over it. I was sent here tae be trained in battle and the arts of warfare — but... I want ye tae ken, I will make sure ye are taken care of, that ye will hae all the fineries ye could want.”

I raised my chin, “I hae all I could want or need, that is not at all what I... I... where would we live?”

A smile turned up the corner of his mouth, but he continued on. “I believe we could live in any number of

castles here or return tae Riaghalbane or..." He asked, "Are ye agreein' tae m'proposal?"

"Would I hae a title?"

"Aye, ye would hold the title of Princess."

"...och, it daena sound like me at all."

"Ye will come tae appreciate it, as ye hae come tae appreciate me."

I shook my head, "I daena appreciate ye, ye are the most vexatious man I hae ever met."

"But och, how ye love me."

My eyes went wide. "This is... this is not... true."

He pushed back his chair and dropped to his knees, and pulled my hands against his chest, he was leaning on my skirts.

I exclaimed, "This is a liberty!"

He nodded, and bowed his head. "Aye, Mistress Cleish, Gwynedd, this is a liberty. I hae loved ye since the day I laid eyes upon ye. I want ye tae marry me, tae become my wife, tae hae wee lads and lassies. I would like six, dost ye think twould be a good number?"

"Six bairns?"

"Not all at once."

I laughed.

He raised my hand to his lips and kissed my knuckles. "If ye ask me tae be a better man, tae be quiet, tae be respectful and dignified, I would, anything for yer comfort and well-being."

"If I asked ye tae be less bear I think ye might attempt it, but I doubt ye could do it for more than a day."

"A whole day! Imagine how much I must love ye tae go a whole day without once being a bear!"

I smiled.

He kissed my fingers again.

“Will ye marry me, Gwynedd?”

I forgot all about my father and the auld laird or anything else and I said, “Artair, I feel as if I hae always known ye, as if ye hae always been mine, Aye... Artair, I will marry ye.”

He kissed my hands, and pulled himself up and kissed my lips, ever so slightly a press, then he pulled away and sat on his chair.

“Ye hae made me the happiest prince in Riaghalbane—”

Just then my father walked intae the room, he was frantic. “There is a large group of men at the gate!”

Artair asked, “How many guards do ye hae?”

“There are eight men altaegether.”

“Och, this is not nearly enough.”

I stood, I could hear horses coming.

Artair drew his sword. He asked me, “Dost ye hae a safe room, Gwynedd?”

“Aye, near the nursery.”

“Are ye armed?”

“I hae a knife.”

“Good, go there, I will come get ye as soon as the danger has passed.”

I rushed from the room tae go meet m’father’s wife and our cousins in our safe room on the upper level.

Chapter 20 - Artair



1578, THE DAY BEFORE THE YULE FEAST
THE COURTYARD, CLEISH CASTLE

I went out tae the gate tae lend m'self tae the guards there in the dark, freezin' night, tae find a group of men on horseback. The leader yelled, "We are lookin' for Artair!"

I stepped forward. "What business dost ye hae with Artair?"

"I hae a message from his father, Niall, King of Riaghalbane."

I said, "Tell me the message and I will deliver it tae Artair."

The man laughed. "Ye hae the look of him and the attitude."

I narrowed my eyes, "How dost ye ken Artair?"

He dismounted his horse in front of me. "I think we hae gotten off on the wrong foot, m'apologies, Artair, I sound combative and warlike, I dinna mean it — daena tell yer father that I frightened all these people."

He was actin' as if he were charmin', but was steppin' closer — his manners covering a malice underneath.

I kept m'sword drawn and close.

He said, "We could put down our weapons. Ye could invite us inside. I hae a message, I would like tae relay it and tis cold out here."

From the corner of my eyes I saw the men of the house sheath their swords.

I said, “Ye still haena told me who ye are.”

“I am yer father’s general, ye daena recognize me? But I suppose it makes sense as ye were verra young when ye were sent away.”

I peered through the night trying tae make out his face in the moonlight, about twenty years had passed, he was altered.

“How did ye find me?” I looked around at his men, armed, ready tae strike, though he claimed tae be on m’father’s side.

“Ye hae told people who ye are, ye are in danger, men are comin’ for ye—”

I took a step back, shaking m’head. “Nae—”

He was menacin’ as he neared. Then he lunged and the next thing I knew there was a sharp pain in m’neck, not a blade, but a wee needle, and I took a step, slashin’ m’sword, but the world spun around me, m’next step sent me crumpling tae the ground.

Chapter 21 - Artair



Gathered that night in Nor's Great Hall, having just finished a fine meal, exhausted from the long day of work travel and raising the howitzer on the walls, I had been asked tae tell a story, so I had stood in the middle of the rug, holdin' m'mug and said, "I can only tell this tale of woe if ye promise that the ale will flow intae m'mug throughout, so I winna become despondent."

Nor said, "I promise, Artair, the ale will flow, now tell the story afore I change m'mind and ask Aenghus tae tell his story instead. His story is the one about the Legendary Quest and the Wee Rabbit, which we hae heard a hundred times already."

Aenghus groaned, "Ye winna let me live that one down, the Legendary Quest is a *great* tale of valiant battles, and the beast was much larger than a rabbit!" He turned tae his wife, "Ailsa, dinna I tell ye twas a big beast? If Malcolm were here, he would agree! Twas a beast with ferocious fangs!"

Nor laughed, shaking his head, he loudly whispered, "Twas a wee rabbit."

Aenghus waved his hands, "He might hae been wee, but he was elusive. I will go on the hunt again this year — dost ye want me tae tell the story?"

Nor had said, "Hurry Artair, he is close tae tellin' the Endless Quest for the Wee Beastie, and twill put us fast asleep in boredom."

They all laughed.

I had said, “Where shall I start?” I sipped from m’ mug, and then I began.

Twass a long story about finding Gwynedd in her uncle’s castle, declarin’ m’intentions, finishin’ m’duties, and then ridin’ tae her at her father’s household, Cleish Castle. Then about how I had valiantly declared m’self tae her and had asked her tae be my wife.

And how she had accepted my request and then I had been torn from her arms.

As I was telling this story tae all in Duke Nor’s Great Hall, I had actually fallen tae m’knees, and collapsed over ontae the rug. Lyin’ on m’back, I had sloshed some of m’ale on m’shirt, but held the mug up, tryin’ not tae spill, valiantly.

Some of my audience applauded.

Aenghus whistled. Charlie cheered.

I raised my head, “I was done for, dragged away from Gwynedd, totally insensible!” I drew m’ mug tae m’lips and tried tae drink from it while prone, sloshing a great splash down my cheek, then said, “I woke up in m’kingdom, centuries later.”

Charlie said, “Cool story, bro.”

Artair raised his mug. “Aye, I kent ye would appreciate it, Charlie, and twass verra cold that night.”

Chapter 22 - Livvy



Charlie said, “But how did you get taken away? You’re a big guy, I get you were outnumbered but, did you go down fighting?”

Artair scowled, still lying on the rug. “Nae, after I felt a wee jab in m’neck, I took a step forward, slashin’ m’sword, but the world spun around me, I took a tentative step, and another.” He rolled onto his side and raised on one elbow. “I dropped m’sword, a sword that is lost now, I haena seen it since,” some of the men in our group groaned.

He continued, “and I stumbled tae the ground.” Artair rolled onto his back again, balancing his mug above him.

Nor gestured and one of the servants rushed forward and filled Artair’s mug with ale while he held it aloft.

Everyone laughed and applauded for the ever-flowing ale, just as the Duke had promised.

Charlie asked, “What happened next?”

Artair sat up, drank some ale and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “I daena ken how they managed it, I hope I made it difficult on them, but somehow I woke up in m’father’s house. He had told those men tae subdue me, I daena hold it against him though, I would hae killed them all. I demanded m’father return me tae Gwynedd’s castle, but I was told nae. I was locked in a room until I behaved like a civilized prince, and told, *commanded*, that I ought not return tae Gwynedd.”

My eyes went wide. “Artair! You haven’t seen her since?”

“Nae. They wouldna allow me tae use the devices, ye ken — they knew I would flee. I had tae build their trust and then, finally, m’mother gave me one.” He said, “I daena really ken how tae use it — m’mother set the code. I hoped ye would ken how tae set it, Yer Grace, when I was ready tae go see Gwynedd.”

Nor nodded. “I believe we can figure it out, but ye canna go tae the moment ye left, that would be loopin’. I hae been advised, strongly, against it. I was told tae make sure tae leave three days between visits, for time between, in case there is a trouble.”

Artair said, still sitting on the ground. “Och nae, tis true? I wanted tae go back tae the same day, tae draw m’sword and fight alongside the other Artair. I thought together we would be victorious and I would be married by now.”

Nor said, “That is *precisely* what ye arna allowed tae do.”

Artair lumbered up and brushed off his kilt. “Then I am glad I asked afore I went — what would happen?”

Nor shrugged. “I am not certain, but as bad as all this is, as dark and dire as yer tale is... twould be worse.”

I said, “But truly Artair, she doesn’t know where you are?”

“Nae, she must be verra concerned.” He slumped into a chair. “I told her that I was goin’ tae marry her and she accepted me and twas the last thing we said tae each other.”

I frowned. “*That* is a tragedy.”

Nor said, “After we fight this battle against Johnne, I will go with ye, I will help ye explain tae her.”

Artair said, “And her father.”

Nor said, “Aye, and I will help ye speak tae her father.”

“Thank ye, Nor.”

Nor stood and got everyone’s attention. “We hae a big day on the morrow, and this day has been long, tis time for bed. If ye

are called tae the walls, tis time tae go, remember yer stations — I will see ye at dawn.”

The servants took away plates and cups as we each took our leave and headed off in different directions.

Claray came up, her eyes across the room on Charlie and Artair, she huffed. “I am told I must sleep with m’cousins as the house is teeming with lads.”

“Teeming, I suppose it is, but this is okay, you love your cousins.”

She sighed. “I am too auld tae hae tae sleep with bairns. And I am the daughter of a Duke, I daena want tae sleep in a pile.”

“I don’t think the decision was made because you’re young. It’s because we are on high alert, and we need to put people wherever they can fit to sleep.”

She frowned. “And then we must flee the castle in the morn, ugh, I daena like Carnasserie Castle much, tis not nearly as fine as Kilchurn, but I suppose I must be...” Then her face brightened, “On the morrow may I come tae yer room? First thing? Without the cousins?”

“Of course, we can have breakfast together before you go.”

“Good, then I might be able tae bear this insult tae m’sation.” She wandered off.

Charlie sauntered up. I asked, “You know where you’re sleeping?”

“Apparently Artair and I are bunking in the barracks. It promises all the fun of the military, but without any of the comfort of modern life, wish Ryan was here to see it. Or wait... nah, what I want to do is get really good at this, *then* have Ryan come so that for once I can show him around and tell him what to do.”

I said, “Sucks to be a baby.”

“That it does.”

“When’s your guard duty?”

“No one tells time in a normal way, so I’ve been told to just go when Artair goes.”

“Does Artair know you’re hard to wake?”

“He told me if I didn’t wake up he would wake me with a ‘waft of flatulence’ near m’nose. He waved his kilt when he said it.” Charlie shivered. “I can only imagine the horror. I may not sleep at all.”

I laughed and left him for the door of the Great Hall, where Nor was standing, answering last questions and seeing to last minute commands as the men left. I stood just behind him and then finally, the room mostly empty, he took my hand to lead me to our chamber.

I let him lead me, because it was still way too dark to not feel a little nervous, and I needed to wait until we got a little away from the Great Hall, with no one around, to pull a flashlight from the small leather pouch at my waist. It was a penlight, a very small beam, I positioned it right in front of my feet.

Nor said, “Och, now I canna see. I shouldna hae looked at it.”

“How about this?” I held the light, cupped in my hand near my waist. It gave me a tiny glow, but left our feet in darkness.

My husband said, “Better, m’lady.”

“Good, I didn’t need to see anyway, I’m just going to let you lead me, and this is not a bad thing, I went down the stairs by myself today, met you in the Great Hall like a grownup who can do things.”

“Aye, twas astonishingly brave.” He led me up the steps to our floors. “Twas thrilling tae turn and see ye entering the Great Hall all on yer own.”

I looked down at the dim glow of my light, then pressed it to my middle. I didn’t need it *honestly*... then I looked at it again because I kinda did.

But I said, “Pretty badass, if I do say so myself,” anyway, because half of being brave is telling yourself you’re brave.

As soon as we got in our room I remembered, “Damn, first night and I forgot to bring water already.”

He took off his coat. “Check the side table, Yer Grace.”

My iron kettle had been placed there. I pulled back the lid and peeked inside, it was full of water. “We have people for that?”

“Aye, ye just ask Tim, he will bring it when he brings the wood.”

“Check, I think asking Tim to bring it for us will be much easier than carrying it up in these wide skirts.”

A second later my lady’s maid, Cannie, entered, and began helping me undress. Something that was easier to get used to than I had originally thought — if you had asked me a year ago, would I allow someone to undress me and dress me again in the morning, I would have said hell no, but that was before I met these dresses.

Cannie got the dress unlaced and the fabric heavily drooped to the floor, though it was so stiff it kept itself up in a high pile while Cannie removed my collar and expertly finger-combed my hair down for bed. Then because I shivered, she wrapped a plaid around my shoulders. I thanked her as she scooped the dress from the floor to take to my wardrobe.

She left the room and Nor entered, freshly undressed down to his shirt. He knelt by the hearth to get the fire working. It was briskly cold.

Then we climbed into bed.

I curled up along his side, my head on his shoulder. “This was a busy day.”

“Aye, ye traveled, and we spent the entire day preparing the castle for a siege. We hae made plans — set them in motion, we hae a reason tae look tae the future, on the morrow

we hae some last things tae do, but midday we will move all the women and bairns tae m'cousin's castle at the far end of Loch Awe—”

“Not me though, you promised me I could stay.”

“Against all m'better judgement, aye, ye will stay.”

“If you and Charlie are here, fighting, then I have to be here. I will fight, I will do whatever, but I will do it here. Do we have to argue it again?”

His fingers entwined through a lock of my hair and twirled it, comfortingly. “Nae, I agree, ye will be here.”

“Good, we are stronger taegether.”

He pushed me onto my back and rolled onto me. “Aye we are strong and ready...” As his words trailed off his mouth went against the side of my throat, and he lay there heavy.

I said, “Are you okay?”

“Nae...”

He drew his mouth down my skin, and lay with his face pressed to my chest.

It was my turn to twirl my fingers through his hair. “Tell me.”

“We are plannin' tae fight, guardin' the castle, Artair warns us that we hae two more days... It daena sit right with me. I am a Duke, and a Time Traveler, someday I will be a king. And who is Johnne?”

He rolled onto his back and stared up at the drapes over our bed in the dim, flickering firelight. “He is a nobody, it keeps runnin' through m'mind, Livvy, he used me tae further his ends. He couldna solve his problem without the assistance of Normond, Duke of Awe.”

“You are very powerful,” I whispered, “You just don't know how to use the power.”

He chuckled. “Ye callin' me witless?”

“I didn’t mean it that way, I kinda mean, Johnne has more knowledge, he has that book you mentioned, but you must have more power, because he needed you — you could literally just steal his book and you’d outsmart him. Then you would win.”

He raised his head and looked at me. Then lay back, raising his brow, looking up at the draping fabric. Then he turned onto his side looking at my face. “*Then* what would I do?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t seen the book, it’s... I mean, you’d know the rules then, right?”

“Aye, I would know the rules.”

I yawned, “I am so tired, I wish I could figure this all out...”

I curled my head back on his shoulder, and we were quiet for a few minutes then he jostled my head with his shoulder, “Ye fallin’ asleep, Livvy?”

I nodded.

“I’m goin’ tae switch off yer light, remember, I am going tae get up in the night tae go tae the walls, so when ye find me gone, ye ken why.”

I nodded again, nearly all the way asleep, but then mumbled, “Don’t forget to wake me to say goodbye.”

“I winna, m’love.”

He pressed his lips to my forehead and we both drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 23 - Livvy



In what was the black of night, he was up, moving quietly around the room. I heard him poke at the fire, then, after that, completely dressed, he came to the bed, sat on the edge and whispered, "I am goin' tae the walls."

He kissed me. "I was goin' tae switch on yer lamp for ye, but I think twill blind me, can ye do it once I've stepped from the room?"

I nodded. "Thank you for going out in the night to keep me safe."

He kissed me again and left for guard duty.

I clicked on the lantern as soon as he left, and stared at the glowing light, watching it attempt to beat back the darkness, so much darkness, castle-in-the-seventeenth-century darkness. The lantern was on its lowest setting but overpowered the fire in the hearth and the fire was really lovely... I would almost prefer just the flame.

But I was in the 17th century.

I felt a slow rise of panic, but I forced it down — Charlie was down the hall. Nor was on the roof. I had a lantern, and a radio. I could probably call out, "Hello?" And Cannie would run in from the next room. I was *fine*.

And the hearth flame was beautiful, and I was warm and taken care of — I flicked the lantern off.

And watched the flames as I fell back to sleep.



I woke up to Claray's voice from the outer room. "Are ye still asleep, Livvy? The sun is up!"

I moaned. I had been deeply sleeping, so wiped from the activity the day before, and the bed was comfortable and cozy. I called out, "Yes... still... sorry! Can you put that kettle on the hearth?"

Her voice from the other room. "Aye, this one, on the table?"

"Yes, I'm going to serve coffee. We have a coming war, we deserve a little..."

I was about to say 'comfort', but it was despicable — *I was comfortable when a war was about to start...* this thought was enough to get me up, serious about the matter at hand.

I tossed the covers aside and stepped into the cold room. I could see the poker, jabbing into the logs on the other side of the hearth, worked by Claray as she built the fire up with little bursts of ash, to put the kettle on. I peed in the chamber pot and then called for Cannie to help me dress. A casual dress, meaning only three layers, not as much lace, but heavy and as dignified and beautifully crafted, an elegance that did not at all seem 'casual' for war preparations.

It was a borrowed dress, still, as we hadn't had time to call for the dressmaker yet.

Because of all this talk of war.

While I was being dressed I faced the tapestry. It was beautiful and I hadn't really studied it before. When I had left, I had been disappointed with myself that I hadn't paid attention to it.

So now I took in the details: woven with intricate detail and vibrant colors, in the center stood a large and majestic oak tree, its roots deeply embedded in the earth, its branches

reaching up and out. The leaves were lush, the trunk of the tree looked strong and sturdy.

I called into the other room, “Claray, do you know where this tapestry came from?”

She stopped in the doorway of our private chamber. “I am not allowed in here.”

I said, “But I give you permission, I’m inviting you.” She stepped into the room as I said, “So I suppose you don’t know anything about the tapestry?”

“My grandfather gave it tae m’grandmother as an anniversary gift.”

“Oh... it’s beautiful.”

“Tis about the strength and resilience of our family and tae celebrate havin’ many descendants. I haena seen it in years. When I was wee I was allowed tae come in here, but after m’father passed and Nor took the chambers for his own, I was not allowed tae come see it anymore.”

I said, “I am really sorry about your loss, Livvy.”

Then said, “You know a lot more about the tapestry than I expected. Do you know about more of the art here in the castle? Maybe you could give me a tour, tell me the stories and—”

She clapped her hands. “I would love that! *Everything* has a story. My grandmother would take me from room tae room recounting the provenance of the paintings and the rugs. She loved this castle. My grandfather fought a terrible war for it, as ye ken, and she was verra proud when they moved in.”

My kettle began to whistle. I took the lid off the french press and opened a can of ground coffee and scooped some into the press with a spoon. I pulled the kettle from the hearth and poured the hot water over the grounds. While I did this, I asked, “Did she teach you about the art?”

“Aye, she loved tae tell stories. She was verra humorous. She was a bit like ye, Livvy, tis why Nor likes ye, I think... My grandmother loved the day like ye—”

“I prefer the day?”

“Aye, ye daena like the night at all...”

“I suppose you’re right.” I pushed down the plunger on the press.

Claray continued, “Many times during the day m’grandmother could be found standing in the gallery, she called it ‘contemplating.’ I asked her, what was there tae contemplate in a painting,” and she told me that ‘man has a soul’ and she meant ladies too, Livvy, if ye dinna ken.”

“I did.” I spooned sugar into two mugs and then poured a mug for me and one for Claray.

She continued, “And she said that man had tae treat his soul with dignity, and that man was so indebted for the gift of his soul that he made beautiful art tae express his gratitude.”

“That’s a lovely thought.”

“Aye, tis, and tis why Nor carves stone, out of gratitude. But ye daena hae tae carve or paint, tae be thankful for yer soul, my grandmother *contemplated*.” Claray took a sip and scowled, smacking her lips.

“Do you like it?”

She grimaced but tried to hide it, and forced out, “I love it.”

“Good.” I considered putting more sugar in it, but it suddenly dawned on me that it might be a mistake to caffeinate Claray. I might not want to make coffee more palatable for her. She might be an absolute handful if she were buzzing around.

I lied, “The *best* part about coffee is that one sip can easily be enough, some who love it the most drink it the least — you can take a wee sip and then set the mug aside.”

She said, “I do love it verra much,” as she set the mug to the side and continued, “My grandmother could tell me whole stories about the wee dog in the painting in the gallery before the Great Hall, ye ken the painting?”

“No, I don’t but I’d love to see it.” I took a long sip of the coffee and sighed — *That was good.*

Claray said, “I suppose we hae tae gather our things — we are tae leave in a couple of hours. The boats hae been taking trips down the loch all morning, delivering supplies tae Carnasserie Castle.” Her face drew down.

“I am sorry you have to go, Claray, I know you’re frightened.”

“I am not frightened for me, I am frightened that ye will remain.”

“Please don’t worry about me, Claray, I will be safe. Nor will keep me safe, and I will listen to him in everything. I will be protected. I’m not scared at all.”

I gulped.

“Mam says ye are stayin’ so ye can help take the burden from his shoulders.”

“That’s... yes, that’s why, I’m very glad she understands, I want to be a help to your brother.”

Claray huffed, tapping her foot as if she were going to run from the room. “I wish I could be a help too... I want tae prepare the castle for war, but instead Mam says I must help the women and bairns move tae Carnasserie. She winna allow me tae help with the weapons on the walls, Mam says I am a distraction, instead I must help with the bairns.” She sighed again. “I feel I am poorly used. If only they would let me stay, I could run up and down the steps, carrying canon balls, or... I can pick one up, ye ken, Livvy, I hae done it before. I could carry them up and down the steps and be verra helpful — if only I were allowed.”

I grinned, “That one sip of coffee, that you loved, was very effective. You have lots of energy.”

“Aye,” she looked around, “I feel as if my mind is goin’ a mile a minute.”

I casually stepped in front of her mug, blocking it from view. I had changed my mind, a morning cup was not at *all*

what Claray needed.

She continued on, "...but I must meet Mam, I ought tae go downstairs for some breakfast first, the sun is almost all the way up."

"Yes, and I will meet you there in a few moments, I want to finish my coffee..."

"Aye, I will go see what Charlie is doing!" She buzzed out of the room and down the hall.

I stood in the middle of the Duke's office sipping from my mug enjoying the pop and crackle from the hearth and actually being alone for one of the first times since I had come to the past.

I marveled, looking at this room, this old castle chamber with such a long history, the antique books and the carved desk, the upholstered chairs and the ancient tapestries on the walls, thinking that these tapestries were lovely but not quite as beautiful as the one in our bedchamber.

I was new here and already fond of it, one of my favorite things in the world, even more so thinking of Nor's grandmother contemplating it through the years, as she bore children and raised them, as she lay with her husband...

I walked through to our bed chamber to look some more — *in the light of day*.

So that I could remember its beauty in the darkness of night, a little like Nor's stone orb and how it soaked up the light and almost seemed to glow in the night...

Kind of exactly the same thing...

I took a sip of my coffee, standing there. The year was 1670. This tapestry of a tree was probably a few decades old... an old man from an older time had given this gift to his wife, in hopes that it would bring them many grandchildren, and

here I was, years on, in their same bed, the new wife of their grandson...

It was a lot of tradition and expectation that I would need to live up to.

I wandered back into the outer room and stood, looking at the fire, drinking from my coffee, enjoying it as it warmed me through. The floor was covered in a rug with a thistle design, celebrating the protective strength of the woody plant.

My eyes drew to the marble bust, fashioned after Nor's first wife, but meaning fertility... all the symbols of strength and growth around me, protecting me—

Nor entered.

He stopped still in the middle of the room.

“Och, this is a fine sight!”

I smiled. “Do you mean me, dressed, or the mug of coffee I'm holding?”

“All of it — ye are alone?”

I nodded.

“If ye weren't already m'wife, this would be the tableau that would draw me down on my knees asking ye tae marry me.”

“That's funny... if I wasn't your wife, how would I be standing in your private office?”

“I canna explain what m'heart kens tae be true.” He kissed me.

I asked, “Want a cup? Claray left this one...”

“There is sugar in it? Then nae, but if there is another without sugar, then aye.”

I poured him a cupful of warm coffee.

And we stood side by side watching the fire, sipping from our mugs.

“How are the preparations going?”

“Good. Laird Carswell sent men. We hae the women and children packed and ready tae leave. We hae sentries in the woods around us. The castle is reinforced. The armory is full. We hae been goin’ over and over the plans.”

“Kinda like planting thistle around the base of your castle?”

“Aye, tis a fine Scottish tradition.”

I finished up my coffee, then asked, “Where do you want me?”

“Mam needs ye in the Great Hall, before they leave. Are ye alright with this?”

“Yes, that’s good. When will I see you again?”

“I will be there at the midday meal. Dost ye need me tae escort ye down?” He put his arms around me.

I patted his chest. “No, love, I know how to get to the Great Hall.”

“I will see ye soon.”

I kissed him goodbye and he was off on his way.

Chapter 24 - Livvy



I met Mam and Claray and the rest of the women downstairs in the Great Hall where we made ourselves busy running back and forth with food and goods and blankets and all the last minute details, preparing the women and children to flee and getting the castle ready for a siege. Something big was coming.

There were carts all over the courtyard, full of food, bags that had to be moved, piles created, crates stacked, we had to keep track of where it all needed to go. I was running from one side of the courtyard to the other and glanced up to see my husband on the wall, talking to the men. I was on one opposite side, near the kitchen, when I saw him jogging down the far staircase. He went with a large group of men out through the gate and were gone.

I had only gotten a glimpse.

I said to myself, *this is fine*.

Then, I said, out loud, “Totally fine, I’m an amazing, brave, cool woman, a duchess,” and then Charlie sauntered up.

“Talking to yourself, Livvy?”

I hugged him. “Where you been, did you have a good night?”

“Let’s see, no, it was loud as hell, you won’t believe how many ways a man can snore, fart, moan, and talk in his sleep. You would never believe it.” Then he shrugged. “But I’m not complaining. It was basically a straw bed, straw in a sack, on a rope net.”

I said, “Yep, been on one of those. It was only passable because Nor acted like the mattress.”

“My option was Artair, he’s not really my type.”

I said, “Ha! Yeah, I’ve seen your girlfriends, they don’t usually have beards.”

He asked, “What’re you doing?”

“Shifting boxes, taking inventory, packing supplies, reporting back to Mam—”

“She scares me a little. Every time I pass through a room she’s eagle-eyeing me. It’s like she’s watching my every move.”

“She’s *definitely* watching you, you are not wrong, but it’s probably not that she wants to scare you, it’s more likely she plans to match you with someone. You are a highly marriageable young man.”

He grimaced. “I truly doubt she knows my type.”

“Sorority girls from Tallahassee?”

“Exactly, don’t see many here.” Then he asked, “You taken the view from the walls?”

“Not today, why?”

“Come on, let’s go see...”



I stepped out through the door to the battlements. All the men turned, then bowed. Charlie stopped in his tracks. “Oh wait, forgot you’re the Duchess.”

“Yep, I know, it’s hard to get used to.” I sort of waved my hand, giving them permission to raise their heads and not be awkward and then they ignored me. “I don’t know for sure if I’m allowed to be up here without an escort.”

Charlie said, “What am I, chopped liver?”

“You don’t have *any* of the skills, knowledge, or manners to know how to protect Nor’s duchess-wife in the seventeenth century.”

His eyes swept out over the landscape. “Yeah, you’re right. And if shit goes down I’m not even entirely convinced I wouldn’t just run.”

I laughed. “I would expect nothing less.”

“Just gotta be faster than the slowest person, I expect your dress weighs you down a bit.” He added, “And why would you need an escort around these guards — don’t they work for your husband?”

“Yeah, but I don’t hundred percent know the rules.” I leaned against the parapet beside him and my eyes swept the view.

An army had moved in below us on the grassy plain on the shore of Loch Awe.

He pointed, “In the morning, all those men will be brought into the castle, then we have camps set up, one over there,” he pointed, “and one over there.”

“You know a lot.”

“I’m just happy to be here. Aenghus and Malcolm and I set up a few monitors and motion detectors already this morning. We have a few more to put up.”

“You’ve already been up and at ‘em while I was dressing?”

“Up before dawn. Whatever’s coming, we’re going to be ready.”

“So many people working toward this main goal... *Then* we just wait.”

He said, “Aye, then we wait.”

My eyes swept the horizon looking for any signs of distress or menace. It was all just a beautiful view, rolling green hills, snow capped mountains, the choppy waters of the loch, the boats at the dock waiting to take the women and children away.

Then I looked over the loch shore, wondering where they were going to go. I was told to Carnasserie Castle, but I didn't know where that was exactly, but they were going down the loch by boat and there would be guards there to protect them and food enough for all of them.

This all just seemed so risky.

Kind of like embarking on a trip where everything was life and death and none of it made sense and the rules of war were completely out the window.

“Except waiting sucks.”

“Yeah, but what else are we going to do?”

I nodded. *We could only prepare, right?*

I looked down at the courtyard, Nor had returned and was down there with a group of men. I watched for a moment. Wherever he went, heads bowed. I couldn't hear what he said, but I could see he was ordering people around. Oh how I trembled at his power — he was hot. But now was not the time for that — this was a time of war.

Except...

Wasn't the best way to win a war by not fighting?

I glanced at Charlie as his eyes swept around. He said, “I need to get back to work, I just thought you might want to come up and see the grand plan from a different perspective.”

“Thank you, it was a good idea, gave me a moment to think... everybody is just reacting, you know? I wish we could... I don't know... do something, *anything* else.”

“Yeah, but war is coming.”

“...but with the grand plan laid out before me, all these preparations for war, I was thinking about Dad's favorite quote.”

“The one by Orwell or CS Lewis?”

“Sun Tzu.”

“Yeah, I memorized some Sun Tzu. Remember when Dad paid us a dollar for each quote we could recite?”

“Yep. I memorized the long ones, you did the short ones.”

“I am younger than you. ‘The greatest victory is that which requires no battle,’ by Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*... that the one you’re thinking about?”

“Yep.”

“And how would you accomplish ‘no battle’...?”

“I don’t know... I have no idea.”

“There are a lot of dudes here who only think about war, they strategize in their sleep, I think you have to accept that when a war is coming, you have to be ready to fight.”

“True, I need to trust the process, I suppose, and speaking of... I need to get back to organizing the baskets of food.”

He nodded. “Okay, I’m out, going to walk the courtyard, lend a hand.”

I turned from the balustrade to see Nor emerging from the stairwell. “Ye taking a view?”

Charlie said, “We are, but we’re finished, where do you need me now?”

Nor said, “I need ye tae come with us tae the dock, we are seeing the women and children off... Livvy come say yer farewells.”

Chapter 25 - Livvy



All around the courtyard were frightened women and children. Farewell hugs, then a long line as they left the castle, heading out to the dock where two boats waited. There was a flurry of activity, carrying babies, children lifted across from dock to deck, women climbing aboard, everyone settling in. Last minute supplies had been carried down, and were lugged onto the boats, while at least three babies were wailing, to cap off the stress.

Finally everyone was in and the boats departed the dock. Claray and her mother had a nice seat in the best boat, she turned to wave as they set off, and then the sails raised, the boats bounced out across the water, pushed by the current and wind. We stood and watched until all were out of sight.

A strong wind was blowing head on, I huddled, turning away — up and down the dock, the shoreside, the castle walls, in every direction, I was one of the very last women left at Kilchurn castle.



There on the dock the men gathered to discuss what they needed to do next. Aenghus said, “Malcolm, Charlie, and I are going tae set some traps.”

Charlie said, “Not quite traps, I have a couple more monitors and motion detectors to place.”

Aenghus said, “Aye, what Master Charlie said.”

Artair asked, “Where do ye want me, m’Great and Glorious Laird on High?”

Nor shook his head. “Ye hae a way of makin’ me regret havin’ ye around. Why daena ye try again.”

Artair nodded. “My apologies, Yer Grace, as soon as I said it I knew I would need tae make amends, but this is m’way, and I remind ye, ye already promised tae help me win Gwynedd — ye canna hold my lack of good graces against me. Ye heard him promise, dinna ye, Duchess?”

“I heard him, but you ought to show him more respect.”

“Likely true.” He nodded and then his eyes cut to me, his lip pulled up playfully, and he said, “Ye ken, these are the thoughtful moments after the ladies hae fled frightened from the castle, where men are made tae feel circumspect, our hearts full of determination. We must fight for the ladies, way over there on the far end of the loch, with our hearts full of longing... *except*, Yer Grace, ye dinna send yer wife tae join them...?”

Nor raised his brow.

Artair asked, “How will the Duke feel the longing and the determination if the Duchess is before him, tellin’ him how tae fight?”

I stamped my foot. “That is *incredibly* rude, Artair.”

Nor said, “Artair, I hae put up with a great deal, but if ye continue tae speak so familiarly tae either of us, ye will be in the dungeon while *we* use Howie from the walls.”

“My apologies, Yer Graces, I tease those I love, and I hae a verra high regard for both of ye, almost as if ye were like m’own father, or m’own verra wretchedly auld great-grandfather... I will say things for which I must apologize, but, in truth, I would lay down m’life tae protect ye.”

Nor said, “Good, and firstly, Artair, I am nae old enough tae be yer father, we are near the same age. And secondly, the reason why the Duchess has remained with me is in case we must flee with the portals, I need her near.”

“Aye, I see that.”

I said, “And Artair, if ye find yerself needing to apologize after *every* conversation you might need to learn to think before you speak.”

“I ken, I am a lumbering bear, tis what Gwynedd told me — ye see, I must get back tae her so she can rescue me from m’self. Also, did ye just notice, ye advise me as if ye are a wizened auld grandmother crone!”

I shook my head and jokingly stamped my foot again.

He sighed, “Yer foot stamping has reminded me of my Gwynedd, och nae, Yer Grace, ye stamped yer feet just like her. Oh how I miss her sweet exasperation.”

Nor said, “I am near tae declarin’ it a punishable offense for ye tae continue speaking endlessly on Gwynedd.”

“Nae! Ye canna! She is the spark of m’life.”

Nor groaned.

Artair waved his hands. “But, my apologies, I am distractin’ from the purpose at hand, we must prepare for war. Oh Exalted One, ye want me tae see tae the...?”

“Go see tae the armaments on the west battlement, then go ask Callum if he needs assistance. And Artair, ye might need tae be busy on that side of the castle, as I would prefer tae not cross paths with ye for a time.”

“Aye, wave if ye want me.” He jogged off taking the steps away from the dock three at a time and then up the slope to the castle.

Chapter 26 - Livvy



I asked, “What do we need to do, m’laird?”

“I daena ken,” his eyes swept up and down the loch and then the mountains behind the castle. “I thought we could stand here and talk for a moment.”

“As long as you block the wind.”

He shifted so his back was facing the wind and I stood close.

“What dost ye think, Livvy? Does this seem the right thing tae ye?”

His tone of voice seemed pensive, thoughtful, it made me take my time before answering, “I’m not at all sure.”

“We are preparin’ for a siege by a larger more powerful army.”

I nodded. “It doesn’t sit well.”

“Aye.”

I shivered.

He pulled me close and wrapped his arms around me, his lips pressed briefly to my forehead. Then said, “When the women and children were here they needed tae be protected and their lives fought for, but now we hae gotten them tae safety, it dawns on me — what are we left protectin’...?”

“The castle, all these men?”

“These men daena hae tae fight Johnne, they hae tae defend the castle. If Johnne dinna come, their lives would be saved.”

“True... but what does that *mean*?”

“It means we ought tae be considered on this matter. We are time travelers, why do we hae tae fight? Canna we circumvent the attack? We hae enough power.”

I said, “Yeah, and the most powerful people usually don’t have to fight, no one should challenge us.”

“Aye, why does he think he can challenge me? I am Nor, Duke of Awe, and a time traveler, he ought tae be too frightened tae raise m’ire...”

I said, “Yeah, how dare he challenge you, you’re the Great and Powerful Normond, the Duke of Awe.”

Nor chuckled. “Exactly.”

He added, “But then Artair arrived with Howie and our plan was set — we are goin’ tae fight over the walls, but I hae been wondering... Is that what we ought tae—”

Artair came jogging back down the slope toward us. “Yer Grace!”

I pulled away from Nor.

Nor called, “Did something happen?”

“Nae, I just thought of an..” He got near and was puffing as if had run a long way. He panted and tried to catch his breath.

Nor rolled his hand. “Get tae it, Artair.”

“I had an idea.”

Nor said, “Go ahead, we are discussin’ our own.”

“I want tae apologize for...”

Nor said, “Now ye are askin’ for forgiveness afore ye hae offended me! When I told ye tae go tae the other side of the castle was for the peace from yer endless—”

“*This* is m’point, why I ran all this way, Yer Grace. I think I hae advised ye wrongly. I am concerned. It has been weighing on me that it daena feel right, what we are doing.”

“What are we doing?”

“Waiting, like fools.”

I watched Nor’s face, irritation crossed it, his jaw clenched. “What do ye suggest?”

“I hae been thinking on it as if two great and noble armies are about tae battle each other, but... one thing I hae learned from m’father’s war — just because ye hae a noble cause daena mean ye will win. A mistake could be made at any time.”

“And...?”

“So I am thinkin’, ye are trying tae win a battle by thinkin’ like a nobleman with a castle tae protect.”

Nor nodded. “This is what I am thinking as well. On the one hand I am a nobleman, I find it difficult tae consider a course that inna based in tradition, but if I am fighting by rules and he is fighting through time travel... we arna fighting the same battle — I am likely tae lose.”

I said, “My dad thinks about war and battles more than anyone I know besides my brother, Ryan. If I told him that Johnne was going to attack with a large army, really strong, I think he would call it an arms race. And he would say we better be stronger, bigger, and faster, *or* don’t take the battle on at all, go around him.”

Artair nodded approvingly. “Ye strategize like a man, Yer Grace, m’Gwynedd is like this, she has great wit for a woman.”

I stamped my foot in the grass. “For a *woman*? Artair, that is a horrible thing to say.”

He said, innocently, “I am givin’ ye a compliment, Yer Grace! I mean that ye hae great wit for a woman as *well* as m’Gwynedd.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s the ‘for a *woman*’ part of it that’s the issue.”

He shook his head, “I daena understand. Ye daena want tae hae great wit for a woman? Why wouldna ye want tae be seen as havin’ a great wit, settin’ yerself apart from women? Tis a modern thing? Do I not understand yer meaning?”

I sighed, “Yes, it’s a modern thing, and we have pressing issues, so *fine*, yes, thank you for thinking I have a great wit.”

Artair said, completely oblivious, “For a *woman*, and ye’re welcome, Yer Grace.”

To Nor he said, “Ye need tae take the opposite course of a nobleman, perhaps, think like a barbarian, run headlong at him with yer hammer held high.”

Nor said, “I am not certain I want tae pattern m’cause after pagan barbarians. There ought tae be a civilized order tae the world.”

I said, “I get that, but maybe think about it differently... don’t become a barbarian, but change our tactics, swoop in, catch him unaware, be unexpected, put him on the defensive, take the upper hand — then maybe we win.”

Artair said, “Aye, true, not a barbarian, more like a midge.” He began frisking around as if he were batting bugs. “Ye could irritate and inflame him by biting and sheer menace until he rushes intae the water begging for mercy. Then ye sting him through the heart with yer sword and watch him die in a puddle of blood and water. We would solve this *all* if we just killed him with a blade.”

I said, “If we knew where and when to find him we could hire a hitman to sneak into his house and kill him while he sleeps.”

Nor gulped. “Och, that is not noble at all, but I suppose twould be a better way tae protect the castle and m’family inside.”

Artair rubbed his hands together. “Aye, it might be our best idea yet. But we daena need a ‘hitman’ whatever that is, ye just need tae tell yer friend Artair where he makes his bed.”

Nor gestured with his head that we ought to continue walking along the shore. There was a grassy slope, a rocky edge to the water, and a wide path that went around the castle.

The walls of the castle blocked the winds as we walked, and it was thankfully a bit warmer.

Artair said, “Then we are in agreement, once ye find out where he is, tell me when and where, and I will end the war afore it starts.”

Nor said, “Ye are too brazen and prideful, if ye hae all this power and competence how hae ye allowed the cousin who stole yer throne — what was his name?”

“Eduard.”

We came to the east side of the castle, a view of the land spreading out over the encampment and the forest and mountains beyond. The wind picked up, blowing my hair forward, I tucked it behind my ear as we walked.

Nor asked, “How come ye haena just gone and killed Eduard?”

Artair raised his chin. “Tis a good question, with a simple answer, Yer Grace, because m’father winna listen tae me on it. I want tae challenge him tae an arena battle for the throne. It would save his armies from the bloodshed of a great war, it would end the war, and save the kingdom.”

“This is courageous, but also dangerously incautious — ye might lose.”

Artair scowled, “Ye sound like m’father — I winna lose. I will win. But either way twould end the war. This is why I’ve come, tae speak tae ye on it, tae ask ye tae build the arena, tae set the stage.”

Nor stopped in his tracks. “What arena and *when*...? Ye speak tae me as if I am a man with power over yer future, but I *am* only a Duke.” His brow drew down. “I’m in nae position tae build an arena, Artair, and *where*...? I am trying tae protect a castle...”

Artair said, “I ken, just... keep it with ye, Yer Grace, daena consider it now, but remember *later*, yer friend Artair asked ye tae build an arena. That’s all I ask.”

Nor nodded.

We all took a moment to stand in silence, looking out over the loch.

Chapter 27 - Livvy



I tucked my head against Nor's chest to block the wind and watched behind us, at the wind pushing the surface of the dark water, white caps cresting on the waves ridging across the rough surface.

Artair broke our silence. "We could go tae Finlarig unannounced before he comes here."

"That would take precision. We daena understand the rules of time travel as well as he does, if he sees our storm or lays in wait..." Nor shook his head. "Ye knew he was goin' tae advance upon us, ye say twill happen in a few days... dost ye ken any other places when he might be?"

"I ken when he was in the war in the future."

Nor said, "Aye, but I was also there, I canna go or I am looping."

Artair said, "What is loopin' again?"

Nor said, "I am not entirely certain, but we must not do it. I hae been warned."

Artair said, "That is m'least favorite of the rules, the ones we daena understand but must follow anyway."

Nor said, "Aye, tis an intolerable situation."

Artair said, "I also ken the date and time of the moment when he first found the Tempus Omegas — November 1, in the year of our Lord, 1557."

Nor said, "I was there as well."

Artair said, “Och nae, Yer Grace! If ye hadna found yerself in so many dangerous places we would be winnin’ this already.”

Nor nodded. “I canna argue with ye, Artair.”

Artair exhaled. “That is all I ken. I could return tae Riaghaltane, research Johnne’s history, find yet another place tae interfere with him, but I must remind us all — m’father is likely tae be irate that I hae run off with a Tempus Omega. Twould be unlikely he will allow me tae leave again.”

I said, “He would have you jailed?”

“Aye, or death, if he is particularly irritated. He daena stand for disobedience, and this is beyond it. Unless I right the world, this is certain tae be m’last quest.”

I said, “Okay then, *that* is not an option, so...” My voice trailed off, thinking... watching all the activity in the encampment, there were carts being brought up the causeway to the castle, a line of men on horses, a boat on shore, with three men unloading barrels.

I broke our silence with, “I think, and I’ve thought this for a long time, we need to go ask the time travelers you met, Nor, the ones who saved your life... We need to ask them for advice. They seemed to understand how this all works, it seems likely they’ll have information about Johnne Cambell.”

Nor said, “It would be asking men farther along the timeline tae help with our cause, tis interference, and sounds like someone would be near loopin’.”

Artair said, “I am from the future, helpin’ ye in the past, naething bad has happened.”

Nor said, “Yet.”

I said, “I don’t think that’s exactly what looping means. I think looping is two of a person in the same time and place, looping sounds like it might cause temporal time-shift issues, or some other madness. This isn’t what I’m talking about doing.”

Nor said, “I was explicitly warned against approaching them again.”

“Maybe you were warned against approaching them because it might complicate things, sure, but if they can help, if they know more than we do... What if they know exactly where Johnne lives? Maybe they don’t realize how much trouble he is causing all of us. Maybe they don’t know how dangerous he’s become. If they *knew* maybe they’d want to help.”

“A big warrior saved m’life and told me tae never cross paths with him again, ye want me tae approach him? Och nae, I daena think tis wise...”

Artair said, “I’d like tae meet this ‘big warrior’, what’s his name?”

“Magnus, ye ever heard of him?”

“Nae, but with a name like that ye might not want tae cross him.”

Nor said, “...and I do ken where he is — Amelia Island. I wonder when?”

“Can you remember much about the conversation?”

“Just the warnin’. *That* is clear in m’mind as we discuss not heeding it. Then he gave me some food and—”

I asked, “That’s right, what kind of food?”

“Two pieces of bread with sweet fruit jam within it, yer family calls it a... I canna remember.”

“A peanut butter and jelly sandwich, sounds like, how was it passed to you?”

“In a bag, twas see-through.”

“That helps. That’s modern. What else?”

“Another bag with cookies inside.”

“So we can assume they were modern, but that leaves a few centuries to consider.”

“They had a way that they could project their voices verra loud.”

“That narrows it down a bit more.”

“...and they gave me the drink in the bottle that was similar tae yers.”

“Oh, that’s right! It was in the HydroFlask! That helps. That’s a pretty new brand in my time... I think that means, with pretty good certainty, that Magnus lives farther in the future than I do. But maybe not too far. So... I don’t know, what if we went to Amelia Island a dozen years further in time, like... um, 2024? A big Scottish guy named Magnus, on Amelia Island? I bet we can just ask around, it’s a small town.”

Nor said, “And if he inna there...?”

“We can go twelve years further in the future, and keep asking until we figure it out. Foolproof.”

Artair said, “And then His Glorious Grace, the Duke of Awesome, will just saunter up tae a man named Magnus and beg him tae help his cause?”

I glanced at Nor’s face, he was chuckling. “Remind me why I am allowing Artair tae be part of our deliberations?”

Artair whispered, “Because he is going tae help yer cause, Yer Grace, without ye needing tae ask.”

I laughed, “Very funny. And Nor is not going to saunter, or beg, he is going to walk up, and ask. And anyway, Nor can handle Magnus, he’s capable of brawling, but he told me once that as a Duke he’s learned to end a battle before it begins. Either way he’s got this.”

Nor looked bemused. “My braggin’ in an ale house a century ago has returned like an ornery and neglected dog—”

Artair smiled. “My braggin’ often does it — returns tae bite me right in the arse.”

I was reminded again of their similarities. Most were fairly common, they were both big and tall, though Artair was a hulk, Nor looked civilized in comparison. Artair had a beard,

Nor was clean shaven sometimes, though stubbly today. Nor was well-dressed, and people around him bowed and scraped, he was noble. Artair epitomized what Birdie called ‘rough-around-the-edges’, and then there were some uncanny similarities: the crinkles at the edges of their eyes, the way one side of their mouths curled up when they were saying something funny, which was often.

It struck me sometimes, with certain expressions: *They looked like they came from the same family.*

And that didn’t even mention the fact that they were both *very*, in Artair’s case, *overly* arrogant. At least in Nor’s case he was also charming, and hot.

Although, probably there were women who would think Artair was charming, and hot too.

Artair said, “Well, if ye think ye can speak sense tae this man, Magnus with the grand name, ye will need an escort. I’ll go with ye.”

Nor chewed his lip and looked off, the wind blowin’ his hair. Finally he said, “I agree, we ought tae discuss this with Magnus. He might hae advice for us. We will go now. I will take Livvy, she will help me get around in the time, and I do think ye ought tae come as well, Artair. As a united force, travelers from three different times, we will convince him that his advice is necessary.”

Artair said, “Good, and we can return on the morrow. Just in time for the war.”

Nor nodded. “We will be cuttin’ it close, but Livvy is correct, tis important tae try. We will also send a messenger tae the village of Killin tae announce that I hae departed from Kilchurn — word will travel tae Finlarig, Johnne Cambell winna understand what I am doing. He winna ken what tae do next. It will unsettle him. Why attack if I am not here? It might buy us some time. We will ask Charlie tae remain, he can help m’brothers in case Johnne attacks while we are absent. Kilchurn is prepared in any case. Dost ye agree, Livvy?”

I nodded and said, “Aye.”

He smiled.

Artair scoffed, “Ye ask a woman’s opinion, but not mine?”

“‘Yer Grace’.”

“Ye ask yer wife’s opinion, but not mine, Yer Grace?”

“Aye, because I daena care for yers, ye must do as I tell ye. The Duchess has proven herself tae give thoughtful, considered advice, with wit. What hae ye proven?”

“That I am a wild boorish arse, prone tae impulse and exaggeration?”

“Aye.”

Artair said, “Daena hold it personal, Yer Grace, tis m’way.” He clapped his hands together. “We ought tae pack tae go.”

I asked, “I don’t think you brought the right clothes for the twenty-first century — what are you packing?”

“Weapons. Ye need weapons tae meet a man named Magnus.”

Nor said, “As soon as we are packed we will ride out tae find m’brothers and Charlie and let them know we are leavin’.”

Chapter 28 - Nor



Aenghus, Malcolm, and Charlie were hangin' the last of the monitors from a tall pine, usin' a rope tae pull it up intae the branches.

We dismounted and stood watching as they finished. Once the monitor was up, Charlie adjusted the dial on a machine he had in a bag slung across his horse's saddle. He then said, "Alright, that was the last one. I think we have the perimeter set, we'll know when anyone nears the castle."

I said, "Well done, forewarned will allow us tae raise arms. Twill buy us time."

Aenghus asked, "What did ye want tae speak tae us about, Nor?"

I said, "Tis so plain? Ye can tell I hae something tae say?"

Aenghus said, "Aye, canna ye tell, Malcolm?"

"Aye, he holds his mouth like that, ye see, he daena smile — ye ken he has something tae say. Out with it, brother, ye will feel better after, even if we draw swords because of it."

I scoffed. "Ye would never draw swords on me."

"Depends on what tis."

I said, "Livvy and I hae decided tae go find a man named Magnus and ask for—"

Aenghus said, "The man who told ye tae not cross his path?"

"Aye, the one."

Malcolm dug in his sporran for a coin and pressed it into Aenghus's palm.

I asked, "What was that for?"

Aenghus laughed. "As soon as ye told the story, that there was a man who knew how to work the portals and told ye not to cross paths with him, I said to Malcolm, 'Nor will I need to go talk to that man again, to find out more.' Our brother, Malcolm, said ye were too oath-abiding, ye would honor the man's request and not bother him again. I said, 'While Nor will abide by oaths, he also daena rest if someone kens more than him, he daena like to be outdone.'" He placed the coin in his sporran. "I said ye would be going to visit the man. Malcolm said nae."

I shook my head. "Och tis hard to be an older brother when yer younger brothers are wagering on yer life."

Malcolm said, "We arna wagering on yer life, daena be so dramatic, Nor. We are wagering on what ye are going to do with yer life. We would prefer ye not do anything incautious, as we need ye to keep between us and the danger, but this sounds suspiciously like ye winna be between us and danger — this sounds like ye are fleeing!"

I said, "Och tis hard to be an older brother when yer younger brothers are accusing ye of fleeing... To explain further, now that we are prepared for battle, I have decided to go around the field. I plan to inflict pain or death upon Johnne without a battle. I just need to seek more information."

"From the big warrior who told ye 'nae'?"

"Aye, from the big warrior who told me 'nae'."

Charlie said, "Livvy, is this about that conversation we had on the walls about Sun Tzu's *Art of War*?"

"A little, our goal is to win this war without battling."

Charlie said, "This makes sense, except... what am I doing during this?"

Livvy said, "Great question, Little Brother, you'll be here with your monitors protecting the perimeter, and you promise

not to tell Mom I left you here.”

Aenghus said, “Nor, who are ye taking with ye?”

“I am taking Livvy and Artair, as he has been in the future, he might be able tae talk some sense intae the man.”

Malcolm said, “Good, I daena want tae leave the castle, not while m’family is hidin’ in our cousin’s castle at the far end of the loch.”

I said, “We will leave this evenin’ and return on the morrow. Nae matter what happens we will be here before the battle.”

Livvy said, “And maybe, just maybe, we will have fixed this before the battle begins.”

Artair said, “The dreams of a woman — och nae, Duchess, tis unlikely that we winna need tae draw our sword.”

I said, “Careful, Artair, ye are bein’ offensive.”

“My apologies, Yer Grace, I daena mean that the dreams of a woman are wrongly expressed, she might even hae a point—”

Livvy said, “*Might?* It was my idea to go see Magnus!”

He shrugged, “We daena ken if this is a good idea or not.”

She huffed, “If it does work you owe me an apology.”

Artair smiled. “If yer idea works I will tell ye, ‘Well done, Yer Grace, for having fine wit for a woman,’ and we are back at the beginnin’, I canna win.”

Charlie said, “Artair did you just say that Livvy has ‘fine wit for a woman’? Hoowee, them’s fighting words.”

“I daena understand modern women.”

Livvy said, “This is the truest thing you ever said.”

Aenghus asked, “Nor, ye are planning tae walk right up and ask this man for counsel?”

I said, “Aye. We think we ken how tae find them, I will ask for his counsel and ask if he knows Johnne’s vulnerabilities.”

Artair said, “We will find out how to corner him, we will call him out tae fight, and bring him tae his knees bleeding in the dirt by our feet. This is a grand plan.”

Charlie said, “But what about Howie? You have a whole new plan that doesn’t even involve Howie?”

“After we stab him through *then* we will use Howie, we can tie him tae it, and drag him through the streets, and string him up outside the—”

I said, “Och nae, Artair, the duchess is present, ye are being too candid.”

“My apologies, Yer Graces. M’point being, we daena hae tae worry which weapon we use, we just need tae smite him from the earth.”

Charlie said, “I suppose we can come up with some other purpose for Howie then, decorate him for the holidays perhaps.”

I said, “There is always an enemy.”

Charlie said, “That’s right, I forgot I’m in the seventeenth century.” He added, “And Livvy is goin’ tae leave me here, though I am brand new to it. What do you think Mom is going to say about that?”

Livvy said, “We’ll leave you a portal, you can get home, but really, just monitor the castle, and watch for storms. We’ll be back tomorrow.”

We all mounted our horses and rode them tae the path.

Charlie bent back, lookin’ up at a hawk soarin’ through the high sky. “But no worries, Livvy, this will be fun. Besides with Artair gone, our room will not be so foul.”

Artair, at the front of the line, raised up in his stirrups and emitted flatulence. Then called over his shoulder. “My apologies, Yer Grace!”

I shook my head. “Och, I ought tae hae him strung up.”

Livvy laughed. “This is going to be a wild trip.”

Aenghus asked, “When ye leaving, Nor?”

I said, “Now, but we arna takin’ our horses, will ye accompany me tae return them tae the stable?”

Chapter 29 - Livvy



We arrived on a sandy beach. I spit sand from my mouth and moaned, I patted beside me, finding a wool coat and... I pulled my head up to see. *Yep, Nor.*

He groaned.

Then a voice above us. "This one is waking up."

I peeled open my eyes, wincing from the brightness. There were three guys standing above, looking down at us. One prodded Nor with his toe. His voice overly loud to my sensitive ears. "Get up."

I glanced to my left to see Artair, his hands up. I realized that one of the men, a black guy, was holding a gun.

I put my hands up. "Please don't shoot, I'm Livvy, I'm... ugh..." I put my hands against my temples. "I'm a friend, I'm really not a threat."

No one answered me. One prodded Nor again. Another rummaged through our gear. "How many weapons they got?"

"Looks like five."

"Seems like a threat to me."

A big guy chuckled. "That is how many I carry on a Sunday picnic."

Nor woke up fully and raised his hands. "Daena shoot. We are friends, nae foes."

I asked, "Can we sit up? Sun... bright."

The black guy said, “As long as you take all your weapons off — toss them here.” He pointed with his boot.

I sat up and pretended like I didn’t have a gun under my skirt.

Nor sat up, unsheathing his sword and tossing it away. “Must I also remove m’dirk?”

The men nodded. Artair tossed his sword over.

The other man said, “...and the gun you’re carrying.”

Nor unholstered his gun and tossed it aside.

One of the men leaned over to look at Nor’s face. “Wait, have we met before?”

Nor said, “Aye, we met, ye are one of the men who saved m’life, I am—”

The big guy said, “Normond! Och! I recognize ye! I am Fraoch, och, ye were in a world of hurt, and here ye are, ye regained yer strength!”

He put out a hand to help Nor up, but the black man said, “Don’t let him up yet, Fraoch. We still don’t know why they’re here, and this dude looks iffy.”

Artair said, “Iffy? What does ‘iffy’ mean?”

I said, “It means they aren’t sure what you are about.”

Artair grinned. “Och, I am mysterious, that is an excellent description.”

Fraoch waved his hand. “That man inna anymore iffy than me. I am not worried on him at all.” Then he asked Nor, “What ye doin’ here? I remember ye were warned tae stay away.”

Nor had his knees up, his arms around them, his head lowered. “Och, tis verra bright — I ken I was warned... but I need tae speak tae Magnus.”

One of the men stepped aside to make a call.

I said, “He *has* been warned, yes, but I convinced him we needed to come — we’re in a fight with Johnne Cambell

and—”

The guy on the phone interrupted, “He’s coming.”

Artair asked, “Who?”

The black guy said, as he gathered up the weapons and moved them into a pile, “Magnus.”

Artair groaned, “Can I hae m’sword? I need m’sword if I am fightin’ a man named ‘Magnus’.”

“Ye arna fighting anyone,” said Fraoch. “Ye are waitin’ patiently for Magnus, then explainin’ yerself, then leaving without a hassle. We hae a meal planned, I daena want ye tae interrupt it.”

The black guy said, “I’m Colonel Quentin, this is James, you already met Fraoch. Let’s get up, nice and orderly, and move to the shade — it’s hot for November.”

Beads of sweat rolled down my temple. Nor stood and helped me up, not easy in my big dress made of thick brocade fabric. We shuffled through the sand to the shade of a low scrub oak in the parking lot near their truck. Everyone leaned on the truck bed. They pulled a cooler from the back of the truck for me to sit on.

I sat there, primly, in the shade glancing at Nor who stood tall and straight in his coat and kilt. He had a pensive look on his face, looking hot and distinguished yet sweaty — absolutely still and patient except for the bead of sweat rolling down his temple.

Artair looked confident and casual as if he didn’t have a care in the world. He watched a bird fly through the sky, then he kicked sand, picked up a stone, got a glower from Fraoch, and tossed it back down.

Finally a truck pulled up, and a big man got out. He was handsome, looking a bit like a Nor actually, a cross between Nor and Artair but with dark hair. He slammed his door.

From the passenger side a woman climbed out. She was a little older than me, very beautiful. I was embarrassed about

my dress — *when was the last time I showered?* Only a couple of days ago, but we had been under duress.

She looked me up and down, her eyes traveled across Artair and settled on Nor. Her eyes narrowed.

The man named Magnus said, “What ye doin’ here, Normond? I thought we had an agreement?”

“Aye, we did, but... I need yer assistance.”

Magnus scoffed, “That is precisely why I told ye ye couldna come tae m’island, because I ought not help ye.”

He looked at me and Artair. “And who is this?”

“This is m’wife, Livvy, she is the Duchess of Awe.”

The woman with Magnus looked at him sharply.

Magnus said, “Och, that is right, I had forgotten ye are the Duke of Awe. What number are ye?”

“The fourth.”

“Aye, I am much further down the line than ye.”

The woman with him asked me, “And you are from where, Livvy, the Duchess of Awe?”

“Florida, originally, the year 2012. I found a portal and accidentally ended up in the way past. I met Nor.”

The woman sighed. “Well, we knew it was going to happen, didn’t I tell all of you? We leave enough of them laying around and there’s bound to be some drama. I’m Kaitlyn, Queen of Riaghalbane, also a Duchess of Awe.” She put out her hand and we shook. “...but you can call me Kaitlyn.”

She turned her attention to Artair, all of everyone was looking at Artair, who was standing off to the side, smiling, looking bemused.

“I am Artair, prince of Riaghalbane. M’father is Niall, he has been deposed by cousin Eduard, I hae come tae assist Normond, because... nae reason.”

Magnus asked, “What year was yer father crowned?”

“The year of our Lord, 2221.”

Magnus asked Nor, “And what connection do ye hae with Riaghalbane?”

Nor shook his head, “I daena ken. I suspect, but I am nae sure.”

Magnus said, “I see...” He chewed his lip, deliberating, then said, “I suppose we ought tae go tae the house for some conversation and food.”

Fraoch said, “Aye, tis hot as an arse-crack in a wool kilt on a Florida beach at noon.”

Everyone laughed and went to climb into trucks.

The three of us climbed into the backseat of Magnus’s truck.

Artair asked, “Ye been in one of these afore, Yer Grace?”

Nor said, “Aye, I like when they go fast.”

We drove really slow about a mile up the beach, and arrived at a gate, then rolled up a long driveway to a mansion nestled in the dunes.

We all climbed out. I tried to brush the sand off me. “Sorry about the smell. I imagine we’re frightful. This is a huge issue with time travel.”

Kaitlyn chuckled. “Don’t I know it, but no worries, I know what it’s like to be months without a shower, in the wrong clothes for the wrong time.”

Quentin said, “We are the Original Time Lords.”

Kaitlyn said, “Yep, if a timeline is screwy, it was likely our fault, until you guys showed up. I don’t know whether I’m relieved we’re not responsible for all the time-shifts or terrified that we have even *less* control... either way, that dress is gorgeous.” She grinned. “Sometimes that’s enough to make it okay.”

“Thank you, it was loaned to me by my sister-in-law, we haven’t had time for a fitting with the dressmaker yet.”

“Having the appropriate clothes is one of the most difficult things about time travel, I’ve been in the past in a slinky, tiny little sun dress, and here in a big, heavy, eighteenth-century gown. And five minutes in this Florida weather and you want it off off off. It’s bulky, hot, scratchy, and uncomfortable... totally been there. Bad news is, I wish I could offer you a shower and a change of clothes, but it’s very concerning that you are here. We’ll share a meal, but I’m sorry you’ll have to be uncomfortable during it. How long have you been in the past?”

I said, “A few days, so I’m okay, just pardon the smell, and the sand sifting down from my skirts.”



Magnus opened the front door and the smell of a delicious meal being cooked wafted out.

Kaitlyn said, “Don’t mind all the kids.” Two little girls ran by.

Artair stopped one foot on the front step. “We arna goin’ tae fight, Magnus? Ye warned the Duke away and now ye are just goin’ tae invite us in? With a name like Magnus I thought ye were goin’ tae be trouble.”

Magnus at the top of the steps held the door open. “Aye, Artair, I am invitin’ ye in. I sized ye up and determined ye arna a threat. I could bring ye tae yer knees here on m’front steps if I wanted tae, but instead I am goin’ tae feed ye and consider ye a friend. I warn ye though, my children are inside, I winna allow them tae come tae harm — ye going tae cause trouble?”

“Nae.”

“Ye ought tae address me as King Magnus, or Yer Highness.”

Artair groaned under his breath, “Och nae,” then said, “Nae, Yer Highness, I winna cause any harm. We are only here tae learn the rules.”

“Good, there is only one rule: daena mess with m’family. And welcome tae m’home.”



Nor and I were shown into the guest bathroom by a woman named Emma, and given hand towels to wash up for the meal. She said, “Dinner will be ready in five.”

I nodded. “Good, be there in a minute.”

She left and Nor and I looked at each other. I said, “This was much easier than I thought.”

“Aye, as long as while we are washin’ Artair daena run his mouth and get us sent from the household.”

I laughed as I turned on the water. “It looks like Magnus knows how to handle him.” I looked around, while I wetted my hands, squirting soap on them. It was hard to compare this mansion to the houses I had grown up in — these people were very rich. This house was grand, opulent, everything was white and gleaming and clean and had a look of elegance. I lathered my hands up and washed up to my elbows.

I wished Charlie were here. He would love this, but I was also glad he was back there helping. It gave me a bit of solace that we had left Kilchurn protected, plenty of weapons, monitors and security cameras, and that Charlie knew how to use them.

I checked myself in the mirror. “She looks beautiful and look at me, I’m a wreck.”

“Och ye thought she was pretty? Ye are the far more bonnie lass.”

I grinned. “And you are a very good lad.”

He teased, “*M’laird.*”

I said, “You ready to go out?”

He nodded and we left the guest room to go down the hall to the main room following the sound of all the voices.

Chapter 30 - Livvy



We walked into a roomful of strangers. Introductions were made. I tried to repeat names but gave up after about five, there was a lot of activity, talking at once, laughter, and commotion.

Artair was sitting on a barstool at the large kitchen island. His hands looked pink and clean, though the rest of him looked like a dust ball that had rolled from under a medieval bed, dark and sooty. There were about ten adults there, maybe more, plus kids rushing around, the woman who had shown us to the bathroom, Emma, said, “Good, you’re here, we’ll eat in just a moment!”

A tall man was cooking. He raised a hand covered in an oven mitt. “I’m Zach.” He pulled a wide tray out of the oven covered in long French breads and brushed them with what looked and smelled like garlic butter.

I said, “Yum, it smells delicious.”

A ginger-haired man strolled in, he was tall but so young it looked like he couldn’t manage to grow a full beard yet. He said in a big booming voice, “Nor! I heard ye were here! Ye arna flat on yer back growling and mewlin’ like a bairn anymore!”

Nor smiled. “Lochinvar! Nae, I am on m’own two feet, thank ye for the rescue.”

Lochinvar pulled him into a hug and clapped his back. “Not a problem!” He released Nor but kept two hands on

Nor's shoulders, and asked, seriously, "What did ye think on the cookies?"

Nor said, sadly, "Och nae, Lochinvar, I dinna get tae eat the cookies. I woke on the edge of a loch with a monster in it." He looked at me to explain.

I said, "An alligator."

Fraoch from the other end of the kitchen said, "A gator ate yer cookies? Och nae, now they will hae a taste for them! *None* of our cookies will be safe."

There were two little girls in the kitchen with a big pig who was looking up at them adoringly. Kaitlyn said to them, "Don't listen to your Uncle Fraoch, gators don't *like* cookies, he might have eaten them, but they don't *like* them."

One of the little girls said, "Uncle Fraoch, it's not true! Gators only like chicken nuggets, that's why we lock the front door when we eat them."

Lochinvar said, "If ye missed out on the cookies ye get double tonight. But ye made it home, that's what's important. Ye lived tae eat cookies on another day, I see ye brought yer wife?"

"Aye, this is Livvy, I made it home, then I made it back tae Kilchurn."

"Great, and this is...?"

Artair said, "M' name is Artair, Crown Prince of Riaghalbane."

Lochinvar leaned on the counter, reached for a piece of bread and Fraoch smacked him on the back of the hand. Lochinvar said, "Fine, but I am past hungry."

Zach said, "We eat in three minutes, you can wait."

Lochinvar exhaled low, then said, his eyes narrowing. "Crown Prince, huh? Who did ye kill in the arena for that gig?"

Artair said, "Arena? Wait, what dost ye mean... arena?"

Magnus said, petting a dog between the ears, “Careful Og Lochie, we daena want tae say too much. Everything ye say tae a fellow time traveler is a complication.”

Lochinvar nodded. “Sure, I get that, Magnus.” He dipped a finger in the garlic butter, yanked his hand to his mouth before Fraoch could smack it, and grinned.

Then said to Artair, “But just tae be clear, if ye fought in the arena — twas not against me, right? You didn’t kill me, not Fraoch, not Magnus, *right?*”

Artair shook his head. “Nae, I never met any of ye before... but can ye tell me what ye mean by arena...?”

Lochinvar shook his head. “Nothing, nae arena, forget I said anything.”

Kaitlyn was carrying a baby in a carrier on her front, swaying side to side on her feet to calm him. “So, y’all came on Puttanesca night, hope you like pasta, it’s the scent that does it for me, plus Zach makes piles, plenty for everyone — beer?”

Nor said, “Aye.”

I nodded. She popped the tops off two bottles and passed them to me and Nor.

Zach said, “If everyone will sit, I’ll serve.”

The adults gathered around the long dining table. The kids, giggling and squabbling, sat on the barstools along a counter.

So many strangers.

Magnus sat at the head of the table. Fraoch sat at the opposite end. A bunch of us down the middle. A pig and a dog lurked nearby hoping for scraps.

Plates in front of us, Magnus ripped a piece of bread in half, dipped a bit in his sauce and said, “Why daena ye tell us why ye are here, Nor?”

“First, I’d like tae say, Magnus, thank ye for yer welcome. We dinna expect it, ye hae been much more welcomin’ than I

ought tae hae expected as I was comin' against yer direct command."

Magnus didn't look up and sort of shrugged. "I hae calculated what I ken of timelines, we must tread verra carefully, and I ought not kill anyone. Instead, I will feed ye dinner and ask again, why are ye here, what is happening with yer cause?"

"I daena ken what m'timeline is tae yers, I daena ken the truth of any of it, but m'castle, the lands around Kilchurn, and my family are about tae be attacked by Johnne Cambell—"

Kaitlyn gasped. "My apologies, I was just shocked to hear his name. Keep going."

Nor continued, "Artair has offered his sword, but even so, we are ill-prepared for the battle. I came tae ask for yer advice."

Magnus chewed his bread and swiped the other half through the sauce.

Then he looked down the table at Quentin. "Ye remember when we had tae protect Balloch from a future attack?"

"Yep, not fun."

I said, "My brother has installed security cameras and monitors, we have a howitzer on the walls."

Artair raised his hand. "I brought that."

Nor said, "But I keep thinking, Magnus, why are we waitin' for him tae attack? Tis a poor position and it daena sit right. I am givin' up the offense. But tae attack him first, I need knowledge. Where is he, what is he plannin'? And it seems tae me, that ye are all downstream of us, and therefore the outcome of my battle somehow affects all of yer lives. Yer prosperity depends upon my actions, so ye are in a good position tae advise me."

Magnus met Kaitlyn's eyes. "We could let them see the book, the last page...?"

My eyes went wide. "You have the book? Johnne's book?"

“Yeah, I stole it from Lady Mairead, we shared it for a while, passing it back and forth — it’s very dangerous, I think. We keep it hidden and don’t let anyone have access to it, *generally*.”

I said, “I think we *really* need access to it.”

She looked around the table. “What does everyone think? Help me think this out, we’ve had the book, and we didn’t screw anything up—”

Quentin rolled his eyes. “You know as well as anyone, everything is *always* screwed up.”

Kaitlyn said, “Yeah, I was kind of joking.”

A woman who had earlier been introduced as Hayley gestured around with her fork, and said, “All of this has always been screwed up, every bit of it. Y’all say you don’t want to mess up history, but that’s all we *ever* do.”

Fraoch said, “As one of the stakeholders of this whole—”

Zach said, “Nice use of the word, Frookie.”

“Tis a verra useful word, thank ye for telling me of it, Zachary — as a *stakeholder*, I think we can show them the book, if it messes up the world we can just use the Bridge—”

Nor asked, “What is the Bridge?”

Magnus groaned. “The Bridge fixes time, it inna tae be used except in extreme cases.”

Nor said, “Tis the box with the black stone in it?”

Magnus nodded. “Ye hae seen it?”

“Johnne forced me tae steal it from a vault—”

Magnus’s expression turned sharp. “Where was this vault?”

“I daena ken...”

“How did ye open it?”

“Somehow, by my palm.”

All the men gave each other knowing looks, shaking their heads.

Quentin said, “Look, Magnus, this dude, Nor, is important. And he doesn’t know what the hell is going on. He doesn’t have enough knowledge to be safe, this makes him dangerous.”

Magnus nodded. “I agree. Nor, tell me the tale, how exactly did ye steal the Bridge?”

“I was kidnapped after m’wedding, by Johnne, and taken tae a castle as it was being built. There I was led down intae an underground vault, all the doors opened tae m’hand. Johnne stole some time travel devices, and the Bridge. I saw m’sister there, but dinna ken why or how — then I was forced tae use the Bridge.”

He said, “Dost ye ken where ye were when ye used it?”

“Nae, we had a car, but it could hae come from any time. But when I used the Bridge, Johnne seemed distressed. He kept askin’, ‘Did it work?’”

Magnus nodded.

Nor added, “Then he sent me back in time and had me imprisoned. That was how I ended up meeting Lochinvar in a dungeon in 1557. That was when ye rescued me.”

Magnus said, “How long had ye been in the dungeon?”

“A few weeks, Johnne said he was testing how far back in time the portals could go.”

Kaitlyn took a bite of food, chewed, and swallowed. “So at that point he knew how to use the vessels pretty well, knew how to break into the safe at Riaghallbane by using Nor, but was unsure how to use the Bridge.”

Nor nodded. “He was usin’ it for the first time, he was verra concerned, almost frightened.”

Kaitlyn said, “Well that will do it.”

Magnus said, “In all this time was he the same age... did he seem tae progress in order? If ye ken what I mean?”

Nor shook his head. “Nae, twas odd, he seemed aulder, then younger, sometimes civilized, then we jumped and he was rough and filthy, twas not orderly.”

Magnus and Kaitlyn met eyes.

She twirled pasta on her fork and said, “Ugh, we have just been dealing with these time issues for so long, I truly hoped we were done.”

Magnus said, “Ye ken, Kaitlyn, the troubles will come back around, always, because tis a wheel...” He leaned back in his chair. “And we hae been fortunate, we never had tae deal with Johnne, he always remained in the past—”

Nor said, “He is m’present.”

Kaitlyn said, “So are we going to give them access to the book?”

Magnus said, “I think so, but tis yer decision, ye stole it from Lady Mairead and then worked out a shared agreement with her, a fine negotiation, ye decide what tae do.”

Kaitlyn nodded, then she stood up and asked, “Livvy, will you come with me?”

I followed her from the room, and two little girls scrambled down from their barstools and followed behind us.

One said, “I wike your dress, it bootiful.”

I said, “Thank you.”

The other said, “Mammy, can Zoe and I come too?”

Kaitlyn said, “Of course.”

Chapter 31 - Livvy



She led me up the stairs and into an office and gestured toward a chair in front of a desk. “Sit down.” She sat down behind the desk.

The two little girls stood beside her chair. She introduced us. “Livvy, this is Isla and Zoe. Isla, Zoe, this is Livvy. She’s a Duchess.”

Isla said, “Is it better than a Queen, Mammy?”

She laughed, “Not quite—”

Isla said, pointedly, “My mammy is a Queen.”

Kaitlyn said, “Livvy, do you have precocious children yet?”

I shook my head. “We’ve only been married for about two months, we were apart for a lot of it. It’s been an ordeal.”

She nodded. “I know... I know exactly what you mean—”

Isla said, “Mammy, this is boring, can Zoe and I go back downstairs?”

“Yes, but it’s important, Isla, to be respectful when you meet people, to say hello, *politely*, it makes your family stronger if you treat people with courtesy.”

Isla sort of curtseyed, “Pleasure meet you, Libby.”

I said, “Same to you...” as she and Zoe barreled from the room.

Kaitlyn said, “Because of so much ordeal, and with new people in the house, she gets nervous and doesn’t want me to leave her side, that’s why she followed us in here.”

She leaned back in her seat. “Where was I...? Oh, right... so my children are the youngest members of a long line of Campbells, and I think you are a part of that line as well. I’m not sure what your life holds, or mine, but I think you ought not know much about me, or I about you, it’s safer, but...”

She leaned over and started pressing buttons on the outside of a large safe. “We are time travelers, something I’ve struggled with is how to decide what paths to take, how to keep timelines straight, how to keep from changing history and to steer the best course... These are tough decisions. It came to me in time, that all I can do is try to keep Magnus safe, and our children. I ask myself, *what will keep them safe?* In every move we need to keep in mind the descendants of the Campbell clan, and consider what would keep *their* world orderly. I don’t know... seems to me that if you make decisions with all of our kids in mind... it might help.”

I said, “I think it will help, thank you. I had a dream the other night, it seemed like it was about my son, but I don’t have a son, but he seemed very real.”

“He is real, it’s an echo, or a prognostication — it’s your body knowing him before you meet him.”

“I like that.”

She opened the door of the safe and slid a painting out. I caught a glimpse as she brought it to the desk, it was about twenty-four inches square, a portrait of a woman in shades of blue, in an ornately carved gold frame. “So you and Nor are both new to this, and you need to get to Johnne Cambell, I’m going to show you the book...” She placed the painting face down on the desk.

I asked, “Who painted that?”

“Picasso, it’s of Lady Mairead when she was much younger.” On the back of the painting was a door. “I have to know I can trust you — can I trust you? Magnus is relenting,

but he thinks this is a mistake. He's letting me be right, please don't blow it for me." She grinned. "Being right is important when you've been married for years, you'll see."

I nodded. "My grandparents have been married for fifty years, so I totally get that. And truly, I just want to keep everyone safe. I think it will be better if we come up with a way that doesn't end in war. A war might ruin everything, it could destroy the world."

"That is true — we don't want to destroy the world. Please don't tell anyone about this book."

"You have my word."

"Good." She pressed her fingers to the lock, it clicked and she lifted the door. Inside was a very old book.

"I share it with Lady Mairead—"

I said, "By share it, you mean, through time?"

"Yes, it's here, in the back of this painting, and also in the back of the painting in the castle of Riaghalbane in the year 2381, in every time."

She blew dust from it.

I said, "Thank you for agreeing to show me, we've been... he's been terrorizing us for a long time. I thought he would kill Nor, we just don't understand how to fight him."

"Yeah, you both sound like you're in *way* over your head. I think the most important part is the last page." She passed me the book.

I opened the front page. I was so excited — I was holding Johnne Cambell's ancient book.

I gingerly turned over a few pages, each filled with a tiny longhand, edge to edge, lines of words, illegible, cramped around drawings crammed onto the page. I flipped another page and another: diagrams, charts, chicken-scratch dictations. I turned another page, then said, disappointed, "So you... do you know how to read it? I don't know what I was thinking..."

She said, “You thought it would be like an instruction booklet, I know... I would be disappointed too, I have spent a lot of time with it, and I still don’t understand it all. The person who can explain it is Lady Mairead, but you have to promise not to involve lady Mairead. But this is what I think is important.” She reached across the desk, pulled the book around, and opened it to the last page of writing. “See this?” She tapped the page. “After this line there are blank pages, this is the last page he wrote on, the last thing he wrote.” She pointed at the top of the page. “See that?”

I said, “It’s a date.”

“...and see down here...” She pulled the page close, her eyes scanning the writing, then she placed the book in front of me and tapped. “That’s the location. I’ve never been there before, and definitely not in that time—”

I said, “Why is that important?”

“Because you don’t want to loop.”

“Oh, right... and what exactly...? I’ve heard this, it does sound terrible, but... I’m not sure exactly what happens...?”

“Looping means to backtrack on your own life, to try to redo things at the exact same time, so that you’re interfering with yourself. It’s not good. Don’t do it. Once, I tried to say goodbye to my grandmother before she died and looped on myself, I interfered so much that she died earlier than she would have, I tried to loop again and again, making it worse, until I couldn’t keep going. Magnus had to beg me to stop. It was awful. I do my best to *never* loop.”

Her eyes traveled to an embroidery on the bookcase. It said:

Your heart will always guide you home.

I asked, “That’s beautiful, did your grandmother stitch that?”

Kaitlyn nodded. “Yes, and it’s a reminder that we are all entangled, but if you loop around and around, tightly, it creates a knot. The lesson is, don’t knot the thread...”

I said, “Yeah, that makes sense.”

She turned her attention back to the book, “So, what I’m thinking is this last page is the last thing he wrote. I often wonder what made him stop writing there, practically mid-sentence, and then nothing, check it out.”

I read the last line it read:

Now I rest, on the morrow I will

“It stops without finishing.”

“Yep, like he was interrupted. I’ve always thought that it might have been Magnus and I who interrupted him, but in all our years of time travel we haven’t really crossed Johnne’s path, and I’m not sure that crossing his path is in our interest at all. I would never want to... never try to... unless I absolutely had my back against the wall... but now I’m thinking...”

I said, “It could be Nor and I who interrupt him, couldn’t it? I mean, it totally could. This could be the record of it! Maybe we go right to this moment, right at this time,” I tapped the page. “And we kill him, right when he’s writing this sentence.”

She said, “It’s as likely as anything.”

She pushed forward a piece of paper and a pen. “Write it down, you and Nor can decide what to do about it.”

I wrote down the date and the location, saying, “This is going to help, this *has* to give us the upper hand.” While I made my note, she consulted on a laptop and wrote down three long strings of numbers, and the printer behind her desk vibrated to life and shoved out a printed map. She passed the two pieces of paper toward me.

“This is to get you there, to an area outside the village of Langside. And yes, this has to help, at least you can confront him away from your family.”

After I finished writing she put out her hand for the book. “I can’t let you keep it, it belongs to my bitch mother-in-law and she will be furious if it’s gone. Again, and I can’t stress it enough, don’t mess with her.”

“Also don’t loop.”

“Yes, and I think now you know what you needed to know, right?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

She put the book in the back of the painting, closed the door, pressed her hand to it and locked it. Then she returned the painting to its place inside the safe.

I followed her from the room, my big dress rustling as I walked, sand in the folds, rubbing against my skin. I folded the pieces of paper and held them tight in my hand.

Chapter 32 - Nor



While Livvy followed Kaitlyn upstairs, I asked, “I hae a question for ye, Magnus, if ye had a similar adversary, what would ye do?”

Magnus looked across at Quentin, “What would ye advise me tae do, Colonel Quentin?”

Quentin said, “Probably war, but we would make sure we weren’t outmatched. I assume you are, Nor?”

“Aye, he has a vast modern army.”

The man named James said, “We could show up with your army, Mags, and protect them.”

Magnus shook his head. “Nae. Tis too much interference, a time traveler, causing a war in an earlier time, using weapons from a future time, and we get in the middle of it? I daena like the sound of it. I am uncomfortable with even hearin’ what Nor plans tae do.”

Lochinvar said, “I think ye need tae find out where Johnne is, call him out, and run him through with a sword.”

I said, “Tis why we are here, tae see if we can find him.”

Artair said, “And I will fight in Nor’s stead. He is important tae the history of the world, and he daena hae bairns yet. So I will run Johnne through with the sword. We just need tae name the place.” He leaned back in the chair. “And *this* is why we need arena battles.”

Magnus groaned. “As a man who was imprisoned by his father and forced tae fight in an arena, I daena hae the same

affinity with the idea as ye, Artair.”

Artair raised his glass, “Ye were imprisoned by yer father as well? Och nae, that is a terrible fate — we all must drink tae the terrible fathers of the world.”

Magnus said, “Slàinte!”

Lochinvar, Artair, and Magnus drank.

I said, “I canna join ye, my father was an honorable man.”

Fraoch said, “The man who raised me was honorable, and believed himself tae be my father, so I canna drink as he might be lookin’ down on me from heaven and become confused.”

James joked, “My dad wasn’t honorable, but he was good enough, kinda fun, actually.”

The woman named Hayley asked, “So if you don’t battle Johnne, or beat his ass man-to-man — could you negotiate a treaty?”

We all scowled.

Kaitlyn and Livvy returned downstairs and rejoined us around the table. Kaitlyn asked, “What are you talking about?”

Hayley said, “Nothing, I lost my mind and asked if Nor could negotiate with Johnne.”

Kaitlyn laughed. “You forgot that you should never negotiate with power-hungry time travelers or Campbell men.”

Everyone laughed as Zach appeared with another round of beer.

Quentin said, “Maybe Johnne’s unimportant, *we’ve* never had to deal with him.”

Magnus said, “Here in this room we are a king, a crown prince, a duke, a king’s colonel—”

Fraoch said, “And most important of all, Fraoch!”

“Aye, and Fraoch—”

Lochinvar said, “And the man who killed a king.”

Magnus said, “Aye, that too,” and then he looked around. “Anyone else want tae put yer accomplishments intae m’list?”

Zach said, “Chef to a king!”

Magnus chuckled. “My point: we are all historically important. We must tread carefully and we ought tae consider that Johnne himself might be integral.”

James said, “He is the first time traveler.”

Magnus said, after a gulp of beer. “Aye. He was the first. But I am the best.”

Everyone laughed again.

Kaitlyn said, “I showed Livvy the final page in his book, and shared my theory that this is the last known day....”

Livvy waved her hand. “I have it all here.” I took the piece of paper she was holding and put it in my sporran.

Kaitlyn said, “So it will be easy.”

Quentin said, “With time travel nothing is *ever* easy.”

Magnus looked thoughtful, spinnin’ his glass, then said, “And whatever ye do, from here on out, I urge ye not tae tell us what ye intend, we canna be a part of it.”

I said, “I understand, and I am grateful that I ken where tae find him.”

“So ye will follow the information that Kaitlyn provided ye, go tae that point in time and ye will pursue Johnne. Meanwhile my family will do our best tae ignore the whole thing—”

Quentin said, “But you know, out of curiosity, and for strategic plans, where are you going, and what are you planning?”

Magnus groaned. “Nae, Colonel Quentin, we daena want tae be involved. Nor, daena tell us yer plan. We canna rescue ye, we canna be involved.”

Kaitlyn said, “I think what we’re saying is we wish you the best of luck and please don’t screw up—”

Livvy said, “We won’t.”

Artair said, “We winna. We ken where he is, we just walk up and end him.”

Fraoch said, “Sounds like a good plan.”

Magnus pushed his plate away. “Ye armed well?”

I nodded.

Quentin shrugged. “I disarmed you, and took stock; you could always use more.”

Magnus said, “Good, Colonel Quentin will see tae adding tae yer weapons... also I recommend always carryin’ a pen, dost ye hae a pen?”

I said, “Nae, I daena—”

Kaitlyn opened a drawer, pulled out a pile of pens and handed each of us two.

Livvy asked, “What’re these for?”

Magnus said, “Immeasurable things, but most important, tae ask for help if ye are lost.”

Livvy held hers clutched in her fist and nodded.

Zach said, “Do you have vitamin drinks? Lotta jumping in a day.” We shook our heads and he opened a cabinet. “Coming right up, go-go juice to go.”

Magnus asked, “I note ye dinna bring horses... Ye might need them where ye’re goin’...?”

I said, “I dinna think we would need them here and—”

Fraoch said, “Og Maggy, ye said ye dinna want tae be involved!”

Magnus chuckled, “Aye, ye’re right... I will wheesht on the details. But Normond, perhaps ye ought tae come back tae see us, in three days... just a simple return tae tell us if ye hae accomplished yer goal.”

I nodded. “That sounds good. I promise we will.”

Magnus put his hands on the table and stood. “And thank you for understandin’... though it has been a pleasure havin’ ye at our table, ye ought not remain for long.”

I stood, “Of course, Magnus, thank ye.”

Chapter 33 - Livvy



Quentin and Magnus drove us to the beach to jump.
They dropped us off, shook hands, and left.

Artair said, “Well, that was fruitful.”

Nor said, “Was it? I think I hae more questions than when we began.”

Artair said, “At least we had a meal, tis always fruitful when ye hae a meal.”

I said, “So are we returning to Kilchurn first or intercedin’ with Johnne Cambell?”

Nor passed me the papers from his sporran. “We go after Johnne first, we daena hae time tae waste, we must go first thing.”

I consulted the papers, looking down on the portal, “Alright... we’re going to 1568—”

Artair said, “1568 is near in time tae m’Gwynedd in the year 1578, perhaps we could go get her first, then go get Johnne?”

Nor said, “Nae, we canna go yet, we must do this first. ”

He looked out over the ocean and exhaled. “I ken, Yer Grace, and I daena want tae put her in harm’s way, I am just becomin’ desperate. I ken we need tae solve this first. I just mentioned it tae see if ye changed yer mind.”

“I haena changed m’mind. I promise we will go there next.”

I ignored their conversation, checking the numbers, concerned I didn’t know enough, *still*. “I wanted to ask them if we were doing this right, but... I forgot, Magnus is intimidating.”

Nor grunted. “We daena need his help in it, we hae it figured out.”

I twisted the portal and held it out for him to look it over. “It’s right?”

He looked it over, then said, “Aye, tis right.”

Artair planted his feet. “Then tis time tae leave yer great friend Magnus, he who gave us so much help and advice, and go.”

I said, “We got a warm meal, he didn’t want to learn too much about us, or for us to learn too much about him—”

Artair said, “Aye, His Grace’s friend, Magnus, has good instincts.”

I asked, “What do you mean?”

“In that short visit I learned that Magnus, King of Riaghalbane, has grown soft, and by sitting at his dinner table I learned how tae bring him tae his knees. He was smart tae throw us from his house before I decided tae do it tae him.”

I said, “Artair! You were looking for ways to conquer him over dinner?”

“Aye, definitely. Were ye determinin’ how tae conquer him, Nor — I mean, Yer Grace?”

“Aye, I found the points of entry, learned that his weakness is his children, his strength is the men around him, of course I watched for it all. I kept m’eyes on Lochinvar’s sword hand, and though Fraoch was friendly, I could see his deadly side. Yet I daena agree with Artair, I think Magnus inna soft, I think he was capable of killing us without batting an eye.”

Artair shrugged. “Wonder how many men he’s killed?”

“Likely more than ye hae.”

“True, and yer friend, Magnus, said he had killed men in the arena too. I *knew* it was a good idea.”

Nor said, “Ye keep calling him m’friend, I just met him.”

Artair said, “A man like that is either yer friend or yer enemy, ye ought be grateful he gave ye a meal afore he sent ye on yer way. That could hae gone verra violent.”

I said, “...and on these dark notes, we ought to go.”

We linked arms and Nor turned the portal, May 13, 1568 and the pain pulled apart my insides, dragging us into the past.

Chapter 34 - Livvy



MAY 13, 1568
THE BATTLE OF LANGSIDE

Ugh, the pain rolled through my body, but... I was moving, jostling, not on the ground, carried uphill... someone had my feet, someone else holding around under my arms, they were running with me... a roaring inside my head, the sound was deafening, it sounded like... war, explosions, shots, screams, and under it — *wake up wake up wake up, Livvy!*

What?

I opened my eyes, Artair had my feet, saw my eyes open and said, “Good!” He dropped my feet into a mud puddle with a splash and rushed down hill toward the battle, drawing a gun from his holster.

I said, “What... what is happening?”

Then Nor dropped my back onto sodden ground on the edge of a wooded area, “Get yerself tae cover, Livvy, I need tae get Artair! And we dropped one of our bags!”

At the bottom of the hill, spreading out below me was a huge melee, smoke rising above it. Two armies met at a path outside of a village and spread out along the hillsides, shots firing, horses rearing, swords slashing, and just... mayhem. A frontline of men with long pikes stabbing into each other, the screams and shots were deafening. As Nor raced down the hill, I put my hands over my ears, dug my heels into the dirt, shoving myself back behind the cover of a tree. *No no no no no no no.*

Artair swung his sword at a man, fighting him at the bottom of an incline, they were on the edge of the battle, but another man rode up on a horse and slashed his sword down at Artair. Nor was racing toward them; his gun drawn, he fired at the man on the horse, hitting him, knocking him back off the horse. Artair, battling a man with a sword, jumped forward and stabbed him through.

Nor stood for only a moment, then scooped up our bag and slung it over his shoulder as Artair pulled his sword from his opponent.

Nor grabbed Artair's coat sleeve at the shoulder, "Come on!" He pulled him away from the battle.

They were running back toward me up the hill, as behind them men fled the battle, rushing away to the south.

Nor tossed down the bag and collapsed into the mud beside me, "Och, twas a great deal of effort..." His breath was coming in bursts.

Artair mud all over his back, blood all over his front, faced the field, watching the battle. "Twas exhilarating! What a battle! Ye see the Queen's men hae been routed? They were unprepared for it, och — they will feel the loss."

I said, "What battle is it?"

Nor said, "Tis the battle of Langside, the army of Mary against the army of her son, the future king."

"That sounds dire."

"Aye, twas! In this battle we are witnessin' the loss of the kingdom tae James, and the beginning of the Marian civil war."

Artair said, "M'blood is pumpin', twas glorious, did ye see me slay the man?"

I said, "Yes, but what side was he on, Artair? Whose side were you fighting for? What if you had changed the course of the battle?"

“Yer Grace, these are not the considerations a man can make when he is fighting for his life! Twas kill or be killed, and I am relieved tae hae won.”

Nor had his arm over his eyes, “Livvy, ye canna stop in a battle and ask what side a man is on if he is swinging his sword at ye, ye must swing in return.”

Artair said, “Exactly, I agree with His Grace, though I am irritated that he shot that man on the horse, he was mine tae fight.”

Nor said, “Ye were goin’ tae lose, he had the upper swing, och, ye ought be grateful! I saved yer life.”

“I had him, I was goin’ tae slash him and—”

Nor said, “Ye think ye were goin’ tae somehow vanquish him *and* the other? Ye are mad.”

Artair said, “Well, now we winna ken.”

“Aye, we winna ken that ye would hae died in the mud of Langside because instead ye are alive and insufferable. I also rescued the bag, yer welcome.”

Artair said, “Good, Yer Grace, tis a relief.”

“Now what?”

Nor sat up and he and Artair watched the battlefield for a few moments.

Artair pointed, “The battle is over, Mary’s force has crumbled, vanquished, they are fleeing the field.”

Nor said, “Daena look like the King’s men are in pursuit.”

“Nae, Moray is holding them back. Och, look on the field, so many men lost.”

Artair said, “Dost ye think Johnne is down there? Does he fight in this battle?”

I said, “I don’t think so, he was writing, and he was interrupted. Not sure why he was here... but I don’t think he was here to fight.”

Artair chuckled. “Likely he was here tae watch.”

“To watch? Like to watch a battle?”

“Aye, tae see it, tis likely.”

Nor said, “If he is here he has now seen our storm, he will ken that time travelers hae arrived.”

I said, “It’s hard to sneak up on someone with a thunderstorm.”

Nor said, “We hae tae assume he is guarded, but we ought tae carry on... this is still our best plan. Ye said he is stayin’ in a tavern in the village of Langside?”

“Yes.”

Artair said, “The battle is between us and the village.”

I pulled out the map and looked it over, orienting us with the river bend and the woods. “There’s a public road, just behind us, if we follow it north we’ll go around, I think... and there’s likely a tavern near this crossroads.”

Nor said, “As long as we go well around, we daena want tae get caught up.”

Artair said, “Aye, a warm tavern sounds good, can we also stay in a room? I need sleep and I daena want tae sleep in the mud like a mucag.” He shook his head, flinging specks of blood and mud.

I said, “Hey, you’re getting it on me!”

Artair said, “Ye hae mud all over ye already, Duchess, ye arna nearly as clean as ye ought tae be when we are about tae speak tae the proprietor of a tavern.”

I stood and tried flicking my skirts to knock mud off the back. Then I pulled a bottle of go-go juice from my bag and untwisted the cap. I swigged some and passed it to Nor.

He said, “I daena want it.”

“You have to have some anyway.”

Nor begrudgingly sipped, and grimaced.

Artair chuckled. “Ye must drink because Her Grace says so?”

Nor passed him the bottle, “Ye hae tae drink because I say so.”

Artair drank, then belched loudly. “Tis not so bad.” He passed it back to me and I put the cap back on and stuffed it in my bag.

Nor said, “Tae continue the earlier point, we are here for a purpose, not tae hae a nice evening at a tavern and an inn. We are here tae avenge m’self on Johnne. That is all.” He stood and adjusted his coat and smoothed back his hair, trying to make himself presentable.

Artair dug through a bag for a rag to clean himself. “Yer Friend dinna mention we were arrivin’ during a battle, or in the middle of a battlefield.”

Nor said, “Who, Magnus? He is nae m’friend, and ye are forgetting ‘Yer Grace’. And I am aware of how little we knew. We might hae died if we hadna gotten up at the time.”

Artair wiped a smear of blood off his face and looked down on the disgusting rag. “Och nae, I am filthy, not fit for meetin’ people — and how come, Yer Grace, we just fought on a battlefield taegether, how are we not on a first name basis? Ye are on a first name basis with yer friend, Magnus, and he inna followin’ ye on this wretched journey.” He took a wide stance, and wrung out the bottom of his kilt, sending a shower of dirty water to the ground.



We gathered up our bags and began trudging through the woods toward the road. We were cautious and quiet, listening to make sure there weren’t any soldiers coming near, but it seemed that the victorious king’s men were camping to the east, the Queen’s army had fled to the south, we came to the road after about an hour and looked up and down.

Not a soul to be seen.

Nor said, "It seems all the crofters are hidin' from the battle."

We walked north. I held my skirts up, as we sloshed through a puddle in the wheel rut to the middle of the lane that was raised and relatively dry. We walked single file. Artair said, "Tis odd tae travel along a main road and not see any other travelers."

Nor said, "Aye, dost ye hear the camp?"

We all listened. There was a rumble in the distance. The aftermath of a battle. There were still shots fired to the south.

Artair said, leaping over a puddle, "It does seem like yer friend, Magsy, could hae given ye a tank, Yer Grace, tis the least he could hae done. Och, but wait, I forgot, he gave us some pens, we are saved."

Nor exhaled. "He inna my friend."

We came within sight of the crossroads and near the corner the White Cart Inn. We stood under a tree and watched for anyone coming. I eyed the inn. "I wish I could take a warm shower."

Nor said, "We canna stay the night, but also they daena hae a shower anyway."

"True, they probably have sucky beds too."

Artair said, "I will go in the inn and inquire about Johnne Cambell."

"Bein' verra careful that ye arna seen by Johnne."

"Aye, I will be cautious."

Nor watched the building. "Livvy and I will go around tae the back and sit outside and try tae listen. Should we discuss what ye will say?"

Artair's eyes narrowed. "Nae, ye are this close tae causin' his end and ye want tae hae more discussions, tae what end?"

“I daena ken, in case Johnne is there, or ye say something that would make the innkeeper suspicious — we daena want tae lose him.”

“Yer Grace, this is not m’first time comin’ across an enemy. Ye ought tae trust m’skills — inna this the man who absconded with ye on yer weddin’ night?”

“Aye.”

“Inna this the man who left ye lost in the past, who had ye risk yer life for his treasure, who means tae conquer yer lands? The man who is right now preparin’ tae lay siege tae yer castle?”

“Aye, but Artair, we must use our wit tae come tae a—”

“Nae, we are past discussion, tis time tae act.” Artair turned and strode across the road to the White Cart Inn.

Nor said, “Och nae, he is runnin’ off like a hound, followin’ the scent of a squirrel.”

We waited while he jiggled the handle, then looked in through the open window, calling, “Is someone within? I need a drink!”

He yelled again, “Can ye open? I am not a soldier, just a man searching for rest and an ale!”

The front door unlocked and a woman spoke with him for a moment, then grasped his arm and yanked him in. She closed the door behind him.

We looked both ways to make sure no one was coming and then crossed over to the inn, snuck around to the back and found a place to sit after shooin’ chickens away. With our backs to the wall just under a window, we listened and waited.

We could hear Artair’s heavy steps on the wood floor, and the innkeeper say, “Ye canna be here, sire, if I serve ye an ale, every soldier from the field will be wantin’ one, I daena hae nearly enough.”

Artair said, loudly, “Och, but I am a lonely traveler, ye canna turn me away! It daena follow that if ye serve me an ale ye must serve all — I see a cask and a mug just there and nae one else in the tavern!”

Her voice, “But sire, there was a battle, just moments ago!”

“Och, who cares, tis nae my battle, I am not here tae fight, I am here tae drink! Ye daena want the silver in m’pocket? Ye would rather not give me an ale?”

Nor shook his head and whispered, “Och, he is going tae get himself killed with the lack of caution, he is supposed tae be wary.”

The innkeeper said, “Fine, sire, I will give ye an ale, but ye must be soon gone —” Then she drew near our wall and we heard the cask pouring ale, and her muttering, “He must think himself verra high for a man covered in mud.”

I bit my lip to keep from laughing.

Chapter 35 - Artair



MAY 13, 1568
A TAVERN, LANGSIDE

She drew me a mug of ale and placed it on the table in front of me. I dinna want tae cause any suspicion by directly asking for Johnne, so instead I decided tae be conversational. “What is yer name, Madame?”

“Ye can call me Mary.” She sat on a stool near the cask.

I raised m’ mug. “Here’s tae the battle. Tis over, almost afore it started.”

Mary put her own mug under the spigot and drew her own drink and asked, “Who won, twas the witch Queen, or the king’s men led by Moray? M’ laird was pressed intae service for the king’s men. I hope he is unharmed.”

I said, “I am sorry, m’ lady, ye must be concerned about him. I am glad tae report the king’s men hae routed the witch.”

She said, “Och good, I pray m’ laird will return soon and is well.” She drank from her mug, then added, “I am certain he will return any moment, he is fierce and easily angered, so ye ought not cause any trouble.”

I smiled. “Mary, dost I look like I cause trouble?”

She laughed. “Ye look like all ye do is cause trouble.”

I gulped some ale and said, “Tis true. I canna deny it and as I was on m’ journey I got caught in the battle and had tae fight for m’ life.”

She raised her mug. “Tae the battle won.”

I raised mine and said, “Aye.” I passed m’ mug over tae be filled again and asked, “Remind me, who was leadin’ the Queen’s battalion?”

“Argyll.”

I said, “Ah, a Campbell! Dost ye ken, was his name Johnne...?”

She shrugged. “How would I ken?”

I winked. “Ye seemed astute, I thought ye would ken, if anyone kens, twould be my auld friend, the innkeeper of Langside.”

She laughed and sipped her ale, “We are friends?”

“Aye, we are auld friends, I hae come tae hae an ale with m’ auld friend, Mary.”

“Ye are a scoundrel. But we hae had a man here by the name of Johnne Cambell—”

I leaned forward, “Where? When? Mary, I am shocked, ye allowed a Campbell tae stay here in yer inn?”

“Aye, he has a room upstairs.”

I looked up at the boards over our heads. “Och, upstairs! Is he here now?”

“Nae, he left for the morn, but said he would return after the battle.”

She seemed disinterested in telling me more. I asked, “Why did he stay here and not in the encampment?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “He dinna come tae fight in the battle, he came tae watch. He said he liked the excitement of a battle, whatever he meant by that. He was a peculiar man, burning down m’ candles, writing in his book as he drank.”

I grunted, “He is a Campbell, perhaps he came tae go through the pockets of the dead on the battlefield.”

She grimaced. “I daena like the thought of it, but men will plunder...”

I said, “But if he went out in the morn, twas a great risk, he might hae been pressed intae service—”

“Like m’laird.”

“Aye, and if he dinna come tae battle, if he haena chosen a side, why would he risk it?”

Mary said, “He seemed verra keen on advisin’ his cousin—”

My eyes wide, I said, “But Mary, ye are alright with one of yer guests assisting his cousin, the commander of the Witch Queen’s army? Are ye harboring the enemy in yer fine inn?”

Mary said, “Daena matter, he had a great deal of silver.”

Chapter 36 - Livvy



MAY 13, 1568
OUTSIDE THE WHITE CART INN, LANGSIDE

Listening from outside I looked at Nor with my eyes wide. I whispered, “If Johnne isn’t careful he is going to change history. What is supposed to happen in this battle, did he screw it up?”

Nor whispered, “Ye dinna study it? Mary abdicates for her son, James, and he becomes king, but the armies winna accept it—the battle of Langside is short and bloody and inna good for the Queen. Johnne dinna change it.”

I groaned. “Unless he already did. It seems so important. He shouldn’t be messing around with it.” Chickens gathered around our legs, scratching at the dirt. I shifted my foot and caused them to squawk away.

“Argyll ought tae pray a time traveler would come tae change the outcome of the battle. He proved himself worthless tae the command and tis said he near fainted from fear during the fight.”

I said, “Oh no, that’s not good, but... What if we are already living in an altered timeline?” I put my head back on the wall and exhaled. “I am too tired for this drama.”

Nor nodded. “Me as well, but if time has changed there is not much we can do. And in this instance I prefer tae think time has been altered. Tis hard tae imagine a Campbell bein’ so poor at warfare — there must be trickery involved.”

I gulped. “How would we ever know?”

He whispered, “We daena ken, Livvy, we canna. History is in the past and as the story is told tae us we must rely upon

memory, although this is always a trick. When m'brothers and I would come back from a battle, m'father would hae us gather in the Great Hall tae discuss the events of the fight. We would be fresh from it, yet all our stories would differ, but as the tale was told the stories would combine, and by the end we would hae a tale we all agreed upon. It wasna the truth of the day, twas the truth of the history tae be passed down." He added, "Should make ye feel better. The story might change a wee bit but it winna affect us much."

"Maybe it's not possible to change the big things."

"Aye, tis likely that some events are set, if we hae a beginning tae a story and we are livin' in the end, it canna change too much, or what might happen tae us?"

I said, "I hate to think of it, it's too cruel, and you know, Artair reminds me of you a bit, the way he holds his head, his cockiness, his—"

Nor's brow went up. "Ye think me 'cocky'? Usually that is a word reserved for someone with an attitude of grandeur who daena hae proof of their worth — I hae a title, Yer Grace, it gives me proof of m'grand cock."

I giggled, trying to keep it very quiet. The chickens returned and pecked around my feet, I kicked to send them fluttering away again.

Nor whispered, "I regret all these plans."

I put my head on his shoulder. "This is fine, Artair found Johnne, now we just wait for him to come back to the inn. Our job is to stay awake, keep the chickens from nesting on us," I yawned, "and then we—"

"We will kill Johnne and he will have deserved it."

We waited, holding hands across our knees. He kissed my forehead.

I tried unproductively to shoo the chickens away again. "This is not fun."

"Aye."

“I thought we were goin’ tae prevent havin’ tae wait for Johnne.”

Then we heard Artair say, loudly, “Mary, where is yer privy?”

She said, “Tis out back, in the field.”

Nor whispered, “Livvy, wait here. I am goin’ tae meet him out there.”

Chapter 37 - Artair



MAY 13, 1568
A TAVERN, LANGSIDE

I strode toward the poorly built shack, and entered. It had a long bench with holes tae allow the excrement tae drop intae a foul ditch. I relieved m'self intae the cesspit and when I emerged found Nor standing, his eyes scanning the horizon.

I said, "I hae a great deal tae tell ye."

He said, "I need tae relieve m'self first."

While I heard his piss splash intae the pit, I watched in all directions — if Johnne came along the path he might spot us. I stepped intae the shadow behind the foul shack.

Nor met me there. "Well done, Artair, ye found him!"

"Aye, he could return any minute now. I will return and pay for m'ale, take m'leave of my great friend, Mary, then come join ye in yer... where are ye waiting?"

Nor said, "I found a fine hen-yard."

I laughed. "Och, tis verra ignoble for a Duke tae sit in a hen-yard, this is just the barbaric plan we needed. Can ye hear well from amongst the chickens?"

"Aye. Well enough."

"Good, I ought not stay in the tavern. After the storm he will be suspicious."

"Aye, he will take one look at ye and head the other direction, m'chance will be lost."

I said, “Daena worry, Yer Grace, I hae thought this all through. We hae snuck up on him, now I will lie in wait.”

Nor said, “I ought tae be the one that kills him, tis more honorable.”

“I think ye are just bored, Yer Grace, over-considering honor, ye just want an ale.”

“This is true.”

“It might be more honorable, aye, and fair, but he is a time traveler, he daena play fair. Did he ever treat ye honorably?”

“Nae.”

I said, “Ye want tae beat Johnne before he lays siege tae yer castle, and now is our chance. If he be killed, will it matter if tis another hand or yer own that drives the blade?”

“Nae.”

I said, “Will it matter if our actions change history?”

Nor said, “I suppose it winna. He is changin’ history by stayin’ here and visitin’ the encampment. I daena think he is keeping in mind the order of the world.”

“He inna. He is disorderly, unfair, and dishonorable.”

“I agree, Artair, we ought tae end him here, even if it is yer hand on the blade, even if we must wait in a hen-yard all night. I pray we daena hae tae wait in a hen-yard all night.”

“Och,” I said, “This winna take all night, the battle is long over, he will grow bored and return for his bed. This is goin’ tae be easy, Yer Grace, tis time travel, we are men who make history—”

Nor groaned. “There is *naething* about this that is easy, ye daena understand how much power these devices hold, or how much danger. This misunderstanding will be yer undoing.”

I scoffed. “It winna undo me. I winna fail at this. This man, Johnne, has been yer enemy for a long time, therefore he is mine. The wellbeing of the Duke and Duchess of Awe is m’utmost consideration, tis almost as if I guard yer life as my own! I will use m’power tae find him. I will meet him, then I

will kill him. This is what I mean by easy, step by step I will overpower him.”

I began walkin’ toward the tavern, callin’ over m’shoulder, “Besides, the sooner I get this done, the sooner I get tae Gwynedd. I’d like tae hae her in this lifetime, I daena want tae waste anymore time.”

I entered the darkened tavern and said, “Mary, thank ye for yer friendliness, but I must leave now, I hae a long journey ahead of me.”

“Ye daena want a room for the night?”

“Nae, though ye are m’great friend, and ye hae a warm room, I must go, I am expected.”

I pressed silver intae her hand as I heard the front door jiggle back and forth.

She said, “Wonder if this is m’laird returned?”

I bowed, “I will go through the back door, else I get caught up in conversation and more of yer delicious ale. If anyone asks after me, Mary, make sure ye tell them I am long gone.”

The door shook again.

I slipped through the back door as Mary crossed tae the front door. I nodded tae Nor and Livvy, and crouched beside them, in a shadow, I raised up and peered inside.

Mary let a man in.

I gestured tae Nor. He peeked over the window sill and nodded.

It was Johnne.

Inside, Mary said, “Ye need an ale, sire?”

He was gruff. “Aye... is someone else here?”

“Nae, there was... he is long gone.”

“Who was it, a stranger?”

“Nae, twas an auld friend.”

I peeked over the sill again. His back was tae the window, I could charge him, except I dinna want tae frighten her.

He asked, “There was a terrible storm, hae ye seen any strangers? Anythin’ unusual?”

“Nae, sire, but the village is teemin’ with soldiers, how would I ken? Did ye see m’laird in the battle?”

He said, “Nae, I dinna, but I wasna lookin’ for him.” He waved his hand in front of his face. “Yer friend filled the tavern with his stench.”

I sniffed my underarms, and smiled at the Duchess. She stifled a laugh.

Inside the tavern, Mary passed Johnne a full mug. “My apologies, sire.” He went tae sit in the corner, his back was tae our window.

Then he shifted in his seat and asked, “Nae one has come tae stay in yer rooms?”

Mary said, “Nae, ye are the only one, sire, *most* God-fearing people will stay clear of battlefields if they can. The rest are witless, filthy, scoundrels and highwaymen come tae dig through the pockets...”

I glanced over the sill once more. Johnne had turned his back on Mary, pulled a candle close, and opened a book on the table before him.

Mary said, “I suppose I ought tae see tae yer room, Master.”

Johnne turned his head tae gave her a sharp look. “Ye haena cleaned m’chamberpot yet?”

“Nae, Master.” She climbed the steps as Johnne, using a modern pen, began tae write.

I moved my hand slowly tae m’dirk, wrapped m’fingers on the hilt and began to draw it from its sheath.

Johnne stiffened at the sound.

For a long moment it looked as if he were listening.

He finally went back tae writing.

I lowered my head below the sill.

Livvy gestured that she would go tae the front door tae create a diversion, and before Nor could hold her back, she rose, and crept away around the building.

Nor peeked over the window sill again.

We waited. I banged m’fist on m’thighs as crouchin’ was causin’ m’muscles tae burn.

And then we heard the Duchess, causing a commotion at the front door, shakin’ the handle as if someone were tryin’ tae get in.

Nor and I peered over the sill intae the interior of the tavern. Johnne looked up from his book toward the door.

Mary called down the stairs, “Johnne! Tell them they canna come in, we are closed!”

I readied tae run in, Nor and I met eyes.

The door shifted again, Johnne called out, “Go away there is nae one tae—”

I leapt up, unsheathed m'dirk and raced in through the back door. He glanced up, shocked, as I charged across the tavern and before he could defend himself, I swung a blow at his face.

He fell over backwards, his chair clattered tae the ground as he fell ontae the floor. He cowered and tried tae pull himself away.

“Where ye goin’, Johnne?”

He was slinkin’ away, but I stepped after him, followin’, towerin’ over him.

He asked, “Who are ye?”

“I am Normond’s great-grandson, and ye and I hae a problem.”

Johnne made it tae the wall, and tried tae shimmy up the stone tae his feet. I stood in his way, with m'dirk drawn.

He tried tae stand. “Ye and I daena hae a problem.”

I stabbed forward. He dropped down tae his arse again.

I said, “Och nae — we hae so many problems! So many problems. Ye hae bedeviled m’grandpa, I will need tae kill ye for yer bedevilment. But I wanted tae make sure ye ken who I fight for.”

He scowled, “The Duke makes his great-grandsons fight for him?”

I said, “He dinna force me, I offered.”

“And who are ye?”

I said, “M’name is Artair, prince of Riaghallbane, great grandson tae the original king—”

Nor lunged past me and before I could say or do anythin’ more he plunged his dirk right down intae Johnne’s heart.

Nor stood over him, breathing heavily, his eyes locked with Johnne’s as his life drained from him.

Then Nor shoved Johnne away and sat down on the floor shaking.

I said, “Yer Grace, I was a second away from doin’ it!”

His face pale, he said, “Och, ye were too busy makin’ speeches.”

Mary stalked down the stairs, shrieking, “Och nae! What hae ye done?! Ye killed him on m’floor!”

Nor said, “Aye, Madame, m’deepest regrets.” He lumbered to his feet. “But he was a thief... I will pay ye for the trouble.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Aye, ye will pay me, ye will pay me for the ale, for the trouble, for the mess, and for bringing the war intae m’tavern.”

I said, “Aye, Mary, ye will hae it and more.”

Livvy came in through the back door. “Is he dead? Did it work?”

I shoved him with my boot. “Aye, he is gone.”

Mary raised them tae the heavens. “Lord, look at what I hae had tae portend with! M’laird is battlin’ and I am servin’ ale tae scoundrels! And now I hae a lady comin’ in through the back door while there is blood upon m’floor!”

Chapter 38 - Livvy



MAY 13, 1568
A TAVERN, LANGSIDE

The tavern was a mess, and Nor was shaken. Mary stalked to the corner of the room and brought a bucket of water and a rag over, dropped them beside our feet, and then stalked upstairs for a sheet.

As soon as she was out of sight, we began to plunder through Johnne's things. I picked his book up off the table and fingered through the pages. It ended right where the book had ended in Florida. "This is right where it had been written to...! We didn't change history at all!"

But then I added, "Unless we changed *all* of history, but how would we know?"

Nor said, "If we daena ken, none of it matters."

I said, "Yeah, I suppose if it doesn't matter then we ought not worry about it." I dropped the book into my messenger bag.

Artair dug through Johnne's sporran, grabbing anything valuable and stuffing the silver into a small bag, while Nor opened Johnne's leather sack and poured it out on the table: a vessel, some coin, another book, a wallet. He and I scooped most of it into our bags, adding the coins into the small bag for Mary.

She returned downstairs, carrying a linen sheet.

I helped Artair pull it over the body, while Mary began washing the floor of the blood, with big strokes of sloshing water.

Nor wiped his blade on a piece of Johnne's kilt, then sheathed his sword. "I pray this winna cause trouble for ye, Madame."

She was on her hands and knees, her ass in the air as she scrubbed. The blood turned pale as it was sloshed and swiped across the boards of the tavern floor. "Twas not the first death on our tavern floor and I doubt twill be the last... there is death all around us; the battlefield will be certain tae fill the cemetery."

Nor said, "All the same, Madame, I meant ye nae trouble, I will take the body with us, see he has a proper burial."

"Aye, m'laird, it would be a great help tae me. I daena yet ken if m'own man is coming home. He would handle the trouble caused." She wiped her forehead with her arm.

"I ken tis a dire time..." Nor was holding her hands, comforting her. His words were low and calming, but his expression was pained, blood was splattered across his shirt, a bit on the side of his face, some on his arm. His hands shook, but bound by duty he overrode his own distress to bring Mary a wee bit of comfort.

I collected our bags, trying not to look at the dead body — it was upsetting, and hideous and made my stomach hurt.

Mary wiped her eyes. "Johnne hadna paid for his rooms yet... There is also his tab for ale. He drank a great deal of ale."

"I ken, Madame, we want ye tae hae this." He placed the bag of silver they had collected from Johnne's sporran in her hand.

Her eyes went wide. "Och, tis heavy with coin!"

Artair wrapped the cloth under the body, dragged it up, and slung it over his shoulder.

Mary wrapped the loose ends of the cloth over the form. "I suppose m'laird and I will hae a good tale now, on the day of the battle of Langside we had a dead man in the tavern."

Artair said, "Tis the sordid tales that will sell the ale."

We said goodbye and left Mary to clean the floor.



Outside Nor said, “We canna carry a dead man out tae the lane and down through the village of Langside, we will need tae jump from the closest field.”

Artair said, as we trudged toward the outhouse, “How come I am carryin’ the dead man when he was not m’kill, Yer Grace?”

Nor moved his arm around in a circle and shook his hands. “I would offer tae help, but I am still weakened from the deed.”

Artair said, “Tis alright, I hae been overcome with weakness after a death at the end of m’blade. I once had tae lay under a tree for a full day afore I could free m’self of it.” Then he said, “I suppose, since we hae a dead man on m’shoulder we daena get tae go get Gwynedd yet, ye will hae tae go somewhere else first...”

Nor said, “Aye... we canna—”

Artair said, “I must always wait. Ye would think ye would try tae do what I want for once.”

“Why is that?”

“Because ye are my ancestor, ye ought tae help yer descendant.”

Nor said, “According tae Magnus we canna know this much about each other.”

Artair’s brow lifted. “Ye will listen tae one descendant over another?”

Nor exhaled. “Och, now ye are complicating it all, ye ought tae wheesht — forbye look at ye, ye canna go get her yet — nae, we ought tae go back tae Kilchurn, let m’family ken we hae killed Johnne. We need tae tell them that we are nae longer being hunted or on the edge of war, and bring the

women home. Then ye can clean yerself, get a horse — how would ye go tae her without a horse?”

We came to the middle of a field and Artair dropped Johnne’s body onto the ground and stood looking down it, wrapped in a blood-stained sheet. I looked away, it was too disturbing.

Artair said, “Aye, I need a horse, and I ought tae be clean, not covered in blood.”

Nor clapped his hand on Artair’s shoulder, his arm shaking from the exhaustion of killing a man, riding high on the excitement, then crashing from the effort. He was standing in a field, exhausted, blood splatters on the side of his face and his clothes, making him look even more weary and distressed. “We will return for her, I promise, Artair, we just need tae go back tae Kilchurn first, then we will go. Ye hae m’word.” He pulled the portal from his sporran.

Artair said, looking out at the wooded horizon, the rumbling hum of an army that was recovering from a battle ensconced there within the trees. “I am verra glad I had a chance tae witness the battle...”

I said, “Witnessed? You were in the middle of it. This whole thing has been horrible.”

“Nae, tis not horrible, Yer Grace, think of all we learned by watchin’ a great historical battle unfold! This is what one ought tae do with time travel, go tae visit all the battles in history tae see what ye can learn and offer yer sword.” His eyes went tae the road. “And speakin’ of offerin’ yer sword... it looks as if Mary’s laird has returned home victorious.”

There was an older man striding up to the back door of the tavern, where Mary met him and embraced him in the doorway.

I said, “Oh, I’m so glad he made it home.”

“Aye, twas likely he would, he was fightin’ on the King’s winnin’ side, but in a battle ye never ken if yer skill will help ye survive.”

Nor said, “We must remove ourselves afore he thinks tae come after us. Tis time tae head home tae Kilchurn and enjoy the victory.”

Artair clapped him on the shoulder. “Och aye, ye were victorious, Nor, ye won it well.”

“Aye, we need tae celebrate.”

Chapter 39 - Livvy



FROM BARRAN MOOR TO THEIR PRIVATE CHAMBER IN
KILCHURN CASTLE

I woke up in the field around the stream in Barran moor. The stream was trickling, peacefully. The light was dim, the darkness of time travel around the edges of my sight, but the sky was blue, a breeze was blowing. Aenghus's voice called, "Hail!"

I glanced beside me, Nor was sitting up. He waved up at his brother. "Ye came, verra promptly."

"Aye, Yer Grace, I ken not tae make ye wait — ye bellyache if I inconvenience ye in any way."

Nor helped me sit up. I leaned my head on his strong shoulder. He was filthy, dusty, smelly, and there were splatters of his enemies blood on him. His hair stood up all over, he looked like a madman.

Aenghus said, "Ye look as if ye hae been in battle and there is a body beside ye."

Nor nodded, "The good news, Aenghus, is I hae killed Johnne."

The words shook me from my lull. I glanced over my shoulder at the dead body lying in the field, a bloody cloth wrapped around him. In the breeze the edge of the linen fabric rustled and flapped.

Aenghus dropped from his horse and picked up one of our bags and began tying it to his saddle. "I am not certain I ken who Johnne is but I will take ye at yer word that this is a good thing."

I looked around dazedly, and growing more confused. *What was going on?* Something didn't sit right with me... about this...

“Wasn't um... Artair with us?”

Nor looked around, his brow drawing down. “Aye... but he inna here, where is Artair?”

Aenghus said, while focusing on the strap's buckle, “Who's Artair?”

I squinted my eyes.

Nor said, “Brother, ye daena ken who Artair is? The man with the big gun, who came tae help in the war?”

“Nae... and what war? We hae been strengthening the castle, but there haena been a war...”

“Were the women sent away tae Carnasserie Castle?”

“Nae... ye seem confused, Yer Grace. Nae, ye warned us something was comin', but we...”

Nor asked, “Who did ye bring with ye tae meet us? Where is Malcolm?”

Aenghus said, “He's at Finlarig! What are ye on about, Yer Grace? This is all—”

I said, “What about Charlie?”

He said, “Who's Charlie?”

I said to Nor, “What is going on?”

He exhaled. “I believe we hae changed history. We were warned, yet here we are, history has been altered.”

I gulped. “I don't like it, I don't like it one bit. Thank God we are here, together.”

He drew my hand to his lips, and kissed my knuckles. “... and I am ready tae celebrate the victory even if nae one else joins me.”

Aenghus said, “I will celebrate with ye, Yer Grace. Ye finished off yer enemy, of course I will raise a beer tae ye.

Once ye clean up, of course. Ye will frighten Claray the way ye look.”

Nor looked down at his shirt. “Aye, I am wearin’ the blood of m’enemy. It seems I just killed him moments ago, yet I traveled a hundred years since...”

Aenghus put out his hand and helped Nor up, then Nor helped me up. He asked, “Claray and Mam are good?”

“Aye, but I will warn ye, Claray winna be quiet about the lad... the one with the weak chin from the dance the other night...”

“Young Gordy of Menzies?”

“Aye, I ken his name, I am just refusin’ tae acknowledge him, he seems a poor choice yet she has spoken of nothing else and is waitin’ for ye tae return so she can speak with ye, first thing.”

“Thank ye for the warnin’, I canna bear the idea of listening tae her enumeratin’ young Gordy’s questionable traits while I am drippin’ blood upon the rug. I will sneak intae the castle and wash before I am cornered.”

Nor and his brother, without speaking, each grabbed an end of Johnne’s body, hefted it up and slung it over the back of the horse.

And we began the long trudge to Kilchurn castle.



As we approached the castle from this direction, it was, like always, a sight to behold; it made me feel breathless with awe to see it. Shadowed by the ring of mountains around it, but strong and high in the middle, its towers and thick walls were so protective of the family within.

As we walked along the causeway, a group of soldiers rode out to bring horses for Nor and me. We mounted, and led the formation, the horses hooves pounding, sending up clouds of dust, and clots of dirt on the causeway lane.

Inside the gate, we dismounted the horses to see Lady Gail on the steps.

Aenghus said, "I'll go speak to her, tell her to keep the wolves from your door until you can change yer attire. We'll have dinner soon, and I promise we will celebrate." He wandered off.

Nor and I slowly climbed the stairs to our room. I noticed his knee buckle on the stair. "Are you okay, m'laird?"

"Aye, the weariness after a battle has me in its grips, tis all."

We were quiet, I was introspective.

In our room I stopped in the center and looked around. "Is all my stuff here?"

He looked around too. "It seems like it... nae, these are the original things... what we brought when we came..."

He lifted the lid on a cooler. "There is not much left."

He pulled a soggy, wrapped cheese from the bottom, dripping from melted ice.

I shook my head. "So I never went home? I never got Charlie and came back with the coffee and the kettle?"

"It daena look like it, we ought tae go back and get it, the kettle was a good idea."

"And I did it, you're sure of it? I brought my brother, we met Artair — that definitely happened, right?"

"Aye, I am certain of it."

"I spoke to Charlie up on the walls, it was just a day or two ago, fresh..."

Nor nodded.

Cannie knocked on the door, wanting to help me dress. Nor told her I didn't need her yet, then he sent his valet away. I asked, "Why did you send them away?"

“So we might undress and freely speak.”

“We haven’t been alone in days, Artair was... he was a lot.”

“What does a ‘lot’ mean?”

“Kind of like, a lot of trouble, a lot of energy, action, talking, a lot of everything.”

“Aye, he was all of that. He was high-spirited about wagin’ battle, but he helped me defeat Johnne. I wish he were here tae celebrate the victory.”

While he spoke, he unbuttoned the front of this shirt and pulled it off. “I wonder where he is? Did we leave him behind?”

“No, he was holding onto my arm, I’m sure of it, and he was holding the body on his shoulder, right? And the body is here...”

He was shirtless.

I put out my arms and he undid my laces and we got my dress off my arms, so that I was down to my chemise.

He asked, “Did ye hear him say that I was his ancestor?”

“Yeah, I heard.”

He shook his head. “I daena ken what tae do with that knowledge.”

“Me either. That whole experience was... difficult.”

He dropped his pants to the floor.

I pulled my chemise off over my head.

We stood there naked in front of each other. I flushed, feeling somehow timid in front of him. I picked up our pitcher of water and poured some into the washing bowl. And got a washcloth from my box of linens — still there, a relief that I hadn’t completely lost my mind.

I dipped the washcloth in the bowl, wrung it out, and then stepped in front of my husband and began washing his chest, his stomach, and around his shoulders and down his arms,

mindful of Johnne's blood, making sure my husband was washed clean of it.

And when I poured clean water on the washrag and wrung it out, the bowl tinged pink, so I used clean water and washed again, his face, and down his arms, we put his hands over the bowl and I poured water over them and then ran the washcloth over his skin until finally he was clean.

I got out another washcloth, poured water on it and cleaned off my own face and arms, and then he took it, and gently stroked the cloth over me, over my skin, around my curves, until I was quite steamy with just the thought of him. He picked me up and carried me to our bed.

There was a moment when I was looking around at the bedding making sure it was all as I remembered it, but then he was kissing me, his hands rubbing along my skin, *I love ye, I love you too*, and our strokes and fingers gathered urgency and the mood became primal, our bodies hot, and I was breathlessly anticipating him, as he rolled over on me and entered me, and drove into me, slowly and carefully, a hot friction against me, fingers trailing and mouth wet against my skin, cresting to a climax, and breathless, my mouth pressed to his shoulder, his fingers wound in my hair, his breath against my ear, a low moan between us as I found myself cascading down the other side. His hands gripped my buttocks — he held on, tense and powerful, until finally he released, and sank down on and around me.

That had been a necessary release.

His mouth pressed against my shoulder, head on the pillow, still with a firm hold on my ass, "Och, I needed ye, Livvy... I was havin' trouble thinkin', I lost m'mind in the death of him."

I ran a finger down his skin. "Did you? You seemed calm... except for the shaking..."

"I wasna calm. Tae want tae kill someone and then tae do it — tis sinful tae seek revenge. It had taken over m'heart..." He kissed my skin. "There is a darkness that has fallen upon our lives, och... I will need tae beg God for forgiveness, but I

needed tae come down from the rage of it.” His mouth pressed as he spoke. “Ye canna speak tae God when yer blood is pumpin’ hard from the sin.”

I nodded against his skin and whispered, “I’m glad I can help.”

“Och, ye are m’helpmeet, m’wife and m’love, ye do help, and I am calm, finally, from the murderous rage, and my head is clearin’ tae find, what...? We daena ken an Artair?”

“Apparently not.” I whispered. “What if he’s completely gone?”

Nor simply shook his head.

I said, “And no Charlie... is he back in Florida?”

Nor rolled off me and kissed my cheek. “I assume he is, but we ought tae go check.”

“I don’t really understand what happened. What if he’s not?”

Nor said, “We ought not borrow trouble, we need tae check on him...”

I slid my thigh up to his waist, he put his hand comfortingly on it. “I like ye when ye distract me from m’troubles.”

“I like you too.” I snuggled up against his side. “Do we have troubles now? You killed your enemy. I think we are celebrating. We just had sex, maybe things are finally going our way.”

“Dost ye remember visitin’ Magnus?”

I nodded. “And Artair was with us.”

He said, “I agree. So what happened, I think, is we killed Johnne at the time that was between Artair’s life and this time at Kilchurn so that somehow we overwrote what was happening here, which is fine, we dinna need this time tae be set in stone.”

“Without a war the only purpose of bringing Charlie was to show him something cool and to confuse Claray.”

“Aye, and she couldna marry yer brother, nae matter how much she begged.”

I raised up on one elbow and looked down on him. “How come? I mean, just so I know...”

He lowered his brow, seeming skeptical of my line of questioning. “Because all marriages are alliances and our families are already allied. Twould be a waste tae bring yer brother intae m’family, he is m’brother already. Yer grandfather and father are already a part of m’family and the alliance is strong, but... they live in another time. Claray’s marriage will be important in strengthening my title in this century — she will need tae marry a baron, at least, and then his family will be a strong alliance here.”

I lowered my head again, “That makes sense... So what are you going to do about her relationship with Young Gordy?”

“I will continue tae tease her about it, mercilessly, or she might grow bored of him as he is witless. But he comes from a good family. He is young, if he wants tae impress her brothers, he might grow in wit... I will watch him tae see if he has the right temperament for our Claray. She does sound set in the match.”

“That sounds good, you’re a good brother.”

“And ye can arrange a good and profitable marriage for yer brother.”

I teased, “Och nae, we don’t get to say *anything*, Charlie is on his own.”

Nor said, “Tis a cruel place tae be on yer own, tae hae tae allow the fates tae bring a match tae ye.”

“It is cruel, but we do have chocolate, so we deal with it. Speaking of fates... how long will we be here before Mam mentions me giving you a son?”

He smiled. “I’m surprised she inna barging on the door tae ask us already. I suspect she will mention it at least once afore we eat.”

I laughed. “How about a wager? I’ll give you a piece of silver if she mentions it before we eat or during the meal, and I’ll take the long view, I think she’ll mention it *after* dinner... you’ll owe me a piece of silver if she waits.”

“Och, I do love a wager, especially when it means I will get an extra piece of silver for m’sporran.”

I said, “So, beyond the victory celebrations, what are we going to do?”

He thought for a moment. “We need tae check in with Magnus tae let him ken we succeeded. We need tae look in on yer family, make sure Charlie is well. And then I will hae tae go help Artair find his long lost... lass, what was her name?”

“I can’t remember.”

We both considered, then he said, “Tis weighing on me that I haena helped him and now he is gone.”

“I almost forgot all of it. He talked about her constantly and it almost left my memory altogether.”

“I made him a promise, I hae tae live up tae m’word.”

I said, “We have a lot to do, should we get up and get started?”

He groaned and put his arms around me in a big hug and buried his face against my neck and pulled me on him, teasing, “This is nae fair! I just want tae bed m’wife after slayin’ m’enemies, canna a man hae some peace?”

I laughed. “You already bedded your wife, quite well, I might add.”

“Twas not enough.” He ran his hands down, teasing my breasts, then pulled my hips down onto his. “I daena think I will ever get enough. And this is a celebration, a man must hae *more* than enough during a celebration, and a Duke doubly so.”

I would have laughed, but his hands stroking around me were already exciting me — I centered him between my elbows and kissed his lips, lovingly, deeply, then passionately, and we made love again.

Less desperate, more acrobatic and fun, the ending left me sprawled, arms and legs spread out on top of the covers, totally satiated, with the warm glow of loving him so much... He stood by the bed, looking down on me. “Ye are a sight, m’love, ye hae been well bedded, with a high color on yer cheeks.”

I grinned. “And what of you, that was awesome — don’t you need a nap?”

“Nae, I am weary, but ready tae eat.” He ran his hands through his hair, pushing it back from his face. A simple act that caused his muscles to ripple.

I said, “You’re tantalizing me again.”

He strode to the cabinet, pulled out a clean shirt, and pulled it over his head. “M’wife is insatiable!”

“No, fully sated, I just don’t want to leave our bed.” I pulled the cloud-like comforter up and used it as a full-body pillow. “I want to lie here and cuddle and if going around again happens, then so be it...”

A clean kilt was folded, ready to be put on, he pulled it around himself, and buckled the belt. Then he adjusted the pleat so it was straight. “I ken tis yer desire, m’love, yet... ye will regret havin’ yer desires met when the meal has been served and ye hae missed it.”

I said, “Food? There is food coming? I... I *am* really hungry.”

“Aye, ye are famished, ye need tae be fed. And ye winna want tae miss raisin’ a glass with yer husband tae the destruction of our enemy.”

“This is so true.” I tossed the covers aside and climbed from the bed and went to look in our wardrobe. “What dress should I wear?” I added, “I think I need Cannie to come help.”

He kissed my shoulder. “That is why I am dressed already, I will tell her ye need her, as I go tae the chapel tae seek pardon for my sins.”

“I am truly sorry that it weighs on you.”

“All is well, Livvy. This is my burden tae carry. But I mean tae celebrate fully. We hae won a war.”

“Good, and dressing for it might take a while. Don’t raise your glass without me!”

He left and sent Cannie in.

Chapter 40 - Livvy



By the time I was dressed and downstairs I was faint with hunger.

Claray grasped my arm when I found her near the Great Hall. “I am so glad ye are returned, Livvy, we are going tae hae such a lovely night. Young Gordy is here once more tae see me!” She spoke as if I hadn’t been away to try to stop a war, but instead had been on a small errand, and the only important thing was her love life.

She was so sweet and silly, yet her silliness was in pursuit of marriage which was hard to square, to want to marry so young and to have her marriage be centered on the idea of noble titles, land acquisitions, and family alliances. I wished she could marry for happiness, but I was not thinking about it right, apparently...

I shook my head from my meandering thoughts as she said, “He is so well-formed, wait until ye see him, Livvy, he is—”

The doors were opened for us and we entered the Great Hall. I was handed a glass of wine while we milled about before we sat down to eat. There were not as many people as we had had for our wedding reception, but close to a full hall, and Nor standing in the center, handsome and distinguished in his kilt and coat. There was a sword at his hip, signifying his power over all. He was one of the tallest in the room, big, and although some men looked more rough and dangerous, he looked both dominant and noble.

Claray whispered, "Och, he is the most handsome man in the room!"

I drew my eyes from my husband to follow her eyes to the young man, Gordon of Menzies, smaller than Nor, and with a weakness in his chin that caused him to look overly youthful. His face fresh like he would never need to shave. He was wearing a suit that looked new, he was standing beside Nor and Aenghus and mimicking Aenghus's stance, holding his head the same way, his hand hooked in his belt. Aenghus looked amused at Gordy's mimicry.

He saw Claray and a blush rose up his cheeks, then he stepped behind Nor to block Claray's view. I stifled a laugh, *what was he doing back there, staring at the back of Nor's head?*

Claray looked perturbed. He was only partially hidden from view, his top half behind Nor, his feet easily seen.

If this was love it was a very very awkward passion.

But, as I had been told, he checked her boxes: young, check. Rich, check. Landed gentry, check. And Nor would probably agree with her pick, check.

He was, of course, a far better choice than the last old guy. I glanced at Claray, she was trying to look disinterested, while trying to see what he was doing.

Nor was biting his lip, his brow raised, the side of his mouth went up. He said, loudly, for Young Gordy's benefit, "I must go speak tae Her Grace."

He strode toward us, leaving Young Gordy to look around for some other place to hide.

Claray asked, "Yer Grace, were ye speaking tae Young Gordy about me?"

He teased, "Nae, why would I?"

"Because ye promised ye would speak tae him!"

“I *did* speak tae him, I asked him how the weather was at Menzies castle and he told me the weather was verra fine. Why, did ye want me tae ask him something in particular?” His smile was widening.

Claray looked like she might faint. “Ye are supposed tae ask him if he will dance with me! Ask him what his intentions are!”

Nor screwed up his face, “I feel like ye would prefer tae dance with *anyone* else, Claray. Have ye noticed the cut of his coat, I think it alone is reason enough tae look elsewhere. And when ye command me in the Great Hall, Claray, ye say—”

“Yer Grace! I ken, Yer Grace, did ye ask him what his intentions are with regards tae me?”

“Aye, he will ask ye tae dance. And I told him that he could sit near ye during the meal.”

I quickly grasped her arm because she looked like she might faint in a pile on the floor. “Och nae! I will hae tae converse with him over the meal?”

Nor laughed as his mother, Lady Gail, walked up. He said, “I agree, Claray, the thought of havin’ him near my end of the table is dreadful, this is why I will put ye both down below the salt tae converse taegether alone.”

Lady Gail said, “Nor, ye are teasin’ yer sister and close tae sendin’ her insensible tae her room.”

Nor bit his lip. “My apologies, Mam, and Claray, ye ken I am in jest.”

Lady Gail said, “And Claray, yer brother will not put ye below the salt, daena be ridiculous, I will sit between ye and Young Gordon at dinner and run the conversation.”

Claray, properly, bowed her head, “Thank ye, Mam.”

Lady Gail said, “We ought tae all be seated now, food must be served, and I hae been told it is tae be a celebration?”

Nor said, “Aye, Mam, we hae vanquished our enemy.”

“And who is that?”

“Johnne Cambell, he was verra dangerous, but this is unimportant, he is gone now, never tae bother us again.”

“Good, good, verra well done, Yer Grace.” She put out her arm for Claray and led her to the table.

I watched them walk away. “It’s difficult to get used to this, no one seems to realize how close we were to absolute destruction. I watched them get into boats, heading out across the loch to hide.”

“Aye, tis disconcerting, if we see it in this instance, how often has time changed and we never kent?” He put out his arm.

“That is very dark. We need our glasses refilled with wine.” We crossed the Great Hall to the table to sit down for a large meal alongside convivial conversation, loud stories, and near-drunken revelry, and so much dancing.

Though Lady Gail tried, desperately, to get Young Gordy and Claray to speak to each other, they were mostly mute, with deep flushes on their cheeks, heads hanging, staring down at their meals, picking at their food.

Nor met my eyes more than once, expressing amusement at their ineptitude. Everyone at our end of the table was pretending not to be focused on the two, but it was difficult not to be attentive whenever Lady Gail would try to start a conversation. “Master Gordon, does yer family spend much time along the river? Claray and her father used tae enjoy long walks...”

Young Gordy’s color rose on his cheeks, his head hung even lower. He mumbled at his plate. “Aye, Lady Gail.”

She looked amused. “What dost ye most like about walking along the river? Perhaps ye and Claray hae seen some of the same flora and fauna?”

He mumbled, “I daena walk along the river much, Lady Gail.”

She turned to Claray, who spoke, “I daena remember much of takin’ walks—”

Aenghus leaned in. “*Really*, Claray? Ye daena remember the walks with Da?”

Ailsa said, “M’laird, maybe daena tease her?”

He said, “I am nae teasin’ her, but I think she ought tae remember the walks she went on with our father...” He said to Claray, “I remember one walk ye went on, ye spoke of nothing but the birds ye saw, ye learned tae whistle like them, what were they...?”

She muttered, morosely, “The Dippers.”

“Aye, the Dippers, ye mimicked their song and their dance, oh how ye mimicked them! It was a marvel!” He turned to Nor, “Remember, Yer Grace?”

“Aye, I remember, she performed a verra fine mimicry of a Dipper. Dost ye want tae shew us, Lady Claray?”

Her cheeks turned even deeper red.

Gordy’s head went even lower, with his shoulders hunched he looked like he wanted to crawl under the table.

Aenghus stood behind our chairs. “If I remember it went something like this.” With his head bobbing up and down, he started going, “Caw, caw!”

Claray watched him, her eyes narrowing. “Twas not like that at all.”

Aenghus’s eyes sparkled with challenge. “Then why daena ye show us?”

She shook her head.

He turned to Nor, “Our sister, Claray, has a high spirit, and is surrounded by friends and family alike, she ought tae ken that she should behave as the true Lady Claray, daena ye think, Yer Grace?”

“Aye, naething good comes from pretendin’ tae be shy when she is usually more spirited.”

Aenghus said, “She ought tae be as she is, I think, around all. Twill make ye feel much better, daena ye think, Claray? Ye look strained, dost ye want tae lie down?”

“Nae.”

Nor leaned in, “What if I command ye, Claray? We are commemoratin’ my hard-fought victory and m’sister ought tae entertain us, I think.”

She raised her chin, “Fine.” She stood from her chair, walked tae the head of the table and beside Nor’s chair put her hands under her arms and bobbed and juttet her head, cawing loudly, almost like a shriek.

Aenghus asked Young Gordy, “Hae ye ever seen such a bird, Young Gordy? The Dipper they call it, near the river?”

Young Gordy nodded his head.

Aenghus urged, “Did it look just like this — is my sister doing a good impersonation of it?”

Young Gordon’s face turned red, he said, “I hae seen a Dipper, aye, she looks like one.”

Aenghus grinned. “I think ye ought tae go act it out with Claray, tis the only way we move on from this discussion.”

Ailsa said, “If we can move on from the discussion *I* will do the Dipper! Would everyone like tae do the Dipper?”

She stood and joined Claray, then I stood and joined Claray too.

Ailsa said, “Aenghus, ye must do it as well.”

He joined us and we all did the wing flapping, head jutting, cawing screech beside her and laughing about it, joyously.

All the while Gordy had a desperately high redness on his cheek and looked as if he wanted to run from the room, except *then* he would be noticed.

After a round of applause, we collapsed back down in our seats, and finished our meal. Claray and Gordy were sitting on either side of Lady Gail, and they didn’t speak or even look at each other throughout, though Claray tried to flirt with smiles and proclaiming things loudly to get his attention, like, “I love this wine! Daena ye adore this wine, Ailsa?” and to me, “The tarts are verra fine this evening, daena ye think, Yer Grace?”

Then finally Nor gestured to the musician and requested that the endless song change to dance music and he raised his glass. "I demand that everyone dance. This is my celebration!"

Everyone was standing up from their chairs, except Young Gordy, who remained seated even while Lady Claray was standing, waiting, fuming.

Nor leveled his eyes on Gordy for a moment, then said, "Laird Gordon, tis time for ye tae ask Lady Claray tae dance."

He stood and bowed, "Aye, Yer Grace." He put out a hand. "Lady Claray, would ye like tae dance?"

She looked thrilled as she followed him to the dance floor.

Lady Gail said, "Och nae, we canna put them together, they will never once speak tae each other! I daena want tae sound dramatic, but his incessant brooding means there winna be any bairns!"

Ailsa said to Aenghus and Nor, "Both of ye were valiant in yer attempt at drawing him out, but I fear he is nae match for her wit and charm."

Aenghus said, "I couldna sit by as that witless lad thinks he wants tae marry someone without ever havin' conversed with her. Imagine if he thinks he is wedded tae a demure and quiet lass and woke up three days after the wedding tae meet Claray, wholly altered, behaving like a screeching Dipper in his chambers!"

Nor raised his glass, "Hear hear, that would give him a fright, he would march over here demandin' I take her back, but now he kens she will be a Dipper, he best be prepared."

Aenghus said, "I fear the young lad is not at all prepared. He is here attempting tae win Lady Claray and has nae idea what a wife he is asking for."

We all watched the two young people dance, Claray had her eyes up, her chin high, confident, while Gordy was shy and tripping over his own feet. He seemed ready to leave the floor if only the music would stop. Aenghus shook his head, "Look at him, what are we thinking? He is woefully ill-disposed."

Nor joked, “He refused to perform a Dipper and yet here he is, dancin’ just like one.”

Just then Young Gordy, doing a reel, juttled his head forward while dancing and we all laughed, then stifled it and pretended to be talking about something else.

Then Ailsa and Aenghus went to dance and Nor said, “Tis time.”

I said, “For what?”

He put out a hand. “Ye must dance.”

I let my husband lead me out to the dance floor. There we did a combo Scottish Jig and modern waltz around, dancing to another song and another. It was very fun, like wedding dancing. I was not great, but we were exuberant and we laughed a lot. Then we kissed and returned to our chairs while the musician took a break.

A messenger approached and whispered in Nor’s ear. Then Nor raised his glass to the table, “We hae received good news, a messenger from Finlarig says Malcolm sends his best wishes and looks forward tae comin’ soon tae meet my new bride.”

He and I met eyes. *His brother Malcolm didn’t remember meeting me...*

I raised my glass. “I look forward to meeting him too.”

Nor grasped my hand and gave it a squeeze.

Next time we got up to dance, I said, “We suspected it, but he doesn’t remember meeting me, none of it happened.”

“Aye, we altered time — och, this could all be verra dangerous without usin’ caution.”

We began to do a jig-type dance. Then while doing the swim around him, I asked, “If you knew that you were going to change time, would you still do it?”

“Kill Johnne Cambell? Och aye. We canna second guess ourselves, we must do our best and canna think of ourselves as godlike. God will change the world, change time — humans do their best not tae, we hae tae remember we are human.”

We danced some more.



Later, Nor and Aenghus left to relieve themselves, and I stood by the dance floor with Ailsa and Lady Gail with our toes tapping to the music, watching Claray and the lad dance. They were not getting any more comfortable with each other.

Ailsa said, “Alas, it looks as if Claray’s match is made, *finally*, yet...”

Lady Gail said, “We are blessed tae hae it decided, though they are not the best match in temperament, at least he is a good match in age and station, so perhaps now there will be quiet.”

Ailsa said, “I am not so sure about the quiet, imagine how much she will anticipate the wedding! I fear we will hear of nothing else.”

Lady Gail said, “Och nae, this is true. We must post the banns, for the next three weeks, then marry her soon after, or we winna endure her impatience.”

I said, “Are we *sure* about this? They’re both so young! And they won’t even look at each other... it’s all so awkward.”

Ailsa said, “Tis that. I daena ken, they hae known each other since they were wee, perhaps they will learn tae like each other. Tis possible tae build a strong marriage over time.”

The song ended and Young Gordy awkwardly bowed and wandered away seeming not to know where he was going, almost as if he just wanted to get away.

Claray went over to the table, by herself, and sipped from her wine glass.

I asked, “Do you think they suspect we are talking about marrying them to each other?”

Lady Gail said, “The moment, at yer wedding dinner, when Gordon’s mother told him tae put on his best suit and ask the Duke if he might dance with his sister, och, he *knew*. His mother has likely been whisperin’ it in his ear for years.”

Nor and Aenghus returned. I asked Nor, “You agree, the match between Claray and Young Gordy will be made?”

He watched Claray quietly standing by her chair, pretending not to mind that she was alone. “Regrettably.”

Lady Gail said, “Regrettably! We hae been looking for a match for her for months! Young Gordy is rich and will hae a title. He is a good match for Claray in all things except disposition. *That* he can learn. What does this mean — *regrettably*, Your Grace?”

He grinned, raising his mug to his lips, sipping, then said, “I mean, I hae vanquished my enemy and am about tae marry off m’sister, *then* what will I do with m’self?”

Lady Gail arched her brow. “Ye might consider that a son will keep ye busy.”

He chuckled, opening his sporran and passed me a silver coin, “For yer purse, m’lady.”

I grinned.

Chapter 41 - Livvy



First thing in the morning, though our heads ached from the hangovers from the night before, Nor had to meet with Young Gordy's father for a discussion of Claray's dowry.

I asked, "How do you know how much to offer?"

Nor pulled his arms into his coat and straightened the front. "I hae a first offer decided — I meant tae begin low, but m'head aches so I might begin high just tae end the discussion earlier."

"Especially as we are traveling later today."

"Aye." He tried to fasten his collar, and grew frustrated.

I stood in front of him to help. "Does she know you're negotiating for her match?"

"Nae, and daena tell her, she is still at that moment where if it comes too easy she might set her mind against it. She needs tae believe she's the one wanting tae wed him, and that I am set against it."

I patted his chest, smiling, and teased, "How did you get so smart about arranging a sister's marriage?"

He took a deep breath and his mouth drew down. "Ye ken, Livvy, I was married once before... I received a dowry."

"Oh, right." I smoothed my hands across his chest. "Yeah, I wasn't thinking about... what did you get for her... um, dowry?"

“I was given some land and silver was added tae m’coffer.”

“Oh,” I gulped. “I’m sorry I’m saying ‘oh’, I’m surprised that hearing the term ‘dowry’ about your first marriage is giving me a lot of feelings... it’s...” I shook my head, unable to come up with the right words. “I have this image in my head, you’re young, and excited about marrying and there’s a meeting... I see the excitement in Claray’s face and can imagine how your Mary must have felt and now... I’m so sorry that I brought all of this up.”

He lifted my chin. “Ye are my love, Livvy, daena think on it. There is naething good that comes from imaginin’ a past — ye think twas exciting tae sit in a long meeting discussing the amount of silver I would take for marrying Mary? Twas excruciating, but... it did do one thing: I was young, on the cusp of a dukedom, I dinna think I had a failing, and I might hae been a terrible, uncarin’ husband. But the long meeting, with the seemingly never-ending negotiations, was so heavy and somber ye might think twould throw me off marrying altaegether, but instead it gave me a sense of gravity. It made me understand the importance of the union.”

“Oh... and there I go saying it again, but did you miss that I didn’t give you a dowry?”

He smiled and then teased, his brow going up, “What dost ye think the house is ye built for us? The refrigerator in the house with the endless food? if I hadna wanted tae marry ye but I had been told ye came with a box of never ending food and beer, I would hae thought twas a good deal.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s good dowry, I never thought of it that way.”

“And I wanted tae marry ye, and I understood the gravity of it. I love ye, Livvy, I will care for ye and protect ye for as long as I live. This is important.”

“I love you and will take care of you for as long as I live, too.”

He stepped away and smoothed the front of his coat. “Do I look dignified? Am I suitably attired tae lend gravitas tae the occasion?”

“You do, very dignified.” I wondered aloud, “It does seem odd that Claray won’t be there...”

“She daena want tae hear her brother discuss her worth. Twould be more than grave for her spirit. Nae, she must not have the light taken from her too soon. He will understand the responsibility of marrying her. He will barely live up to the requirement, but she will delight him, in the end twill be a good match, but daena tell her I said so. I still think he is ridiculous.”

“Me too. He is not really right for her. It’s disappointing that he is so shy, but she seems set.”

Nor said, “She does seem set. I canna talk her from it and then hope someone better comes along... he is youthful, has a title coming, a good family, and she knows him, he is the best we can expect.”

“So while you have your meeting...?”

“Perhaps ye can take Claray for a stroll around the castle? Ye could invite Ailsa, ye can distract her.”

He grinned, “And by dinner we will be in Florida. M’mouth is salivating with the idea, what dost ye think Birdie will serve for dinner?”

I smiled, “Whatever, it will be good. And necessary after what we’ve been through, and Charlie will be there — *right?*”

“Aye, he certainly will.”

“You’re sure? I keep thinking he’s lost, like there’s a fold in the space-time continuum and he’s in the fold.”

Nor shrugged. “How would that even work, Livvy? Tis not the way it goes. We killed Johnne in a year that shifted time by a few days — we daena hae a siege, we daena hae yer brother or Artair.”

I nodded. “Yeah, so he’s definitely at home.”

“Aye, but we will be certain in just a few hours. Let me go arrange the marriage of Claray first.”

Chapter 42 - Livvy



We had gone for a walk along the loch shore and then there was a messenger, asking us to return to speak with Nor and Lady Gail.

Ailsa and I glanced at each other.

Claray asked, as we returned to the castle, “What dost ye think this is about?”

Then she stopped, her eyes went wide. “Dost ye think I...” I was certain she was going to say something about the marriage contract, but then she said, “Dost ye think there is trouble because I danced with him last night?” She turned to Ailsa, “Nor and Aenghus daena approve of him! Dost ye think they hae sent him away?”

I said, “Claray, I don’t think that’s it at all.”

“What else could it be! They will *never* let me be happy! Nor will set his heart against me, there will be an old man brought tae the castle for me tae marry, Och nae!” She lamented, “How old will he be? *Twenty-five*? I canna bear the thought!” We walked briskly up the path.

Ailsa looked bemused, although she was trying to hide it. “Twould not be so bad, Claray, ye daena truly like Young Gordy, he is but a—”

“I admire him greatly, Ailsa! He is the most ideal of men!”

Ailsa said, “Och nae, ye call him a man, but he is just a lad—”

“Nae, he is strong and fit and so handsome!”

Ailsa said, “Ye think so, Claray, but he winna even look at ye! He is too timid!”

“Nae, he is just right, some might say, Ailsa, that *I* am too bold.”

Ailsa bit her lip. Then asked, “But ye arna put off by his lack of facial hair?”

Claray stopped still. “Ye take it back Ailsa, he is handsome! His beard inna full yet, but his father has a—”

Ailsa said, “Ye are correct, m’apologies, Claray. His father has a strong beard as does his mother, it bodes verra well for Young Gordy’s beard.”

Claray opened her mouth then closed it.

Ailsa said, “I am simply teasing ye, Claray, I just wonder if ye hae spoken more than two words tae him.”

“I haena but I ken, I *ken* he is everything I could want. How can I convince m’brothers tae let me hae him? Och nae!”

We came to the shadow of the castle, the gate open and welcoming. It was such a relief to not have any danger around for once.

She stopped again, just inside. “I will refuse tae see them! I winna let them tell me they hae sent Gordy away! I will remain in m’room until they allow him tae return.”

Ailsa said, “That would be *verra* disobedient, Claray. The Duke might find it unforgivable. Ye daena want tae upset him. *If* he sent Gordy away, he might decide on someone much worse.”

I said, “Or it might not be about this at all. You might want to give your brother the benefit of the doubt.”

“Aye,” she clutched her hands in front of her and repeated, “aye, ye are offering verra good guidance and I promised Mam I would listen tae good guidance.” She sighed. “I winna allow them the satisfaction of seein’ me distraught. I will speak tae His Grace plainly, and win him tae my side.”

A servant said, “Yer Grace, Lady Claray, Lady Ailsa, ye are expected in His Grace’s chamber.”

We walked up the stair, silently.

I could see Claray on the edge of an unseemly tantrum, barely holding it together. I wondered if this whole idea had been a terrible mistake.

The guards let us in the door. Standing in the middle of the room was Lady Gail, smiling broadly. Nor and Aenghus stood from their seats by the fire and strode toward the long table.

Nor said, “Claray, please take a seat.”

She pouted. “This sounds like dreadful news.”

He said, “How does it... I asked ye tae take a seat, *this* is terrible?”

“Aye, ye are setting me still tae tell me something miserable.”

Aenghus said, “Yet Mam is smiling at ye.”

Claray huffed. “I canna understand that part.” She slumped into a chair and then sat straight as she had been trained and as her dress would allow.

We all sat down at the table, Ailsa and I on either side of Claray, Lady Gail, Nor, and Aenghus on the other side.

Nor said, “Claray, we hae met with—”

She collapsed her head down on the table, “Nae! I canna hear it, ye hae sent him away!”

Nor’s mouth drew down. “Nae—”

“I am distraught!” She raised her head and asked Nor, “Was he devastated when he departed? I canna bear hearing it! How did he seem?”

Lady Gail’s eyes had narrowed through this lament and now she said, sharply, “Child, ye must hush and ask yer brother one thing, nothing else.”

She folded her hands nicely and said, “Mam, what must I ask?”

“You are allowed tae ask His Grace, with whom did he meet, and why. Tis all, or ye will be sent from the room and the men and women of the castle with sense will remain tae discuss the matter that involves ye.”

“Aye, Mam...” She took a deep dramatic breath, “Yer Grace, with whom did ye meet and why?”

“Why thank ye, Lady Claray, for askin’ so politely, I hae met with Old Gordon of Menzies the father, and Young Gordy, the son...”

Claray was wringing her hands, about to speak but holding it, wrangling it...

“Arranging the dowry of Lady Claray the young sister of the Duke of Awe.”

She blinked. “My dowry?”

“Aye, and it has been arranged.”

She stood. “My dowry? My dowry has been arranged! Tis true, Mam? Tis true, Aenghus?”

Lady Gail nodded, “Tis true, Claray.”

Aenghus said, “Aye, Claray, though I argued against it—”

She raced around the table and threw her arms around Nor’s neck. “Thank ye, Yer Grace, thank ye!”

Nor said, “I am pleased tae hae done it, he seems a fine young man.”

Aenghus said, “Though he blushes like a maiden at the river’s edge during a bathe.”

Ailsa said, “Aenghus, tis unseemly, and wheesht, the teasing crossed well past the amount that was bearable.”

Claray raised her head from Nor’s shoulder where they remained hugging, her eyes wet with tears, her nose turned red from it. “Ailsa, did ye ken the whole time?”

“Aye, and Livvy. We were tae keep ye distracted or ye might get over emotional.”

We all laughed.

She looked down at Nor’s face, “Brother, I ken ye could hae chosen anyone, accordin’ tae yer own views. Thank ye for listening tae me on it. I am forever grateful.”

Nor pushed an errant hair back from her forehead and said, “Father would be verra pleased with this moment, Livvy. He would hae approved of Young Gordy and would have done his best tae see ye married well.”

Claray kissed him on the forehead. Then she left his arms and went and perched on her mother’s lap with her arms around her.

Lady Gail said, “Claray, ye are quite auld tae be on me!”

“I ken, Mam, I am just so pleased, I must hug ye.”

Lady Gail centered Claray’s face and said, “Ye are embarking on a journey, Claray, tae last yer whole life. Ye will need tae be stolid and reasonable.”

Claray nodded her head up and down. “Of course Mam, I will be everything he could wish for in a wife.”

“Of course ye will, dear, and he will barely deserve ye, but will care for ye all his days.”

Aenghus said, “Or he will hae yer brothers tae answer tae.” Then he said, “Yer Aenghus daena get a hug? I am the one who asked him if he was willin’ tae pay us for the honor of marryin’ ye and set him tae become so frantic that he dinna understand what the negotiation was about.”

Nor said, “That was a fine moment. Young Gordy was stutterin’ about how much he would give us.”

Aenghus tapped his temple. “I got Young Gordy tae show for all tae see, that he would be willing tae pay for the honor of marryin’ ye.”

Claray said, “But he dinna, Aenghus, ye dinna make him! Ye offered him a dowry!”

“Aye, Claray, he dinna, he will hae a large dowry, he will take fine care of ye.”

Claray got up from her mother’s lap and went and hugged Aenghus hard, then she came back and sat down on her side of the table. She said, “Father is lookin’ down on all of ye and he is verra proud. Ye hae behaved verra benevolently toward yer sister.”

The corner of Nor’s mouth went up. “Thank ye, Claray.”

Aenghus said, “I hope ye will still think it when ye are married tae him.”

“Of course I will! Gordy is all I could wish for, I hae known him since I was a wee lass and he has always been m’favorite.”

Nor said, “Now we will go tae the Great Hall, after ye set yerself tae rights, Claray, yer hair is mussed and yer color is too high, and ye will see Gordy and we will hae a meal and raise our glasses tae yer union. Then I must go away for a few days. We’ll get ye married after I return and we post the banns.”



When we walked into the Great Hall, Gordy was standing very straight between his mother and father. I was introduced again, and took his mother’s hand and told her how pleased I was that Gordy would become a part of our family.

She curtsayed and thanked me for the kindness.

And then Claray walked into the Hall, and Gordy blushed and looked down at the floor and tried to drift back away from the receiving line.

She strolled right toward us, between Nor and Lady Gail.

Gordy’s mother nudged him, he mumbled, “Good afternoon, Lady Claray.”

She said, “Good afternoon, Laird Gordon of Menzies.”

Gordy's mother and father welcomed Claray tae their family and the conversation was stilted and awkward.

Servants offered us each a cup of wine and Nor raised his drink. "Tae the coming marriage of Young Gordon of Menzies and the Lady Claray of Awe, may their union be a blessing upon us, may their hearts be filled with love, their family with bairns, their castle with sons, and our lands with their joyous continuation of our families. Slàinte!"

After all the teasing and drama about the coming marriage it was clear that everyone was thrilled it was behind them. Gordy was young, I believed him to be about nineteen, but he was, according to everyone, marriageable though he behaved like he was about ten years old.

He did not seem like a man capable of being a laird, but it was bloodline and title that we were after, not personality. His father was boring, properly deferential to Nor, his mother seemed like any number of regular moms I had grown up with. She had wanted to land a Lady for her son and Claray had been at the top of all lists. She was incredibly pleased with the match, gleeful and practically crowing, clinging to Lady Gail who wore an expression of dismay. Young Gordy's mother was enjoying her new station as the mother of a son who would marry the sister of a duke.



After the meal, Young Gordy and his family left. They would return for the wedding the following month. Lady Gail had much to plan. Malcolm would need to come. We would leave and be back in three days, plenty of time to spare.

No looping.

It was growing dark very early. I had changed from the fine dress I had worn to a plain travel dress. Lady Gail had seen me leaving, and said, "Och nae, ye are dressed as a peasant, Livvy! We must hae yer dresses made!"

I said, “It’s for traveling, to be comfortable—”

“When ye arrive, ye must promise that ye will put on a presentable gown, ye are a Duchess. Ye must present yerself in the manner that tells of yer noble title.”

Nor said, “What of my dress, am I done well?”

“Nae, ye need a finer coat.”

“Livvy and I both promise we will dress appropriately. We winna allow any one of importance tae see the Duke and Duchess in their worst garb.”

“I should hope not, Florida sounds a wonderful place, full of riches. They need tae be aware of yer worth, ye canna be the poor relations.”

He met my eyes with a grin and bowed to his mother.

At sunset we left with our horses to jump to Florida.

At Barran Moor we dismounted. It had grown dark. We each held our horse’s reins in our hands. I took a flashlight from my pocket and shone it down on the portal and we checked the code three times. We both agreed it was right.

Then I said, “You did really good today, I have loved you for a long time now—”

He said, interrupting me, “Has it been a long time? Some might say we are still newly wed.”

I smiled. “Some might say it, but we are time travelers, by their time it has been days, by ours it has been centuries.”

“Aye, I see, ye are speaking on the *meaning* of the time.”

“Yes, and I have loved you for a long time, but if I hadn’t already loved you, the way you took care of your sister would have been enough to soften my heart toward you.”

“If ye hadna come intae m’life she likely would hae been married tae that auld man with the tiresome demeanor.”

“So what we are saying is that we are awesome and now that your sister is taken care of we must go see to Charlie...”

“Aye, tis time.”

I pressed my head to his chest. “I don’t want to, I hate it, it hurts, it’s awful.”

“Aye, but we must be brave.” He twisted the portal and sent us on our way, screaming in pain.

Chapter 43 - Livvy



When I woke up, Nor was already sitting. Uncle Dan was crouched beside him. Ryan was standing over us.

I moaned, my eyes stinging from the brightness. “Where’s Charlie?” Terrified that they might say, “Isn’t he with you?”

But instead Ryan said, “He’s in the stables.” He looked in that direction. “Now he’s on his way.”

“You don’t have to talk so loud.” I glanced across the fields, Charlie was jogging toward us, holding a shovel.

I said, “Second question, was I just here? Did I see you a few days ago?”

Ryan shook his head, “I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“Weird.” I pushed myself up. Then weakly held up my arms. “You gotta come here to hug me, this sucks, I can’t hug you there.”

Ryan said, “This your husband? These your clothes now? This arrival passed-out-in-the-dirt is your current thing?”

I grinned. “Yep. This is what I do. Nor, this is Ryan. Ryan, this is Nor.”

Ryan put out his hand and they shook, then Ryan said, “Ready?” and hefted Nor up to his feet.

I lumbered up, just in time to hug Charlie. He asked, “Why y’all back?”

I said, “Because, long story, we needed to see if you were okay.”

Charlie said, “Yeah, we’re good—”

“No, I mean *you*, I thought you were with me.”

He squinted. “You thought I was with you? That’s effed up.”

Nor said, “Aye, but the good news is—”

I said, “Let’s save that for dinner, what’s for dinner?”

Charlie said, “Well, it’s freaking 10 am.”

I said, “Stupid time travel. How about brunch? Can we tell you our news over brunch?”

That’s how we ended up with Birdie going to pick up food, once she told us she hadn’t gone to the grocery store yet, and didn’t want to cook a whole brunch.

She returned with bags and boxes from our local diner, all placed down the middle of the table. Charlie dug in a bag. “Did you get waffles and chicken, Birdie?”

“Of course I did.” She playfully smacked his hand. “It’s the wrong bag. Get your hands away from my pancakes.”

He grinned and dug through another bag, pulling out a box with chicken and waffles. I put a box with corned beef hash in front of Nor, a box of bacon, eggs, and toast on his side. I had a box with a stack of giant pancakes, with sausage and eggs. There was disorderliness while we all dug through boxes, got utensils, tossed around napkins, asked for syrup, passed around salt and pepper, then we finally settled down and began to eat.

Lou said, “You have news, Nor?”

“Aye, Lou.” Nor swallowed and wiped his mouth. “I hae killed Johnne Cambell.”

The table erupted with, “Well done!” and “Good for you!”

Charlie said, “Awesome!”

Ryan looked around. “Alright we’re celebrating murder now? What the heck is going on with you guys?”

Dad said, “He’s talking about the man who showed up here, held your uncle captive—”

Junior said, “Hit me on the head real good too.”

Lou said, “Held us all at gunpoint, here, on my *land*.”

Dad continued, “And kidnapped Nor. What else did Johnne do? Nor, tell Ryan...”

“He forced me tae steal, assaulted me, kept me captive and then put me in a dungeon where I almost starved. He deserved the death I delivered tae him.”

Ryan said, “Okay, cool, cool. That makes more sense.”

Lou said, “So you killed the bad guy, everything is good? How’s your family, Nor?”

Nor said, “They are well, but...”

He looked at me, so I finished, “Nor’s family *were* in danger, but then we killed Johnne and somehow it all got weirdly kerflooey. So we came to check on you, we had a... I’m not sure how to explain it — a shift. A time shift.”

Mom said, “Explain this exactly?”

“Well, how about I start with the first story: the scene around Nor’s castle was tense. Johnne, the asshole, my apologies, Lou and Birdie, was about to attack, he’d taken over Nor’s second castle Finlarig—”

Ryan said, “How many castles does this dude have? Seems excessive.”

I pointed at Ryan with my fork. “You said almost the exact same thing the first time we went through this.”

Lou said, “How about no one interrupts the story, including you, Livvy. Tell us what happened.”

“We had to evacuate Nor’s brother and his family from Finlarig and Johnne was about to attack Kilchurn, any day. It was terrifying.”

Nor said, “I was concerned I couldna protect Livvy, so I sent her home.”

Lou said, “I appreciate your vote of confidence, even though your ass got kidnapped from my front lawn.”

I said, “*That*, what you just said, Lou, is another thing that is a repeat of the last time I was here.”

Mom said, “But you haven’t been back here.”

I said, “I came home, freaking out, scared, and we sat around this table and you all convinced me to go back, or rather, I convinced myself. Then, I took Charlie with me.”

Charlie’s eyes narrowed. “Did not.”

“Did too.”

Nor said, “There was a time traveling storm, I raced out ontae the moor and there was a man there, by the name of Artair. He was from the future. He had come tae assist me with Howie.”

Dad said, “What is ‘Howie’?”

“A howitzer, I had it placed upon m’walls.”

Ryan said, his mouth full of pancakes, “This is freaking awesome — a howitzer on a castle?”

I said, “On a seventeenth century castle.”

Nor said, “Right after Artair arrived, Livvy and Charlie arrived with their horses.”

I said, “We had to ready for battle. We had to send all the women and children away from the castle for their safety. Ugh, the last few days were terrifying.”

Nor said, “But then Livvy, Artair, and I decided tae go tae the time of Magnus. He is the man who saved m’life when I was in the dungeon. We decided tae ask him for help.”

Dad said, “Smart thinking, what did he do?”

Nor said, “I am relieved he dinna kill me, as he had told me never tae come there.”

I said, “His wife showed me Johnne’s book, his journal, and on the last page of it, there was a date and location. So Nor and Artair and I went there looking for him.”

Nor took a bite of hash, chewed it up, and swallowed. “Sorry, we are attempting tae talk while the food is beckonin’ — he was stayin’ at an inn in Langside tae witness a historical battle between Mary Stuart and the army of her infant son, James, led by Moray.”

Junior said, “Yeah, that’s what I would do with a time machine.”

Dan and Ryan said, “Same.”

I said, “Seriously? You would go watch a battle? It sounds like the dumbest thing to do with a time machine!”

Dad said, “Ye think so? That’s where history is made, if I could go to a revolutionary war battlefield to watch, I absolutely would.”

Lou said, “That’s what I want for my birthday, to go to Yorktown, take m’chair, the one with the awning, a pad of paper for notes. I could write a first hand account, it would be amazing.” All the men nodded.

I rolled my eyes, “I do not understand any of you, at all.”

Nor said, “We waited for him tae come tae the tavern, then I assaulted him, delivering a final blow through his chest.”

Dad said, “Damn, Nor, I am sorry tae hear that, that’s brutal.”

“My apologies for the bluntness of it—”

Dad said, “I didn’t mean your story was brutal, I meant that having to do that must have been brutal. That is a great deal for you to bear.”

Nor nodded. “Aye, thank ye, Master Dave, twas — m’hands were covered in his blood, I was overcome, and twas difficult tae focus on getting us from the tavern.”

Dad said, “He deserved it though, son.”

Nor nodded, and pushed hash around on his plate, then put down the fork. "I feel relieved that he is gone."

Dad said, "If you need to talk, Nor, just ask. I've been in the military, I fought in a war. I remember what it's like."

"I will, Master Dave, thank ye. But I hae been distracted, and it has given me some peace. I spent a long time in church, asking for forgiveness, as I ought."

I squeezed Nor's hand. "I'm so sorry it was so difficult for you."

"Twas not something I meant tae speak on, there are other things for us tae do, like arrangin' for Claray tae be married. Sometimes the best thing tae do after darkness is tae pray for forgiveness, then work toward a brighter future."

I smiled, "Yes, and you did good with that."

Birdie said, "Your sister will be married?"

"Aye, I hae arranged the marriage of Lady Claray tae a lad by the name of Gordon of Menzies. Tis a match between two silly bairns, but we are all rejoicing that they will carry our family line intae the future. We hope it shall be a dignified union."

Birdie clapped. "Lovely, do you have photos? Livvy, I would love to see them!"

"I will take some when we go back. It would be so fun to take some of you for the wedding!"

Lou said, "So you killed your enemy in a tavern. *Then* what happened?"

"We time jumped tae my castle, Kilchurn, in Scotland, and when we woke up after the time jump we found out that Artair wasna with us. The body of Johnne was there, but Artair was gone. Nae one had heard of Artair, twas as if he had never been tae Kilchurn. There was no howitzer on the battlement, and no one remembered the world had been dangerous. We were not on the brink of war, the women had never been evacuated, and most concernin', Charlie had never been there."

Charlie said, “Weird.”

Lou said, “Damn, you kids changed time.”

I asked, “Did you notice anything? A ripple or shift? I don’t know... were your dreams weird? *Anything?* I have memories of doing things and they’re not based in reality, it’s such a strange feeling.”

Everyone shook their heads.

Mom said, “I haven’t noticed anything different. You and Nor left and we were just waiting for you to return, the rest of the days were regular.”

Nor squeezed my hand.

Dad said, “Overall though, you solved a problem, ridded your life of an evil man, it was necessary.” He raised his mug of coffee. “Well done.”

Nor raised his mug, we all raised our mugs. “Thank ye, Master Dave. Slàinte!”

We drank.

Charlie said, “Damn, out of coffee. How much is too much? Twelve cups?”

Birdie said, “Yes! Twelve cups is too much!”

Charlie leaned back in his seat and patted his stomach. “I’m not the one who decided on serving a second breakfast. It’s not my fault, it’s Livvy’s fault, she’s making us eat and drink coffee when we already did it once.”

I huffed, “Oh boo hoo, you live here and get to have takeaway chicken and waffles with ease whenever you want. Nor and I needed breakfast, we can’t figure out how to pick what time of day we arrive. It’s a pain in the ass, but *also* our actions changed *time*. This is not easy at all.”

Nor said, “When we visited Magnus we were warned by his man, Colonel Quentin, that ‘With time travel nothing is ever easy.’”

Dad raised his mug again, “Sounds like we all ought to drink on that one too.”

We said, “Hear hear!”

While Nor said, “Slàinte!”

We all sipped from our coffees.

Charlie said, “I would love to go back in time.”

I said, “I’m wary, but I will bring you as soon as I think we’re stable again.”

Nor said, “We must first go tae see Magnus once more—”

Lou said, “The man who told you to never ever come see him?”

“Aye, this will make the second time I hae gone against his warning. But last time twas because we needed their advice, this time tis because we want them tae know that we hae rid the world of Johnne Cambell, and that we survived it.”

Birdie picked up an armful of bags from the middle of the table and dumped them in the trash can, beginning to tidy up after our meal. “They likely already know, right? They are in the future, they probably knew before you knew.” She closed the lid on the trashcan and turned around with her hands on her hips. “That’s how it works, right? You do something, it ripples down through history.”

I nodded, “Yes, likely, that sounds right. But we told them we would come. I think in time travel situations if you tell someone you will be there on a date and time you *have* to do it, there’s no other way for anyone to truly know if we are alright.”

Mom said, “Except through your descendants.” Jokingly she said, “Pregnant yet?”

I laughed and said to Nor, “I think I owe you silver now.”

He chuckled, “We will just pass it back and forth as our mothers question us about bairns.”

Mom said, “It’s our job to ask. What kind of mother would I be if I didn’t ask where my grand-baby is? I’m sure your mother feels the same way.”

“Aye, she certainly does.”

I said, “It’s almost less about the cute baby though, and more like she wants the next Duke.”

Mom grinned, “Livvy, you’re young... from this side of motherhood it is the *exact* same thing.”

Lou said, “So how long will you kids be here?”

Nor looked at me then answered, “I feel we must leave on the morrow. We will return when we feel better about all that has shifted. I am unsettled until we solve some things.”

I said, “After we visit Magnus we have to go find Artair and help him reconnect with his long lost love.”

Birdie stopped fussing with clearing the table and dropped down in the chair opposite me. “Do tell! He has a long lost love? What is her name?”

I nodded. “I can’t remember, I have to call her his long lost love, because I can’t believe I forgot her name, but he promised her he would marry her and then, poof! He was whisked away through time and she has no idea where he is.”

Birdie leaned back in her chair, her look sad but also delighted by the tale. Then she leaned forward, her bosom bound in a blue denim shirt with a bedazzled American flag stretching across it, resting on the tabletop. “What are you going to do about it?”

Nor said, “I will attend him, go tae her household, vouch for his character, negotiate a dowry, and convince the laird tae accept his claim on his daughter.”

Birdie said, “So romantic!”

Junior teased, “Birdie, you saying that Nor and a medieval laird and a man named Artair negotiating for a bride is *romantic*?”

She waved her hand. “It is if they’re in a castle, them’s the rules.”

Chapter 44 - Livvy



Nor and I opted out of working in the stables and instead went to our trailer to wash up and relax for the afternoon. When we went in I looked around. “Hard to believe I was back here a few days ago, but no one else remembers it.”

I opened the fridge; it was empty. Birdie had told the maid to clean it out because she didn’t know when we’d get back.

Then I walked through to the bathroom and looked. Again, no shampoo in the shower. I glanced under the sink. There were the small bottles of hotel shampoo that I remembered using.

I came out to the bedroom where Nor and I undressed, Nor helping me with my laces, letting our clothes fall to big dark dusty piles on the ground. We climbed into the gleaming white tile, glass, and chrome shower, and took a really luxurious shower, with steam all around us... “When was the last time we were in a shower together?”

“Och, it feels like centuries.” He pulled me close and his mouth was on my neck, his hands rubbing up and down my arms, my back.

“This is awesome, we have all afternoon.” I breathed into his skin.

“Can I linger? I daena ken, the idea of takin’ ye in a luxurious shower has me verra warm already.”

His hand rubbed around my bottom and he pulled my thigh up to his waist. He planted his feet wide and pressed my back

to the tile. I wrapped both legs around him. His arms holding me up, steamy air around us, a small stream of water rolling down my face, pooling against our lips, warm and hot breath mingling, he pressed his way into me, force and power, a moan rising, his head beside mine, cheek to cheek. I was lightness suspended, up and effortless, he was power and force and strength holding me, his breath hot, the pressure of his fingers holding my flesh, dampness as my arms went up around his neck and clung — my body receptive and open, receiving his energy, bound tightly, our mouths, damp and mingling, *oh love...* I moaned as he drove me to climax, then through the following stillness, sliding, small points of pressure as the wetness rained down on my skin giving me sensory overload... *all over.*

He moaned against my skin as he met me at the climax and followed me down the other side, his wet breath against my skin, a moan against my ear. I could feel him as he stilled, the climax still rolling through us, and then the exhale again, *och*, I said, *I know.*

My heart racing, then my breath slowing. He softened and slowly let my feet drop to the floor. We embraced and kissed, long and slow and tantalizing.

I said, “I wish we could have showers in the past.”

“I might never leave them. I would get nothing done, except... possibly I would try tae make everything come tae the shower.”

I giggled. “What if we call my family and tell them we aren’t coming to dinner, they can just send our dinner here?”

He grinned. “While I do like the idea of it, I daena think Birdie will comply.”

“True, and we’ll get pruned up if we stay in here for that long, not to mention cold: the water heater doesn’t have enough.” I poured shampoo in my palm and began rubbing it through his hair, lathering it up and then rubbing the lather all over his body.

He finally said, “The water heater?”

“Yes, the tank outside, it’s got water in it and heats it up, then sprays it on us and...”

I put my hand under the water. “It’s actually cooling off, see? We have to hurry.” I added, “Now you rinse,” while I lathered myself, because he was rubbing me, but not effectively, more like he was attempting to get rolling again, but the water was cooling by the second.

I lathered up and used conditioner, then Nor climbed from the shower and I rinsed very quickly and followed him. We wrapped ourselves in towels.

Finally, dressed in sweats and loose shirts, we went out to spend the rest of the day on the deck looking over the land. I introduced him to the delight of Coke with a big can of caramel, cheese, and kettle popcorn.

He preferred the savory cheese flavored.



Ryan and Charlie came over with a six pack in the early evening and we sat around and talked about Ryan’s military life and Charlie’s school life, and my new life as a Duchess. Then we went up to Birdie and Lou’s for dinner.

Late at night we returned to our house and climbed into our big comfortable bed and twined around each other. He said, “Yer brothers are good men, I am pleased tae be allied with them.”

“And you haven’t even met Dylan yet. But then again he’s a dad now, he’s not ready to ride into battle quite like Ryan and Charlie are.”

“Aye, they are verra stirred tae come tae the seventeenth century and take up the swords in defense of m’castle.”

I stroked my hand down his shoulder. “It’s going to be hard to leave here tomorrow.”

“I ken, it has been a good visit.”

“And the jumps suck.”

“Aye, and we will likely have tae jump twice on the morrow. When we go tae visit Magnus, I daena think he will give us a room for the night.”

“Maybe a hotel?”

“Will it remind me of the tavern? I would like a respite from the vision of it for longer.”

“I truly doubt a modern hotel would remind you of the tavern.” I ran my fingers down his skin. “You’re still bothered by it? So am I, I must confess. I can’t get the image of his dead body out of my head.”

He nodded his head against my shoulder. “Tis dark and heavy, but yer embrace makes it better. Yer embrace, and bein’ here, bein’ comfortable, with the cool air blowin’ upon us, our stomachs full from a good dinner, our hearts warmed by the love of yer family. All of that makes it better, and in time, we will barely feel the burden of it.” He clutched my ass, and squirmed down so that his head was on my stomach and he sweetly kissed me right under my navel and it felt like a promise.

We embraced like that, holding on, talking more about what we had done, and learned. “What do we know so far? Anything new?”

In the darkness, his voice from my waist, his breath against my skin. “I hae been reminded, tis important tae always ken the date, and what date we will try tae return...”

“...Yes, there needs to be a sign that we are okay, or not...”

“...and without letters, an agreed upon date would make a good sign...”

“I wish we could send letters, some way to communicate.”

“I, as well.”

“For some reason we are supposed to keep pens packed in our bags.”

He said, “Aye, I am unsure why, but I will take Magnus at his word.”

We lay quietly for a while, then I said, “I am so curious... there was the book in the back of a painting, a Picasso painting, I’m sure you have no idea how important that is, it’s probably worth millions of dollars, and there was a compartment in the back, that opened with a code, and Johnne’s book was in there, and she said she shared the book with a Lady...”

He raised his head, his chin on my pelvis, looking up at me through the darkness. “Dost ye ken how it works?”

“No, not really... it’s an ancient book, shared in the twenty-first century, with someone... in the future. Couldn’t we do that? Fill in a book in the past with messages and then my family could read those messages now, right? But how would that work?”

He put his head back down. “I daena ken.” Then he said, “Ye ken what I keep thinking about?”

I shook my head, then said, “No,” since he couldn’t see me.

“That there is a kingdom, and I am certain tis mine. How will I gain it?”

“Are you sure?”

“Aye, I am sure. I hae been there before.”

“That seems a long way away from this manufactured home in the year 2012.”

“Aye, tis.”

We lay there, entwined, together in the dark, falling asleep even as we murmured to each other...about the dinner...the family...our love.



We would probably jump twice today, so we packed lightly.

I was wearing a dress. Nor was wearing a pair of nice slacks and a dress shirt. We were shaved, and as Birdie said, “Polished to a shine, and then powdered to take the shine off.”

I was wearing makeup.

Nor had his hair cleaned and brushed.

Dad said, “You two look like you’re headed to church.”

I smoothed the front of my dress. “Not quite, we’re going to the family house of a king who told us to never ever come there, and yet is also expecting us. We ought to look good.”

We carried a duffle bag with our seventeenth century clothes in it, and some bags with new things I wanted, like more toilet paper. I brought Gatorade for after the jump even though Nor thought it tasted like he would “Prefer the long painful death-by-pieces brought on by the jump.”

I ignored him and said, “Orange or lemon-lime?”

I brought orange: it was classic, like my Duke.

Mom and Birdie said goodbye to me at the house. Mom said, “It’s too hard on me to watch you go. I am relieved now that you’ve gone and returned without any physical harm, but still I am going to kiss and hug you here so I won’t have to be frightened by the storm.”

I nodded and hugged them both.

Birdie stuffed a fancy chocolate bar in my hand, “For the trip.” Then she gave me another one, “For the queen.” I gave her a look and she said, “You can’t arrive empty handed, she’s a *Queen*, you have to take her a gift.”

A few minutes later I was standing in the field beside Nor, with our horses, reins in hand, and two trucks pulled up to the side, with Charlie, Ryan, Dad, Junior, and Lou seeing us off,

hugging us goodbye, then waving as they climbed into the trucks and backed them away.

I looked up at Nor. “This jump is weird. I have layers of dread and trepidation: the jump, the subsequent landing, the meeting with royalty who don’t want to meet with us, and what we might learn.”

“Aye, twill be tough. But look on the bright side, m’love. Perhaps we will be served another fine dinner. And though the man will hae his fingers itching beside his sword, at least this time we are better dressed.”

I smoothed down the front of his shirt. “Your handsomeness gives you the upper-hand, m’laird.”

“Not sure I have the upper-hand against a king.”

I put my hands under his lapels and pulled him close for a kiss. “Except I think you’re a king, too. The more I hear time travelers talk the more likely it seems.”

He smiled and put a finger on my lips and said, “Wheesht, m’love, ye are goin’ tae give me too much confidence. I need a wee bit of humility when I stand afore Magnus.”

I smiled. “Okay, we’ll talk about all of that *after* our meeting.”

“Perfect, ye ready tae go?”

He twisted the portal and sent us on a jump to Amelia Island, twelve years in the future.

Chapter 45 - Livvy



2024, THREE DAYS AFTER OUR LAST VISIT
AMELIA ISLAND

“Wake up, Livvy.”
“Wake up.”

A nudge on my shoulder.

I slowly pulled myself up, my eyes so bleary it was difficult to see. It was that brightness of time travel combined with a sunny day. Thankfully it was cool. There was only one man there to greet us, Lochinvar. He was young, like twenty at the most, big, ginger, with a beard that was long but patchy, not quite full. He was wearing Nikes, a t-shirt and a kilt.

He was crouched down across from Nor. They were conversing, I shook my head to clear it, so I could actually hear what they were saying. “...ye canna come tae the house...”

I mumbled, “What...? We can’t come...?”

Lochinvar said, “Nae, Magnus asked me tae meet with ye here. I brought ye some snacks.” He grinned and patted the top of a cooler. “Ye both look verra fine.”

I said, grumpily, “We dressed for a meeting with a king.”

“Och nae, m’apologies, but we ought not. Tis too coiled round, if ye ken what I mean. We decided it would be best for ye not tae meet again.”

Nor exhaled, deeply. “I suppose we only truly wanted tae let him ken we survived and that Johnne Cambell is dead.”

“We ken, the historical record showed it — he has been laid tae rest at Kilchurn in the year 1670?”

“Aye, but he died in the village of Langside on the date of the Battle of Langside.”

Lochinvar looked excited, “Did ye defeat him on the battlefield or in the arena?”

“We killed him in a tavern.”

Lochinvar looked momentarily disappointed, but then lifted his shoulders, indifferently. “Och nae, but I suppose tis Johnne Cambell’s death, that is all that matters. I am pleased I ken more of the story than Magnus, I can lord it over him later.” He opened the cooler lid, pulled out a thermos, and unscrewed the lid. He passed it to Nor to drink.

Nor sipped and groaned. “Tis the frightful drink.”

“Aye, go-go juice, it will help ye recover faster as ye will force yerself tae be well so ye winna hae tae drink it again.”

I said, “Any aspirin?”

He dug through the cooler and pulled out a bottle, passed it to me, then pulled out a cookie tin and opened the lid. I took two aspirin, a shot of the go-go juice, and then a warm chocolate chip cookie.

Nor ate a bite and put the rest down on the lid of the cooler, uninterested. I whispered, “Can I eat yours after mine?”

“Aye.”

Lochinvar said, “I brought many.”

I said, chewing the delicious cookie, “We’ve also got Johnne’s book. I’m not sure what Magnus wants us...”

“Good, good, tis yers, it has naething tae do with Og Maggy.”

Nor chuckled, with his arms around his knees, then glancing up to check on our horses, standing to the side. “So now what, we gave ye our message — now we’re being turned away?”

“Nae, one more thing.” Lochinvar pulled an envelope from his chest pocket. “I hae a message—”

But then he asked, “Where is Artair?”

I said, “You remembered he was with us?”

His eyes narrowed. “Aye... is he missin’?”

Nor said, “When we left Langside with the body of Johnne, Artair was with us, when we arrived at Kilchurn he was gone.”

Lochinvar shook his head slowly. “A time shift, yet another — dost ye see, Nor? This is an excellent example why ye canna come tae visit. There is a long line of descendants and they ought not mingle out of order. *This* is disorderly. Artair is best left alone.”

“I made him an oath though...”

Lochinvar exhaled as if that was very difficult. Then, marking his words with taps of the envelope on his knee, he said, “I canna advise ye either way, beyond that this is dangerous. I suppose ye hae tae live up tae yer oath, but I leave it up tae ye tae decide what ye will do. Just please be conscious that there are men who are counting on ye tae not change time.”

Nor nodded. “I understand, I will do m’best.”

Lochinvar said, “Good, and before ye do anything about yer oath tae Artair, there is something else that must be done first.” He passed the envelope to Nor. “This is from Magnus, instructions for ye. There is a date there, where and when ye are expected tae go.”

“A command?”

He shrugged. “However ye want tae think on it.”

Nor shook his head slowly looking down on the envelope. “I thought we were not supposed tae interfere in each other’s lives.”

“After ye visited last, Magnus called us tae a family meetin’ and we had a long-rangin’ discussion. We came tae a

conclusion, a date and time.”

Nor said, “He canna say this tae m’face as it would interfere, yet he sends a message tae interfere, and demands I follow his orders, tellin’ me through you how I must proceed?”

Lochinvar’s brow went up. “Somethin’ like that.”

“What if I refuse tae comply? Magnus is not m’ruler.”

“Ye can do whatever ye want, Yer Grace, but we came tae this date after a verra long meeting where great arguments were had. Colonel Quentin took one side, Og Maggy took another, Fraoch and I almost came tae blows. I disagreed at first, but came tae agree and I offered tae come talk tae ye because I knew ye would trust me. Ye ought tae go tae this date, Nor.”

Nor nodded. “Ye promise this inna Magnus takin’ over m’life?”

Lochinvar said, “Frankly, he daena want anything tae do with ye. Think of it this way: ye did him a favor by removin’ Johnne Cambell from the timeline. Now he is returning the favor.”

Nor broke the wax seal and pulled out the page. There was a date in the middle of it, written in longhand.

August 11, 2167

At the top of the page was an ornate M. At the bottom of the page were the codes for the place and year.

Nor asked, “We ought to go now?”

“Aye, ye are dressed, ye hae been fed cookies — ye ought tae go now.” He pressed the cookie tin into my lap, stood, lifted the cooler, and began carrying it away toward his horse.

I said, “Damn, not this again, I need a nap... but I guess we can’t go to a hotel with horses, where are we going?”

Somewhere familiar, somewhere dangerous?”

Nor said, “We are goin’ tae the Kingdom of Riaghalbane, m’love, m’destiny awaits.”



We pulled up the portal, spread the instructions on his knee, and took time making sure we had everything right. It took us a while. I glanced over my shoulder at Lochinvar.

He waved, sitting on his horse. “Tis alright, Yer Grace?”

I said, “It just takes us a moment, we’ve ended up in the wrong place before.”

He called across the sand, “What’s the worst that can happen?”

Nor said, “War, death, destruction, embarrassment...”

Lochinvar shrugged, “Och, that will all happen whether ye are cautious or not, ye might as well go.”

Nor said, “Wheesht, Lochinvar, I am tryin’ tae concentrate.”

Lochinvar said, “All right, Yer Grace, and tis likely I winna ever see ye again. Twas a pleasure.”

Nor raised his head, “Aye, Lochinvar, thank ye once more for savin’ my life.”

“I would do it again. Safe travels!”

And up my arm came the roaring pain followed by realization, we were jumping again, to a place neither of us knew.

Chapter 46 - Livvy



AUGUST 11, 2167

RIAGHALBANE

We woke in a grassy clearing, surrounded by trees and many horse legs. My eyes drew up. There were men on those horses.

I twisted to see Nor, already climbing to his feet. He said, “Time tae rise, Livvy, we hae company.”

I squinted up at the men, and there in the front, up on horseback, was one of Magnus’s men. He was wearing a uniform, with ribbons and badges.

He nodded. “Hello, Yer Graces, welcome to the Kingdom of Riaghalbane. I am not sure if you remember our introduction, I’m Colonel Quentin Peters.” His horse stamped.

I wished I could get up on Dusty, just to be eye-level.

Nor said, “I remember, we met at Magnus’s house.”

Colonel Quentin said, “Yes. We need to ride as soon as you’re able.”

Nor asked me, “Ready Livvy?”

I picked up the cookie tin. “Now I am.” I climbed up onto Dusty, Nor climbed on Balach Mòr.

Colonel Quentin said, “An introduction. Normond, this is General Stanford: General Stanford, this is Normond.”

The older man named General Stanford nodded. “Good to meet you, sire,” as we turned our horses to follow Colonel Quentin. All the twenty or so men who had accompanied him

fell in around us. Nor said, “Who are all these men, your guard?”

“No, they’re yours.”

Nor shifted in his saddle looking around. “I daena recognize them. Tis a time shift? What is happenin’?”

“You’re not in a time shift, I promise, this is just the normal progression. But you killed Johnne Cambell earlier than expected, so Magnus was worried about the line of succession. No offense, but you didn’t fill us with confidence that you knew what you were doing, so we came on ahead and laid the groundwork for your arrival. Magnus told me to make sure you were welcomed properly and wishes you well, also—”

“Said to leave him alone and not tae come around him ever again?”

“Now you’re starting to understand.” He snaked our train of riders around a tree and followed a path that descended a hillside.

Nor said, as if he were repeating it to make it stick, “... Magnus laid the groundwork... these are my men...”



We came to the edge of the woods, looking out over a wide expanse of land, and in the distance, a large castle under construction. The construction site was a spectacle, workers everywhere, faintly we could hear the hum of machinery and the clatter of metal on metal, metal on stone. Above the site drones hovered, transporting blocks, lifting enormous loads. Around them were cranes and robotic arms, turning and swinging.

Colonel Quentin said, “This is your kingdom, that is your, or rather, *will* be your castle.”

Beside the construction site stood a temporary military encampment, with three long white tents, flags fluttering overhead. In rows beside them, tanks, helicopters, jeeps, and

other military vehicles were parked, ready to go at a moment's notice.

“Time is of the essence. That's where we will have your coronation, then you and I will meet tonight to discuss details—”

I said, “...you said *coronation*?”

“Yes,” he looked at his watch. “As soon as we arrive—”

“I daena get any say in the matter?”

“Nope. I mean, not really, no, your son and grandson and great grandson and on and on are reliant on you.” Quentin set his horse in motion and led us out across the field, headed toward the encampment, surrounded by twenty men on horseback.

But after a few minutes he slowed and pulled even with Nor. “Wait... *do* you have a son?”

Nor said, “Not yet.”

Colonel Quentin said, “Dammit, *see*? That's why we aren't supposed to hang out with each other.”

I said, “That's okay, we've gathered that we have a son... I don't think you've changed anything.”

Colonel Quentin said, “Fair enough, now let's turn you into a king!”

I watched the men, all leading us toward a castle, trying to understand the meaning. “Is he serious?”

“Aye, I believe he is, I am verra glad I wore m'dress pants.”

I said, “I wish you didn't have a leaf in your hair.”

He ran his hand through his hair. “This is an important day and we are weakened by jumpin'...” He shifted in his saddle and looked around. “And though the horizon is familiar, we are in the midst a landscape I barely recognize.”

“Where are we?”

“Tis formerly Scotland, I can see it in the bens. Loch Tay lies tae our west, Kilchurn much farther along. Balloch castle sits nearby, though, it must hae nearly a thousand years of age upon it.”

We rode up to the temporary military tents. There were thousands of soldiers, hundreds of construction workers all over the scaffolding of the planned castle, and they all stopped working to watch as we rode up.

Nor said, “I recognize some of this, it looks like the weapons of war belongin’ tae Johnne.”

Colonel Quentin said, “They belong to you now.”

Chapter 47 - Livvy



AUGUST 11, 2167
TEMPORARY COMMAND CENTER, THE KINGDOM OF
RIAGHALBANE

General Stanford climbed off his horse and commanded all the soldiers to attention.

I gulped. This was... this was a *lot*. I kept thinking maybe they had the wrong guy. But when I glanced at Nor, His Grace, I thought, no... he was the right guy. He was capable of this, he was meant to be royal, but I...?

I was clearly unprepared.

Nor, and I dismounted and stood there, holding our reins, looking awkward, watching all the soldiers and construction workers and commanders go back to their business.

A man came to take our horses away. Nor asked, "Where will they be taken?"

"Your royal stables, Your Majesty."

The horses were led away, Nor watching as they went, slowly shaking his head, muttering, "My royal stables...?"

One of the other men from Magnus's dinner party sauntered over, wearing slacks and shirt, looking like he would be at home on an upscale Florida golf-course. He spoke to Colonel Quentin for a moment, then smiled at Nor and me, and put out his hand to shake. "Nor, we met the other night, I'm James Cook."

Nor said, "Aye, I remember."

James said, “I’m your contractor... But I’m sure this is pretty damn overwhelming, first time we’ve built a kingdom before, it’s been a—”

A man walked up and interrupted him, pulled him aside, and they conversed for a moment, looking at a projected image of a plan, then pointing up at the construction site.

I reached up and pulled a leaf from Nor’s hair. He leaned in so I could brush through his hair with my fingers. I turned and he brushed off my back. “Tis a bit dingy here, ye hae landed in sand, and then dirt.”

I brushed off his back too.



Quentin turned away from a conversation to tell us, “We’ll begin in just a moment.”

Nor asked, “Why such haste?”

“This might be the first time in the history of Riaghalbane that we’ve had a peaceful transfer of power, but tomorrow? Maybe not so peaceful anymore, we ought to act while we can.”

James smiled, broadly. “Of course Nor *did* murder the man who was building the kingdom just before he could assume the crown, so it wasn’t *entirely* peaceful.”

Nor’s eyes scanned the crowd. “All these men will follow me, just because they hae been told tae? Were any loyal tae Johnne? What trouble do I hae in store?”

Quentin said, “Johnne’s loyalists were very small in number, they’ve been brought around. Magnus accepted their surrender, and met with the commanders — he has installed men at every level who are allied with him, and therefore *you*. You have the military equipment you need, a large force, and your coffers are full.”

“Sounds like I am indebted tae Magnus.”

Quentin shrugged. “One way to look at it, but also, he’s um... you know a direct beneficiary...”

James said, “If you have a strong kingdom, he has a strong kingdom, all thanks to time travel.”

Quentin said, “I guess what this all means is yes, if he needs help you might owe him, but know this: he doesn’t think you should have anything to do with each other, so it’s unlikely he would think to ask. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“Tis easy for ye tae say, ye daena owe Magnus a favor.”

Quentin and James both laughed.

James said, “I owe Magnus so many favors!”

Quentin said, “Magnus’s code of conduct is that if you’re family you have each other’s backs, but you don’t owe each other favors.”

Nor nodded, “And I am family?”

Colonel Quentin said, “Yep.”

Nor let out a low breath, then said, “Okay, so we’re going to install me as king and then what...?”

“Then you rule.”

“A foreign land? A foreign future land with machines I haena ever seen before?”

Quentin said, “I’m here for a bit, helping with the peaceful transfer of power—”

James said, “You gonna keep saying ‘peaceful transfer of power’ over and over?”

“Yes, so it will be what it is, *peaceful*. James, here, is overseeing the building of the castle. You’ve got some good men in positions of power up and down the chain of command. It’s going to be great—”

Nor asked, “Ye ever done this before, Colonel Quentin?”

“Not once, but no worries. We know this works because, the good news, we know that the kingdom is still standing centuries from now.”

“And ye are certain ye arna changing time?”

Colonel Quentin grinned. “Never certain, always doing our best not to. That’s all we can do.”

James clapped Nor on the shoulder. “Anything you need?”

“A stiff drink would be good.”

James snapped his fingers, gesturing for drinks to be brought around.

Quentin went to speak with the General. James spoke to someone else. Nor and I stood in the midst of many people, conversing, waiting, until finally a soldier came up with a bottle of whisky under his arm. It was uncorked and poured into three shot glasses. James gave one each to Nor and me and kept one for himself. He raised his glass, “To Nor, for the responsibility he’s about to undertake.”

Nor drank his shot in one gulp.

I drank mine.

James drank, then we passed the glasses back to the soldier.

James asked, “Ready?”

Nor said, “Aye.”

Chapter 48 - Livvy



AUGUST 11, 2167
THE CORONATION OF NORMOND I

We strode through the parting crowd, headed to the door at the end of one long white temporary military shelter, and paused outside. Quentin waited with us, to be called inside for the ceremony.

I asked Nor, “So this is an all new experience.”

“Tis not new, Livvy, I hae had another much like this. Twas only a few years ago that I was interrupted from m’life and told that m’father was dyin’. I was called tae his bedside and prayed over him, mourning his life, then without any preparation, I was bidden tae rise from my knees and told that I was the new Duke of Awe. I was unprepared for all it entailed, but was made tae run the lands that had been m’father’s. I wished every day that I had asked him more questions and listened tae his guidance, as I was verra much under-equipped. This is much the same.” He smiled his charming smile. “What I learned is tae act as if I were prepared, with confidence, and demand deference from those around me while I figured out what I was tae do. I am certain I can figure this out as well.”

Colonel Quentin said, “You’re going to do great.”

Nor raised his brow. “Ye are goin’t tae do great, ‘Yer Majesty.’”

Colonel Quentin chuckled. “Yes, Your Majesty, you’re going to do great.”

“Thank ye, Colonel Quentin, I hae deep gratitude for yer assistance in these matters.”

The doors were flung open, the gathered men were seated in folding chairs. Nor and I were led in and down the middle aisle.

I was asked to sit in a chair at the front.

I held my hands in my lap and tried to look regal.

Nor stood at the front of this whole room of strangers, except for me, while the minister gave a sermon and a prayer, and a small speech was made by the man named the Administrator of Riaghalbane, from a teleprompter. Then Nor was directly asked, by the Administrator of Riaghalbane, “Will you, Normond, solemnly promise and swear to govern in wisdom and thoughtful deliberation, the People of Riaghalbane?”

Nor said, “Aye, I promise, tis m’oath.”

The Administrator said, “Will you, Normond, within your power, seek Law and Justice in Mercy, to be executed in all your judgements?”

Nor’s voice broke as he said, “I will.”

He was becoming king of a people who he had never met, this would not be an easy role — a first king, he would need to be the king that figured out how to rule a people.

Nor was asked to turn around and face the audience. His face was serious, his expression heavy. He looked as if he was aware of the burden being placed on his shoulders, as the Administrator lifted a golden crown from a table, and placed it on Nor’s head.

Nor breathed in and out.

The administrator handed him a sword.

Nor held it, hilt up, in front of him with two hands, looking very royal and hot. The administrator told him to repeat an oath, and Nor said, “The things which I hae here before ye

promised, I will perform and keep. So help me God. Tis m' oath and I am a man of m' word."

The administrator called me up.

For a half second I nervously thought of the old joke: *looking around, who me?*

Yes, it was my turn.

I was told to stand beside Nor, with my right hand on his hand on the hilt of his sword. And a smaller crown was placed on my head.

Then we stood there while a prayer was made. My hands shook from the solemnity of the occasion and the sight of all those strangers staring up at us. Then the Administrator said, "I introduce, Normond I, King of Riaghalbane, and Queen Olivia."

The audience stood and the administrator gestured for us to follow him down the aisle to the side door. We left that building and walked across a small dirt patch to another building. This one was the dining hall, long tables stretched the length of the room, covered in tablecloths, with candelabras in the center, places set with fine china and silverware.

The administrator introduced himself as John Clark. He and General Stanford, Colonel Quentin, and James walked us through the crowd that was streaming in, introducing us to various people, whispering in our ears who they were, and what they meant to the kingdom. I joked, after meeting the tenth important dignitary, "This is worse than the reception line at Kilchurn."

Nor said, "Aye, arna ye glad ye had the practice?"

"You did warn me that it was necessary to meet them in line so you could save yourself endless meetings."

He whispered, "Alas, I fear it winna save me from endless meetings. I fear I will be in meetings for the foreseeable

future, perhaps the rest of m'life. There is a great deal tae be decided and planned."

We were, after dinner and drinks, completely totally absolutely exhausted, and *finally* offered a helicopter to go to our safe house.

Nor whispered to me, "Och nae, we are certain we must fly through the skies?"

"They are making it sound like, yes, we must fly in a helicopter if we want a comfortable bed."

He sneered, "I think as the king I ought tae decide how I will get around."

I chuckled and sighed. "I don't think the new king or queen have gotten to make one single decision for hours."

He raised his chin. "Tis true, and the only reason I will get in the horrible bird is because as the king I demand a comfortable chamber and a sip of whisky before I bed m'wife."

I raised my chin, "The only reason I will get on the horrible bird is because as the queen I demand a proper bedding from the king."

He asked, "Ye haena been in one of these conveyances before?"

"Nope, not looking forward to it, but hey, that means we're in this together. We can hold hands through it."

He nodded, then told General Stanford we were ready to go.

The rotors were turning, making a huge racket, the engines roaring, the wind blasted us. We were led by the general, "This way, Your Majesties," running toward the helicopter. He gestured how to climb in. I got to go first, ear protection was put over my ears, I sat in a seat and Nor sat beside me, his own ear protection on. We glanced at each other, *this is terrifying*.

We belted in, and then put our heads back as we lifted into the air. We clasped hands.

The helicopter, airborne, swept in a wide arc in the cool darkness, and we flew over the grounds of the castle, picking up speed, then over a black expanse of forest, and finally edged around a wide sparkling sprawling city and then headed towards the barest outline of mountains in the distance. The helicopter swung and bounced in the changing air currents, then rose up the sweeping side of a pitch-black mountainside, and turned a wide arc. Through my window I could see a large palace, nestled in the trees. There was a helicopter landing pad on one of the wings of the building.

The landing freaked me out so I clamped my eyes shut tight, gripping Nor's hand until we were safely down with a thump on the rooftop. General Stanford climbed from the helicopter and gestured us out. I fumbled with the belt for a moment, whereas Nor was up and out of his seat like a bolt, standing outside the chopper with his hair whipping around. I got my belt off and climbed from the helicopter, with Nor's hand guiding me from the machine.

General Stanford said, "Your Majesty, we will be on the grounds, let us know if you need anything." He opened the door to the palace and we entered.

Staff lined the very ostentatious hallway. Decorated in a cream and gold color palette, sculpture-topped pedestals lined the hall, an ornate rug lay down the length, and oil paintings hung on the walls. Maids and a cook, a butler, a man who introduced himself as Mr. Alton, all bowed as we entered. I ran my fingers through my hair trying to smooth it down.

Mr Alton asked, "Might I get you something, Your Majesty?"

Nor looked as weary as I felt. "Aye, whisky, wine, a dessert for the Queen, and we desperately need our room. It has been a verra long day."

He said, “Absolutely,” and led us away, down a long hallway to our rooms. His arm swept out, “Welcome to the King’s Suite, Your Majesties, if you need anything let me know. We should have most everything you require. Please use this intercom if you need anything.”

I looked around at the opulence, marble flooring and gilded accents. The walls were adorned with rich tapestries and ornate moldings. A dazzling chandelier hung from the ceiling of the foyer.

Nor said, his expression strained, “I canna think of anythin’ I need besides sleep.”

We walked through to the living area and were given a cursory tour that I barely remember because I was so sleepy. There were plush furnishings covered in silk brocade and velvet upholstery. And a grand fireplace framed with marble and adorned with gold leaf, had a fire blazing at one end of the room.

Everywhere I looked were fine crystal, silver, gold, paintings and sculpture, it was overwhelming how beautiful it was. In my head I thought, *I am not going to touch anything.*

A servant entered, carrying a tray with a covered dish. She placed it on the bar and lifted the lid to show us warm cookies under it. The bar had bottles of whisky and vodka, red wine, and in a small refrigerator were several bottles of white. An assortment of glasses were arranged on polished glass shelves.

Mr Alton asked, “Would you like someone to remain to pour your drinks?”

Nor said, “Nae, thank ye. We would rather be alone.”

Mr Alton said, “As you wish, Your Majesty.” He and the servant backed from the room, bowing.

The door closed behind them.

I went to the big floor to ceiling windows and drew back a heavy curtain to look out. It was pitch black, in the moonlight I made out where the stars ended and the blackness of trees and mountains ringed our horizon.

I put the curtain back and went to the ornate desk and pulled open the drawer. Inside was a piece of stationery that said, in embellished lettering:

from the desk of J.C.

Ewww. I shoved the drawer closed. *We were in his house?*

Yes, probably. When I closed my eyes I could see him dead, covered in blood.

This was why I shouldn't touch anything.

Nor stalked to the bar, pulled a stopper from a crystal decanter labeled Scotch, poured a splash into two glasses and pushed one toward me. We both lifted the glasses and drank in unison. I, crassly, wiped my arm across my mouth. Then said, "Next I want a beer, gotta beer?"

He opened the refrigerator door and pulled out two bottles, passing me one. We found the bottle opener, flicked the caps off, and clinked our bottles together as we often did back home in Florida. We guzzled some beer.

Then I joked, "What... and I can't emphasize this enough... the *hell* is going on?"

He joked, "I daena ken, Yer Majesty, I thought ye, as a Queen, would be able tae explain it."

"A *queen*? We were in Florida this morning, how are we a King and Queen in some country we've never heard of before?"

He said, "I blame Magnus."

"Me too."

We clinked our glasses together again.

Chapter 49 - Livvy



THE SAFE HOUSE, SOMEWHERE IN THE KINGDOM
RIAGHALBANE

At two in the morning I felt Nor jostle me awake, “Livvy?”

I smacked my lips and mumbled, “What are you doing awake?”

“I woke up tae change the heat in the room, now I canna sleep.”

I turned over from my ‘on my stomach’ position and cuddled up, my thigh across his waist. The bedding was fabulous, the softest bed, fine linens, layers of bedding, each perfectly soft against my skin. The scent was lovely. His hand grasped my buttock and pulled my hips close.

“What’s got you up? I mean, I know... *everything*, but anything in particular?”

“Nae, I am just thinking this all over, my position in the world, how I am new tae everythin’.”

“True, you need to listen to Colonel Quentin tomorrow, and I will take notes. I think he’s a fount of knowledge but I’m not sure how long he will be here, not indefinitely... it *is* worrisome...”

“But that is not precisely what I mean... tis not worrisome, I hae a great deal tae do, aye, but I am not really worried on it. I hae seen m’future, Livvy, ye ken, we survive this. We hae bairns and a long life. I am not worried... I daena like tae prove m’self ill-equipped for a challenge, but I do think Colonel Quentin will assist me, and I will learn enough tae be able tae carry on when he goes...”

“Then what is it, if it’s not worry?”

He chuckled in the darkness of our unfamiliar, very luxurious room, then kissed my head. “Tis more that I am pleased, and ready tae move forward. Dost ye see, Livvy? I hae *won*. I kent that killin’ Johnne would save our lives, but I dinna ken that it would bring us this kingdom and this security.”

I watched the side of his face as he spoke. “I didn’t think about that.”

“Ye ken how we were unable tae see who was comin’? Just a week ago I was near beaten, just a few weeks ago I was captured and held in a dungeon, now look at all we hae.”

I said, “I don’t think it’s truly dawned on me that this is all ours.”

“Och aye, Livvy, tis *all* ours. Goin’ tae meet with Magnus was a verra good idea. He was an arse and dinna tell us much, he barely advised us, but he set this in motion.”

I smiled. “We won’t let it bother us that he did it because he didn’t think we would be able to solve it on our own.”

“We couldna, I had nae idea how tae begin.”

I waved my arm around. “So this is *all* ours?”

“Aye, a whole kingdom at the top of the world.”

“What does one do with a kingdom?”

He shrugged. “I already run vast lands, I will come tae understand it.”

“You see over your lands really well. You are admired, your family is happy and healthy, imagine what you can accomplish with a good night’s sleep on a comfortable bed in a century like this.” I pulled the covers up to our shoulders.

“Och, I can imagine it. This memory of this bed will bring comfort tae me when my arse grows numb from sittin’ during the long meetings on the morrow.”

“So you aren’t worried, you’re looking forward?”

“Aye. I am lying awake thinking on the fact that we hae won.”

I raised my head and looked down on his. “We won hard, so so so hard.”

“Aye, I killed Johnne and gained his kingdom. I am the first king, he never even got tae wear the crown.”

I grinned. “I feel like it’s not great to rejoice in that, but man, he was awful.”

Nor said, “Tis alright tae think it, Livvy, he wanted us dead, ye ken. I was the first king: Magnus knew it. I hae always been the first king. Johnne was attempting to change that history, if he had accomplished what he planned, he might hae stolen this kingdom from me, and my sons, and their sons. He lost. I destroyed his nefarious plot and we are victorious.”

“Man, now I can’t sleep either, we ought to celebrate!” I tossed the covers off, jumped from the bed, and went to the intercom on the wall. I pushed the button, “um...?”

A woman’s voice said, “What do you need, Your Majesty?”

I grinned at Nor.

I pushed the button. “I was... I didn’t eat much, can you send up some food? Like, a... maybe breakfast? Eggs waffles sausage? Champagne?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

There was nothing else.

I said, awkwardly, “This is okay? You’re bringing it?”

“Yes, your majesty. There is a bottle of champagne in your refrigerator, would you like someone to come up and serve it?”

“Um... no thank you. Just the food, um... thank you.”

I looked at Nor and said, “This is wild.”

“Aye... or tis the opposite of it, tis *verra* civilized.”

“Yes, exactly.”

Fully awake now I grabbed the bottle of champagne from the fridge at the bar and two glasses and returned to the bed.

I fluffed the pillows up on the headboard and leaned back, opened the bottle, the cork popping and coming close to hitting the chandelier. “Oh shoot! Wow, that is... that would have sucked. Would I be in trouble, you think?”

Nor said, “Ye canna be in trouble if ye are the Queen, ye would hae even less trouble than as the Duchess.”

“Phew, but I still don’t want to break anything, it’s all too pretty.”

I filled the two glasses, and put the bottle on the side table. There was a knock on the outer door. Nor said, “Enter!” as he climbed from bed and grabbed a thick robe from the back of the door and pulled it over his naked form. He spoke to the servant, and sent him away, then Nor pushed a cart of food into our room and up to our bed.

I said, “It’s magic.”

“Aye, tis close tae magic, we are blessed.”

I opened the lid on a plate with a stack of waffles. “I am so hungry. How did I get so hungry?” I smeared dollops of butter on the waffles, then poured syrup all over the stack.

He said, “Aye, I barely ate, I was so concerned with the events of the day that I couldna eat.”

He speared a sausage and chewed it, moaning with pleasure, and sipped champagne. I ate most of the waffles and sipped champagne, until finally I leaned back on the bank of pillows, satiated. He took a last couple of bites, wiped his hands, pushed the cart away from the bed, grasped me by the ankles, pulled me down from the berm of pillows, and climbed on top of me.

I giggled. “Ooooh, kingly carnal desire.”

“Aye, we ought tae partake, I think.”

“This seems decadent when I have royal maple syrup on my lips.”

He kissed me. “Aye, tis decadent.” His lips kissed and nibbled down my cheek to my throat and his breath against my skin and my breath on his, sweet sticky syrup fingers and champagne tasting kisses, and a long lingering love making in our palace bed through the night.

Afterwards, I flung my arms and legs out wide. “Wow, that was fun. *Now* we will be able to sleep.”

His brow lifted. “Careful, when ye are lyin’ like that ye make me think we might ought tae go round again.”

“*This* is sexy? That can’t possibly be true.”

He curled up against my side, with the covers pulled up, the lights dimmed again.

I ran my fingers along the skin of his shoulder, tracing a line across his strong back, up his neck, and twirling through his hair.

I whispered, “We will live here?”

He paused, then said, his voice low and deep, near sleep, “I daena ken, but it would be a good life.”

“It would, but we would miss our family.”

“We can visit.”

I said, “This seems like a lot for just me and you and... but you’re still a duke too, this is a lot of responsibility.”

“Aye,” there was another long pause, he was thinking in the darkness.

I said, “Never mind, we ought to sleep. I didn’t mean to get you started again, thinking.”

“Tis good tae think, I need the clarity, m’love.” Then he added, “I daena ken how we will manage, but I hae brothers, ye hae brothers. We hae men we trust. We should be able tae rule a dukedom and a kingdom.”

“That makes sense. And we can travel. We can go back and forth.” Then I asked, “How do you mean, brothers?”

“Aenghus will run Kilchurn and the lands around it whenever I am away. Malcolm... I could bring him here, but it might be good tae hae yer brothers, Charlie and Ryan, here in our absence... Claray would love tae see this house...” He grew quiet then said, “She was here, in the future, when Johnne brought me tae steal from the safe.”

“Oh, that’s right...”

“Aye, tis further proof that we are on the right path. We haena changed anything. This has always been my castle, Johnne was attemptin’ tae steal it.”

I said, “There’s a note from Johnne in the table by the door.”

“I will make sure my staff cleans the house and grounds of all mention of him.”

“Your staff?”

He chuckled and weakly waved his hand around. “Ye ken, all the strangers who answer tae me. I will command them with m’sheer will.”

“Transitions of power are fraught, huh? What if they don’t pay attention to you. What if they don’t want to follow you?”

“They will need tae be compelled. Magnus has laid the groundwork for it, and Johnne was an arse, so that helps as well. Twill be fine. Ye should see a household when the auld beloved Duke dies and the young man must step intae his shoes — och, there is disorder. It requires someone like Lady Gail. I could bring her, but she would hate to be so far away from her family and home.”

“My mom and dad might be good...”

“Aye, they would be good. This is why we make family alliances, so we hae men tae choose from, according to their talents.”

“I see that, I get it... and there’s a vault — is it full of portals?”

“Aye, and though I dinna want *any* of the portals, I now hae *all* of them.” He yawned, his body growing heavy.

I said, “We just keep winning.”

He nodded, against my shoulder, but he was already falling asleep.

Chapter 50 - Livvy



I woke up bleary-eyed to find a strange woman in the main living area and a rolling rack hung with dresses for me and suits for Nor.

Somehow she had managed our sizes pretty well. I picked out a red dress and pumps that I felt looked like ‘Princess Kate on a tour of a hospital,’ which seemed like a good vibe for me. Besides, she was literally the only role model I had for this.

All the steps I took crossing our suite back and forth getting ready for the day, trying on clothes, doing my hair, were *already* wearing me out, and then the household manager gave Nor and me a tour of the mansion. We stopped to speak to his head of security about all the measures that were in place to keep us safe, which kind of freaked me out — then came the stress of climbing in the helicopter once again and flying back to the castle grounds.

General Stanford and Colonel Quentin gave us a tour of the massive grounds by car, we did a big loop. Whenever we stepped out of the vehicle to take a closer look, or meet someone, we wore hard hats. And I was regretting my choice of the heels: they kept sinking into the excavated earth around the building site.

Colonel Quentin and James Cook explained the construction, and we were shown the pit that held the vault, installed in the ground, the elevator shaft already built beside it.

Nor nodded. “I hae been in there before.”

We rode down the elevator and were led into the vault. There were display boxes, darkened, not installed yet, bins and crates on the floor, and then a second room. Colonel Quentin pressed his hand to the wall beside the door and it slid open. Inside, James pointed out ancient looking crates, and said, “Vessels and other machines for time destruction.”

Nor said, “Aye, the portals.”

Colonel Quentin said, “Yep. At this point I’m not sure if we’re their master or they’re ours. Either way, guard them with your life. I’m sick and tired of gathering them back up in emergencies.” Then he said, “Oh, and there’s this...” He opened the lid on a chest and pulled out a small gold box, he lifted the lid, and inside were small golden threads. “When you’re about to time jump you can press these to the back of your head, right here at the nape.” He passed one to James and presented his back to him. James pressed the thread to the back of Colonel Quentin’s head.

Nor said, “What’s it for?”

“It makes the jump not hurt as much.”

I said, “Damn, wish I had had one of those from the beginning.”

He said, “Yeah, they are amazing...” James peeled the gold thread off his head and Quentin returned it to the box. “But it’s a double-edged sword, there are only a few in here, and we never seem to have them when we need them.”

James said, “Also, we’ve all decided to save ours for the kids, so even though we know they exist we rarely get to use them. It totally sucks, but what are you going to do, listen to Isla scream?”

Colonel Quentin winced. James shivered.

Colonel Quentin said, “But they’re yours, you get to use them if you want.”

I grabbed the box and carried it with me as we returned to ground level, and rode over to the command center and looked at wall projections of the blueprints. James's finger traced along a system of tunnels that laced around under the grounds.

Nor asked, "Dost we need tunnels? Winna they be difficult tae protect?"

James said, "I would like to say that King Nor gets to decide, but honestly, Your Majesty, I can't stress this enough, you don't get to change a darn thing. There are tunnels, we need tunnels, I have to build tunnels."

Nor nodded. "I understand. What about the ground here? I canna figure out what this is?"

Quentin said, "Your Majesty, this is actually the spot where your arena ought to be, and contrary to James's declaration, just one moment ago, we are divided on building it."

"What is the purpose?"

"To broadcast sports, or concerts, or... fights for the throne." Colonel Quentin chewed his lip, nervously.

He looked over at the blueprint projection as it shifted and changed on the wall.

Nor said, "I remember Artair mentionin' the idea, he wanted tae fight his cousin for the throne. Could ye explain tae me, in barest terms, what it means?"

Colonel Quentin said, "The arena battles are run according to rules, men with a claim to the throne can challenge the king. He decides whether to take the challenge."

"The king must fight?"

"He can choose a warrior to fight in his stead. Once the fight is declared, the weapons are chosen. The winner takes the kingdom."

"Sounds a good way tae lose a throne."

"Or win it."

Nor asked, "Magnus said he fought in the arena?"

“He was forced by his father to fight many times. He is not a fan. He is a ‘no’ on building the arena, but...”

“If an ancestor decided against the arena, wouldna that change Magnus’s history?”

“Yes, it would, but it’s difficult for him to think about it without letting his emotions take control. He is irrational about it. He says no. But also, that is the main reason why he left, because he knows it’s best for him not to be involved in the decision.”

“What about Lochinvar, he fought in the arena?”

“Yes, he fought for Magnus, he won, he votes ‘yes.’”

Nor glanced at me. He said, “Artair wanted it, tis one of the reasons he came tae help me against Johnne, he believes it will end a war.”

Colonel Quentin nodded.

Nor asked, “What does Fraoch think?”

“He is an undecided vote. He wants to vote yes, but... he is also Magnus’s brother. He knows how difficult those years were on Magnus, so he will vote ‘no’, too for his brother.”

James said, “Fraoch is basically no help at all.”

Nor said, “What of you, James?”

James said, “While I think it’s great entertainment, it’s barbaric. I’ve seen the stress it puts Mags in, and I don’t like the idea of his son Archie having to do it. I’m a ‘no.’”

Nor said, “Finally, Colonel Quentin, what dost ye think?”

He said, “I’ve been considering it... I see both sides, but it must be decided, and I believe in all things we must come down on the side of keeping the timelines straight. If it hadn’t been for the arena battles our whole history might be different, it is through battle that we test our mettle. I’m not proud of coming down on the opposite side of Magnus, and I don’t like the idea of putting him through what he went through, but without the arena battles he wouldn’t have his son, he

wouldn't have grown into the man we know. History is too important. I think we must build the arena and set the stage.”

Nor nodded watching the blueprint on the wall.

Colonel Quentin said, “This is a big decision though, if you want to think about it tonight...”

Nor shook his head. “I daena need tae think on it. I ken we hae good men with opinions on both sides, I can see all their reasons, but I feel we must keep in mind history for better or worse. That is enough tae make the decision. We canna err on the side of tryin’ tae better what happens, as we might destroy our lives. But even without that knowledge, m’descendant, Artair, came tae assist me and tae ask for my favor. I hae spent time with him, he is a good man, and is trying tae cut down on the loss of life by offerin’ tae risk his own. I feel tis foolhardy, but courageous, and that is enough — build the arena.”

Colonel Quentin said, “Thank you, Your Majesty, for clarity on it.”

Nor smiled. “When ye speak tae Magnus on it, make sure ye tell him that I deliberated long, and wished it wouldna cause him harm.”

Colonel Quentin said, “He understands, but I’ll make sure to mention it.”

By then my feet ached, desperately. It had been hours of walking and talking, touring and discussing, introductions and polite conversation. There had been trays of snacks and drinks everywhere, like a conference hall set up. I had had my share of coffee, fruit, and bagels... but I hit a wall. This was all too much.

I spotted a bucket, turned it over, and sat down, hoping not to have to go any farther.

Nor said, “Ye are weary, m’lady?”

“So so so tired, m’laird.”

Quentin said, “We thought we would have a big banquet for...” His voice trailed off as he glanced at me, the exhaustion

on my face. “What if we send you back to the safe house? This has been plenty. Tomorrow, you’ll meet the troops.”

We were escorted back to the helicopter.

Later, in our very fine dining room, a long table, with just me and Nor catty corner at one end, I was full after a big meal, my feet up on Nor’s thigh. “The nice thing about being this tired, is that I think of this as home, it’s such a relief to be here.”

“Aye, we needed the respite.” He leaned back in his chair, comfortable and relaxed. Casual and hot.

I said, “What time is it even? I’m ready for bed, but it looks light out still.”

He looked at his watch, “Tis seven p.m., m’lady.”

“If we were in Kilchurn right now it would be dark, we could go to bed.”

He said, “We are king and queen, we get tae go tae bed just because we want tae.”

I yawned, very long and loudly. “I think I’m ready to go to bed, but I’m too tired. This house is big and I’m irritated by it all.”

He picked my feet off his thigh, gently putting them to the side and stood. He said, “I am tired as well. Ye will need tae stand on the chair so I might lift ye properly.”

“You’re going to carry me? Awesome.” I kicked off my shoes under the table, and climbed up onto the seat of the fine chair.

He leaned forward and I squealed as he slung me over his shoulder, arms around my hips, my ass in the air. “Ye thought it would be romantic?” He lugged me out of the room.

I pressed against his ass, to lift my head, awkwardly watching the back of his feet and the ground behind us as we went, seeing the feet of one of the staff, possibly the household manager, as we passed. “Sorry, too tired to walk!”

Nor laughed, and said to the person as we passed, “The queen was fretful, I needed tae carry her tae the rooms.”

I giggled as a man’s voice said solemnly, “Of course, Your Majesty.”

In our suite Nor dropped my feet to the ground. I flipped my hair back, my sight a bit dizzy. “*That* was arriving in style.”

He said, “Dignified as a Queen.”

I laughed and went to the bedroom where there was a stack of pajamas for each of us, wrapped in a ribbon. For the hundredth time in two days I said, “What the hell is going on?”

“I daena ken for certain, Livvy, but I ken if this is changin’ time it worked out verra well for us.”

“And by the looks of your descendants, it works out well for them too.”

“Yer Majesty, they are yer descendants as well.”

My eyes went wide. “Seriously? What the *hell* is going on?”

I took my dress off, tossed it to the side, and pulled on a pair of silk pajamas.

Nor pulled off his clothes and pulled on flannel bottoms and a cotton top. “How come yers are silky, and mine feel like wool?”

“Because if yours were silky ye might never want to get inside mine.”

He chuckled. “Ye hae had yers on for one moment and I already want tae be inside them.”

I sighed, over-dramatically. “But it’s not *bed* time. We are so tired, that if you get inside my pajamas now we will be asleep in twenty minutes.”

He laughed. “I think I can last longer than twenty minutes.”

I teased, “Can you? We’ve barely slept, toured all day, eaten a really big dinner...? I think we make love for twenty minutes and boom, we’re *both* back to sleep. *Then* we wake up at two a.m. again, hungry, and we’ll have to order food. We have to order food if we wake and we’re hungry, and then tomorrow we will be exhausted, yet *again*. If we keep being this exhausted, we will look weak, we can’t look weak — we must power through to a legitimate bed time, then we can make love, and sleep straight through.”

“Och, ye are being verra imperious, when is this strong and powerful bedtime for a king?”

“At *least* 7:30.”

He laughed. “What do we do instead?”

I sighed. “Sit on the couch and talk? No sleeping!”

We made ourselves some drinks and sat down on the couch. “That was a big day.”

“Aye, twas. Tomorrow will be bigger.”

I yawned. “I’m going to fall asleep, let’s play a game.” I jumped up and pulled the small trash can that was near an antique secretary desk over toward the couch. I grabbed two pieces of blank stationery off the desk. I passed one to Nor. “Wad it up, we’re going to play baskets.”

He put down his drink, wadded up his paper, and tossed his ball into the basket, scoring.

I joked, “Clearly the basket is too close. First try, sheesh.”

I moved the basket farther away, wadded up my paper, sat down on the couch and tossed it to the basket, it went in. I yelled, “Swoop!”

Nor tossed his ball in too. I jumped up and returned our paper balls to us. Nor aimed and tossed again.

He asked, “What do ye think Artair is doin’?”

I tossed my paper ball. “I’m not sure... I suppose, likely, he doesn’t remember any of it.”

“Perhaps... he told us, dost ye remember, that his father was holdin’ him and dinna allow him tae hae a portal. I am thinkin’ on him, do ye think he might be desperate tae return tae his long lost lass?”

“You can’t remember her name either?”

“Nae.”

“He might be, but also, you approved the arena to be built. He might have a completely different life now: he might have fought for the throne, he might have won, he might have moved on from his ‘long lost lass’—”

“I daena ken, he was verra set upon her. I canna imagine changin’ his mind. He seemed likely tae try tae move heaven and earth tae get tae her.”

“True, but maybe he’s come up with a different plan by now.”

“Perhaps.”

He got up to retrieve our paper balls, and joked, “Should I call in staff tae bring us our paper balls? I could tell them we are too tired tae do it from all our kingdom ruling.”

I said, “I don’t know, they saw you sling me over your shoulder. We might not want them to know everything we get on to in our private time.”

“True.” He tossed another ball.

Then he said, “I will need tae go see about him.”

I hadn’t expected him to say it, I thought we were just speculating. “Oh, really? You think? But what about... we aren’t supposed to meet up with, you know, other time travelers. What if it messes something up?”

“I canna worry on it, I made him a promise.”

“But...”

He went to the desk and brought over a stack of paper so we could wad up more balls. “But, nothing... Livvy, I promised him. I must go and do what I promised, go with him

tae meet her father, stand for him when he asks for her hand. Why are ye set against it? He helped us a great deal.”

“But we’ve overwritten that. He likely doesn’t remember, and he’s in a whole different part of a timeline. I think if you go you might mess something up, and he’s probably already figured out a solution anyway.”

He wadded up a ball, aimed, and sank it in the basket. “Daena matter, I hae decided.”

I said, “I think Magnus would disagree.”

He said, “Magnus is an arse, we canna worry on his opinion.”

I said, “That arse built you a kingdom—”

He said, sharply, “He dinna build me a kingdom. He assisted because it strengthens his own kingdom, his actions are self-servin’, Livvy.” He wadded up another piece of paper. “He inna doin’ this from kindness, tis for strength. I am grateful and I owe him for it, but he inna tae determine m’actions. I am not his servant.”

“I get that, I’m sorry, I was simply thinking he’s had more experience with the portals, and if he wants to limit the interactions between all of us, maybe his reasonings are correct.”

He nodded. “Possibly... he might verra well be correct, and I hear ye, Livvy, I do. I ken ye are trying tae ‘talk sense’ tae me, but ye must remember we canna ken what the future holds. We can only live in the present.” He picked up a bunch of the balls we had tossed and brought them to the coffee table and set them in front of us.

I sank a ball in the basket and picked up another and tossed it back and forth while he explained, “When I am at Kilchurn, considerin’ what tae do, I hae one reasoning: will this strengthen m’family? If I act in honor, if I fulfill m’duties, and if I guard them well, I will hae a strong house. A strong house means my descendants will be strong.” He tossed another ball. “But now I have met them, my descendants visit me tae ask for help — is it a mistake tae help them? I canna say. I can

only continue with m'work: act in honor, fulfill m'duties, guard well, and hope for a strong outcome. That is why I will go help Artair, because I promised, and because I ought to, not because I ken it is right, but because I ken it is good."

I nodded. "Okay, maybe we can agree to disagree. You *are* making sense. It's as good an idea as any, but it seems dangerous. I just wanted to make sure you've thought it through."

"I haena, not truly, because I daena ken what the outcome would be, so I will just do it."

"That's all you can do, I suppose... your best. Please don't be rash." I picked up three balls and tossed them, saying, "One, two, three."

He laughed.

I asked, "Want me to come with?"

He said, "Aye, I believe I do, we will visit Artair's time, and see if we can help him. We will go soon."

"Perfect. And I'm so glad it's not tomorrow. I have to spend the day going over the running of the household. Fun!" I scooped up balls by the trash basket and brought them to the couch.

He said, "I will trade ye, I hae tae meet the troops. Yer tour is far likelier tae be near the kitchen."

I smiled and shook my head. "Just weeks ago I was proudly showing you the manufactured home we were going to live in... you know, I was never one for household management. I barely had food in my refrigerator, now I'm supposed to be the boss of a staff running households in different places across an empire? What the hell is going on?"

He tossed five balls in a row, sinking them all. "This is not an empire yet, I am just getting started."

Then he checked his watch and joked, "Och, *finally*, tis time tae take ye tae the bedroom, if I am going tae build an empire, we need some sons."

Chapter 51 - Nor



The following few days were full of appointments, meetings, discussions, tours, and endless planning sessions.

One day I was with Colonel Quentin and James in m'office in our safe house, goin' over the blueprints for my castle compound, while Livvy was in the kitchens discussing the meals for the week.

I sipped a cup of coffee, black. "There is somethin' I need tae discuss: I must go find Artair tae lend him m'assistance."

Colonel Quentin put down a pen, shaking his head.

James said, "Hoo-boy, that does *not* sound wise."

I said, "I ken, it sounds like the ravin' of a madman, but still I must. I vowed tae."

Colonel Quentin said, "I knew you would come to this."

"I understand why I ought not do it, but I canna think past that he came tae assist me, tae back me in a war, and he did it before he went tae find his lass. He never went tae find his lass. How can I sit idly by, enjoyin' m'coffee and m'time of peace in the kingdom, when Artair daena hae his lass? Seems a cruelty."

Colonel Quentin said, "Maybe he got her already. Time shifted, maybe he accomplished it and he's moved on."

James said, “He might be happily married. You don’t know.”

We all stared down at the blueprints. I said, “True. I daena ken....” Then I asked, “What are these rooms on the lower floors?”

Colonel Quentin said, “The dungeons, but not what you might think, not dark and dank, these are upscale, modern, prison cells for criminals.”

James quipped, “Or your sons.”

I asked, “What do ye mean?”

Colonel Quentin said, “James is joking—”

James said, “Not really, dead serious — Magnus was held in these cells and forced to fight for his father, Donnan.”

“Och, that is a miserable way tae treat a son. I daena like the sound of it at all... I suppose like the arena and the tunnels, I canna decide not tae build them?”

Colonel Quentin shook his head. “Nope. I mean, bad shit went down, and if you had to ask Magnus he would say ‘no,’ but... it’s part of his life now, he survived it.”

James said, “I think you’ve got to build it.”

I shook my head, repeating what I had told myself many time that week, “I daena get tae make decisions or I will undo the world... I am not a god.”

James said, “You are not a god. But... we will add to the dungeon security that your hand-print will open the doors, that’s a little god-like.”

I nodded, “That is how I broke intae the safe tae steal the Bridge for Johnne.”

James said, “See, you can’t change anything or you’ll undo your world too.”

I flipped the page and said, as my finger traveled along a series of tunnels, “I canna believe these tunnels must remain — they seem difficult tae manage and protect.”

Quentin said, “Everyone in Magnus’s life has used those tunnels at one point, they gotta stay. You just have to do it.”

I chuckled. “So remind me why we are looking at the blueprints?”

James said, “Merely a courtesy, Your Majesty. Something to do while we drink coffee, giving me a break from walking around the construction site, losing my mind at incompetence and delays.”

We looked down on the blueprints again, then I asked, “... so how would I ken?”

James continued looking down, but said, “You can’t let it go, huh?”

I said, “Nae, tis impossible, it weighs upon me.”

Colonel Quentin said, “We know when Niall, Artair’s father, is crowned king, and we could send someone to that time to investigate. If it’s safe, you could send Artair a message.”

“I would like tae ken if there is still a war. Also has the timeline been altered — could ye send someone this week?”

Colonel Quentin said, “I will gather some men and travel with them. We can leave tomorrow.”

James said, “You’ve never been there before, you’re not going to travel on yourself, no looping, right?”

Colonel Quentin said, “I don’t think so, probably not, I’d remember, right?”

I said, “I hope ye would.”

James said, “Asking this is just a formality. All of us have pissed up and down this timeline, but in actuality there are whole centuries we haven’t messed with, but it’s always good to ask.”

I said, “I understand the danger, and I am not sure I will act upon the information ye gather. I will consider carefully... and I am not sure if I will tell Livvy that I am exploring this,

she seemed set against the idea. I daena want tae worry her before I hae decided.”

“I won’t mention it to the Queen.”

I said, “Thank ye, Colonel Quentin.”



Four days later I was in the command center on the grounds of the castle construction site speaking to General Stanford and James. It was afternoon when Colonel Quentin entered, leading a group of soldiers who had just returned from a jump to check on Artair in the future.

Colonel Quentin sat down across from us at a long table, complaining, “How many times is too many times? As many times as I’ve done it, even with the gold thread on my head — thank you, Nor, it *still* sucks.”

A servant asked him if he needed something and he asked for vitamins and orange juice.

“Did ye uncover anything?”

“We stopped at a restaurant and found a chatty waitress — Niall is king, crowned in 2221 like we thought.”

“Nae war for the throne?”

“No, killing Johnne, building the arena fixed all that. But... your man, Artair, has fought three times in the arena. The latest was just two days before we arrived. The waitress said the latest was a rough one. Artair barely won, but he did.”

“Och nae.”

Quentin said, “Och nae is right.”

I asked, “Any word on if he is married?”

“No, not married, and this part is... he’s basically kept in a cell because, as the waitress said, ‘He tries to leave.’”

I said, “He is tryin’ tae go back tae get the lass.”

“That’s what I think too, and I gotta tell you, Nor, I changed my mind on the whole thing. You gotta go get him.”

“How?”

“Well, I think I have a plan.” We spent the next few hours going over the details.

Chapter 52 - Livvy



We had a lot to do so we were almost a full week before Nor fessed up. He had been investigating Artair and coming up with a plan.

I was irritated. “Without me?”

“Aye, m’love, but only so ye winna worry.”

“I’ve been worried! I knew you were going to get Artair, and because you weren’t talking about it I was worried you were keeping it from me — guess what? I was right!”

He said, “I am sorry, m’love, I just... I wasna certain we would go. I was bein’ cautious. Now we are going. As soon as I hae memorized the layout of the castle.”

“We’re going into someone else’s castle?”

“We are goin’ intae *my* castle. I am building it, tis all mine, if I want tae go in, I can.”

“Well, that’s badass, I definitely want to be part of that, but what if I don’t want to go with you now? What if I’m sulking?”

“The Queen of Riaghalbane, the Duchess of Awe, the love of the King, who was tossed intae time travel and shot at and menaced and yet still jumped when she was needed, who has never scorned an adventure... *that* Livvy? Ye expect me tae believe that *that* Livvy winna go tae rescue Artair when she heard me give him an oath that I would? I daena believe it.”

I scoffed. “Yet you didn’t trust me?”

“I trusted ye. I trusted that ye would go with me. I just dinna trust m’self tae ken what I ought tae do. Now I ken, now we go. Ye hae never said nae tae an adventure.”

I said, “You know me so well... so what kind of adventure is this? Queen’s dress or cargo pants?”

“What under the heavens are cargo pants?”

“You know, the pants the soldiers wear.”

He grimaced, “I truly doubt, Yer Majesty, that I would take ye on an adventure that would require ‘cargo pants’. I think there must be a third choice between dress and lookin’ like a soldier.”

“But I will need pockets for my weapons and a chapstick.”

“Aye, ye will want yer smeary lip stuff where we’re goin’.”

“Then I’ll think of something.”

Chapter 53 - Nor



Colonel Quentin and James Cook met with me on the final day. Colonel Quentin asked, “You’re sure you don’t need me to come?”

“Dost ye think ye ought tae come? Seems fraught with difficulties. Ye hae already, as James Cook says, pissed all over the time period, ye ought tae be careful.”

James said, “We are in too deep, too entangled as it is. It’s best if we don’t hang out with Artair, honestly.”

Colonel Quentin said, “Yeah, you’re right, but... you know the castle, you’re ready, seems like — you sure you should take Livvy?”

“I am not goin’ tae be the person who tells the Queen whether she can come or not. I hae learned m’lesson.”

James said, “Sounds like Katie, doesn’t it, Quentin?”

“Yep.”

I said, “And I hae been thinking about it, that after we get Artair, we will return here, briefly, then Livvy and I will run the errand with Artair. I daena think ye ought tae be here when we return.”

James said, “The castle won’t be finished yet.”

“Ye ken I hae builders, I hae men, I hae commanders. Ye hae fulfilled yer duties. I am in yer debt, but tis time for ye tae leave. We can rule without ye.”

James said, “Damn, don’t let the door hit us in the ass?”

I chuckled. “Ye ken that is not the point.”

“Yeah I get it, and I do get to see the finished castle, couple of centuries in the future. It’s majestic, it’s cool I played a part in that. You’re right, we should leave before our entwining becomes stupid. Did we tell you about the time we blew up the wall of the castle to swing Magnus out to a flying helicopter?”

“Och, nae, ye blew up my castle?”

“Yep, the castle gets destroyed more than once. It’s a violent history, kind of lovely to see the old girl get built from the beginning, so full of hope.”

Colonel Quentin chuckled, “I will make sure that General Stanford has his full roster of duty personnel, arms, and transport. We will plan to leave the day before you return.”

We shook hands, then we hugged. “Thank ye for all ye hae done and let Magnus ken, I am grateful.”

Colonel Quentin said, “He knows.”

Chapter 54 - Livvy



Nor was wearing a military uniform. He looked badass, like he was going to battle, but also sexy *and* regal. He was strapped with a modern gun.

I was wearing a pair of tight-fighting pants with pockets, in a deep royal blue, with black boots, a tight tee and a jacket. I was also strapped with a gun at my hip.

He admired my ass. I teased, “You like my cargo pants, Your Majesty?”

“Och aye, they arna at all like what the soldiers would wear.”

Nor and I went out on the back lawn of our house. We had two guards traveling with us, and Nor and I had the gold threads on the backs of our heads. I was hopeful it would help.

Quentin had also arranged a couple of guards in advance, to meet us with transport at a safe distance from our target.

I asked, “We know where we’re going?”

He looked down at the device. “Aye, Colonel Quentin and James hae given me instructions, I am verra good at this now. I understand all of it, especially tae not loop. Never loop.”

“That’s easy enough, we won’t.”

“Aye, and I ken the layout of the castle, just follow me.” He asked the soldier accompanying us, “Ye ready?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Nor twisted the portal for us to go.



This was a kind of luxury. There was an SUV, and our guards were waiting for us.

The gold threads were a miracle. I ached, a wee bit, but nothing like the pain of before. I got up and was helped into the backseat, and there was a fridge full of juice and water in the SUV.

After several hours, the driver turned off the paved road, and onto a narrow dirt track. The guard said, “Your Majesties, we will need to hike from here.”

We left a man with the SUV, and the rest of us walked along a path, until we came to a wide field with a stone circle at the far end. We skirted the field, keeping within the forest, until we came to a tree. Nor said, “Ahead of us is the door to the tunnels.”

I asked, “We know how to get around in them?”

“I hae an idea of it; while we are there we must be verra quiet.”

“Yeah, I can do that.”

He and one of the guards rushed forth, opened the hatch door, and waved for me and the other guard to follow. Nor led us down the steps into the tunnel. We left two men behind, guarding the hatch door.

We jogged down a long tunnel, until finally he stopped us in front of a door. Nor whispered, “Pray it works.” He pressed his palm to the pad by the door. It slid open and we went in.

We passed down a hallway to an elevator. Nor pressed his hand, the elevator doors opened. We all stepped in and rode up one floor, coming out on a long hallway with multiple doors.

Nor looked up and down, then whispered, “We found the prince’s cell.”

There was a food cart stacked with dirty china parked outside a door. Whoever had cleared his room’s dishes had left them outside to be carried away.

Nor gestured for us to follow, then pressed his palm to the pad by the door, and it slid open.

We stepped into the room.

Artair was sitting on the bed, his face had been beaten to hell, sporting a black eye, a busted lip. He cocked his head back as if it was hard to see. “What are ye doin’? I daena hae a fight scheduled, I am in nae condition—”

Nor asked, “Artair, ye daena ken who I am?”

“Nae, how dost ye ken me...?”

He had a bandage on his shoulder that we could see because his shirt wasn’t buttoned. He looked like he wanted to button it, but winced when he tried to use his left arm.

“I am Normond the First, I came tae release ye from this prison and go with ye tae get yer long lost lass—”

“Gwynedd?” He stood with a wince. “How do ye ken Gwynedd?”

Normond said, “Ye told me all about her, ye talked endlessly about it, and now I am here tae help ye, grab yer things.”

“Ye are a king, Normond... I ken that name... ye are here tae help me?”

“Aye, and from the looks of ye, ye need my help — ye got yer arse kicked.”

“Tis barely a scratch, ye should hae seen the other man — taken away in a casket.” He looked around the room. He didn’t have much at all. “Coat?”

Nor asked, “That’s all ye hae? Then bring it and come.”

Artair pulled a coat over his one good arm and left the back dangling down unable to get it over his injured arm. His eyes narrowed. “Why should I trust ye?”

“Because I said so, and ye ought tae, as I am the only one who is goin’ tae help ye. This is really all ye hae? Nae weapons?”

“I am a prisoner, nae, nae weapons.”

We moved to the door, and out to the hall. Nor pressed his hand to the pad and the door slid closed. Then the soldier led us at a jog down the hallway to the elevators and soon enough we were jogging at full speed down the long tunnel to the door at the end.

No one spoke, we just ran, raced up the steps at the end and emerged in the stone circle, lit by a pink Scottish sunset. We met up with our soldiers, who led us in a race across the field to the road, where our SUV was waiting.

We dove in and the SUV raced away.

Nor grinned. “It worked perfectly.”

The driver raced our SUV down a winding road, then craned looking out the front window. “Not so soon, Your Majesty, we’re being tracked by a drone.”

Nor pulled a portal from his pocket and worked on it, while the SUV careened around a corner. “Ye ready tae jump?”

One of the soldiers said, “Hold onto your ass.”

I said, “Hear hear.”

Nor twisted the portal and flung us in the SUV back to our safe house.

Chapter 55 - Livvy



I woke up in my seat, my head on Nor's shoulder, something heavy on *my* shoulder. I glanced down. It was Artair's head, lolling.

I looked up at Nor's face, he was awake, looking around. He asked, "Are all well?"

The soldiers said yes and began climbing from the SUV out onto the grass. We were on the lawn in front of our mansion.

I said, "Yeah, I'm good, fully accounted for. With the gold threads this is actually doable."

Nor said, "Artair? Ye arrived safely?"

Artair groaned unhappily, then muttered, "I hate it."

Nor said, "I ken, we do as well, but yet we must — ye ought tae get yer head off the Queen's shoulder. Tis unseemly."

Artair picked up his head, wobbling, his eyes still closed, then opened one eye. "Where the hell are we? Wait, is this my dad's safe house?"

Nor said, "Tis my safe house."

"And remind me who you are...?"

"I am Normond the First, King of Riaghalbane, this is Livvy, the Queen."

"Pleased tae meet ye, I am Artair, prince, warrior, slayer of usurpers — are ye a usurper?"

“Nae, I am a rightful king. I daena need tae fight a poorly treated confused prince for m’crown.” Nor climbed from the car.

I followed him out.

Artair followed, awkwardly, his sore arm paining him, he winced. “I need a chair and an explanation.”

Nor stopped walking, “Ye ‘need a chair and an explanation, Yer *Majesty*.’”

Artair raised his brow. “I thought we were friends?”

“Och aye, we are friends, but I am quickly regretting it — yer friend, Nor, needs tae be shown a bit of gratitude for rescuin’ ye.”

Artair said, “Aye, ye are correct, Nor, my friend who I hae nae memory of, I am tense because of pain, and behaving poorly. Thank ye for rescuing me, I think. I am not sure why or how, but I am indebted tae ye, I believe, though this is all verra strange.”

We went into the house and sat down in the main sitting room, letting Artair sit on the comfortable couch. Nor and I sat in chairs across from him. Nor said, “First, dost ye need a physician, Artair?”

He peeled the coat off his shoulder and then pulled his shirt away from his chest, exposing a bandage over a wound that had some blood seepage. He inspected it. “Nae, it looks terrible, but tis merely a small wound. I am just sore and wailin’ like a bairn, tis m’way. Ye ken, Nor, I ought tae hae been celebrated after the win, instead I had tae sit in m’cell feelin’ all the pain of m’wounds. It has caused me tae become irritable.”

Nor said, “I will send ye tae a physician anyway.”

Artair said, with his head back on the couch, “Fine, but I am in great health.” A servant brought in drinks and passed one to Artair, who winced when he leaned forward. He sipped, then said, “The safe house looks great, new and clean. By the time dear old dad took me there... back in... when was that?”

Nor narrowed his eyes.

Artair said, “Some memories are clear as day but others feel indistinct and layered... as if they hae been overwritten.”

Nor sipped from his glass. “Tis exactly like that, so let me begin at the beginning. I was at war with a man named Johnne Cambell.”

Artair said, “Heard of him.”

“Ye helped me kill him.”

“Tis odd...” Then he shrugged his good shoulder. “I suppose it does sound like me, I am verra heroic.”

Nor carried on, “Johnne had kidnapped me, put me in a dungeon, near killed me, then he planned tae attack m’castle, Kilchurn—”

“What year?”

“1670, but then ye showed up with a cannon, and offered yer assistance.”

He leaned forward. “How did I come?”

“Ye had a portal, one of the...” Nor snapped his fingers. “I canna remember what ye called it.”

“The Tempus Omegas?”

“Aye.”

He huffed. “Nae one lets me have a Tempus Omega, I wonder why they would?”

“What ye told me is that yer kingdom was at war, yer cousin had stolen yer father’s throne. For some reason ye came tae help me fight against Johnne. Yer mother, I believe, gave ye the device tae do it.”

He leaned back and considered, shaking his head. “I wonder why...? And why daena I remember it?”

“We went farther back in time and found Johnne at a tavern at Langside—”

“During the battle of Langside? Och, I would like tae see that battle fought!”

I grimaced. “I can’t believe you’re saying that, you said it then too.”

He looked at me confused.

I reintroduced myself again, “I’m the queen, Livvy. You don’t remember me?”

“Nae, but also, why were ye, a *woman*, with us if we went tae the battle of Langside?”

“Because I’m a badass person who can handle her — you know what, I’m not answering you.” I huffed. “Now I’m irritated.”

He said, “I hae the tendency tae do that tae people.”

I rolled my eyes, “You say that all the time too. You know, Artair, if you admit that you are irritating, more than once, maybe just *maybe* could you try to be *less* irritating?”

He shrugged again and grinned, joking, “I canna stop being irritatin’, Yer Majesty. I daena understand what tis that causes it — m’warrior spirit? Tis that I am a winner of near all battles? Tis because I am right in most things? How can I stop any of that? *There* is my true nature.”

I jokingly flung my arms out and collapsed back in the chair. “I think I died from the irritation. I think you have killed me, Artair, with your insolence and lack of humility.”

He joked, “Yet ye still speak, Yer Majesty.”

Nor said, “I feel like ye remember us, Artair.”

He said, “Ye do seem familiar, but nae, I canna place ye... ye say I killed Johnne in a tavern in Langside?”

Nor said, “Nae, *I* killed him. And then we returned with his body back tae m’time—”

Artair said, “Kilchurn, 1670?”

“Aye, but there had been a shift and ye were gone. Nae one at the castle remembered meetin’ ye.”

I said, “My brother, Charlie, was also missing, he had been visiting us at Kilchurn. When I went back home to check on

him, he didn't remember coming to Kilchurn."

He patted his chin. "Charlie? Was he a funny bloke...? I remember huddlin' with a Charlie on a cold night, but canna place where."

I said, "It's like you're remembering but not really... it was a *big* time shift. We figured as much, that you were back in your own time, and that you likely didn't remember any of what happened."

"Yet ye still came tae help me? Och, I must hae greatly charmed ye, that ye would come though ye dinna need tae."

Nor raised his brow. "We needed tae, look at ye! Ye are beat all tae hell, ye were held captive by yer father, a real shite da, and ye had nae hope of gettin' tae yer long lost lass."

He half-grinned, accentuating the swollen lip. "Tis not so bad, I can almost move m'arm, and I can mostly see through m'eye, and I dinna lose any of m'handsome visage. I will be recovered in nae time." He leaned forward, "But ye will help me get tae Gwynedd?"

"Aye."

"Ye would give me a Tempus Omega?"

"Dost ye ken how tae work them?"

"Nae, I hae been dragged around by them — I daena ken."

Nor said, "I plan tae accompany ye tae meet Gwynedd's father and make yer case."

Artair leaned back on the couch and took a sip of his drink. He wiped his mouth gingerly with his good arm. "We leave in the morn?"

Nor said, "Hae ye seen yer face, Artair? I daena ken if ye want tae make yer case in yer condition. Ye ought tae wait a few days."

He looked down at his clothes, "I will need some better clothes as well."

Nor said, "I will do some investigation tae prepare for the trip, what date were ye last there?"

“I arrived the day before Twelfth Night in the year 1578.”

Nor said, “So not on the feast day, but January fifth, the day before?”

“Aye, we were eating a simple meal, and I was professin’ my intentions, and then the soldiers arrived tae whisk me away tae m’ father’s time.”

Nor’s brow drew down. “But not his *kingdom*, he had been deposed. That is what ye told me.”

Artair looked blankly. “Nae, twas tae his kingdom, he wasna deposed. I trained and then fought in the arena.”

Nor said, “I built the arena so ye would hae an arena tae fight in.”

Artair winced. “That is a stupid idea, och nae, why would ye go and do that?”

“Ye specifically asked me tae, ye said ye would rather fight an arena battle than a war.”

“While it sounds like m’heroics, tis unlike me not tae see the horror it would bring tae m’life. I changed m’mind, daena build it.”

Nor shrugged, “I canna change history, Artair. The arena battles happen. Ye might hae started them, who is tae ken whether tis a good idea or nae, but they *are*, we canna stop it.”

He groaned and put his head back on the cushions. “I ought tae hae let the armies wage war, leave m’self out of it.”

“Ye said it was barbaric, ye said ye would fight and save the lives of all those men.”

Artair lamented, “Why must I always want tae be the hero?” He exhaled. “Tis m’way I suppose, but ye say we canna fix it? We canna go back and dismantle the arena and make more sense of the kingdom?”

I said, “If you did that, would there be long years of war? That sounds pretty barbaric.”

“All of it is barbaric. I tell ye, Yer Majesty, the barbarism of fightin’ in the arena... tis truly horrifying.”

Nor said, “Yet ye won three times... I thought ye were wrong when ye first mentioned the arena battles tae me, but think of all the lives ye hae saved, Artair. Some might say that tae duel tae stave off war is the truly moral and ethical stance.”

He sighed again. “Fine, I will be the better person.” His head back he said, “But if we changed time did we change *all* time?” He leaned forward suddenly. “Is Gwynedd’s time unchanged?”

Nor said, “We will see verra soon. We will go three days past yer last time with her—”

“Nae, nae we canna, what if time has changed — what dost ye think might hae happened? We hae tae go back tae the same day.”

Nor shook his head. “Nae, that would be loopin’. Ye would be at the same time as yerself.”

“But there was another man there, she might... nae, what if she married? I canna bear it, we need tae go tae the moment I left.”

Nor said, “Ye must listen tae me on it, we hae tae give it some time.”

“What if we go the day of the feast? Tis the verra next day.”

I said, “I think it’s better to have a buffer, a safeguard, so that if you make a mistake you can fix it.”

He blinked, then shook his head. “We winna make a mistake. I was taken the day before the feast for Twelfth Night. I daena want tae make Mistress Gwynedd wait, I mustn’t, she will be waitin’ for me. I canna cause her tae worry.”

Nor said, “What dost ye think, Livvy?”

“I think it’s necessary to have a buffer, everyone says so. I’m putting my foot down about it.”

Artair nodded. “All right, fine, och ye are making yer friend Artair listen tae reason, I hate listenin’ tae reason... but I daena want tae mess anything up, we will give it three days.”

Nor nodded. “Good, three days past Twelfth Night.”



With medical treatment and a few days of rest Artair looked much better. His face was no longer swollen, the eye was turning yellow instead of black, his shoulder wound wasn't oozing anymore. He could move his arm, only wincing when it was an extreme or very sudden movement.

Artair had been outfitted for the trip, and Nor and I were dressed in the garb of the time. Horses had been selected, and were saddled and waiting for us.

Nor asked, “Ye ready tae go get yer long lost lass, what was her name...?”

“Gwynedd!”

Nor chuckled, “I ken, Artair, ye hae been talking on her endlessly, we ken her name, tis etched in m'mind. Ye ready tae go get her?”

Artair moved his arm around in the socket. “Aye, as long as I daena hae tae fight. I am good tae go.”

“Who would ye hae tae fight? We are just going tae make yer case!”

“Gwynedd is verra beautiful, ye never ken if ye will hae tae fight someone over a beautiful woman.”

I teased, “We've *heard* she is beautiful. You keep talking about how beautiful she is and I might refuse to go help, stay here and do household management stuff.”

He joked, “Hae I told ye how Gwynedd manages her household? She provides me with venison just because I ask.”

I groaned.

Nor chuckled.

I said, wrapping a plaid around my shoulders, “You said it would be cold?”

“Aye, ye will want the cloak and gloves as well.”

He pulled on his gloves with a grin. “Tis time tae go get m’long lost lass!”

Chapter 56 - Livvy



We awoke in a field, rather quickly and feeling fairly fresh, considering we had jumped about five centuries. And it was freezing. Cold clouds were forming around our noses as we breathed. It was light, morning, but we knew the day would be short. We needed to get up and head out. We drank some protein and vitamin drink from a flask that Nor and I shared. He grimaced, comically. “Tastes terrible.”

I said, “They didn’t have whisky flavor.”

“Tis a shame.”

We got up with a lot less groaning and shuffling around than before, now it just felt like stiffness as the effects of the jump wore off. I did some jumping jacks to get the blood moving, then we mounted our horses and fell into a line down a path. Artair led us, Nor was behind me, we headed toward the household of Baron Cleish.

The air was sharp, very cold, and a misting of snow on the ground sparkled in the sun, glittering white. The horses snorted icy vapor as we walked, their hooves crunching on the frozen ground.

Ahead was a large household with a wall around it.

Artair picked up speed.

As we approached the gate, a guard met us outside. “The family inna havin’ visitors, sire.”

Artair’s horse stamped side to side. “What dost ye mean, nae visitors? I hae come tae see Mistress Cleish—”

“I am sorry, sire, the Mistress is nae more, she has passed.”

My heart sank as the color drained from Artair’s face. He was frozen, all but his horse, clomping, breath puffing. Artair remained absolutely motionless.

Nor looked from me to Artair, then asked, “What dost ye mean, the Mistress, dost ye mean the Mistress Gwynedd Cleish?”

“Aye, the Baron’s only daughter. She was murdered on the feast day, three days before. Och, she was a bonny lass, tis a grim fate for the family.”

I watched Artair, worried about him, as he began to tremble.

Nor asked, “How... who would hae done this?”

“Twas a group of men, they came the day after the feast day, they killed her.”

“Ye dinna ken them?”

The guard said, “They told the Baron they were here from a far kingdom; we had never heard of it before. Then they were gone.”

Nor said, “Was it Riaghalbane?”

“Aye, sire, much like it...”

Artair mumbled, “I need tae see her.”

The guard said, “Who are ye?”

“I am Artair, I was here the day before the feast...”

The guard shook his head.

Artair said, “Dost ye remember when the men came and took me away...?”

The guard said, “Sire, I daena understand—”

Nor interrupted, “We ken the castle is in mournin’, we winna take yer time, thank ye...” He said to Artair, “We ought tae go, Artair...” He turned his horse, I turned Dusty to follow.

Artair didn’t follow so Nor commanded, “Come!”

Artair muttered, “Nae, I winna. She is here, he is mistaken.”

The guard set his stance firmly. “Sire, ye will not pass the gate. I hae been ordered tae give the Baron peace.”

Artair reared back his horse, turning it to try to go around the guard. “Let me see her! Ye are a liar, let me see her!”

Nor grabbed the shoulder of Artair’s cloak, wrenching him back. “Artair, he canna let ye in, ye canna pass.” Their horses stamped as they were jostled together by the force of Nor’s reach from Balach Mòr to the other horse.

Artair’s voice broke, “What happened tae her? How can he keep me from her?”

Nor shook him roughly. “He canna let ye in, Artair, they are in mourning—”

“She is mine! She was goin’ tae be m’wife!” Artair grabbed the hilt of his sword and unsheathed it. “Ye let me pass! Ye—”

Nor wrenched him back, more forcibly, twisting in his saddle to keep away from the blade. “Och nae!” Then he dismounted with one hand, while holding the fabric of Artair’s cloak. He yanked Artair harder, backwards, knocking him off balance and pulling him from his horse.

The sword swung dangerously, as Artair hit the ground on his sore shoulder, with a bellow. He drew up his knees and curled on his side holding his shoulder, wincing in pain.

His sword had fallen weakly to the ground.

Nor kicked it away and said to the guard, “Go in the gate, close it. I will handle him.”

“Aye, sire.” He backed up and went through the gate.

Artair remained on the ground, his bare head in the snow.
“Nae! Nae! It canna be true!”

Nor crouched beside him, shaking his head.

Artair said, “She is gone! Tis nae fair!”

Nor said, “Aye, Artair. I daena understand how it could hae happened.”

“She was a beauty. She was light and fairness, she was everythin’ I wanted and she promised tae by mine.” He wiped his face with the sleeve of his good arm.

Then he went back to holding his elbow close to his side.
“Och, ye hurt me when ye knocked me from m’horse.”

Nor said, his hand on Artair’s shoulder, “Imagine the pain if the guard had fought ye, tis good ye only fought gravity. Ye might hae had a sword piercin’ through yer heart.”

“I would hae never lost, tis not possible.”

Nor chuckled. “I ken Artair, I ken.”

Artair said, “What am I tae do? Can I go get her? I could go get her before the men come... I could remove her from the castle afore my father’s men get tae her.”

Nor grew serious. “Ye think tis yer father who would do it?”

“Aye... I am certain. I told him I wanted tae come get her and he told me ‘nae’. He told me he wouldna allow it.”

Nor said, “Och nae, Artair, he is cruel.”

“Aye.” Artair slowly stood up. “Tis cold as a witch’s ear during a midnight jig — can we go get her before she dies?”

Nor looked thoughtful for a moment.

Artair groaned, “Nae, daena say nae, Nor! I ken ye are goin’ tae say, ‘Ye canna loop, Artair, ye canna change history, Artair.’” He shook his head. “I tell ye, Nor, daena say it. I hae tae go get her and if ye winna give me a portal I will—”

Nor said, “Artair, afore ye go threatening me, stop yerself — how could ye? Ye would threaten me, yer friend, when I am standin’ here with m’wife in the freezin’ cold trying tae help ye? This is not good, Artair. Ye need tae take a deep breath and reconsider. We must think this through. Dost ye think raisin’ yer sword and charging intae battle is goin’ tae bring her back?”

The corner of his mouth went up in his beard. “Nae, and ye winna let me anyway. If I raise m’sword ye are likely tae knock m’horse out from under me. I only just met ye... but I remember ye were often overturnin’ my ideas, the memories are all returning.”

“Is it? Ye remember our adventure in Langside?”

“Somewhat... I canna decide though if I remember because ye told me the tale, or I truly remember. Either way, this is a poor way for a friend tae behave.”

“I am behavin’ exactly as a friend would behave. I am helpin’ ye get tae yer long lost lass, and I am keepin’ ye from dying in a fit of temper. Now, we must be sensible, we will go tae the day before she was killed.”

“Aye, the day of the feast. The day after I left.”

“So we winna loop.”

Artair pulled his horse’s reins over and mounted.

Nor mounted his horse, and we rode away.



Our jump took us to the feast day, even colder than the last day.

Blustering blizzard weather impeded our path as we rode toward the castle. As we arrived there was a loud commotion comin’ from the household walls.

Artair sped up his horse.

I raced Dusty, following, Nor behind me.

We could see men ahead of us around the gate, men yelling.

Ahead of me, Artair drew his sword as we approached.

Nor's voice, "Livvy, draw tae the side!"

I pulled Dusty to the side of the path as Artair and Nor, with swords drawn, stormed toward the walls.

I sat on Dusty in the gloom, peering ahead at the dim outline of the walls, a commotion I could hear more than I could see, but only barely because of the wind and roaring winds. I was alone in the dark. I fumbled for my flashlight necklace in my bag and pulled it over my head and tucked it in the front of my cloak, turning it on. It was comforting, but stupid — I could no longer make out the dim outline of the walls in the distance.

I took a deep breath and wrapped the cloak tighter around my shoulders, leaving a tiny crack in the front so that my light could glow.

Then a rumble of hooves headed my way, *oh no* — headed right to me. I urged Dusty, "Go!" racing into the woods. I pulled him short behind the tree and prayed we were hidden enough that they would pass me by.

At the last minute I remembered that my front was glowing. I pulled the cloak tight and pressed my hand over the light.

The rumble of hooves flew by.

I didn't see Nor in the large group of about fifteen men on horseback, but then again, I couldn't see much of anything.

A few moments later there were two men on horseback coming my way. One seemed like Nor's shape, but I knew for sure when his voice whisper-yelled, "Livvy?"

I whispered back, "Here!" And rode Dusty out from behind the tree. "What happened?"

Nor said, “We neared the gates and overheard the man. Artair, what did ye say his name was?”

Artair said, “Twas m’father’s general, he was at the gate askin’ for me. Nor and I hid tae the side. Twas exactly like the day I was there, but yet this is a different date...”

Nor said, “Livvy, twas verra odd. I was beside Artair, and yet, within the walls I could hear Artair’s voice saying, ‘I am Artair!’ And then there was yelling, a loud shriek, a commotion, and we saw the men leave the castle with what looked like Artair draped over the back of a horse.”

Artair said, “Tis an affront tae m’dignity.” Then he added, “We ought tae go back now, I will tell Gwynedd that I—”

Nor pressed his finger to his lips.

We all fell absolutely quiet to listen, someone was coming up the path.

Ahead of us, a voice that sounded exactly like Nor’s was saying, “...Now do ye remember our adventure in Langside?”

A voice that sounded like Artair said, “... aye, I remember, I remember it all, we are doin’ it over and over again.”

“Aye, we are loopin’...”

The wind blustered, obscuring the rest of their words.

Artair stared in that direction.

Nor gestured for us to go the other way.

We quietly moved our horses to the path and went a little ways before we pulled up under the shelter of trees that broke the wind, giving us a small respite.

First thing Nor said was, “Och, we are loopin’.”

Artair said, “I was there more than once and I daena ken who is right and... och nae, I am tryin’ tae fix what has happened, and... tis a godless night.”

“Aye, there is a devil at work here. I am worried it is us.” Nor pressed his finger to his lips again and we moved our horses to the side.

A group of three went by.

I couldn't look, it was too freaky. Instead I looked down at the mane of Dusty in the soft glow of my light inside my cloak. I glanced from the corner of my eyes. Nor was looking down, patting the side of Balach Mòr's neck.

Of the passing group we heard one say, in a voice that sounded just like Artair's, "...can I go get her before the men get tae her...?"

They passed along while they murmured over their next plan.

Once they had passed I raised my head and watched the way they had gone, the same path we would be taking.

I glanced at Artair, who was watching their path as they rode away.

He said simply, "Och nae, we are loopin'."

I said, "I truly hate to say this, but it's really cold, I don't know how much more... this is awful."

Nor looked at Artair, who was silently watching, then at me shivering. "We need tae take a moment tae discuss, tae think this through."

Artair shook his head, "Nae, we canna leave it like this. Ye ken, if we leave her dead, she will always be so. We hae tae change this course."

"But how...?"

"We go earlier, we go two weeks before this, I will come unannounced and surprise her, she will be unharmed, nae one else will be there..."

Nor said, "Ye want tae try once more? I wonder if it can be borne?"

Artair said, “I canna bear this, tis why I hae nae choice, I must try again.”

We agreed upon a date, by the time we had the portal set I was fully shivering. I muttered, “I really hope the weather is better.”

Artair said, “Even in Scotland, awful weather must break eventually.”

Nor twisted the portal and flung us through the loop once more.



The weather was much better. It was day, the clouds were thick and heavy as if it might rain, but the clouds kept in warmth too. There wasn't much pain from the jump, and gratefully I felt my toes and fingers begin to dry and cease aching.

None of us spoke, the situation was grim. I was worried that it would keep getting worse.

Once we were finally up and had eaten a bit, I had my hands on the reins and my foot in the stirrup, when I heard horses coming closer. Nor said simply, “Someone's a'coming.”

I flung my foot over Dusty's back and sank into the saddle. We turned our horses away from the clearing and got far enough into the woods not to be seen. But then I realized that my bag was back there on the rock, left behind.

I pointed, silently.

Nor shook his head.

We waited. I averted my eyes downward again and had my back to the clearing. Listening, I heard my own voice, sending chills down my spine. “That's where I left my bag.”

Then another Nor's voice, "We are loopin' tis all a mistake, how does it end...?"

Then Artair's voice, "We canna stop, if we try once more we will save her this time..."

My voice, "I am so tired of jumping..."

Nor's voice, "Aye, m'soul feels threadbare from it."

We began to feel the wind rise from the use of their portal, they were preparing to jump, we moved our horses further into the woods.



After the onslaught of wind died back we were able to speak.

Artair said, "What do we do?"

Nor said, "I think we need tae use the Bridge."

I asked, "What exactly does it do?"

"I believe it ends the unraveling caused by a loop. It takes a timeline and brings it back tae order, tis how it was described tae me. And remember I hae used it before, when I was with Johnne."

"We have one?"

"Aye, it's in my vault in Riaghalbane."

"Then we ought tae go get it."

Artair said, "Ye can, I am goin' tae try once more."

Nor said, "Och nae, Artair, tis time tae be sensible, we need tae fix the timeline."

Artair put out his hand. "Nae, I want a portal."

Nor reached in his sporran. "What is yer plan?"

"I will go a week farther on, ye ken, we canna loop forever."

Nor said, "But ye can, Artair, I can see verra clearly, if yer spirit is broken and ye arna listening tae sense, ye *can* loop for

eternity, never finding success nor peace.”

Artair said, “Give me a portal, please, Yer Majesty.”

Nor put one in his hand. “Livvy and I are going to go get the Bridge, we will meet ye — will ye be goin’ two days past this? Daena go any further, we will meet ye.”

Artair nodded.

Nor said, “I need ye tae say it, Artair, will ye wait for us on that day?”

“Aye, Yer Majesty, but what does it matter, we destroyed everything that was good in the world.”

Nor groaned. “It matters, Artair, we will fix this, just wait for us.”

“Aye, I will wait.” Nor put one of our portals in Artair’s hand.

Chapter 57 - Livvy



We landed near the castle construction site in Riaghalbane and there was a car. Colonel Quentin and James were leaning against it, waiting for us to wake up.

Nor said, “Ye were supposed to be gone by the time I returned.”

Colonel Quentin said, “How so? We weren’t leaving until tomorrow, you’re back just in time.”

Nor said, “We had a conversation about it — ye daena remember agreein’ tae be gone before I returned?”

“No.”

“Och nae, we are loopin’, time is shifting.”

He put out a hand and James hefted him up, saying, “Looping? Shit I hope not, looping makes the world go all effed up. Is the world all effed up?”

Nor said, “I daena ken exactly what that means, but the fact ye are standin’ here talking tae me when we hae already said goodbye tells me, we are not in the normal time.”

Colonel Quentin said, “You need tae use the Bridge.”

“That is why we are here, tae procure it.”

James said, “Just great. Perfect. The world is effed up. So basically, Quennie and I ought tae get the heck away, so we aren’t caught in a time shift. We have people waiting for us at home.”

“Aye, I believe tis a good idea.”



Nor and I had a big meal in the cafeteria in the temporary command center. Then I got out Johnne’s book, looking it over for instructions, while Nor went to the vault to procure the Bridge.

Colonel Quentin and James had escorted us to the castle, packed their bags, said a quick goodbye, and left for home. We probably didn’t need to go that fast, but having seen the unraveling of time it was freaky to think what might have changed for them back in their normal lives.

But also... Nor and I were worried about what trouble Artair could be getting into back in the loop, and whatever trouble that was might be rippling outward — a thought that made me feel frantic.

Nor returned with a bag slung over his shoulder. He placed it on the table, glanced around to see who might be listening, then under his breath, “I hae it, did ye find instructions?”

“Nothing, did Colonel Quentin tell you anything?”

“I gather that we are supposed tae pinpoint the moment when time became unwound, then I press m’thumb tae it. I ken that part, I am less clear on the moment when time came unwound.”

I said, “I suppose that means we can’t use it here?”

“Nae, we must return tae Artair.”

“So it’s kind of like a zipper, we go a little bit further in the past than the loop, and then use it, it will zip up the whole timeline.”

“Ye ken how it works from the book?”

“Oh no, just imagining it, I have literally no idea.”

We desperately needed a rest before we jumped again, so we were once again flown to the safe house, to nap, stripping all our clothes down in the middle of the floor and climbing tiredly onto the bed and wrapping around each other and falling to sleep.

We woke up and made love, then showered and ate a meal, and then in the dark of night we dressed in our sixteenth century garb, and went out onto the back lawn to jump to meet Artair.

I said, “My time is totally turned around.”

“Aye, shifts make it seem unreal.”

“I meant just that it’s night but I feel like it’s morning.”

“Aye, it feels like that as well.”

“I also feel so sad for Artair, he is heartbroken.”

“I thought we were given an incredible power with the portals, but now I see the darkness it can bring. Tae ken that ye can control the world, is tae play at being God, and tae bring heartbreak upon yerself.”

“Yeah. But I also meant that we got a meal and a nap and he didn’t.”

Nor chuckled. “I think I am too flattened by this fate tae understand yer meaning, m’lady.”

“And, m’laird, I am too flattened by the events to communicate well. We ought to kiss and be quiet.”

He leaned forward and we kissed. Then I said, “I love you, m’laird, and I know we are in the heat of it, things are appalling, but I’m grateful for every minute I am with you.”

“I as well, Livvy. Ye ready tae go?”

Chapter 58 - Livvy



I woke up in a clearing, my head on Nor's lap, he said, "Artair inna here..."

I muttered, "Just what we needed, a time-deconstructing madman not living up to his word." I sat up. "We should have taken the gold thread off his head, he's got no consequences."

Nor said, "Aye."

"It's freaking me out to be in this clearing, what if a loop happens?"

"I ken, we ought tae rise if we can."

We got on our horses and rode from the clearing and down the path. "Where do we begin to look for him?"

Nor said, "I believe we already found him." Ahead of us Artair was sitting despondently on a rock.

He didn't look up.

We drew near and Nor dismounted his horse, dropping down beside him. Artair looked shell-shocked. In his hand was his sword, the end of it bloody.

Nor said, "Och nae, Artair, what did ye do?"

Artair looked up at him, then at me. "What...? Where hae ye been...? Yer Majesty, I am glad tae see ye, did ye...?" His voice trailed off as he looked down at his sword.

Nor crouched down and repeated, “What did ye do?”

Artair stared blankly down at the sword. “I killed him for it.”

Nor looked up at me.

I dismounted Dusty. “Artair, who did you kill?”

He shook his head. “I daena ken, Yer Majesty, I daena...” He dropped his sword in the dirt, his hand limply beside him. “How can I get tae her? She has been taken from me and I canna slay him afore it happens and...” He raised his hands to his face and his shoulders shook from weeping.

Nor put a hand on his shoulder, “Och nae, Artair.”

It took long minutes before he recovered enough, then he said, “I must try again.”

Nor gestured toward Artair’s sword with his eyes. I plucked it up from the dirt and put it behind my back.

Artair said, “What...?”

“Nothing, no worries.”

I walked the sword over to his horse, away from his view, while Nor asked, “How many times hae ye jumped, Artair?”

His brow drew down. “Verra many, I canna tell.”

Nor nodded and stood up, giving him a heavy pat on the shoulder. “Rise tae yer feet, Artair, I hae brought the Bridge. We are goin’ tae fix the time and begin anew.”

Artair stood and wiped his eyes. “Will she be livin’ when we do?”

“I daena ken, but what ye are doin’ here, this inna working. Ye must try something else.”

“It might work this time.”

“Nae, ye hae broken the timeline of the world, Artair. I went tae Riaghallbane and time was altered, ye hae tae stop, ye canna keep going.”

“But if I—”

“Nae, I winna allow it.”

“Ye canna stop me.”

“I can try, and ye might kill me for it, Artair, but I will try, as ye are m’friend. I think of ye like family and—”

Artair chuckled. “Och, ye think of me like family? We *are* family.”

“I ken... I ken we are, what dost ye think happens when ye kill me? Ye might remember that I am the logical order for yer life tae exist.”

He shrugged, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, then pointed at me. “She is with child, so it winna matter much, at least the bloodline is secure.”

I said, “What are you talking about, Artair?”

“Ye are with child, so I can kill Nor for standin’ in m’way.”

Nor groaned.

My hand went reflexively to my stomach, “What are you...? What do you mean...?”

He said, “I mean everyone can see it. Now give me m’sword so I can dispatch His Majesty and rescue my fair Gwynedd.”

I said, “Can you see it, Nor?”

“I suspect it, aye.” He returned his attention to Artair. “But, Artair, this is how tis goin’ tae go: ye arna goin’ tae get yer sword, ye are not goin’ tae kill me, and ye are not goin’ tae loop again. Ye will instead help me decide where tae close the loop with this Bridge, so that time will be orderly. Ye want tae be a hero? That is how ye are a hero.”

He huffed.

Nor continued, “Ye are out of yer mind, Artair, ye daena ken where or when ye are, ye dinna meet us when ye promised tae. Ye hae killed someone and canna place it. Ye are losing yer soul. Ye must stop and rest and help me fix this.”

He slumped down on the rock again. “I daena ken what day tis.”

“I ken, ye are dreadfully lost. Ye canna continue this way. The most important part of ridin’ intae battle is tae ken where ye are.”

“True. Can I hae m’sword back?”

“Only if ye arna goin’ tae fight me, I daena want tae fight ye.”

“Ye need tae meet yer son.”

I said, “Artair, what are you talking about? You truly think I’m pregnant?”

“Aye, I saw it when I first met ye, I wondered why ye dinna mention it — ye dinna ken?”

I shook my head.

Artair shrugged, “Perhaps I am wrong, or perhaps ye canna see it. Ye are clearly with child but I might be wrong. I probably am. We winna speak of it again.”

Nor said, “Well, we ought tae get goin’ tae use the Bridge before anything else happens. But when? This...” he waved his hand around, “is clearly not a good time. Ye hae bloodied yer sword, and seem out of yer mind. We ought tae go tae the day before this, perhaps? Ye hae been goin’ back and back and—”

Artair said, “And back, day by day, over again...”

I said, “Then we go back a bit more, use the Bridge, fix the timeline. Easy.” I gulped. “Though nothing is ever easy.”

Nor and Artair conferred for a few minutes, until Nor came up with a date that he believed would work. Artair offered to take the Bridge and do it all himself, but Nor pointed out that he wasn’t inclined to give Artair the portal, the Bridge, or even his sword back quite yet.

Artair said, “Are you calling m’trustworthiness intae account?”

Nor said simply, “Aye.”

Artair said, “I canna believe ye would think it.”

Nor said, “When I first met ye, ye had stolen a howitzer from yer father, so I daena think ye ought tae proclaim yer trustworthiness.”

He sighed. “I daena remember it, but it does sound like somethin’ I would do.”



We jumped to that date.

Chapter 59 - Livvy



It was raining. I pulled the hood over my face and wrapped it around me. I was sopping wet. I turned on the flashlight necklace at my chest and gazed blearily at the darkness all around us in the clearing. It was late evening.

Artair's voice, "I hate it."

Nor's voice, coming from above me. "The jumping?"

"Aye, the jumping, the agony of not gettin' back tae her, and the... I canna control any of it. Tis night and I needed day. Tis raining and I wanted sun. And I hae lost Gwynedd, irredeemably, and there is nothing I can do tae gain her. Tis as if all the sun is gone from my life and God has turned his back upon me."

Nor breathed out, then stood and said, "We need tae get under the cover of the trees. Can ye move, Livvy?"

"Yes, I think so, but I feel kind of... ugh... we have jumped too much. Even with the gold threads I feel like hell." I pulled myself up, gathered up my drenched skirts, and dragged myself to the cover of a tree.

Artair and Nor met me there.

I shivered, pulling out a flashlight and turning on the beam and shining it in a circle between us. "What do we have to do?"

"I will activate the Bridge. Then we will go tae meet with Cleish about his daughter."

Artair said, "She will be living?"

Nor nodded. "She will be, Artair, it has tae be true."

Nor pulled the small chest from the bag buckled to Balach Mòr's saddle. He wiped rain off the top. Then he pressed his hand to the top and there was a click, the lid sprung open. I shone the beam down on it. He knelt down, placed the chest on the ground and readied his thumb just above a black rock in the center. "Are ye ready?"

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Do we need to hold on?"

"Nae, we winna feel anything."

"I'm going to hold on anyway."

He pressed his thumb to the black stone. It appeared as if the stone liquified, wrapped around the end of this thumb, then drew away and returned to solidity. The whole thing took about a minute.

Artair asked, "Did it work?"

He said, "Aye, ye ken, we hae changed time, twas monumental. The world was righted again, did ye feel the shift?"

"Nae."

Nor closed the lid. "I am only provoking ye, I dinna feel anything either, but I dinna expect tae."

The rain stopped, finally the weather was clear. It seemed like a good omen.

We mounted our horses and rode along the path toward Cleish's household.

As we neared, I said, "How many times have we ridden down this same path? At least three, right?"

Artair grunted, "Near a hundred."

We pulled up at the gate, the guard asked, “What is yer business?”

We agreed that if I spoke we might seem less antagonistic, so I said, “We are here to see Mistress Gwynedd—”

He asked, “Yer names?”

Artair said, “Will ye please announce tae her that Artair has come?”

Nor said, “...and we are the Duke and Duchess of Awe.”

The guard bowed, “I will check.”

I glanced at Artair. “This is great news, she’s here, she’s well, he’s *checking*. This is great news, perfect news.”

We waited outside the walls, our horses stamping in the mud puddles. It wasn’t that cold, but my skirts were damp. I pulled my cloak tighter around my shoulders, feeling weak. I kind of thought about lying on Dusty’s mane... and so I did, like I used to when I was younger. I patted Dusty on the side of his neck.

Then a woman in a cloak approached the gate, with the guard walking beside her.

I raised my head.

Artair spoke under his breath, “Tis her, tis Gwynedd.”

She came to the gate, her cloak hood falling back, exposing her red hair, twisted at the nape of her neck. Her face was pale, a blush on her cheek from the cold. She nodded her head in greeting. Her eyes swept over us and my heart sank, she didn’t recognize any of us. She spoke to Nor, “Can I help ye, laird, there hae been terrible storms happening, day in and out...”

Her eyes glanced at Artair, her brow drew down, as if trying to place him, but then she said to Nor, “Ye are here for the wedding?”

He shook his head, and looked flustered. “Nae, I mean... nae, I—”

Artair said, “Mistress Gwyn— Mistress Cleish, are ye well?”

Her expression looked shocked, her brow drew further down. “Do I know ye, laird?”

“Aye, I am Artair — ye daena recognize me?”

“Nae, ye look familiar, but I daena ken... how would I?”

His jaw clenched. “I met ye at yer uncle’s castle!”

She said, “I daena think so, I would hae remembered, certainly... are ye here for the wedding?”

Artair’s mouth opened and closed without sound.

Nor said, “If I might be so bold, whose wedding?”

“Mine, tae a baron, Laird Dudley, the festivities begin on the morrow.”

Artair’s eyes held anger, he was tightly gripping the reins, his horse stamping, splashing. She backed up.

Nor said, “Artair, watch yer horse.”

Artair reined the horse in. “M’apologies Mistress Cleish, I just... ye were at yer uncle’s house, and I was certain we had met... ye dinna mention ye were tae marry?”

“Tis only now decided, but I daena remember meeting ye and...”

Nor and I were looking back and forth between them.

Artair persisted, “*When* were ye at yer Uncle’s house?”

Her brow drew down really far.

“I was there from a fortnight before Lughnasadh, and remained until after Martinmas, but I am certain I would hae noted yer presence.”

Artair said, “But I—”

I said, “Artair...”

He clamped his mouth closed and said, “My apologies, Mistress Cleish, I must hae confused our meeting with another. I was arrived at yer uncle’s castle just after ye left, I remember now, yer cousins were verra complimentary about yer charms. They spoke so well of ye that I felt as if I met ye...”

Her face blushed pink. “I will send yer regards tae my aunt and uncle next I speak tae them.” Then she added, ”But ye do seem familiar, did we meet elsewhere?”

Artair exhaled, looking down on her.

Then he turned his horse, twisting in his seat, speaking over his shoulder, as his horse stepped away. “Nae, I would hae remembered, ye are a beauty, ye would hae been etched on my heart.”

She said, “Och, I... ye canna speak tae me in that... I feel as if I hae said this tae ye before, but ye canna...”

Artair’s horse was carrying him away down the path.

She looked at Nor and I.

We were staring from her to Artair’s back as his horse picked up speed.

Nor called after him, “Artair, where are ye headed...?”

“I must... I forgot... I hae somewhere tae be!”

Nor said, “My apologies, Mistress Cleish, our best congratulations on yer coming nuptials, twas a pleasure meeting ye.” He put his horse into movement following Artair away.

I said, “Sorry to bother you!” And turned Dusty to follow them. By this time Artair had his horse at a full gallop, heading headlong back to the clearing.

Nor yelled, “Artair! Where are ye going?”

“I must go back!”

Chapter 60 - Livvy



When we arrived in the clearing, Artair had dismounted his horse and had laid a bag on a rock. He was emptying his pockets and arranging his gear. He seemed not to notice when we galloped up.

Nor asked, “Where are ye goin’ Artair?”

Artair said, “...ye ken, I am thinking, I wasna there... Did ye hear her say it? She dinna meet me — yet I *was* there, I remember it clearly...” He paused and stared at the horizon of trees, then added, “Tis not so clear, there is a fog around it. I *was* there, wasna I there?”

“Aye, ye were there, ye told us all about it. Ye talked of little else.”

“Aye, I remember meeting her, twas at her uncle’s castle. Twas verra cold outside. We asked for shelter. I saw her in the halls. I must go back and do it all once more.”

I said, “A full do-over? Ah, Artair, that’s worrisome... so much can go wrong.” I dismounted from Dusty’s saddle.

“Och nae, Livvy, what *more* could go wrong? There is nothin’ that could be worse than Gwynedd having nae memory of meetin’ her Artair! She is lost tae me forever, about tae marry... I hae tae go back and try again.” He exhaled like a huff. “Dost ye think twill be looping? I am nae there, will I set things awry?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “Not sure, but it seems like it will be safe enough as long as ye daena cross yer own path.”

He asked, “Is the danger in crossing paths in the time or in the land? I was there in that time... or was I? M’father called me home, twas before or after...? Now I canna remember.”

“I think that is the best sign, I think it’s safe to say that it won’t be looping. It seems like the Bridge fixed it, but...”

He said, “I winna ken until I try.”

Nor exhaled, long and low. “While I appreciate that ye are ready tae ride intae battle, tae test the limits of loopin’, I think our paths need tae diverge — Livvy and I canna keep assisting ye on this errand. We ought not be involved. We canna keep getting caught up in loops.”

I said, “I, for one, am exhausted by all the jumping. I kinda feel like throwing up.”

Artair nodded. “Aye, I understand, I will do the rest of it alone. Besides, Her Majesty ought not in her weakened condition—”

I said, “My ‘weakened condition’! I’m just *nauseous*... that’s all. What in the world...? We have jumped over and over, too much jumping. Everyone knows this. I’m not weak.”

Nor was watching me, then shook his head of it, and asked Artair, “Do ye hae a way tae prove ye are a prince?”

Artair waved his hand, showing us a gold signet ring on his ring finger. “I hae this, it’s got the seal of Riaghalbane on it, but... tis likely not enough. Instead I will win her with m’charm.”

Nor groaned, “*That* is not enough. Livvy, dost ye hae a pen and a paper?”

I pulled out a spiral notebook from my messenger bag and a pen. Nor said, “Yer script is finer, will ye write it?”

I nodded and sat down on the rock with the notebook on my knees. “Go.”

From his dictation I wrote across the top of the page:

Royal Declaration of Lineage

Then, I asked, “Are you acting as the King of Riaghalbane, or Duke of Awe? The Duke of Awe would be more familiar in this time?”

“Nae, not for this time, tis a hundred years earlier, I think m’great-grandfather haena been given the title yet.”

“Good point.”

He said, “We will write it as the King of Riaghalbane.”

Then he dictated as I wrote, like a letter:

To Whom It May Concern,

Be it known that I, Normond the First, King of Riaghalbane, founder of the noble bloodline of the Campbells of Riaghalbane, do hereby affirm and declare the authenticity of Artair Campbell’s royal lineage.

Artair interrupted to say, “Well done, Yer Majesty.”

Nor smiled, “Ye like, ‘founder of a noble line’?”

I said, “It’s awesome.”

He continued:

I, Normond the First, bear witness to the illustrious heritage that flows through the veins of Artair Campbell. This document serves as a testament to the noble ancestry that has been passed down through

generations, tracing its roots to the esteemed house of the Campbells of Piaghalbane.

Then Nor asked Artair, “What is yer father’s name?”

He said, “Niall. But if ye write it, daena mention that he is a malevolent arse who has likely disowned me for escapin’ my cell and that I am certain tae no longer be the crown prince.”

Nor said, “Tis unlikely ye hae had yer promise of a throne taken from ye, but I winna mention it. We are writing this letter as if ye are confirmed and yer throne is secure.”

He continued dictating and I wrote, continuing on another page:

By the authority vested in me and in recognition of the sacred duty to uphold the truth, I attest that Artair is the legitimate descendant of Niall the First, and heir to the throne. The noble bloodline has been preserved with honor and integrity.

May this declaration stand as an irrefutable testament to the royal heritage of Artair. Any doubts or challenges to this lineage are hereby dismissed, and the bearer of this document is to be accorded the respect and recognition befitting his royal status.

Signed in the year of our Lord 1577.

Then Nor signed his name.

Normond I

I tore the pages from the spiral notebook and pulled the loose edges free, then folded them together, and passed it to Artair.

He folded the pages a second time and stuffed it into his sporran. "My humblest gratitude, Yer Grace."

"Ye are welcome. And Livvy, dost ye see, Magnus was correct about the pen, tis verra useful."

I nodded. "So true."

He said, "I am ready, I will meet Gwynedd, and I will win her, and rewrite this grim story we are involved in."

I said, "I hope it works."

Artair said, "Twill work, we are time travelers, we hae learned a lesson, daena loop, but are we goin' tae let that change our course? Nae. Are we goin' tae let that stop us? Nae. We are goin' tae win Gwynedd."

I teased, "The royal we?"

"Aye. Though I am not certain I hae a life as a royal anymore... but I hae a fine letter assuring Gwynedd's father that I am a prince. I am not certain I can return tae m'kingdom after fleein' from my cell." He closed his bag and slung it over his shoulder, "But I winna worry about it, instead I will win Gwynedd and then... perhaps I will live here in perpetuity..." He added, "That reminds me," and turned around, lifting his hair in front of Nor. "Take the gold string from m'nape."

"Ye daena want it?"

He said, "Nae, they are for ye and yer clan."

Nor peeled it off the back of his head and passed it to me to return it to the small gold box that I was carrying in my bag.

Nor said, "I wish I could offer ye a place in Riaghalbane, but I fear our timelines ought tae remain unbound."

Artair said, "Aye, I agree. It means that remainin' here is likely my only recourse, as m'father is a vengeful prick. Tae tell ye the truth, Yer Highness, he daena hae nearly the number of good qualities that I hae."

Nor said, “Ye might challenge yer father tae his throne. I hear ye are good in the arena.”

He chuckled. “That does sound like me.”

Nor said, “Whatever ye choose, I wish ye well.”

Artair said, “I wish ye well too, Yer Majesty.” They shook hands, then embraced.

Artair bowed to me, “Twas a pleasure meetin’ ye, Livvy, Yer Majesty.”

“Pleasure meeting you as well.”

He grabbed his horse’s reins, “Ye ought tae move from the clearing while I jump.”

Nor and I mounted our horses and rode from the clearing, as the storm behind us rose.

I held tight to Dusty’s reins as he reared and stamped, riled up about the storm.

Then finally it dissipated and I said, “Phew.”

Nor said, “Aye, I will be glad when we hae a respite from all these storms.”

“Me too. And now, where are we going?”

He said, “We need tae visit Kilchurn, there is a wedding that must be planned, and I am concerned about what might hae changed in our absence.”

“I also feel kind of ill, and...” I gulped down, feeling sick rise in my throat. “I need a pregnancy test.”

Nor said, “Tis a thing we can do?”

“Yes. And I have no idea how long it’s been, how much we’ve done. It seems like it’s just been a week since my last period, but maybe it’s been months? I have no idea. Do I look pregnant to you?”

He grinned, “Aye, ye do, I noticed it the other day.”

“Then let’s go home to test me first.”

Chapter 61 - Livvy



We jumped to the ranch.

Charlie was waiting for us to wake up, sitting in his truck with the door open. He joked, “Sleepyheads! Whatcha doin’ in the dirt?”

I groaned. “You should be happier to see us, we have jumped like, I don’t know, fifty times in the past few days.”

He climbed out of his truck and helped me and Nor up. “That sucks, why so much?”

I brushed off my skirts, finally dry. “Apparently we looped, we broke the world.” I bent over and retched, but nothing came up. I wiped my face with my sleeve, and continued, “Then we had to fix it, saving everyone, you’re welcome.”

“Damn, you’re sick?”

“Just the... you know... jumps got me down.”

“Guess you deserve a beer. Want to come up to the main house?”

I said, clutching my stomach, “Actually... First we need to go to our place to shower and change. Is everything normal?”

“What do you mean?”

Nor said, “When was the last time we were here?”

“You were here about a week ago, we had breakfast together.”

I said, “Have you visited Kilchurn?”

“Nope, but I’m promised a trip, soon. Weird line of questioning, did you forget where we were again?”

“Looping sucks.”



Charlie dropped Nor and me off at our deck and we went in.

I put my bag down on the counter.

“Everything seems normal, right?” I opened the freezer and pulled out an ice cube and rolled it around on my forehead.

“Aye, it does.”

Nor filled a glass with ice water, gave me a long sip, then put his arms around me and said, “How do we test ye?”

I kissed him, then stepped back with my arms out. “I have a test in the bathroom, but first, what do you mean, you ‘can tell’? I don’t understand.”

He said, “I canna describe it, tis like ye are rounder and softer than ye were.”

I looked down with my eyes wide. “How on earth — I am *exactly* the same!”

He put his arms back around me, and grabbed my butt through the thick skirts, “Ye are much more than the same... ye canna tell?” He started walking me backwards down the hall toward our bedroom.

I giggled, then groaned, “Careful, backward walking is going to make me throw up.”

He kissed me, “Sorry, dost ye need tae be carried?”

I nodded, pouting. “But if you throw me over your shoulder I will throw up on your kilt. You need to carry me gingerly.”

He picked me up in his arms and carried me down the hall to our bedroom, asking, “Is this test a naked test?”

I said, “It can be, I need to pee on a stick—”

He pulled away and said, “A stick? This is a kind of witchcraft?”

“Nope, a special stick-shaped device.”

We undressed, leaving piles of our clothes all over the floor, then went naked into the bathroom. I turned on the water in the shower and he stepped in and washed while I found the box in the back under the sink. I pulled it out, tore it open, and pulled out a test stick.

I glanced over the instructions, noting that it said ‘in the morning’.

I said to Nor, who was lathering up his hair, “We can’t be disappointed if it says no, it might be too early in the month, or maybe I’m not doing it right, and it says to do it in the morning.”

Nor wiped the steam off the inside of the shower and said through the glass, super sexy, with soap and water dripping down his skin, “Livvy, m’love, if I can see ye are with child, I think yer fancy witch-stick can see it as well, or what good is it?”

“Excellent point. Just don’t be disappointed.”

I sat on the toilet and peed on the stick. And then put the stick on the counter upside down.

“Now what?”

I drummed my fingers on the counter. “Now we wait, but really this is a good time to shower...” I climbed in the shower with him, it was lovely, but... “I need to sit down.” I sat cross legged on the floor of the shower, while my husband lathered my hair and washed it and then rinsed it. For a few short minutes I forgot that I was ‘waiting’ for a big answer.

What if I wasn’t?

What if I was?

Then the water started to turn cold. Nor turned off the water and stepped out. He wrapped a towel around his waist. I wrapped one around me and went and stood in front of the sink. “It’s going to be fine either way, right?”

“Aye, but... m’love, ye ought tae look.”

I picked up the stick and turned it over. *Oh*. There was a plus sign.

He didn’t even look, he just said, “Told ye.”

“I’m pregnant?” Then as it hit me, “I’m pregnant!” I threw my arms around him, “Nor! I’m pregnant!”

He laughed. “Ye are, ye are pregnant with our son.”

I passed him a toothbrush, “We have to hurry, I have to tell Mom, Birdie, *everyone*, then we need to go tell your mom, we have to tell all the moms. We have so much to do!”

His smile grew even broader.

Chapter 62 - Livvy



I raced up the steps to the house, “Mom! Birdie!”

They came from the kitchen. Mom said, “Whatever the heavens is — Livvy are you okay?”

“I’m pregnant!” Then I clamped my hand over my mouth and clutched my stomach and gagged.

Everyone laughed and the commotion was loud and gleeful and Nor and I were hugged many, many times.

I was put on the couch with my feet up, a damp cloth on my forehead, and unlimited service for anything I wanted.

I assured them it was unnecessary, but I was lying: I was very queasy.

But food helped lessen my nausea and rest helped a lot.

We told them stories and it was lovely.

We stayed for a few weeks, until I was over my nausea and most days felt great. It was a lovely vacation after the drama of the past few weeks. We felt like we were really over all the hard parts.

We slept, and ate and showered, and helped around the ranch, and we planned.

Mom and Birdie and I decided that I would need to be here for when the baby came.

But that left us with an issue.

How would we deal with the Dukedom and our Kingdom?

— and then Ryan came home for good toward the end of our visit. Nor and I talked it over and the next night, Ryan and I went for a long walk after dinner.

When we were little we loved to go down the southeast end of the ranch along the marshy shoreline to visit Betsy and George, the gators. We had always pretended we were going to go visit them, while professing our bravery.

“How will you greet them after being away?”

“A hug,” he said, but then when we neared, he joked, “From a safe distance, did George get bigger?”

“I think so. Or that’s Betsy, she’s let herself go in her old age.”

We stood well away, looking out over the water. I said, “How’s it feeling to be done?”

“Good.” He picked up a stone. “I just...” He skipped it out across the surface. “I just want something big to do, you know? I expected there to be a plan.”

“Yeah, I know... you’re supposed to be doing something important. I mean look at you.”

His brow went up. “What’s that supposed to mean? Little sister saying I’m handsome?”

“You know you’re handsome.”

His jaw clenched in his perfectly shaved face. Broad shouldered, when he stood he looked straight and tall, chin up, eyes direct. But when he smiled, as Birdie used to say, “He warms up the room.”

“Doesn’t mean there’s something good and important for me to do. The world is littered by people who were handsome dumbasses who ended up working a ranch to the end of their days.”

“There are worse things.”

“True. Main problem is I’m lonely. I see you and Nor and you look happy, you know, together, running your lands...”

“None of it is easy.”

“I didn’t say it was easy. Easy sounds like it would suck, it looks hard as hell, but you also look happy. I’d like that problem.”

“I don’t get why some beautiful girl hasn’t caught you up yet.”

He grinned. “Oh they try, but you know me...”

“You always said, ‘I want an uncomplicated girl, the kind who will bake me a pie.’”

“I’m still that way,” he tossed another rock. “You’d be surprised how few women I meet who know how to bake a pie.”

I laughed. “I’m not sure I know how, but I married nobility, I have staff for that.”

He said, “So why did you bring me out here?”

“Well... Nor is going to talk to you about something, and I think I want to give you a heads up first, plus, I wanted to feel you out, before I make either of you have the conversation.”

He said, “Out with it then.”

“You like him?”

“Nor, the Duke of Awe? The king of some... some place? Yeah, what’s not to like? He’s got that whole traditional thing going for him, plus he seems pretty badass, and he makes you happy. He knocked you up. The whole family thinks he’s great... yeah, I like him, you did good. Why?”

“Because he’s going to offer you a job. We were talking about it last night, but it’s big and I need you to really think it over. He will probably make it seem like not that big a deal, but it’s a huge deal and we’re kind of... what’s the word?”

“The way you’re talking in circles you make it sound almost desperate.”

“That’s the word I’m looking for. We’re desperate. I’m not sure what we’ll do if you won’t take it, but on the other hand, it’s big and you should really think carefully, and... you know, no pressure, but also so much pressure.”

He said, “Alright, Livvy, out with it.”

“We need someone to be the regent of his kingdom in his absence. Someone we can trust, someone who would be good at the job. Someone who is looking for a big important career path...”

He exhaled. “I wondered how you would manage it, when he’s got lands in three different places. That’s an empire, it’s not easy to keep an empire.”

“Yeah, he needs help.”

“You said he trusts me — we just met.”

“I trust you, I’m vouching for you.”

“Man, this is huge, Livvy. You want me to run a kingdom in the future? Like, I don’t even get what that means.”

“Well, it’s being built, there are generals, a military, and a whole lot of construction crews, it will be a lot of work, but kind of cool, if you think about it. It’s like becoming president, you step into the role, and you’re surrounded by people who help you figure out how to run things.”

“Classic Livvy, you think that’s how it goes — you’re the leader of the free world and just *surrounded* by helpful people? I can see you’ve never *once* been in a leadership position.”

I said, “I’m a queen.”

“A figurehead, at best.”

I scowled. “I’m just telling you, this is what Nor is going to ask you. Please think it through. We don’t have anyone else: Charlie is too young, uncles don’t have the skill set, and they’re all needed here on the farm. Dad could come, but not long term. He wouldn’t want to move away from Mom, and Mom wouldn’t want to leave the ranch. She’s lived here her whole life and—”

“Doesn’t he have brothers?”

I nodded, “He does, and he can, of course, trust them, but they’re from the seventeenth century. They haven’t seen a flushing toilet, how are they going to oversee the running of a construction site in the future?”

“Good point, I can see that — is tech well beyond what we’ve seen?”

“You can figure it out, you’re a smart guy.”

“Man, you are buttering me up, first ‘handsome’ now ‘smart’.”

“Trying to win you over. But ultimately the reason you’re such a good choice is you’ve been in the military and you are between things. Nor’s brothers Aenghus and Malcolm both have lives, you don’t.”

He clutched his heart. “First the compliments, then ouch! Livvy stabs me through the heart with ‘you’ve got no life.’”

“True.”

“Yeah, doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt. I’ve been a hero for years, now what?”

“Now you come be our hero, be the super key-holding Regent of Riaghalbane in our absence. Keep the kingdom running, advise Nor — he needs the help. Boss me around, I know you love that.”

“And I get to come back to the ranch to visit?”

“Whenever you want, time travel.” I smiled. “Did I mention your muscles, you been working out?”

He laughed, “Damn, little sister, you must really need me to be your hero.”

“Yep, you have never passed up the chance to stand in the limelight.”

He nodded and stared off at the land over the ranch, then, first George, then Betsy, raised up, turned, and splashed into the water, submerging, and sliding from shore.

“Damn they are majestic and creepy as hell.”

“Yep. Nor’s not a fan of coming down here because of them. The world’s a big place and he only really understands a little of it. He needs someone in his corner.”

“I’ll think it over.”

“Thank you.”

It took him a week of mulling, and then one evening he and Nor went out for a ride and to talk. I watched them go, standing on Birdie’s porch. Mom beside me said, “So is Nor talking him into going with him?”

I said, “How’d you guess?”

“Well, he needs men around him, people he can trust. He’s got a lot to handle. I figure Charlie will go with him too, he wants to help, but he’s young. Ryan can actually run things.”

I said, “Does it bother you that he might come with us?”

“It would have if I didn’t know that we have the best coffee and you’ll come home for Birdie’s cooking.”



They returned after dusk, walking up to the porch.

I was sitting in the porch swing, with almost everyone in my family sitting on the chairs around me. We were enjoying a mild evening and dinner would be ready soon. Nor sat down beside me, Ryan leaned on the post.

I said, “Any decisions?”

Ryan said, “I’ve said yes.”

I jumped from the seat and hugged him. “Thank you!”

He said, “It’s tentative, I have no idea what I’m signing up for, but I’ve promised a year give or take a century —”

Lou said, “That a time travel joke, boy?”

“You know it, Lou.”

Charlie said, “What you signing up for?”

Nor said, “I hae asked Ryan tae join my cause by being the regent of m’kingdom when I am not there.”

Charlie grinned, “Cool, I get to visit?”

“Aye, I would like ye both tae come with us when we go. I will take ye tae Kilchurn tae visit m’family and then I will show ye the kingdom. I need all the help ye can give us.”

Lou said, “Hot damn, Birdie, did you ever think our family would be in charge of castles? All through time, and a kingdom?”

“I never dreamed we’d be so important.”

We made more plans over dinner and... this was all a relief, we had brothers who would help us manage it all.



One night, just before we left, out on the porch in the swing yet again, I asked, “Do you think Artair found Gwynedd and won her back?”

“I pray he did. He deserved the chance tae be with her again.”

“If he did get to do it, that Bridge thing is a miracle.”

“Tis.”

Charlie asked, “What’s the Bridge again?”

I said, “It’s the device we have for fixing a screwed up timeline.”

Charlie said, “Oh right.”

Ryan said, “Don’t be ‘oh righting’ like you know what the hell they’re talking about, that doesn’t make any sense.” He

rubbed his hands together. “But we’re traveling starting tomorrow?”

Nor said, “Aye, tomorrow.”

Ryan nodded. “I was worried I wouldn’t have anything to do, and now look.”

Charlie said, “Be ready, it hurts like hell.”

Ryan said, “Whatever, it’s fine.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not... ‘whatever’... it’s awful, but at least we have the golden threads now.”

He said, “I was going to be mucking out horse stalls and now I get to help run a kingdom in a future world. I think if it hurts like hell it’s at least a good trade off.”

I said, “Besides, this all fits your delusions of grandeur.”

“Says Livvy, who keeps assuring me in her sweatpants that she is a queen.” He rolled his eyes.

I punched him in the arm.

Nor kept us rocking on the swing because the steady rock was oddly settling to my stomach. I wondered if the baby could feel the gentle shifting as his father rocked us.

Charlie said, “But how would you know if things have been changed, wouldn’t the time shifts be unnoticeable? Like if the Wright brothers didn’t invent the airplane, we just wouldn’t have planes, weird right?”

Ryan tapped his temple. “You wouldn’t know, you’d have no idea what you missed out on so it wouldn’t be weird at all. Maybe it happens all the time, maybe every second of our history is just new facts rewriting over old. How would you know?”

“Right, right. Crazy weird.”

Nor asked, “Who are the Wright brothers?”

We all chuckled.

Livvy said, “I guess we have to assume that if life gets overwritten that the new history is the best option.”

Ryan said, “Except your friend Artair had his life overwritten, and it wasn’t the best option. I think you have to face the fact, as time-travelers you have the power to screw up a lot of the world.”

Nor said, “Aye, there is a great deal of responsibility, especially as I am the beginnin’ of a long line of sons. I must guide the throne while keeping their lives in mind.” His hand was around me, resting on my stomach.

I kissed his cheek. “You know, Kaitlyn said something similar to me. She told me that with time travel that are so many tough decisions, all she can do is try to keep her husband and children safe. She keeps the descendants of the Campbell clan in mind and tries to keep *their* world orderly.”

Nor said, “This is why it is crucial that the men who side with us are forthright and ready tae make decisions that will benefit our descendants. That is our most important consideration.”

Ryan said, “Not the most important, the *most* is: do I need to take a raincoat?”

I laughed. “So much rain, but... you can bring a raincoat, but you can’t actually wear a raincoat, you have to dress historically.”

He rubbed his hands together, “Grab a kilt, Charlie, this is going to be fun!”

Chapter 63 - Livvy



We had been in the past for about three months. And yes, time had shifted.

Nor's family had no memory at all of Johnne's attempted siege, and barely any memory of our last visit.

Nor's family was, as Birdie would say, over the moon about my pregnancy.

Whenever Lady Gail spoke to me she wept with joy. I spent a lot of time sitting beside her while she held my hand, attempting to recover after having been "overcome with the blessing upon us."

Nor had gone back and forth to Riaghalbane and had introduced Ryan and Charlie to the future kingdom. I remained here, throughout the months, planning the wedding, nesting with Nor's family, enjoying a quiet life with no jumping, and waiting to go home for the birth.

We really felt like we had fixed things. Time might have shifted, but it had shifted for the best, and we felt like we were going to be able to handle all of this. Nor was surrounded by 'good men' and had his dukedom and his kingdom running well. He had many men he trusted.



On a particularly lovely day in May, 1671, I was watching Claray get dressed for her wedding, her gown was a pale lilac, with light silver stitching, she looked beautiful, her hair up in a

hurluberlu. She asked, while standing stoically while two maids finished working on her hair, “What will ye name the bairn, Livvy?”

“I’m not sure... Nor and I were thinking Maximillian, we can call him Max.”

Claray grinned and clapped her hands. “Tis perfect. I am so happy for ye!”

Lady Gail said, “Tis a wonderful name, Livvy, it sounds important as the son of a Duke and King *should*.”

“Thank you, Mam.”

She wiped her eyes, then took my hand and squeezed it. “I am just so pleased we will hae a new bairn. The Duke was so forlorn when he lost his first born, this is a wonderful gift from God. Thank ye, Livvy, and I wanted tae tell ye, ye hae become pleasingly plump, a fine vessel for the Campbell line.”

I smiled. I had grown used to taking her compliments, as unfortunate as they might sound. I knew she meant to be kind, grateful, and I ignored the bits that sounded insulting. She loved the descriptor of ‘vessel’, calling me it at least once a day.

My dress was an ornate dark floral design, grandly wide, or widely grand, and could be kept loose at my waist as my stomach rounded with the pregnancy. It had a glorious neckline that accentuated my bosom, which was also growing. The edges of the dress were beaded beautifully.

I held the mirror up in front of Claray.

She wiggled her head, setting the ribbons into motion. Then said, “This news of yer bairn is *almost* as grand as m’wedding, though as ye ken, Livvy, a wedding is the best news, as all other good news, such as welcoming bairns, stems from a wedding. I canna wait tae be Lady Claray.”

I teased, “You were *already* ‘Lady Claray.’”

“Aye, but now tis because I am *married* and not because I am the Duke’s sister.”

Her maids finished up her hair and she admired herself in the mirror, “How do I look?”

“Beautiful.” And it was true.



Everyone was gathered downstairs, outside the doors of the family chapel. Mom and Dad were here, having been here for two weeks already, standing beside Ryan and Charlie.

I said, “Are we ready to go in?”

Nor said, “I will wait here for Claray and Mam, go ahead in.”

I walked down the aisle and Mom and Dad slid down the front bench. Charlie sat down beside them, and then me, leaving a spot for Nor at the end.

Then we all turned as Nor walked in with Claray’s hand on his arm. He walked her down the aisle and then placed her hand on Ryan’s beside the altar.

Nor came and sat down beside me.

I whispered, “We did it.”

He said, “Aye, she is marryin’ the love of her life.”

Chapter 64 - Livvy



I got misty-eyed watching my big brother Ryan look down on Claray with so much love. He was wonderfully smitten and had been since the first moment, when he was open-jawed, astounded, walking into the courtyard amazed by the castle walls, the men and horses, asking questions about the pulleys, the boats on the dock, the walls, the cannons, but then he had laid eyes on her — Claray, walking down the steps. And her eyes were on him. Her gentle blush rising up her cheeks.

He later said she had made it all seem ordinary in comparison.

Claray had stood before him, looking directly into his eyes and asked, “Livvy, sister, who is this?”

And I had said, “Lady Claray, these are my brothers, Ryan and Charlie.”

Charlie had said, “Nice to meet you,” and had continued looking around at the walls, more interested in the castle than the inhabitants.

But Ryan had locked eyes with her and said, “A pleasure to meet you, Lady Claray.”

And she had said, “A pleasure tae meet ye as well, m’laird.” And he had seemed like his knees might buckle.

Later, in my chamber, she said, “I never recovered from the love that filled m’heart. I kent he was meant tae be m’laird.”

She had shaken her head, “I am so fortunate we dinna arrange a marriage before I met him, I would hae been devastated if I had been betrothed already.” She sighed. “He is so verra fine.”



We didn't ever tell her that a time shift had happened. Nor and I realized it as soon as we returned and he asked about the marriage arrangements, certain that they were set, but Lady Gail hadn't known what he was talking about.

Nor's brow had drawn down, “I thought for sure we had arranged her tae marry Young Gordy already.”

Lady Gail had said, “Och nae, that would hae been a terrible choice, that young lad daena hae the temperament for Claray, *everyone* can see it.”

Her attention elsewhere, I whispered, “Oh my, there's been a huge time shift.”

“Either a time shift, or perhaps m'sister has had her head turned for every young man for miles around and we have forgotten what we did and did not do about it.”

“That seems unlikely.”

“Aye.”

But when our eyes settled on Claray, blushing in front of Ryan, I just knew we wouldn't be marrying her to Young Gordy, that this was her path.

I added, in a whisper, as we watched Ryan and Claray speak to each other, earnestly, “I remember you saying you *already* allied my family to yours, and that an alliance with Young Gordy would enrich your lands and...?”

He had smiled, “Ye ken, Livvy, that was when I was nought but a lowly duke, now I am a king. I hae all the enrichments and land a man could want. Instead of riches, I need strong men tae help me guard over them. I am not as

worried about marrying Claray tae a baron who is going tae *someday* have a title.”

“So she is free to marry who she pleases for happiness—?”

Just then Ryan said something that made her laugh and laugh, she was silly and beautiful, and his eyes lit up with delight, and he laughed too. Claray put her hand on his arm.

Lady Gail intervened and quietly moved Claray’s hand off his sleeve and folded her hands together on her lap.

Nor winked at me and whispered, “And the best way tae secure strong men tae m’cause? Marry them intae m’family.”

And so that’s what we did. Ryan fell for Claray, and professed his love.

Evening after evening they sat near each other, sought each other out to converse.

She flirted with him, openly, unless she was commanded to behave by her mother or Ailsa.

He seemed to enjoy her company. He laughed at her silliness and seemed to find it enchanting. More than one evening was spent with Nor and me, Aenghus and Ailsa, Charlie, and even Lady Gail giving each other wide-eyed looks because Ryan and Claray were laughing over something that only the two of them understood.

Charlie muttered to me, “Those two need to get a room.”

I joked, “He’ll have to marry her first.”

Charlie said, “That’s the plan.”

I said, “Truly? He told you? When?”

“Yep, the other night, we were bored and he mentioned her, it is very boring around here with no TV.”

“True that, I miss the shows.”

“...and I asked him point blank, I said, ‘So... dude, you going to marry her, because I don’t think you get to just fool around.’ And he said, ‘Yeah, I’m going to marry her.’”

I had grinned. “That’s awesome.”



One night in the Great Hall we saw them dance, a wild jig she had taught him. He was handsome and she couldn’t take her eyes away. She was beautiful in her big gorgeous dress, her hair up, and unlike anyone he had ever met. He looked mesmerized.

They grew flushed with the exertion, and then went and sat at a table, whispering, and I knew they were making decisions. We all knew it, glancing at each other knowingly. Even Lady Gail didn’t get in between them. We could all see that the deal was being struck.

And the next morning, Ryan had knocked on Nor’s office door.

He said, “May I speak to you, Your Grace?”

Nor said, “Aye, though I hae a guess... ye want tae discuss the food at the feast last night?”

I had never seen Ryan so nervous, he ran his hand over his still fairly short, but growing out, military hair. “No, sir, I mean, Your Grace. I mean to... I wanted to speak to you...”

Nor’s brow went up. He rolled his hand.

Ryan stood erect, in his seventeenth century coat, over a kilt, a sword sheathed at his hip, “I want to marry Lady Claray.”

I smiled. “I knew it!”

He joked, “You did not, we’ve been keeping it incredibly quiet.”

I said, “You have been goofy over her for weeks! We all saw it. We all see it. You haven’t been quiet at all.”

Nor smiled. “Ryan, we all knew ye wanted tae marry Claray, thank ye for speaking to me on it.”

Ryan put his finger in the ruff at his neck and pulled it away from this throat.

I said, “Man, Ryan, you look nervous.”

“I am.” He shifted on his feet, but kept himself stiff, staring straight ahead. “I once teased everyone for being so stiff and formal around Nor, but now I get it. This is some pressure.”

Nor said, “I am easy tae speak tae, as long as ye remember ‘Yer Grace.’”

Ryan’s jaw clenched uncomfortably. “I would like tae marry Claray, Yer Grace.”

Nor said, “Now ye hae expressed yer intentions, what will ye give me for Claray’s hand in marriage? Twill hae tae be good as she is a prize and ye are simply a man from Florida.”

“I will... um... I will go to your kingdom, like we talked about, and oversee the building of it and I have been in the military and—”

I said, “Nor is teasing you, Ryan.”

“Oh, yeah.” He grinned.

Nor said, “Generally speaking, tis Claray’s dowry that ye would be interested in.”

Ryan shook his head, “No, that seems... what does it... what does that mean, a dowry?”

Nor said, “I will give ye some land and some gold.”

“That’s not necessary. You already promised me a salary and a title and a grand house and—”

Nor said, “Tis necessary, tis tradition. I must give ye a great deal of wealth tae prove tae ye that she is worthwhile, so

when ye are driven mad by her silliness ye will remember the riches and it will be worth it.”

I said, “Nor, I am so glad your sister isn’t here to hear you.”

Nor said, “She would agree. She will demand her dowry be impressively grand or else she will suffer — tis tradition. Ye must take it, Ryan, because if word got out that I dinna give ye one, the people of our lands might whisper that Lady Claray inna worth much. And because I hae now spoken poorly of her in front of ye, I suppose ye must hae more?”

Nor turned to me with an amused expression. “Livvy, what we decided earlier, ought we tae double it?”

Ryan said, “You decided earlier?”

I teased, “We have talked of nothing else but your marriage for weeks now. And yes, Nor, we should double it. Claray is worth it.”

Nor joked, “Good, we are all in agreement, I am glad ye finally joined us in the plannin’.” He pulled a piece of parchment covered in writing, and using a modern pen, scratched through a line, wrote something beside it, then turned it to Ryan, and pointed. “Sign there.”

Ryan said, “You already had the marriage contract ready? This is how obvious I was?”

Nor said, “Tis a good thing, Master Ryan. Ye are a man of honor and we could see ye had decided tae marry. Tis better that we can see yer intentions than that they were hidden.”

Ryan said, “This was much easier than I thought it would be.”

Nor’s brow raised.

Ryan chuckled. “Much easier than I thought, *Your Grace*,” and signed the bottom of the page.

There was a knock on the door. Claray rushed in before Nor could say ‘enter.’ She was in a rose colored dress with pale

flowers embroidered along the edges. The color matched her blushing cheeks, “Ryan! Did ye ask him, is it well done?”

He grinned, but before he could answer she said, “Nor! Yer Grace, will ye allow it?”

“Aye, Claray, I will allow it, we hae discussed the dowry and—”

She said, “Tis large?”

“The largest, much more than what I wanted, but yer future husband was a formidable negotiator, it means ye will hae a successful union I think.”

She clapped her hands. “Och aye, I am so pleased, thank ye, brother, for yer permission!”

Then she beamed at Ryan. “Ye did verra well. Ye hae made me verra pleased, m’laird.”

My brother, who had always been independent and funny and such a *dude*, that I had wondered if he would be single forever, smiled, and said, “Pleasing you is all I will ever hope for, Lady Claray.”

They left our chamber and I stood beside Nor’s chair. “Well, there we go. I just got one of my big brothers promised to your little sister.”

He chuckled. “He’s in for a lifetime of excitement, but I can see he is clear-eyed on the responsibility. I haena known him long, but I can see he is a good man. When I took him tae Riaghalbane his knowledge and capabilities assured me.”

I said, “He’s always been a good combination of Lou and Dad.”

He reached over and drew me close so that his arms were around my waist, his cheek pressed to my front. I put my arms around his head. He spoke against my dress, “What dost ye think, wee bairn, did we do well today?”

“I can’t wait for you to meet our baby.”

“Me as well. Max, Prince of Riaghalbane. We are building an empire, we will fill it with sons.”

“We are certain he’s a son?”

“Aye, he is, I ken he is. But if ye are wanting a daughter there will be eight more bairns. Tis likely tae be at least one daughter, and our daughters will hae the bravery of sons, so little will it matter.”

“I like that about our daughters, but eight more! Nine children altogether? Whoa. How do you know this, wait, have you seen the future?”

He said, “Nae, I daena ken how many bairns we will hae, Livvy, our life’s course is a journey, but I do pray for many. I would like a long table full of bairns and brothers.”

“Like Magnus?”

“Aye.”

“Then why so sure this baby is a boy?”

“Because I have seen some things tae be true, like when I discovered Claray in a castle in Riaghalbane in the future. I now see that the actions here, today, hae set that in motion. She will live with Ryan in Riaghalbane, and so I daena ken much, but I ken enough... We will hae a son. I ken this is true and how our history will go. I hae a sense of accomplishment. We hae succeeded.”

“I hope Artair has succeeded too.”

“I do as well, I hope he has all the good fortune as I hae had. I met m’great grandson and descendants even further down the line and they are all kings. And I can see, with yer burgeonin’ middle causing ye tae grow ‘plump and pleasing’ as Mam would say—”

I giggled, “She loves saying that. She also told me once that my hard edges were softening.”

His arms tightened around my back and pulled me closer then drew me down on his lap. “Speakin’ of yer softenin’ and m’hardness.”

I giggled again, “That’s not exactly how she put it.” His mouth went to my throat and sucked and kissed there.

There was a knock on the door, and then it opened as I jumped off Nor’s lap and smoothed my skirts. Lady Gail walked in. “Nor, did I interrupt? Livvy, ye look flushed, are ye well?”

“Yes, Mam.”

She said, “Nor did ye arrange the marriage?”

“I did, Mam, she is betrothed.”

She clasped her hands. “Well done! He is a fine young man. The regent of a kingdom, advisor tae a king. She is doing well for herself.”

Nor said, “Tis *my* kingdom, ye might say that I am doin’ verra well for her.”

She said, “Ye might, but ye ken what I mean. Claray was always difficult tae match and he seems tae greatly admire her.”

I said, “He does, and he will take good care of her.”

Nor said, “But, Mam, ye did interrupt. Livvy and I were havin’ a private conversation.”

“Daena make yer discussion too strenuous, she needs her rest. She is a vessel for our family’s bloodline. We mustn’t allow her tae overstrain.”

A smile spread on his face, “I will take great care, but we truly ought tae get back tae it.”

She bowed out of the room.

Nor stood and put his arms around me. He picked me up, his mouth against my throat again, “Where were we?”

“Your mouth was right there.”

He carried me into our chamber.



After arranging the marriage of Claray and Ryan, Nor had taken Charlie and Ryan on a second trip to Riaghalbane. I gave Nor a list of 'wedding presents' they needed to bring back with them and spices and sugar for the wedding feast and some decorations I wanted, like white tablecloths.

I stayed behind, having grown used to living in the castle and we thought it best since I was pregnant. Claray stayed with me in our chamber so I wasn't nervous at night, but I had grown very used to living here now, as long as I had a few comforts.

On the agreed upon date for their return, Claray and I dressed and waited in the courtyard while Aenghus went to meet them and bring them to the castle. We were 95% sure that there wouldn't be bad guys, but still... we felt it safest to have Aenghus go with guards.

The gates opened and they rode through and in the midst were my mom and dad on their horses. "Mom? Dad!" I rushed forward. "What are you doing here?"

Mom said, "Ryan is getting married, we can't miss it, even if that form of travel is a nightmare. I'm glad I didn't know that before I jumped."

I hugged her. "I've been telling you!"

"I didn't believe it, not one word, but now I know. And wow, look at this!" She and Dad were looking all around at the castle. He looked like his mind was blown. We introduced them to Claray and Lady Gail and Mom hugged Claray and welcomed her into the family.

And then we took them on a tour. Nor asked me, "Did I do well, m'love?"

"You did so well, thank you, this is... so great. I don't even care about the tablecloths, did you bring tablecloths? I hope you brought tablecloths because they are kind of necessary for a wedding feast."

He smiled. "I brought all the things. We must celebrate the marriage with white tablecloths. I have been told this is a must for a civilized event, and I am not a monster."

Chapter 65 - Nor



I sat down beside Livvy in the pew and took her hand and drew it tae m'lips and kissed her knuckles. Then tucked it in m'lap.

Twas a good service, Ryan and Claray were solemn throughout. Livvy and I knelt tae pray, shoulder tae shoulder, and we were awed by the passages read. The way that Claray looked upon him filled m'heart. I knew m'father would look down upon this day with triumph. He had often said, the power of a family lies not only in the strength of their sons but also in the marriages of the daughters, the men who are brought intae the family fold. I felt great pride that Ryan had been brought intae our family and that Claray was so pleased with the match. Ye could see by the manner in which he held his head, he would bring calm tae her life; and how Claray looked upon him, that she would bring joy; and that their match would strengthen us. Our family was destined tae be powerful. Meeting Livvy on that fateful day on the moor near Kilchurn had blessed us, and we had an empire of lands spread through time.

I squeezed her hand and she rested her cheek on my shoulder for a moment.

My visit tae Riaghalbane had been good, I was blessed that m'descendants had risked their lives tae assist me. Artair had helped me fight Johnne. Magnus and men from his clan had helped build — the kingdom was growing, the construction ongoing, there was a great deal tae do, but there, as well as

here, I was surrounded by family with good men at my side. I had Livvy's love tae comfort me, and a son tae meet.

The service over, we followed the bride and groom out tae the courtyard where we talked over the wedding and then privately, the bride and groom and the immediate family, posed for photographs tae commemorate the day.

And I pulled Livvy intae m'arms and kissed her.

“What was that for...?”

I said, “I love ye, look at ye in yer fine dress, a Lady, a Queen, and ye are carryin' m'son, I wanted tae say thank ye for marryin' me. Ye hae brought untold blessings tae m'life.”

And she said simply, “Thank you, m'laird, I can't wait to see what our future holds.”

Chapter 66 - Artair



I dismounted my horse, my feet crunching in the snow as I led him toward the gate. Twas verra cold but I hadna traveled for long.

The night before I had jumped outside the local village. It had been mid afternoon, but the shadows were already growing long, the snow draped in bluish hues. I had been too cold tae continue on tae the castle, and I dinna want tae arrive cold and distressed. I spent the night in an inn, warming after the days of torment trying to get tae Gwynedd, and I was able tae wash m'self so that I was presentable. I arrived at midmorn.

I walked up tae the gate and spoke tae a guard. Tae be cautious I asked, "Hae ye seen Torphichen's men?"

The guard looked suspicious. "Nae, we haena."

"*Ever*, ye ever hae Torphichen's men come? There would hae been a man at the head, Jamie, the future baron of Torphichen. They would be a group of men headin' north, coming from Stirling. I believe they would hae asked for shelter on a cold night. Hae they come?"

"Nae, we haena seen them. I would ken, why?"

I said, "I thought tae meet them, I suppose I will find them farther along the road." I patted m'horse's wither. "I will need shelter for the night."

"Ye are alone?"

"Aye. I am alone."

“Ye will remain in the courtyard while we discuss it with the laird. What is yer name?”

“I am Prince Artair.”

His eyes narrowed, and he looked past me. “Ye daena hae a guard with ye?”

“Nae I travel alone. Tell yer master I am here tae speak with him. He winna want ye tae keep me waiting long.”

“Aye, sire, m’apologies.”

The gate drew up, clanking loudly.

I stepped through the gate and stood waiting beside m’horse. It was a long stay in the cold, but then he sent the stableboy over tae take m’horse and called me tae the door tae the main household, the castle that was the home of Mistress Gwynedd Cleish’s uncle, Laird Kincardine.

I was shown up a stair and along a hallway to a chamber and invited intae the room after the guard knocked.

Laird Kincardine said, without rising from his chair, “My guard says ye are a prince?”

“Aye, m’laird, I am the crown prince of Riaghalbane.”

His eyes narrowed. “I hae never heard of it, does the King ken ye are in his lands?”

I lied, “I am headed for a diplomatic meeting with him in Edinburgh.”

“Where is yer guard? I am certain ye understand the concern. Ye claim tae be a prince of a foreign land and ye arrive, unannounced I might add, with nae guard tae m’castle asking for shelter?”

I smiled, “Sometimes a prince prefers tae travel unimpeded by a large train. I hae decided tae go out on m’own because I am a man of m’own mind and I do what I please as the crown prince of Riaghalbane. But I am headed tae Edinburgh soon

enough, there I will tell the king that I hae been on a journey around Scotland. I am certain he will welcome my visit, even if his welcome is after the fact, twill be a warm welcome as m'father, the king of Riaghalbane, is well-admired." I pulled the papers from my sporran and approached his table and spread the papers out.

He looked down upon them, takin' a long time tae decipher the meaning. His brow pulled down, then said, "It looks verra regular. Where are the lands of Riaghalbane?"

"A good distance away."

He nodded. "Beyond the Americas?"

"Aye, well beyond."

He continued looking down on the paper, then turned it over and looked on the other side. "I hae never seen parchment like this... and ink with such accuracy."

I pulled a pen from my sporran. "A gift for ye."

He took it and looked it over. I said, "Ye push the button on the end and it will expose the nib—"

He pushed the button and said, "What of the ink?"

"Tis inside."

He wrote a verra small mark on the bottom of the page. "Och, tis verra fine."

I said, "I will need the paper, in case I need tae present it on m'travels."

"Of course." He put the pen down carefully and folded the papers back and handed them to me. "Ye will leave on the morrow?"

"I might stay a few nights, Laird Kincardine. I could use the rest."

He said, "My apologies, Yer Highness, my brother, Baron Cleish, and m'niece are visiting, along with his guest, Laird Dudley. Our best chambers hae been given over tae their visit. Yer accommodations will not be our finest, though I suppose I might have m'niece moved..."

I said, “Twill not be necessary. I arrived uninvited, and spent the last night in a village inn. I am used tae spare accommodations; certainly I am used tae spareness much more than a Baron’s daughter. I would not expect yer niece tae hae her comforts removed.”

He said, “Good, thank ye, Yer Highness.”

I asked, “But this Baron, this Dudley fellow, a friend of the family? He is favored for yer niece?”

“I believe he is interested in the match, but there hasna been a deal struck.”

I said, “Good, good, tis wise tae take yer time in matches, ye wouldna want tae match yer fine niece with a baron if she is deserving of a prince.” I added, “I do need tae retire, m’journey has been long.”

“My steward will show ye tae yer chamber.” He waved his hand tae a man who stood tae the side, and added, “We hope ye will be rested enough tae dine with us this evening.”

I bowed. “I will.”

Chapter 67 - Artair



My chamber was verra spare, not much more than the room in the inn, but a page was building a fire in the hearth when I entered. There was a chair and a table, a trunk for the few items I carried with me, a rug upon the wood plank floor, and thick curtains over the window. The chambermaid pulled those aside, giving a dim light tae the room. I strode tae take in the view, twas over the courtyard, and the hills beyond.

I settled my belongings in the room and then left for the galleries on the main floor. There, I leaned against a column and waited, wishing I had brought an apple or something tae toss in my hand. After being bored for a while, I pulled a coin from m'sporran and played a game where I flipped it and guessed the side, over and over, practicing a high flip with many turns, and trying tae predict—

Then a movement from the doors at the end of the gallery. I missed the coin, it dropped to the ground and rolled under a settee.

She was at the door, with two women at her side, her eyes settled on me. She had come to a stop.

One of her ladies said, “Mistress Cleish, we must leave...”

But she continued tae stare.

I met her eyes, and saw there a moment of confusion.

She walked directly toward me, och, she was lovely. Her flamin' red hair, the color in her cheek, the long slender pale throat...

The lady beside her tried tae pull her sleeve tae come away. But she neared tae within a few long strides and asked, “Do I ken ye, m’laird?”

I said, simply, watchin’ her face for recognition, “I am Artair.”

“Oh...” A hint of question crossed her expression. “I had not heard that m’uncle had more guests...”

“I arrived just this morn, unannounced, but I hae been invited tae dinner...”

“Oh... tis good, I will...”

Her lady said, “Mistress, we must depart, we canna stay.”

She slightly bowed her head, and allowed herself tae be drawn down the hall. I called tae her as she went, “Good day, Mistress Cleish, I will see ye at the evenin’ meal.”

She paused and looked back at me, then shook her head slightly, and left the room.

Chapter 68 - Artair



I waited for her outside the doors of the Great Hall.

She entered the gallery and I watched as her eyes swept around, as if she were looking for someone — they landed on me. Her dress was a deep, dark red, accentuatⁱn' her hair and the color that rose upon her cheek. She glanced away, but the arch of her brow made it seem as if she wanted tae speak with me.

I smiled as she paused beside me at the door.

I said, "Good evening, m'lady."

She took a deep breath, "Will ye be entering the Great Hall, m'laird?"

I said, "Aye, but I thought we might want tae enter taegether, as ye are the only one I ken in the castle."

She said, "Dost we ken each other? I canna place ye — are ye a friend of m' father, Laird Cleish?"

"Nae, Mistress Cleish, I am yer friend. I hae traveled verra far tae find ye."

Her brow drew down. "That seems unlikely as ye are a stranger tae me."

"Ye might think so, but I think ye hae been etched upon my heart forever."

Her eyes went wide. “Sire, ye hae only just met me! Ye canna expect me tae—”

The woman accompanying her said, “Is he bothering ye, Mistress Cleish?”

She shook her head. “Nae, he inna bothering me, go on ahead tae the Hall.”

As soon as her company was out of listening range, I said, “My apologies, Gwynedd, I dinna mean—”

“Gwynedd— how dost ye...?”

“I forgot m’self, my deepest regrets, might we begin again?”

She shook her head. “Och nae, ye are a scoundrel, ye push well past custom tae insult, then ask m’forgiveness?”

“Aye, I beg it.”

“I daena ken why I should allow ye tae begin again.”

“Because tae forgive is divine. I ken I hae exposed m’self as dreadfully coarse—”

“Coarse as a bear!” She huffed. “Ye canna call me by my given name, ye daena hae permission—”

“I apologize, I hae been a bear lumbering around brutishly.”

“Ye are correct, a big horrible bear that winna ken how tae behave. I find yer company tae be verra vexing.”

“Yet here, beside me, ye remain.”

She stamped her foot and I grinned, I couldna help myself, she was vexed, yet she was drawn tae me.

She huffed.

I continued, “I ken I am coarse as a bear, but if ye allow me tae return tae the beginning—”

“Ye speak tae me so familiarly, as a scoundrel, and then want tae remain in m’presence? My father is here, he will hae ye sent from the castle.”

I wondered at the rise and fall of her bosom, that I was the love of her life and the only man on earth who would hae her color rise at the sight of me.

“Please allow me tae remain, Mistress Cleish.”

“Why should I allow a coarse bear of a man tae remain in m’presence?”

I bit my lip and watched her face, wishin’ she would remember me, but she dinna... I had tae continue on...

“Mistress Cleish, allow me tae begin anew. I will turn the earth and drag the sun away. I will untether time from the turn of day and night, replace history with the new — I plead with ye tae allow me tae introduce m’self and embark on the new meeting, I am Artair.”

She shook her head. “Ye are so full of the worth of yerself, such grandiose speech, bragging as if ye are Hesperus—”

“What did ye call me?”

“Hesperus, the god of—”

“I ken who Hesperus is, Mistress Cleish. And I assure ye, aye, I will be like Hesperus, devoted tae the moon.”

“And I...? Who is the moon?”

“Ye are, Mistress Cleish, ye are Selene riding across the night sky in her chariot, and I am Hesperus, I will drive yer bulls—”

The corner of her mouth went up. “Och nae, ye are already driving the bulls.”

I put my hand over m’heart.

Her eyes narrowed. “Are ye certain we haena met before?”

I looked at a far painting and considered, then said, “I believe we would remember.”

There was a movement by the door to the Great Hall. She said, “I suppose we must go in.”

“Aye, we must...”

Yet we lingered.

She said, “Ye must call me Mistress Cleish.”

I said, “Good, thank ye, Mistress Cleish, I winna keep ye for another moment then, we ought tae enter the Great Hall for our meal.”

She raised her chin, and I kept my eyes down as she turned and left for the door.

Chapter 69 - Gwynedd



We walked intae the Great Hall. My cousin, Janet, whispered, “Who was he? Was he bothering ye?”

I shook my head, but I was verra bothered. He felt so familiar, yet I couldna place him. He spoke as if he knew me, as if he had been invited tae speak tae me, and yet...

I stole a glance at him, entering the room. He was verra fine, big and handsome, a ginger beard. He had a sword on his hip and walked intae the room as if he owned it.

There were about thirty people there for dinner, cousins and distant relations, all standing in groups having conversations near the table, waiting for our arrival before we would all take our seats.

Janet and I joined the group around my uncle, Laird Kincardine, my father and his wife, and Laird Dudley, who stood at my father’s left hand. He had been there all week and though he hadna made an offer for my hand, yet, I suspected that it was planned for the coming morn. I dinna stand near him because I dinna like him much. He was old, with thin shoulders and a pinched face. I sighed and averted my eyes as Artair strode across the room and boldly took the place beside me.

My uncle said, “Good, ye hae arrived, Prince Artair, hae ye met my niece, Mistress Cleish?”

I blinked, struck speechless, then coughed out, "...*Prince Artair?*" I looked at Artair's face. "Nae... a prince?"

My uncle said, "Aye, he is a prince of..." He asked Artair, "...what was the name of yer kingdom, Yer Highness?"

"Riaghalbane, tis past the Americas. And aye, Laird Kincardine, I met yer niece, Mistress Cleish, in the gallery." He bowed tae me.

Then my uncle introduced him tae my father and Laird Dudley.

Prince Artair said tae Laird Dudley, "Hae we met once before?"

Laird Dudley said, "Nae, Yer Highness—"

"I am certain we hae — I ken! Were ye on the losing end of the battle outside of Culross?"

"Nae, I haena—"

Prince Artair said, "Och, are ye *certain?* Were ye one of the men who fled the fields at the end...?"

Laird Dudley looked shocked, shaking his head.

Prince Artair shrugged. "I must hae mistaken ye for someone else, m'apologies."

My father glanced at me and then at Prince Artair. He asked, "What brings ye here, Yer Highness? I dinna realize m'brother-in-law knew any crown princes from distant lands."

My uncle said, "His Highness and I hae only just met."

Prince Artair said, "I was on a journey and was drawn tae visit this castle, twas as if the moon were guidin' my way — ye ought not argue with the moon, lairds, especially when the winds turn this cold. I always say, if there is a warm chamber for ye, ye ought tae seek it. Thank ye, Laird Kincardine for yer warm reception."

My uncle led us tae the table.

Laird Dudley who had been attentively holding my chair and sitting beside me for the past few days was ignored and

pushed aside to sit farther down the table. He looked irritated, his face more pinched than usual, his pursed angry lips accentuating his age.

Prince Artair refused to sit right by my uncle and instead stepped down a few chairs, saying, “Please, go right ahead... I am an uninvited guest... I daena mind sitting farther down... I insist... I winna interrupt a family gathering...” And pulled a chair out, gesturing for me tae sit. And somehow I allowed him tae seat me.

He then put his hand on the chair beside mine, looking boldly around as he sank down into it, sweeping his coat back and adjusting his sword beside his chair.

He smiled.

My cousin sat down beside me and whispered, “He is a prince?”

I whispered, “I suppose so.”

Then said, under my breath to Artair, “Ye dinna tell me, Yer *Highness*, that ye were a crown prince. I wouldna hae spoke tae ye with such insolence.”

He waved a hand. “Och nae, ye would hae. Ye wouldna be deterred by a royal title, Mistress Cleish, besides, twas nae insolence, I deserved every one of yer admonishments. Ye handled yerself impressively.”

“I called ye a bear! I accused ye of being coarse! I am mortified!”

He grinned. “I *am* a bear, I daena care if a bonny lass calls me a bear — how will I find that an insult when tis m’true nature? I am swept away by yer sharp wit and yer beauty...”

I couldna keep listening as my ears pricked up tae hear my father say my name at the other end of the table.

He was speaking tae Laird Dudley, “...about Mistress Cleish ...aye, ye can speak with me in the morning...”

Laird Dudley said, “Good good, I hope we can come tae an arrangement...”

I glanced at Prince Artair.

He looked as if he had heard them as well, his eyes were settled on Laird Dudley and my father... but then he turned in his seat tae face me. "Perhaps we ought tae get tae ken each other, Mistress Cleish."

His eyes were direct and kind.

"Aye, Yer Highness."

"Would ye call me Artair?"

I shook my head and glanced at my father and Laird Dudley. "I wouldna dare."

"Prince Artair then, please."

"Aye, Prince Artair."

He said, "The sound of m' name on yer voice is heavenly."

I blushed.

He smiled. "Dost ye ken, Mistress Cleish, that the high color on yer cheeks is the most beautiful hue I hae ever seen?"

"Nae, ye think so? I find it rather shameful."

He clutched his heart, comically. "Och nae! Och, Mistress Cleish, is the rose ashamed of its petals? Does the bird feel shame because of its plumage? Nae, when yer color rises it accentuates yer beauty, I am enraptured and try tae name it, scarlet? Sometimes. Other times it turns the pink of a wild rose."

I huffed. "Och, for a big scandalous oaf, ye are too flattering."

"Mistress Cleish, yer flesh is the color of flowers, but ye daena expect me tae notice? Even as I canna draw my eyes away? Even a bear has time tae notice the beauty of flowers."

I said, "That is entirely enough. Prince Artair, once again ye hae crossed well past custom, becoming far too familiar."

His eyes glanced around the table and he lowered his voice. “Aye, I agree, and yer high color is attracting the eye of the old gentleman at the far end of the table. I must distract ye from the irritation with me, so ye return tae a modest alabaster shade—”

Our plates were placed in front of us, and there were serving dishes down the middle of the table. There was roasted pheasant with thick gravy and savory spices, with carrots and turnips on the side. I drew a piece of bread to my plate and cut a slice of cheese from another plate.

He said, “How about a game of guessing, what dost ye think my favorite food is? ”

I said, “I think... I think ye look like a man who likes a roast, perhaps venison.” I tapped my chin. “Aye, venison roast, I think ye appreciate going on a hunt as well.”

He grinned, ripping a piece of bread in half. “I do like tae hunt... and ye are correct, tis my favorite, and now tis my turn, I think ye also appreciate a roast venison, because ye ken tis *my* favorite food.”

I said, “Och, ye are so forward! Nae, how would I hae known ye tae like venison when I hae only now guessed it? And ye are a stranger, why would I prefer yer food? I prefer—”

“Nae, allow me tae guess! I think yer favorite is a cream puff.”

I looked at him for a moment. “How did ye guess it? I do so love a cream puff, light and flaky, and delicious. Raso, my cook, has made it for me before with whipped rose cream in the center and flakes of gold upon it.”

“Och aye, that does sound delicious.”

“I can eat m’weight of them, that was a verra good guess.”

He asked, “And how does Mistress Cleish like tae spend her time?”

“I daena want tae bore ye.”

“Ye winna, I want tae ken. Or let me guess, ye daena like tae be bored, ye winna sit for long, ye must be the master of... yer household?”

I lowered my voice, “Well... m’mother passed years ago, I learned, verra young, that I was needed in the runnin’ of things. Aye, that was another good guess. I see tae the planning of the meals, and the running of the house. I do verra much like tae plan a feast.”

“...and ye are also interested in yer attire, ye like a fine dress.”

I blushed, “I do... this one is new.”

“Tis m’favorite color.”

My blush grew so hot that I waved my hand in front of my face.

From down the table Laird Dudley asked, “Are ye well, Mistress Cleish? Ye seem tae glow bright red, ye might want tae retire.”

“Tis well, m’laird, I am enjoyin’ the meal. The room felt warm for a moment.”

Prince Artair, his eyes leveled on Laird Dudley, emitted a low growl.

Under my breath I asked, “Are ye bothered, Prince Artair?”

“Aye, I daena like Dudley tae take an interest in ye.”

I felt shocked. “What is it tae ye...? I am... he has been here for days and ye are only just now arrived and...”

Laird Dudley said, down the table, “Ye seem upset, Mistress Cleish, ye really ought tae go tae yer rooms.”

Prince Artair tossed down his napkin. “Nae, she is well! Are ye well, Mistress Cleish?”

“Aye, I am well, I am enjoying a fine meal and some splendid music, and some warm company.”

My father said, “But ye are overly ruddy and warm, perhaps ye ought tae come tae this side of the table. There is a coolness near the wall. The draft might keep ye comfortable.”

“Nae, father, I am *well*.”

My father and Laird Dudley spoke tae each other and m’uncle joined in.

Prince Artair turned his attention tae his dinner and I ate a few bites of my meal, then said, “Yer Highness—”

He gave me a look and I said it again, “Yer Highness, what am I tae ye? Ye speak tae me as if ye are familiar. Ye are overly bold and grow surly when others show an interest in me.”

He stared at the far wall, nodding as I spoke, then there was a long pause, as if he were choosing his words carefully. He said quietly, “M’lady, I am yers, and I wish ye were mine.”

My eyes went wide, but then I realized that the other men were stealing glances at me.

I turned my head and whispered, “I daena understand. Ye are a prince, and a stranger.”

“Aye, I am a prince, therefore I am not certain ye can refuse me.”

I said, “Sire!”

But then I saw the smile tugging at the edge of his lips.

“Ye are teasing?”

“Aye, Mistress Cleish, ye can refuse me, but I warn ye, twill likely kill me, and ye daena want tae kill yer Artair.”

“*My Artair*.” I scoffed.

“Aye. Tis true.” He put a big bite of pheasant in his mouth and chewed, then swallowed.

“I hae come upon ye, met ye, spoken with ye, and tis irretrievable, m’heart is yers.”

The men all looked down the table. Artair whispered, “Daena look at me, daena speak, just listen...”

I nodded, and sipped from my wine and placed it back as he spoke, keeping his voice low, “I am a crown prince. I can take care of ye. I can protect ye. I am a capable warrior, but... I lead a life of danger and I am cautious about drawing ye in, tae ken I might put ye in harms way — this is a burden, but I wish ye tae be mine.”

The eyes at the other end of the table looked at us. He mopped gravy with a hunk of bread and ate a big bite. “I will explain all tae ye, in time, but for now I need tae ken, am I mistaken in us? I feel as if I hae known ye for a long time, as if we were tied tae each other, and as if ye were mine already, but I ken tis likely that ye daena feel the same way about yer poor Artair, and if ye say it, m’lady, I might not be able tae bear it.”

Just then my uncle said, “Prince Artair, m’niece has kept ye in conversation for too long, I ken ye must grow tired of the attention. We hae been remiss in not bringing yer chair closer tae the top of the table, why daena ye tell us about yer kingdom. Tis large?”

“Aye, it incorporates a great deal of land, spread over a continent.”

“Riaghalbane, ye say? Tis Christian?”

“Aye, tis.”

“Are ye at war? Seems Scotland has always an enemy at the border!”

Prince Artair said, “We had a long war but we ended it with a system of arena battles tae win the throne. We nae longer fight on a battlefield, instead I fight in an arena with a sword.”

My uncle said, “Tae the death?”

“Aye, three times so far, I fight tae protect m’father’s throne.” He glanced at me, “Tis the danger I spoke of.”

I said, “I see.”

My uncle said, “What of yer wealth?”

He said, “We hae a great deal of wealth, a large standing army—”

“Larger than the Spanish?”

“Aye, larger, but daena tell King James. I wouldna want him tae withdraw his royal welcome, I am greatly enjoying my visit tae these shores.”

The men at the other end of the table began tae speak together about the arena and speculating about the kingdom while Artair whispered once more tae me, “I winna lie tae ye, Gwynedd, twill not be easy tae tie yer life tae mine, but I will always keep yer best interest in mind in all things. I will drive yer chariot across the skies. I will be yer servant, yer champion, and yer Artair, for all my days. Tis m’oath tae ye.”

“Tis shocking, m’laird, ye sound as if ye are askin’ for me tae marry ye.”

He glanced around the table, and whispered, “I would like tae speak tae ye more, but I am asking yer permission tae make my intention known. I will ask for yer hand, but I daena want tae frighten ye, I daena want tae cause ye distress. Ye will still be able tae refuse me, but I fear...” He lowered his voice, even more, “Dudley is poised tae ask yer father for yer hand, and yer father is about tae agree. M’lady, allow me tae step in.”

Laird Dudley said, loudly, “Did ye say something, Yer Highness? I do think ye are conversing privately and ye ought not do that with a lady — she is tae be brought tae this end of the table. Daena ye think, Cleish?”

My father said, “Aye, I suppose we ought tae move her seat down here.” He stood. “We could put her beside her uncle, that way we can keep our eye upon her, and she will cease monopolizing the prince’s time...”

Laird Dudley stood and shifted his chair making room for another. “...yer daughter ought not be at the far end of the table...”

Artair looked at me, questioningly.

Laird Dudley continued on, looking mean and angry. "... tis unseemly..."

I said, quietly, "Aye."

Artair's brow raised up, "Aye, tae moving tae the other end of the table, or aye tae me?"

I would hae considered longer, I might hae thought about m'future and the risks of saying 'aye' tae a stranger, a man who looked brutish and had just admitted tae fightin' tae the death in an arena in a faraway land, and all of this had been a long day, with difficult conversations — a man I had just met who spoke so familiarly of love and time and how I was etched on his heart. I wondered if God was testing me, if I ought tae pray on the matter, but...

I looked into his eyes, and beheld kindness. He had been looking out over the room, and now he had offered tae step forward for me, tae speak on m'behalf, twas... I couldna decide if I trusted him, I might lose the offer of a Baron by allowing a prince tae play with m'heart, but I watched Laird Dudley and my father moving chairs, urging me tae leave Artair's side, and I was drawn tae stay. I looked at him and felt a warmth filling my heart and soul, he was mine, from the rumble of his voice tae the raised brow, his jesting words, and the tug at the edge of his smile. I felt like I had known him, as if we were settled.

I said, "Aye tae ye, m'laird."

His smile spread, his hand went tae his heart. "Och aye, m'love."

While the heat spread up my cheeks, emblazoning my skin, he pushed his chair back and stood.

Chapter 70 - Gwynedd



He raised his mug of ale. “Laird Kincardine, thank ye for yer hospitality. It has been a good evening. I appreciate that I was so warmly received.”

He turned his mug and attention in my direction. “And tae Mistress Cleish, thank ye for the conversation over this fine dinner served by our host, yer uncle, Laird Kincardine.”

He continued to the rest of the people at the table. “I haena truly explained the reason for arrivin’ here this evening. My kingdom has wealth and power, all that a young crown prince could want, except... I hae been in search of a bride.”

His mug went even higher. “I am pleased tae announce that I hae found her, at long last, my mind is set, and I wish tae negotiate the contract for her hand. Laird Cleish, may we arrange the meeting?”

I kept my eyes down except for a quick glance at that end of the table.

My father was speechless, his eyes blinking.

Laird Dudley looked furious, his face more pinched, his glare causing me tae consider, *he is frightenin’ me*.

My uncle said, becomin’ the voice of reason, “Yer Highness, are ye speaking of my niece? Of Mistress Cleish?”

“Aye, I would like tae marry her. I am ready for the arrangements tae be made.”

My uncle said tae my father, who sat with his mouth open, “Cleish, do ye hear the Prince? Ye hae a crown prince askin’

for yer daughter's hand in marriage.”

“I hear it... Gwynedd, did ye make a promise tae His Highness?”

“Nae, father. I wouldna without speaking tae ye first.”

Artair put his mug down and sank into his seat, his hand brushing against my skirts, a kindness, a reminder that he was present, beside me.

He said, “Nor would I, Laird Cleish. Gwynedd hasna made me a promise, but she has given me permission tae stand. I intend tae marry her. I wish tae ask ye, Laird Cleish, for yer daughter's hand in marriage.”

Laird Dudley shoved his chair back and stood, “This is verra troubling, she has been spoken for, I hae been here making arrangements!”

“Has a deal been struck? What is yer offer?”

He said, “It has not yet—”

Prince Artair said, “My offer is she will be the princess of Riaghalbane, then when I win the throne in an arena battle, she will become Queen. My offer is that my army, my coffers, the favor of my kingdom and all its strength and power will lay at her feet, tae be directed in the protection of Queen Gwynedd and her family. Do ye hae a counter offer?”

Laird Dudley sat down. “None so grand.”

Prince Artair said, “Aye, tis what I suspected — Laird Cleish, will ye grant me a meeting tae discuss the settlement?”

Laird Cleish said, “Aye, but sire, she is but a baron's daughter, I am not certain the dowry will be what ye...”

I said, “Father, daena say it!”

“Tis true, daughter, ye are not in the station tae hae a dowry for a princess!”

Artair smiled. “Tis unseemly tae speak of a dowry in front of the cousins, daena ye think, Laird Cleish?”

My father nodded.

Artair said, “Besides, she is yer only daughter. I think ye will raise the wealth required for the arrangement. She is verra beautiful, she is all I want, and I am set on the match. Tis important that ye meet me in the morn.”

My father said, “Aye, Yer Highness.”

And I knew that Artair had won.



The cousins were in high spirits, everyone at the table was talking after the excitement of Artair’s pronouncement. He asked for another mug of ale for us, then asked, “Would ye like tae take a stroll around the room?”

He stood and put out a hand. “Ye must bring yer ale, we must drink and be convivial as we go, tis a celebration after all.”

I used his hand to rise, feeling stunned by his touch, but then pulled my hand away and carried my mug, so we wouldna touch anymore.

We walked toward the hearth, and stood near it warming ourselves. There was a man playing a lute in the corner, he was not good at it, but plucked and strummed most nights during my uncle’s meals. He often missed the notes he intended, causing the strings tae screech discordantly.

Artair said, the corner of his mouth turned up. “Ah, he is a master of the lute.” He tapped his foot tae the beat, then when the musician missed his fingers on the strings he continued his foot tapping and said, “Och, we are pulling for yer beat, try tae keep it!”

He and I both laughed.

The musician said, “Aye, sire, would ye like a faster song tae dance?” He missed a note, unable tae speak and play at once.

“Nae, perhaps something verra quiet so the lady and I might converse.”

“Aye.” He began tae play a song with a melancholy melody.

Artair whispered tae me, “Tis too sad for the celebration, but he daena seem capable of too many moods, we must accept his limitations.”

I said, “He practices nightly, ye might think he would get proficient, yet here we are.” The notes of the lute twanged uncomfortably.

Artair looked at me, then raised his chin, “What dost ye think of the night, m’lady?”

“I am overwhelmed by the night, m’laird, tis a great deal tae think of.” I took a sip of my ale. “Ye are so certain of yerself, of me, of this... how can ye be so certain?”

He watched the embers in the fire for a moment then began, “Ye and I... “ then finished, “We hae met before, Mistress Cleish and—”

“I believe ye ought tae call me Gwynedd.”

“We hae met before, Gwynedd, dost ye recognize it?”

“I do, though I canna place the time.”

“There is something I must tell ye of afore we go further.”

I watched his face, waiting for him to proceed.

“I hae been granted the ability tae travel through time, I am here in the year 1578, but m’kingdom is in the twenty-third century. The founder of the kingdom of Riaghallbane has been helping me get tae ye, he’s from the twenty-second century.”

I was bewildered by his story, but focused upon the words, “What do ye mean, he helped ye get tae me?”

“I met ye before, here in yer uncle’s castle. Ye were beautiful and I was enamored of ye and wanted ye tae be mine. I asked ye tae allow me tae visit ye at Cleish Castle and came tae ye for the feast on Twelfth Night. I asked ye tae marry me in yer father’s Great Hall and ye said ‘aye’.”

“These, m’laird, are the ravings of a man who has gone mad. How do I not remember meeting ye? I hae nae recollection of ye visiting me!”

“Because time shifted and somehow ye were marryin’ Laird Dudley and ye broke m’heart, so I hae traveled through time tae get tae ye afore it happened.”

“This is... *none* of it true.”

“Tis true. Tis all of it true, but I ken tis unbelievable. I will prove the truth of it tae ye, in time, but this is why ye daena remember me, yet I remember ye. Because we hae met before. I loved ye, I wanted tae marry ye, and ye said aye.”

I said, “How am I supposed tae believe ye? Ye walk in here a prince, and tell me that ye hae won me before? Ye are, once again, sounding like a scoundrel.”

He said, “Gwynedd, when ye met me, and when ye promised yerself tae me, ye thought I was just a man in Tor—”

“Torphichen’s men... where hae I heard that before...? How do I know it?”

“Because tis deep in yer heart, Gwynedd. I was here with Torphichen’s men. Ye dinna ken I was a prince, and ye promised yerself tae me anyway. That is how much ye liked me.”

I teased, “Seems unlikely that I would like a lowly man in — how high up were ye in station?”

He said, “I was the second in Torphichen’s men.”

“That truly sounds beneath me, how did ye convince me?”

“I made great promises, but I also made ye laugh.”

I said, “I do like tae laugh, tis commonly known, but tis also unlikely that I would promise m’self against the wishes of m’father.”

He smiled, “I am over-speaking it a bit, ye dinna promise me ye would marry me, but ye promised me ye wouldna marry anyone else until I was able tae come speak tae yer father, but I kent yer mind, ye were going tae be mine.”

“This is a story of magic, tis not a Christian tale, m’laird.”

“I ken tis difficult tae understand. This is a story that daena sound real, but tis, real enough, but even without understanding the story, or believing the truth of it, this is all ye need tae ken, that I feel as if I hae known ye, and hae wanted ye as m’wife for a long time. I was willin’ tae turn the world and drag the sun and moon through the skies tae win ye, and I looped, oh how I looped, tis a dangerous and despicable thing, and I set the world awry and almost lost ye and had tae be courageous and valiant and here I am... a prince, but I would give it all away tae hae ye, and...”

He looked at me intently. “Dost ye understand what I say, Gwynedd?”

“Nae, not at all... but even if it sounds untrue, an outlandish story that canna possibly be real, ye sound as if ye truly mean it, and... I canna explain it but it seems true in my heart — ye met me and ye want tae marry me.”

“That is all that is important. Except this...”

He glanced around the room. Most everyone was still there, in discussion, finishing up their desserts, having drinks, laughing and conversing.

Artair got down on his knees and took my hands and held them and looked up at me.

Everyone stopped talking and watched.

“Artair, are ye askin’ me tae marry ye?”

“Aye, I am a bear, askin’ the princess tae be mine. What can I do tae hae ye wed me?”

“Perhaps ye ought not tell such outlandish tales.”

“I winna tell tales, I will only ever tell ye what is true or is funny, because tae see ye laugh makes m’heart sing.”

“...and ye ought not be a bear. Ye ought tae be sensible, and tae be as unlike a bear as ye can be.”

“I will strive tae be sensible, forthright, and when I am a bear, twill be in pursuit of makin’ ye smile or in protecting ye

from harm.”

I put my hands on the sides of his beard, and looked down on his face. “Dost ye promise ye will be true tae me, Artair?”

“Aye, and we will hae a long marriage, with many bairns. I would like six, enough tae fill down the sides of a long table, dost ye think six would be good?”

“Ye hae already planned the number of bairns? Och nae, Artair, ye hae been dwelling upon this. Ye are desperate for m’answer. What if I said nae?”

He clutched his chest. “Och nae, ye canna! Ye would break me intae halves, and then... ye would not hae the most wonderful bairns, the six that I hae promised ye — they will all be bright pink, like a garden of beautiful roses.”

He smiled up at me. “I am on my knees, Gwynedd, beggin’ ye tae marry yer love, Artair.”

“Ye are my love?”

“Aye, I am the love of yer life as ye are the love of mine, we canna fight it, Gwynedd, tis set in time, tis up tae us tae make the story come true.”

I said, “Aye, I will marry ye, m’laird.”



The end.

Thank you

Because I really enjoyed seeing Magnus at his dinner table, now I'm wondering what have he and his family been up to?

That's what I'm writing next.

[Long Live the King](#)

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 and Artair and Gwynedd.



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 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

Diana@dianaknightley.com

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

Artair a crown-prince in the twenty-third century. He was raised in the sixteenth century in the household of *Laird Torphichen*.

Gwynedd. She lives at Cleish Castle in Kinross-shire. She visits her uncle at (old) Kincardine Castle.

Jamie. Laird Torphichen's nephew and heir.

Sir James Sandilands, known to Artair as *Laird Torphichen* is a real historical person.

Malcolm, Nor's brother

Aenghus, Nor's youngest brother

Claray, Nor's little sister

Ailsa, Aenghus's wife

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, Livvy's eldest brother

Ryan, Livvy's older brother

Charlie, Livvy's younger brother

Livvy's uncles on her mother's side: *Junior, Tim, Dan.*

Johnne Cambell. The original finder of the portals in 1557.



The Kings of Riaghalbane:

Normond I - August 11, 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...)



Speaking of dates...

The Twelfth Night feast on the last day of Yule would be held on January 6

Lughnasadh marked the beginning of the harvest season and would be celebrated August 1

The feast day of Martinmas would be held on November 11



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.

mucag - pig

ben - mountain

burn - stream

Alba - Scotland

Balach Mòr - Big Boy



Locations:

Fernandina Beach on Amelia Island, Florida

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

Old Kincardine Castle (Where Torphichen's men asked for shelter) was a 13th-century castle that was dismantled in 1645. Only small fragments remain.

Caldour Castle: (Where Artair was raised.) *The family seat of the Torphichen family, situated in Midcalder.* Home of **Lord Torphichen**, a title in the Peerage of Scotland, created by Queen Mary in 1564 for Sir James Sandilands. He was succeeded by his great-nephew James Sandilands (Jamie) all later lords were descended from the second Lord Torphichen. Torphichen, is pronounced 'Tor-fikken'.



Cleish Castle is a 16th-century tower house in Kinross-shire, Scotland.



True things that happened:

The **Battle of Langside** was fought on 13 May 1568 between an army loyal to Mary, Queen of Scots, led by Archibald Campbell, 5th Earl of Argyll; and an army fighting for her infant son James VI, led by James Stewart, the Earl of Moray. After a forty-five minute battle, Mary's forces were defeated. She went into exile and captivity in England. The battle is the start of the Marian civil war.



This inspired Gwynedd's dresses.



This dress inspired Claray's silver wedding dress.



Cynthia Tyler sent me research for a Yuletide feast (sadly Artair never made it to this feast, but I include the menu in its entirety so we can see what he missed) and the night before dinner:

First, sunset on January 6 in 1570 would have been at four in the afternoon in Glasgow.

I'm thinking the main meal around two-ish - four-ish

They undoubtedly would have had porridge for breakfast, with ale to drink

It's too early for their using forks at the dinner table.

In fact, the lowest people to be seated, WELL below the salt, still may have been using bread trenchers...

Catholicism - EVERYone was still Catholic....It's not impossible that a traveling priest or monk could have offered a mass in the morning.

Remember - the whole of Christmas as we know it was very much an invention of the nineteenth century, thanks in large part to Prince Albert and Queen Victoria, and the introduction of more Germanic customs.

So, in 1570/71, it would have been very little different from most other days.

Spoons

Knives

Maybe a few pewter plates, some very simply painted plates from Holland (simple geometric patterns) for the Laird/Lady, an honored guest

Carved wooden cups for the lowers, pewter or silver goblets for the high end of the table. (In Italy, they might have had glass already - but it's a bit much to expect in the highlands)

Linen cloths draped over the tables - also used for guests to wipe their fingers.

Bevvies:

Ale

Cider (would be alcoholic - no way to prevent fermentation)

There would be a spiced wine known as Hippocras

Soup: a soup of fish

a broth of mutton which would be served in large bowls, each for use by at least two people at once, more at the lower end.

The laird, and the Lady, might have individual bowls.

Served WITH the soups course would be eel pie, pigeon pie, and bannocks with butter.

Second presentation: A haunch of venison (best of my calculations, a good six hours turning over a low fire. It would have to have been started at dawn. Seasoned with juniper, rosemary, thyme, long pepper, and brought in on a wooden trencher

Showpiece would be a roasted swan

Pheasant would be presented cased, that is, in a thick, rather solid pie crust, the bird layered with onions, maybe walnuts

No potatoes yet, nor carrots - but, roasted turnips are good, there could have been cabbage, there certainly was kale

Finals: A cake for Twelfth Night (I have no idea at this time of the recipe, but I would imagine it would have dried currants in it, and honey, probably cinnamon.)

Compote from dried crabapples and pears

A few roasted chestnuts, still a very new delicacy in Scotland

Custards flavored with preserved wild cherries

Quinces in sweet syrup

Dates

A cheese or two

The night before, a light meal of bannocks, cheese, a brothy soup with kale.

At that time, and I'll check again tomorrow, people didn't eat three regular meals like we do.

Breakfast, and a mid-afternoon meal.

If you got hungry later, maybe a bannock, a crust of cheese. Ale.

Dark came early, and people went to bed earlier. The only light was candles, or sputtering oil lamps.

So, Twelfth night cake -

dried currants, certainly

honey, and or sugar, yes

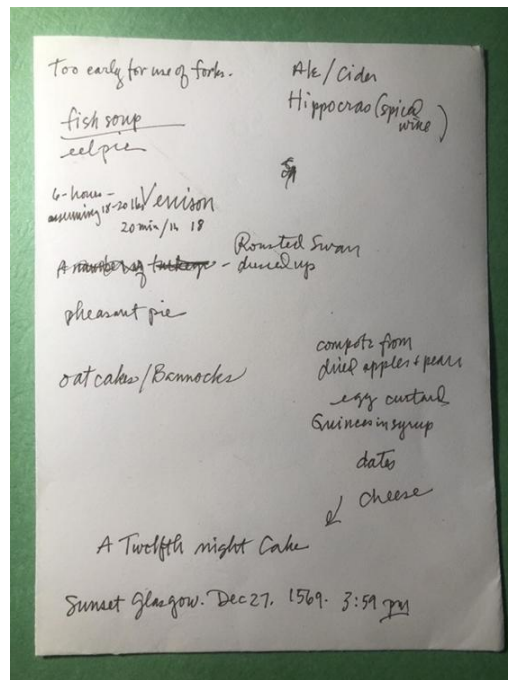
dried raisins, probably

pounded almonds - very likely

cinnamon, maybe

eggs, flour, butter

All very dense. Don't forget the bean.



Cynthia also recommended cream puffs to be Gwynedd's favorite food.

By this time, the cream puff (choux pastry) was in existence, so the idea of a croquembouche is not too farfetched, and were it to be spangled with flecks of gold leaf and dusted with precious cinnamon... quite spectacular.

Acknowledgments

Thank you so much Cynthia Tyler for your tireless story edits and proof-reading. You also helped me out so much with menu research, thank you for all your help.



Thank you to Kristen Schoenmann De Haan for beta-reading in this busiest of seasons. I did your notes last and yes, you found something I had missed!



Thank you to Jessica Fox for your notes and for telling me you “Loved the story, I knew from the title that there would be looping but that is not what I expected which was a pleasant surprise.” It means a lot to me that you’re still here after all this time.



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.



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:

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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:

Johnne Cambell is the OG time traveler, but life is hard sometimes, he needs a break, like a month of calm, a vacation of sorts. It might be a calm historical period, or perhaps he wants a chaotic event to hide behind. Maybe he wants something interesting that he can watch from the comfort and excitement of his balcony.

Pick a year from 1557 and up to present day. And a location, perhaps a castle, a hotel, anything interesting.

From my own research I picked the Battle of Langside, which wasn't suggested but a few of you did think of visiting battles. Kathleen Fullerton said he "would spend time at the greatest conquests", Liz Rains Johnson for thinking of the 1863 Civil War, Paula Flynn for saying 1781 Yorktown, and Cynthia Soto for "Yorktown to witness the surrender of Cornwallis."



Then I asked: *Which book of Magnus would you say is the year 2022? Does anyone have any idea what Magnus and Katie were doing in November 15-December 31 2022?*

Was anyone at their house in Florida? (now you see there was a reason.) I ultimately picked 2024 for the year, but appreciate Alana K Mahler, Alison Caudle, Angelique Mahfood, April Bochantin, Barbara Baker, Fleur Garmonsway, Harley Moore, Kelley Fouraker McCade, Marie Smith, and Maro Andrikidis Hogan for your assistance!



I also asked: *What does the embroidery from Kaitlyn's grandmother say?*

The one on the wall in the office. And what book?

Thank you to Patricia Howard Burke, Alana K Mahler, and David Bowlby for finding it:

"Don't tell Quentin though, not sure I want him to know I hurt my shoulder falling off my horse."

"Truth is, Quentin knows how hard that all is. I don't think you have to worry about it, but I get it. I'll keep it to myself."

I went into the office for our important files. I opened the safe and grabbed out the stack of passports, birth certificates, and other documents. Then my eyes landed on a small framed embroidery, on one of the rows and rows of antique books, first editions most of them, a collection proudly situated on the floor to ceiling shelves. One of the first things I had done when we moved in.

The weird thing was — the embroidery was unfamiliar. I went over and picked it up. It was a Scottish thistle, and above it:

Your heart will always guide you home.

—For Katie, love Barb summer 1997



Result 1 of 2





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.

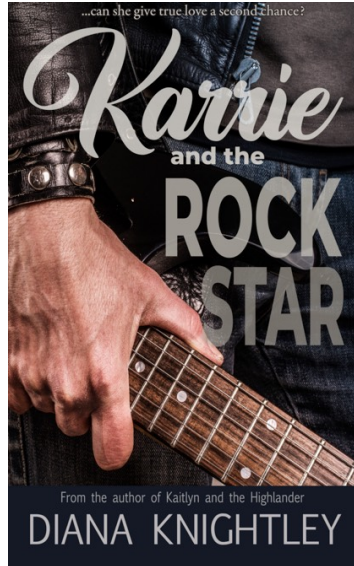
The Kaitlyn and the Highlander series



- [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),
Long Live the King (Book 19).

*Books in the Campbell Sons
series...*



Why would I, a successful woman, bring a date to a funeral like a psychopath?

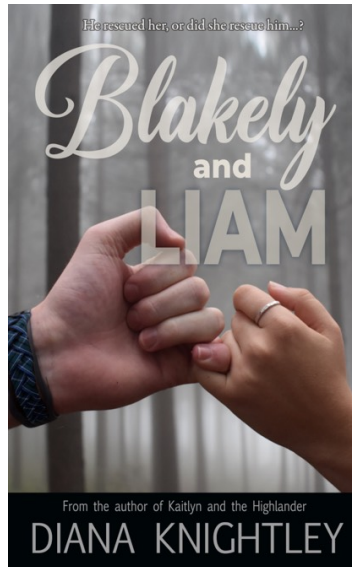
Because Finch Mac, the deliciously hot, Scottish, bearded, tattooed, incredibly famous rock star, who was once the love of my life... will be there.

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...