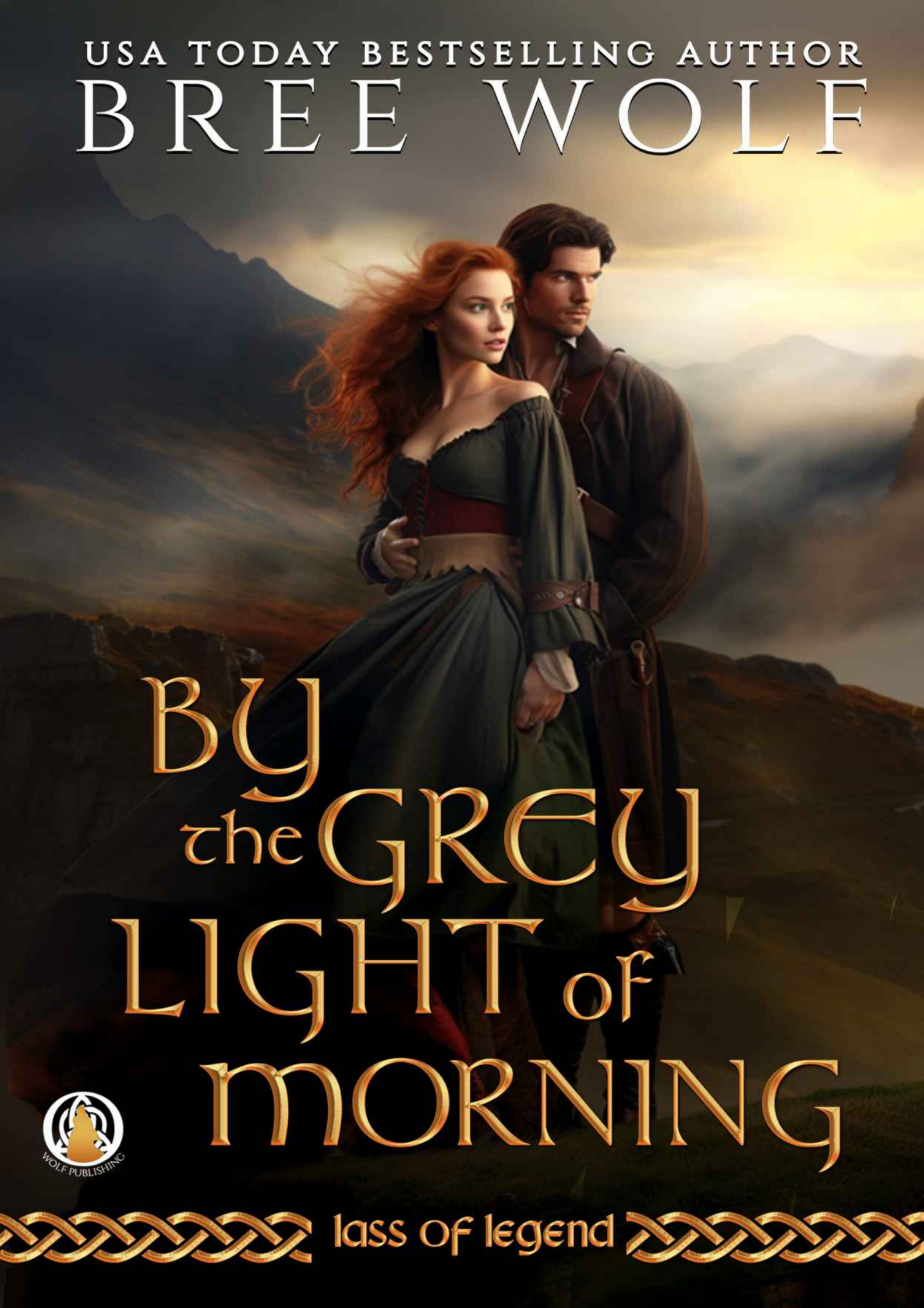


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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MORNING



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#2 LASS OF LEGEND SERIES

BY BREE WOLF



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Lass of Legend

Whisked centuries into the past, fiery Scottish lass Yvaine MacKinnear finds herself entangled in a bloody feud between rival clans. While struggling to reconcile her identity and resist her clan's political plots, she falls desperately for enemy warrior Caelen MacCarraig. Torn between her home and a new life with Caelen—prophesied in the old legends of her people—she races to alter the course of history.

With betrayals, passion, and destiny colliding, Yvaine and Caelen fight to forge peace between the warring clans; yet conspiring forces threaten everything.

[#1 Like the Break of Dawn](#)

[#2 By the Grey Light of Morning](#)

[#3 In the Coming of Tomorrow](#)

Chapter One

BARGAINING CHIP



MacKinnear Island, Scotland 1401 (or a variation thereof)

As Yvaine stepped out of MacLeòir Castle and into the courtyard, the morning sky was painted in brilliant saffron and pink hues, reaching out to the world in a glorious sunrise. Yvaine's heart, though, felt heavy as her gaze flew over the carriage prepared for them. Warriors, their escort to Castle Morganach, were mounted atop their horses surrounding the carriage.

Her brothers Logan and Rory, too, were seated on their mounts, both their faces grim. Not even young Rory with his easy laugh managed a smile, and yet Yvaine could not shake the feeling that there was something on his mind. His green eyes met hers, and the expression there was almost imploring.

A few paces ahead of her, Yvaine saw her mother walk upon her father's arm as he escorted her to the waiting carriage. Only there was nothing gallant in the gesture. Indeed, her father's gaze was hard, and as they reached the carriage, his hand clamped down upon her mother's, causing a gasp to fly from her lips. "Not a word," he hissed, leaning in close, his eyes commanding.

Swallowing hard, Yvaine's mother nodded, her own eyes downcast in obedience and fear, and Yvaine's heart twisted in outrage. If only she could... say something, put her father in his place, demand he treat them with respect.

All of them.

Including her.

Yet it was not to be. Yvaine knew so, and yet her mind constantly ran away toward this hopeful place that reminded her of the life she had had before.

Before she had stumbled into the past.

Still, in a strange way this was her home. After all, she had been born in this time, to this family. She had been only three years of age when circumstances had guided her to a secret island just off the coast. Yvaine could not remember those days. She could not remember how she had found her way there; yet she had to have. Somehow, she had to have found her way to the island, found the cavern there and stumbled into the glistening pool of water in its midst.

Somehow, she had traveled to the future and found her family, her true family. People who had loved her all her life. People who respected her and encouraged her. People who had never stood in her way, only ever concerned with her well-being, her happiness. Aye, it had been a wonderful life, and only now that Yvaine had been jerked back into her old life—so markedly different from the way she had grown up—did she realize how fortunate she had been.

Aiden MacKinnear, the man who had become her father, would never have dared decide her future for her. He would never have contemplated the thought of arranging a union, much less one against her wishes. Heather MacKinnear, the

woman who had been mother to Yvaine for as long as she could remember, had always been a proud and strong woman, her eyes only ever downcast in moments of deep sadness... or moments of mischief. There had been such joy and merriment in Yvaine's family that its absence now weighed heavily upon her heart. Every once in a while, she shared a smile or a laugh with Rory, yet beyond that, there was no happiness here.

As Yvaine watched her birth mother seat herself in the carriage, her gaze collided with her father's. He watched her carefully, as his gaze slightly narrowed. "Mind yer manners," he warned in a chilling voice, his hand now clasped hard around her upper arm, holding her in place. "Ye will do as is expected of ye." His brows rose meaningfully as his eyes drilled into hers. "That is if ye still want the MacCarraig lad to see the next sunrise." A dark chuckle rumbled in his throat, and Yvaine stared into her father's face, aghast at the lack of emotion she saw there. Did he truly not care? Could he end another's life just like that without a moment of hesitation? Without even a touch of regret?

Finally seated in the carriage across from her mother, Yvaine watched from the window as they pulled out of the courtyard, leaving MacLeòir Castle behind. Slowly, their small family party surrounded by an imposing group of warriors made their way along a path winding northward toward Castle Morganach.

Yvaine's mother sat with her hands folded stoically in her lap, her face set in an expression of calm reserve. Not a word left her lips, and Yvaine could not shake the feeling that her mother did not dare meet her eyes.

"What does Father not wish for me to ken?" Yvaine asked in a quiet voice, not wanting to be overheard by the riders

flanking the carriage.

As if slapped, her mother's head snapped up, her eyes wide as she stared at her daughter.

Yvaine heaved a deep sigh. "Tell me."

Swallowing hard, her mother shook her head, a forced smile curling the corners of her lips. "There is nothing, Child. Where would ye get such an idea?" Again, her mother's gaze returned to her folded hands, now clenched in her lap.

"Mother, ye're an awful liar," Yvaine exclaimed with an exasperated sigh. "Tell me. Please." She leaned forward, bracing her elbows upon her legs. "Does it have anything to do with Caelen? Is he all right? Did Father—?" Yvaine swallowed hard, unable to finish the question, unable to even contemplate that her father might have already broken his word... and done something irreversible to Caelen.

Her mother remained silent for a few moments, yet there was guilt etched into her eyes.

Seeing it, Yvaine's heart sank, suddenly weighted down by pain and sorrow. "Please, Mother," she begged as tears shot to her eyes. "Tell me what Father has done."

Finally lifting her head, her mother reached out her hands and grasped Yvaine's, regret in her eyes and a soothing smile upon her lips. "He hasna done anything. I assure ye, Child, nothing has happened to the lad. He is well... as far as I ken," she added like an afterthought, and her gaze instantly fell from Yvaine's.

Desperate hope surged through Yvaine, and she clasped her mother's hands more tightly. "Yet there is something ye're not telling me. 'Tis written all over yer face. Tell me true."

Her mother shook her head. “Ye’re right,” she finally admitted, chancing a glance up at Yvaine. “But I assure ye, ’tis not what ye think. Yer father hasna broken the word he has given ye.”

Yvaine gathered strength from the way her mother’s eyes looked into hers, for once not wavering but steady. She exhaled a deep breath then leaned back in the upholstered seat and closed her eyes for a precious moment.

All night, she had lain awake, thinking of Caelen, wishing she could sneak down to the dungeons and, at least, speak to him. He had come to help her flee her father’s grasp, promised to take her back across the sea to the island and the cavern with that shimmering pool of water that she hoped possessed the power to send her back to the place she called home. And now? Now, Caelen was locked away in the dungeons, a threat hanging over his head, a threat that would see his life ended if Yvaine were to go back on the deal she had made with her father: to see Caelen’s life saved and him set free, she would enter into the union her father had planned for her and marry Malcolm Morganach, leader of Clan Morganach.

The thought alone made her feel sick, and yet what was she to do? Even if Caelen were a stranger, she could not sentence him to death. She could not bear the burden of knowing that she could have saved him and had done nothing to do so. Only Caelen was not a stranger, was he? Nay, despite being the son of the MacLeòirs’ greatest enemy, despite the fact that they had only met a few months ago, despite having spoken no more than a few words with one another, he had somehow, inexplicably won Yvaine’s heart.

It was a simple truth, and a devastating one all the same. More than anything, Yvaine wished to return home. Day and

night, her heart ached for the family she had lost, for her parents and her three older brothers Duncan, Keir, and Magnus. Aye, they could all be exasperating at times, Duncan with his condescending streak, Keir with his teasing humor, and Magnus with his adorable thoughtlessness. Aye, she loved them all and she longed to see them again.

Now, though, there was this part deep inside her that conjured an image of Caelen whenever Yvaine thought of returning home, as though to hold it against her, to throw the image in the balance and make her doubt. And she did doubt, did she not? All of a sudden, what Yvaine wanted no longer led her in a straight line. Nay, the road ahead now forked into two directions, and she no longer knew which one to take, wanting both and neither at the same time.

“If what ye say is true,” Yvaine remarked, her gaze once more fixed upon her mother’s face, “then why the secrecy? I heard what Father said to ye. I saw the expression in his eyes, and I ken that he urged ye to keep something from me. If ’tis not about Caelen, then what is it?”

Again, her mother shook her head, and Yvaine understood in that moment that there was nothing in the world that could persuade her to speak out against her husband. Nay, fear held her in a tight grip, ensuring compliance.

Anger surged through Yvaine’s veins, and she felt her hands clench and ball into fists, the urge to drive them into something hard and painful almost overwhelming. Feeling powerless was such a crippling feeling that Yvaine barely knew how to handle it. She knew she needed to remain in control, and yet with each day that passed it became increasingly difficult. Never before had she needed to rein in her emotions like that. Always had she worn her tongue on her

sleeve, speaking her mind with no fear of repercussions. Now, every word could spell doom, and Yvaine felt exhausted by the need to think everything through before voicing a thought.

“If I marry the Morganach leader,” Yvaine asked tentatively, a shiver of fear crawling over her skin, “will Father keep his word? Will he release Caelen?” Deep down, Yvaine could not shake the feeling that as soon as she was married, as soon as there was no going back for her, her father would no longer feel bound to the deal they had made. Instead he would execute Caelen in order to get back at his greatest enemy and finally see the blood feud between the two clans settled once and for all. After all, with Caelen dead, the future of Clan MacCarraig would be in great peril.

Sadness rested in her mother’s eyes. “Ye’d be wise to guard yer heart, Child,” she murmured softly, her voice barely audible. “Those who care are easily broken in this world. Harden yer heart, and perhaps...” She closed her eyes, and a silent tear ran down her cheek.

Staring at her mother, Yvaine wondered about the life she had lived. In truth, she knew very little about the woman who had birthed her. The conversations they had had over the past few months had rarely gone deeper than fancy gowns and appropriate etiquette, clan loyalty and familial obligations.

“Why did ye marry Father?” Yvaine asked abruptly. “Did ye care for him at some point? Or was it nothing more than an arranged union?”

Her mother’s eyes remained closed, and yet her head turned away from Yvaine and toward the landscape flying by outside the window. Not a word fell from her tongue, her lips pressed into a tight line as though to suppress emotions that

burdened her despite the advice she had only just given to her own daughter.

Harden yer heart, and perhaps...

Aye, perhaps hardening one's heart was not as simple as that. Perhaps her mother had tried and failed as well, knowing from her own experience how devastating this life could be.

Now am I to follow in her footsteps? Yvaine thought desperately, outrage simmering in her veins, making her hands once more curl into fists, testing her self-control yet again. *Am I to be trapped in a union to a man who expects my complete obedience?*

Yvaine clenched her teeth against the roar of fury that threatened to tear from her throat. *Nay, I will do what I must but no more. I willna bow my head or cower in fear. I willna. This willna be my life.*

As they continued on their journey, the rolling hills turned to mountains and the sky overhead darkened as the sun set. They traveled in near silence, and Yvaine found herself lost in her thoughts as the miles passed by. She thought of Malcolm Morganach, the man she would be forced to marry, and a chill ran down her spine.

Only a few days ago, Yvaine had first laid eyes on the man. He stood tall, his hair as dark as Caelen's, yet there had been no kindness, no laughter in his eyes when he had looked upon her. Half his face bore the marks of fire, which had touched him at some point in his past, giving him an almost monstrous expression. Yet it had been the hard and commanding tone in his voice that had sent outrage through Yvaine's blood. He had spoken to her the same way her father spoke to her mother, without respect, expecting to be obeyed.

Perhaps this simply was the way of the world. Even in her own time, Yvaine knew that many unions were not based upon love, were not entered into willingly. Yet on MacKinnear Island, the place Yvaine called home, life had always been different; and somehow, Yvaine had always expected the rest of the world to be the same. Perhaps her mind had known better, her heart, though, had found itself shocked beyond all measure at the discovery that it was not.

The night grew colder as the family party continued onward. Finally, when the sky was black and stars were blazing above, Logan called to make camp until morning, and soon everyone was busy setting up tents and gathering wood for a fire.



While the others worked, Yvaine found herself drawn to the edge of the camp. She had been so wrapped up in her own thoughts that she had not even noticed how far away they had traveled from home, away from the coast and the island Yvaine longed to return to. Before, her mind had been so occupied with only one thought: to get away, to return home. Over the last few days, though, it had not even entered her mind once. Not in the way it had before. Nay, all she had been able to think about had been saving Caelen's life as her future loomed threateningly in front of her.

And now, all of a sudden, here she was, out in the wilderness, far from the walls that had kept her locked in. She stood looking out into the darkness beyond their campfires, unable to shake the feeling that something out there was calling to her.

More than anything, Yvaine simply wanted to melt into the darkness and slip away, find her way to the coast, and reach the island without delay. She wanted to go home.

Home.

The word made Yvaine sigh with longing, and she wrapped her arms tightly around herself, fighting to hold back the impulse to simply run out into the night. “Think of Caelen,” she murmured to herself. “Ye canna leave him to his fate.”

As though out of nowhere, Rory appeared at her side, his eyes searching hers with an intensity that made Yvaine’s heart flutter with both fear and anticipation. “Yvaine, there’s something I needa tell ye,” he murmured, casting a furtive glance over her shoulder, his voice no more than a whisper.

Yvaine’s heart almost paused in her chest, the feeling painful and frightening as though she stood upon the edge of a cliff. “What is it?” she gasped, turning to him, and grasping his little hands. “Do ye ken what Father’s trying to keep from me?”

Rory nodded, the expression in his eyes almost desperate; however, before he could say a word, their father’s voice echoed across the small clearing. “Rory, come and help yer brother with the horses!”

Brother and sister both spun around, eyes wide as they stared at their father. He stood illuminated by the campfires, dark shadows dancing across his features and twisting his expression into a ferocious snarl. He glared at them, his approach slow and yet determined, as though he feared what Rory might say in the few seconds that remained.

“Tell me,” Yvaine hissed urgently.

“Rory, now!” Their father thundered, his booming voice disturbing the quiet peacefulness of the night. Two more steps and he stood beside them, his right hand settling firmly upon Rory’s slender shoulder. “Go.”

With an apologetic gaze in his eyes, Rory bowed his head and turned away, slow footsteps, made heavy by disappointment and failure, guiding him across the clearing, past the watching warriors and toward his elder brother.

“Dunna test me,” Yvaine’s father snarled as he glared down at her. “Ye will do as I say, is that understood?”

Yvaine frowned, regarding her father’s face most carefully. Indeed, there was a hint of concern there, and she wished she knew why. Clearly, Rory did. As did her mother. Yet both were forbidden from saying anything. “I simply wish to speak to my brother,” Yvaine replied, struggling to keep the taunting tone out of her voice. “Why would ye object to that? What do ye fear he might tell me?” Her brows rose in challenge even though she knew it to be unwise.

Yet her father said not a word, his gaze stern as he looked at her before stepping away, leaving her alone on the far side of the camp.

Yvaine sighed in frustration as she gazed after him, for she could not shake the feeling that what she did not know was of the utmost importance.

Chapter Two

A FOOLISH ERRAND



Without horses, Caelen and Fergus had made it nowhere near halfway to the MacCarmaigs' keep when the sun began to set that day. Caelen's heart pounded heavily in his chest, partly from exhaustion and partly from a deep sense of betrayal. Although he knew there was no other way, Caelen could not shake the feeling that he was acting dishonorably by leaving Yvaine behind. She had given her freedom to save his life, and now he was slinking away without lifting a finger to help her after Rory had set them free.

"I can see what ye're thinking," Fergus remarked, his breath coming in fast pants, fatigue overshadowing his face. "We are not turning around."

Caelen shook his head, pulling to a halt and bracing his hands upon his knees. "I wasna going to suggest that," he gasped, closing his eyes to draw deep breaths into his body. "Like this, we are no help to anyone." Aye, his mind knew this to be true, and yet his heart argued otherwise.

"We need horses," Fergus remarked when his knees gave out and he sank down onto the forest floor, leaning his back against the thick trunk of a tree. "It feels as though my blisters

have blisters.” A tired smile teased his lips, and yet his eyes remained closed.

Caelen slumped down beside his friend, his mind once again drifting to Yvaine, wondering where she was and what was happening at MacLeòir Castle. Had they already left? No doubt the marriage ceremony would take place at the Morganach keep. It was a thought that turned Caelen’s stomach for more reasons than one. Yet one in particular stood out. One he had not seen coming. One that had all but surprised him earlier that night.

“I’m in love with her,” he murmured into the quiet night, still feeling a sense of surprise at that realization.

Beside him, Fergus chuckled. “Is that truly news to ye?” He clasped a weak hand upon Caelen’s shoulder. “I never thought ye a fool. Perhaps I was wrong.”

The sun’s last rays glinted off the trees of the forest, and its orange hue bathed everything in a warm glow. Still, Caelen’s heart felt cold. “What if Rory canna get word to her?” Caelen murmured. “What if...?”

Indeed, time stood against him. It would take too long for them to reach MacCarraig land, speak to Caelen’s father and convince him to act. Despite their disagreements, despite Caelen and Fergus having fled the keep only days earlier, Caelen was certain that his father would try his utmost to prevent Yvaine from marrying the leader of Clan Morganach. After all, gaining Morganach as an ally had been the sole interest of both clans these past few years.

“I dunna ken,” Fergus murmured, no humor in his voice now. “Though ye ken better than anyone that the lass is resourceful. If anyone can find a way to stop this wedding from happening, I believe it to be her.”

Caelen nodded, wanting to believe his friend's words. "Aye, ye're right. Yet I canna think of something she could do. Her father is clearly determined to see her wed, and there is no reason why Malcolm Morganach should refuse her." He swallowed hard, remembering the stoic clan leader with his scarred face and hard eyes, certain that even a man like him could be moved by the sight of Yvaine.

Aye, no one could deny that she possessed an unparalleled beauty, her fiery-red tresses and emerald-green eyes captivating, bewitching even, and there was a fire within her unmatched by anything Caelen had ever known. Her spirit was untamed, unbroken, speaking of a strength not even she herself knew. Yet at the same time, her heart was not cold; instead, there was deep kindness and compassion etched into it. She was fiercely loyal, and Caelen knew from experience that she would not hesitate to give her life, her happiness, for someone she sought to protect.

As they pressed on, the deepening darkness cast a chill on their journey and neither one of them possessed the strength to travel swiftly. Their limbs felt heavy, as though weighted down by lead, and their bellies rumbled with the need for sustenance. Caelen knew they needed rest, more even than a good night's sleep, and yet he stumbled onward, unable to stop, his eyes drifting upward to the sliver of moon in the night sky.

It was then that Caelen heard a sound that made his blood run cold—hoof beats thundering closer. He looked to Fergus, his eyes wide with apprehension, and his friend nodded, indicating he, too, had noticed the sound. Without a word, they both began to run, their feet pounding against the hard ground. "We have to hide," Caelen called out, gesturing toward a shadowed thicket nearby.

Yet in the next instance, he heard the distinct sound of hooves coming from behind them. He whipped around and spotted a group of warriors, seven in total, galloping down the path behind them. Although deep down Caelen had known who it would be, his heart sank when he recognized the leader of the group—his cousin, Lachlan MacCarraig, sent out by his father to kill Yvaine before her father could see her wed to the Morganach chief.

Lachlan pulled his horse up sharply and the others followed suit, coming to a halt in front of Caelen and Fergus. Lachlan smiled, a smug look on his face. “Well, well, what do we have here? My traitorous cousin and his equally traitorous friend sneaking away from MacLeòir Castle in the dead of night,” Lachlan said, his voice full of mockery, yet there was a touch of confusion in his eyes as he glared at them. “Tell me, Caelen, what are ye two doing out here? Last I heard, yer own father had ye taken to the dungeon for betraying yer clan.” His frown deepened, and Caelen could tell that Lachlan disliked not being kept informed. “How then do ye come to be here? Did ye flee to betray yer clan yet again?”

As Lachlan’s mount pranced in front of him, agitatedly tossing its head, Caelen felt a surge of anger course through him, and he had to clench his fists to stop himself from lashing out at his cousin. Instead, he squared his shoulders and met Lachlan’s gaze as calmly as he could. “I am on my way to my father’s keep to deliver an important message,” he said, ignoring the doubtful expression in his cousin’s eyes as he glanced at his warriors. “I would ask ye to let us pass.”

Lachlan laughed. “Why should I let ye pass? Ye are a traitor, Caelen, and I have no reason to believe what ye say. As far as I ken, ye’re to be in the dungeon, awaiting yer father’s decision. He didna set ye free, did he?” His gaze narrowed.

“Nay, ye escaped... only to return home now?” He shook his head. “What are ye up to, Cousin? For I’ll never believe that ye’re here with yer father’s permission.”

Caelen gritted his teeth. “Nay, I’m not here with his permission. Ye’re right. We escaped from the dungeon. Yet what I have to say, he needa hear. If ye’re, indeed, loyal to my father and our clan, ye will assist us in returning to the keep.” He lifted his chin and held his cousin’s gaze.

For a long moment, silence fell over the forest before Lachlan dismounted and then stepped toward Caelen, his gaze narrowed in thought. “What message do ye speak of? Where have ye been? We saw the MacLeòir warriors search the surrounding of the keep,” he remarked then, his brows lifted in question. “We overheard them speaking of prisoners escaping. Tell me, dear cousin, how many dungeons have ye escaped lately?”

Caelen exhaled a deep breath through his nose, fighting to remain in control. He needed his cousin’s help because there was no time to lose. Yet Lachlan would know right away if Caelen were to lie. “I always spoke truthfully,” he told his cousin, holding his gaze without flinching. “I never concealed that I wished to see Yvaine returned to her home in order to prevent her from marrying the Morganach chief as well as saving her life. That is the reason we came here, to spirit her away and see this feud settled without bloodshed. Had we succeeded, Yvaine would’ve been safe and the Morganach chief could have married... my sister.”

Behind him, Caelen could sense Fergus’s agitation. Always had there been a strong bond between his childhood friend and his sister; yet only recently, had it blossomed into more. Gwyneth had aided them in fleeing the dungeons at his

father's keep, and before they had parted ways, Caelen had witnessed Fergus pulling his sister into a kiss that had been more than a simple farewell.

“Only ye didna succeed, did ye?” Lachlan mocked, his gaze sweeping over Caelen's and Fergus's disheveled appearance.

Caelen sighed with regret. “Nay, we didna. Before we could make our escape, Yvaine's father discovered us. He threatened to execute me, and in order to save my life, she agreed to his demand.”

Suspicion now blazed in Lachlan's gaze. “His demand?”

“To marry the Morganach chief.”

A curse flew from Lachlan's lips, and disgruntled murmurs passed the lips of his warriors. “Ye fool!” he spat. “Look what yer interference did. Ye doomed us all.”

Fergus laughed as he pushed forward to stand beside Caelen. “If ye truly believe so, then *ye* are the fool. With or without our interference, Yvaine's father would have found some way to force her hand. He was set on seeing this union happen, and he is a man who gets his way. Ye ken that.”

Despite his obvious fury, Lachlan remained quiet, and Caelen could see his cousin's mind racing, considering what to do. “What is this message ye speak of? Why are ye returning home, knowing yer father will surely lock ye up again?”

Caelen stepped forward and held his cousin's gaze. “Ye ken we both want the same thing, to prevent this marriage.” He waited for Lachlan to nod in acknowledgment. “As far as I ken, Yvaine is to be taken to Morganach's keep in a matter of days where the ceremony is to take place.” Merely speaking the words turned his stomach. “If we can reach them in time

before they make it to the keep, perhaps we can spirit her away, see her safely home and ensure that this marriage never happens.” He exhaled a deep breath. “If I could do it alone, I wouldna be here. So, I am returning home to ask for my father’s help. Yet if ye are willing to grant me yers, then we can save ourselves this journey. We are pressed for time as it is.”

As much as Caelen hated the thought of Lachlan anywhere near Yvaine, he knew he did not have a choice. If they were to return to MacCarraig land first, there would be little chance they could reach them in time. Yvaine would be safely tucked away behind Morganach walls before they got anywhere near her.

Lachlan’s face grew dark as he stared at Caelen, indecision in his gaze. “Do ye speak true, Cousin? Weigh yer words carefully, for if ye lie, I shall cut out yer tongue.”

For a wistful moment, Caelen wondered what had happened to the two of them. Years ago, they had been almost as close as brothers, and now? Was it truly only ambition that fueled Lachlan? Was it regret that he was not heir to the chieftainship? Or was it something that Caelen knew nothing about?

“I have never lied to ye,” Caelen stated calmly, his shoulders squared, and his chin raised. “Can ye say the same?”

Lachlan’s gaze hardened, and for a moment, Caelen wondered what it was that his cousin was keeping from him. “What do ye suggest?” Lachlan finally asked, his jaw clenched, a clear sign of how much he loathed the thought of them working hand in hand.

“When ye left the vicinity of the MacLeòir keep,” Caelen inquired, “had they already left?” Every muscle in his body

was tense to the point of breaking as he waited for his cousin's reply.

Eventually, Lachlan shook his head. "Nay, they hadna. We only saw warriors patrolling, searching for escaped prisoners." His right eyebrow arched upward. "We wondered who it could be, and so we decided to look around ourselves." He shook his head. "I never thought it could be ye, yet perhaps I should have."

Caelen sighed heavily, wishing he could trust his cousin, wishing he could be certain that by bringing Lachlan near Yvaine he was not endangering her life. Yet what choice did he have? Once again, time was of the essence.

Chapter Three

CASTLE MORGANACH



On the third day of their journey, Castle Morganach finally rose before them, its walls looming tall into the sky. Yvaine's heart filled with dread as she squinted up at the imposing structure. Was this to be her prison? Another stone box! Rain lashed down from above and made the stones shine silver in the pale light. Thunder rolled overhead like a giant drum, and lightning flashed along the eastern wall. Tall trees stood watch over the castle walls like sentinels, ensuring those that were within would remain.

Yvaine knew the castle was the beginning of her future, and she feared what it would bring.

Glancing out the carriage window, she swept her gaze over the brightly lit keep, wondering if she had come here under different circumstances, would she have been struck by its beauty?, Now, though, all she saw were stonewalls and heavy locks, guards posted everywhere and the threat of another gilded cage.



By the time the carriage pulled to a halt in front of the main doors, the riders flanking them were soaked from the downpour. Rory's red curls lay plastered upon his head, and he

wiped an arm over his face, trying to clear his eyes. Logan, though, appeared unaffected, his gaze as stoic as Yvaine had often seen it in moments of public appearance. Every fiber of him displayed the strong determined leader, who knew not the meaning of doubt and uncertainty. He stood at their father's side, nodding his head to hold back and wait for her and her mother to disembark from the carriage.

Yvaine's heart pounded in her chest as she stepped out of the carriage and felt the rain upon her skin, icy and sharp like needles. Her steps quickened instinctively, and she shot up the few steps to the front door, seeking the warm interior.

Moments later, her parents followed, her mother's hand resting demurely upon her father's arm, with Rory and Logan stepping into the entrance hall behind them. Yvaine's father cast her a chiding look, reminding her to show her best manners and not to rush the entrance.

Yvaine glared at him in response and allowed Logan to offer her his arm, falling into step behind her parents.

For days, they had been traveling to reach this place, and now that they had arrived, Yvaine could feel her apprehension growing. Her future loomed monstrously in front of her, and yet what frightened her more than the prospect of marrying a man she had only met once before was the thought that her father might not keep his word. What if she did this and he still executed Caelen? Was there any course of action she could take to prevent it? If she refused to marry the Morganach chief, she would gain nothing. Instead, she would seal Caelen's fate. Yet once married, she lost all leverage.

The doors opened with a creak as they entered, revealing a grand room with high ceilings and bright tapestries along the walls, depicting battles fought long ago as well as portraits of

past esteemed members of Clan Morganach. The furniture within was intricately carved from dark wood and upholstered in velvet fabrics that had been faded by time but still held their elegance and beauty.

A dancing fire burned in the enormous hearth on the western wall, and its warmth enveloped Yvaine like a blanket despite the chill that lingered in the air.

In the center of the room stood the man Yvaine was to marry: Malcolm Morganach.

Flanked by several guards as well as an older man with a certain family resemblance, Chief Morganach was an imposing figure, tall with squared shoulders and a broad chest, his hands linked behind his back and his chin lifted like a king gazing down upon his subjects. His dark brown gaze was as piercing as blades, and the contrast of his jet-black hair against his pale complexion intensified the frightening marks of scars that decorated the right side of his face from a past fire. Aye, Yvaine could see why he was such a feared man, for he radiated ruthlessness and dominance. He was a man who had gone through hell and come out the victor, with no more than a few scars as a reminder of the battle he had fought.

A cold shiver crawled down Yvaine's back the moment the chieftain's gaze fell upon her. She could feel it like a touch upon her skin, and although she knew she ought not, her chin rose instinctively, her gaze hardening to meet this challenge. It was simply who she was, something she could no more change than the color of her eyes.

A hissed warning from her father reminded Yvaine of the purpose of this journey, once more bringing back into sharp contrast what hinged upon the development of the next few days. Exhaling a deep sigh of resignation, Yvaine lowered her

gaze, breaking eye contact with the man who was to be her husband.

Chief Morganach then moved forward, his steps measured and purposeful until he stood before Yvaine's father. He gave the slightest of bows in greeting before straightening again to meet the older man's gaze. "Welcome to Castle Morganach," he said in a low, hard voice that betrayed no emotion. "I trust yer journey was pleasant."

Yvaine's father nodded. "'Twas indeed, thank ye," he replied, his expression almost sickeningly eager. "We are most pleased to see this bond between our two clans sealed." He glanced at Yvaine, once again, a look of warning in his eyes. "I can assure ye my daughter is most eager for the wedding. She is merely," he chuckled, "afflicted by fluttering nerves."

Yvaine bit her lip, wanting desperately to lash out at both her father and Chief Morganach for forcing her hand in this matter, but she knew she could not do so without consequence. Thus, she remained silent, struggling to contain her emotions as she watched the exchange between them with wary eyes.

"Rooms have been prepared for yer stay," the elderly man stated as he moved to stand beside Chief Morganach and gestured to one of the guards. Both men shared a certain resemblance, their hair as dark as night, while the older man's showed a touch of grey upon his temples. As far as Yvaine knew, Chief Morganach's father was dead. Perhaps this man was an uncle. "If ye would follow him, he will show ye to yer quarters."

Yvaine's father nodded. "Thank ye," he said to Chief Morganach before turning to look at Yvaine and her mother. "Go ahead and rest. 'Tis been a most arduous journey, and I'm certain ye are fatigued." The feigned concern which rested

upon his features made Yvaine want to scream. “I have a lot to discuss with Chief Morganach.”

Anger surged through Yvaine’s veins, and she opened her mouth to protest, only for her mother to place a hand on her arm, silencing her. Yvaine exhaled slowly then closed her mouth again, fuming inwardly. With one last glare toward Chief Morganach and her father, she fell into step with her mother, following the guard who would show them to their chambers.

Yvaine felt her throat tighten at the thought of her fate being decided without her input. She wanted to rebel against this gesture, to shout her indignation, to demand answers, but she knew that any outburst on her part might endanger Caelen’s life. And so, she swallowed hard and then followed her mother out the door and toward the chambers that had been prepared for them.

“Who is that other man?” Yvaine inquired to keep herself from saying something unwise as anger sizzled through her veins. “The one who resembles Chief Morganach.”

“His uncle,” her mother confirmed Yvaine’s earlier thoughts. “Kenneth Morganach.”

The guard led them through the winding corridors of the castle, his steps sure and certain as he navigated around the various twists and turns. The walls were made of a deep gray stone that seemed to glimmer with secrets while the floors were tiled in a warm brown hue that contrasted nicely with the coolness of the gray stone. Tapestries hung from every wall, and everywhere Yvaine looked, she could see the Morganach clan—men and women of varying ages, some of whom stopped to stare at her, clearly aware that she was to be their mistress. Aye, it was a thought that twisted Yvaine’s stomach,

and she kept her head bowed until they eventually reached her chamber.

With a touch of relief, Yvaine stepped into the room, needing a moment to herself after days on the road with people constantly crowding around her. And so, when the door finally fell shut behind her, she fell back against it, her eyes closing for several heartbeats. Yet the distant sounds of voices still drifted to Yvaine's ears, and as much as she tried, she could not escape the reality around her.

With another deep breath, her eyes blinked open once more, and she swept them around the generous chamber. A large bed draped in thick blankets and hung with velvet curtains stood to her right while a writing desk and chair had been set up against the opposite wall near the fireplace in which a warm fire crackled invitingly.

Feeling restless, Yvaine walked to the window and gazed at the rolling hills and the distant mountains that stretched to the horizon. Her thoughts settled and cleared now that she was alone, and she wondered what options she had. Although Yvaine knew she was in no position to fight it, she also knew that she could not *not* fight. She had never been one to meekly accept her fate, and she would not start now.

Yet what could she do? Throughout their journey here, Yvaine has thought long and hard about her options, about what she ought to do, about her best chances for success. Yet she had not come to a clear answer. Of course, her father had made it clear he would not release Caelen before she had married Chief Morganach. At the same time, as soon as she was wed, there was nothing that would keep her father from breaking his word. She had no allies, no one to stand with her and put pressure on her father to act honorably. Not even her

elder brother, Logan, was willing to do anything that might endanger the union their father sought.

Frustrated, Yvaine began to pace, her mind conjuring images of their arrival, of Chief Morganach. Indeed, the man sent shivers down her back, and yet there was something about him that did not make sense to her. One moment, his gaze seemed to drill into her, as though he sought to know her, to challenge her even. And then in the next, he disregarded her completely, paying her no attention, barely aware of her presence.

Again, Yvaine wondered what sort of man he was. She remembered how her father had urged her to appear *willing* upon meeting Chief Morganach for the first time because apparently the stoic clan leader sought a willing bride. Her father had been concerned that if Chief Morganach became aware of Yvaine's resistance, he would refuse her.

Yvaine paused. If she were to speak to Chief Morganach now, if she could make him see that she was only here because of her father's threats to Caelen's life, would he still marry her? Yet even if he did not, if their marriage were not to take place, that would still leave Yvaine with the problem of how to save Caelen's life. Was there no way she could save herself and him as well?

Yvaine stayed at the window for a long while, watching as the rain slowly faded and the sky grew lighter. Yet answers still eluded her. What was she to do?

Chapter Four

A TALE OF TRUTH



The wind whipped around them as Caelen and Fergus joined Lachlan's men on their way back to MacLeòir land. Before, when they had still sought to return to his father's keep, the two friends had grown accustomed to the hard ground under their feet and the constant exertion of walking. Now, though, they found themselves atop two fine horses, purchased in the next village with Lachlan's coin, as they thundered along the dirt road amidst Lachlan's warriors. Caelen glanced at Fergus then back at his cousin who had taken the lead. He could feel the tension between them, though Lachlan's expression was unchanged.

For a long time, they rode in silence and Caelen watched as the landscape flew past. He was relieved to no longer have to trudge through the dust and the heat of the day, but he could not help feeling uneasy. Would they reach the MacLeòir keep in time? Or would Yvaine already be gone? On her way to her wedding? The thought tormented him, and try as he might, Caelen could not banish it. He barely took note of the change of scenery around him, of the way the moon passed overhead and eventually disappeared. They rode hard through the night and set up camp in the morning, allowing themselves and their horses a moment of respite and a quick bite to eat before returning to the road.

All the while, Lachlan regarded the two friends with a hard gaze, his forehead furrowed in thought, and Caelen wondered what went through his cousin's mind. Did Lachlan truly doubt them? Or was he merely considering which course of action would serve his ambition best? Caelen hated that he did not know what to make of him. He still remembered the cheerful boy Lachlan had once been, recalling many wonderful summers spent fishing and swimming together, countless winters huddled around a roaring fire, listening to stories of their clan. Aye, once, they had been close, and for the life of him, Caelen could not recall at what point that had changed. To his shame, he did not remember.

Finally, Lachlan spoke. "So, tell me how ye thought to spirit Yvaine away." He guided his horse closer to Caelen's, his eyes questioning. "Ye said her father caught ye." The furrows upon his forehead deepened. "Did ye make it inside the keep?"

Caelen heard Fergus mutter a curse under his breath, yet he kept his gaze fixed on his cousin. "She went for a walk, and we met her near the woods," he replied, loathing the need to lie, even to his cousin, even if it was to protect Yvaine and her clan. Indeed, it did feel like a betrayal. As a loyal MacCarraig, Caelen knew he ought to share this news, the discovery of the secret tunnel into the MacLeòir's keep with his family, with his clan. It was a vital piece of information that would surely aid them in coming out the victor in this feud that had already lasted far too long. Yet Caelen could not. Did that make him a traitor?

Suspicion blazed in Lachlan's gaze, and Caelen knew that his cousin did not believe him even before he spoke. "Ye lie," he snarled, reaching to grasp the reins of Caelen's horse and pulling them both to a halt. "How did ye get into the keep?"

Ambition lit up his eyes, free of any thoughts of restraint or compassion.

Caelen swallowed hard, desperately trying to find an answer that would appease his cousin without the need to betray Yvaine and her people. Yet what could he possibly say? “Why would ye think that? Why would ye doubt my words?” he questioned, needing time to think.

Lacklan’s lips curled into a snarl. “Because I ken ye, Cousin,” he growled, kicking his horse’s flanks to urge it closer as he stared at Caelen. “I can see that ye’re lying, that ye’re hiding something, something ye’re afraid I’ll find out.” He spoke slowly, his gaze searching Caelen’s face as he did so. “Why will ye not admit that ye made it into the keep if ye’re not a traitor as ye insist?”

Caelen exhaled a deep breath, hanging his head in resignation. Aye, now that his cousin had become suspicious, there was no way to deter him. Caelen was certain of it; that much, at least, had not changed. Lachlan had always been like a dog with a bone. Once he had picked up a scent, he would not release it.

I needa give him something, Caelen thought frantically. He needs to ken that he drew information from me I didna wish to share. Yet what can I say?

“Speak!” Lachlan thundered. “Tell me now or I will take ye back to yer father and see ye locked up.”

Running a hand through his hair, Caelen allowed his inner battle to show upon his face, knowing that if he gave in too quickly, it would only arouse Lachlan’s suspicions further. Nay, it had to be a struggle for him. “I assure ye ’tis of no importance. Ye ken everything that matters.”

Lachlan laughed darkly. "I'll be the judge of that," he growled. "How did ye manage to get inside the keep?" His voice was hard, and he emphasized each word slowly as he spoke, the suspicion in his eyes growing with each growl to leave his lips. "I want the truth, and I want it now."

Caelen hesitated, silent for a long moment as his gaze sought his cousin's. Then it briefly darted to Fergus as though seeking advice. "I gave my word," he murmured, his eyes pleading as he looked at his cousin.

Lachlan, though, remained hard and unyielding. "Ye will tell me how ye got into the keep or I will make ye regret it," he said, his voice free of even the tiniest sliver of compassion. "Did I make myself clear?"

Caelen's heart pounded in his chest, for he knew that if Lachlan discovered the secret tunnel, he would use it to destroy Yvaine's family and her whole clan. Nay, he could not allow that to happen. He had to protect the secret. Yet in order to go after Yvaine, he needed to appease his cousin and regain, at least, a smidgen of his trust. "The MacLeòir chief held a feast at the keep in honor of his daughter's return," he began with a heavy sigh, making a show of struggling with breaking his word. "We dressed as merchants," he glanced at Fergus, who took this cue to sigh in resignation, "and sneaked in among the crowd of villagers that came to the keep for the occasion." He shrugged. "I was surprised at how easy 'twas to pass through the gate as the guards stood watching, not questioning our presence."

Lachlan chuckled and struck his leg with delight. "What fools!" he snickered, and glanced at his men, who joined in on the laughter. He then turned his attention back to Caelen. "So, ye made it through the gate, and then?"

Caelen sighed. “We went into the great hall with the crowd of villagers and listened to the clan chief’s speech about how the Fey favored them because they had returned his daughter.” Anger flared in Lachlan’s gaze as Caelen continued his narration of that night. He spoke of the way Yvaine had stepped forward and how the crowd had received her, cheering and applauding, welcoming her back.

“At some point,” Caelen continued, “she left the great hall, perhaps to seek some fresh air, and went into the walled-in garden. I followed while Fergus stood watch.” Caelen decided to stick as closely to the truth as he possibly could, needing Lachlan to believe him, to not see even a glimmer of doubt.

“Did she not alert the guards upon seeing ye?”

Caelen shook his head. “Nay, she couldna. I grabbed her from behind, claspin a hand over her mouth.”

Lachlan chuckled, as did his men. There was amusement in his gaze, still, a measure of suspicion remained. “Did that not make her fear ye even more?” His gaze narrowed. “What ye say makes no sense.”

“She’s not one to frighten easily,” Caelen replied, allowing his admiration for Yvaine to show in his voice. “I assured her that I meant her no harm, and she was willing to listen. After that, we quickly found common ground.”

“And what was that?”

Caelen showed a hint of exasperation in his gaze. “As I said before, Yvaine doesna seek to be wed to the chief of Clan Morganach. She wants to return to the Fey Isle, which she considers her home.”

Lachlan held up a hand, shaking his head. “What ye speak of happened weeks ago, did it not? Ye already mentioned this

the last time ye returned home, and I doubted ye even then.” His hand fell to the dagger strapped to his belt. “What are ye trying to hide?”

Caelen held up his hands in appeasement. “That night, it all began,” he said quickly before Lachlan’s temper could run away with him. “We spoke that night and found that we wanted the same thing. She wanted to return home while I needed her not to marry our enemy. Thus, we agreed to help one another. Aye, I said so before, and I ken that ye and my father didna believe my word or hers. Yet ’tis the truth, and I still think it the best course of action. Therefore, we returned to MacLeòir land,” he nodded to Fergus, “and met Yvaine outside the castle, discussing how to proceed.” He heaved a deep sigh, praying that his cousin would believe him. “Upon one such occasion, her father had her followed. Clearly, he didna approve of her leaving the castle unattended and sent guards after her. Thus, we were captured and brought before the chief.”

Lachlan remained silent as he regarded Caelen, his gaze contemplative as he weighed his words. Objectively, they made sense, and Caelen hoped that his cousin had not read something upon his expression that stirred doubt. “Verra well,” Lachlan eventually said, and his menacing demeanor faded into the dark of night. “Let’s hurry onward then.” And with that, he spurred his horse forward, leaving Caelen and Fergus staring after him, feeling relieved and exhausted.

Chapter Five

A SCARRED MAN



Yvaine awoke in the middle of the night, unable to sleep any further. She tossed and turned in her bed, suffocating under the heavy quilt that was draped across her body. The moonlight shone through the windowpanes, illuminating the room with a soft, silver glow. Yet the stillness of the castle felt eerie as if something were amiss. And so, taking a deep breath, she rose from her bed, determined to find out what it was. Stepping into her slippers and donning her robe, Yvaine opened the door of her chamber and ventured out.

The hallway stood empty, only filled with silence—the sort that raised goosebumps along her arms and legs. After all, Yvaine had expected to find a guard posted outside her chamber; yet there was none in sight. Had her father foregone the guard because he now believed that she would comply? After all, Caelen’s life was on the line. Or did he not wish to raise suspicions with the Morganach clan chief? Indeed, her father seemed convinced that the man sought only a willing bride. Of course, those had been her father’s words, and after meeting the man for the second time earlier today, Yvaine wondered if they were, indeed, true. Yet what reason could her father have for making up such a thing? Only Malcolm Morganach had not struck Yvaine as a man overly concerned

with her well-being, her happiness. He had barely even glanced at her as if dismissing her out of hand.

Creeping forward, Yvaine glanced into the other chambers that lined the corridor, yet all stood empty—aside from those that had been assigned to her family—revealing nothing of interest. Only the last door stood slightly ajar, a faint shine of light reaching out into the hallway. With her curiosity tugging at her, Yvaine walked along, approaching slowly, her slippered feet making no sound against the stone floor.

Then, voices reached her ears, coming from inside the chamber. Cautiously, Yvaine ventured closer still, wishing she could see inside. Yet, soon she made out the distinct voices of her father and Logan. They spoke in hushed tones, and only the occasional words drifted to Yvaine's ears. Still, she could tell they were discussing her upcoming nuptials, contemplating its importance to their clan's future, especially concerning the ongoing feud with Clan MacCarraig.

As their conversation continued, Yvaine strained to listen, hoping to overhear something of importance, something that might give her leverage. Yet the few words she was able to understand held no meaning, nothing she did not already know. And so, after a few more disappointing minutes, she moved on, certain that remaining here would not gain her anything. Indeed, if she were caught eavesdropping, her father would most certainly punish her.

Her mind still whirled with questions as Yvaine continued her exploration of the sleeping castle. Indeed, Malcolm Morganach was an enigma, and the few things she had heard about him painted an incomplete picture. Thus, Yvaine thought it prudent to learn more about the man she was to marry, the man who ruled this clan, a clan considered a formidable ally.

Gnawing on her lower lip, Yvaine considered how to go about it as her gaze swept up and down yet another deserted corridor. Aye, short of seeking out the man and asking him questions, all she could do was... go through his personal belongings? Oh, if he were to catch her, there certainly would be hell to pay. Still, Yvaine had never been a woman to sit back and do nothing. Sometimes risks had to be taken, and after standing still for so long, she was more than willing to do so now.

Taking a deep breath, Yvaine made her way toward where she believed Chief Morganach's personal quarters to be located. At this time of night, he was most likely asleep in his bed like the rest of the castle, which, of course, ruled out searching his bedchamber. However, his study would most likely reveal more about the man he was, and so Yvaine hurried down corridor after corridor, quietly opening doors and peeking inside until she finally came upon a chamber that reminded her of her own father's study.

Not Douglas MacLeòir.

But rather Aiden MacKinnear.

Her heart was pounding with anticipation as she stepped across the threshold and then quietly closed the door behind her. Immediately, darkness engulfed her, the only thing she could see was the faint flicker of torchlight that reached underneath the door. Yvaine took a deep breath, acutely aware of the danger she was in. She had to be careful and quick if she wished to find out more about Chief Morganach without being discovered.

Thankfully, her sense of touch quickly led her to the candelabra on the desk and with trembling hands, she lit it, breathing a sigh of relief as light filled the chamber. Without

delay, Yvaine began her search of the room, hoping perhaps to uncover some clue that would shed more light on her mysterious intended.

Bookshelves lined the walls, filled with all manner of books and scrolls. Yvaine carefully ran her fingers across them as she read their titles, soon finding books that discussed not only warfare but also politics, democracy, and government. There were historical accounts and maps as well as genealogical charts that revealed information about clan history, notes that compared different strategies used by warriors during battle, and reports that outlined financial investments made by past generations.

Yvaine found herself drawn to these documents, in particular, for they showed a different side to Chief Morganach than simply his military prowess or political allegiances. He was highly educated, clearly having spent much time studying these topics in depth over many years. As Yvaine browsed through each book cover thoughtfully, she found notes in the margins, question marks as well as suggestions to the points made by the author. “Who are ye?” she murmured, trying to understand the stoic man who stood as two opposites.

Suddenly, Yvaine’s attention was drawn away from her book browsing as she turned to see the door creaking open. A shaft of light pierced the room as a figure appeared in the doorway, casting a looming shadow across the chamber.

The Morganach chief.

Yvaine cursed under her breath, quietly returning the book in her hands to the shelf while her mind raced, desperate for an excuse to explain her presence in his study. “I... I thought this was the library,” she murmured, casting him a sheepish glance. “It seems I was mistaken.”

The chief looked at her with suspicion, and Yvaine could see that he did not believe her. An almost menacing calm lingered in his gaze, his dark hair one with the shadows that surrounded him, as he stepped inside and closed the door. “I ken ye’re lying,” he said in a low voice, his gaze piercing through her.

Yvaine felt fear sneak down her back, worrying what he would do. She kept still, trying to maintain an air of calm despite the pounding of her heart as she waited for him to take action. But instead of reprimanding her or threatening punishment, Chief Morganach slowly drew closer, his gaze contemplative, never leaving hers, as though she were one of the books upon the shelf behind her. Finally, he stopped in front of her, then he stood silently for a rather unnerving moment. “What are ye looking for?”

Yvaine swallowed hard, annoyed by the fact that she had to lift her chin in order to hold his gaze. “What makes ye think I’m looking for something?” she asked instead of answering his question. “Did ye not hear what I said?”

“And I said ye were lying.” He lifted a brow, his gaze still as piercing as before, and the scarred side of his face stretched into a grotesque grimace.

Again, silence weighed heavily upon the chamber as they stood facing one another, forcing Yvaine to realize that if Chief Morganach had yelled and shouted, she would have been far less unnerved. Indeed, there was something in his eyes that unsettled her deeply. He truly seemed to know what she was thinking, easily calling her bluff. Only the way his eyes drilled into hers stood in stark contrast to the disregard she had seen in him before. Aye, he had barely looked at her then, making Yvaine doubt her father’s claim that Chief

Morganach was interested in a willing wife. This man, now standing across from her, though, clearly showed interest—only Yvaine wished she knew in what. “People fear ye,” she stated boldly, tensing her muscles, forbidding them to flinch or show any other sign of weakness or fear.

As before, Chief Morganach showed no reaction, his face as immobile as before. “Do ye?”

“Nay,” Yvaine replied without a moment’s hesitation, as though she were a warrior brandishing her sword at the mere suggestion of an attack. Still, deep down, she had to admit that there was a flutter of fear, of uncertainty.

Again, there was no telling whether Chief Morganach was displeased with her answer. “Yet ye dislike me.”

His words were a statement not a question, and Yvaine felt her eyes narrowing, almost squinting, trying to look closer, trying to understand. Who was this man? And what lay at the root of his decisions?

Chief Morganach nodded, understanding her without words. “Ye agreed to marry me, though.” His left brow twitched ever so slightly, an unmistakable question.

Yvaine hitched her chin a tad higher, anger furling in her belly at the reminder of her powerlessness. “I was not given a choice.”

“Had ye been given one, would ye have refused?”

“Aye.” With anyone else, Yvaine might have been worried to cause affront. Yet Chief Morganach once again showed not a sliver of emotion at her curt reply, as though it were all the same to him, as though none of what was spoken here concerned him in the least.

“Why?” was all he asked.

Again, Yvaine found herself compelled to look closer, wanting to understand. In her experience, there were two sorts of people. While all were led by their desires—be they selfish designs or motivated by compassion for others—some followed their instincts, their emotions unchecked by reason, whereas others pursued an almost clinical approach, every step based on rational thought.

“My father told me,” Yvaine replied, her curiosity more piqued than ever before, “that ye only want a willing bride. Is that true?”

The corners of his mouth curled into something remotely resembling a smile, and yet it seemed grim and distant. “Do ye seek a reason to escape this union?”

Yvaine’s lips pressed into a tight line as that familiar voice deep inside whispered a warning, reminding her that Caelen’s life hung in the balance. “I seek to understand why this is happening. Any of it.” She huffed out a deep breath, beginning to get annoyed with this question-and-answer game that never truly answered anything. “Did ye tell my father ye wanted a willing bride? Answer me.”

At the harsh tone in her voice, Chief Morganach appeared amused—if one could call it that. Still, he did not utter a reply but only shook his head no.

Yvaine frowned. “Then why would my father tell me so?” she scoffed, throwing up her hands. “*He* is clearly not concerned with my willingness. If ye’re also not, why the charade? Why pretend that my wishes matter to ye?” She shook her head, frustrated. “It makes no sense.”

“Perhaps yer father misunderstood,” Chief Morganach replied, his tone of voice still disinterested. Yet his dark eyes

seemed to drill into Yvaine's, as though he truly wished for her to understand. "I merely desired a meeting."

"Ye wished to meet me?" Yvaine asked with a frown. "Why?" Indeed, she had thought that all clan leaders were driven by the cold calculation of beneficial alliances, completely disregarding any personal preferences. Why then had Chief Morganach wished to meet her? "Did ye fear ye would be stuck with an ugly bride?" She lifted her brows in challenge. "Is that truly all ye care about?"

Again, Yvaine thought to see a spark of amusement in the man's gaze, only it vanished so quickly that she could not be certain. "Yer appearance doesna matter to me," he murmured, then he suddenly took a step toward her, looming over her so that she could feel his breath tease her skin.

The urge to retreat shot through Yvaine, and she curled her hands into fists to keep herself in place.

"I simply wished to see the woman I am to marry," Chief Morganach murmured, his voice low as though he were whispering secrets, chasing goosebumps across her skin.

Taken aback, Yvaine stared at him, his gaze unsettling in the way he watched her as though waiting for something. "Does a heart truly beat inside yer chest? For ye dunna show it."

At her words, his gaze hardened, and a shadow fell over his face, as though she had somehow conjured ghosts he had long sought to banish. "What is it ye seek to ken?" He stepped back. "Ye clearly came here tonight looking for answers. Dunna deny it."

Yvaine straightened. "I sought to discover who ye are. Both times we met, ye looked at me in a way that..." She

shook her head in confusion. “What question did ye hope to see answered upon meeting me?” Boldly, she took a step toward him, her gaze not veering from his. “If ye speak true and ye dunna care whether ye find me appealing, what is it ye wished to see?”

For the first time, the ghost of a smile darted across Chief Morganach’s face before he leaned closer, as though wishing to challenge her, to unsettle her. “I wanted to see yer reaction.”

Yvaine frowned. “To what?”

Another step brought Chief Morganach forward, his head angled so her gaze fell upon the scarred side of his face. “To me.”

Yvaine exhaled a slow breath, for, all of a sudden, there was something vulnerable in the way Chief Morganach stood before her. She no longer saw an unfeeling, commanding man who did as he pleased with no regard for others. Indeed, the hard edge to his face seemed to hide something painful, something far worse than the scars the fire had left upon his face.

“Ye oughta return to yer chamber,” he said as he stepped back, his gaze now fleeting. “If ye are to be mistress of this keep in a few days’ time, ye’ll need rest.” He glanced at Yvaine, a strange expression crossing his face before he stepped aside so she could pass out of the room.

“A few days’ time?” Yvaine echoed, for a moment uncertain what to respond to first: the words he had spoken or the vulnerability he had allowed her to see. Had he done so on purpose? Or had it been an accident? “My father said our union is to be sealed without delay.” She swallowed hard, for the words felt final, as though her future had already been written.

Anger briefly blazed in Chief Morganach's eyes before he managed to steel his features once more. "I'll not be rushed," he growled as he moved toward the door, threw it open and stalked out into the dark corridor, leaving Yvaine standing alone in the silent aftermath of their conversation.

For long moments she simply stared ahead blankly, too overwhelmed by everything that had happened, everything... It had not even been the words that had passed between them, but rather the glimpses Yvaine had caught of a man who knew how to hide his true self from all those around him.

Aye, Malcolm Morganach was known to all the world as a fierce and intimidating chief, a battle-honed warrior without mercy, who led his clan with an iron fist. Yet was that truly who he was? To this day, Yvaine had believed so. Now, she was not certain at all.

Perhaps she had been right to dig into his life. Perhaps she ought to continue to do so. Because if a compassionate heart hid inside Malcolm Morganach's chest, perhaps not all was lost.

Chapter Six

ON THE ROAD



Lately, it seemed Caelen was spending the better part of his life lying in wait outside the MacLeòir's keep, waiting for something to happen, hoping to catch a glimpse of Yvaine. The sun had already set, and darkness had descended upon the landscape, making it difficult to see from a distance. The keep appeared silent and still, no sign of life or movement coming from within.

Lachlan growled something under his breath, suggesting his own impatience matched Caelen's.

"What now?" Fergus inquired, looking from Caelen to Lachlan. "How are we to find out if they've already left?"

Caelen glanced at his companions, uncertain how to proceed. Perhaps they ought to split up. However, he did not relish the thought of his cousin reaching Yvaine without, at least, Caelen there to temper Lachlan's fury. After all, he did not trust his cousin, especially since he had no reason to. Although they had discussed how to proceed, Lachlan had not promised to allow Yvaine to return to her home. In truth, it was not his decision. Yet Caelen was certain that Lachlan still believed as he had before, as Caelen's father and uncle did: that it would be wise to end Yvaine's life now and not risk further uncertainty in the future.

As morning dawned, they spotted a wagon slowly making its way toward the keep. Lachlan motioned for his men to get down and remain silent until it passed them by and the farmer and his wagon had entered the keep. “He’s no doubt making a delivery to the keep,” Lachlan stated, glee lighting up his eyes at the prospect of finally receiving answers. “When he leaves, we’ll question him. No doubt, he’ll be able to tell us if the family is in residence.” He looked at Caelen, his gaze hard. “Then we’ll ken how to proceed.”

Caelen nodded, his insides twisting and turning, fear for Yvaine shooting through his body. What if the family had already left? Caelen was certain they would not be able to catch up to them if that were the case. They had lost too much time. “What if they’ve already gone?” he asked out loud, wanting to discuss this now rather than later.

Lachlan shrugged. “Then we pursue them.” He paused, his eyes narrowing. “Or do ye object?” he challenged.

Caelen shook his hand. “What if they are already behind Morganach’s walls?” he demanded with a raised brow. “What do we do then?”

Lachlan’s face darkened, his lips pressing into a tight line. Caelen could see that his cousin’s first instinct was always to attack. He was far from a fool, but he was a slave to his temper, and sometimes it made him blind. Better to discuss this now than when the chase had their blood pumping.

With a frown, Fergus turned to look at Lachlan. “As far as ye ken, has Clan Morganach severed ties with us? Has there been word? Something definitive? Something from the chief himself?” He glanced at Caelen, who nodded in agreement, understanding what his friend was saying.

Lachlan shook his head. “Not as far as I ken. Why?”

A smile played across Fergus's lips as he looked from Caelen to his cousin. "Well, then as far as we are concerned, the marriage contract between Clan Morganach and ours is still valid." He raised his brows in question; yet Caelen thought to see a touch of sadness in his gaze at the thought of Gwyneth marrying Malcolm Morganach.

Laughing, Lachlan slapped his knee. "Quite right!" he agreed wholeheartedly. "Why should we not ride up to the keep in order to discuss the marriage arrangements?" He clasped Fergus's shoulder, nodding his head in approval. "Well done. Perhaps all isna lost quite yet." He shot Caelen an accusing glance before silence once more fell over the small group of men.

Sometime later, the keep's gate opened once more to allow the farmer and his now empty wagon back out. Caelen's heart raced, hopeful and fearful at the same time, as Lachlan motioned for his men to follow him toward the road. Keeping their distance, hidden in the underbrush, they sneaked closer, their hands upon their swords, their eyes focused. Finally, a safe distance from the keep, they surged out of the woods, swords drawn, their blades glinting in the fading sunlight.

Lachlan held a dagger to the trembling farmer's throat, whose face contorted in fear as he stared at the man threatening his life. "Please, dunna hurt me," he pleaded, a whimper rising from his throat. "I have a family to care for."

Caelen wished his cousin had approached the old man without threat, seeking to ask rather than demand if possible. Yet Lachlan's mind never seemed to contemplate such an option.

"Tell us now, truthfully, where is yer chief and his family?" He towered over the elderly farmer, his voice low and

threatening. “If ye lie or withhold information, I assure ye that yer life will be forfeit.”

“The chief and his family have left,” the farmer declared quickly, his voice shaking with fear, “to escort his daughter to Clan Morganach for her wedding.”

His words sent a chill through Caelen, and he exchanged a worried glance with Fergus. They were too late! They would never make it in time!

Lachlan cursed under his breath. “What route are they taking?”

Caelen could barely make out the man’s words, his voice was shaking so badly. Lachlan, though, nodded in satisfaction before lowering his blade. He stepped back and released the farmer, who scrambled away in his wagon, casting fearful glances back at them as he hurried to put as much distance between them as humanly possible.

Caelen watched him go, feeling a twinge of pity for the old man. But there was no time to dwell on it now. They had to make haste if they were to reach Castle Morganach before Yvaine was wed to its laird.

He turned to Fergus and Lachlan, who had already mounted their horses and were waiting for him, Lachlan with a rather enraged expression upon his face.

“Come!” his cousin shouted, digging his heels into the horse’s flanks. “We must make all haste!”

Caelen spurred his own steed into a feverish gallop, his heart pounding in time with the thunderous hooves as he and the others raced for Castle Morganach, dust whipping up behind them in a gust of wind. Every second felt like an eternity, every mile stretching his patience to breaking point.

He urged his horse on relentlessly, the animal's breath blowing hot and desperate through its nostrils.

The night air carried the clank of bridles and the muffled thump of hooves as they pushed their mounts to their limits. Exhaustion weighed heavily on Caelen's heart; failure was not an option—all that mattered was getting to Yvaine before it was too late.

As dawn broke on the second day, he saw Castle Morganach ahead in the distance and a chill of dread settled in his bones; had he traveled too far and arrived too late? He refused to accept defeat and redoubled his efforts, driving the last shreds of strength from his tired beast as he raced onward.

Chapter Seven

A TRUTH REVEALED



Hidden behind a stone pillar, Yvaine watched as Chief Morganach strode across the courtyard. The morning sun had just revealed itself, casting tentative rays across the world. Still, a chill lay in the air, and Yvaine felt it trail down her skin as she watched her *betrothed*, eager to learn more about the man she was to marry, hopeful that by understanding him better, she might find some way out of this arrangement.

His steps were measured, unhastened, and yet, he appeared rushed, his countenance marked by displeasure as he made his way across the courtyard and toward the stables.

Out of nowhere, the sweet voice of a wee lassie, skipping across the courtyard, reached Yvaine's ears. Only when Chief Morganach's shadow fell over the girl did she lift her gaze, and in that moment, naked fear manifested upon her innocent face.

Curious, Yvaine hastened closer, careful to remain hidden from sight as she darted from one pillar to the next. Her heart beat fast as she watched the girl's eyes fill with tears and her mouth drop open in shock as she stared at Chief Morganach.

To Yvaine's utter surprise, Chief Morganach neither sought to admonish the child nor order her away. Instead, his features softened in a way Yvaine had never seen before. "Hush, wee

one,” he whispered, his voice uncharacteristically kind as he retreated a step and then kneeled down, his hands held out in appeasement. “I ken I look frightening, but I mean ye no harm.”

Unfortunately, his efforts were in vain, for in the next instant, the girl’s terrified wails pierced the calm morning air, echoing off the walls as though a horde of barbarians were bearing down on her.

Alarmed by her daughter’s cries, the mother hastened toward her. “I’m terribly sorry,” she mumbled, her face a mask of worry and apology as she glanced at Lord Morganach. “Hush, Aileen. Dunna insult our laird.” She pulled her daughter into her arms, and the girl clung to her in panic, burying her face against her mother’s shoulder.

Standing tall once again, Chief Morganach exhaled a slow breath, his expression now unreadable. A moment later, he vanished inside the stables, and Yvaine blinked. Aye, a part of her understood the wee lassie’s terror, for even Yvaine herself had felt a twinge of fear when Chief Morganach had come upon her so unexpectedly the night before. She had straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin, determined not to cower, and yet, truth be told, she had felt uneasy in his presence. Only as they had spoken, something had changed. Not her wish to flee this union to a man she barely knew. However, she had come to look upon him with different eyes, suddenly curious about the man she did not know.

Indeed, there had been moments when he had seemed less like a monster and more like a wounded soul. How had he received the scars upon his face? Rather belatedly, Yvaine realized that she did not know, had not wondered about how he had received them.

Until now.

Had it merely been an unfortunate accident? Or was there perhaps more to the story, something Chief Morganach sought to hide from the rest of the world?

Yvaine sighed, disappointed that answers did not simply manifest out of thin air. Perhaps she simply ought to ask him. Would he answer her? Indeed, the night before, not many words had tumbled from his lips; and yet Yvaine felt that he had said a great deal.

Revealed a great deal.

Yvaine's thoughts still lingered on Chief Morganach when the sound of her mother's voice calling her name drew her attention elsewhere. "There you are, Child," her mother exclaimed, her face flushed and a rather exasperated expression in her eyes as she hurried over. "Why on earth are ye wondering about the grounds? We have to see ye suitably dressed." She pulled Yvaine along, back inside and toward their quarters.

Frowning, Yvaine dug in her heels. "Dressed for what?"

Her mother's jaw dropped, and she stared at her in a rather unbecoming way, clearly aghast. "Why, yer wedding, of course!" She shook her head then chuckled as though Yvaine's reaction could be attributed to nothing more but cold feet.

Indeed, a cold shiver crawled down Yvaine's back in that moment and her heart clung more tightly to the words Chief Morganach had spoken to her the night before. "Ye must be mistaken, Mother," she replied, praying that it was not the other way around. "I am not to be married today... am I?"

Her mother's forehead furrowed. "Aye, but ye are."

“But Chief Morganach told me that it wouldna be for a few days.”

The furrows upon her mother’s face deepened, and a touch of alarm came to her eyes before she once more grasped Yvaine’s hand and tugged her along. “We better speak to yer father.”

Quick steps carried them back toward their chambers and then past them, and Yvaine was rather surprised when her mother pushed open the door without even bothering to knock. Inside, Yvaine’s father was in conversation with Logan while Rory sat slumped in an armchair, clearly bored. Upon their entry, her father spun around, eyes blazing.. “What is the meaning of this?”

At his anger, his wife’s demeanor changed instantly, and she bowed her head. Yet her grasp upon Yvaine’s arm did not lessen. “I apologize for the intrusion,” she murmured hastily, as though for a moment she had forgotten how to behave around her husband. “Perhaps I am mistaken, however, I believed our daughter’s wedding to be today.”

Yvaine’s father frowned, casting a quick glance at her. “Aye, ’tis.”

Seeing her mother’s unease, Yvaine stepped forward. “Chief Morganach told me that ’tis not,” she replied, rather enjoying the stunned expression that came to her father’s face. “He said we wouldna be wed for a few days.”

“What?!” her father boomed, and Yvaine felt her mother flinch, her fingers now digging into her arm.

Yvaine could not deny that a part of her liked to see her father so alarmed, her unease at the consequences of his fury

held at bay by the thought that she was not at fault here. After all, the decision had been Chief Morganach's.

"Ye spoke to him?" Logan inquired evenly, placing a calming hand upon their father's shoulder as his face began to turn red. "When? Where?" A touch of suspicion came to his eyes as they roamed Yvaine's face.

"I encountered him last night on my way to the library," Yvaine replied without hesitation, lifting her chin and holding her brother's gaze unflinchingly. Indeed, part of her even felt amused by her own answer, remembering her lie to Chief Morganach the night before.

"Ye left yer chamber unattended?" her father snarled, pouncing on another one of her misdeeds, clearly in need of something at which to direct his fury, something other than Chief Morganach's decision. After all, the fierce clan chief was not one her father wished to see as his enemy.

In a way, Yvaine felt relief at the thought that she was no longer required to feign obedience in her father's presence. After months of bowing her head, she reveled in the way she could meet his eyes, her chin lifted, and speak with open defiance. "Well, I suppose ye forgot to post a guard outside my door. Truth be told, I was surprised myself. However, ye canna blame me for seizing that opportunity. I was bored, and so, I left in search of entertainment." She cast him a mocking smile. "I must say I found it."

Before her father could explode, his eyes now round as plates and the color of his face turning from dark red to purple, Logan once more stepped forward. "What did ye speak of? What did he say to ye?"

Yvaine shifted her gaze to her brother. "He said he wouldna be rushed," she repeated the words Chief Morganach

had spoken to her. “He said we wouldna be married for a few days.” Her brother’s jaw tightened, and Yvaine once more glanced past her shoulder at her father. “If ye disapprove, then speak to Chief Morganach. After all, I have no say in all of this, remember?”

Oddly enough, in that moment, Chief Morganach felt like an ally, and Yvaine chuckled at the thought. When first meeting him, she had thought him a man like her father. Yet perhaps she had been mistaken. Perhaps Chief Morganach was a man who could be reasoned with. Perhaps she ought to speak to him again.

Perhaps he could truly be an ally.

Granted, it was a rather far-fetched thought. In a world where men were all-powerful, especially men in positions like her father and Chief Morganach, it was rare to see them step off their high horse and treat others fairly when there was no one there to force them to do so. Still, it was a chance, and Yvaine knew she had to seize it.

“See that everything is prepared,” her father growled, glaring at his wife, who instantly nodded then ducked out of his way as he stormed toward the door. “I shall have a word with Chief Morganach.”

“Father!” Logan called out as he hastened after him. “Perhaps ye oughta calm yerself first. Ye ken it willna serve ye if—” His words were cut off when the door fell closed behind them, their thundering footsteps echoing down the corridor.

Yvaine could not help the smile that came to her face, and as she turned, suddenly feeling lighter than she had in a long time, Rory stood before her, grinning widely. “I’ve never seen him so angry,” her brother remarked, still his eyes sparkled, and Yvaine was glad to see no fear upon his countenance.

Her mother, however, was a different matter. Her eyes were wide, and she flitted about the chamber like a chicken in the yard, clearly driven to do something without quite being able to focus her mind on a specific task.

“Would ye like to explore the castle?” Rory asked, his gaze sweeping out the window, curiosity dancing across his features; at the same time, a touch of secrecy seemed to linger about him, reminding Yvaine of the moments they had sneaked down into the dungeons to search for the secret tunnel. Perhaps all he wanted was another little adventure.

And so, Yvaine nodded, and together, they hurried out of the chamber, leaving their mother behind to fuss about Yvaine’s approaching nuptials. Indeed, it was one of the two subjects she would rather not think about.

Unbidden, her thoughts strayed to Caelen, locked away in her father’s dungeon. Did he fear for his life? She wondered as Rory tugged her along, if he was aware of what was happening? That his life hung in the balance?

As light as Yvaine had felt only moments ago, now she could barely recall the feeling. Every limb seemed to ache, every breath a struggle, and she closed her eyes, leaning back against the wall.

“Are ye well?” came Rory’s concerned voice, his hand reaching out to take hers.

Yvaine heaved a deep sigh and looked at her brother. “I worry for Caelen,” she whispered. “I wish there was something I—”

“Come with me,” Rory whispered, urgency suddenly in his voice as he tugged her onward. His eyes flew up and down the

corridor as though wanting to ensure that no one was nearby. “There’s something I needa tell ye.”

Sudden excitement hummed in Yvaine’s blood as she followed her brother down the corridor and into a small alcove. Everything around them remained quiet, no footsteps announcing another’s approach. She could hear birds trilling outside, and people speaking to one another; yet their voices were distant and far away, no more than a hum. “What is it?” she asked as he turned to her, his eyes eager.

“Caelen’s free.”

The words tumbled so quickly from her brother’s tongue that, for a moment, Yvaine couldna quite grasp them. She blinked, staring at him, afraid to hope, afraid to have misunderstood.

“I’ve been meaning to speak to ye,” Rory continued, an apologetic expression upon his young face. “Yet there never seemed to be a moment. I didna wish for father to find out what I had done. Still, he clearly thought I knew something, something ye were not to ken.” He shook his head, confused. “Only he never spoke to me, never said anything.”

Vividly, Yvaine remembered how her father had interfered the night they had made camp on their way to Morganach Castle. Indeed, he had stepped forward the very moment Rory had meant to speak to her. “What did ye do?” Yvaine inquired, her hands grasping Rory’s tightly. “Did ye set him free? How?”

Rory shrugged, as though wishing to dismiss what he had done as something inconsequential, at the same time, his eyes glowed with pride. “I sent the guard on a fool’s errand then snuck down to the dungeons and unlocked the door.” He

shrugged again, smiling up at her. “They left through the secret tunnel.”

A wide smile stretched across Yvaine’s face until she thought she had strained a muscle. Her cheeks ached, and yet it was the most wonderful feeling that had ever grabbed her so completely. “Thank ye,” she breezed, not daring to raise her voice beyond that of a whisper. Then she pulled Rory into a tight embrace. “Thank ye so much.”

Her brother hugged her back, his arms coming around her. “I was standing outside the door when ye and Caelen were brought before Father,” he murmured, his little voice heavy. “I couldna allow it to happen. Ye were right. Caelen is a good man. I think he truly cares for ye, and he wanted me to tell ye that he was free and well, so ye wouldna worry and marry Chief Morganach.”

Yvaine flinched as though lightning had suddenly surged through her. She shot upright and out of her brother’s embrace, her eyes staring down at his. “Ye’re right,” she stammered, her eyes blinking rapidly as her mind rushed to catch up, putting everything into perspective, everything she had just learned and everything that implied. “I dunna have to marry him.”

Rory nodded, yet the expression upon his face remained serious. “Not to save Caelen’s life, nay.” He sighed deeply, and Yvaine could read upon his face that he held great concern for her, that there was not a doubt in his mind that their father would find some other reason to force Yvaine’s hand. Who might he threaten next?

“Ye’re right,” Yvaine whispered, clasping Rory’s hands tightly. “We needa be cautious. We needa think this through.” She smiled at him. “It feels so good to have ye on my side, to

ken that I can trust ye. Ye're my little brother, and I'm grateful to have ye in my life."

Rory glanced up at her sheepishly. "I'm sorry we took ye away from the island, from yer home. I ken ye never wanted to come, but... I, too, I'm grateful to have ye in my life."

Tears filled Yvaine's eyes as she pulled her brother into another tight embrace. Oh, she did have many regrets, her mind constantly asking questions about what would have happened if she had never come. Yet at the same time, Yvaine could not imagine never meeting Rory. He truly was her little brother now, and she could not imagine ever bidding him farewell.

"What do we do now?" Rory asked, always the planner, always thinking of all the possibilities. "I dunna think there's any way out of this castle for ye. Father willna allow ye, and neither will Chief Morganach." Rory looked up at her. "Did ye truly speak to him? Alone?" A small shiver snaked down his frame.

Yvaine nodded. "Aye, I did. He isna the man I thought him to be." She paused then asked, "Do ye ken how he was injured?"

Rory shook his head. "No one ever spoke to me of it. Mother once said 'twas not a story for a wee lad's ears." He heaved a heavy sigh. "Though I always wished to ken."

Yvaine could not deny that she did as well. Perhaps knowing what had happened would provide more answers to the mystery of Chief Morganach. "Perhaps I'll simply ask him."

Rory's eyes widened at the suggestion, and Yvaine could see that her brother, like so many others, was frightened of

Chief Morganach. At the same time, Yvaine doubted that her brother could even say why. Yet an air of danger and pain lingered about the fierce clan chief, one that held others at bay and made them fearful. Was it intentional? Yvaine wondered. Or did Chief Morganach perhaps long for companionship, but did not know how to achieve it?

“Ye’re awfully good at keeping yer ears and eyes open,” Yvaine remarked, a bit of a wicked grin teasing her lips as she looked down at her young brother. “Would ye not say?”

Pride and a touch of bashfulness made Rory’s cheeks glow in a deep red. “Aye, I suppose I would. Do ye wish for me to spy?”

Yvaine nodded. “If ye dunna mind. If there is a way out of this castle that isna the front gate, ye’re the one who’ll discover it; I’m certain of it.” She paused, though, placing a hand upon her younger brother’s shoulder. “If ye’d rather not, if ’twould see yer loyalty divided, I’ll not press ye.”

Rory smiled up at her. “Ye’re my sister, and I will never turn my back on ye. If ye need me, I’ll be there. Always.”

Impulsively, Yvaine hugged her brother yet again, her heart heavy with thoughts of farewell. After all, if Rory were to discover a way, the day would come when their ways would part for good. ’Twas an almost unbearable thought. Yet so was the alternative.

As Yvaine and Rory continued their exploration of Castle Morganach, she stirred her thoughts back to its reclusive laird, considering it a safer topic—and one far less heartbreaking—than her final farewell to the brothers she had come to love.

Though Yvaine did not wish to wed Malcolm Morganach, she was still intrigued by the man and his secrets. Wherever she went people of his clan all treated him with the utmost respect, but Yvaine could see fear lurking in their eyes as they gazed upon him, and she wondered what it was that made them so wary. After all, Chief Morganach never truly seemed to do anything that would warrant such fear. He never said much, and yet when he spoke his voice was always calm and controlled. Never once had she heard him raise his voice to anyone. Of course, she had spent only a handful of moments in the man's presence. Perhaps she was mistaken. Perhaps she was so desperate to see him as a kind and reasonable man who might help her that she refused to see the truth right in front of her eyes.

Still, whenever Chief Morganach set foot among his people, his mask of coldness remained steadfast, making Yvaine continuously wonder what lay beneath.

Chapter Eight

FORTUNATE TIMING



As Caelen and the others rode up to the gates of Castle Morganach, his heart thundered in his chest, mimicking the sound of the horses' hooves upon the hard ground. He could not recall ever having felt this unhinged, worry and fear curled into a tight ball in his stomach.

Guards stood upon the high walls, their eyes upon them as they halted their horses at the gate. Caelen had never been here before, but the towering walls and turrets of the castle were familiar enough from tales. It was known as a great fortress, and the stronghold of the powerful Chief Morganach, a man both feared and respected throughout the land.

The sun glinted off the stone walls as Caelen peered up at the gatehouse the moment the guard stuck his head out. "Who goes there?" he demanded, squinting his eyes as they swept over the group of warriors standing in front of the gate.

Caelen understood that especially unannounced an air of hostility lingered about them, and he worried that they might not be admitted into the castle to begin with. If so, what would they do then? Caelen shook his head, not wishing to dwell upon this matter now. Nay, he needed to focus his mind and find a way inside. Failure was not an option.

Yvaine needed him.

“I am Caelen MacCarraig, son of Laird MacCarraig,” Caelen replied, his voice strong and authoritative, and as he glanced at his cousin, he saw Lachlan’s face twist into a mask of disapproval and fury. Clearly, his cousin disliked the reminder that he was not the heir, but only second to Caelen. “We have come to visit Chief Morganach.”

The guard nodded in understanding, and yet the way his gaze swept over their small group of warriors worried Caelen. Clearly, they ought to have left most of their warriors behind in the woods and perhaps even approached the gate on foot. Now, though, it was too late.

Caelen cursed under his breath, reminding himself of what happened, of all the things that could go wrong when one failed to keep a clear head. He had rushed forward, his concern for Yvaine only, and in doing so he might have jeopardized his only way inside the castle. If only he had stopped to think!

“I shall speak to my laird,” the guard intoned, and the hard edge to his voice suggested that he doubted they would be admitted. “Wait there.”

“They willna let us in,” Fergus murmured under his breath as he met Caelen’s gaze. His own clearly revealed his own doubt before he glanced up at the tall walls keeping them out. “Even if Chief Morganach has not yet sent word to yer father, he canna be in doubt about why we are here.” His gaze swept over Lachlan and their warriors before returning to Caelen. “We might’ve come a long way for nothing.”

Caelen feared the same, and yet he could not give up. Too much was at stake. He wished he knew without a doubt if Yvaine was truly inside. Yet there was no reason to doubt that she was. What he wished to know more than anything was,

had she already been wed? Had she already sacrificed her own future, believing it the only way to save his life?

Caelen cringed at the thought.

“What is *that*?” Fergus murmured beside him, his head turned away from the castle and toward the road they had come. His eyes squinted as he tried to see into the distance. “Is that a carriage?”

At his words, Caelen, and Lachlan, too, turned to look. “Aye, ’tis,” Lachlan intoned. “I wonder if ’tis a visitor Chief Morganach is expecting.” He glanced at Caelen. “Perhaps this might be a way into the castle.”

Caelen frowned, wondering if his cousin was right. Even if Chief Morganach was expecting someone, someone he did not wish to remain outside the castle gates, his warriors would certainly keep everyone else at bay, would they not? On the other hand, the MacCarmaigs and the Morganachs were not at war, and as far as Caelen remembered, Chief Morganach had never been one overly intent on making enemies. Unlike Lachlan, his first thoughts did not stray to battle and bloodshed. Perhaps he could be reasoned with... if only they got a chance to speak to him.

As the carriage rolled along the road and up to the gate, Caelen and his companions watched with bated breath. It was only accompanied by four riders, yet each was well armed and watchful. Still there was no hostility in their eyes, and Caelen felt certain whoever was inside the carriage was someone Chief Morganach trusted.

Perhaps a friend even.

Approaching the gate, the carriage did not have to pull to a halt because it was admitted entry without the need for

introduction, without the need for Chief Morganach to be consulted.

Caelen urged his horse closer, and one of the guards following the carriage looked back at him, his eyes narrowing. Yet when he saw Caelen posed no threat he rode ahead and through the gate. Pulling his horse to a halt, Caelen peered through the gate, sweeping his eyes over the courtyard within. He saw the doors to the entry hall open and a figure step outside.

Chief Morganach.

From this distance, Caelen could not see the man's face, yet he moved with the slow, measured steps of the stoic clan leader, his gaze fixed upon the carriage as it pulled to a halt. The driver jumped down and then held open the door the moment Chief Morganach stepped forward and offered his hand to the passenger inside.

Caelen's gaze slid away from the laird and locked onto the woman descending the carriage's steps. He noticed her long, auburn hair that shone in the light like a waterfall cascading down her back. Her tall figure moved with a regal air of elegance, yet he sensed something distinctive in her strides—a slight limp that betrayed a hint of vulnerability. When her hand settled upon Chief Morganach's arm, she seemed to lean heavily upon him.



In that moment Chief Morganach looked up, and his gaze met Caelen's.

Although Caelen could not quite decipher the man's expression, something unspoken passed between them, something he could not quite grasp. He thought to see a touch

of surprise in the way Chief Morganach straightened. Clearly, the man had not expected to see him here today. Yet after a moment of pause, he turned to one of the guards, giving a slight nod of the head, and immediately the man hurried over. A few words were exchanged, and then the guard hastened across the courtyard and toward the gate and Caelen.

Yet Caelen could not seem to focus his attention on the guard approaching them. Instead, it lingered upon Chief Morganach and the unknown woman as they ascended the steps together. Indeed, she seemed to lean heavily upon his arm, and the way he escorted her spoke of great concern for her well-being. Was this woman someone the laird cared about?

Finally, the guard reached them and addressed them in a low yet firm voice. "Chief Morganach wishes to see ye in the great hall," he informed them. "Ye are to be escorted there immediately."

Caelen and his companions followed the guard across the courtyard, all of them lost in their own thoughts. While Fergus appeared merely curious, his eyes wide as he looked around, clearly intrigued to be inside this castle, Lachlan's face showed his usual scowl, his gaze sweeping over his surroundings in frank perusal and assessment. They passed through a long corridor and went up several steps until they reached a large wooden door, which opened upon their approach. Inside was a grandiose room with high ceilings and walls adorned with tapestries depicting scenes from ancient battles.

To Caelen, it looked like all the great halls in all the castles he had ever been to, a large chamber meant for gatherings in times of peace as well as times of war. The clan's colors

decorated the walls and ceiling, tapestries speaking to its history, reminding all those within of sufferings and triumphs that had led them to this very day.

The great hall was filled with a number of the laird's clan members, all eyes trained upon Caelen and his companions as they entered. While some faces held mere curiosity, others looked hostile, suspicious, for they clearly wondered what had brought the son of the MacCarraig's laird here today. Caelen did not doubt for a moment that all those on Chief Morganach's counsel knew of his impending marriage to the daughter of the MacLeòir's laird. He wondered what these men were thinking. Indeed, some looked worried that he might be a harbinger of doom, bringing word from his father that another conflict stood upon the horizon. Thinking about it now, Caelen wondered that Chief Morganach, who had always appeared calm in his decisions and wise in his actions, would not have taken more time to sever the contract with Caelen's father before agreeing to marry the MacLeòir's daughter.

Mere moments ticked by before Chief Morganach finally entered the hall through a side door. His face was as stoic as ever as he stepped forward, his gaze sweeping over Caelen and his companions. "Welcome to Morganach Castle," he said formally as though this were a friendly visit and not one overshadowed by a broken contract. "Please, partake of drink and food," he added as his gaze moved over Caelen's men before returning to him, "while I speak to yer commander in private."

Taken aback, Caelen met the laird's gaze, wondering what was about to pass between them. Yet as he stepped forward, he cast a glance over his shoulder and saw the look of fury on Lachlan's face when he realized he would be excluded from the discussion they were about to have.

Without saying a word, Caelen followed Chief Morganach out through the side door and out of the great hall. The man turned down a long corridor, and they proceeded onward without speaking. Eventually, they stepped into Chief Morganach's study, an impressive chamber full of bookshelves filled with ancient tomes and scrolls, as well as several pieces of furniture crafted from dark wood, among them two chairs facing each other across a large desk where Chief Morganach seated himself. He motioned for Caelen to sit in the other chair before speaking. "I expected a visit," he merely said, leaning back, his gaze trained on Caelen.

Caelen exhaled a slow breath, cautioning himself. It would do him no good to allow his concern for Yvaine to decide his actions. Yet he had to know if she was already married to the man sitting across from him. "There is a contract between our two clans," he stated simply, his brows rising in question.

Chief Morganach nodded. "Aye, there is. A contract in which our fathers agreed upon a marriage between myself and yer sister almost two decades ago. A contract that was to be renewed and confirmed once I came of age." His gaze remained calm and steady as he looked at Caelen.

Exhaling a rather exhaustive breath, Caelen closed his eyes. "'Twas not, was it?" Indeed, this was the first he heard of it, and he wondered why his father had not pressed for it at the time. Had he forgotten? So significant to detail? Whatever the reason, if this was true, Chief Morganach had not acted dishonorably, not simply disregarded a standing contract.

"Why are ye here?" Chief Morganach asked calmly. "Have ye come on your father's behest?" Yet the expression in the other man's eyes suggested that he did not think so.

Willing himself to remain calm, Caelen asked, “Have ye entered into a new agreement with the MacLeòirs then? Has this new contract already been... fulfilled?” He held his breath as he waited for Chief Morganach’s reply, knowing that it held the power to break his heart.

However, Chief Morganach said not a word. Instead, his dark gaze swept over Caelen’s face with a most intriguing expression, as though he was suddenly realizing something that had eluded him before.

Chapter Nine

A SCARRED LASS



Sunlight flooded the castle, casting rays through the tall windows and warming the grey stone walls, as Yvaine and Rory traversed the hallways and corridors, trying to find gaps in the guards' duties or perhaps a door left unlocked. Thus far, though, they had discovered nothing of worth, for it seemed Chief Morganach ran his castle like a tight ship—as her brother Duncan would say. The air was still with a heavy silence, only broken by their echoing footsteps as they ascended a large staircase. Turning a corner, down a long corridor, a loud cry of pain suddenly broke the silence.

Yvaine and Rory exchanged a look of alarm before they sprinted down the corridor, glancing frantically around every corner until finally they arrived at a chamber door, slightly ajar. Yvaine stepped forward and pushed it open to find an auburn-haired woman crumpled on the ground. She grasped her stomach with one hand while her other was pressed against her forehead, eyes scrunched shut in agony.

Yvaine rushed to her side and kneeled down beside her. “Are ye all right?”

The woman winced and shook her head, her breathing labored.

Yvaine looked up at Rory, “Go and fetch a doctor. Hurry!”

Rory nodded in agreement and ran off.

“How can I help? What do ye need?” She gently grasped the woman’s arm, and when the woman tried to rise, helped her to her feet. “Perhaps ye wish to lie down.”

Again, the woman winced in pain but forced a smile. “Thank ye, but there is no need for a doctor. I merely slipped.” Yet the woman’s voice still rang with suppressed pain. Clearly, she was in agony, and yet one look into her face told Yvaine that she was used to brushing it aside and struggling onward.

Eyeing the woman curiously, Yvaine found that she walked with a slight limp, her movements strangely stiff, as she staggered to one of the armchairs situated near the fireplace. She all but dropped into it, as though her muscles cramped up, unable to hold her upright any longer. Another moan fell from her lips, and she closed her eyes for a moment, breathing in and out slowly. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and some of her auburn tresses clung to her temples. She wore a tall-necked dress, the collar so high that it almost reached her chin. Yet when she let her head fell back, Yvaine glimpsed small scars that peeked out from under her collar.

Instantly, Yvaine felt reminded of Chief Morganach’s scars, and she held her breath, staring at the unknown woman. Who was she? Yvaine knew she had never seen her before. She had not stood in the hall upon their arrival at Castle Morganach. Yet she was clearly not a servant, judging from the fine dress she wore and the chamber that had been assigned to her. Was she family?

“My name is Yvaine.” Tentative steps carried her closer, for she did not wish to intrude if the woman was, indeed, in need of solitude. “Is there anything I can do for ye?”

After a long moment, the woman's eyes blinked open, and she forced a smile onto her lips. "I'm Ellen," she reciprocated, struggling to seat herself upright. "I'm Chief Morganach's cousin, and I have come for... the wedding." She eyed Yvaine curiously, and yet her hands were clamped upon the armrests as though she still remained in the grip of pain. "Are ye his intended?"

For a moment, Yvaine could do little else but stare at the woman. Perhaps she had been a fool to assume that Chief Morganach had no family to call his own. Did not everyone have someone in their life? "'Tis a pleasure to meet ye," she murmured then, her true mother's voice in her head reminding her of her manners. "I..."

Despite everything that had happened thus far, hearing Chief Morganach's cousin speak of their wedding somehow made it seem inevitable. It felt as though a large boulder suddenly settled upon Yvaine's chest, robbing her of all her strength, and she sank down into the unoccupied armchair across from her intended's cousin.

A touch of alarm came to Ellen's face. "Are ye all right?" the woman asked kindly, pushing to her feet despite the pain that still lingered, all too visible in her blue eyes.

Yvaine shook her head to clear it, willing herself to get a grip on her emotions. It would not serve her if she lost her head now. Indeed, after learning that Caelen was no longer in danger, she ought to feel revived, her strength renewed to address this issue of her nuptials.

In that moment, a knock sounded on the door then it was immediately pushed open. In rushed Rory, an elderly gentleman upon his heels, huffing and puffing, exertion

marking his features. “There,” Rory exclaimed, nodding toward Ellen, and waving the doctor forward. “She’s unwell.”

A polite laugh flew from Ellen’s lips as she waved the doctor, who hastened toward her, away. “Oh, I am so sorry to alarm ye. ’Tis nothing, truly. I merely experienced a moment of dizziness.” She smiled at the doctor reassuringly. “Please go and rest. I am deeply sorry to have alarm ye.” She turned to look at Rory. “Thank ye for yer kind assistance. I had no idea that such a fine young man resided with us.”

Rising from her chair, Yvaine walked over, quite taken in that moment with the beaming pride upon Rory’s face. “This is Rory, my brother,” she told Ellen, then she nodded for the doctor to take his leave. “I suppose ’twas a mere misunderstanding.”

Looking a bit disgruntled, the elderly gentleman took his leave.

“Would ye give us a moment alone, Rory?” Yvaine asked her brother, well aware of the thoughtful gaze that came to his eyes as he looked back and forth between the two women. However, without a word of question, he, too, took his leave, closing the door behind him.

“Ye’re quite fortunate to have such an endearing brother by yer side,” Ellen remarked, deep emotion swinging in her voice despite the look of fatigue that lingered upon her face. She staggered back to the very chair she had vacated before and sank into it, a sigh of deepest relief leaving her lips.

Yvaine stepped closer. “Ye’re not well, are ye?”

Ellen sighed then met Yvaine’s eyes. “It is what it is. There’s no point in lamenting one’s fate, is there?” She

swallowed hard. “We must accept what we canna change. It has taken me a long time to realize that.”

Countless questions shot through Yvaine’s mind, and yet she did not dare ask a single one. Somehow, it felt disrespectful to press this woman for information, for she possessed a kindness that was all the more impressive because of the pain she suffered so silently.

“Ye are his betrothed, are ye not?” Yvaine almost flinched at the question, and a knowing look came to Ellen’s face. “Yet... he isna yer choice.” A shadow fell over her face for a brief moment before she shook her head and pushed it determinedly away. Then she gestured to the other chair. “Please, sit.”

Yvaine complied, curious to learn more about this woman who had so unexpectedly showed up in her life. “Ye said ye were his cousin?” she asked, unable to put into words all the things she wished to know.

Ellen nodded. “Aye, I am,” she murmured with a thoughtful expression. “And yet the word falls far short.”

For a long moment, the two women regarded one another, and Yvaine could not shake the feeling that Ellen was contemplating how much—if anything—to share with her. Eventually, Chief Morganach’s cousin sighed, nodding her head ever so slightly as though she had reached a decision. “Yer union is like all the others, isna it? A contract agreed upon to the benefit of the clan.”

Taken aback by Ellen’s frankness, Yvaine nodded. “It is,” she confirmed, relishing the feeling of saying so out loud. “I didna choose this. In fact, my father forced me to come here. He threatened the life of someone... I hold dear.”

Yvaine closed her eyes, and for the first time, the full meaning of all the fear she had gone through in the last few days surfaced, enveloping her whole. Tears pricked her eyes, and she struggled to hold them back, wondering in that moment if she would ever see Caelen again. At least, though, she reminded herself, he was alive.

“I’m sorry to hear it,” Ellen replied, not even a touch of shock or outrage upon her face, and it made Yvaine wonder about the other woman’s life. “I ken how it feels to be nothing more than a pawn, used for strategic purposes and then discarded.” She heaved a deep sigh, and Yvaine thought to see great sorrow in her gaze.

“Did yer father do the same to ye?” Yvaine inquired, suddenly feeling as though she could say anything to this woman.

A sad smile flickered across Ellen’s face. “’Twas a long time ago. I was barely of age, and then...” She looked down at her hands before sweeping her gaze over the rest of her body, and for the first time, Yvaine noticed that she wore gloves. “And then this happened, and all of a sudden, no one wanted me any longer.” She looked up and met Yvaine’s gaze. “Yet I hold no regrets, for how can I?” She closed her eyes, releasing the tense grip on her limbs and her body slumped back, exhaustion upon her features.

“Ye were burned, were ye not?” Yvaine asked boldly, sensing that on some level the other woman wanted to share her fate as much as Yvaine did. “Was it the same fire that burned Chief Morganach?”

Ellen’s eyes blinked open. “He was always like a brother to me,” she whispered, silent tears streaking down her cheeks.

“I loved him. I always have. I couldna let him come to harm. I couldna.”

Yvaine all but held her breath, feeling so close to a mystery that had eluded her these past days. “What happened?”

Ellen blinked. “He didna tell ye, did he?”

Yvaine shook her head. “Yet at the same time I didna ask,” she admitted, surprised to feel a sudden sense of loyalty to Chief Morganach. “I wondered, though. Yet he isna a man easy to talk to, is he? I think I did see pain in his gaze, and yet there isna a bond between us, one that would allow me to ask a question such as that.” She sighed. “If... things were different, I suppose I’d like to get to know him.” She met Ellen’s eyes. “As a friend, not my future husband.”

Ellen nodded in understanding. “No one kens how the fire broke out. Malcolm was reading in the stable, in the hayloft. He often went there and curled up with the kittens.” She chuckled wistfully. “He was no more than a lad, before life demanded things that darkened his heart.” She exhaled a slow breath, and her hands once more clamped down upon the armrests. “I think I smelled the smoke before I even saw the fire. I’m not certain. My memories of that day are not clear.” She looked into Yvaine’s eyes, as though needing something to hold onto. “I think he’d fallen sleep in the hay, and that was why he didna notice. A beam had come down upon him, struck him upon the side of the face. He lay pinned. Somehow, to this day, I dunna ken how I managed to free him. Yet by the time I managed to pull him to his feet, the fire had closed around us.”

Yvaine listened with bated breath, trying to imagine what the two cousins had lived through while at the same time struggling to hold the images at bay.

“My skirts caught fire, and all of a sudden, my entire dress was aflame. I remember the heat and the pain, but I dunna remember much after that. I dunna remember how I made it out. I woke up days later and there was more pain... Malcolm sitting at my side.”

Silence fell over the chamber then, and Yvaine knew that from this day forward she would not look at Chief Morganach with the same eyes ever again. Aye, guilt could be crippling, more so than deep scars. Clearly, there was deep affection between the two cousins, and thus Yvaine knew that each time Chief Morganach looked at Ellen, his heart twisting in agony, it blamed him for her pain, for the future she had lost...

... to save him.

Chapter Ten

FOR REASONS UNKNOWN



Caelen's unease grew as he shifted in his seat, his gaze fixed upon the man behind the desk. The mahogany furniture gleamed in the sun shining through the windowpanes, creating shadows that seemed to speak of knowledge hidden within these walls.

Gripping the armrests, Caelen held his breath, waiting for Chief Morganach's answer, afraid to hear confirmed that Yvaine was already married and thus lost to him. As the moments ticked by, and Chief Morganach said not a word, his inquisitive gaze trained upon Caelen, Caelen felt his lungs strain for air, and his skin began to prickle. Yet he could not seem to bring himself to release the tight hold he kept on his body. His fingers would not loosen, and his lungs would not contract.

"Nay," Chief Morganach finally said after a small eternity, that one quiet word echoing through the study like a stroke of thunder. Caelen could feel it like a shift in the air, pushing against his eardrums, and all of a sudden, he drew in a sharp breath of air, his eyes closing in utter relief.

From the sounds that drifted to Caelen's ears, he surmised that Chief Morganach was leaning back in his chair, and truly, when he opened his eyes, he saw the other man sitting

comfortably and seemingly at complete ease, his fingers steepled in thought. Aye, the expression in Chief Morganach's gaze sent a chill down Caelen's back, as though they were enemies upon the battlefield, and Chief Morganach had just now realized how to defeat Caelen.

“Considering that Yvaine MacLeòir only just reappeared after years of being missing, presumed dead even,” Chief Morganach remarked in a rather calm and calculating tone, “I canna help but be surprised by the way ye speak of her.” His brows drew together ever so slightly, and Caelen could feel the other man's gaze drilling into him. “In fact, you seem acquainted. In the short time since her return, have yer paths crossed?”

Caelen felt an uncomfortable tightness in the pit of his stomach as Chief Morganach regarded him shrewdly. He did not doubt that the other men would immediately know if Caelen told a lie, and yet he did not want to give away too much information about Yvaine's past. Eventually, though, Caelen realized that the truth was the only course of action, the only thing he could do was not to add too many details. “I first encountered Yvaine on the Fey Isles,” Caelen said reluctantly, breaking the quiet stillness of the room that was only punctuated by the soft ticking of an ancient clock in the corner. “It happened by sheer happenstance. We were there because...” He swallowed, remembering that day, remembering his apprehension. Sadly, nothing had changed since. “'Tis not important.”

“I verra well ken why ye were there,” Chief Morganach replied, lifting his brows to convey a sense of superiority, as though he were all-knowing and there was no point in Caelen trying to hide anything from him. “How did she come to be there?” he asked then before adding, “I suppose it wasna yer

clan who had her abducted as a child? After all, rumors abounded.”

Caelen scoffed. “There are rumors about everyone and everything, most far-fetched and without a grain of truth to them.” He felt his hands once more tighten upon the armrests, furious with Chief Morganach for bringing up this issue now. He had spent his whole life with that shadow hanging over his head, that his clan had acted so dishonorably.

Stealing a child.

Yet Caelen could not deny the sense of unease that slowly spread through his body. After all, only recently, his own father had ordered him to end a young woman’s life without so much as a show of regret.

“Yet how would ye ken?” Chief Morganach remarked thoughtfully, tapping his right forefinger against his chin. “You were only a wee lad when it happened.” He heaved a deep sigh. “And fathers are not always forthcoming, are they?”

Caelen frowned, regarding the other man, constantly torn between antagonism and a strange sense of camaraderie.

“Did she say how she came to be on the island?” Chief Morganach inquired, leaning forward and resting his elbows upon the desktop.

Caelen shook his head. “She didna.” Regret filled his heart, for he wished to know Yvaine better. “I assume she didna tell ye, either,” he spat the words, his gaze hardening as he returned Chief Morganach’s penetrating stare. “Odd, considering ye are her betrothed.” The word felt sour and painful and deeply wrong upon his tongue.

Chief Morganach’s heavy gaze lingered for a moment, openly studying Caelen, before Caelen thought to see the

beginnings of a smile twitch upon the corners of his mouth. Indeed, it looked quite odd, for Caelen could not remember ever having seen the man smile when he had visited MacCarraig Castle for the negotiations regarding his betrothal to Gwyneth. Yet again, perhaps it was only the scarred side of his face that gave him a forever stern expression. “Upon hearing of yer arrival, I thought ye had come to speak to me on yer sister’s behest,” Chief Morganach said calmly, his eyes still watchful. “Now, though, I suppose yer intentions are not quite what I expected.” His brows rose questioningly.

Again, Caelen held his breath, weighing his words before daring to speak. As the moments ticked by, the silence in the study became oppressive and charged with tension. “I am here to settle this matter,” he finally said, intentionally keeping his words vague.

Yet, unfortunately, Chief Morganach was not to be misled. “What matter is it that ye speak of?” Flattening his hands upon the top of his desk, Chief Morganach leaned forward, his voice dropping to a whisper. “What brings ye here today? How well do ye truly ken... my betrothed?” A touch of menace and accusation sparkled in his eyes, and for the first time, Chief Morganach gave the impression of a man of flesh and blood with emotions and desires, a man who sometimes lost control, a man who, in fact, did not know everything,

A man not unlike Caelen himself.

Caelen’s heart pounded in his chest as he regarded the man across from him, wondering if Chief Morganach had come to care for Yvaine. Could it be that he was jealous? The thought that Chief Morganach wanted Yvaine for his wife not because of some contract but because of the woman she was turned

Caelen's stomach, and in that moment, all hope fled his body, leaving him defeated.

"I am to marry Yvaine in a matter of days," Chief Morganach remarked calmly; yet Caelen could not shake the feeling that the other man's words were meant as a challenge.

"I'm surprised her father wishes to wait that long," Caelen growled under his breath, remembering the man's eagerness to see his daughter wed, to secure alliances and gain superiority over the MacCarmaigs.

"He doesn't," Chief Morganach replied to Caelen's surprise. "I do."

Confused, Caelen stared at the other man. "Ye do? Why?" In truth, he could not imagine anyone wanting to wait. If it were him, you would—

Closing his eyes, Caelen heaved a deep breath, realizing at that moment that if it were, indeed, him, he would not hesitate. He would marry her in a heartbeat.

The realization felt like a fist to his stomach, and Caelen groaned silently, knowing that his future would never be a happy one if he lost Yvaine. If she were to marry Chief Morganach or decide to return to her home—wherever that was—Caelen would remain behind with this ache in his heart that would never be soothed.

"Do ye object?" Chief Morganach inquired, his left eyebrow rising in question and challenge. "Would ye rather see me wed yer sister?"

Caelen stilled when he saw a shadow fall over Chief Morganach. He remembered well the last time the man had visited MacCarraig Castle. He remembered the way they had stood in the great hall when Caelen's father had sent for

Gwyneth, asking her to join them. She had been lovely as ever, and yet her gaze had been glued to the floor, never once daring to rise and meet Chief Morganach's eyes. Caelen had known instantly that she was terrified, her hands trembling and her breath coming fast.

So, he could not rightly say that he wished for Chief Morganach to marry his sister. Yet what was the alternative? It seemed happiness would not be in store for all of them. If one heart's desire was fulfilled, another's heart would be broken.

Chief Morganach expelled a deep sigh, an almost vulnerable expression on his face now. "Yer sister fears me," he murmured, his tone low and hard, as though the words he spoke pained him. "Yvaine does not."

Caelen blinked, taken aback by this simple yet profound admission by the scarred laird. He wondered what it was like to walk through life and have all those around look at one with fear and perhaps reluctance. Although Chief Morganach was well-respected, it was for his fighting prowess, his calculating mind, the steadfast way with which he led his clan. Yet, Caelen supposed, there was another side to this man as well. Was there not to everyone?

"Ye ken I speak true," Chief Morganach murmured, heaving a deep sigh. "I would have upheld the contract between our clans despite the fact that it hadna been renewed as stated within, had Yvaine not returned." He shrugged, something almost apologetic in his gaze. "I must marry for the sake of my clan, and I'd rather have a wife who doesna cringe at the very sight of me."

As much as Caelen wished to argue, he could not. In fact, he well understood Chief Morganach's reasoning. After all,

the man was showing Caelen's sister a kindness that their father had never even considered.

"Tell me true," Chief Morganach continued, his dark gaze seeking Caelen's, "how well do ye ken Yvaine?"

Caelen felt his throat go dry as all the months of burying his feelings broke free inside of him. A part of him wanted to shout his feelings to the world, to Chief Morganach in particular; and yet fear held him back. All he managed was a meek whisper: "We've not known each other long... yet..." He swallowed hard, unable to finish the sentence, worried what such an admission would do to him. After all, Yvaine was as good as lost.

Chief Morganach nodded, a sense of understanding in his gaze as though Caelen had explained himself in great detail. "The lass is an unusual woman," he remarked then swallowed, and he seemed to hesitate for a moment. "Would ye like to see her before ye leave?"

Caelen's heart rose and fell at the same time. The thought of seeing Yvaine, speaking to her, being near her was elating. Only Chief Morganach's words made it unmistakably clear that he still intended to wed Yvaine, and that Caelen would meet strong opposition should he try anything to prevent that.

"Aye, I do," Caelen replied nonetheless, knowing that no matter what would happen, he could not leave without seeing her once again. Would she be devastated, though, to learn that Caelen could not free her from the union her father had arranged for her? Or had she already made her peace with it? Clearly, she had made an impression on Chief Morganach, and Caelen could not help but wonder if Chief Morganach, too, had made an impression on her.

Chapter Eleven

A BURIED HEART



The late afternoon sun had just begun its descent, dipping lower over the castle walls, when its rays cast a golden light across the grounds. Yvaine shivered slightly in the cool autumn air, wrapping her shawl tighter around her shoulders as she stepped outside with her brother Logan.

As they began to walk, she noticed a slight tension on Logan's face, and she glanced at him with curiosity. He seemed to be deep in thought. "Something wrong?" she inquired, another shiver, not caused by the cold, trailing down her spine. "Did Father say anything to ye? About... my wedding?" Knowing that Caelen was alive and well and not in danger of being executed at any moment eased Yvaine's heart greatly; and yet over the past few months, she had come to know her birth father, and she feared what he might do if she were to refuse him. Even more than before, at Castle Morganach, she was among strangers, no one at her side who would aid her.

Perhaps with the exception of Rory. Yet as brave and kind as his heart was, he could not aid her. And he had tried. They both had. Yet all their explorations had led nowhere. If there was another way out of Castle Morganach, they had been unable to unearth it. Was hope truly lost?

Never! And yet a streak of brilliance eluded Yvaine.

Logan heaved a deep sigh, and the absent expression upon his face changed. His eyes met hers, and the ghost of a smile played across his features. “Father spoke to Chief Morganach last night, and apparently, your betrothed insists upon a few days’ time before the wedding takes place.” He shrugged, surprise evident in his gaze. “He is unrelenting, and Father is furious. Yet what is he to do? More than anything, he seeks this alliance.”

Yvaine’s lips curved into a smile as she thought of her father being put in his place by Chief Morganach. “I would’ve liked to be there,” she said with a slight smirk. “I would have liked to see him fight for control, for once unable to get his way, knowing his opponent to be in a stronger position.” Aye, Yvaine had come to loathe her father, yet her own words caught her off guard, for it had only been the day before when she had begun to feel something akin to compassion toward Chief Morganach. Ellen’s story of their sufferings had changed how she saw him, for she now understood that there was more to the cold gaze in his eyes than a man hardened by his own ambitions.

Logan nodded, a bit of an indulgent smile coming to his lips. “I ken he hasna made things easy for ye but—”

Yvaine drew to a halt, her hand grasping her brother’s arm. “Not made things easy?” She chuckled darkly, shaking her head. “He’s a tyrant. He is the most awful man I have ever met in my life.” She threw up her hands, feeling a weight lifted off her shoulders at finally saying so out loud. “I ken he is my father, and yet I... hate him. He doesna deserve my loyalty, and he shall never have it.”

Sadness gathered in Logan's eyes as he looked at her, and Yvaine even thought to see a spark of guilt, shame, and regret. "Perhaps..." Closing his eyes, he hung his head. "Perhaps I shouldna have taken ye back." He sighed and looked at her again. "Perhaps I simply oughta have left ye on the island." He swallowed. "I overheard ye telling Rory once that ye think of it as yer home. Is that true?"

Yvaine sighed, that piercing longing once more surging through her heart whenever she thought of home, of her family, of the place she desperately wished to return to. "Aye, 'tis true. I, too, wish I had never left." She bit her lip, a sudden tug upon her heart making her pause. "And yet I dunna regret coming here."

A deep frown drew down Logan's brows, marking his surprise. Yvaine shrugged helplessly. "Well, perhaps I do regret coming here but only because of the situation I now find myself in." She offered her brother a tentative smile. "What can I say? I loathe father, but..." She stepped forward and grasped Logan's hands. "I have come to care for ye, for ye and Rory and Mother as well. Aye, her absolute obedience and lack of spine," she added in a scornful tone, "are maddening, but I ken that she loves me, that her heart broke the day I disappeared." Anger flooded her heart in that moment. "Yet none of it will matter once I'm *bartered* to the Morganach chief like a piece of cattle; I'll lose ye all the same."

Logan nodded, and his hands tightened upon hers. "Aye, I'm sorry. Yet 'tis good to have ye back, wee sister. When..." He drew in a slow breath, his gaze never leaving hers. "I never thought I'd ever see ye again. In the beginning, I used to..." He closed his eyes, and an almost sheepish smile came to his face. "I used to speak to ye in my mind, and ye would answer.

I would hear yer babbling words, yer laughter, and yer giggles.”

Touched beyond words, Yvaine beamed up at him, taken aback by this unexpected moment of brotherly affection.

“With time, though, my memories of ye faded,” he admitted in a strained voice, an apologetic shrug moving his shoulders. “I tried to hold onto them, but with each day, they slipped further and further away. Yet when I saw ye again when I looked into yer eyes,” he reached out a hand and cupped her cheek, “’twas as though no time had passed. I knew ye to be ye, and I simply couldna leave ye behind.” He sighed deeply. “I’m sorry.”



Flinging herself into her brother’s arms, Yvaine held onto him tightly, her heart rejoicing when she felt him pull her tighter into his embrace. “I wish I’d known ye growing up,” she murmured into the folds of his plaid. “I wish I remembered ye from when I was a child.”

Logan’s arms tightened upon her, one hand settling upon her shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “I wish I could’ve been there for ye... wherever ye were.” He stepped back and looked into her eyes, his hand still upon her shoulders. “Ye never said, and I never asked.” Now, though, the question gleamed in his eyes.

Although Yvaine always kept her past close to her chest, here in this moment she could not deny Logan his answer. “I grew up with a loving family, with brothers who doted on me every moment of every day.” She chuckled. “Annoyingly so. More than once, I wished they wouldna watch me so diligently, always there when I fell, always there when I

stumbled even.” Tears pricked the back of her eyes as she thought of her brothers back home, hundreds of years in the future. “Yet I love them all the same. They always had my back. They always stood with me. I was never alone.”

Again, guilt showed in Logan’s gaze. “I failed ye,” he murmured, self-reproach in his voice. “I left ye alone when ye needed me.” Before Yvaine could speak, before she could object, wishing to put her brother’s mind at ease, Logan said, “If ye dunna wish to marry Chief Morganach, I will help ye achieve that goal any way I can.”

Stunned, Yvaine stared at her older brother. For months now, she had been certain beyond the shadow of doubt that Logan would never, under no circumstances, speak out against their father. He was a loyal man, serving his clan without regard for his personal feelings. It was a noble trait, and yet it had frustrated Yvaine to no ends. “Are ye serious?”

Though doubt remained in his gaze, he nodded.

Momentarily overwhelmed, Yvaine did not quite know how to reply. It had been a long time since someone had asked for her wishes, ready to sacrifice in order to assist her. Yet that was not altogether true, was it? Had Caelen not done the same? Had he not almost paid with his life? And what of Rory?

“I ken why we’re here,” Logan remarked darkly. “I ken what father did to gain yer compliance.” His gaze sparked with fury, and yet there was something searching there as he looked into her eyes. “Ye care for him, do ye not? The son of the MacCarraig laird, I mean.” He chuckled. “Of course, ye do. Why else would ye have given up yer freedom for him, given up everything to save his life?”

Unblinking, Yvaine stared at her brother, his words echoing through her mind. Aye, she cared for Caelen; there was no denying that. Still, Yvaine had done her utmost to do just that, to ignore that feeling that slept in her chest, to convince herself that it was no more than a passing infatuation. After all, if she truly did care for Caelen, what about her plans to go home?

“I shall speak to Chief Morganach,” Logan said, interrupting her thoughts. “In my experience, he is a man who can be reasoned with.” He paused, his gaze distant all of a sudden. “But sometimes, all our hands are tied.”

Looking up at her brother, Yvaine frowned. “What’s the matter?” she asked, unable to shake the feeling that something was wrong, that Logan had been acting strangely since they had arrived at Castle Morganach. “Ye’re not quite yerself, are ye?” She looked around the courtyard, her gaze sweeping about the tall stone walls. “Is it this place? Have ye been here before?”

Logan’s eyes closed, and he exhaled a deep breath. “Aye, I have been here before.” His hands tightened upon Yvaine’s arms, and for a moment, she felt as though it happened without his knowledge, triggered by some memory that had taken him unawares. Then his gaze focused once again and met hers. “Rory mentioned that ye met Chief Morganach’s cousin.” He swallowed hard. “Ellen.”

Staring up into her brother’s face, Yvaine could all but see the pieces of the puzzle that was her brother fall into place. She did not yet have all the answers, and yet deep down in her heart she knew that Ellen was not simply Chief Morganach’s cousin.

Not to Logan.

At the raw emotions upon her brother's face, Yvaine felt her heart skip a beat. His jaw tensed, and his gaze swept past her head, not wishing for her to see him. Yet it was too late for that.

"Ye knew her before, did ye not?" Yvaine inquired, remembering everything Ellen had told her the day before. "Before the fire."

Heaving a deep sigh, Logan moved past her, slow steps carrying him down the path. "Aye, I did."

Yvaine hurried to catch up to him, keeping her distance but not allowing him to walk away. "Ye cared for her."

His head fell, his chin almost touching his chest, and that sign of weakness was all the answer she needed.

"What happened back then?" Walking beside him, she gently bumped his arm with her own. "Please, share this with me." She peered up at him, trying to catch his gaze. "I can see that it still pains ye."

At the edge of the garden, Logan drew to a halt, yet the restlessness in his limbs remained. Only there was nowhere else to go. And so, he turned and faced her, his lips parting as though he wished to speak; yet no words fell from his lips.

"She told me of the fire," Yvaine volunteered, seeking to aid him along. "She told me how she was burned, that her father had planned a union for her but that it fell apart because of the scars she bore after that day." Yvaine took a step closer, peering up at her brother's eyes. "Who was she to marry? Ye?"

Without looking at her, Logan shook his head. "I wanted to but Father refused. She wasna a laird's daughter." His lips thinned, bitterness filling his voice. "After she was burned, her father all but locked her away. He acted as though she no

longer existed, never spoke of her, never allowed her to step outside. I tried to see her once, but he made it quite clear that I wasna welcome.” A heavy sigh drifted from his lips. “I havena seen her in twelve years.”

Staring at her brother in disbelief, Yvaine slowly shook her head. “Twelve years,” she echoed softly. “And ye still feel for her. I can see it.”

Aye, it was a statement rather than a question, and finally, Yvaine understood the man who was her brother. He had not refused to give his aid because he believed her to be in the wrong. Once, he himself had sought happiness, hopeful that he would be free to choose, and it all had ended in heartbreak, an experience that had taught Logan that there was no point in having hope. Instead, he had thrown himself into his duty to his clan, pushing aside all desires for his own future and simply living for others. It had become second nature to him, and he had not dared question the course he had chosen so long ago.

“Ye havena seen her in twelve years,” Yvaine once more echoed his words, “and yet she’s here now. She said she came for her cousin’s wedding...” Still, Yvaine wondered if perhaps on some level Ellen had hoped that Logan might be here as well. Did she wish to see him again? Was her heart still his? “Do ye wish to see her?”

Yvaine waited for some sort of reaction from her brother—though none came. His face remained an emotionless mask as he stared off into the distance with his hands clenched into fists at his sides. She did not know what else to say, so instead she kept silent, simply standing alongside him in solidarity until finally he spoke again.

“Aye, I do,” he murmured, his voice barely audible, as though he was uncertain whether it was wise to speak so. “However...” He did not say more, and yet this one word was laden with fears and doubts.

Perhaps Logan simply needed a bit of time to wrap his mind around this sudden, new and unexpected development. Yvaine remembered well how she had been reeling the day she had found herself swept back in time, the loss of her family breaking her heart into tiny shards, all hope lost and yet her body had refused to lay down and die. She had been forced to go on despite the pain, and perhaps that had been the worst of it all.

Yet eventually, she had risen again, and perhaps, Logan would as well.

Chapter Twelve

DESPERATION



Stepping into one of the chambers he and his men had been assigned by Chief Morganach, Caelen found Fergus seated in an armchair by the fire while Lachlan paced restlessly. Indeed, the tension in the air was thick enough to cut with a knife, and Lachlan spun toward him the moment he walked in, restlessness visible in every fiber of his being. After all, their presence at Castle Morganach had been accepted under one simple condition: they not leave their assigned quarters unescorted. Caelen supposed Chief Morganach wished to avoid a confrontation between the two warring clans... and with good reason. Still, confined to their quarters had all their tempers running higher.

“What happened?” he demanded, his face contorted into a snarl, the expression in his eyes still revealing loud and clear that he disliked being kept out of the loop. “What did Chief Morganach say?”

Caelen sighed with a heavy heart. “He insists upon marrying Yvaine.”

Lachlan almost roared with fury, curses flying from his lips as he stalked around the room like a cornered animal, his body taut and his hands balled into fists. Fergus, though, remained where he was, an odd calm spreading over his face,

one that perhaps only Caelen truly understood. After all, while Fergus was certainly loyal to their clan and most invested in ensuring its well-being, he also cared deeply for Caelen's sister Gwyneth. More than once, Caelen had seen a rather torn expression upon his friend's face, uncertainty in his gaze.

"Are ye all right?" Fergus inquired quietly as he stepped toward Caelen. "Were ye able to speak to Yvaine?" Concern rested in his gaze.

Caelen heaved a deep sigh, his emotions all over the place, torn like his friend's. Aye, Chief Morganach still wished to wed Yvaine... and with good reason, Caelen had to admit. That, in turn, freed Gwyneth from having to marry the stoic clan leader, no doubt her mind would be set at ease when she found out. At the same time, it did not free her completely. As much as Gwyneth and Fergus might care for one another, they would never be allowed to wed. As the daughter of a clan laird, Caelen knew their father would seek to marry her to another more influential man, preferably a laird in his own right. Nay, there would be no future for them.

As, apparently, there would be no future for Caelen and Yvaine. "Not yet," he replied to his friend's question. "Yet Chief Morganach gave his permission for me to see her before we leave."

"Leave?" Lachlan demanded with another growl, his eyes shooting daggers in Caelen's direction. His emotions ran much higher, and there was a far more dangerous edge to them. "Ye canna truly intend to leave?" He stalked closer, shaking his head in a clear sign of defiance. "Nay, we're staying. This marriage isna yet sealed, is it?" His brows rose, demanding confirmation.

“It is not,” Caelen admitted, wishing it never had to be. If only he could think of something to do, something that would see everything changed. Yet reasonably, Yvaine would make Chief Morganach a better bride than Gwyneth. At the same time, both clans yearned for this alliance. Ultimately, someone would be disappointed. It seemed inevitable.

“Then we stay and wait for yer father’s arrival,” Lachlan stated, pitching his chin higher, the glare in his eyes not lessening.

Caelen frowned. “My father’s arrival?”

Lachlan scoffed. “Ye didna think I would leave him out of this, did ye?” Scowling, he shook his head. “I am not like ye, Caelen. My loyalty is to my laird, to my clan, and I will do everything necessary to protect them.” He took a step closer, his gaze hard. “Before we left, I sent a rider back.” He cocked his right brow. “Did ye not notice?”

Thinking back, Caelen could not remember his cousin sending off the messenger. Yet at the time, he had been much too preoccupied to notice anything happening around him. Aye, Yvaine had become a distraction. Whenever she was near, whenever his thoughts dwelled upon her, everything else seemed to fade into the background as though it were not even there.

“This willna stand,” Lachlan spat, pacing the room once again as if he could burn off some of his rage. “Our clan canna be left in such a position. Yer father shall arrive soon, I am sure of it.” He squared his shoulders, drawing himself up tall. “Perhaps with him here, we will be able to reason with Chief Morganach, prove to him that it would only be to his advantage to seek an alliance with us.” He searched Caelen’s gaze. “After all, from what ye said, ’tis clear that the MacLeòir

lass isna even loyal to her own clan. If Chief Morganach were to wed her, he could never be certain she would remain here. We needa make it clear to him that she would pose a risk to his clan, to his clan's future. Perhaps together, we will be able to convince him.”

Caelen could not deny that his cousin's words made sense. Perhaps there was some way to discourage Chief Morganach from seeking a match with Yvaine. Yet could he do this to his sister?

Caelen groaned inwardly, wishing that for once life could be simple, that there could be an answer that would satisfy them all. Yet he knew that with his father's arrival, there was the potential for more bloodshed. He could not recall all three lairds ever having been in the same place. Years had passed since Caelen's father had spoken to the head of Clan MacLeòir in person, no messengers sent back and forth between them. Aye, Caelen feared that emotions would run high again, that there would be more bloodshed. If only everyone were willing to talk, to find some sort of solution.

A wistful smile flickered across his features as he remembered speaking to Yvaine about this matter. With affection, he recalled her fierce reply, her annoyance with the way things were handled. She, too, could see a different path.

If only their fathers could as well.

Chapter Thirteen

THE LONG REACH OF THE PAST



Throughout the following day, Yvaine observed a great many things, none of which surprised her.

Except for one.

While her father was quietly seething, fury marking his features as he paced, outraged that Chief Morganach insisted the wedding would not take place that very day, her mother fluttered around like a nervous chicken, ultimately trying to stay out of her husband's way and soothing his temper as best as she could. Rory, despite their many disappointments, had vanished into oblivion yet again, his determination undeterred as he continued to explore the castle and its grounds, searching the library, his eyes glued to every tapestry, every hidden nook and cranny, his heart undoubtedly pumping with excitement as he dove deep into the castle's history, hoping to learn something—anything!—that might lead Yvaine to freedom; and Yvaine loved him for it!

And then there was Logan.

Despite his assurance that he would do his utmost to assist Yvaine in circumventing their father's plans for her, she had not truly believed that he would do so. Not until she saw him meet their father's gaze head on, his own calm and insistent.

“Father, perhaps Chief Morganach’s hesitancy is a sign that he doesna desire this alliance.”

Safely concealed, Yvaine stood around the corner from where Logan and her father had come upon one another in a deserted corridor. She all but held her breath and listened intently, suddenly feeling a measure of regret for having involved Logan in this.

As expected, their father’s jaw dropped, a brief moment of stunned silence stretching between them. However, he quickly shook it off, and his eyes narrowed once more, his jaw tensing with more fury. “Why would he not desire an alliance with our clan?” He took a step toward Logan, his hands clenched. “Did he say something to ye?”

Logan held his ground, his gaze unwavering. “He didna. However, his actions speak loud and clear. Neither he nor Yvaine desire this union. Perhaps...” He heaved a deep sigh, and for a moment, Yvaine felt reminded of earlier that morning when they had spoken in the gardens. “Perhaps this union isna meant to be.”

Now, their father’s jaw dropped for real, shock marking his features, and for a second, Yvaine thought he might faint, for his face grew frighteningly pale. His color, though, returned quickly, hot upon the heels of a deep sense of outrage. “How dare ye say something like that?” His eyes drilled into Logan’s. “What did she say to ye?” He shook his head, a dark scoff flying from his lips before he raked a hand through his graying hair. “I knew the moment she returned that there was something... unnatural about her. She doesna behave as a woman should. She’s... wild and defiant. She doesna ken her place.”

Yvaine tensed every muscle in her body to remain where she was, knowing that if Logan were to have any chance of reasoning with their father, she could not get involved. Still, hearing their father say out loud what he thought of her, how low he regarded her, threatened to rip every last bit of self-control from her hands.

Always had Yvaine been proud of the woman she was. Certainly, she had her faults. Her temper often ran away with her, and she knew she was not the most patient of people. Yet at the same time, she had always cherished the unpredictability of her character, the way she followed the wind and answered her heart's calling, trusting that in the end everything would turn out all right. Thus far, she had never once been proved wrong. However, ever since stepping into that long-forgotten cavern and finding the shimmering pool of water, her faith had been severely tested.

Exhaustion played over Logan's features, and a deep sense of sorrow came to his eyes. Yvaine could see that in that moment there was very little strength left in him, as though he had been fighting for the past two decades, living a life that was never meant to be his, pretending and playing a role he disliked. Could it have anything to do with Ellen? Yvaine wished she knew what had happened between them twelve years ago.

"Perhaps she isna wrong," Logan stated calmly, his hands clenched tightly at his sides. "Perhaps... there is another way. Perhaps we should strive to end this feud once and for all." He took a step toward their father, his voice hardening, shaking off every last bit of hesitation. "Tell me, Father, why is it that we hate the MacCarmags and they hate us?"

Yvaine would have loved to hear the answer, and yet she did not for a moment believe that she would receive it.

“The MacCarmaigs are traitorous thieves,” their father growled, the expression upon his face reminding Yvaine of feral animal, no sense of reason lighting up his eyes. “They canna be trusted. Never. Ye turn yer back on them, and they’ll stab ye in it.” He grasped Logan’s shoulder. “Dunna for a second see them as anything else, for ’twill be our downfall.” Then he stepped back, his expression changing, calming, as though he had once more gained control of his emotions. “I am yer chief. Dunna forget that again.” Turning away from his son, their father strode away.

Logan heaved a deep sigh, and for the first time, Yvaine saw her fierce older brother, the powerful warrior with the broad shoulders, who stood more than a head taller than her, slumped in defeat. Every last bit of strength seemed to drain from him, and Yvaine knew in that moment a mild breeze could have pushed him over.

Yvaine was about to step out of her hiding place, her heart aching to offer comfort, to apologize for involving Logan in this, when the sound of delicate footsteps drifted to her ears. They drew closer from the other end of the corridor, and she peered around the corner, her eyes squinting to see.

At first, Yvaine could not make out who it was in the dim light in the corridor, yet her brother’s reaction spoke loud and clear.

The moment Logan beheld the other person shrouded in shadows, every bit of fatigue fell from him. He seemed to come alive in an instant, every muscle suddenly tense as if pulled by an invisible force. “Ellen.” He spoke her name in

disbelief, his voice laced with pain and a longing so strong it filled the air around them.

Yvaine did not dare move, could not have moved even if she had wanted to. She stood transfixed, staring at her brother and the woman he clearly still loved to this day.

Ellen stepped forward then and into the light of a nearby torch. As before, she was dressed in a gown that covered every inch of her, revealing only her face, gloves concealing the scars upon her hands and a veil cascading down her back.

Yvaine watched as the two of them stared at one another, neither daring to move or speak, their eyes locked in a silent exchange. It was only when Logan finally spoke that Yvaine realized she had been holding her breath all this time.

“What are ye doing here?” her brother asked, his voice low and urgent.

Ellen hesitated for a moment before answering him, her gaze never leaving his face. “I ken I shouldna have come,” she said softly, her voice barely audible. “A long time has passed since...” Uncertainty played across her features, and Yvaine could see that Ellen feared that she had lost Logan’s love long ago. Still, here she stood, her head held high, seeking at least a moment with the man she had been unable to forget these past twelve years.

Logan swallowed hard, his gaze fixed and unblinking, mesmerized by the woman before him. And then he moved. It was only a step, one single step toward her, and yet it felt powerful all the same.

Again, Yvaine held her breath, her fingers digging into the stone wall behind her as she watched a most unexpected reunion.

“I came to see ye,” Ellen confessed after a long moment of silence, her voice trembling and her hands clasped together in front of her. Still, she did not once look away. “I had to. I... I simply had to see ye. I hoped... I hoped ye would be here at yer sister’s wedding.” She shrugged, a tentative smile tugging upon her lips. “And so, I came, hoping that...” Her teeth sank into her lower lip, and Yvaine was struck by how young Ellen suddenly looked: a shy lass, who dared reveal her heart to the lad she loved.

Tears pricked the backs of Yvaine’s eyes as she watched the two of them drift toward each other, the longing between them palpable in the air around them. Their desire was so strong it seemed almost tangible, like an invisible thread drawing them together against their will.

With each step they took toward one another, Yvaine felt herself become more and more entranced. She could see her brother and Ellen both struggling with their emotions—they were so raw and powerful that it almost hurt to be in their presence. Yet he did not move away from Ellen or stop looking into her eyes, even for a second.

At last, Logan’s hand moved, and he gently touched Ellen’s face with the tips of his fingers, tracing the contours of her skin. His touch was so gentle and yet so full of emotion that it brought tears to Yvaine’s eyes. She felt as if she had stepped out of her own body and into the moment.

At Logan’s touch, Ellen closed her eyes and let out a deep sigh. Her shoulders slumped in exhaustion, yet her face glowed with joy and longing held at bay for far too long.

Whispered words passed between them, spoken too low for Yvaine to understand. And then, as if the universe had tilted on its axis, they moved into each other’s embrace.

Ellen's shoulders shook with silent sobs as she clung to Logan, her hands gripping onto him tightly as if he were a lifeline. Logan held her firmly, his own tears now streaming down his face as he whispered words of love into her hair.

It was then that Yvaine realized how deeply these two still cared for one another despite everything that had happened between them, their love remained strong and true after all these years apart.

It was truly inspiring and made Yvaine realize that she was far from giving up.

Chapter Fourteen

AN OFFER OF FRIENDSHIP



The early autumn evening was already cloaked in darkness, and the corridor ahead of Caelen was inky and mysterious in the twilight. He paused, allowing his eyes to adjust, before stepping forward into the gloom. The corridor seemed to stretch on for miles, the thick stone walls whispering secrets to each other as he walked.

Reaching the end of the hallway, he stopped before the door to Chief Morganach's study, his heart beating a rapid tattoo against his chest. He could almost feel the presence of Chief Morganach beyond the heavy wood and wondered why the man had asked him here this late... and in such a cloaked way.

Indeed, even on their second day at Castle Morganach, Caelen and his men were still confined to the east wing of the castle, not permitted to walk its grounds freely, so as to keep them from encountering the MacLeòir chief and his family randomly in the halls. Clearly, their host had yet to inform their rival clan of their enemies' presence here.

It had been hard for Caelen to remain in his chambers all day, his patience wearing thinner with each turn of Lachlan's frantic pacing. His cousin, too, was not made for idle moments, his fury about their current circumstances rising

with each moment that ticked by. Still, Caelen had done his utmost to wait, to comply with Chief Morganach's wishes, trusting that it would gain him the man's favor.

Swallowing hard, Caelen raised his hand and knocked three times, a sound that echoed through the hallway.

"Come in," came the authoritative call from within.

Bracing himself, Caelen pushed the heavy wooden door open and stepped into the chamber, taking in the sight of Chief Morganach, seated alone behind his large oak desk.

With a wave of his hand, Chief Morganach bid him closer, and Caelen stepped forward, still wondering why he had been summoned here. "Ye asked for me?" he asked, waiting for the other man to lift his gaze and meet his eyes.

Chief Morganach nodded. "Aye, I did." He rose from his seat and stepped around his large desk, his left hand trailing over its wooden surface. His gaze remained upon Caelen, and yet, there was a sense of impatience in his bearing, as though the time of an appointment had arrived and the one he was supposed to meet had not.

Caelen frowned. "What can I do for ye?"

Chief Morganach shook his head, an odd expression playing across his features. Before he could speak, however, there was another knock on the door.

Caelen glanced over his shoulder in surprise, wondering who would be calling so late in the evening. Then his gaze returned to Chief Morganach as the laird called for the person on the other side of the door to enter.

A moment later, it creaked open and a sliver of light fell over the stone floor before in the next instant... Yvaine stepped across the threshold.

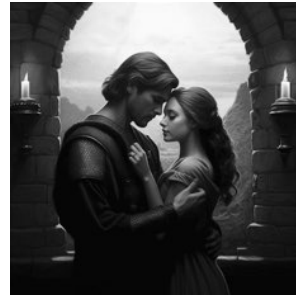
Although Chief Morganach had promised to allow them a moment together, Caelen's chest tightened in disbelief as he saw her in the candlelight. Her hair was a waterfall of molten metal, cascading around her like a fiery-red cloak that glinted and sparkled in the gentle light. The midnight-blue dress she wore hugged her body like a second skin, clinging to every curve and line of her lithe figure, shimmering with an ethereal luminescence. Even in the dimly lit room, her face shone like a bright star—with high cheekbones and full lips set against her mesmerizingly pale skin which seemed to radiate with its own soft glow.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Caelen was too shocked to move, and Yvaine seemed just as surprised to see him, her eyes widening as she beheld him only a few arm's lengths away from her.

Caelen did not know what he had expected to happen. Aye, there was no denying that a bond had grown between them. They had kissed twice, and these moments had been life-changing for him. Still, to this day, they knew very little about one another, and part of him still wondered if what he felt was no more than a short-lived infatuation. Would it eventually end? He could not imagine it to be so, yet how would he know? They had not seen one another in over a fortnight, and in that moment, Caelen realized that, at least, a part of him had feared that by now Yvaine had forgotten about him, her heart now touched by whatever kind consideration Chief Morganach might have bestowed upon her in order to win her for himself. After all, what man wouldn't?

Then, though, Yvaine flung herself into his arms without warning.

The force of her embrace nearly knocked Caelen off his feet, and for a moment, the world seemed to stand still. His arms instinctively wrapped around her waist as if to ensure she would not slip away from him again. He could feel the warmth of her breath against his skin and smell the sweet scent of wildflowers that seemed to linger around her like an invisible aura.



Caelen held her close, unsure of what was going on but feeling as though he would never let go. The moment seemed surreal—as if they were suspended in time—and yet it felt so right for them both to be together like this. He closed his eyes and pressed his lips against the crown of her head, feeling a wave of emotion wash over him.

After several moments, Yvaine pulled away from him enough to look up into his eyes. Her gaze was filled with an emotion he had not seen before; one that made his heart flutter and ache all at once. “Caelen,” she murmured, her voice thick with emotion. “I was so afraid for ye. I can hardly believe ye’re right here.” Her hands swept over his shoulders and down his chest, and Caelen felt her touch in every cell of his body.

His breath hitched, and his hands tightened upon her waist, pulling her closer again. “I was worried for ye as well.” He wanted nothing more than to sweep Yvaine into his arms once more and never let go—but before he could do so, Chief Morganach cleared his throat from across the room, reminding them both that their time together was limited.

Reluctantly, Caelen released his hold on Yvaine, touched to see a similarly displeased expression upon her face. Then he

turned to meet Chief Morganach's gaze. "Why?" was all Caelen said, certain that the laird of Clan Morganach had anticipated this situation. Yet it did not explain why he had facilitated it.

Chief Morganach stepped toward them, and his gaze moved from Yvaine to Caelen. "I have my answer," he replied dryly, his expression unreadable. "And ye have yers." He heaved a deep sigh and then linked his arms behind his back, his chin rising a notch before he spoke again. "Yet this is a problem."

"Ye asked me here," Yvaine remarked, a slight frown upon her face as she moved toward Chief Morganach. "Ye knew he was here." She glanced back at Caelen, slowly putting together the pieces of the puzzle before them. "Yet ye said nothing. And now this." She glanced back and forth between them. "Indeed, why did ye do this?"

Chief Morganach heaved a deep sigh. "I can see ye have affection for one another," the man remarked as dryly as before. "Yet the fact remains that Yvaine and I are intended to be wed soon." His brows rose meaningfully. "As I said, this is a problem."

Torn between his heart's desire and his loyalty to his clan, Caelen did not quite know what to say. In fact, what made it worse was Chief Morganach's kind consideration. He could have ordered Caelen from his home, threatened him, even relocked him up, yet here they stood speaking to one another civilly.

"I willna marry ye," Yvaine stated in a voice loud and clear, surprising them all.

With his heart dancing in his chest, Caelen watched as Yvaine took a step toward Chief Morganach. The man's gaze

betrayed nothing, and he did not react as Yvaine spoke. “Ye’re not the kind of man I thought ye to be,” she murmured softly, and Caelen saw a friendly smile play over her lips that briefly made his heart pause in his chest. “I was mistaken, and for that I am grateful. Yet I canna marry ye. ’Twould be wrong for the both of us. All I can offer ye is friendship.”

Chief Morganach nodded. “Yer father willna be pleased to hear this,” he remarked, yet the tone of his voice suggested it was not meant as a threat. “Have ye thought of this?”

Yvaine’s shoulders slumped. “I never meant to cause trouble. I never meant to cause any of this. Yet I canna be someone I am not.” She heaved a deep sigh. “Can ye not help us?”

Caelen stared at Yvaine, his breath lodging in his throat, because for a split second he thought she was speaking about the two of them. Then, however, her next words shattered his hopes.

“I needa return home,” she told Chief Morganach, “but I dunna want to see this destroy two clans who could live side by side in peace, knowing them to be locked in an endless battle for supremacy. Why is this so impossible? What happened to cause this animosity? Do ye ken?” She threw up her hands, an exasperated expression coming to her features. “Apparently, no one kens; and yet they fight one another at every turn.”

Despite the pain Yvaine’s words stirred within his chest, Caelen listened intently. After all, she was right. He, too, had wondered more than once about how this feud had started. He had grown up learning that the MacLeòir were the enemies, never quite hearing the factual reason of what had caused this rift. Over the years, Caelen had overheard bits and pieces

when his father had spoken to his advisors, men his own age, men who had seen the beginning of all this. He had also stumbled upon private moments when his father had felt unobserved, when his guard had been down. In these moments, Caelen had seen pain in his gaze, something that spoke to a personal loss.

Yet to this day, Caelen did not know what it was.

Was it possible that Chief Morganach did?

Chapter Fifteen

WHAT CAME BEFORE



Yvaine's hands still trembled as she stood before Chief Morganach, her body reeling from the shock of seeing Caelen so unexpectedly. Of course, she had known that he was well and free, yet seeing him here tonight had brought forth emotions she had not expected.

And she feared them.

Desperate to keep her wits, Yvaine sought to put distance between them, turning her attention to a problem that might have a solution, unlike her ill-fated affections for a man from another time. "It hada have begun some time," she continued, watching Chief Morganach carefully. Somehow, she could not shake the feeling that he knew... something. "Please, if there is anything ye can tell us..."

Chief Morganach met her gaze, searching, hesitant. Then he heaved a deep sigh, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "As far as I ken, it all began two generations ago," Chief Morganach said, his deep voice reverberating off the walls of the chamber. "A peace had come between Clans MacLeòir and MacCarraig, after years of conflict and strife." Chief Morganach shook his head, his gaze distant as though he no longer saw her. "My father spoke of it when I was a lad," he continued, his eyes seeking hers before they moved past her

shoulder and toward Caelen. “Both lairds had a son and a daughter to call their own, and so two unions were forged in an attempt to unite the clans, an ancient hope for peace, and an alliance of convenience.”

Yvaine held her breath, and her gaze moved, sought Caelen’s despite knowing it to be foolish. Yet she could not help it, for Chief Morganach’s words gave voice to something she had not dared allow herself to consider.

Aye, all clans sought alliances, sought allies, and these allies were secured through unions between them. After all, it was the very reason they were all here because both the MacLeòirs and the MacCarmuigs sought to ally themselves to Chief Morganach, sealing the agreement with a marriage. Then why should there not be a union between the two feuding clans? Yvaine had thought of it before somewhere in the back of her mind, never allowing it to form into something coherent and conscious. After all, she could not stay. She could not stay and become Caelen’s wife. Even history said so. Did the legends not speak of failure? Of an impossibility to unite the two clans? Of a new beginning? Were the clans truly to meet their end?

As though he could read her thoughts, Caelen’s gaze seemed to burn into hers. A muscle in his jaw twitched, and in his eyes, she saw an almost desperate need to have her close, to restore the connection that had pulled them into each other’s arms the moment she had stepped across the threshold. Yet he held himself back and remained where he was, his struggle written all over his face.

“’Twas a union borne of necessity, rather than of love,” Chief Morganach continued, his gaze, overshadowed and yet watchful, drifted back and forth between the two of them.

“Before long, all hope perished in the attempt to bridge the gap between the clans. Rumors soon whispered that the wife of the MacCarraig heir was in love with another man, one of her own kin. Yet nothing was ever proved for certain, and so the rumors remained rumors.” Chief Morganach sighed deeply, regret marking his features. “Nevertheless, the spirit of distrust and hostility continued to grow.”

Caelen heaved a deep sigh as he listened, his feet now carrying him around the room, his gaze occasionally distant and then darting back toward her. Yvaine, too, felt the inevitability of Chief Morganach’s tale prickling beneath her skin, as though she could see events unfold, unions shatter, and bonds being destroyed.

Perhaps it was not simply an awful practice but a downright wrong one to base political relations upon the emotions of individuals. Because everybody felt. No one could help that. As much as one might try to fulfill one’s duty, to act for the greater good, to ignore what one wanted, eventually, it would all unravel. People could not subdue themselves forever. They could not suffer in silence endlessly. Eventually, the truth came out...

... and then everything was lost.

“Eventually, a lad was born to the MacCarraig heir,” Chief Morganach went on, his shoulders tense, and his hands gripping his upper arms as they remained crossed upon his chest. “Unfortunately, both mother and child perished. No one quite knows what happened. All those involved kept quiet and are now long dead. What my father told me was that rumors whispered of the child not having been sired by the husband.” He shrugged, loosening his grip, and allowing his arms to hang down. “How anyone could be certain, I dunna ken.

However, outrage soon spread through both clans, and the MacCarraig laird demanded the return of his daughter. Only by now, she, too, was with child, and the MacLeòirs would not allow her to return home. Thus, the feud began.”

For a long moment, silence settled over the study, and Yvaine felt a heaviness upon her shoulders that seemed to rob her of every bit of strength, of every bit of hope that some sort of solution to the feud could be found. After all, people had tried already... and failed. Clearly, both sides feared that another union would end in a similar disaster. And what could they do?

“Perhaps another union would be different,” Caelen spoke into the silence, his voice low and weighted by emotions. “Perhaps if there is true affection...” His voice trailed off.

Yvaine could barely move, every inch of her shivering with the words he had spoken, with implications she understood only too well. She wanted to flee from the chamber, leave the situation behind unresolved, for she knew it had the potential to break both their hearts.

Slowly, reluctantly, Yvaine met Caelen’s gaze, her heart thundering in her chest with fear and excitement alike. She knew not what to do or think or feel, her mind and heart torn into two opposing directions.

Holding her gaze, Caelen stepped toward her, his eyes two dark pools that drew Yvaine in. “This could be our chance,” he whispered as his hands reached out and grasped hers, holding them gently despite the determination she could sense in every fiber of his being. “I ken ye feel something for me.” His voice dropped to a murmur, meant for her ears alone. “Ye canna deny what is between us, what stirs in yer blood every time Fate brings us back together.”

Yvaine blinked her eyes rapidly, fighting to discourage the tears that wanted to sweep forth. “Nay, I canna deny it.” The hopeful smile that came to his face nearly brought her to her knees. “Yet neither can I forsake my home, my people. I was never meant to be here. This is not my place or my—” She broke off before she could say too much. After all, no one in their right mind would ever believe her. Yet how could she make him understand without speaking honestly. If she accepted him now, her family—her true family!—would be lost to her; and Yvaine was not ready to see her heart broken thus. Nay, there had to be another way, a way that allowed her more time to consider her options, to unearth a path that perhaps allowed her heart to remain intact. A foolish hope, was it not?

Still...

Caelen’s face fell as the reality of her words hit him square in the chest. He all but stumbled backward, his hands slipping from hers as he stared at her in shock. Aye, he seemed to deflate before her eyes, and Yvaine felt her heart break for him, for them both, even as she fought against the temptation to give into his wishes and take a chance.

“Perhaps there is another union,” Yvaine spoke the words before she could stop herself, desperate to fight down the longing she felt well up deep inside her heart. “What if Logan were to wed yer sister?” The moment the last words left her lips, Yvaine realized her foolishness. After all, Logan loved another, and Caelen’s sister deserved better than to be wed to a man who would always long for another.

Too stunned to respond, Caelen looked at her for a long while, his expression almost unreadable. Then he let out a sigh

and pulled away, another step putting more distance between them, never once meeting her gaze.

Yvaine felt like someone had just punched a hole through her heart—it felt as if all the breath had been knocked out of her body at once. She wanted nothing more than to throw herself into Caelen’s arms and tell him everything that was in her heart; yet despite how much courage it had taken for him to speak this truth aloud, Yvaine knew that she could not give in to temptation here.

For both their sakes.

The one who spoke next was Chief Morganach, and they both flinched at the sound of his voice, having all but forgotten his presence. “I’m afraid I canna agree to that,” he remarked in his calm tone, “for I, too, have a clan to consider.” He stepped forward, moved in between them both and then turned to look at Yvaine. “I asked ye both here tonight, so ye could say yer goodbyes. We are still to be wed in in a matter of days.”

Stunned, Yvaine stared at him. After the way he had spoken before, she had not expected this. “I told ye I wouldna marry ye.”

“And I’m saying that ye dunna have a choice,” he replied, yet the expression upon his face suggested that he was as displeased with his own words as was she. “Neither do I.”

Then he turned and left his study, leaving behind two heartbroken people, who did not quite know what to say to one another.

Chapter Sixteen

CONFRONTATION



Caelen felt a wave of apprehension wash over him as he watched the riders approach from the ramparts of Morganach Castle. The men on horseback were silhouetted against the horizon, their figures becoming larger the closer they got. Lachlan stood beside him, an aggravatingly pleased expression on his face while Fergus appeared rather tense, his hand tightening on the hilt of his sword.

Truth be told, Caelen was not entirely certain how he felt about his father's arrival. After the conversation with Yvaine and Chief Morganach the night before, all his hopes lay in the dust at his feet. He still remembered vividly the moment Yvaine had refused him, not even willing to contemplate a shared future. Had he been a fool to believe that she might?

All night, Caelen had paced his chamber, unable to rest, unable to sleep, his mind racing, replaying that very moment again and again. Aye, she had refused him. Aye, she had also made it very clear that she would not marry Chief Morganach, either. She still wished to return home. That, at least, was a small comfort.

On the other hand, Chief Morganach had made it equally clear that he intended to wed Yvaine. He, too, seemed trapped

in this game of alliances, always afraid to be left out in the cold, always worried others might band together against him.

Caelen squinted his eyes, trying to make out more details amidst the riders. He saw the glint of a sun-dappled carriage in the midst of the group and realized with a sinking heart that his father had brought his sister Gwyneth with him.

One glance at Fergus told him that his friend knew so as well. His features tightened, and he stared past the open ground and toward the approaching riders.

Only Lachlan remained unruffled, an easy smile upon his features as he lifted his hand in greeting. Clearly, he interpreted Gwyneth's presence as a sign that their chief, Caelen's father, was confident to see his daughter married to Chief Morganach.

Caelen wondered how he could be.

Yet his father was a compelling man, especially with his brother by his side, and Caelen wondered if perhaps there was some sort of chance he might be able to persuade Chief Morganach to change course once again.

Caelen glanced at Fergus, knowing that such a redirection would shatter his friend... and his sister as well. He had only recently become aware of their affections for one another and could not help but wonder how long they had kept that secret.

Perhaps even from one another.

As his heart pounded in his chest, Caelen prayed for calm as he watched his father, seated atop a dapple-gray mount, approach the castle gates, shoulders drawn back, and his head raised in confidence. Caelen's uncle rode beside him, his face stoic, the look in his eyes hard and determined. Warriors followed, flanking the carriage, and Caelen could feel his

blood run cold as he contemplated the days ahead. He could only hope that Chief Morganach would not see their presence here as a sign of aggression.

At last, the MacCarraig laird and his men reached the walls of Morganach Castle, pulling their mounts to a halt. “Open the gates!” boomed his uncle’s authoritative voice. “The Chief of Clan MacCarraig has come to speak to yer laird.”

Caelen watched as a man dashed away from the gate, no doubt to inform Chief Morganach of their unexpected visitors. His long legs ate up the distance, and he darted around the corner of the keep like it was his own private labyrinth, rounding the next bend and heading toward the inner bailey. Caelen met his father’s gaze from up on the wall, feeling a shiver of apprehension go through him as his father’s eyes narrowed in contemplation and then moved past him to settle on Lachlan. Caelen’s stomach churned uneasily, for the last time he had spoken to his father, the laird of Clan MacCarraig had sent him to the dungeon for betraying his clan. Would they ever move past this?

After a small eternity, the guard returned and the massive gates opened with a resounding creak, allowing the MacCarraig men inside, their horses’ hooves clattering on the cobblestones of the courtyard. Caelen’s father rode at the front, flanked by his warriors while the carriage followed, also surrounded by a swarm of warriors, which made Caelen worry for Chief Morganach’s response. At least, he had allowed them in. Was that a good sign? Caelen wondered, wishing he knew what message Lachlan had sent to the chief in order to bring him here this day.

Caelen descended from the walls to greet the men of his clan, noting their wary glances, and a part of him understood, for as far as they knew, he ought to be locked away in the MacCarraig dungeons. Glancing into the interior of the carriage, Caelen met Gwyneth's gaze. She looked pale, her teeth worrying her lower lip, before her gaze darted past Caelen, and he knew that Fergus stood behind his right shoulder.

"My laird awaits ye in the great hall," one of Chief Morganach's men stated, his voice hard and his eyes steely. In fact, looking around, Caelen saw the Morganach warriors gather in the courtyard, their bearing not threatening but alert.

Caelen took a deep breath and steeled himself for whatever was to come, watching as his father straightened in the saddle and squared his shoulders. His gaze swept over the men who had gathered to greet them before he met Caelen's gaze for a brief moment, his expression unreadable. Then he turned away and dismounted from his horse, striding to the carriage, and offering his hand to Gwyneth. He helped her disembark, his movements surprisingly gentle and tender as if he was afraid of breaking her. Then, together, they moved toward the castle doors and into the keep.

Caelen watched them go, wishing life could have led them down a different path. Exchanging a glance with Fergus, the two men followed Lachlan into the castle, his cousin's steps eager and his expression filled with fierce determination as he caught up to his own father, silent words passing between them.

As they walked, Caelen noticed the Morganach warriors move aside at their approach, allowing them passage into the great hall where Chief Morganach waited.

Once inside, they made their way to their laird's side, so as not to give rise to any speculations with regard to their unity. Fergus moved to stand to the right of Gwyneth's shoulder, her eyes firmly fixed on the stone floor and her shoulders trembling. Caelen watched his friend lean closer ever so slightly without raising anyone's suspicion, and then in an unobserved moment, the tips of his fingers brushed hers.

A shuddering breath left Gwyneth's lips, and Caelen's heart ached at the thought that they would never have what they wanted. He sighed, knowing precisely what that felt like.

The murmur of voices around them died away when a side door opened and revealed Chief Morganach, flanked by two warriors. He approached slowly, his expression calm, not a touch of concern in his eyes, his gaze trained on Caelen's father. "Welcome, Laird MacCarraig," he said, his voice gruff but not unkind. "I trust yer journey was pleasant." His right eyebrow arched upward in question, making it clear that he had neither expected to see Caelen's father nor that he was pleased by this development.

"I have come to discuss the marriage contract," Caelen's father began without preamble, his hard gaze sweeping across the room as if daring anyone to contradict him. "'Twas agreed that ye would marry my daughter," he nodded to Gwyneth, who looked more ill at ease in that moment than Caelen had ever seen before, "and I wish for ye to honor our agreement."

Chief Morganach's face remained impassive as he considered Chief MacCarraig's words. Caelen held his breath, watching with bated anticipation as the two men stared at each other in silence for what seemed like an eternity, knowing that whatever happened would determine all their future.

Then finally, Chief Morganach spoke. “This is a matter I dunna wish to discuss in public.” He took a step toward Caelen’s father. “I’ve already addressed this issue with yer son.” Both men glanced at Caelen, and he, too, wished they were not standing here with so many eyes on them. “If ye would follow me to my study.” Without waiting for reply, Chief Morganach turned upon his heel and strode away.

For a moment, Caelen felt his father’s gaze upon him, a question in his eyes. Then, however, he turned away, and with his brother by his side followed in Chief Morganach’s wake. Caelen, too, went after them, determined not to be left out, hoping that somehow a peaceful solution, satisfying to all parties could be achieved. Perhaps he was foolish to even dare have hope. Yet what was a man without hope?

The four men made their way down the hall and into Chief Morganach’s study where the man settled himself into the chair behind his desk before gesturing for Caelen’s father and uncle to take a seat across from him. Caelen shifted nervously on his feet as he watched the three men consider each other silently. Then at last, Chief Morganach broke the silence by addressing Caelen’s father directly. “So,” he said slowly, “ye wish me to honor my agreement?” He gave no hint of emotion, his expression still as unreadable as ever.

“Aye,” Caelen’s father replied firmly without hesitation. His gaze never wavered from Chief Morganach’s face as he continued speaking in a low voice that had none of its usual gruffness to it. “My daughter deserves to be treated with respect.”

Caelen almost rolled his eyes, knowing that his father’s insistence had nothing to do with Gwyneth’s happiness. She

was nothing more than a pawn, and the thought made Caelen sick.

Chief Morganach nodded thoughtfully. “I do agree. Yer daughter deserves to be treated with respect. However, as I’ve told yer son, the contract between us is no longer valid.”

Caelen saw his father’s and uncle’s faces turn a dark shade of red, their mouths opening to utter a protest. Yet before either one of them could, Chief Morganach lifted a hand to stay any reply. “Ye cannot deny the stipulation in the contract which says it needa be renewed upon my coming-of-age.” Again, his brows rose in challenge, daring Caelen’s father and uncle to contradict him. “Such a renewal hasna taken place, has it?”

Grumbling under his breath, Caelen’s uncle remained quiet, his large hands tensing on top of the feeble looking armrests of the chair, while his father briefly closed his eyes, a touch of resignation now upon his features.

“Therefore, the contract between us no longer stands,” Chief Morganach reasoned calmly.

For a long moment, silence reigned, and frustration hung heavy in the air. Caelen could see from his father’s expression that he felt cornered, indignation about this perceived unfairness sizzling beneath his skin. In such a state, Caelen knew there would be no reason found.

“Is there no other way to resolve this?” Caelen suggested in a soft voice, not wishing for tempers to rise even further. Indeed, he was grateful for Chief Morganach’s calm appearance. It seemed the man never lost his temper, a quality Caelen much appreciated.

A somewhat hopeful expression came to his father's face as Chief Morganach asked, "What do ye suggest?" His own tone was full of doubt, and Caelen wondered what he could possibly suggest that would see this resolved.

Truth be told, he could not think of anything.

Chapter Seventeen

FAMILY



Yvaine stood hidden behind a pillar, peering at the happenings in the great hall, her heart pounding in her chest with excitement. This she had not expected, not even dared contemplate. Biting her lip, she held her breath to avoid making a sound, at the same time straining her ears to listen, desperate to learn what was going on.

At the far end of the hall, Chief MacCarraig and Caelen accompanied by another grey-haired man had just stepped through the open archway into the great hall, and the sight of the two of them together sent a chill down Yvaine's spine. How had this come to be? Last she had heard, Chief MacCarraig had sent Caelen into the dungeon for failing to comply with a direct order: the order to kill her, Yvaine, in service of his clan.

Indeed, this was the first time Yvaine laid eyes upon Caelen's father, a man who stood tall, an authoritative gaze in his eyes as he surveyed those before him. She knew he had once been a formidable warrior, his physical prowess now diminished by age. Still, there was something menacing about him, something that reminded Yvaine of her own father. Indeed, these were men made for times of war, none of their thoughts ever straining to the option of peace. It was utterly frustrating!

Her gaze moved from the MacCarraig laird to his son, the grimness of their expressions making her stomach cramp. She searched their faces, looking for clues as to why Caelen's father had come and why he had brought his daughter.

At least, Yvaine suspected that the young dark-haired woman standing with her head bowed was Caelen's sister. She looked utterly fearful, her demeanor that of a frightened deer, cornered and left at the mercy of predators. The very sight of her stirred something protective within Yvaine, and she hated the thought that these men had come together this day to determine the young woman's future without even once thinking of considering her own wishes. Aye, perhaps she was not simply outraged on Gwyneth's behalf alone. Indeed, the young woman's position felt only too familiar, stirring a yearning deep within Yvaine to return to a place where life was different.

To return home.

That thought, however, inevitably led her back to the night before when Caelen had all but asked for her hand in marriage. At the mere thought, her body flinched, her mind shying away from it while her heart encouraged her to explore it further. Oh, she had wanted to. She had known so right away, and so she had pushed it aside with all the strength she could have mustered, knowing it might be her undoing.

Yvaine's eyes narrowed as she saw Caelen's friend Fergus shift closer to Gwyneth, his jaw tense. She wondered what he was about when his left hand moved forward ever so slightly, and he touched his fingertips to Gwyneth's.

A silent jolt went through the young woman at the touch, and yet after a moment, after the initial surprise had passed, Yvaine could see her reaching out to him as well. Aye, there

was something between them. Something as doomed as what Yvaine felt for Caelen. Something that could never be.

Another terribly frustrating thought, and Yvaine wanted to scream with the unfairness of everything that was happening around her. Was this truly the way of the world? Did no one mind? At least not enough to do something to change it?

“I have come to discuss the marriage contract,” Caelen’s father started without warning, his eyes scanning the room with a hawkish glare, as if he expected someone to challenge him. “’Twas agreed that ye would marry my daughter,” he motioned to Gwyneth, who appeared terribly uncomfortable, her eyes cast down and her jaw clenched, “and I wish for ye to honor our agreement.”

Chief Morganach kept his expression blank as he seemed to think over what Chief MacCarraig had said, and the two men eyed each other for a long time without uttering a word.

Eventually, Chief Morganach spoke. “This is a matter I dunna wish to discuss in public.” He stepped toward Caelen’s father. “I’ve already addressed this issue with yer son.” Yvaine swallowed hard, her mind drawn back to the very moment the night before, for it would be forever tied to the crestfallen expression she had seen upon Caelen’s face when she had refused his proposal. “If ye would follow me to my study.”

The sudden announcement of a private meeting between Chief Morganach and the MacCarraigs filled the great hall with a tense silence. However, the moment the four men had left, excited murmurs rose into the air. Yvaine could only speculate what would be said in Chief Morganach’s private study, and for a moment, she contemplated hurrying after them, wishing for nothing more than to press her ear to the door.

Silently, Yvaine slipped away, rounding the great hall, her steps quickening as she dashed down the corridor. Unfortunately, Rory came upon her in that moment, his brows drawn down into a frown and concern resting in his eyes. The moment he spotted her, he called out, “Yvaine! Where are ye going?”

Drawing to a halt, Yvaine gritted her teeth, torn between dashing away and remaining with her brother. She did not wish to involve him in this, and the tense expression upon his face triggered sisterly concern. “Is something wrong?” she inquired, still dancing upon her feet with impatience.

Rory shrugged and glanced over his shoulder. “Logan doesna seem like himself,” he remarked, a slight shake to his head. “Something is wrong. I just spoke to him, and he barely looked at me.”

Yvaine exhaled a deep breath, casting one last longing look down the corridor along which the four men had left. Perhaps she was not meant to find out what went on behind Chief Morganach’s closed door. Perhaps not right now. “Where is he?”

Rory waved her along, and together they hurried in the opposite direction. “Do ye ken what’s going on?”

“I have an inkling,” Yvaine replied, deep concern for her older brother settling in her heart. “Yet ’tis not something easily explained.” She cast Rory a small smile. “Please understand.”

For a moment, he looked displeased. Then, however, he nodded.

As they rounded a corner, Yvaine saw Logan standing a few feet away, clearly lost in thought. His expression was

almost blank, as though he were a mere shell, not quite here, not quite inhabiting this world. “Will ye give us a moment?” she asked Rory, squeezing his shoulder gently.

He nodded. “Please, help him.” Then he moved away.

Inhaling a deep breath to still her fluttering nerves, Yvaine moved toward her brother. “Logan?” she called out gently then reached out a hand and placed it upon his arm.

At her touch, he startled, spinning around to face her. For a moment, his gaze was barren, and she knew that he did not quite see her. Then, though, he returned, his mind now back in place. He swallowed hard, blinking his eyes as though struggling to keep his attention upon her.

“Yvaine?” His voice was hoarse, and he cleared his throat. “What is it? What’s wrong?” he asked then, his brow furrowing with concern.

Yvaine smiled at him gently, pushing all thoughts of the MacCarmaigs’ arrival away. “I might ask ye the same thing, Brother. Ye looked terrible.”

He bowed his head, a sad smile playing across his features. “Do I?”

Yvaine chuckled, placing both her hands upon his upper arms, her chin lifted as her gaze sought his. “’Tis Ellen, is it not? I saw the two of ye together. What happened?”

Deep in her heart, Yvaine had hoped for a happy outcome for Ellen and her brother the moment she had realized the depth of their affection for one another. Yet from experience, Yvaine knew that such a fate was bestowed only on a few fortunate ones. Thus far, she had not met a single one here in this time.

Logan sighed and his shoulders slumped, the sight of him one Yvaine had never witnessed before. She had only ever seen Logan standing tall, determination blazing in his eyes and strength shooting down his limbs. “I am... grateful to have had a chance to see her again,” he murmured, his gaze still distant, clearly trapped in the past, “yet, part of me really wishes she had never come.”

Yvaine frowned. “Why? Perhaps now ye could have another chance.”

A dark chuckle left Logan’s lips, and he shook his head. “Now, we have even less of a chance. Father was never willing to grant me his permission to marry her, and when she suffered that accident, he argued that she would never be a fit wife.” A touch of unease came to his eyes as his gaze touched hers and then quickly darted away. “He argued she would never be able to give me a son.” He stepped away, raking an agitated hand through his hair. “Now, twelve years have passed, and I ken just what he will say.” He spun around, and for the first time, his eyes met hers fully. “Ellen is no longer a young lass, and whatever chance we might have had at being parents all those years ago no longer exists.”

Seeing her brother’s forlorn expression, Yvaine closed her eyes and silently counted to ten, knowing that if she allowed her temper to run away with her, she would not be of any help. “I dunna care what Father says,” she said then, her voice still agitated but calm. “I dunna care what people think. I never have.” She stepped closer and grasped his hands. “What do ye want? That is all that matters.”

Logan stared at her blankly, his mind clearly unable to wrap around the words she had spoken. “I canna disregard what my clan—”

“Stop!” Yvaine snapped, her fingers squeezing his. “Ye canna live yer life solely in service to our people. Ye will be no good to them like this. Do ye not see that? We all need happiness. We all need people we love, those who motivate us, those who give us strength, those who give us a reason to get up in the morning, to fight and struggle and put one foot in front of the other. If we dunna have that,” she shrugged, shaking her head, “what reason is there to do anything at all?”

A slow smile spread over Logan’s face as he looked at her, his gaze trailing over her features as though he were seeing her for the first time. “I’ve never known a woman like ye,” he murmured as he stepped toward her. “I’ve never known anyone like ye.”

Grinning, Yvaine shrugged. “What can I say? I am who I am, and I’m not trying to be someone else. I understand that ye care, that ye believe ’tis yer duty to do the best ye can for our people, and yet no one is asking ye to sacrifice yer own happiness.”

Logan scoffed before he could stop himself, a contrived look coming to his eyes.

Yvaine chuckled, stepping forward to grasp his hands once more. “I ken that Father disagrees.” She rolled her eyes. “From what I hear, Caelen’s father is much the same. Perhaps ’tis the pressure of leadership, the responsibility that goes with it, the power bestowed upon them. Perhaps ’tis all that or nothing. Yet it changes them. They are no longer individuals, people like ye and me, demanding sacrifices that no one else would dare. They believe it necessary, and yet I doubt that they are right. In fact, I’ve seen a different way. I’ve seen people protected and provided for and happy at the same time. These

concepts are not mutually exclusive, Logan. You must believe me. There is a different way. One that works. I promise ye.”

Almost hypnotized, Logan’s gaze swept her face as though if he looked hard enough, he could read her mind, see what she had seen. “One day, will ye tell me where ye’ve been all this time? Will ye show me?”

Yvaine heaved a deep sigh, wanting to say *aye* with all her heart. “I am not certain if that is possible,” she replied, not wishing to lie. “’Tis a world... far away, not even I ken if I will ever be able to return to it.”

Logan nodded. “If what ye say is true, I understand why ye so adamantly fight to return home. Must be a wonderful place.”

Blinking back tears, Yvaine nodded. “It is.” And she quickly brushed all thoughts of her family aside, knowing they would not serve her now but only cause tears. “Yet what of ye and Ellen? Are ye willing to fight for her? Or will ye bow yer head and do as father tells ye?”

Logan stared at her as though she had asked him to fetch the stars from the sky. Clearly, the thought of defying their father had never even crossed his mind, not in a way that he would honestly consider it. “I...” His mouth opened and closed before he shook his head, confusion marking his features.

“Think about it,” Yvaine urged, suspecting that after years of obeying their father’s wishes, it was a difficult step for Logan to consider his choice his own. “And ken that whatever ye decide, I will support ye.”

A wide grin stretched across his features. “I never doubted it for a moment.” Then he enveloped her in his strong arms,

hugging her tightly in a way that once more tugged on Yvaine's heart. Returning home was still at the forefront of her mind, and yet with each day that passed, each smile and hug she exchanged with her brothers, she knew her heart would break a little when the time to leave came.

Seeing her expression, Logan's forehead furrowed. "What is it?"

Yvaine blinked, quickly shoving aside the heavy boulder that rested upon her heart, turning her thoughts back to the here and now. "I was just... passing by the great hall when I saw that the MacCarmaigs had arrived."

At her words, Logan stilled, and his eyes went wide as he stared down at her. "Are ye certain?" he inquired, his hands gripping her arms tighter. "They're here? Now?"

Yvaine nodded. "They are. Chief Morganach asked Caelen, his father, and another man into his study to speak privately."

Logan cursed under his breath. "No doubt they are here to contest our marriage arrangement with the Morganach clan." He paused and glanced down at her apologetically. "What are we to do?" he asked, and Yvaine knew he was not speaking of securing their clan's alliance with the Morganach people. Nay, he was not speaking as the laird's second-in-command, whose duty first and foremost was to his people. He was speaking as her brother, who would stand at her side—always.

Yvaine heaved a deep sigh. "The problem is that there is no good solution. Not for everyone." She remembered the way Fergus and Gwyneth had tentatively reached out to one another in the great hall. "While our father as well as Caelen's seek this alliance, this marriage, neither I nor Gwyneth wish for it." She threw up her hands, understanding how deeply torn

Logan had to feel every day of his life, walking this fine line between desire and duty. “What are we to do?” she asked, returning the question to him. “The MacCarmuigs are here because—”

“What?” boomed their father’s voice, cutting through the air like a clap of thunder.

Brother and sister both spun around, their eyes wide as they stared at their father, standing a few paces down the corridor, his face pale but quickly gaining color, darkening with each breath he took.

Yvaine cursed under her breath while Logan lifted a placating hand as he stepped toward their father. “’Twill serve no one to lose our wits,” he counseled calmly. “The best course of action is—”

Their father thundered toward them, his hands clenching and unclenching as fury blazed in his eyes. “The MacCarmuigs are here?” he demanded, and Logan nodded reluctantly. “How dare they?” he thundered, suddenly glaring at Yvaine as though she had brought them here. “We have a contract. A binding contract. They had their chance, and they lost it.

Yvaine could feel her stomach drop, worried what their father might do. She knew that people who were quick to anger often caused irreparable pain, their actions too rash, too hurtful to be ignored or forgiven. Yet her father was not simply a man. He was a laird, the chief of their clan with the power to lead them all down a path from which there would be no turning back.

Logan stepped forward, clasping their father’s shoulders, his strong hands holding on tightly. “Father, listen,” he

growled, his voice hard and bearing the same commanding tone he used when speaking to his men.

Their father blinked in surprise and then struggled to shake off Logan's hands. However, his son held on tightly.

"We dunna yet ken what is happening," Logan stressed calmly despite the upheaval visible in his eyes. "'Twill not serve us to lose our minds but only prove to Chief Morganach that we are not fit to rule our clan. Father, ye must stay calm."

Yvaine held her breath. Never had she seen her brother address their father in such a way. Neither had she ever seen such a shaken expression upon her father's face. Fury still raged within him, and yet he had heard his son. Doubt sparked in his eyes, and Yvaine felt a sliver of hope that perhaps there was a way to talk this out.

Perhaps there was a way to avoid bloodshed.

Chapter Eighteen

A WAY TO BE FOUND



Tension hung over Chief Morganach's study as all eyes turned to Caelen. He could see hope sparking in his father's eyes and knew that if only he could come up with a satisfying plan, he would be forgiven for all he had done. Yet there was nothing, was there?

"There must be a way," Caelen said nonetheless, unwilling to simply give in. "After all, what is the alternative? If we canna find a way through this, there will be bloodshed again, won't there?" He shifted his gaze from his father to his uncle and then to Chief Morganach, daring them to contradict him, praying that they would realize the foolishness of the conflict they had held onto for so many years.

Instead of a calm reply, though, his father's booming voice echoed through the chamber as he once more turned on Chief Morganach. "I demand to know why ye would refuse my daughter, why ye would refuse an alliance with our clan." He shook his head, his lips in a snarl. "Surely, if ye wished, ye could step back from the contract with the MacLeòirs just as easily as ye stepped back from the one between us." He stepped toward Chief Morganach, his expression hard and yet imploring. "'Tis not too late. Ye're not wedded to the MacLeòir lass yet."

As always, Caelen's insides twisted painfully at the reminder that Yvaine was to be Chief Morganach's wife. He knew she had refused, yet sometimes it was hard to guess what the future might bring. How often had he himself done things out of pressure alone? Indeed, Caelen could not deny that he worried Yvaine's father might find another reason to pressure her into this marriage.

Though, his demeanor remained unshaken, Chief Morganach seemed to hesitate before speaking as if searching for the right words. "I am bound to the contract with Clan MacLeòir," Chief Morganach declared after a moment of pause, a spark of solemnity in his eyes.

Caelen watched as his father's face darkened with rage, knowing his father had been counting on this alliance to strengthen their clan, to ensure its future. Of course, it was understandable that he felt betrayed. His uncle, too, looked thunderous, though his lips remained sealed.

"I should've seen this coming!" Caelen's father roared, pacing around the room. His words bounced off the walls of Chief Morganach's study, leaving a sense of dread in their wake. "Clan MacLeòir can never be trusted! They've broken promises in the past. They're always trying to gain an advantage over other clans!" He pointed a finger at Chief Morganach, his face twisted with rage.

Despite Caelen's father's obvious agitation, despite the murderous gleam in his eyes, Chief Morganach remained calm. He nodded solemnly then rose to his feet, meeting the man's eyes. "I understand yer frustration," he said quietly, his gaze hard and yet... "However, I am bound by the agreement with Clan MacLeòir and must uphold it."

Squinting his eyes, Caelen watched Chief Morganach most carefully, for he could not shake the feeling that the other man was withholding something. Was there perhaps another reason he no longer wished to wed Gwyneth? Caelen sighed. Perhaps Chief Morganach, too, had been taken with Yvaine the very moment he had laid eyes on her.

At Chief Morganach's reply, Caelen's father once more turned bright red, anger clenching his fists as he stared at the other laird. However, before he could speak, before a single word could pass his lips, the door to Chief Morganach's study flew open, and a furious Chief MacLeòir stomped inside. He strode into the room with an expression of rage on his face, his eyes blazing and his expression a grotesque mask, marked by betrayal.

"Ye!" Chief MacLeòir bellowed, pointing an accusing finger at Chief Morganach. "Ye canna break the agreement we made! 'Tis binding." He pointedly ignored Caelen's father. "My daughter is already under yer roof. She's here at Castle Morganach as ye well ken, awaiting yer wedding. Ye canna go back on yer word now."

A low growl emanated from Caelen's father. "My daughter is here as well," he stated with a pointed look in his eyes as he glared at the other chief. Then his gaze shifted back to Chief Morganach. "If ye wish, the two of ye can be wed within moments."

Watching the moment unfold, Caelen felt sick to the stomach. He stared at the two fathers, trying to sell off their daughters, caring nothing for who they were or what they wanted. Chief Morganach, too, looked briefly taken aback, his gaze hard, and yet it drifted back and forth between the two men, as though he could not believe what he was hearing.

Chief MacLeòir stepped toward his rival, bristling with indignation, his hand shifting to the dagger upon his belt. “Ye canna mean that,” he said, his voice full of anger. “Ye have nay right to be here. Yer agreement with the Morganachs was only made possible by yer traitorous acts. Ye attacked my family and stole my daughter to ensure our alliance wouldna come to pass.” A dark laugh fell from Chief MacLeòir’s lips. “Only ye didna plan on my daughter’s resilience. The MacLeòirs canna be subdued. We stand tall, and we fight until we achieve victory.” His gaze shifted to Chief Morganach. “Ye would be wise to align yerself with the most powerful clan here.”

Caelen stepped forward and placed a calming hand upon his father’s shoulder. Only it seemed to have no effect. Chief MacLeòir’s words had riled him into a frenzy, his head such a deep shade of purple that Caelen briefly feared for his health. “Ye!” he snarled at Chief MacLeòir, his hands balled into fists as he strained against Caelen’s hold on him. “Ye lying, traitorous—”

“Stop!” Chief Morganach commanded in a voice that brooked no argument. Swiftly, he stepped forward and in between the two arguing clan chiefs, and his gaze was as hard as before as he met their eyes. “This is no way to discuss matters. If ye canna remain civil, I must ask ye to leave my castle immediately.” His gaze shifted from one laird to the other. “Is that understood?”

Caelen exhaled a slow breath, nodding to Chief Morganach, relieved that, at least, one of the three lairds was keeping his wits about him. Still, there was no solution in sight. Neither one of them would give in, and Chief Morganach could only wed one daughter. Caelen would have preferred he would marry neither. It was a thought that gave

him pause, and he barely heard the next few growled words that passed between the two enemies before they both nodded their heads in acquiescence.

“Verra well,” Chief Morganach remarked, linking his hands behind his back. “While I dunna enjoy repeating myself, I shall say this once more and then not discuss it again. Do ye hear?” He looked from Caelen’s father to Chief MacLeòir. “I will wed Yvaine because I feel bound to our original contract. ’Twas my father’s wish, and I shall honor it.”

Relief painted a smug smile upon Chief MacLeòir’s face, and Caelen instantly clamped his other hand upon his father’s shoulder as he felt his anger rise once more. “Remain calm,” he murmured into his father’s ear. “Dunna give him the satisfaction of seeing ye come undone.”

His father shoulders rose and fell with heavy breaths, and yet not a word left his lips. He cast another furious glance at Chief Morganach and then simply strode from the study, his brother upon his heels, their footsteps echoing down the hall.

“I am glad we were able to straighten this out,” Chief MacLeòir remarked, grinning at Caelen in a rather aggravating way before his gaze narrowed in accusation that Caelen felt reminded of their short exchange of words down in the dungeons of Castle MacLeòir. Indeed, Caelen had tried to rile the man, implying that he had bedded Yvaine in order to prevent her father from forcing her into marrying the Morganach chieftain. Yet it had done no good; all it had accomplished was that Chief MacLeòir had even more of a reason to despise him than before. Perhaps he even feared Caelen would be equally forthcoming with Chief Morganach and, thus, ruin his daughter’s upcoming nuptials. Was it a course of action worth considering?

Before Caelen could finish the thought, Chief MacLeòir shifted his attention back to Chief Morganach. “Frankly, I never quite believed ye would go back on yer word. After all, it only makes sense that we align our two formidable clans.” Then, he, too, turned upon his heel and left.

For a long moment, silence reigned, the absence of angry voices soothing to Caelen’s mind. Then he turned to Chief Morganach, eyeing the other man curiously. “Do ye truly feel bound by yer father’s promise?” he asked calmly. “Or is it merely the reason ye hide behind?”

Chief Morganach met his gaze, and Caelen was relieved to see no hostility there. The man merely sighed, a touch of exhaustion marking his features, and then said, “As I told ye before; yer sister fears me. A mere look at me sees her trembling, and I dunna wish to place such a burden upon her.” He swallowed hard. “Or myself.”

Surprised by this admission, Caelen looked at the other man, only now becoming aware of the sense of sorrow and regret that lingered about him. It made him wonder what it was like to walk this earth and have others shrink away from you because of something that was not within your power to change. After all, a man who growled at others could learn to speak calmly and with respect. Yet Chief Morganach could do nothing to erase the scars that tainted one half of his face. Aye, Caelen understood the other man’s decision, for he could not imagine taking a wife who would forever fear the sight of him.

“Thank ye,” Caelen said then, surprised that his initial response was gratitude. “Truth be told, my father cares very little for my sister’s heart. He only sees politics, alliances, and power.” He shook his head, feeling a sudden kinship to the scarred man he had always thought to be coldhearted and

unfeeling. Clearly, he had been wrong. “It seems both fathers have more in common than they would like to admit.” A chuckle fell from Chief Morganach’s lips, and Caelen smiled at the other man in surprise. “Would ye not agree?”

Chief Morganach nodded, a heavy sigh echoing through the chamber. “Aye, I suppose ye’re not wrong. Yet unions have always been agreed upon like this, have they not? People seek to ensure loyalty and stability in such a way, hoping that ’twill bring them peace for years to come.”

Caelen agreed wholeheartedly with Chief Morganach’s assessment. “Yet, we both ken life is not as simple as that.” He thought of the tale Chief Morganach had told him and Yvaine the other night, of the unions people had hoped would achieve permanent peace. Yet in the end, it only had caused conflict, stirring a blood feud that lasted to this day.

Stepping toward the door, Caelen paused and then looked back at Chief Morganach, seeking the other man’s gaze. “If ye were to choose a wife based upon your heart’s desire,” he asked tentatively, his own heart tensing in his chest as though holding its breath, fearful of the answer he was seeking, “who would ye marry? My sister or Yvaine?”

Chief Morganach’s gaze became distant, and for a moment, Caelen wondered if the other man had even heard him. Then, the ghost of a smile flitted across his features, and he closed his eyes, as though giving himself up to a wonderful memory. “Neither,” he finally murmured, and Caelen wondered who the woman was who currently occupied his thoughts.

Chapter Nineteen

A LATE NIGHT PLAN



The walls of Morganach Castle seemed to quiver with the force of the winds, ushering in a dark and tumultuous night. Yvaine's gaze darted nervously along the corridors as she strode forward, seeking solace in movement but finding none as her mind replayed all that had happened and imagined all that might.

Then a voice drifted to her ears from farther away, the tone urgent and agitated.

Clinging to the shadows, Yvaine stopped abruptly and spun on her heel, pressing her back against the cold stones of the wall. Her fingers curled into tight fists as she waited, heart pounding fiercely in her chest. Then she slinked around a corner and crouched below a stained-glass window. With bated breath, she listened to the muffled conversation; one voice was undeniably Logan's, and the other could not be mistaken, either; it was their father.

"Chief Morganach will honor our agreement," her father said, triumph in his voice, in the way he paced the cold stone floor.

"Aye," Logan replied, his voice subdued, and Yvaine could hear his disappointment.

“But I canna understand why the MacCarmuigs are still here,” her father continued, suspicion making the muscle in his throat twitch furiously. “We must see to it that Yvaine is married to Chief Morganach as soon as possible.”

Logan scoffed. “Father, do ye not think it callous of us to marry her off to a stranger so soon after her return to us?”

“’Tis the way,” her father said. “’Tis tradition.”

Yvaine trembled at the thought, at her father’s cruel disregard for her. Her true father, Aidan MacKinneer, would have never acted like this, would have never dreamed of choosing a life for her. It was in moments like this one that Yvaine missed him most.

Both of her parents.

Her hands trembled, and her mind raced with what to do. Aye, she needed to flee the castle, but how? Guards were everywhere, all doors and gates locked or patrolled. And now, Chief Morganach had confirmed their betrothal. “I needa find a way out of here,” Yvaine murmured to herself, wracking her mind about what to do, how to accomplish such a feat. Indeed, she felt uncertain, more so than ever before, wondering if this was finally the moment she would fail, fail to free herself, fail to walk her own path, and her heart yearned for her mother’s reassuring voice. Heather MacKinneer had always been a woman of strength and purpose, her hands steady, her eyes soulful and compassionate. Yvaine wondered if her mother had ever known a day of uncertainty in her life. Surely, it had to have been so; after all, they were all human. And yet her mother’s gaze had never shown it.

Oh, what Yvaine would not give for her counsel, her reassurance, her warm embrace. Yet right here, right now, despite every doubt and uncertainty, she had to make do

knowing that her parents trusted in her abilities. Always had they told her to follow her heart, to find her own path and not allow others to choose it for her. Aye, as much as her birth family demanded she fulfill her duty, Yvaine knew that her true parents would not be disappointed in her if she turned from her so-called duty, using any means necessary.

And what Yvaine wanted most was to simply run away.

Her head buzzed with all the many voices she had heard over the past few days, everyone wanting something different, everyone making demands of her. Indeed, these were turbulent times, so unlike the peaceful home Yvaine remembered.

Since neither her birth father nor Chief Morganach would allow her to leave this castle, Yvaine knew that she would have to find another way past the guards without being seen, without anyone the wiser. Yet she did not quite know how to go about it, that streak of brilliance still elusive. If only they had more time, Yvaine felt certain that Rory would discover some sort of escape route. He truly possessed a gift when it came to finding his way around unseen. Still, that was wishful thinking because there simply was no time. Within a matter of days, she would find herself wed... if she did not act now.

As Yvaine tiptoed through the dank and narrow hallway, her footsteps echoed in the dead of night. She stopped at every crevice, trying to decipher cloaked shadows in the moonlight that emitted from the single window at the end of it. Her heart thundered within her chest as she crept forward, searching for anything that might help her out of this dire situation. Of course, she could not simply leave through the main gate. But was there another way? There had to be!

An eerie chill rippled through her body, one that whispered of a presence behind her, and Yvaine stopped dead in her

tracks as a shiver slowly trailed down her spine. Then she slowly turned around and spotted a figure standing tall and strong in the shadows.

The air was thick with tension as Yvaine's heart thrummed faster, recognizing who it was without needing to see his face.



Caelen.

The corridor was almost eerily still, the only sound their labored breathing as they stared at each other. The atmosphere felt charged with tension, and every second seemed like an eternity. Neither of them wanted to take the first step, afraid of breaking the fragile balance. Eventually, though, one of them would have to blink first. And when that happened, Yvaine knew, things would never be the same again.

How could they? Yvaine vividly remembered the moment Caelen had suggested they wed, the moment she had refused him. She remembered his crestfallen expression as well as the jolt of pain that had seared her own heart. All of a sudden, there was this urge to apologize, to take back what she had said. Yet there was no use, no future for them. Not like this. As much as Yvaine wished things were different, they simply were not.

She had to go home.

Home.

A wistful sigh drifted from her lips at the thought of her family, of the barrier forced between them. Aye, her heart

longed to return... if possible. Yet she had least had to try, did she not? She had to return to the island and seek out the portal, see if it could return her to her own time. And if it did? Would that mean she could come back... eventually? Back to Caelen?

Perhaps.

Yet if she told Caelen, would he allow her to go, uncertain if she would be able to return? Yvaine doubted it, knowing that deeply passionate side of him, that side that tempted her even now. Yet she had to walk her own path, make her own choices, and if she told him the truth, she feared he might sway her.

And so instead, Yvaine said not a word but simply averted her gaze and made to hurry past Caelen.

Yet before she could take more than two steps, he stepped into her path and held her back. "We needa speak," he said in a low voice, his gaze piercing through her as if trying to read what lay beneath the surface.

Yvaine did her utmost to ignore the shivers of joy that danced across her skin at his nearness. She also tried to ignore the jitters that danced in her belly, for she knew that part of her had wanted him to hold her back. Of course, she did not wish to leave him. She knew that. The problem simply was that they quite literally lived in two different worlds.

Two worlds that could never be one.

"What is there to speak about?" Yvaine asked, trying to keep her voice steady despite the raging emotions inside her. "I needa get away from here," she added quickly, knowing that Caelen would not whisper a word of this to anyone. After all, he had already proven himself loyal beyond measure on too many occasions. Indeed, it had been that devotion, that kindness and compassion of his that had conquered her heart.

Alarm came to Caelen's face at her reply, and as though in reflex, his hand reached out and grasped her arm. Still, his touch was gentle, and Yvaine did not doubt that if she were to retreat, he would release her. "What do ye speak of?" he murmured, inching closer, his gaze drilling into hers.

Yvaine hitched her chin higher, willing strength into her voice. "What do ye think I speak of? I needa leave this place. Ye heard what Chief Morganach said. He is a kind man, and yet he is like our fathers in many ways. He puts his clan's needs before everything else, and I..." She swallowed hard. "I dunna have the strength to battle them all. I needa leave before... I give in." A lump formed in her throat, making it hard to swallow, and her eyes suddenly felt misted with tears. Exhaustion spread through her body, mingling with a deep sense of disappointment and heartache. Always had Yvaine thought of herself as strong, and yet after so many months of constant opposition, she felt bone wary, wishing for nothing more than to simply lay her head down and rest.

Yet if she did so, they would pounce. After all, they were the predators and she the prey.

Caelen nodded, and despite all the questions he still had, on some level at least he understood. "What is yer plan?"

Yvaine scoffed, still feeling the warm touch of his hand upon her arm despite the fabric of her sleeve. "There's no plan," she admitted, anger briefly sparking in her voice. "I dunna ken this place, and yet there has to be some way to leave it. Perhaps a distraction..." She looked up into his eyes, leaving her question unfinished.

Again, Caelen nodded. "Where will ye go?"

"Ye ken where I will go," Yvaine replied, and his hand tensed upon her arm, his jaw clenching ever so slightly. "I've

never hidden this from ye. I wish to return home. 'Tis the one place where I am free, the one place where I can be myself without struggle and disapproval.”

Caelen sighed deeply. “It sounds wonderful,” he murmured and suddenly his hand tugged upon her arm, urging her closer. His gaze sought hers as they drifted closer as though by an unseen bond. “I understand why ye wish to return.”

He paused, and Yvaine felt his other arm wrap around her waist, tugging her against his chest. She gasped in surprise, her hands rising to hold him at bay; yet there was no strength in her arms, no desire to push him away.

“Let me come with ye,” Caelen whispered against her lips, his warm breath teasing her skin. He stood so close that Yvaine felt the warmth of his body and the soft pulse of his life. “Let me come with ye. Please.”

Yvaine closed her eyes and rested her forehead against his. Her hands curled into his shirt, unwilling to ever release him, and as much as she tried, her fingers simply would not uncurl. She knew this to be unwise, yet her heart soared to new heights and her mind instantly conjured images of a shared life.

A happy life.

Free from the politics of clan alliances. Free from the duty to live their lives according to the needs of others.

More than anything, Yvaine wanted to give in, entranced by the images those few words had conjured. And if she did, what would happen then? After all, their choices did not simply affect the future of two clans right here, right now in this time. Indeed, there was a much grander picture to consider, one that reached through time and might adversely

affect the people Yvaine cared about the most. Of course, she worried what would happen if she left now. Would it destroy her people? Would her beloved clan never come into existence? Yet if she left, she could also return, and that thought gave her strength.

Aye, Yvaine thought. Perhaps I can.

The moment the thought entered her mind, it spun into something bigger, like a ripple of water upon a lake. Perhaps right now, she truly needed to escape this conflict and return home, assure her family that she was well, that she had never intentionally left them. She could speak to her grandmother, to Mrs. Murray and learn more about this time, about these two clans, about the legend that was supposed to be her future. And then, she could return, armed with the knowledge necessary to set things right.

She could return to Caelen.

Opening her eyes, Yvaine gazed up into his beloved face, for once allowing herself to feel everything, every emotion coursing through her heart. There was such soft tenderness in the blue of his eyes, and she loved that he never tried to hide himself from her. She admired his strength, always tempered by kindness, his heart so determined to protect those around him—even if it meant sacrifice on his part. He was a remarkably good man, like her father and brothers, one of those men who came along perhaps once in a lifetime, and in that moment, Yvaine knew that he was meant to be at her side.

And so, with no more hesitation or doubt, Yvaine surged into his embrace, wrapping her arms around his neck, and pressing her lips against his. It was a passionate moment of surrender, one that only seemed to increase in intensity as their lips moved together, filled with all the love and longing that

had been hidden away for too long, that had been denied for too long.

The world around them melted away, leaving only two hearts beating as one, and in this moment of utter bliss, Yvaine knew what she had to do—return home and then come back for Caelen.

As Caelen held her tightly in his arms, Yvaine smiled knowing that no matter what happened next, they would always find each other again.

“Let me sleep on it,” she said softly, her voice barely more than a whisper. “I canna make this decision tonight. One night. ’Tis all I ask.”

Caelen gazed at her for a long moment, the intensity of his love and admiration washing over her like a wave. Reluctantly, he released her and nodded. “Verra well,” he said quietly, his voice full of understanding and support. “We’ll speak more in the morning.”

Yvaine nodded and made to step past him, her heart growing heavy with the thought that come tomorrow—if she managed to find a way out of this castle—Caelen would feel betrayed. Yet if she were honest with him, Yvaine knew he would not allow her to leave.

Caelen’s gaze softened slightly as he regarded her intently before stepping aside and allowing her room to pass by him without obstruction. Yet before she could take even a single step forward, he spoke again in a low whisper: “I love ye, lass. ’Tis the one thing I’m certain of.”

Yvaine froze, briefly wondering if it had been no more than the howling of the wind outside the castle walls. Yet one look into Caelen’s eyes told her that he had truly spoken. His

words hung in the air like an unspoken promise, one which Yvaine silently accepted without hesitation as she hurried away into the night before he could see the tears that were streaming down her face.

Chapter Twenty

RESPECT



His hands were trembling ever so slightly as Caelen watched Yvaine leave down the corridor, her figure diminutive against the towering castle walls. Yet even in the soft glow of the torchlight, her fiery curls seemed ablaze, a beacon in the dark, and Caelen knew that with her by his side he would never again feel lost. His heart felt lighter already after revealing his feelings to her, the memory of that moment one he would retain for the rest of his life.

Truth be told, he had certainly caught her off guard. He recalled the slight widening of her green eyes, the way her breath seemed to lodge in her throat as she had paused in her step, her gaze seeking his once more. And then, there had been a moment, perhaps no more than a mere second, when his revelation had found her heart. Caelen was certain of it. Her expression had changed, warmed, opened to accept his offering.

Aye, she had not reciprocated. Something had held her back. Was it perhaps the thought of the place she called home? He could not imagine what it might feel like to stand at such a crossroad, knowing one could travel only one path and had to forsake the other. He needed to speak to her again and find out what lived in her past, what urged her onward.

Heavy footfalls gave Caelen pause, and even before Lachlan stepped out of the shadows, Caelen knew it to be him. Instantly, the air in the corridor thickened with tension as their eyes locked. The expression upon Lachlan's face was hard as always, and reproachful, too.

Caelen would have liked to avoid his cousin, to simply forget that he existed for at least this night. He was not in the mood for further arguments and rather wished to retire, allowing his mind to drift back to the moment he had just shared with Yvaine.

Yet it was not to be.

"Caelen," Lachlan all but growled, his voice as hard as his expression, "ye still seem to have a hard time deciding where ye're allegiances lie." He glanced down the side of the corridor where Yvaine had disappeared. "Still, right now, perhaps yer divided loyalty may have its merits."

"What do ye want?" Caelen snapped, not in the mood for playing games, wondering what sort of reaction Lachlan hoped to provoke with his renewed accusations.

A sly grin came to Lachlan's face as he moved closer. "I want ye to do precisely what ye desire."

Caelen's forehead furrowed as he stared at his cousin, now certain that something was not quite right. "What on earth do ye speak of? Is this some sort of trick?" He lifted his chin and stepped toward his cousin. "Lately, in particular, ye havena made it a secret that ye disapprove of my choices."

Lachlan chuckled. "Aye, yer choices," he mused with a shake to his head. "If only ye had heeded yer father's word when he ordered ye to take Yvaine's life, none of this would've happened." An icy expression came to Lachlan's

gaze as he fixed Caelen with a stern expression. “Now, here’s yer chance to fix that mistake.”

Still at odds, Caelen frowned as a chill slowly crawled up his spine. “I ask ye again, Lachlan, what do ye want?”

His cousin paused for a moment, his expression steely and the look in his eyes making it clear that he expected to be obeyed. “Take Yvaine and leave with her,” he said slowly, emphasizing every word. “If ye do this, Chief Morganach will have no choice but to marry Gwyneth and the alliance between our clans will be secured.”

Quite frankly, his cousin’s suggestion was not what Caelen had expected, which perhaps was not surprising considering the order his father—with Lachlan’s full approval—had given last time they had spoken. Of course, he could not deny that every part of him wished to comply, basking in the thought of taking Yvaine away from all of this and beginning a life with her somewhere else. Still, this was not only his decision. Yvaine was not a woman who would allow anyone to dictate her choices. She had made that quite clear, and Caelen was proud of her fierce spirit.

Aside from that, Caelen knew that simply removing Yvaine from the equation might not change anything. After all, Chief Morganach had made it perfectly clear—at least, to Caelen—that he would not take a bride who feared him, who trembled at the mere sight of him. So, even with Yvaine gone, he might refuse to marry Gwyneth.

“I assure ye that there’s nothing I wish to do more,” Caelen told his cousin honestly, seeing no upside in lying or concealing anything. “Yet she asked me for time to think and I granted it to her.” He lifted his hand when Lachlan made to

object. “Arguing would be futile. I shall not force her hand. What she needs now is time.”

Lachlan scoffed at this statement. “Time? Ye dunna have time. She must make a decision now, or she will find herself married to Chief Morganach, and our clans will suffer the consequences. Ye have a duty to yer clan, and ye must fulfill it.”

Caelen sighed, gritting his teeth, knowing that his cousin was not wrong. “One day,” he told his cousin as much as himself, “will not make a difference. Show a little patience, Lachlan, as well as a little faith. Perhaps things are as bad as they are because people always expect the worst.” Nodding to his cousin, Caelen walked away, hoping with every fiber of his being that he was not wrong.

Chapter Twenty-One

AROUND A CORNER



Yvaine's heart raced as she tiptoed down the torchlit corridor of the castle. Shadows danced along the vaulted walls, and a profound silence lingered in her wake. Goosebumps prickled her skin, as if an invisible gaze was following her every move. She glanced over her shoulder warily, but to her relief, Caelen was not there. Despite his own impatience, he had granted her a night of reprieve, allowed her the chance to think everything over and question her heart about what it wanted. And what was she doing?

Closing her eyes, Yvaine briefly leaned back against the stone wall, feeling its coldness seep into every inch of her body. Aye, she had all but given him her word that they would speak on the morrow, that she would not attempt to leave the castle tonight. And what was she doing? Yet Yvaine knew she could not stay. If she did, she might never leave. Every moment she spent in Caelen's presence could prove fatal to her resolve to return home.

And she had to return home.

For now.

Yvaine cast another glance down the darkened corridor, needing to be certain that Caelen was not following her. Then she continued onward, her steps quickening until she was

almost running. Running toward something or running away from something Yvaine did not dare contemplate.

However, she abruptly stopped, her left hand reaching out to the stone wall to brace herself, when she heard voices coming from around the corner. Voices raised in argument.

Indeed, it seemed this night few people lay sleeping in their beds, the eerie silence that lingered in the darkened corridors frequently disturbed by footfalls and voices as well. Was it merely servants finishing up their tasks before hurrying to their own beds? Yvaine rather doubted it, for although she could not make out the words spoken, there was a distinct edge to them. For a moment, she contemplated turning around, yet with only a vague idea of the castle's floor plan, she might end up losing her way, and there was no time to lose.

Thus, Yvaine edged forward, her back pressed to the stone wall, and peeked around the corner, her gaze sweeping over the hall, multiple corridors leading off in various directions.

At first, she saw very little, only dim outlines, their movements juttred and abrupt. She squinted her eyes, trying to see in the faint glow from the torches along the walls. Then, however, one of the voices grew louder in obvious outrage, and Yvaine froze.

Her father.

In that moment, everything fell into place and Yvaine could make out not only the outline of her father's face but also that of Chief MacCarraig. Like two warriors, they stood across from one another, barely an arm's length separating them. Their shoulders were tense, and their hands balled into fists, as though they were merely waiting for a reason to strike the other one down. Harsh, guttural sounds passed their lips

and sent a chill down Yvaine's back, and yet the words they spoke still eluded her.

Of course, she ought not be surprised to find Caelen's father still at Castle Morganach. After all, had the MacCarraig party left, Caelen would certainly have left with them. Yet they were still here, and Yvaine wondered why that was. Was Chief MacCarraig unwilling to accept defeat just yet? Was there some sort of plan afoot? Or were they simply waiting until morning to make their departure? Yvaine did not know, and, in truth, she did not want to know. She wanted no part in these politics, annoyance spreading through her chest as she glared at the two men who were the cause of this conflict.

Finding her path blocked by the two lairds, Yvaine resigned herself to having to retrace her steps and find another way downstairs. Yet when she was about to turn away, a movement caught her eye, holding her in place.

Again, she squinted her eyes, trying to see. Indeed, there was someone there, hiding in the shadows at the opposite end of the hall, at the mouth of yet another corridor. It had to be a woman, for Yvaine could make out the soft swirl of skirts as the other person moved, withdrawing a step as the lairds' argument led them in her direction.

Then though, the two men paused, once again growling something at one another before finally parting ways, both stomping off in opposite directions.

Yvaine breathed a sigh of relief as she watched her father disappear, soon swallowed up by the darkened corridor. Her gaze then moved to Caelen's father, who also moved away, his steps though slower, and his head slightly bowed.

Again, Yvaine caught movement near the other corridor, her heart suddenly stilling in her chest when the person moved a step forward and into the light from one of the torches along the wall. “Mother?”

Shaking her head, Yvaine stood stock-still. Indeed, it was her mother. What on earth was she doing here? Why had she remained hidden to watch the exchange? That, though, made sense, considering her father’s temper and her mother’s fearful spirit. Yet what truly unsettled Yvaine was the way her mother’s gaze seemed to follow Chief MacCarraig as he crossed the hall and then slowly disappeared down another corridor. There was an almost wistful expression upon her face, far from what Yvaine would have expected. Indeed, there was no contempt, no anger, no sign of hostility at all, considering that the man was her enemy as much as her husband’s. No, what Yvaine saw was a woman looking at a man... she cared for?

Yvaine shook her head, disbelief flooding her body, quickly mingling with a deep sense of aggravation. Were there secrets everywhere? Was nothing the way it seemed? Apparently, few people truly meant what they said, secret lives hidden in every corner. Yvaine was tired of it, tired of having to figure out how to navigate this treacherous sea. She wanted straight, clear answers, and she wanted them now.

The moment Laird MacCarraig disappeared from sight, Yvaine’s mother hung her head, looking distraught, her face tight with emotion, and then she turned away as well. Her soft footfalls were barely audible as she walked back toward her chamber.

Yvaine knew she could not waste time if she meant to get away this night; and yet, she could not simply ignore what she

had just observed. Something was going on that she knew nothing about, a secret that might have been in existence for a very long time.

In the spur of the moment, Yvaine tiptoed across the hall and then slipped down the corridor along which her mother had disappeared. She needed to know what was happening here, what secrets lay hidden. And thus, only moments later, she knocked upon the door to her mother's chamber.

When her mother opened it, Yvaine was met with a surprised gasp, and her mother's face quickly changed from shock to anger, her features contorting into a deep frown. "What on earth are ye doing here, Yvaine?" she asked, her voice tense. "'Tis late. Ye should be abed."

With a disappointed look into her mother's eyes, Yvaine pushed past her and into the chamber. "Why are ye not abed then?" she demanded, turning around to face her mother. "Ye're not even in yer nightgown yet." She straightened her back and met her mother's eyes, determined to get answers.

Alarm showed upon her mother's face, and her mouth opened yet no sound came out. Then she turned away, a few silent, heavy steps leading her to the window. Stars twinkled outside, the light soothing and full of promise, and yet the air in the chamber felt heavy with secrets and lies. For a long time, neither one of them spoke, her mother all but lost in thought.

"I saw ye," Yvaine said gently, fighting down her anger. After all, she doubted this was her mother's fault. Like Yvaine herself, her life had been chosen for her, and not once had Yvaine seen her rebel against it. "I saw ye out in the corridor, watching Father and... Laird MacCarraig."

Her mother sighed heavily, and her shoulders trembled before she turned to face her daughter. Fear rested in her eyes despite the forced smile that showed upon her face. “Well, I... I heard them arguing,” she began in a stammer, her voice trembling as hard as her shoulders. “I left my chamber to see what was going on and then found myself worried for... yer father’s safety. I could not quite bring myself to leave him alone.”

Holding her mother’s gaze, Yvaine approached slowly. “Are ye not tired of it, Mother?” she murmured gently, allowing her own exhaustion to play across her features. “Of all the lies and secrets? I dunna pretend to ken the truth, yet I ken ’tis not this.” She grasped her mother’s hands. “Please, tell me.”

Her mother’s eyes filled with tears, and she bit her lower lip as though struggling to contain emotions she had pushed down for far too long. At the same time, her hands clamped down hard on Yvaine’s, revealing her desperate need for comfort. Still, she shook her head, the necessity to uphold the lies she had been living ingrained into every cell of her body.

“How can ye deny me this, Mother?” Yvaine demanded, not allowing her mother to look away. “Ever since I returned, ye pressured me to be the young lady ye wished to see so that Father can arrange a favorable match.” She scoffed. “Ye pushed me toward a life that ye yerself didna want, isna it so? Tell me the truth, do ye feel something for Laird MacCarraig?”

As the last word fell from Yvaine’s lips, her mother’s eyes closed in shame. Tears squeezed out and then ran down her cheeks as she hung her head. “I’m sorry, my dear,” her mother sobbed. “I’m so verra sorry.” She pulled her hands from

Yvaine's grasp, her feet carrying her away, back to the window. Clearly, she needed distance, her emotions too overwhelming, too painful, and Yvaine knew if she had not stumbled on this, her mother would never have said a word.

"What happened?" Yvaine asked gently, remaining where she was, allowing her mother the space she needed.

Her mother sighed, her shoulders trembling and her voice low as she reluctantly began to speak. "I was young when I married yer father, Yvaine. 'Twas a union arranged by my father." She shrugged helplessly. "I always knew my marriage would be a clan matter, that my heart was of no importance." She glanced over her shoulder at Yvaine, her gaze apologetic. "I suppose 'tis the way of the world."

Yvaine sighed, disgusted with the way people often accepted something simply because it was tradition. They never even thought to ask themselves whether they truly approved. Perhaps it was easier that way. Perhaps, deep down, people feared that even if they tried to bring about change, they would not succeed.

As hard as it was, Yvaine was not one of those people.

"I... I..." Her mother cast her a careful look before once more turning away, clearly thinking that her next words would meet Yvaine's disapproval. "I first met Graham MacCarraig when I was a young lass." Wistfulness swung in her voice. "Of course, we were from different clans, yet whenever our paths would cross, he would pick wildflowers for me, handing them to me with such a shy smile upon his face that my heart went out to him." Having seen the stoic chieftain, Yvaine could not imagine such a moment, yet she wondered what his heart, too, had endured these past years to have hardened so.

Once more, silence fell over the chamber, the only sound her mother's strained breathing. "And yet ye married Father," Yvaine remarked, feeling an almost oppressive weight settle upon her shoulders at the thought of her mother's fate. Indeed, she had assumed as much, yet hearing it recounted like this made it feel different.

Crushing.

Devastating.

"It wasna my choice," her mother said simply, an oddly rehearsed touch to these few little words, as though she had said them to herself time and time again. "Yer father, he... he was a good man, and he treated me well." She exhaled a slow breath and then turned from the window, for the first time seeking Yvaine's gaze. "Yet there were things that he couldna give me—things of the heart." She paused for a moment before continuing, and Yvaine got the distinct impression that having started, her mother now wanted to tell her story; perhaps she even found it liberating to reveal her heart to another. "I never forgot Graham, and whenever our paths would cross in the years after my marriage, I could see that he had not forgotten, either. We never spoke of it, never truly said anything to one another. Still, sometimes I could feel his gaze upon me. I could feel it as though he had reached out and grasped my hand." Tears welled up in her eyes, yet the smile upon her face was heartbreakingly beautiful. "I used to dream of him." She sighed, her smile slowly dimmed. "Yet as the years began to pass, life took over, and dreams slipped away." She shrugged. "What else is there to say?" Yet Yvaine could see how much emotion still lingered in her mother's eyes when she thought of Graham MacCarraig.

“I’m sorry,” Yvaine whispered after a moment of silence. “I’m sorry ye were not given a choice.”

Her mother smiled sadly and shook her head. “’Twas a long time ago, and no longer matters.”

Yvaine bridged the distance between them, her hands reaching out to grasp her mother’s. “Time is of little consequence when our hearts ache,” she murmured. “I can see it in yer face. Ye still care for him now as ye did then.”

Her mother pressed her lips into a tight line, clearly fighting to hold back emotions that threatened to crush her if she were to allow them. “Even if what ye say is true,” she finally replied, her lips trembling, “it changes nothing. Life is what it is, and I...” A heavy sigh fell from her lips, her body’s tension waning as though every bit of strength was abandoning her.

Yvaine nodded in understanding. Indeed, her mother’s fate was different from hers. Her marriage had been sealed many years ago, she had born children and any decision now as a laird’s wife would upend her position and bring forth devastating consequences. “Ye’ve made yer choices, Mother, and now I must make mine,” Yvaine whispered, seeking her gaze. “I *have* made mine, and I willna marry Chief Morganach.” She shook her head for emphasis.

Her mother’s eyes widened, and yet the expected shock and devastation did not manifest. Instead, a sliver of understanding lit up her face. “Yer father will be furious. He willna accept it. He will...” She shrugged, unable to foresee her husband’s reaction yet knowing it would be devastating.

“I ken. ’Tis why ye needa help me.”

Her mother's brows furrowed. "Help ye? What do ye mean?" She shook her head then, fear once more showing in her eyes. "I canna go against yer father. I simply canna. He wouldna listen to me anyway. Ye ken that."

"Aye, I do." Yvaine squeezed her mother's hands, her gaze imploring. "Yet if ye dunna wish for me to share yer fate, to be married to one man while my heart belongs to another, then ye will help me escape this castle. Tonight."

Her mother's eyes widened in stunned shock, and yet Yvaine thought to see a spark of devotion, of loyalty in her green depths.

Not to her husband.

But to the daughter she had birthed... and thought lost for so long.

Chapter Twenty-Two

IN THE NIGHT



Caelen was suddenly wrenched awake by a cacophony of clamorous racket. He rose, overtaken by weariness, and slowly stumbled to the window of his chamber, last night's lack of sleep catching up with him. As he peered through the glass pane, he was met with a flurry of movement from below in the castle courtyard. The guards were scurrying around frantically, their sharp commands ringing across the grounds as if they were on the hunt for something precious.

Caelen flinched, the fog of confusion quickly fading away in an instant. His heart pounded erratically, and a chill ran through him as he registered the frantic shouts and clattering hooves echoing around the castle. His mind raced with possibilities, each more terrifying than the last. Had his father and Laird MacLeòir finally come to blows? Was there some sort of altercation that had occurred? Or was it...

Yvaine! An icy dread consumed Caelen as he contemplated the thought.

In the next instant, he fumbled with his clothes, his mind spinning as he desperately tried to recall the events leading up to this moment. He could still remember her voice from last night—her determined words of defiance against her tyrannical father's plan and the wedding she was to be forced

into, her intention to leave. But had she gone through with it? Had she abandoned him? Caelen felt a sharp stab of pain in his chest—she had promised they would escape together and yet here he was alone.

Caelen hung his head, momentarily too stunned to even move. Aye, truth be told, Yvaine had not quite promised, had she? To Caelen's ears, in that moment, it had sounded almost as if. Yet she had only asked to be granted the time to think it through. What if she had come to the decision that she could only leave without him?

Why would she? Caelen groaned, remembering the closeness he had felt between them the night before. Again, they had shared a kiss, one that had revealed all they felt. Was it possible that he had been mistaken, though? Caelen could not fathom it to be so. He remembered every breath, every heartbeat, every whispered word. She had lain in his arms as much as he had lain in hers. And when he had spoken, when he had asked to go with her, she had wanted him to. Caelen was certain of it. Her eyes had made that unmistakable clear, and yet she had held back, something on her mind, something that kept her from agreeing outright. What had it been?

Yet again Caelen reminded himself that he knew very little about Yvaine's life. She was a true enigma, a mystery—her past, her secrets were kept close to the chest. Why? What was she hiding and why could she not trust him? Caelen wished he had any of these answers, wondering if he ever would... now that Yvaine was gone.

Aye, he was certain that she was.

Leaving his chamber behind, Caelen hastened downstairs into the great hall, agitated voices drifting to his ears, growing louder with each step he took. There, he found a great

assembly, including their host as well as his own father and Yvaine's. Gwyneth stood off to the side, eyeing the proceedings warily, while Fergus hovered close by. They exchanged secret glances, their faces taut and overshadowed by concern.

"Ye canna blame us for yer daughter's disappearance!" Caelen's father roared, standing like a raging bull in front of Chief MacLeòir, his eyes blazing with outrage.

"I can, and I will," Chief MacLeòir shot back, his face a dark shade of red and a murderous gleam in his eyes. Only his son's tight grip upon his shoulders kept him from lunging himself at Caelen's father. "Ye have nay right being here. My daughter is the betrothed of Chief Morganach. Leave!"

Caelen saw a rather smug smile come to his father's face. "We shall not," he replied, clearly enjoying this moment as he shared a meaningful look with his brother. "For it seems the last word hasna yet been spoken. Quite obviously, yer daughter has no desire to find herself the mistress of Castle Morganach." He glanced sideways toward where Gwyneth stood beside Fergus. "Perhaps her rash and selfish decision to run off will prove to Chief Morganach that there might be a better choice for him."

"Enough!" Chief Morganach commanded as he stepped between the two clan chiefs. His gaze was hard, and the expression upon his face brooked no argument. "This isna the time for petty quarrels." He glanced at Caelen, who nodded, granting the man his support. "We needa locate the lass as quickly as possible and ensure that no harm has come to her." His gaze narrowed as he looked from one father to the other. "If I discover that anyone had a hand in her disappearance..." He left the sentence hanging, handing over the possible

consequences to each man's imagination. Then, he marched through the castle, bellowing orders to his servants and guards. Despite his calm, his voice seemed to bounce off the tall stone walls, inciting a mad frenzy among his people as they organized a search for her. Everyone was expected to remain composed; yet fear blanketed many like a shroud, each for their own reasons.

Clearly in the grip of anxiety, Gwyneth hastened across the hall and toward Caelen. Fergus remained at her side, both their faces taut. "What now?" she asked, and her voice quivered. "With Yvaine gone, am I now expected to wed Chief Morganach?"

Fergus grasped her hands before quickly releasing them lest anyone see. "Of course not." He looked at Caelen, clearly asking for confirmation.

"I dunna ken," Caelen replied, uncertain what would happen in the hours and days to come. What if Yvaine were truly gone? What if she had disappeared for good? His heart tightened at the thought.

Fergus glared at him. "How can ye say that?" He grasped Gwyneth's shoulders and looked imploringly into her eyes. "Ye willna wed him. I'll take ye away before that happens," he murmured in a quiet voice, still it rang with conviction, giving Caelen pause.

"Do ye truly mean that?" he asked his friend, surprised to hear Fergus speak so. Thus far, despite his feelings, Fergus had always stayed true to his clan, subduing his own desires, and acting solely as was expected of him. Yet, Caelen understood. After all, was he not in a similar situation?

Fergus met his gaze, a hint of contrition in his own, and then he nodded. "Aye, I mean it." He sighed. "I'm sorry, old

friend, but I—”

“I understand,” Caelen interrupted, placing a hand on his friend’s shoulder. His gaze moved to Gwyneth, offering her a smile. “I understand, and I will help ye in any way I can.”

Gratitude shone in their eyes, but then it quickly vanished when Lachlan strode into the hall. His sharp eyes swept over the assembled crowd, briefly lingered upon Chief MacLeòir and his wife before finding Caelen.

In only a handful of strides, Lachlan was at Caelen’s side, his voice dropping to a whisper as he quickly glanced around to ensure that no one was eavesdropping. “This is our chance,” he murmured excitedly, his gaze darting to Gwyneth. “We have to make certain that Yvaine willna be found so that Chief Morganach realizes that Gwyneth is the better choice.”

Another sob tore from Gwyneth’s throat, and Fergus instantly grasped her hand. Yet before he could growl at Lachlan, Caelen stood nose to nose with his cousin. “Tell me, ye didna have a hand in this, did ye?”

Caelen’s heart pounded in his chest as he stared at Lachlan, terror seizing every part of his body. After all, his cousin had been ordered to take Yvaine’s life not long ago. Foolishly, Caelen had thought that with their arrival as well as his father’s at Morganach Castle, this order was no longer valid. Had he been wrong?

Lachlan’s expression remained unchanged, and he met Caelen’s gaze with a steady one of his own. “I didna lay a finger on the lass,” he replied calmly, though there was a hint of offense in his voice.

Caelen stared at him for another moment, searching for any trace of untruth in Lachlan’s words. Yet all he found was

the same fierce loyalty that had been there since they had been children. “If ye’re lying,” Caelen said slowly, his voice low and dangerous, “if ye hurt Yvaine in any way or if this is some kind of ploy to ensure Gwyneth will be forced into marrying Chief Morganach, then I’ll make sure yer life ends here.”

Lachlan’s eyes narrowed, and for a moment, Caelen thought he had pushed his cousin too far. However, it was merely an illusion as Lachlan remained icily calm, the only hint of his turmoil the rage that sparked in his eyes. “Ye can trust me on this,” he said quietly. “I serve my clan any way I see fit, and I follow orders given to me by my laird.” He took a step toward Caelen. “Ye may accuse me of a great many things... but I dunna lie. I give ye my word that I had no hand in this, and that is the truth.”

Caelen studied him for a moment before finally nodding in agreement. “Verra well.”

With that settled, Lachlan stepped away and made his way over to Caelen’s father, the words exchanged between them echoing in Caelen’s mind. Lachlan might not have hurt Yvaine or facilitated her disappearance, yet he would use it to his advantage. That, he had made unmistakably clear.

“We will find her,” Caelen murmured more to himself than anyone else, fear ringing through every word as he tried to ignore the deep sense of foreboding that lingered in his mind. He wanted desperately to believe that Yvaine had not been harmed by anyone—especially not by someone from his own clan. Indeed, the alternative was far preferable. At least, if she had left on her own accord, she was unharmed.

Finding his way out onto the ramparts overlooking the land, Caelen prayed that it was so, and yet the thought stirred a deep sense of disappointment and betrayal. Why would she

not confide in him? Had he not made it clear that she could trust him?

More than once, Caelen had shared sensitive information with her, had come to her aid, had risked everything to protect her. Yet it never seemed to be enough. Was he mistaken about the bond that connected them? Or was there something terrible in Yvaine's past? Caelen could not imagine what it could be; only there had to be some sort of explanation.

As Caelen watched the chaos below in the courtyard as the Morganach and MacLeòir warriors mounted their horses, ready to be off in a moment's notice, he wondered where Yvaine had gone. Aye, the only place she had ever wanted to go was home.

The Fey Isle.

Only here at Castle Morganach, they were even farther away from the coast than before, and Caelen wondered if she would find her way all by herself. Yet that point would be moot once the warriors caught up to her.

And they would.

As far as Caelen knew, no horse was missing from the stables, and on foot not even a woman like Yvaine, resourceful and dauntless, could evade them for long. Nay, they would find her eventually. And then?

Then, they would drag her back here where she would be forced to marry Chief Morganach.

"Not if I find her first," Caelen murmured before he spun around and rushed down the stairs leading down into the courtyard. In the commotion, no one took notice of him as he hastened into the stables and returned moments later with his mount. Of course, part of him understood that neither Chief

Morganach nor Chief MacLeòir wished for any MacCarraig warriors to join in the search. Yet as Caelen thundered out the main gate, tightly grasping the reins in his hands, no one held him back.

Chapter Twenty-Three

ESCAPE



The crimson sun stretched its rays across the horizon, a blazing fire of light that illuminated her escape, and Yvaine stole one last glance over her shoulder as Morganach Castle faded from view. She still felt the warmth of her mother's kiss on her forehead as she had secretly helped Yvaine slip past the guards unseen. Yet with no horse and no signposts to guide her she was already breathless; still, her feet kept running—the farther away from the castle, the better. Adrenaline coursed through her veins as desperation urged her on—no plan or destination could provide what she truly desired, only freedom. In this moment, nothing else mattered.

Escape was all that remained in her wake.

Not allowing herself even a moment of rest, Yvaine ran her gaze over the horizon as her pulse raced. Dread seeped into her veins as she imagined the warriors being sent after her, ordered to retrieve her by any means necessary. No doubt they would not hesitate to drag her back to the castle kicking and screaming to face her father and Chief Morganach. She could imagine her father's fury as clearly as if he stood in front of her, and it propelled her forward faster than she had ever ran before. This was the most desperate gamble she had ever taken, but it was now or never.

And then there was Caelen.

Aye, Yvaine had promised him that she would think his plea over and consider fleeing with him. Only her heart was torn in two; for a part of her longed to stay with him forever, to never leave his side. Yet another part craved the home and family that awaited her beyond the horizon, and ultimately it was this desire that won out... at least for now. And so, she had left at night without so much as a goodbye, without a letter to explain that if she could, she would return someday... and her heart felt heavy at the thought of the betrayal he must be feeling when he awoke to find her gone.

Guilt weighed heavily upon Yvaine, and yet she pushed it away, knowing it would not serve her, and simply kept walking.

The hairs on Yvaine's neck stood up as the hours ticked by, her apprehension intensifying with each passing second. She pushed herself harder, her feet pounding the ground beneath her as though they were sprinting away from impending danger. The late autumn sun beat down upon her, sweat dripping off her forehead and stinging her eyes. Her chest heaved and she gasped for air, but she refused to stop. Every step was a step in the right direction, no matter where it would lead her—she had to keep going, to escape from her father's tyranny before his warriors could catch up to her. She scrambled through winding paths that wove between thickets of trees and overgrown foliage, feeling desperation take hold of her heart and driving her onward with a desperate hope for freedom.

Every step marked a new beginning.

Away.

It was all that mattered now.

The day passed in a flurry of dread and anxiety, and Yvaine felt the weight of despair settling deep into her bones. She had been walking for hours, but still there was no sign of her pursuers. Burning muscles and parched lips begged for rest as night fell, yet Yvaine's mind kept going; she knew that if she stopped, she would be doomed.

Suddenly, the menacing sound of hooves and shouting broke through the silence and struck fear into her soul. Desperate adrenaline surged through her veins as if to say, *Run, run now before 'tis too late!* But it already felt like it was too late—her exhaustion weighed heavy on her limbs like shackles, making each step seem impossible. Her mind only went blank with terror and willed her feet to move faster than ever before.

As Yvaine flew through the night, a sudden apparition came into view. A waif-like figure with pale blond hair melted from the shadows in front of her and suddenly stood to block her way. A jolt of fear shot through Yvaine's heart, and she pulled up short, staring at the woman, a dark cloak draped over her shoulders, yet the hood flung back to reveal her features.

At first, a spark of unease seeped deep into Yvaine's soul, before recognition dawned.

With no time to lose, the woman motioned toward her, gesturing for Yvaine to follow before her hood fell back into place, once again hiding her pale hair and allowing her to slip back into the shadows. For a second, Yvaine even doubted her eyes, certain her mind had conjured the images she had seen. Then, though, the woman called out soft, "Come. Quickly."

Weary and exhausted, Yvaine hesitated until the thundering sound of hoofbeats drew closer. And so, with no

other option, Yvaine gritted her teeth and took off after the young woman.

As they ran, Yvaine's eyes remained fixed upon the shadows surrounding her, her feet nimbly navigating the forest floor. Yet her thoughts replayed the moment the cloaked figure had stepped into her path, her mind's eye drawn to her features, half in shadow.

At first, it had been no more than a vague sense of familiarity. Then, though, it had hit Yvaine with a force of a club brought down upon her head.

The island.

Upon arriving in the past, Yvaine had searched the island far and wide and only found ruins, not a soul in sight. Then, though, only moments before Caelen's cousin had come upon her, her path had crossed that of young woman, a young woman with pale blonde hair, almost white, and trustworthy blue eyes. The woman had introduced herself as Catriona, and she had spoken to Yvaine with a knowledge that had sent her mind reeling.

She had even known her name.

Unfortunately, though, Yvaine had had no chance to ask questions. The woman named Catriona had disappeared as suddenly as she had come to stand in front of Yvaine, not a trace left of her.

Then all hell had broken loose, and Yvaine had had no thought for the young woman, who she might be and how she could possibly know the things she had known. Over the course of the past few months, Yvaine had found her mind occasionally stray back to her, the same questions still

coursing through her head. Yet answers had not come, and so she had quickly abandoned the topic.

An odd surge of relief shot through Yvaine as she followed the stranger's beckoning arm and raced through the dense foliage of the forest. What had brought Catriona here this night? Had she known to find Yvaine here? Yet the thought seemed ludicrous. How could she possibly have known? Still, Catriona moved with certainty, as though she knew precisely where to go, not a doubt in her mind.

The forest was dense and dark, the canopy of trees blocking out the moon and casting a deep shadow upon the countryside. As Yvaine ran, her heart raced with fear of who was chasing her—she knew without a doubt that her father's warriors as well as those of Clan Morganach had been sent after her the moment she had been found missing from the castle. Yet how close were they?

Yvaine forced herself to keep running, pushing her body beyond its limits, until at last Catriona pulled to stop, holding out an arm to catch Yvaine as she stumbled forward, exhaustion coursing through her body. A few more steps guided them through a thicket, and Catriona held back the branches so Yvaine could pass. Then they stepped out into a small clearing illuminated in the moonlight, where a small group of horses were waiting.

Yvaine grasped the woman's arm, pulling her back. "How do ye come to be here? Who are ye?" She frowned, staring at the young woman.

A soft smile came to Catriona's face, her features calm and relaxed as though they had not just run through the forest, chased by men who could do them harm. "Ye ken who I am," Catriona replied simply, placing a warm hand upon Yvaine's

shoulder. "I'm here to see ye safe." Her smile deepened, joy now dancing in her eyes. "I heard ye fled Castle Morganach, and I thought ye could use some help."

Frowning, Yvaine shook her head. "Ye heard? How did ye hear?"

Catriona shrugged, the expression upon her face strangely mysterious. "The wind whispered it to me," she replied with a bit of a mischievous grin. "Come. There's no time to linger." She took Yvaine's hand and led her closer to the horses grazing nearby.

"How is it that ye ken me?" Yvaine asked as she stumbled along, her muscles quivering with exhaustion. "And why do ye seek to help me?"

The young woman sighed, her steps slowing as they drew closer to a dapple-gray mare. She turned to look at Yvaine, clearly contemplating what to say or how much to share. "We are the guardians," she whispered, squeezing Yvaine's hand. "We have been watching over ye since before ye were born."

"Guardians?" Yvaine shook her head, her mind slow to comprehend the meaning behind the woman's words. "What do ye mean? Guardians of what?"

"Of that which is to be," Catriona replied, holding out her hand to the dapple-gray mare, who moved closer nuzzling her side. "Sometimes," she murmured, her gaze distant as she stroked the horse, "I have dreams. Dreams of what is to come. Dreams of dangers that await." Her gaze moved and met Yvaine's. "My mother saw that ye were in peril, and so she sent ye through time to keep ye safe, knowing that one day ye would return to set things right."

Yvaine's mind reeled, unable to comprehend what Catriona had said, for the young woman spoke of otherworldly forces as though they truly existed, as though the Fates guided their every step, leading them toward their destiny. Indeed, upon their first meeting, Catriona had spoken of Caelen, had she not?

Ye must find a man named Caelen. He will guide ye on yer quest. Was that not what she had said? Aye, Yvaine remembered clearly, for it had shaken her to her bones. Her mind had instantly gone to the Caelen of the old legends before screaming out in disbelief, arguing that it could not be him.

Without another word, the woman led the dapple-gray to Yvaine's side, nodding for her to mount the horse. "She'll take ye where ye needa go. Trust her."

As Yvaine swung herself onto the mare's back, Catriona ran her hand affectionately over the mare's neck. "And dunna worry," her eyes rose and met Yvaine's, "Caelen will find ye. I'll see to it."

Yvaine frowned, staring down at the young woman, her hair almost silver in the moonlight. "But he... he's back at the castle. I... I left without him." A new wave of guilt washed over Yvaine, threatening to pull her under. Aye, she had betrayed Caelen by leaving. Only she had also betrayed... destiny? If, indeed, she was meant to be here, stay by Caelen's side in order to assure that the future turned out the way it was meant to, then she had made a grave mistake, had she not? Yet her heart yearned to go home. Would all be lost if she left now to return later?

Before Yvaine could ask, the woman smiled and said, "Caelen left the castle at daybreak. He isna far behind."

A cold shiver danced down Yvaine's back. "How can ye possibly ken this?" she asked, even though her mind trailed off in another direction, imagining the moment Caelen would come upon her, furious and outraged, laying blame at her feet. Aye, he would have every right to do so.

"Go now," Catriona urged, whispering something inaudible in the mare's ear. Then she met Yvaine's eyes once more. "Ride safely and may the winds be with ye." Then, she stepped away and as the mare charged forward, almost upending Yvaine's balance, Catriona faded back into the shadows of the woods.

Clinging to the mare's back, Yvaine watched Catriona disappear, certain that those in pursuit would never discover her. She seemed a part of this place, of the forest, of everything that grew and thrived, a hidden world people had all but forgotten. Yet she had come to Yvaine's aid, and her words echoed through her mind as the mare charged through the forest, dodging trees left and right with such surefooted skill that it soon calmed Yvaine's racing heart. Her feet ached from the strain she had put on them, and now all but sighed in relief as she sat atop the horse, clinging to its back, able to rest her aching muscles at least a little.

Yvaine leaned forward, her body all but draped over the horse's neck, and whispered a small prayer of thanks into the mare's ears as the animal charged toward dawn.

Chapter Twenty-Four

UPON A LONELY BEACH



Caelen watched the MacLeòir and Morganach warriors racing away in different directions, each searching for Yvaine, not knowing where to go. Of course, they had no direction in mind. How could they? After all, they knew nothing about her.

He, though, knew her well; at least, he hoped he did. He prayed he knew her well enough to find her. After all, she had never hidden the fact that she wished to return home. Home to the Fey Isles. What Caelen did not know was what awaited her there. She had spoken of family, of the place she called home, and yet Caelen could not imagine what it might look like. After all, he *had been* on the island several times over the years. He *had seen* the ruins, the forests and lakes, the far-reaching meadows, and the tall cliff tops. Yet what he had never encountered was another living soul.

At least not until the day they had stumbled upon Yvaine.

To the best of his knowledge, there was nothing and no one on that island. Yet Yvaine called it home, and a part of him believed her, believed that there was something outside his reach, something meant only for her. It was that that made him certain beyond the shadow of a doubt that if she were to reach the island, she would be lost to him for good. She would go where he could not follow. He might stand upon the same

shore or in the same meadow and yet not see her, unable to reach her.

Caelen spurred his horse on, praying that he would catch up to her before it was too late. He had heard countless stories about the Fey Isles, whispering of people disappearing, never to be seen again, of ships losing their way in the treacherous waters near the cliffs, soon shattered upon the rocks. Indeed, stories abounded, stories which had often enough kept people away, and Caelen wondered if that, indeed, was their true purpose. Was there something or someone on that island who did not wish to be found? Was Yvaine part of whatever it was?

For days, he galloped across the wooded terrain, always on the brink of exhaustion. The rolling hills and dense forests raced by in a blur of browns, greens, and deep blues. His horse could barely stand beneath him as it wheezed from the effort. Still, he dared not rest; his sense of urgency was too strong. He had to reach her before she melted away like the clouds dissipating across the horizon. Every stride filled him with dread that he would be too late.

And then, at last, he saw the sea stretching out endlessly before him. The wide expanse of rippling blue water sparkled in the sunlight just beyond a grassy cliff overlooking the boundless horizon.

He pulled his horse to a halt on a clifftop and then he saw her.

Yvaine.

Caelen screamed her name, and she jolted as if a lightning bolt had just electrified the air. Slowly, she turned away from the sea, her gaze downcast as though she did not dare raise it, as though she did not dare look upon him. Then,



though, she did, and the moment their eyes met, Caelen felt utterly mesmerized, for her eyes held a desperate ache that seemed to reach into the depths of his soul.

Without further hesitation, Caelen urged his horse forward, down the steep slope of the cliff. The path was treacherous, and he feared Yvaine might vanish into thin air whenever a boulder or bush blocked his sight. But soon enough, he found himself down at the shoreline and dismounted, allowing his mount some much needed rest.

Yvaine stood a little way down the rocky beach, her long hair blowing in the wind. She did not speak, nor did she move. She simply stared out to sea, as though she were not even aware of his presence. Deep sadness lingered upon her face, and Caelen's heart tensed painfully at the thought that she truly did not want him here. Had he been so thoroughly mistaken? Had she left without a word because her heart had never belonged to him at all?

Caelen had no words to describe the feelings that overwhelmed him in that moment. All he could do was stand there and stare back, transfixed by the sight of her. He wanted nothing more than to reach out and take her into his arms, to promise her whatever she desired if only she would stay with him. But he knew he could not do that; it was not his place.

Yet neither could he walk away.

As Caelen approached, the stillness fell from her, and she turned to face him, her gaze hard and her arms crossing over her chest. Her fiery curls blew in the wind, dancing around her face, teasing the stoic expression she seemed to cling to with every fiber of her being. Yet in her green eyes, Caelen saw a spark of longing, desperate and overwhelming. Still, the muscles in her neck tensed, twitched, as she steeled herself.

Hope grew in Caelen's heart as he found her not as immune to him as he had feared. Clearly, she had not expected to find him here, perhaps because her heart, too, grew weak whenever he was near?

"What are ye doing here?" Yvaine snapped, her eyes shooting fire. "Ye're not supposed to be here. Ye were not supposed to follow me." Her jaw tensed, and she lifted her chin a fraction.

Caelen exhaled a deep breath, watching her carefully. "Ye left without me," he observed, his voice free of accusation. "Why?"

Pressing her lips into a thin line, Yvaine shook her head, then she retreated a step. "It doesn't matter. Ye shouldn't be here," she said again, as though needing to remind herself of it.

"I willna leave," Caelen stated calmly, encouraged by the slight tremble to her lips. "I willna leave without answers." He took a step toward her, and she almost flinched. "I need ye to tell me true. If I am to let ye go, I deserve to ken why 'tis ye canna stay and where 'tis ye're going."

Shaking her head, Yvaine backed away. "Ye wouldna understand. Ye wouldna believe me." She nodded toward the path he had come down to the shoreline. "Go back. Now."

"No. Not without answers." Holding her gaze, he approached, wondering what made her so fearful. Was she truly uncertain? Afraid to be swayed from her path? Caelen knew what that felt like, for she had done the same to him. Life was no longer straightforward, his only concern the well-being of his clan. Nay, from one moment to the next, his focus had shifted, and Caelen remembered a moment of anger to have the certainty of what path was his to walk snatched away.

Heaving a deep breath, Caelen sought her gaze. “Ye agreed to marry Chief Morganach,” he said, surprising even himself. “Did ye not?” His brows rose in challenge.

Caught off guard, her fierce expression faltered. “What? I...” She swallowed, and a touch of suspicion came to her eyes. Aye, she knew why he was asking this, what it was he wanted to hear, and she did not care for it.

Not now.

Not when she struggled to keep him at bay.

Caelen rejoiced, seeing her falter. “Why did ye agree to marry him?” he asked, inching closer, his gaze daring her to lash out at him, to rant and yell and accuse him of stealing her heart. Aye, he had, had he not?

Yvaine swallowed hard, her jaw set in defiance. “To save yer life,” she replied, yet her hands tightened upon her upper arms. “Ye saved my life when ye disregarded yer father’s order to kill me. I only meant to return the favor.”

Caelen chuckled. “Liar!” he growled, and still, the smile upon his face would not wane for every spark of anger in her green eyes delighted him. “Tell me true! Why did ye sacrifice yerself to save me?”

Her eyes became frantic, narrowed into slits, as she desperately searched for something to say, for some reason that would keep him away; Caelen could see it upon her face. “For the same reason, ye saved me... because ’twas the right thing to do.”

Caelen remained still for a long moment before he then moved with sudden speed, bridging the distance between them, and settling his hands upon her shoulders.

Yvaine gasped, struggling to free herself, but Caelen would not release her, his hands holding her in place, his gaze seeking hers. “I saved ye,” he murmured, overcome by a sudden longing when she lifted her chin and suddenly met his eyes, “because I canna bear the thought of ye dead, lass. I saved ye because... though I didna ken it at the time... I care for ye.” He exhaled a deep breath, relief flooding his body as it had the night before when he had confessed his love to her. “Ye stole my heart, lass, and ye have it still.”

Although she kept her lips pressed together tightly, they quivered with emotion as she stared up at him, her head slowly shaking from side to side as though the movement could negate his words. “Nay, ye canna... I...” Her eyes closed, and she hung her head, misery marking her features. “It canna be,” she murmured, then she rested her forehead against his chest, all fight leaving her body. “It canna be. Not now. We canna...” Her gaze returned to him, and the longing and sadness in her eyes was so intense that it pierced his heart. “Nay, ye have to let me go.” She jerked back, steel coming to her eyes as she fought her way out of his embrace. “I dunna belong here. We... We can never be.”

Frustration roared in Caelen’s heart at her denial, and without another thought, he yanked her back against his chest. One arm wrapped around her while his other hand grasped her chin, tilting it upward so she would look at him. “Tell me true,” he growled, and she shivered as his breath fanned over her lips, “do ye *want* me to go?” His gaze drilled into hers. “Dunna lie, lass, or I swear I’ll...” He gritted his teeth, uncertain what he would do, yet knowing that it would kill him all the same.

Doubt and temptation mingled in Yvaine’s eyes, giving him hope, as he tightened his grip upon her chin.

“Do ye *want* me to go?” he asked again, his voice so low he could barely hear it.

An eternity passed as they stared at one another, the sound of the rolling waves echoing to their ears, wrapping them in a cocoon of solitude, as though the rest of the world no longer existed.

As though it no longer mattered.

And then finally, Yvaine spoke. It was no more than one word. A soft gasp. Barely audible. There one moment and carried away by the wind the next. “Nay.”

It was all Caelen had needed to hear. His lips claimed hers in a fierce kiss, a kiss that lit a fire in his soul, erasing every last doubt, making him certain that this was it.

That she was the one.

That he would never let her go.

Chapter Twenty-Five

TRUTH BE TOLD



The kiss was full of passion and longing, Caelen's hands moving from her chin to cup her face as he deepened the kiss. Yvaine found herself melting into his touch, her senses overwhelmed by the feel of his lips against hers. His breath was hot and sweet as it mingled with her own, sending shivers down her spine. Every fiber of her being begged for more, and she felt herself responding to his kiss with a passion that she had not even known she possessed.

The waves crashed against the shore behind them, a reminder of their fragility in the face of such an immense force. But in that moment Yvaine felt invincible, like nothing could ever tear them apart. Time seemed to stand still as they kissed, their souls connecting in a way she had never experienced before—and neither had he, she supposed. There was something magical about it, something that transcended mere physicality and connected them on a much deeper level.

When they finally broke apart, their eyes met and held. Caelen smiled down at her, then he gently brushed a strand of hair from her face before pressing his forehead against hers. "Ye are mine now," he whispered softly.

Yvaine wanted to nod in agreement, her heart urging her to take this gift and offer the same in return. Then, though, reality

set in, and instead of pressing another tender kiss to Caelen's lips, Yvaine shoved him away. "Nay, I'm not, and I canna be yers... right now." She swallowed hard. "Ye have to let me go and perhaps one day..."

Yvaine's heart broke when she saw the destroyed expression upon Caelen's face. He stared at her with wide eyes, disbelief etched into his features. His resolve, though, did not wane; Yvaine could see it in the fierce glimmer that rested in his eyes.

Before he could speak, though, Yvaine straightened, afraid of what he would say, afraid of what it would do to her own resolve. "Ye had no right to come here, no right to ruin everything." She pressed her lips into a tight line and glared at him. "This is my choice, not yers. I told ye from the start that I wanted nothing more than to return home, yet ye wouldna hear me." She shook her head and lifted her chin in defiance, trying to make him understand that he had to let her go. "Ye needa leave. I... I want ye to leave."

For a long moment, Caelen simply looked at her, and Yvaine could not tell what he was thinking, his expression strangely guarded. Then he moved closer, ignoring her harsh words. "Ye feel something for me," he whispered, his voice low and passionate and deeply compelling, "something strong. Ye canna deny that. So, tell me, why ought I not have come? And be honest." His brows rose in challenge, making it unmistakably clear that he would not walk away, not without answers.

Yvaine's heart raced as she spun around and strode away from Caelen and toward the water's edge. She stared out to the horizon, the rhythmic movement of the waves almost hypnotic, offering to carry her mind elsewhere. And Yvaine

was tempted, her heart desperate to escape this moment. Yet if she did so, she would never be at peace. Truth be told, she had never felt such an intense connection to another soul before. Aye, what Caelen had said was true; she could not deny that. Yet she knew, deep down, that she needed to be brave and return home. Her place was not here, but far away with a family who loved her and missed her. They deserved to know that she was alive. She could not abandon them to the constant heartache of not knowing what had happened to her.

“Yvaine, please,” Caelen murmured, suddenly standing behind her, his voice so close she could feel the soft teasing of his breath against her skin. His body’s warmth reached out to her, enveloped her, standing against the chill of fear. “Ye canna expect me to go. At least, not like this. Not knowing why.” His hands settled upon her shoulders, and Yvaine had to fight the urge to lean into him.

“Ye must go,” she repeated firmly, her eyes still fixed upon the horizon, not daring to look at him. “This canna happen. I needa return home, and ye canna come.”

Caelen’s hands slipped down her arms and then grasped her hands, gently spinning her around to face him. “What is home?” he asked, his voice full of emotion as his blue eyes looked deep into hers. “What are ye running from?”

Yvaine shook her head, surprised. “I’m not running from anything. I am not.”

Caelen regarded her shrewdly then noted, “If that is so, then why do ye insist on leaving.”

“Because I dunna belong here,” Yvaine huffed, her mind overwhelmed and her heart all but useless in this argument, for it seemed to work against her. “This is not my—” She clamped

her lips shut before she could say too much. “I needa return home. I have a family and a place where I can be who I am.”

Caelen nodded, his gaze still watchful, trailing over her features as though he expected to discover the answer he sought at any moment. “Ye said so before, many times,” he murmured, his voice gentle. “Yet ye’ve never told me how that is possible. Ye speak of the Fey Isle as yer home, yet I ken that no one lives there.” He searched her eyes, begging her to answer him. “There is nothing there but ruins. Ye ken that. Ye’ve been there.” He shrugged, shaking his head in incomprehension. “Please, if there’s something ye ken, share it with me.”

Yvaine bowed her head, tears stinging her eyes. “Ye willna believe me,” she said quietly. “Ye canna.”

For a moment, Caelen seemed to move not a single muscle. Then, though, he reached out a hand and gently grasped her chin, forcing her to look up at him. He waited patiently until she finally opened her eyes, daring to meet his. “Try me.”

Yvaine swallowed hard, tempted to let the words fly off her tongue. She had kept the secret for so long, that the mere thought of sharing it with another felt liberating. Yet what if he did not believe her? What if he thought her insane? Or worse? Would he keep his word if she told him—whether he believed her? Fear grew in her heart that her words would stir up anger within his, that he would continue to stand in her way, robbing her of every chance to return to the island. She had come so far, finding the coast despite her unfamiliarity with these lands. Aye, without Catriona, Yvaine knew, she would never have succeeded. She still wondered who that woman was, where she had come from, and how she knew all the things she

did. Yet deep down, Yvaine felt certain that these were questions that would never find answers.

“There are no people on that island,” Caelen remarked; as always, though, his tone held a question.

“But there will be,” Yvaine replied without thinking, unable to deny the existence of all those she held dear. “There will be.”

Caelen frowned. “What do ye mean?”

Closing her eyes, Yvaine bowed her head, knowing that she did not have the strength to keep Caelen at bay for much longer. He was relentless, and he was right: he truly deserved to know.

Retreating a few steps, Yvaine then opened her eyes and looked at Caelen, holding his gaze, every inch of her trembling. “I dunna belong here,” she repeated, wondering if there was any way to ease him into this. “’Tis not the place I dunna belong to... but the time.”

A slight frown creased Caelen’s forehead, and yet he did not say a word. He simply waited for her to continue.

“I’m not quite certain how it happened,” Yvaine murmured, no longer seeing Caelen, her mind drifting back to the day everything had changed. “I was exploring the island as I had so many times before. I found a path through the rock; it had been hidden by thick brambles. I followed it to the water’s edge and then...” Even now, a mesmerized smile claimed her features as she remembered the shimmering glow of the cobblestone path below the water’s surface. “I grew up with the tales of the sea serpent that was rumored to guard the island. My grandmother often spoke of it when we sat around the fire in the evenings. She knew how to paint vivid images

of its shimmering scales, hidden just below the surface, unseen, undetected, but there nonetheless.” She smiled, blinked and once again met Caelen’s eyes.

Caelen nodded, not disbelief but understanding upon his features. “I heard it as well,” he murmured, a wistful expression upon his face now. “Before she died, my mother used to speak to me of it. I was only a wee lad, but I remember that it was said to live in a cave underneath the water, ensuring ships would not reach the island.”

“Aye, ’tis said to protect the people of the Fey Isles,” Yvaine replied, hearing a faint echo of her grandmother’s voice. She took a step toward him, wondering if he was prepared to have one of the ancient tales destroyed by reality’s truth. “I saw it. Only ’tis not truly a snake. ’Tis a path built beneath the water’s edge, a path that leads out of the bay and onto a small island hidden behind high cliffs.”

Caelen’s gaze narrowed, and Yvaine knew that he was intrigued.

“I dunna ken how it came to be there, who built it; yet I followed it to that small island, a place I’d never been before. My mind kept turning with why it was there, why anyone had gone to such lengths to build it simply to reach a small speck of land that held nothing special.” She heaved a deep sigh, finding it surprisingly easy to speak the words and reveal all that lived in her memories. “I searched it for hours until I found a hidden trap door. It led me underground and into a small cavern.” Shivers raced over her skin at the memory of the small pool of water in its center. It had almost seemed alive, reaching out to her, beckoning her forward.

Yvaine blinked, and all of a sudden Caelen stood by her side, his hands upon her shoulders and his blue eyes wide with

concern. “Are ye all right?” he inquired, seeking her gaze. “For a moment there, ye seemed...” He shook his head, at a loss for words.

Yvaine heaved a deep sigh, knowing she could not back down now. He had to know. She had to say it. For both their sakes. “I dunna quite ken what ’twas,” she admitted, remembering that the water had not quite felt like water at all. “There was something there, at its center. It looked like a puddle, an indentation in the ground filled with water, and yet it seemed to glow as though a light lay beneath. I kneeled down to touch it and then...” She shook her head, wishing she could remember. At that point, her memories grew hazy as though reality had shifted, changed in a way her mind had been unable to absorb.

“And then?” Caelen prompted gently, his hands still upon her shoulders, holding her close, offering comfort.

“And then I was here,” Yvaine replied with a helpless shrug. “Here. In this time.” Her gaze swept over her surroundings, so similar to the home she remembered and yet so far away.

“This time?” Caelen echoed, incomprehension marking his voice. “What do ye mean?”

Yvaine chuckled. She could not help it. She remembered the first time she had met Catriona, remembered what the young woman had told her. Yvaine, too, had echoed these words in disbelief. After all, people traveled from place to place, yet they did not travel from time to time. Not in an abrupt way, at least.

Gathering all her courage, Yvaine looked into Caelen’s eyes and then said, “Ye didna see anyone on the island because people dunna live there yet. However, they will in the future.

That is where I belong. In the future with my people.” The moment the last word left her lips, Yvaine held her breath. She could not avert her eyes, her gaze fixed upon Caelen’s face. Terror surged through her as an icy chill sent goosebumps all over her skin.

Aye, she loved him and if he were to turn away from her now, it would break her heart.

Chapter Twenty-Six

THE LAST PIECE



Caelen stared at Yvaine. Her words echoed through his mind, and he saw the sincerity upon her face. Yet at the same time, his thoughts felt slow to catch up, to draw meaning from what he had heard and put together a comprehensive image. “The future,” he murmured, slowly becoming aware that she was holding her breath, fear lingering in her emerald green eyes, fear that he would not believe her.

As little as Caelen knew about Yvaine, he knew her to be a strong and confident woman. She spoke her mind and was wont to make decisions that challenged everything he thought he knew. In many ways, she was dauntless, always pushing the limits, speaking of a changed world he could only imagine. Aye, she knew fear, and yet she refused to be hobbled by it.

It was that more than any explanation Yvaine could have given that made Caelen believe her. He certainly did not understand, but he knew that she would not lie to him. “How?” he asked with a frown, trying his utmost to wrap his mind around what she had told him.

A deep breath rushed from Yvaine’s lungs, and for a moment, Caelen feared she would faint. Her face grew pale, and she closed her eyes, relief flooding her features. “Do ye... Do ye believe me?” She stared at him, shaking her head from

side to side. “I never once thought... that anyone could. After all, I... I barely believe it myself.”

“The day we found ye on the island...?” Caelen prompted, understanding that this secret had weighed heavily upon her; and now, finally, the time had come to share it. Caelen was glad that he was the one standing here with her.

Yvaine nodded. “Aye, ’twas the day I arrived here... in this time.” She paused, a slight frown creasing her forehead. “Nay, ’twas the second day. I had arrived the day before. I remember following a tunnel which led me to the ruins.” She closed her eyes, and deep sorrow appeared upon her features. “I couldna believe what I saw. I walked around, stepped over crumbled walls and around holes in the floor. Only earlier that morning, I’d been in the great hall, having breakfast with my family.” A disbelieving expression grasped her features, and she stared up at him as though hoping that he might provide her with an answer. “And then, it was all gone, destroyed as though long ago. I couldna believe my eyes, and my heart broke, thinking that something had... somehow...” She shrugged, unable to find the words to speak them.

Yet Caelen understood. He understood that she had thought her family lost to her, possibly killed in some sort of attack. Of course, she had not known then what she knew now. “Ye didna realize what had happened then, did ye?”

Yvaine shook her head, looking utterly forlorn.

“How then? What made ye realize it?”

She swallowed hard. “’Twas that woman,” she gasped, her breath now coming fast as though she were running. “I left the ruins behind and had walked around, trying to find something, someone. And then she was there, all of a sudden, as if out of nowhere.”

“Who was she?”

Yvaine shrugged. “I dunna ken. She said her name was Catriona, and that she had been waiting for me. I didna ken what she meant.” She scoffed. “How could I have? ’Twas all so unbelievable.”

Her hands began to tremble, and Caelen stepped forward, pulling her into his arms. He held her tightly, pressed to his chest, offering his warmth, his presence, his reassurance that she was not alone in this. As the waves rolled onto the beach, their soothing sound all that filled their ears, they simply stood there and breathed, allowing all that had been said to wash over them.

“She said,” Yvaine continued as she stood in his embrace, “that the Fey had sent me away to keep me safe and that I had now returned to set things right.”

Caelen frowned, a shiver tracing down his own back at the mention of the Fey. He had never quite believed in them, not since he had been a lad. They were otherworldly in a way he could not grasp. He had enjoyed the stories told about them, and yet they had never been more than that: stories. “The Fey?” He stepped back and looked down at Yvaine’s face. “Have ye seen them?”

Yvaine shook her head. “I have not. All I ken is what Catriona said, and I’m not quite certain if I should believe her. On the other hand, I am here.” A nervous chuckle fell from her lips. “’Tis not something easily explained, is it? I dunna ken how it happened. I wish I did. All I ken... is that I dunna belong here.” Tears misted her eyes as she looked up at him, and Caelen understood that saying so broke her heart. Aye, she cared for him as he cared for her, and yet admitting it would force an awful decision upon her. He understood that now.

“To set things right,” Caelen murmured, repeating her words. He sought her gaze then asked, “Did she say anything more? Do ye have any idea what it means?”

Yvaine’s eyes fell from his, and Caelen knew instantly that whatever it was she knew was something she did not wish to share.

And then something else echoed through Caelen’s mind: *the Fey had sent me away to keep me safe*. His thoughts reeled as he remembered all the rumors about Yvaine’s disappearance as a wee lassie, and he stared at her, shaking his head. “Ye went to a different time when ye disappeared as a wee lassie,” he murmured more to himself than her. Of course, she knew so. Yet he was only slowly putting all the pieces together. “That’s where ye’ve been all this time. Ye’ve been... in the future.”

Yvaine nodded. “Aye, I have. Only I didna ken it.”

“Ye never knew ye were from the past?”

Yvaine scoffed. “I was three years old. I barely remember anything. Most of what I remember is not truly a memory but simply the tales my family told me of what had happened.” She fixed him with a daring gaze. “How much do ye remember from when ye were three?”

Caelen chuckled, holding up his hands in appeasement. “I didna mean it as an accusation. ’Twas nothing but a question.” He offered her a smile, needing her to understand that he was not her enemy, that he was not doubting her words. “How did ye come to be with yer family?”

Yvaine shrugged. “One day, they simply found me. My father and eldest brother rode out one day and... stumbled upon me, all alone, starved and covered in mud.” She shook

her head, and her gaze became distant. “They searched everywhere, tried everything to find my parents, but they never could.” She blinked, and a scoff fell from her lips. “Of course, they couldna.” She sighed, a sigh that was not weighted down by sorrow but rather one that spoke of peace. “I became their daughter, and they loved me as though I had been born to them.” Tears misted her eyes. “I was happy, and I loved my life. Of course, I would occasionally think about my birth parents, wondering who they had been and how I had come to be there, all alone. I suppose ’tis only natural to be wondering about that. Yet I never wanted to be anywhere else. I felt in my heart that this is where I belonged.”

Caelen heaved a deep sigh, hearing the longing in her voice and the need to be reunited with her family. “Ye wished to return home,” he echoed the words she had said more than once. “Aye, I understand that now. I’m sorry I didna before.”

With a sigh, Yvaine reached out and touched her hand to his cheek, the gesture gentle and deeply touching. “Ye couldna have,” she murmured, smiling up at him. “I ken I didna make it easy for ye. I simply... I couldna tell ye because I feared that...” She shrugged helplessly.

Caelen nodded. “I understand. Truly, I do, and I dunna blame ye for not speaking to me sooner. ’Tis a lot to bear, to be suddenly ripped from yer home and find yerself among strangers. I canna imagine...”

His gaze held hers for a long time, and Caelen could feel them moving closer than they ever had been. Finally, he understood. Finally, he knew. He now saw sides of her that had lain hidden before while she had proof that there was nothing she could say that would make him turn from her. At least, Caelen hoped that she did.

“Did Catriona say what things ye are to set right?” Caelen asked tentatively, sensing that this was an area she did not wish to discuss. Still, he could not shake the feeling that it was of the utmost importance, that—as odd as it sounded—it concerned him as well.

As expected, Yvaine’s gaze once more fell from his, and Caelen could all but see the distance between them grow. “She didna.”

Caelen regarded her carefully. “She mightna have said so. Yet ye ken, do ye not?” His mind spun. “How do ye ken?”

Yvaine stepped away, her feet carrying her a little down the beach. She looked out toward the sea as though asking for advice, hoping for counsel. Then she turned back around and met his eyes. “I canna tell ye.”

Caelen frowned. “Why not?”

Biting her lower lip, Yvaine shook her head, something almost fearful in her gaze. “I simply canna. Please, leave it at that.”

Caelen shook his head, and then stepped into her path as she meant to walk by him. “What ye speak of concerns me, doesna it?” He held her gaze, and she looked at him defiantly. “Catriona told ye that ye were brought back to set something right, here, in *my* time.” Indeed, the word sounded odd upon his tongue. “That is something that concerns me.” He grasped her shoulders, urging her to look at him, to reveal what lay buried in her mind. “What are ye to set right? Is it about my clan? About...?” He paused as his mind raced. “The feud,” he murmured, then he all but stumbled back, his hands falling from her shoulders as he stared at her. “Ye’re here because of the feud, are ye not? After all, ye’re the MacLeòir’s daughter,

spirited away to safety because ye were meant to return one day... to ensure peace?"

Yvaine hung her head. Then with an exasperated sigh, she shook it from side to side. "Nay, there will be no peace between our clans. Never." Regret shone in her eyes, and yet, there was something there that...

Something else.

Caelen's eyes narrowed. "How do ye ken?" he questioned, his heart thundering in his chest at the sudden revelation. "How can ye possibly ken?" He paused. "Of course, ye're from the future. My time is yer past." He sought her gaze. "There must be some sort of record of what happens here, detailing how the feud continues... and how it ends?"

Clenching her hands, Yvaine lifted her chin then reluctantly met his gaze. "There will be no peace. Neither one of our fathers is willing to take that risk. They would rather fight and destroy one another." Bitterness swung in her voice, and Caelen knew that she felt as disheartened and furious about this as he did. "In my time, our clans no longer exist."

Caelen reeled from that admission. It felt as though someone had driven an iron fist into his stomach. He almost doubled over in pain, his knees suddenly weak as he stared at her in disbelief. "It canna be," he stammered, thinking of all the many times he had spoken to his father as well as his uncle, urged them both to consider a different path. Yet they had always refused, and from the few times Caelen had crossed paths with Yvaine's father, he knew the same could be said for him as well.

"'Tis true," Yvaine confirmed, her voice soft and apologetic. "I'm so sorry, Caelen. I wish it were different. Yet

the stories tell that the two clans destroy one another, that they shall never rise again.”

Bracing his hands upon his knees, Caelen closed his eyes, fighting the black void that threatened to engulf him. He could barely breathe, his mind spinning, trying to find something, anything, to hold onto. And then, he found it. “Stories?” he murmured, looking up at her. “What stories?”

Instantly, Yvaine’s guard went up, the expression upon her face once more troubled and yet terrified at the same time. She took a step back and shook her head. “It doesna matter. I—”

“It doesna matter?” Caelen snapped, his patience running out, his heart in an uproar as he stalked toward her. “Ye canna tell me that the end of my clan is near, and yet keep from me whatever else ye ken about it.” He stopped in front of her, his voice hard as he spoke next. “What stories do they tell in yer time about what happens here?”

“I canna tell ye,” Yvaine repeated, yet her voice sounded weaker now.

“Why not?”

“Because...” Her jaw clenched, the expression in her eyes almost frantic.

“Why not?” Caelen repeated, fighting to break through her defenses. Whatever it was she was keeping from him, it was important to the both of them. He was certain of it. It was something that plagued her, had been plaguing her for a while, and perhaps if she shared it with him, it would help her as well, ease her mind and soothe her heart.

“Because ’tis not true,” she snapped, fury blazing in her eyes, fury that hid something else, something far more

unsettling. “Because it canna be. The legend is wrong. There has to be some other sort of explanation.”

“Why do ye think so? What does it say?”

Thrusting her fingers into her hair, Yvaine sank to her knees, her eyes closed. “Because... Because if it is true,” she looked up, her green eyes were misted with tears and overshadowed by a deep sense of loss, “I canna go home.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

ONE'S PURPOSE



Yvaine felt like a piece of driftwood swept away by a strong current, unable to determine its own course, completely at the mercy of the waves. Her heart ached for her mother's embrace, for her father's reassuring counsel. More than anything, she wished to feel Duncan's protective hand upon her shoulder, ride across the fields with Keir by her side, or snuggle up beside the fire as Magnus read to her. She missed her grandmother's mischievously sparkling eyes, the way the old woman had always encouraged her to find her next adventure.

Aye, she had. Only now, Yvaine was uncertain whether she was strong enough to brave it. Every limb felt heavy, weighted down by a responsibility she had never asked for. Now, when she stood so close, her gaze traveling across the waves, her mind picturing MacKinnear Island in the distance, Caelen asked her to turn around.

Oh, he had not yet but Yvaine was certain that he would once he knew the truth.

Once he knew the legend.

"What does the story say happens?" Caelen prompted once more, impatience written all over his face. Yvaine could tell that he did not mean to pressure her, but his heart, too, was on

the line. He was fiercely protective of his clan, of his people, and he had tried for years to find some way to make peace, to ensure their safety. Of course, he wanted answers! Yvaine understood his need only too well. And what would he do once he knew the truth? Did it matter? Could she be selfish and not tell him?

Yvaine wished she could, and yet with each gaze into his eyes, she felt her resolve crumble, break away beneath her feet.

“If the Fey sent ye back here to right things,” Caelen murmured, and once more his hands reached out to grasp hers, “what are ye to do?”

Yvaine looked up into his eyes then shrugged. “I dunna ken, and that is the truth.” She sighed. “The legends are vague. They speak of conflict and betrayal. They speak of a peace summit that ends in bloodshed.” Caelen’s face paled, his hands tensing upon hers. “They say that out of the ashes of two warring clans a new one shall arise. Over there,” she nodded across the sea and toward the horizon, “upon MacKinneer Island.”

“MacKinneer Island?”

“That is my family,” Yvaine explained, memories warming her heart. “My true name is Yvaine MacKinneer, and I grew up on that island over there with my family, with my clan.” She smiled up at him, suddenly proud to share something incredibly wonderful. “’Tis our origin story. My people were not born to one another. Instead, they made the choice to be a family, to be a clan. They came from all over Scotland—aye, most came from the two warring clans. Yet over the years, more and more people joined, wishing for a brighter future, for a life that was theirs, for choices that were not taken from

them. Our home is a place of new beginnings where everyone is free to be who they are.” By the end, tears were streaming down Yvaine’s face and her heart ached more fiercely than it ever had before.

Caelen, too, appeared deeply touched, a glow in his eyes that spoke of longing and a deep desire to see what she spoke of realized. “It must be a wonderful place,” he murmured, cupping his large hands to her face, his thumbs gently brushing away her tears. “No wonder ye long to return.”

Yvaine smiled at him, grateful to have shared her story with him, to hear his joy for the existence of such a place, and she wished she could leave it at that. Yet even before Caelen spoke, Yvaine knew what he would ask.

“Are ye mentioned in those legends?”

Yvaine sighed. “Aye, I am. At least, I think I am.” She closed her eyes, remembering how much she had always loved these tales. Yet not even for a moment had she ever thought them to be a recounting of her own life. “The stories tell of a young woman who appears as though out of nowhere.”

Despite the sadness in his eyes, Caelen chuckled, his hand squeezing hers. “Ye have to admit it does sound like ye.”

“She appears as the clans threaten one another with war,” she murmured, seeing his expression fall, all humor leaving his eyes.

“Could she prevent it?”

Yvaine shook her head. “She... She spoke to the lairds and convinced them to hold the peace summit. Eventually, they agreed, and the clans came together to speak about the option of peace.”

A hopeful expression came to Caelen's face despite what she had told him beforehand. "And then?"

"There was a traitor among them," Yvaine went on, trying her best to recall every detail from the story she had heard. "He attacked at the summit, and fighting ensued. The clans once more turned against one another, and many lives were lost."

Caelen hung his head, his hand upon her shoulder suddenly heavy as though he needed her support to remain standing. "Do ye ken who the traitor was?" He raised his head and searched her eyes.

"The legends dunna say. I'm sorry."

With his lips pressed into a tight line, Caelen nodded. "What happens then?"

Yvaine bit her lower lip, then she pushed on, her hands trembling. "The woman... She led those willing to turn over a new leaf to the island, and all those tired of fighting, tired of losing those they loved followed her. The MacKinnear clan was born and thrived upon that island forever after."

Caelen's eyes had narrowed during her retelling, and Yvaine felt a cold shiver dance down her spine as he regarded her. "There's something ye're not saying," he remarked, the look in his eyes suddenly calculating. "Ye pause every so often as though... choosing yer words most carefully." He took a step toward her and his hands once more grasped hers, holding on tightly, not allowing her to escape. "Ye said if ye told me the truth, ye couldna go home." A question rested in his gaze.

"Am I wrong?" Yvaine demanded. "Will ye let me go even though now ye ken what will happen? Will ye not insist I stay and do my duty to yer clan, to mine, to the future?" Tears

burned in her eyes, and she closed them. “Aye, I am afraid that if I leave, there might be nothing for me to return to. And yet I canna believe that the life I had, the people I knew, could simply vanish from existence. It feels impossible.” She shook her head. “Nay, perhaps by changing the past, things will simply come about differently.” She made to turn away, but Caelen held onto her hands.

“Ye said a great deal,” he whispered, inching closer, his gaze lingering upon hers, “and yet I feel as though every word has been meant to keep me distracted, to keep me from asking the one question ye dunna wish to answer.”

Yvaine swallowed hard, willing her gaze not to falter. “Whatever ’tis ye wish to ken, ask it.”

Caelen regarded her for a long moment. “Am I mentioned in the legend?”

Yvaine flinched. She could not help it. Although she had steeled herself for his question, tensed every muscle in her body, it had still betrayed her... and Caelen had felt it. She could tell by the look in his eyes. “Aye, ye are,” she answered reluctantly.

He nodded, already having known. “Ye asked me once if there was a woman named Yvaine in my life, one who held my heart.” His brows rose questioningly.

“I did,” was all Yvaine dared to say.

“Why?” Caelen inquired, the ghost of a smile teasing his lips, as though he already knew what she was trying to keep hidden, as though a part of him was already rejoicing at the knowledge. “Do the legends tell of a great love between Yvaine and Caelen? Are ye afraid that we are them?”

Yvaine swallowed. “Aye,” she whispered, shaken to her core by the look in Caelen’s eyes.

“And it frightens ye because...?” He grinned at her—the scoundrel! “Because ye dunna love me... or because ye do?”

Yvaine groaned at his direct question, jerking her hands from his. She spun away, quick steps carrying her down the beach, her mind racing, perhaps seeking to outrun her thundering heart. After all, she did not want to know the answer to that question—not yet. Not even knowing if it was the fear of loving him or simply fear of what their love could bring about that had her running scared. How could she know such a thing when she herself did not understand any of what was happening?

Yet as Yvaine moved farther away from Caelen, she felt an unbearable longing wash over her—a longing for him and all he promised—love, comfort, and most of all hope. Hope that perhaps the legend of their people could still come true, that perhaps they were meant to be together after all.

Finally, Yvaine came to a stop, her feet unwilling to carry her any farther. She could run no more, not from herself or from him. Aye, if she left now, she would regret that decision for the rest of her life, would she not? Yvaine could not imagine it to be any different; yet at the same time, would she not feel the same if she never returned home? Was there a right decision? Was there a choice that would not see her heart broken? If only she knew whether the portal could be used at will—hers and not that of the Fey.

Slowly turning around, Yvaine made her way back to where Caelen stood waiting for her on the beach. Although the expression upon his face was tense, uncertainty in his gaze, he still stood where he had before, and Yvaine was grateful for it.

Somehow, despite their short acquaintance, he seemed to know her well, and it felt good to acknowledge it.

When, finally, they were face-to-face once more, Yvaine looked deep into his eyes and with a trembling voice asked: “Do ye think... Do ye think we could be...?” She straightened, annoyed that she could not seem to banish that flutter from her nerves. “Are we meant to be together?”

A slow smile spread over Caelen’s face, and it felt more reassuring than anything he could have said. “I dunna ken about *meant to be*,” he murmured softly, the expression in his eyes steady and whispering off a conviction Yvaine wished she felt herself. “All I ken is that I want us to be together.” He heaved a deep breath full of longing and fear. “The thought of ye leaving...” He swallowed hard, shaking his head, anguish marking his features. “I was afraid I wouldna reach ye in time. Somehow, I knew if ye were to reach the island, ye would be lost to me for good.”

The trembling sensation returned to Yvaine’s limbs, and yet it felt different this time. The flutter was not one born out of anxiety, of doubt; instead, it felt warm and teasing and comforting. “What is it ye want?”

“Ye,” Caelen said simply. “I want ye. Here. With me. For always.” He shrugged helplessly, an almost apologetic expression upon his face. “Ye’re the one. I knew it from the first moment we met. Not one day has passed that I didna think of ye, that I didna wish ye were here with me. I dunna ken if that is the will of the Fey, and truth be told, I dunna care.” His hands reached out and cupped her face gently, his deep blue eyes sending chills across her skin as they looked into hers. “All my life, I’ve lived for my clan. Every choice I’ve made has been for them. They deserve my loyalty and

support, and I hold no regrets.” He sighed deeply, and she could feel the soft touch of his breath against her lips. “Now, though, for once, I simply wish to walk my own path, not that of my clan. I’m simply Caelen, a man, who finds himself rather unexpectedly swept off his feet by a most unusual woman.” He grinned at her mischievously.

Yvaine chuckled, delighting in the lightness that had come to his voice. “I ken what ye speak of,” she murmured, her hands moving to settle upon his chest, grasping him by the collar of his shirt and giving a soft hug. “I’m tired of it. I’m so tired of thinking all the time, of considering every angle, wondering if one wrong step might doom everyone.” The words simply burst from her lips, and it felt good to speak them out loud. “I never asked to be the Yvaine who lives in the legends of old. I never wanted that responsibility. I simply want to be me. I want to do as I please. I want to be able to seize the moment and follow my heart.” Indeed, in this very moment, it was pounding in her chest as though it had finally woken up from a long slumber, its beats strong and determined.

“What is it that ye want?” Caelen inquired, that teasing expression still in his eyes as though neither one of them had a care in the world. “Which moment do ye wish to seize?”

Yvaine laughed, for clearly he had a moment in mind, more precisely this very one. And so, Yvaine complied, her heart most willing and her spirit for once not rebelling. “Ye are a most awful person, Caelen MacCarraig,” she murmured as she tugged him closer, his lips now no more than a hair’s breadth away from her, “which, I must say, makes ye a perfect fit for me.”

And with that, Yvaine closed the distance between them and kissed Caelen, their eager lips meeting and molding together as if they had done this a thousand times before. She savored the taste of his breath mingled with hers, and felt an almost electric connection that bound them in ways she could not explain. She clung to him desperately and time seemed to stand still around them. His hands were strong on her body, caressing her curves tenderly with each passing second, and their hearts raced in perfect rhythm, like two parts becoming one.

A rumble of thunder echoed in the distance, warning of an approaching storm, and as they stepped apart, their eyes traced the sky, dark clouds had gathered above them. “We should find shelter,” Caelen said softly as he took Yvaine’s hand into his own. “Come with me?”

Yvaine loved the tentative question in his eyes. She squeezed his hand in silent reply then allowed him to lead her down the beach.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

REMINISCING



Caelen delighted at the feel of Yvaine's hand within his own. It was the simplest of touches, and yet it moved him to the depths of his soul. It spoke of trust and longing, of faith and hope. Although strong, Yvaine was above all a most stubborn woman. It was a realization he would not quite yet say to her face, for he supposed she would not take kindly to it. However, it simply meant that he truly knew her, knew all the little nooks and crannies of her soul, all those little things that made her who she was. She liked to lead, to choose our own path and walk it without ever bowing her head, and so Caelen knew that handing this decision over to him was a sign he had hoped for since the day they met.

Sweeping his gaze down the beach and over the tall cliffs that lined it, Caelen remembered coming here as a lad with Fergus and Lachlan. Often, they had camped here with his father and uncle as well as other MacCarraig warriors, gazing out to sea, contemplating the Fey Isles and the meaning they might hold. Aye, a little farther along, Caelen remembered there to be a small cave, one that did not flood with the tide.

With Yvaine's hand held tightly within his own, Caelen tugged her along, laughing as they went. The rain started then, fat drops plummeting from the sky, urging them into a run. The growl of thunder seemed to follow them, and as Caelen

turned to look over his shoulder, whistling for their horses to follow, lightning cut across the sky.

“Quick!” Yvaine called in delight, a wide smile upon her face as she lifted her face to the heavens. Her hand slipped from his then, and she began to spin in circles, a carefree moment if Caelen ever saw one. Indeed, she was radiant as the rain poured down on her, darkening the fiery red of her tresses and sending tears down her cheeks. At the same time, she seemed to glow like the sun, stronger than ever, her spirit undaunted.

Finally, they found the rocky outcropping that hid the entrance to the cave, and Caelen swiftly unsaddled their horses. He spoke softly as he rubbed their noses, then he took off his own saddle bag and set it aside. Yvaine moved quickly, her movements efficient but gentle as she gathered stones from around the opening and crafted a neat fire pit. She hummed quietly as she unloaded the small rations of bread and cheese Caelen had brought, her face softening with relief at the thought of a warm fire.

The storm raged outside, but within the cave was a safe haven. Laughter and love surrounded them as they shared a simple meal then cleared away their things. Caelen watched Yvaine, unable to tear his eyes from her, entranced by the smallest things she did: the way her fingers would every so often move to tug an unruly curl behind her ear, the small grunt that fell from her lips when the stopper on the water bag would not yield. Every moment seemed precious, and Caelen felt tempted to commit them all to memory.

“Ye’re staring at me,” Yvaine remarked chidingly without even looking up.

Caelen chuckled. “How would ye ken? Do ye happen to have eyes in the back of yer head?”

She shrugged and rose to her feet, her bright green eyes teasing. “Perhaps. How would ye ken?”

Caelen crossed the cave to her side, the fire’s warmth reaching out to him. “I never saw any,” he remarked, his arm circling around her as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

Yvaine smiled as she leaned against his chest, her own arms wrapping tightly around his waist as he held her close. It felt like they were finally safe from all of life’s troubles. There was something utterly comforting about being tucked away inside this little nook together.

For a long time, they stood arm in arm, watching the rain pour down outside the cave’s mouth. The sky was all but black, swaying shadows streaking across it whenever lightning flashed. And yet the warmth of the fire made them feel safe and comforted, its gently flickering flames a calming force against the harsh brightness of the lightning.

“Will ye tell me of yer home?” Caelen murmured, his chin resting upon the top of Yvaine’s head as they stood with their arms still slung around one another. “Will ye tell me of yer family?” He could not deny that he was most curious and rather certain that it would do her good to speak about those she loved. Yet at the same time, he could only hope that it was not too soon. Would she cringe away from him now?

Indeed, Caelen detected a tensing of her muscles, yet it passed quickly before she moved to step back to look up at him. Sadness lingered in her eyes, and yet the smile upon her face gave Caelen hope. “What would ye like to ken?”

Caelen shrugged. “Anything. Everything.” He hugged her close one last time and then took her hand and led her closer to the fire. There, they settled down, his arm around her shoulders and her head resting against his chest. “Whatever comes to mind.”

Yvaine sighed deeply, her gaze fixed upon the dancing flames, before she pulled his arms tight around her, snuggling close. “My mother loves being outdoors,” she began softly, her voice distant, wistful, and mesmerized. “Yet not quite like I do.” She chuckled, and all of a sudden, the words seemed to flow forth with more ease. “She has an immense garden that she tends to every day. Rain or sunshine, that is where ye find her. Whenever people say something canna be done, something simply willna grow in our climate, she finds a way.” Pride rang in her voice, and Caelen closed his eyes, imagining the woman who had raised Yvaine, who had been her mother for all intents and purposes. “I think I’ve never seen her without a smudge of dirt somewhere on her. Father often teases her that even on their wedding day she had dirt underneath her fingernails.”

Caelen found himself captivated by Yvaine’s storytelling, his mind and heart straining to imagine the people she spoke off and the life she had lived. “And yer parents? They love one another?”

Craning her neck to look up at him, Yvaine smiled broadly. “Fiercely and completely,” she replied without a moment’s hesitation. Then her smile slowly dimmed, and a faraway expression came to her eyes. “One day—I was perhaps five or six years old—a wee lassie from the village didna return home by nightfall. I remember everyone searching for her, torches dotting the landscape as I stood up in my chamber in the castle. I could see far and wide, and ’twas as though the stars

had fallen to the earth.” She sighed, and then her eyes blinked, and she saw him again. “I had no idea my parents were out searching as well.” She chuckled affectionately. “Mrs. Murray knew well how to keep us distracted. She’s the housekeeper of Castle MacKinnear... and the heart and spirit of our people. Sometimes, she seems as old as time itself.”

Caelen grinned. “She sounds like a fascinating woman.”

“Aye, she is.” The longing expression upon Yvaine’s face deepened, and Caelen wondered what it felt like to have such strong bonds to people, knowing you might never see them again.

“My mother returned late from the search,” Yvaine continued as she settled back into Caelen’s arms. “We were all downstairs in the great hall, waiting for her. Father was pacing up and down in front of the fireplace. My brothers kept themselves busy with... one thing or another.” Her forehead furrowed as she tried to recall. “And then Mother stepped across the threshold, and Father rushed toward her, grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a shake. He growled at her, demanding where she had been, why she was home so late.” Yvaine heaved a deep breath, and yet it spoke not of fear or pain but rather of something beautiful. “I had been about to throw myself into my mother’s arms when I stopped. I was confused seeing my father like this. He never raises his voice, never growls at people, never speaks unkindly. I was stunned to see them like this, and at the time, I didn’t understand why.”

“He had been afraid for her,” Caelen murmured in her ear, imagining such a situation where he did not know if Yvaine was well or not, and it sent a cold shiver down his back. “He had been afraid that something might have happened to her.”

Yvaine nodded. “Aye. Only I didna understand then. I was frightened of him in that moment. Keir saw me flinch and pulled me aside to explain.”

“Yer brother?”

“Aye.” For a moment, she remained quiet, her fingers toying with a strand of her long hair. “Ye dunna have brothers, do ye?”

“Nay, only a sister. Gwyneth.” His thoughts briefly drifted to her, and he hoped that she was all right, wondering what might be happening in their absence.

“I never had a sister,” Yvaine murmured absentmindedly. “Though I often wondered what it might be like.” She chuckled. “Having three brothers, though, all older than myself—mind ye!—is quite a challenge, I can assure ye.” She craned her neck to look at him, and a beaming smile rested on her features. “Ye have no idea how insufferably condescending older brothers can be, always thinking they ken better, always reminding me to be careful, always urging me to reconsider and choose the wiser path.” She rolled her eyes in annoyance.

Caelen chuckled. “I bet ye were quite the handful as a wee sister.”

“Hey!” Yvaine exclaimed in mock outrage, slapping him on the shoulder. “Whose side are ye on?”

“Yers,” he replied laughing. “Always yers.” His arms wrapped around her, pulling her against his chest, and he pressed his cheek to hers, enjoying the feel of her lying back in his arms. “I shall forever remain on yer side. Promise.”

“Good.” Her fingers twined with his. “And what of ye? Will ye tell me of yer life also?”

Caelen sighed. “What do ye wish to ken?”

For a moment, Yvaine remained quiet, the tip of her right forefinger tracing patterns across his forearm. “Are ye close with yer father?”

Resting his chin on Yvaine’s shoulder, Caelen exhaled a deep breath. “I was once, as a lad. I used to look up at him and see this tall, brave... good man.” Memories flooded his mind of the many happy moments of his childhood, each one laced with a touch of sadness. “He often made time for me even when he was busy with the council, with clan business. He taught me how to fight, and more than that, he taught me when *not* to take a life.” His arms tightened upon Yvaine as he remembered the moment his father had ordered him to kill her. “I canna quite say when he changed. He never truly seemed... happy, even when he was with us. I always felt as though there was a part of him... that didna wish to be there.”

Yvaine had become still, her finger no longer tracing patterns upon his arm. “And what of yer mother? Did he love her?”

Caelen paused, trying his best to remember. “My mother died giving birth to Gwyneth. She was a kind and caring woman and a wonderful mother. I remember feeling safe with her when I was young. I remember feeling lost and frightened when she was suddenly gone.” He frowned, trying to recall moments of seeing his parents together, the same kind of moments Yvaine had just spoken of herself. “My father was never unkind to her, and I only ever saw them speak politely to another. But...” He shook his head. “Nay, they didna love one another.”

Again, an odd stillness came over Yvaine, and Caelen could not shake the feeling that her questions had been prompted by something.

Something specific.

Something more than mere curiosity.

“Why do ye ask?” he whispered beside her ear. “I feel as though... ye have a reason.”

After a moment of hesitation, Yvaine scooted away from him and then turned to look into his eyes. “Before I fled Morganach Castle, I spoke to my mother after observing something that... gave me pause, made me wonder.”

“What was it?” Caelen watched deep sorrow grow between her brows, her gaze distant as she thought back.

“After we spoke that night,” Yvaine began, a bit of a sheepish expression upon her face, “I knew I had to get away without delay. I knew I couldna wait, and so, I hastened along the corridors, trying to think of some way out of the castle. Only then I heard voices, voices I soon recognized to belong to my father... and yers.”

Caelen drew in a sharp breath. “What happened? Did they come to blows?” He shook his head, for he could not remember seeing any bruises on his father’s face the morning after.

“Nay, they didna. However, while I couldna understand the words they were saying, the way they growled at one another was quite unmistakable.”

“What does this have to do with yer mother?”

“I hid around a corner, only peeking at them, afraid they would take note. They did not, for they were too absorbed in their hatred of one another. However, *I* took note of another one hiding nearby.” She looked into his eyes, her brows rising meaningfully. “My mother.”

“She was watching them? Perhaps she was simply concerned for yer father. After all, their hatred for one another is not a secret.”

“I thought so at first, too,” Yvaine continued, and her hand grasped his as though she wished to offer comfort, knowing that what she was about to say would somehow unsettle him. “Then, though, I saw something I didna expect. Our fathers parted ways, each walking off in a different direction while my mother stayed where she was, her eyes trained not upon her own husband... but upon your father.”

Caelen frowned, feeling his heart thundering in his chest. Although the implication of Yvaine’s words was unmistakable, part of him refused to believe it. “Are ye saying... there’s something between them?”

Yvaine shook her head, her hands tightening upon his as she held his gaze. “I thought the same, and so I sought out my mother and asked her.”

“And?” Caelen could not quite say why, yet the answer to this question worried him. Yet why should it? He already knew that his parents had never loved one another, a circumstance that was far from unusual. After all, marriages were entered into for reasons other than love. Caelen knew that only too well.

As did Yvaine.

“She confessed that she cared for yer father, that there has been affection between them ever since they were children.” She sighed. “Perhaps that is part of the reason why our fathers hate each other so much. Perhaps... all the secrets we keep are not truly secrets at all. Somehow, the truth will always come out, and even if ’tis not revealed to all, those it concerns the most will learn of it.” Her hand squeezed his. “Hearing my

mother's story made me think of what Chief Morganach told us about how our clans once before tried to establish a union—two marriages to bind us together.” She shook her head, disapproval curling her lips. “People think they can find peace by forcing unions that are bound by nothing but a bit of ink on parchment. After all, our hearts are always true and honest, and although we may force them into obedience, we canna change them. Forced unions are a betrayal waiting to happen.”

Caelen nodded, seeing the wisdom in her words. Ever since the dawn of the clans, alliances had been sought between them, seeking peace and prosperity. Yet the way people had gone about it had been wrong; history had proved that time and time again, and yet people did not learn.

Silence fell over the little cave as Caelen and Yvaine snuggled down side by side, their thoughts consumed by all that had been and all that tomorrow might bring. The rain continued on, as the thunder and lightning drained away, their echo slowly fading into the night. Eventually, Yvaine fell asleep, her soft breathing mingling with the gentle crackling of the fire and the drumming of the rain. She looked peaceful, her eyes closed and her features relaxed. Her hand still held his, her head upon his shoulder and his arms enveloping her. They fit together nicely, perfectly even, and as Caelen drifted off to sleep the promise of forever lingered between them.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

ACCORDING TO LEGEND



Yvaine stirred as sunlight tickled her nose, and not quite ready to meet the world just yet, she moved to shield herself from its bright rays. Only her hand did not comply, her fingers entwined with something soft and warm and thrillingly familiar.

In an instant, Yvaine's eyes flew open, and the events of the past day and night returned in a flood of memories.

“Any regrets?” Caelen murmured from behind her, the whisper of his breath tickling her ear. “Are ye disappointed to find me here with ye?”

Yvaine chuckled, sensing an almost desperate need to hear her contradict him in his voice. “Not at all. I am grateful for yer warmth last night. Ye're better than a blanket.”

Caelen chuckled wickedly, then he leaned closer, his arms wrapping around her waist and drawing her against him. The sensation was strange yet immensely comforting, and Yvaine allowed herself a moment to indulge in the embrace before twisting around to face him.

“Any regrets?” Yvaine returned his question, searching his dark eyes as they lay so close that their breaths mingled into one. Aye, despite her initial resolve to keep Caelen away, she had let go of all reservations the night before and there was no

denying that the connection between them had remained strong even when morning light filtered through their cave. “Are ye disappointed to find yerself here with me?”

Caelen’s grip tightened around her waist, and he smiled gently down at her as if reading her mind.

“Of course not,” he whispered, his lips brushing against hers briefly before pulling back again. “I can think of no place I’d rather be.”

Yvaine’s heart did that little flutter again that she had come to expect whenever Caelen drew near. It felt unsettling and yet indescribably wonderful all at the same time. It made her question her choices, her path. It had made her stay.

But stay for good?

It was a question Yvaine did not dare address.

Perhaps later.

They both stayed silent for a while longer as Yvaine slowly allowed herself to sink into Caelen’s embrace. Only when hunger began to gnaw at their bellies did they draw apart. While Caelen stoked the fire, Yvaine saw to the horses, her mind whirling with what would happen next.

As they sat by the fire, their eyes turned down to the food in their hands, Caelen spoke up. “What now?” he asked simply, yet those two words were weighed down by so much that Yvaine felt her shoulders slump.

“I dunna ken,” she murmured and lifted her gaze to meet his eyes. “I want two different things, and yet I ken I canna have them both.” She shrugged. “What would ye do?”

Caelen hung his head, raking a hand through his disheveled hair. “Perhaps I’m not the right person to give ye

advice.” He offered her small grin. “After all, I am biased. I want ye to stay.”

Yvaine smiled, touched by the simplicity of his declaration. “I want to stay with ye as well, and yet...” She set down her food and threw up her hands. “I keep picturing my family, not knowing where I am or what happened to me. Do they think me dead?” Tears misted in her eyes as she imagined her parents’ heartbreak. “Even if I could never see them again, at least, I wish I could somehow let them know that I am well.”

Caelen frowned. “Do ye suppose there is a way to send a message instead... of a person?”

Yvaine shrugged then rose to her feet, her limbs suddenly buzzing with energy, with the need to do something. “How would I ken? The only person who seems to ken anything about this is the one who only shows up whenever she wishes. I dunna think I could even find her if I tried.” She paced to the mouth of the cave, her gaze sweeping over the calm seas and the bright blue sky, once more untouched after last night’s storm.

“Do ye think ye could,” Caelen began tentatively as he rose to his feet and made his way to her, “go back to yer family, explain to them what happened, and then return here?”

Hearing her own thoughts echoed back to her, Yvaine stared at him. “Truth be told, I dunna ken. Yet... ’tis what I thought to do when I left. I hoped... I hope that ’tis possible. Yet perhaps ’tis not. Perhaps... I canna even go back. Perhaps what Catriona said is true. I am meant to be here, to right things, and so I canna leave. Or I can go back and then canna return. How would I ken? I’m not even certain if ’twas the pool of water that brought me here. I simply assume that ’tis

because from what I remember it makes the most sense. Yet I have no definite answers. Perhaps she does.”

“Let’s find her,” Caelen replied as he grasped her hands, holding them safely within his own. “After all, she came to ye before. Perhaps she’s always nearby, watching, ready to interfere should ye need her.”

“Only if that is true, then she kens that I dunna truly need her, and she willna reveal herself.” She heaved a deep breath, again feeling that heavy weight upon her shoulders. “Perhaps the only way for me to go home is to do what she wants me to do.”

The expression upon Caelen’s face changed, grew tense. “Ye speak of the clans? Of the peace summit?”

Yvaine nodded reluctantly.

“But why? Did ye not say it failed? That it ended in bloodshed?”

Yvaine withdrew her hands. “Aye, I did. I ken what the legend says. I grew up with it after all. Yet what else can we do? Do ye think that... we, at least, have to try?”



Caelen remained quiet for a long moment. “The true question is,” he murmured, “if we are meant to change what happened according to legend or to ensure that everything plays out exactly like it.” His expression darkened, and sorrow overshadowed his eyes. “Perhaps it has to happen.” He closed his eyes and hung his head. “I canna believe I’m saying this, but perhaps our clans must die in service of a brighter future. If they dunna, this fighting will never end.”

Speechless, Yvaine stared at him. “Do ye truly mean this?”

Caelen shrugged, a helpless expression upon his face. “How am I to ken what is right? I’ve tried for years to make a difference, to bring about change, and what good has it done?” Looking suddenly exhausted, he shook his head. “Perhaps it simply canna be done.”

“What are ye suggesting?” Yvaine asked, feeling her pulse drum beneath her skin.

“Perhaps the peace summit is a good way to flush out the traitor. Perhaps we can find him before...” The expression upon his face said loud and clear that he did not believe his own words. “Ye said ye dunna ken who it is. Does the legend say which clan he belongs to?”

With a heavy heart, Yvaine shook her head. “It doesna. There is nothing specific. Nothing that would help us. It only ever speaks of the clans coming together to talk about peace, that at first everything looked promising... and then it all fell apart. Suddenly, fighting broke out and it didna end until only a few remained.” Yvaine could not imagine such a blood-soaked day, lives perishing, one after another. She had grown up with this legend, had heard it spoken of countless times, and yet only today could her mind truly conjure an image of what it meant. Now, the people she imagined had faces she knew. People she had spoken to. People she even cared about. Would Logan fight if it came to a confrontation? Yvaine was certain that he would; after all, he stood loyal and always had. Would he die as well? And what about Fergus, Caelen’s dearest friend? Would he lose him? Yvaine did not even dare ask the question that was most predominant upon her mind. If they did this, if they went down this path, she knew she could lose Caelen. Aye, according to legend, he survived. However, there was more than one way to die, wasna there? Sometimes, the heart still beat, and yet the soul inside was gone. What

would Caelen suffer if all he cared about came to such an end? Would he ever recover from it?

Endless circles of questions shot through Yvaine's head as she and Caelen stood in the mouth of the cave, staring at one another, wishing for a brilliant idea to save them from their fate. Deep down, she could see in Caelen's eyes that he, too, knew there was nothing they could do.

"I dunna ken why," Yvaine murmured, "but I think we are not meant to change anything. I think I was saved so I could return now and do what I'm supposed to do." She saw the sadness in Caelen's eyes and her hands tightened on his, offering what little comfort she could. "I'm so sorry. I assure ye I dunna wish for anyone to come to harm. Yet ye said it yerself, ye have fought for peace for so long and yet somehow it seems not meant to be."

Caelen nodded. "Aye, ye're right, lass. Only 'tis hard to accept." He tugged her closer, his gaze seeking hers in a more profound way. "Does this mean ye will come back with me? To speak to our fathers and do what must be done?"

Yvaine swallowed hard, still struggling with the decision to abandon her return home... or at least postpone it. Yet deep down, she had always known that she could not simply walk away. As much as she wished she could, this place now held memories, some of which were most dear to her. Now, she had family here as well, and her heart ached for Logan and Rory especially. Although she cared not for her father, not in the least, the rest of those who were her blood did not deserve what was about to happen. If she could help them, could prevent their loss, was it not her responsibility to do so? Her wish even? Could she truly wait, risk that she might not be able to return at all?

“I’ll come back with ye,” Yvaine finally said, and her heart delighted at the affectionate smile that came to Caelen’s face despite their hopeless situation. “How do ye suggest we go about it? Should we simply ride back to Morganach Castle?” A frown drew down her brows, doubt in her heart.

Caelen shook his head. “Nay, ye shouldna go anywhere near that castle. If ye return, who knows what will happen. Alone, I canna guarantee yer safety, and we dunna ken how Chief Morganach will react. Aye, he is a compassionate man despite his reputation, yet he, too, serves his clan.”

Yvaine could not help but agree. After all, Chief Morganach had made it very clear that he did not wish to see a union between Clans MacLeòir and MacCarraig, afraid it would harm his own clan’s standing. Everything seemed to be about politics, about fear. Everyone always assumed the worst, and no one ever offered a helping hand out of the goodness of their heart. Nay, people always wanted something in return. It was a truly awful world, one that needed to be changed.

Indeed, the clans had to die, and they could only hope that the hatred between them would die as well, that the future would be bright and promising.

“There is a large clearing to the north of here,” Caelen remarked, his gaze distant, thoughtful. “It sits upon the border between our two lands. ’Tis far enough away from Morganach Castle that I dunna think any of the warriors sent out to fetch ye back would venture there. Go there and wait for me. In the meantime, I’ll ride back to Morganach Castle to deliver a message.”

“A message?” Yvaine frowned at him.

“Of the peace summit, inviting both lairds to discuss the option of a peaceful solution,” Caelen clarified, and Yvaine

could see that hope still lived in his heart. Despite everything he already knew, a part of him could not seem to abandon this course, he had to make one last stand. “I’ll make it very clear that ye are determined not to wed Chief Morganach, that if they wish to resolve this they will have to talk.”

“And what of yer sister?” Yvaine inquired, remembering the anxious young woman she had seen in the great hall. “Will yer father not use the situation to his advantage? Will he not seek to wed her to Chief Morganach instead?”

Caelen scoffed darkly. “Aye, he will. Yet we will not give him the chance.” His jaw tightened, steel coming to his eyes. “I shall return on the cover of darkness and seek out Fergus and my sister first. I’ll ensure that they are long gone before I speak to our fathers.”

Yvaine nodded in agreement. “And what of me? I am simply to sit in the clearing and pick flowers?” Crossing her arms over her chest, she glared at him teasingly.

Caelen chuckled, and the sound was one most welcoming. “I never once thought of ye as one who likes to pick flowers,” he murmured, leaning closer and pressing his forehead against hers, his hands warm upon her arms. Then he straightened, his gaze seeking hers once more. “Nay, I was hoping if we separate, if ye’re on yer own, perhaps Catriona will show herself again.”

A wide grin came to Yvaine’s face. “Aye, I like that idea. I’d truly love to speak to her again in a moment when my mind is not overwhelmed. I wonder if she will show herself.”

Caelen smiled back at her, his gaze still so warm. “I hope she will.” He took a step back, and his hands fell from her arms. “There is nay time to waste,” he murmured, regret in his gaze. “We needa be off.”

Yvaine felt her heart clench tightly in her chest. After everything they had shared, it felt wrong for them to go their separate ways now. She wanted to throw her arms around him and never let go, yet she knew that was not an option, either. So instead, she lifted her chin and looked him directly in the eye as she spoke.

“Take care of yerself, Caelen,” she said softly, reaching out to brush a dark strand of hair away from his face. “Let no harm come to ye while I’m away or I’ll have to hurt ye.”

Grinning, Caelen gave a single nod before leaning forward and pressing his lips against hers in a gentle kiss that left Yvaine wanting more; yet he pulled away all too soon and stepped back once more.

“Be careful as well,” he murmured, his gaze never leaving hers until he finally turned away, gathered his few belongings before leading his mount out of the cave and down the beach without looking back.

Yvaine watched until he disappeared from sight before turning away herself with a heavy sigh; though even as she did so, she could feel the warmth of his kiss still lingering upon her lips and knew that nothing would ever rob her of the memories they had shared together.

Those, at least, could never be taken.

Chapter Thirty

FOR THOSE WE LOVE



The moon cast a soft, silver glow over the landscape as Caelen crept through the night's shadows and toward the castle walls of Castle Morganach. He had left his horse behind, knowing he faced a better chance on foot. A thrill of excitement surged through his veins as he approached the stronghold; after all, it was not every day that he sought to sneak into a castle such as this without being caught.

Though Caelen longed to return to Yvaine's side, he had planned this carefully, spending days watching the castle, observing the guards' routines, inspecting every stone, every crevice of the outer wall. He had gathered all the supplies he needed: a long, sturdy rope attached to a hook that hopefully would see him across the wall.

Hurrying from shadow to shadow, Caelen slowly and yet swiftly approached the castle. The night was dark, barely a star in the sky and only a sliver of moon visible. Dressed in black with a hood pulled deep into his face, Caelen stalked through the darkness, his soft boots making no sound upon the ground. He could spot the shine of torches here and there, spotted shadows moving upon the parapet wall. Of course, guards were on watch all night. Caelen had expected no less. Still, no one turned in his direction. No one called out. And with

patience, eventually, Caelen made it to the castle wall undetected.

As he stood at the foot of the wall, though, Caelen wondered if his luck would desert him now. Was there even a chance for him to make it into the courtyard undetected? Yet there was no choice. Yvaine's life depended on it, as did Gwyneth's. If he failed, Caelen knew that they would all face the future he did not care to see. No, he had to keep his wits about him. He could not falter now. Too much depended on it.

On him.

Taking a deep breath, Caelen steeled himself for the task ahead and then slowly began to climb the wall, his fingers finding purchase in the various crevices and cracks. The climb was slow and arduous, and more than once, Caelen paused, holding completely still, listening to the night. He heard guards move past him above, their boots almost deafening upon the hard stone ground. Yet they never took note, the echo of their footsteps soon disappearing.

Eventually, Caelen reached the top, his heart beating frantically from the exertion, his fingers aching and bloody. Still, a sense of accomplishment swept through him as he paused in the shadow of the wall to catch his breath, his gaze quickly surveying his surroundings. Indeed, he had planned his arrival perfectly, anticipating the exchange of guards, which granted him a few minutes to find his way down the wall and into the keep.

Another moment ticked by, as Caelen waited, his gaze watchful, drawn to every shadow, his ears aware of every sound. Thankfully, though, everything remained quiet, still and peaceful. And so, taking a cautious glance over each shoulder, Caelen quietly descended the stairs that led into the courtyard.

He did not like how exposed he was in that moment; however, it passed quickly and no one took note. Again, drawn to the shadows, Caelen hurried onward, relieved to be familiar with the Morganach Castle, his mind's eye picturing the path ahead.

Once down in the courtyard, he hurriedly moved toward the main door of the castle, then he quickly slipped past it, preferring the small side door servants often used. He managed to reach it without being seen, voices drifting to his ears from inside the castle. Taking a deep breath to steady his nerves, Caelen eased the door open and then slipped inside. A faint glow came from the other end of the corridor, and Caelen hastened onward, knowing that he had to reach Fergus's chamber quickly before too many hours of the night passed.

Undoubtedly, his friend would be relieved to hear of Caelen's plan. Although Fergus had never harbored hope in regards to Gwyneth, Caelen knew that his friend's heart ached at the thought of their impossible situation. Before, Caelen had not quite understood the heartache his friend faced every day, being separated from the woman he loved. Now, though, after meeting Yvaine, Caelen understood well. Aye, Fergus and Gwyneth deserved to be together, and his heart warmed at the thought of the joy it would bring them.

Slinking upstairs and along dark corridors, Caelen counted the doors and then quietly knocked upon the one assigned to Fergus. For a moment, no sound came from the chamber, and Caelen wondered if his friend might be asleep. He was just debating whether to simply step inside when the door silently swung open, revealing Fergus in its frame.

"Caelen?" Fergus muttered, stunned disbelief in his voice. "I thought ye were gone. I thought ye had gone after Yvaine."

He stepped back and quickly waved Caelen inside. “What’s happened?”

In a few words, Caelen explained what had happened, and how he had come upon Yvaine as well as their decision to seek peace between their clans. However, he did not mention the fact that Yvaine had traveled here from the future, that her knowledge spelled doom for their time according to the legends of old.

“Is she here as well?” Fergus inquired, his voice tense, his gaze clearly suggesting that he did not think it a good idea.

Caelen shook his head. “Nay, she waits in the clearing bordering both our lands. I dunna think it wise to see her back here.”

Fergus nodded in agreement. “Her father’s still out searching for her,” he explained as he pulled on his boots and donned his coat, anticipating their imminent departure. “Tensions ran high. Chief Morganach is doing his best to appease yer father as well as hers; however, at present, he doesna seem to have much luck. Her father blames us for her disappearance while yer father constantly seeks to convince Chief Morganach to choose Gwyneth instead.” A muscle in his jaw twitched as he gritted his teeth. “What is yer plan? I assume ye have a plan?” He frowned, suddenly skeptical. “Although ye dunna always do, as I recall.”

Caelen chuckled, remembering that, aye, upon occasion he acted on instinct alone. “I have a plan,” he replied, and Fergus sighed in relief. “I assumed that Father would seek to benefit from Yvaine’s disappearance. Therefore, I am here to see ye and Gwyneth safely away.”

Fergus stilled, his eyes staring at Caelen as though he had suggested they travel to the moon or to the depth of the ocean.

“What do ye mean?” A glimmer of hope flickered in his eyes, and yet Caelen could tell that he was afraid to let it spark into more, no doubt certain that a happy ending was not in the stars for him and Gwyneth.

“What I mean is that ’tis not right, nor does it serve anyone, to force people into marriage,” Caelen replied, now more certain than ever. “Do ye remember what I told ye about the origin of this feud between our clans? About what Chief Morganach told Yvaine and myself?”

Fergus nodded.

“So, ye see, a forced union never leads to anything good. Eventually, true loyalties take over and our hearts guide us back to where we belong.”

Still, Fergus did not look convinced, the expression of hope upon his face tentative. “Yet ye want us to go?” He shook his head, a confused expression upon his face. “I’m afraid I dunna quite understand.”

“Choose yer own path,” Caelen finally said, grasping his friend’s shoulder. “I can see that ye care for my sister, and I ken that she cares for ye as well. Ye deserve to be together, share a life that pleases ye both. That is what I want for ye.”

“Truly?” A face splitting grin tugged upon Fergus’s lips, and the joy that stood in his eyes was heartwarming. Aye, Gwyneth had found someone who truly loved her, and Caelen was glad for it.

“Truly,” he confirmed, striding back toward the door and beckoning his friend to follow him. “However, first we have to find a way out of this castle. Are ye ready?”

Fergus nodded, not a hint of hesitation in his expression now. “I was born ready,” he exclaimed, eagerness in his gaze,

his limbs no doubt humming with energy.

“We must be quick and quiet,” Caelen reminded his friend, momentarily worried that Fergus’s eagerness might make him careless. “We must make it to Gwyneth’s chamber without being discovered. Ye have a better chance of getting away if no one sees us leave.”

Fergus nodded, exhaling a deep breath to calm himself before he led the way out of his chamber. Caelen was not at all surprised that his friend knew precisely where Gwyneth’s chamber was located, his steps surefooted as though he had walked these halls a hundred times.

Perhaps he had.

Unfortunately, their knock remained answered, and so, they were forced to enter without being invited.

Of course, it was not surprising to find Gwyneth’s chamber lying in darkness, the only light coming from the gently dancing flames in the hearth. The bed stood on the opposite side of the chamber, a faint shadow outlining Gwyneth’s form. She lay still, unmoving, her soft breath echoing to their ears.

Slowly, Fergus approached, his steps soundless upon the rug covering the stone floor. He reached out a hand and placed it upon her shoulder, giving her a gentle shake. “Gwyneth,” he murmured and brushed a strand of her hair from her face. The gesture was deeply caring and affectionate, and it was only in that moment that Caelen realized how deep his friend’s affections ran. Of course, his mind had known in some way, and yet his heart had not fully grasped what these two meant to one another.

Perhaps Caelen ought to have acted sooner. Seeing his friend’s and his sister’s misery ought to have been enough to

make him act, to demand change, to give these two a chance. Aye, he ought to have.

Gwyneth woke with a start, her eyes blinking against the dark, and her gaze widened when she found herself not alone. “What is going on? What—?” The moment she recognized Fergus, a deep breath rushed from her lungs. “Fergus? What are ye doing here? If my father finds ye—”

Fergus lifted a hand to stop her. “Quiet,” he murmured gently, grasping her hand, and tugging her from the bed. “Caelen has come to take us away.”

Uncertainty stood in Gwyneth’s gaze as she slid from the bed then quickly reached for the blanket to cover herself, her gaze lowered bashfully. “Caelen?” She turned toward him then, silent steps carrying her closer. “Where have ye been? Father was furious when he couldna find ye.” She swallowed hard. “Lachlan said ye had stolen the MacLeòir lass away to ensure that I could be the one to marry Chief Morganach.” Her voice quivered, tears now clinging to her eyelashes. “Is that true?”

Caelen shook his head as he stepped forward and grasped her hands. “’Tis not,” he assured her. “She went on her own, but I left to find her. That much is true.”

“Why?” A deep frown creased Gwyneth’s forehead.

Coming to stand beside her, Fergus chuckled. “Because he’s in love with her.”

Gwyneth’s eyes widened as she looked from the man she loved to her brother. “Is that true? Are ye... in love with her?”

Briefly, Caelen closed his eyes, exhaling a deep breath. “Aye, it is. I love her. I suppose I’ve loved her since the moment we met.” Reminding himself that time was of the

essence, he lifted a hand as Gwyneth opened her mouth to ask another question. "I'm afraid there's not much time to talk. I came here to ensure ye wouldna have to marry Chief Morganach. We have to go now. Please get dressed quickly."

Although more questions burned in her eyes, Gwyneth nodded and turned away, rummaging through her armoire, her hands trembling with nervousness. "What should I wear? Where are we going?"

"Put on something fit for traveling," Caelen instructed as he waved Fergus forward. "My horse is tied to a tree east of here. It shall help ye cover ground faster."

"Where are we to go?" Fergus murmured as they kept their backs turned so Gwyneth could change.

Caelen paused for a moment, uncertain, wishing he had discussed this with Yvaine. Then, though, the answer came to him. "To the coast," he told his friend. "The Fey Isles."

Fergus's eyes widened. "The Fey Isles? Are ye certain?"

Aye, Caelen remembered the day they had last been there, the way the clouds had gathered, the sense of being watched. He understood Fergus's hesitation; yet after speaking with Yvaine, Caelen had no doubt that the Fey would welcome them. After all, was the island not meant to harbor a new clan, new people who chose love above misguided duty?

"I am certain," Caelen confirmed. "Ye shall be safe there, and we will follow as soon as we can. I promise."

Fergus nodded, and Caelen strode toward the door. He opened it a bit and peeked out into the corridor. It still lay deserted, no voices echoing to his ears. "We needa go," he murmured, closing the door again. "Are ye ready?"

Dressed in a woolen gown with a heavy cloak wrapped around her shoulders, Gwyneth stepped forward, her eyes seeking Fergus's for reassurance. "Aye, I'm ready." His hand wrapped around hers, holding it tightly, and Caelen smiled to see them thus.

"Come." Caelen pulled open the door and led them out of the chamber. The corridor was still deserted, and Gwyneth's steps were silent as they hurried toward the stairs. Caelen kept his eyes peeled for any sign of danger, but all remained quiet; even when they reached the bottom of the stairs, no one seemed to be around.

Pausing briefly in the courtyard, Caelen looked one last time at Gwyneth and Fergus. "Go," he told them softly. "Stay safe."

Gwyneth smiled up at him, her eyes filled with gratitude. "Thank ye for everything ye've done for us, Brother," she said softly, embracing him tightly.

"Take good care of my sister," Caelen told his friends above the top of her head. "Keep her safe... and make her happy."

Fergus smiled at him. "I will. Ye have my word."

"Stay here," Caelen said to them both before nodding toward the main gate. "I shall cause a distraction and lure the guards away so that ye can slip out. But ye must be quick and quiet."

Both nodded in agreement and then silently darted along the wall, drawing closer to the gate.

Caelen, in turn, stayed back, hastening in the opposite direction and toward the stables. He slipped in through the side door, taking care to remain unseen. The horses were all in their

stalls, and Caelen quickly led two of them out into the night. He was careful not to make too much noise as he unhinged their halters and set them loose. With a few gentle pats on their necks, they cantered away across the courtyard, their hooves clapping against the cobblestones.

Then he rushed back inside, opening more stalls and freeing more horses one by one and shoing them outside, urging them to follow the lead mare. Within moments, sounds in the courtyard echoed through the night as horses galloped about in wild abandon.

Soon enough there was commotion from within the castle walls as guards shouted orders back and forth to each other, people running about, seeking to retrieve the horses and reestablish order. Fortunately, distracted by the chaos outside, the guards failed to notice Gwyneth and Fergus slip away through the gate and out into the dark of night.

Hidden around a corner, Caelen watched them until they disappeared from sight, relief flooding his body that they had escaped the walls that had kept them confined. Especially Gwyneth. After having the threat of a forced marriage hovering above her head all her life, she was finally free to be with the man she loved, and Caelen hoped with all his heart that the life she had chosen—freely, willingly!—would see her happy.

Now, though, he needed to do his part and hope that it, too, would end in success.

Even despite the odds.

Chapter Thirty-One

AN ELUSIVE LASS



Yvaine looked out at the clearing before her with a mix of trepidation and hope. The bright morning sun shone down from the sky, casting its golden light upon the meadow and the trees that lined it. The air was still and silent as she urged her horse forward, its hooves crunching against the dry grass as it moved farther into the clearing. As she rode, she thought of Caelen and prayed that he was safe, that he had found his way into Morganach Castle undetected and managed to see his sister and his friend to safety. Yet what would await him then? Would his father listen? Would hers?

Yvaine could not shake the feeling of doom upon the horizon, as though there was something they had not considered, something that would see all their efforts come to nothing. “Please, bring him back to me,” Yvaine whispered into the stillness of the clearing, wondering if the Fey truly existed, if they were nearby and listening. Did they truly decide the fate of man? Did they intervene and guide people to their true destiny? Or were those simply tales, stories to entertain children?

Aye, long ago, as a wee lassie, Yvaine had lived off these tales, her heart thundering in her chest whenever her grandmother or Mrs. Murray had spoken of them. As a grown woman then, though, they had turned into something more

fleeting, something that inspired and gave strength but not something that was true and real, like something one could touch.

Now, though, Yvaine was not certain. She wished she knew but supposed that certainty was not to be had.

At the edge of the clearing, she drew her horse to a halt, touched by the silent beauty of the world around her. This place seemed to be alive with more than trees and flowers, birds and bees. It was as though she could feel the energy of the souls of her ancestors dancing upon the wind, urging her to be careful, urging her to lead their clan to safety. Yvaine felt the weight of the future pressing down on her and the responsibility of her people resting on her shoulders. There was so much she had to do, so much to learn, and so much that depended on her. Was this a life she had lived before? Yvaine wondered yet again. After all, she had grown up with the legend of Yvaine and Caelen even before she had lived that life herself. How was that possible?

She scoffed, the soft sound echoing across the clearing. Indeed, how was any of it possible?

Again, Yvaine felt that sense of exasperation creep into her weary bones. She had never been one to play games, toying with others, making them fear for something that might never come or something they could not prevent even if they tried. Setting her hands up on her hips, she lifted her chin and surveyed the meadow. “Catriona!” she called and then again, in her loudest voice.

Of course, the one woman who possibly possessed any of the answers Yvaine sought did not reveal herself. In truth, Yvaine had not for a moment believe that she would. Still, she could not help feeling disappointed.

“What am I to do now?” Yvaine murmured to herself, wondering how long it would take for Caelen to bring their fathers here. Days? Perhaps even weeks?

Despite a possibly long wait ahead, Yvaine chuckled when she remembered her last conversation with Caelen. “Perhaps I truly ought to pick flowers,” she exclaimed on a laugh. “It would certainly shock him, would it not?”

Dismounting, Yvaine wandered along the edge of the clearing until she spotted a glimmer of something peeking through the standing trees. She turned toward it and found a small lake, half-hidden behind tall pine trees, its waters shimmering in the morning light. There, she tied her horse to a branch and then slipped out of her garments, desperate for a bath.

Despite the rain that had come down on her and Caelen only a few days passed, it had been a while since she had had a bath, able to soak her hair in the water and float upon its surface.

With a deep breath, Yvaine stepped into the lake and felt the cool water caress her skin as she submerged herself. The water was like a balm to her weary body, soothing her tired muscles and washing away all of the worries that had been weighing heavily on her mind. She swam around in circles, letting the liquid refresh her and clear her head, barely aware of the way it raised goosebumps upon her skin.

When she finally emerged from the lake, Yvaine felt invigorated and ready to tackle whatever challenge might come next. After drying off with a soft cloth she had brought along in her pack, she retrieved her horse and wandered back toward the meadow. There, she began to pick wildflowers in

an effort to pass some of the time until Caelen would return, hopefully with good news.

“Ye’re finally here.”

At the sound of the familiar voice, Yvaine froze, briefly wondering if she had merely imagined it. Then, she slowly turned around, the few wildflowers she had gathered crushed in her clenched hand. “Catriona?” The moment her eyes fell upon the pale-haired young woman, Yvaine breathed a sigh of relief. “Where have ye been? I’ve been looking for ye.”

“I ken,” the other woman replied, her hair almost white in the bright sunshine of the morning.

Yvaine rolled her eyes. She knew she ought not to, but she could not help herself. “If ye knew, why did it take so long for ye to come to me?”

Catriona laughed, a melodious, pleasant sound. “Because ye are to find yer own way.”

Yvaine scoffed. “I am to find my own way? Ye canna be serious? Have ye not meddled in my fate for many years now? Ye and... yer people?” She stepped closer, meeting the young woman’s eyes. “I want answers, and I want them now.” Her heart pounded wildly in her chest as she awaited Catriona’s reply.

“There is a great battle coming,” Catriona finally said, her eyes guarded and filled with sorrow. “Yer people are facing difficult times, and they will need yer courage and yer strength if they are to prevail. Yer decision now will determine the fate of yer clan.”

Yvaine listened with bated breath, her mind racing as she imagined what was to come. In that moment, she would have given anything to prevent the demise of her people, Caelen’s

people. Though, sometimes it was not as easy as sacrificing one's own life, was it? Sometimes the greatest challenge was that no matter what one was willing to do, there was nothing that would bring about a difference. Would she truly be forced to stand by and watch as these two clans destroyed one another? Would she be forced to watch her people die? People she cared for?

It was an awful thought—one Yvaine did not dare contemplate for long. What would happen would happen, she knew that, and dwelling upon it served no one. All she could do was try to make a difference and find a way to live with it if she could not.

Before Yvaine could contemplate what lay ahead, she needed answers, though. And so, she stepped toward Catriona, her gaze determined as she met the other woman's eyes. "How do I come to be here?" Yvaine inquired, determined not to let Catriona slip away once more. "Ye spoke of the Fey seeing me safely to another time to protect me." She almost laughed as she spoke the words, for a part of her still struggled with the reality of it. "How do ye ken this? And how does it work? Is it the cavern? That... shimmering pool of water?" The words rushed from her lips without a moment of pause. For months now, Yvaine had asked herself these endless questions, never able to find any answers. And now her time had come.

Hopefully.

A gentle smile rested upon Catriona's face, and yet her eyes seemed to twinkle with something deeply mysterious. "The cavern is a place marked by the Fey," she explained as a soft breeze tugged upon her pale tresses, sending them dancing through the air as though by an unseen hand. "Ancient people knew of its power and built the shimmering path below the

water's surface. They sought to craft a bridge between now and then." A heavy sigh drifted from her lips, an almost chiding tone to it as though she were a mother displeased with her child's foolish behavior. "Only the Fey would not allow it, and so they saw these people off the island, ensuring that the place remained untouched."

Yvaine listened with fascination, trying to imagine the moments of which Catriona spoke. Indeed, ancient ruins stood on the cliff where one day MacKinnear Castle would rise into the sky. Who had built these ruins once? And why had its people left? Had it truly been the Feys doing?

"If the Fey dunna want us on the island," Yvaine inquired, her mind racing, afraid to run out of time, to see Catriona disappear before all her questions were answered, "why then did they allow the MacKinnears to inhabit it in the future? Do ye ken about this?"

Catriona shook her head. "I have not been to the future nor have I heard anyone speak of it."

"Then... how do ye ken what the Fey wish for ye to do?" Yvaine asked with a deep frown, feeling as though she was speaking of a child's fairytale as though it were real.

Catriona shrugged. "I simply do."

"That's not much of an answer," Yvaine remarked with roll of her eyes, deeply annoyed by the vague comments the woman offered. "Certainly, ye must have some idea." Her gaze narrowed. "Perhaps ye're lying to me."

To Yvaine's surprise, Catriona chuckled, the sound so ordinary that it struck Yvaine as utterly out of place. "Ye're a fierce one, Yvaine MacKinnear, and it will preserve yer people well." She paused for a moment, and her gaze seemed to turn

inward as if remembering something from long ago. “Sometimes, the Fey bestow gifts. I dunna ken why or for what purpose, and yet eventually it always reveals itself.”

“Did ye receive a gift as well?” Yvaine inquired, certain that the other woman was not speaking of jewels or gold or anything tangible one could touch.

Catriona nodded. “I did.” Again, her eyes twinkled with something hidden, something not quite from this world; perhaps, though, Yvaine was merely imagining it. “When they choose, they send me images of what is to come, guiding me as I guide others.”

“Is that how ye ken me?” Yvaine well remembered the moment Catriona had first come upon her, and it had truly felt as though the other woman had awaited her.

“Aye, it is. I saw yer path. I saw it cross with Caelen MacCarraig. I saw the two of ye guide yer people away from war and toward peace. Yet I canna say how everything will come to pass. Some things remain hidden.” A breeze suddenly swept over the meadow, and a slight frown touched Catriona’s brows before she inhaled a deep breath, one weighted by the knowledge she possessed. “As I stand here, ’tis as though I can hear the cries of battle and the sound of swords clashing.” She blinked, and met Yvaine’s eyes. “I dunna ken how but blood will be spilled here.”

Yvaine inhaled a sharp breath. “Is there any way to stop it? Is there anything we can do to prevent this from happening?”

Catriona shook her head. “Ye’re not meant to prevent it,” she confirmed Yvaine’s worst fears. “Ye’re meant to ensure it willna happen again.”

Yvaine's shoulders slumped, the weight resting upon them suddenly too heavy. She sank down into the tall grass, her limbs suddenly trembling and weak. "Can ye tell who will die?" she murmured, looking up at Catriona, her heart aching so fiercely that she thought it might break.

Catriona kneeled down in front of her, a deeply compassionate expression upon her face. "I ken ye're afraid, and ye're wise to be. Change is never easy, and it never comes without sacrifice. Yet ye must stand tall and do what ye ken to be right." She reached out a hand and tucked a stray curl behind Yvaine's ears. "Follow the path laid out before ye and ye will find yer way back home."

Yvaine flinched. "Home?" She stared at Catriona. "Are ye saying I will see my family again? That there truly is a way to return to my time?"

A deep smile graced Catriona's features. "Nothing is ever truly lost, and those we love shall never leave us." She rose to her feet then. "Trust in that." She took a step back.

Panic shot through Yvaine, and she scrambled to her feet, afraid that once again Catriona would disappear in a heartbeat. "Wait! Ye canna—" A loud clap echoed across the clearing like that of thunder just overhead; it made Yvaine flinch and spin around, her eyes wide as she searched for its origin.

Only there was nothing there. The sky was clear, not a cloud in sight, and the birds continued to trill as though nothing had happened.

Yvaine heaved a deep sigh, and even before she turned back around, she knew that Catriona would no longer be there.

As before, she had vanished into thin air.

“If a battle canna be avoided,” Yvaine murmured to herself, her gaze sweeping over the nearby forest, “I’ll be needing a bow.” And with that thought in mind, she marched forward to find the perfect branch.

Chapter Thirty-Two



Early morning light filtered in through the windows, illuminating the thick stone walls of the castle and bathing it in a gentle glow. Caelen awoke from his fitful slumber, still exhausted from the previous night's adventures. After setting loose the horses to ensure Gwyneth and Fergus's successful escape from Morganach Castle, he had slunk back to his assigned chamber, relieved to find it empty. There, he had spent the night, hoping no one would see any need to call on him. Fortunately, no one had.

Caelen yawned and stretched, then he rose from the bed and dressed, his heart teetering between light and heavy. He could only hope that Gwyneth and Fergus had made it safely away, found the horse he had left in the woods nearby and were on their way to the coast. Still, he wished he knew for certain. And what of Yvaine? Had she reached the meadow yet? Had she been able to draw Catriona out?

Caelen hoped that it was so, for he, too, wished to see some questions answered, for his own sake as well as Yvaine's and their people. Of course, the idea of a peace summit stirred hope in his chest. How could it not? After all, all his life, he had hoped to lay the quarrels between their two clans to rest. Yet now knowing what he did, he could not help but doubt his

path ahead. Was he doing the right thing? Or was he simply ensuring the end of his own clan?

Aye, if only they knew who it was who would ensure the peace summit ended in bloodshed. Could it be Lachlan? Caelen considered, knowing well that his cousin's temper sometimes got the better of him. But would he truly attack the MacLeòirs during peace talks?

With a heavy heart, Caelen left his chamber and then made his way down the narrow passageways of the castle. Everything lay quiet around him, and the few servants who had risen were going about their duties in hushed whispers. Outside Chief Morganach's study, he paused, gathered his thoughts, and then knocked.

After a brief moment of silence, Chief Morganach called for him to enter, and Caelen pushed open the door, stepping across the threshold. The other man sat in the chair behind his desk, a cup of tea by his side as he noted down something in a leather-bound ledger. "I see ye've returned," he remarked in a steady voice before looking up and laying down his quill. "Any news of Yvaine?"

Caelen paused. "Ye ken I'd left?"

"Quite frankly," Chief Morganach replied, leaning back in his chair, and stapling his fingers in a rather thoughtful gesture, "I was surprised ye hadna gone with her in the first place." His brows rose questioningly.

Caelen nodded, not wishing to lie to the man. Despite his gruff appearance and sometimes hard words, Chief Morganach was a fair man; and despite his earlier words, he seemed in no rush to marry Yvaine. Was he, too, perhaps holding out for a different solution? "Well, truth be told, had she allowed it, I would have."

For a moment, a touch of amusement sparked in Chief Morganach's eyes. It passed, though, without a chuckle giving voice to it. "Why would she leave ye behind? Last we spoke, I assumed..." Again, his brows rose in question.

"There are," Caelen searched for some way to explain their situation without giving away too much, "circumstances that complicate everything, I'm afraid."

"I see," Chief Morganach remarked as though he truly did. "Yet ye went after her."

"I did."

"And did ye find her?"

Caelen nodded. "However, she didna return with me." He held the other man's gaze, waiting to see how Chief Morganach would react.

"That would have been foolish," Chief Morganach replied, nodding for Caelen to seat himself. "Why then are *ye* here? Clearly, there's something on yer mind."

Sitting down, Caelen decided to speak as openly as he could. "I need yer help; however, after ye hear what I did last night, ye mightna be inclined to offer it."

Chief Morganach's brows drew down, suspicion flaring in his eyes. Yet he did not say anything nor ask a question.

"Upon my return last night," Caelen began, wishing to play with open cards, sick and tired of every last bit of deceit, "I went to see my friend Fergus, and together, we woke my sister."

Chief Morganach did not move a muscle. "The horses," he murmured, and his face darkened ever so slightly. "Ye ensured they would get away safely."

Caelen nodded. “They are in love, and they deserve a life free from political agendas.”

Again, Chief Morganach steepled his fingers, regarding Caelen most carefully. “I wonder why ’tis ye believe that the news of yer sister’s departure should prevent me from granting ye my assistance. After all, she is not the lass I am to marry.”

“She is not,” Caelen agreed. “However, with Yvaine gone, she would have been yer last chance to align yerself with one of our clans. I ken that my father has been trying to persuade ye of that, has he not?”

Chief Morganach sighed, a touch of exhaustion coming to his eyes. “Indeed, he has been most insistent.”

Yet Chief Morganach had passed up the opportunity to marry Gwyneth and align himself with Clan MacCarraig. Surely, he had to know that considering Yvaine’s wild spirit, she would never agree to become his wife. Indeed, Caelen could not shake the feeling that Chief Morganach was as tired of these marital schemes as the two young women themselves.

“Yvaine and I wish to see our clans lay their hatred to rest,” Caelen said without preamble. “We wish to propose a peace summit, and I would like yer assistance in convincing our fathers of the benefits of such a step.”

Chief Morganach remained quiet for a long moment. Then he asked, “Do ye seek to marry Yvaine?”

Caelen frowned, surprised by this question. “I canna say what will happen in the future; however, I would marry her in a heartbeat if she were to agree. Not because it would bind our clans together, but simply because I love her.”

“I see,” Chief Morganach said once more, his face overshadowed as he seemed to think this new situation

through. Caelen watched him most carefully, and in that moment, he could not help but wonder if perhaps Chief Morganach was the one who would see the peace summit come to such a horrific end. Although he seemed to be a reasonable and fair man, Caelen knew that he, too, worried about his clan, worried about the other two binding together against him and his people. Would desperation drive him to such an aggressive act?

Caelen's mind spun, and suddenly he doubted the wisdom of including Chief Morganach in this.

"I assume ye have yet to speak to yer father," Chief Morganach remarked as he rose to his feet. Caelen did the same. "I propose we have them brought to the great hall and speak to them there. Do ye object?"

Caelen shook his head, knowing that he could not change course now. After all, Yvaine was waiting for him.

Chief Morganach nodded, and as they stepped from the study, the man waved over a servant and then sent him to fetch the two lairds to the great hall. Then, he and Caelen turned down the corridor themselves, their steps echoing along the stone floor. Caelen's heart was pounding in his chest as they made their way through the castle, unable to shake that sense of foreboding, as though he had just committed a grievous mistake.

Fortunately for Caelen's nerves, they did not have to wait long in the great hall for the two lairds to arrive. Their voices, angry and raised, already drifted to their ears through the closed door. Clearly, they had long since forgotten the meaning of civility.

"I ken why ye're still here," Laird MacLeòir growled as he shouldered his way into the hall, stepping in front of Caelen's

father and nearly tripping him. “Ye still seek to marry yer daughter to Chief Morganach. Well, let me tell ye, that will never happen.” He stormed toward the dais at the other end where Caelen and Morganach were waiting. “My laird, I must insist that ye remove this man from yer castle. He’s—”

Without saying a single word, Chief Morganach cut Yvaine’s father off by simply lifting a hand, the expression upon his face so stern that the other laird faltered in his steps.

Waiting for Caelen’s father to catch up, Chief Morganach looked from one to the other. “I have called ye here this morning because yer children demand that a peaceful solution is found for the quarrel between yer two clans.” His voice held an icy tone, and Caelen marveled at the man beside him, wondering how many sides there were to him, sides few people ever saw. Or was it simply a mask? One that changed depending on the demands of the occasion?

While the face of Yvaine’s father darkened in outrage at this revelation, Caelen’s father seemed almost embarrassed, his eyes wide as he stared at him. “What is this nonsense? I ken ye’ve—” He broke off then swallowed hard before continuing. “Surely, Caelen, ye must see that no peaceful solution can ever be achieved considering the dishonorable ways the MacLeòirs conduct their business.”

At that remark, Chief MacLeòir once more flew into a rage, and the next moment, the two lairds were at each other’s throats again, spitting accusations and uttering threats.

“Silence!” Chief Morganach’s voice thundered, its echo bouncing off the walls.

Caelen almost smiled as he saw the two red-faced lairds flinch, their eyes wide as they stared at their host.

“May I remind ye that ye have a duty as leaders to yer clans,” Chief Morganach growled in a dangerously low voice, his hard gaze moving from Yvaine’s father to Caelen’s. “If this is how ye serve yer people, I consider myself fortunate that no marriage between myself and either one of yer clans will ever be achieved.”

Unintelligible words sputtered from both their lips as they stared at Chief Morganach, confusion marking their features now.

In that moment, Caelen stepped forward. “As ye well ken, Yvaine fled the castle a few days back, and last night, I myself aided Gwyneth in doing so as well.” His father turned pale at the news. “There will be no union. Do ye understand?”

“How dare ye speak to me like this, lad?” Yvaine’s father growled, waving his fist as though he wished to do him harm. And perhaps he did. However, he was, at least, wise enough not to do so, not to act on this impulse.

As Chief Morganach took a step back, Caelen squared his shoulders and then crossed his arms over his chest. “Ever since I can remember,” he hissed, glaring at the two men before him, “ye have hated one another, drawing yer clans into this hatred and forcing them to endure years of bloodshed.” He shook his head. “But no more. If ye dunna wish to see the end of both our clans, ye will agree to a peace summit and ye will meet me and Yvaine in the clearing on the border of our two lands in three days’ time.”

Wide-eyed, both men stared at him, suddenly not a word passing their lips. Caelen could see the wish to argue, the instinct to refuse, and yet perhaps some of what had been said here had given them pause. He could only hope that their

hatred for one another had not robbed them of every sense of right and wrong.

“Three days,” he repeated, shifting his gaze from his own father to Chief MacLeòir. Then, he strode past them, down the great hall and out the door. He did not stop, did not bother to fetch his things. He simply headed into the stables, chose a horse from among his father’s and rode out the gate.

Of course, he could not know if they would heed his call, yet Caelen felt utterly certain that there was nothing else he could say that would aid him in convincing them. Indeed, he had said his peace, and now he would have to wait.

Chapter Thirty-Three

ALONE TOGETHER



Days had passed since Yvaine had arrived in the clearing, and her patience was running out. After she had set up a makeshift camp and fashioned herself another bow alongside a few arrows, there had been nothing much for her to do, nothing beyond dwell upon what would happen once the two clans arrived here—if they arrived here.

Her mind spun with all the possibilities, everything that could go wrong, contemplating for the hundredth time who the traitor could be, the one person who doomed two clans to destruction. Or were they mistaken? Yvaine wondered. After all, legends were not accurate accounts of past events. They were nothing more than stories with a grain of truth to them. Perhaps there was no one man who turned against them all. Perhaps it was simply years of hatred that could not be overcome.

Still, Catriona's voice echoed through her head, reminding her that this had to happen. The Fey willed it. Still, Yvaine had not had the time to ask Catriona more about the Fey, about who they were and how she knew about them. Had she ever even met them? Was that possible? Yvaine could not imagine it to be so, for they seemed rather out of this world, perhaps existing in a realm of their own.

One early afternoon as Yvaine was once more pacing rather frantically up and down the length of the meadow, she heard the soft neigh of a horse and spun around. Squinting her eyes, she stared into the distance, and for moments, she saw nothing but swaying stalks of grass and rows upon rows of trees. Then, though, another movement caught her eye, and from the dark of the forest, a shadow separated.

A man upon a horse.

Yvaine's heart did that fluttering thing again, and before she could even make out Caelen's face, she knew it was him. He had always had that effect on her, and although a part of Yvaine loathed the power he held, another quite reveled in those sparks that shot through her veins whenever he drew near, whenever their eyes met. Days had passed since they had last seen one another, and yet it felt far longer.

Caelen urged his horse into a gallop, charging across the meadow toward her, and Yvaine felt her heart fall into a similar rhythm as though she were running alongside him. No more than a few steps away, he pulled his mount to a halt and then jump to the ground, his face alight in a way that stole the breath from Yvaine's lungs. Before she even knew what was happening, she was in his arms, her feet lifted off the ground as he spun her in a circle, joyous laughter pouring from his lips.

For a precious moment, the world around them ceased to exist. Even the sight before her eyes began to blur as Yvaine clung to Caelen's strong shoulders, enjoying the sense of weightlessness as he spun her around. Then, though, he stumbled, and unable to regain his balance, they both fell to the ground, laughing.

“Walking upright is not meant for everyone,” Yvaine teased as they lay side by side in the tall grass. “Perhaps ye could do with some lessons.”

Caelen roared with laughter then reached out and pulled her on top of him before quickly rolling over and pinning her beneath his large body. “Prisoners oughtna speak with such disrespect,” he mocked, holding her hands down with ease, his blue eyes sparkling with mischief and temptation alike.

Yvaine chuckled, ignoring the breathless flutter that seized her heart. “Prisoner?” She eyed him curiously for a moment then swiftly lifted her head off the ground and kissed him.

Instantly, his hold on her hands slackened, and she used that moment to regain her freedom, pushing him off her and jumping to her feet. “Prisoner, is it?” She rather delighted in a wide grin stretching across his face. “It seems that ye’re overestimating yerself by far.”

Still sitting in the tall grass, Caelen grinned at her, his blue eyes sparkling as they swept over her. Slowly, his expression sobered, and his gaze settled firmly upon hers. “I’m... rather relieved to find ye here.” He exhaled a slow breath.

Yvaine frowned. “To find me here? Correct me if I’m wrong,” she replied, seating herself beside him, “but we were supposed to meet here, were we not?”

Caelen nodded, and for a split second, a touch of fear sparked in his eyes. “Aye, we were.” He held her gaze, his own guarded and yet revealing something deeply vulnerable.

And then, Yvaine understood, and her heart tightened in her chest. “Ye thought I’d leave,” she murmured, casting him a sideways glance, her face heating with shame.

“Aye,” he murmured, trying to meet her eyes. “It crossed my mind. Can ye blame me for it after the way ye fled Morganach Castle?”

Yvaine sighed. “I suppose not.” She offered him an apologetic smile then reached out and placed her hand upon his. “I promise I’ll not do so again. Ye have my word. If I decide to leave,” she swallowed hard at the thought, “I’ll tell ye first.”

“Thank ye.”

“I can blame ye, however,” Yvaine exclaimed, rather detesting that somber expression upon Caelen’s face, “for taking so long to return.” She slapped him playfully on the shoulder. “As ye can see, there’s not much to do around here.” She swept her arm sideways.

Caelen followed her gesture, then he grinned, clearly relieved to be leaving such a serious topic behind. “So, what *did* ye do?”

Yvaine glared at him in mock outrage, realizing in that moment how natural it felt to be with Caelen. She never once worried about what to say, to find the right words so as not to offend. Somehow, despite the short time they had known one another, they knew how to speak to each other, to be around each other. “Well, I set up camp and rode a bit,” she told him with a dismissive gesture, enjoying the wicked grin that came to his eyes, as though he already knew what she would say. “I carved a new bow,” she nodded toward the camp, “and there’s a small lake over there,” she nodded behind them, “so I went for a swim. Though, the water is quite chilly. Summer is definitely behind us.” She shivered at the memory of the cold water closing over her head the other day.

“What else?” Caelen prompted, suspicion curling the corners of his mouth.

Yvaine narrowed her eyes even further and then crossed her arms over her chest for good measure. “Well...”

Caelen slapped his knee and laughed, his eyes twinkling in the late afternoon sun. “Dunna tell me! Ye...” He stared at her. “Ye picked flowers, did ye not?” He seemed to be holding his breath.

Yvaine wanted to slap him, and yet she was enjoying herself immensely. “There was *nothing* to do.” She emphasized every word.

Caelen laughed again before pulling her into his arms. Together, they rolled across the grass, laughing until their sides ached and they came to rest side by side, their eyes gazing at the sky above. Shimmers of orange and red began to show, streaking across the blue canvas, as a gentle breeze stirred the trees nearby.

“How did it go?” Yvaine asked after a long moment of silence. A part of her wished to ignore all that was at risk, all of which they could not be certain. Only it was not possible to live in dreams alone.

Caelen heaved a deep sigh, and his hand found hers in the grass. “They were furious,” he remarked simply, his words far from a surprise to her.

“Will they come, though?”

Caelen nodded. “I believe so. Now that both our fathers have no union to arrange,” he turned to look at her, a rather proud smile upon his face, “they dunna have much of a choice.”

“Then yer sister and Fergus are safe?”

“Aye, they are.” His expression stilled for a second, and Yvaine could see a touch of doubt flicker in his eyes. “At least, I hope they are. They got away unseen.” He shrugged, and Yvaine understood the need to be certain, yet in this world it was not to be.

“Fergus is quite capable,” Yvaine reminded him, her hand squeezing his as she looked up into his eyes. “And yer sister is as well. They’ll be fine. Ye’ll see.”

Despite the smile upon his face, a slow frown creased Caelen’s forehead as the trees around them cast more shadows over his face. “How would ye ken my sister’s capable? Ye never truly met her, did ye?”

Yvaine pushed herself up into a sitting position. “I glimpsed her here and there. But ye’re right, I never met her.”

“Then how would ye ken? How would ye ken her to be capable?”

Yvaine regarded Caelen curiously, wondering if anyone had ever called his sister capable before. She could not help but think that the expression of doubt upon his face did not merely stem from Yvaine’s lack of acquaintance with Gwyneth. “Well, she’s yer sister,” Yvaine replied with a grin. “She might have been raised with the limits put on women these days; however, I doubt that her heart is feeble or weak. Also, she’s clearly in love with Fergus, and women in love are capable of anything.”

Caelen chuckled. “Is that so?” A question sparked in his eyes, and yet he did not voice it.

Neither, though, did Yvaine answer it. Still, it hung between them, like something palpable in the air, and she could feel her own heart beat a little more forcefully after

seeing the expression in Caelen's eyes. "Well, I suppose that there's little else to do but wait." She threw up her hands and huffed out a deep, rather annoyed breath.

Caelen nodded then grinned mischievously. "Or we could pick some flowers."

Yvaine tore a clump of grass from the ground and threw it at his head. "Watch what ye say," she warned with a grin and pushed to her feet, her hands dusting off her skirts. "How about a swim instead?"

Caelen frowned as he rose to stand beside her. "I thought ye said the water was icy?" His right brow arched upward.

"I said it was chilly. Still, a chilly swim is better than picking flowers." She turned away and marched off. "Are ye coming?" she called over her shoulder, an odd sensation humming along her skin as she strode toward the water's edge, Caelen walking only a few steps behind her.

Though he said nothing in reply, Yvaine sensed his approach. He kept his distance, and Yvaine's heart fluttered excitedly as she reached the water's edge, for she could feel Caelen's eyes on her and knew that he was watching her every move.

With quick hands, Yvaine rid herself of her dress, her cheeks aflame yet her mind made up. A chuckle fell from her lips when she heard Caelen all but spin around to avert his eyes. "Dunna tell me ye intend to swim fully clothes?" Yvaine teased him, needing something to distract herself from her own trembling fingers.

Now only in her shift, Yvaine felt her heartbeat quicken as she turned away and without another word stepped into the cool water, shivering slightly. She kept her gaze averted from

Caelen, her ears picking up the soft rustling of fabric as it was dropped to the ground.

A faint blush crept across her cheeks, and she quickly ducked beneath the surface of the water, her hair fanning out around her like a dark cape. She stayed below for a few moments before resurfacing, emerging from the depths with a gasp. The chill of the water had done little to quell the heat in her cheeks, and Yvaine quickly glanced away when Caelen, too, entered the water, though she could feel his eyes upon her still.

Dunna be a coward! Yvaine chided herself even as she swam away from him, wishing that she could hide beneath the water once more.

Caelen, though, would not allow her to escape, swiftly closing the space between them and pulling up alongside her.

“Yvaine,” he said, his voice like silk as she finally looked directly at him, his torso bare, his skin sun-kissed. They swam a few more strokes, nervous laughter following in their wake. Yvaine splashed some water in his direction, and Caelen retaliated with a splash of his own. “Oh, that means war!” he shouted with mock seriousness, and Yvaine joined in their playful joviality.

The coolness of the water numbed their skin and chased away any remaining self-consciousness as if it had never been there at all. They laughed and teased each other until Caelen’s hand brushed against her thigh, sending a jolt of electricity through her body. Yvaine’s laughter caught in her throat as she looked up at him, and she could see the desire in his eyes. He leaned in closer, his lips a mere breath away from hers, and Yvaine’s heart raced with anticipation.

Yvaine's breath hitched as Caelen's lips brushed against hers, sending a shiver down her spine. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer, deepening their kiss. The water lapped around them, the only sound the soft splashing of their movements.

As they broke apart, gasping for air, Yvaine looked into Caelen's eyes, her heart pounding in her chest. This was dangerous, reckless even, but she could not help the way she felt. They had been dancing around each other for so long, the tension building, and now it had finally snapped.

Caelen's hand trailed down her back, sending shivers of desire through her body. He leaned in to kiss her again, but Yvaine forced herself to pull away, her mind suddenly filled with doubt.

"This is madness," she said, her voice barely above a whisper, her thoughts racing. "We canna..." Oh, she hated the blush that heated her cheeks. "We dunna ken what tomorrow will bring. Perhaps 'twouldna be wise to..."

Caelen's expression fell, and yet it seemed to clear as though her words had woken him from some dream. He swallowed, putting a bit of distance between them. "Aye, ye're right," he murmured, and yet his hands remained upon her waist, keeping them close. "We canna say what the future will bring." He swallowed hard. "We canna ken what decisions we might make tomorrow."

Yvaine wanted to weep in that moment, knowing precisely what he meant. Of course, he did not trust her to stay. They both knew how they felt about one another, and yet there was something that drew her away. She knew it, and he did as well. Ought they truly give into these emotions raging within their hearts if tomorrow might see them separated for good? Indeed,

perhaps it was not wise, for Yvaine could not say with certainty where her path would lead her on the morrow, where it might lead her should they save their clans, or where it might lead her should they not.

The world around them had darkened, night was falling, and yet bright starlight filtered through the trees, glistening upon the moving water. Few words passed between the two as they returned to shore, this time keeping their eyes averted, their backs turned to each other. Countless thoughts raced through Yvaine's head, and her heart ached fiercely. More than once she was tempted to simply throw caution to the wind and herself into Caelen's arms. Yet she did not.

The fire warmed them as the night grew colder, and they were both grateful for a warm meal to fill their bellies. Still, each word spoken between them was light, not daring to touch upon anything too meaningful. She briefly spoke of Catriona, of the woman's elusiveness and the way she had once more disappeared without revealing anything truly useful. Eventually, they lay down, their eyes drawn to the star-speckled sky above, and despite the chasm between them, they ended up falling asleep in each other's arms.

Chapter Thirty-Four

AND SO IT BEGINS



Caelen awoke with a start, cold sweat dripping from his forehead. He had been sleeping deeply, but now he was suddenly alert, his senses alive. He heard the clopping of hooves, the clanking of swords, the distant echo of voices; it all came from outside the small clearing, the sounds distant and faint. Still, Caelen knew with certainty that they were no longer alone, that the day they had been waiting for had come. Still, it was not only relief that now filled his heart. Aye, the day had come, yet how would it end?

Swiftly, Caelen roused Yvaine, loathe to disturb her, wishing he could simply sit here and watch her sleep. Yet there was no time now, and she needed to be aware of the impending danger to both of their worlds.

Indeed, the past two days they had spent here in the clearing near the lake had been wonderful. Of course, they had been overshadowed by what might come, by what might go wrong; and yet Caelen had never found himself more at peace—despite the uncertainty that lived in the future. As though by silent agreement, neither one of them had spoken of tomorrow. They had only lived in the here and now, riding their horses, swimming, and strolling through the forest. They had spoken of their past lives, shared stories and meals around the fire—all wonderful moments Caelen would never forget.

No matter what tomorrow might bring.

“Yvaine,” he called softly, once more glancing over her shoulder toward the sounds drifting to his ears. “Yvaine.”

Beginning to stir, Yvaine yawned. “What is it?” she mumbled, slowly blinking her eyes open.

“They’re here,” Caelen said without preamble, knowing that there was no way to cushion the blow, to give her hope when he himself was afraid to hold any in his heart. Were they truly fools to think that they could alter the future? Aye, Yvaine had lived her life knowing from the old legends how today would end, and yet...

Her eyes flew open at his words, and she set up properly. “Where?”

Caelen nodded over his shoulder. “We needa be quick. Pack up what ye need and then...” He swallowed hard, grasping her hands and pressing a sudden kiss to them. “I hate to see ye walk away from me, but we both needa speak to our fathers.”

Yvaine suddenly threw herself into his embrace, her arms linking around his neck as she clung to him. “I love ye,” she murmured, the words catching him off guard, freezing every muscle in his body. He could not move or speak or think in that moment. All Caelen was aware of was the loud thudding of his heart beneath his ribs as well as the slow and agonizing joy that crept into every fiber of his being.

And then, in the next moment, Yvaine was gone.

She disappeared out of his arms as though vanishing into thin air, her movements almost lightning quick as she flew around the camp, grabbed her bow, and then disappeared into the woods, tears glistening in the corners of her eyes.

Watching her disappear, Caelen sank to his knees, all strength suddenly gone from his body. He had not wanted it to end like this, his arms even now reaching out to pull her back. Still, there was no other way. His mind knew it to be true, and yet his heart rebelled against that knowledge.

“I oughta have told her as well,” Caelen murmured as the echo of his father’s approach grew louder. “I oughta have kissed her again. I oughta have...” He closed his eyes, knowing precisely what he wanted, fearing he could never have it.

Willing himself to his feet, Caelen staggered toward the sounds of men approaching. Soon he reached the edge of the clearing and spotted his father seated atop his midnight black horse, surrounded by a large group of warriors. Anger still rested in his eyes, his face red, yet his expression strangely resigned. Lachlan, too, was there, at his laird’s right-hand side... where Caelen ought to have been. His face was twisted in a mask of hatred, and Caelen swallowed hard, knowing that his cousin would not have allowed an opportunity to speak ill of him slip by.

Gritting his teeth against a wave of anger and disappointment that threatened to engulf him, Caelen squared his shoulders and then turned his head toward the north. There, from amongst the trees, he spotted riders, the MacLeòirs, their red hair gleaming in the sunlight. He spotted Yvaine’s father, Laird MacLeòir, riding side by side with his eldest son, Logan. Indeed, the future chief of Can MacLeòir looked a lot like his father, a younger version of strength and determination. Still, every once in a while, Caelen had glimpsed something soft in his gaze whenever it had fallen upon his younger brother Rory or even Yvaine. While they had grown up apart from one

another, not as brother and sister, Caelen had seen devotion in both their eyes.

In truth, he could not say he was surprised. Yvaine had a way of conquering people's hearts—including his own—that was unrivaled. She was direct in her approach, honest in her opinions and deeply compassionate in her loyalty. She had impressed him the first moment he had seen her, and Caelen could not imagine that ever to change, knowing full well that others had to have seen it as well.

A flicker of movement caught his eye, and as his gaze focused, he glimpsed Yvaine darting in between the trees, hurrying toward her father and his warriors.

Caelen's heart clenched at the sight, and he prayed that she would be safe with them. After all, what was to keep her father from dragging her right back to Castle Morganach to see her married to its laird? Perhaps she ought not have come here.

With one hand on his sword's hilt, Caelen turned toward his own people, aware that his father looked no less furious than the MacLeòir chief. Aye, perhaps they had been fools to think that this could truly work.

Yet as he walked, his gaze continued to stray, glancing over his shoulder toward Yvaine. He saw her meet her father's gaze unflinchingly, harsh words flying from the chieftain's lips as he glared down at his daughter. Still, Yvaine did not flinch, did not bow her head, but fired back with equal fervor.

Caelen could not deny that he was proud. She was a force to be reckoned with, and more than anything, he wanted to call her his own.

Logan dismounted and grasped her arm, his face tense as he spoke to her. Still, from Yvaine's reaction, Caelen could tell

that her brother's words were not fueled by anger but rather by concern.

“How dare ye betray me?” Caelen's father snarled the moment he was within earshot. “How dare ye betray yer people?” He dropped out of the saddle, anger darkening his face as he strode toward Caelen, accusation blazing in his eyes.

Clearly, the last few days had not served to cool his father's anger. “I did what I believed right,” Caelen responded firmly, his gaze meeting his father's, his shoulders squared and his hand still upon the hilt of his sword. “As did ye?” Indeed, he made it a question because he no longer believed that his father was solely acting out of his belief about what would be right for his clan. Nay, by now he knew better. “Or were there other motives that fueled yer decisions?” he spoke quietly, not wishing others to overhear, not wishing to undermine his father's authority. Still, he needed to make his point.

His father's face paled as he stared at him. “Other... Other motives?” He shook his head then stepped closer. “How dare ye accuse me of betraying—?”

“I accuse ye of being a man of flesh and blood, Father,” Caelen interrupted, remembering all that Yvaine had discovered before fleeing Castle Morganach. “I accuse ye of being a man who had his heart broken long ago.”

Aye, his father's face paled even further, and Caelen had his answer.

“It is true, isna it? Ye loved her long ago.” He swallowed, desperately hoping he would not share his father's fate. “And then ye lost her, and ye hada find a way to live with it.” His voice grew gentle as he stepped toward his father, his eyes imploring. “Yet this is not the way, Father. Please, ye canna

make us all pay for the loss ye suffered. I understand the heartbreak ye must've felt, ye still must feel today, and yet 'tis not enough reason to send us into war. Can ye not see that?"

His father's eyes closed, and a deep breath rushed from his lungs. "How do ye ken?" he murmured, his voice distant as though he was not truly asking for an answer. Then he met Caelen's gaze. "What would ye have me do?" He nodded past Caelen toward their enemies. "Would ye have me step back and allow them to gain power? Can ye truly not see that that would harm our people?"

Barely daring to hope, Caelen stepped toward his father, placing a hand upon his shoulder in a gesture of comfort and loyalty. "I would have ye consider peace," he replied firmly. "Come with me and speak to Chief MacLeòir. I assure ye, he is in the same position ye are. There will be no union between either of our clans and Clan Morganach."

His father sighed. "Where's yer sister? Is she well?"

Caelen nodded. "Fergus will keep her safe."

"How do ye ken? How can ye trust her life to—?"

"Because he loves her," Caelen replied firmly. "He would give his life to protect her. Ye should ken what that feels like, Father."

His father bowed his head, and Caelen saw that he understood. "I dunna believe it wise to trust him." He nodded across the clearing toward the MacLeòir laird.

"We have to try, Father. Are ye not tired of this? This hatred? There has to be a better way, and perhaps we can find it together." He met his father's eyes. "Please, Father, trust me. I've always been loyal. Everything I've done has been for the good of our people."

To Caelen's relief, his father's gaze softened, and he could see that more than anything his father wished to believe him, to trust his judgement. "Verra well. Lead the way."

"Thank ye." Caelen exhaled a deep breath, willing his hands to remain steady. "Then let us go and meet them."

As he fell into step beside his father, their warriors following close behind, Caelen heard his cousin's disgruntled voice, muttering under his breath, clearly disapproving of his laird's choice. No doubt, Lachlan and Angus had done everything within their power to ensure that their laird would heed their words and not his son's.

Aye, sometimes events took an unexpected turn.

Chapter Thirty-Five

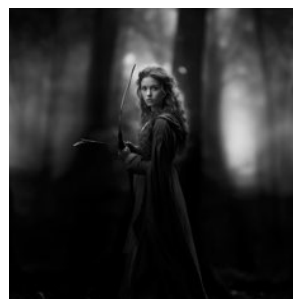
OUT OF NOWHERE



Yvaine stood atop the grassy hillock, her feet planted firmly in the soft earth and the reassuring weight of her bow upon her shoulder, and felt the chill of the wind on her skin. Before her stood her father, her brother, as well as the warriors her father had seen fit to bring, all of whom were watching in uneasy silence as Caelen and his father, Laird MacCarraig, conversed quietly before approaching with their own warriors from across the clearing.

The wind whipped at Yvaine's skirts, and she shook her head to clear her long, unruly hair from her eyes.

The sight before her was one of tension and dread—the two families had been at odds for too long, the feud between them an insurmountable chasm, and at present, only a truce that seemed to hang on by a thread kept them from coming to blows.



Yvaine felt her father's ire, a heated presence that radiated from his body in waves, and he glared down at her as she came to stand before him. "How dare ye slink away in the night?" he snarled, the look upon his face menacing, his eyes narrowing even further when he spotted the bow strapped to

her back. “Ye were days away from being the Morganach’s wife, days away from seeing our clan achieve its rightful position.” His lips thinned, and he took a step toward her. “Instead, ye throw in your lot with him.” He jerked his head across the clearing toward Caelen. “Have ye no decency? No honor? No loyalty?”

Yvaine almost laughed at his words. Indeed, there was something humorous about a man who spoke of honor and loyalty when he himself showed none of these qualities, only ever concerned with his own standing in life, his own desires and needs. Yet what would that achieve?

Nothing.

And so, Yvaine swallowed her anger, squared her shoulders, and met her father’s eyes. “Nay good has ever come from forcing other people down a path not meant for them,” she stated, her voice loud and clear, and for a moment, it was as though Yvaine could feel her grandmother’s spirit. She could almost hear her voice speaking to all the MacKinnears in the great hall, reminding them that there was nothing more precious in the world than having the right to walk one’s own path.

Her father, though, clearly disagreed and was about to protest when Yvaine held up a hand to silence him. Surprise flickered in his eyes, and yet he did not speak.

“Can ye truly deny the truth of which I speak, Father?” Yvaine asked gently, not wishing to antagonize her father further. “Do ye not remember what happened two generations ago when the MacLeòirs and the MacCarmaigs forced their children into marriages?”

Her father’s gaze thinned, and yet a touch of surprise once more flared up in his eyes. “How do ye ken of this?”

Yvaine shrugged. “Does it matter? All that matters is what that experience oughta have taught us all. We canna bend our hearts. We canna force loyalty. But we can show respect and compassion, and we can give instead of only demand.” She took a step toward him, holding his gaze. “Think of our people, Father. Do it for them.”

Silently, Logan stepped forward, his voice clear and steady. “I agree, Father. This is our chance to make peace with the MacCarmuigs, to put this feud to rest once and for all. Surely, ye can see the wisdom in such a course.”

Clearly taken aback, their father looked from his son to his daughter and back. “Do ye stand with her on this?” he demanded of Logan, and Yvaine held her breath, deeply touched by her brother’s support.

Their father, on the other hand, disliked seeing his children band together. “I can simply drag her back to Morganach Castle and see her married to its laird,” he growled before Logan had any chance of answering. “Then, that will be the end of this foolishness.”

Logan heaved a deep sigh, exhaustion and resignation marking his features. His eyes met hers, and he softly shook his head, clearly abandoning hope.

Though disappointed, Yvaine was far from giving up. “So, this is yer solution, Father? Truly?” Looking up at him, she shook her head in utter disbelief, enjoying the way his gaze narrowed and his forehead furrowed. “And what do ye believe such a course will bring ye? Peace? Loyalty of the Morganachs?” Slowly, she shook her head. “Nay. After all, a union solely resting upon the shoulders of an unwilling bride willna ensure peace, willna ensure loyalty. Can ye not see that? What motivation would I have to remain loyal to a

husband forced on me?” She crossed her arms, her eyes daring as she looked up at her father. “Indeed, such a course might rather stir hatred instead of loyalty and lead not to peace but to war. Is that what ye wish for?”

Her father’s lips thinned, and he glared at her with undisguised hatred; yet at the same time, as Yvaine had seen upon occasion, there was a glimmer of pride as though part of him applauded her mind’s ability to force him into a corner. “Ye would risk our clan’s well-being for yer own personal happiness?”

This time, Yvaine did chuckle. “Are ye not doing the same, Father? Here I am, offering ye an alternative, a better way to seek permanent peace, and yet ye disregard it simply because... ’twas not yer idea?” Her eyebrows rose in challenge, daring him to contradict her, daring him to agree with her.

“She’s right,” Logan agreed as he stepped forward, seeking their father’s gaze. “Hers is the better way. Father, ye must see this.”

Every fiber in their father’s body loathed the idea of making peace with the MacCarmaigs. Yvaine could see it in the tension in his shoulders, the way his jaw clenched. Yet he no longer argued. “And what is it that ye are proposing? How is this peace to be achieved?” He glared across the clearing at the MacCarmaigs approaching.

Soon, they would reach the center of the clearing, and Yvaine could only hope that they would show patience. “A compromise,” she replied, once again hearing her grandmother’s voice echo in her head. “The lands ye both claim as yer own need to be divided fairly, and ye both shall agree that the Fey Isles remain free and unoccupied.”

Instantly, her father's face darkened, outrage blazing in his eyes, yet before he could sputter a reply Logan placed a firm hand upon his shoulder. "Father, if ye continue to pursue this course, ye will gain nothing." He nodded at Yvaine. "Her way, at least, everything will be divided up fairly and our people shall be safe. Let us, at least, go and speak with them."

Though reluctantly, her father gave an almost imperceptible nod. "Verra well," he grumbled, his expression as always not reassuring. "Yet I willna promise anything."

Still, it was more than Yvaine had expected. In her heart, she had feared that no peace talks would ever truly come to pass, that upon the first words spoken, all hell would break loose. After all, history said it had been so even if she did not know how it came to be.

And thus, Yvaine and Logan walked at their father's side, their warriors following behind as they moved toward the MacCarmaigs who had already reached the center of the clearing. What would this day bring? Yvaine wondered as her gaze found Caelen's. He, too, looked nervous, tense; still, there was a spark of hope in his eyes, and Yvaine prayed that she would not see it extinguished.

Tension and the threat of violence lingered in the air as the two clan chiefs approached one another. Their warriors stood at the ready, hands upon hilts, arrows already drawn from quivers. Indeed, Yvaine could only too easily imagine this ending in bloodshed. Yet what else could she do?

"Greetings, Laird MacLeòir," Caelen's father uttered in greeting, his voice hard and the same reluctance in his eyes that Yvaine had seen in her own father's. Still, as he looked at his son, she thought to see a touch of compassion there, and hope, and she wondered what Caelen had said to him.

“Greetings, Laird MacCarraig,” Yvaine’s father replied, hostility in his voice, and his arms crossed over his chest as he drew himself up to his full height.

A moment of silence followed, in which neither one of the lairds spoke a word. Logan then stepped forward, standing shoulder to shoulder with their father, the expression upon his face one of respect. “Peace must be forged,” he reminded all those within earshot firmly. “We have come here today to create a better future for our children, have we not?”

Despite the heavy sigh that fell from his lips, Caelen’s father nodded. Yvaine’s own father, though, remained silent, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Yvaine wanted to kick him for his stubbornness, unable to yield even for the greater good. She met Caelen’s eyes and saw concern there. Still, as she swept her gaze over the assembled MacCarraig warriors, Yvaine noticed the absence of Caelen’s cousin. Perhaps that, at least, was a good sign, for truth be told she had feared the man’s anger and hatred, feared that he might disrupt the negotiations.

In that moment, a shaft of sunlight broke through the grey sky, lighting the faces of the men before her, and she could not help but wonder if indeed the Fey approved of this meeting if, indeed, they existed.

A soft neigh drew their attention to the west where Yvaine glimpsed warriors arriving, Morganach warriors led by their laird himself. They rode into the clearing, fast approaching before slowing their horses a certain distance from where the other two clans had gathered. Then, Chief Morganach, flanked by two warriors, proceeded toward them. “Greetings,” he called out as he swung himself out of the saddle and handed the reins to one of his men. Measured steps carried him closer,

his gaze tense as he took in the sight before him. “I see ye’re here to talk,” he remarked with a nod of approval. “I have come to join in the negotiations, to ensure that all our clans will live in peace in the future.” His eyes then turned to Yvaine and lingered for a moment before he looked at Caelen. “Yer children have shown great courage in their attempts to seek peace. Let us speak then.”

The first words uttered were tentative as if the concept of peace talks were utterly unfamiliar to everyone involved. No one seemed to know quite what to say, their only discourse thus far having been accusations and threats. Yet Chief Morganach attempted his best to guide the two stubborn lairds, suggesting an equal division of the stretch of land that had been at the root of many arguments of the past few years.

At first, a part of Yvaine truly believe that an agreement could be achieved despite the hostility and reluctance still so visible in the lairds’ eyes. Yet, speaking of land and borders, inevitably drew the conversation to the one topic that ought to have been off-limits: the Fey Isles.

Like clockwork, both lairds started to argue, naming ancestors of long ago who had laid claim to the island, which—as they claimed—proved that it rightfully belonged to them. No one could verify the truth of their words, of course, and Yvaine thought that for too long these disputes had circled around stories of past deeds that held no validity. After all, stories were not necessarily the truth. They also reflected hopes and wishes but also hatred and disappointment. They grew and changed with time, depending on who told them and to whom and for what purpose.

Yvaine felt her heart sink. She ought to have expected this. She ought to have seen this coming. Perhaps they ought to

have chosen a different place for a peace summit. And yet in her heart, she knew that a different place would not have changed anything.

Once again, her grandmother's words echoed through her mind, whispering the story of the two clans so unwilling to find peace. The stories told of their demise, a demise that could not be prevented despite all the efforts taken to do so. Had this been hopeless from the start?

Perhaps so.

Staring into Caelen's wide eyes, full of fear and regret and anger as well, Yvaine listened to the agitated voices of their fathers, to Chief Morganach's calm request they speak with civility, which in turn, of course, was ignored. She saw the faces of the men, tense and worried, all the same whether they belonged to a MacCarraig or MacLeòir. After all, in the end, they were all the same, belonging to different clans, but all people.

People with families. People who wished for safety and happiness. People who feared, just as she did, how this day might end.

And then, an odd sound, soft and whirring, pierced the ruckus in the clearing. Later, much later, Yvaine would even wonder how she had perceived it at all. In that first moment, though, she could not tell what it was, where it was coming from, only that it seemed to draw closer and that it sent a shiver down her back, something about it eerily familiar.

And then Logan suddenly shouted her name, and everyone in the clearing fell silent.

Yvaine spun around to face him, shocked to see his eyes wide with fear, his face suddenly pale, as he lunged himself

toward her. No more than a few steps separated them, and yet it seemed to take him forever to broach that small distance.

And then, he shoved her aside.

Yvaine stumbled backward, losing her balance, and crashed to the ground, the impact resonating through her bones. She felt dazed, uncomprehending, her mind spinning as a collective gasp drew to her ears.

As she scrambled back to her feet, Yvaine saw Logan lying in the tall grass, an arrow buried in his chest...

... and her heart stopped.

Chapter Thirty-Six

HEARTBREAK



Caelen stared in disbelief as Logan lunged himself at Yvaine, shoving her aside a split second before he was suddenly flung backward. A groan tore from his lips, and he crashed to the ground, an arrow stuck in his chest.

For a brief moment, Caelen believed himself to have strayed into a dream, something his mind had conjured. Everything felt unreal. Time seemed to have slowed, perhaps even ground to a halt. He stared across the clearing, seeing shocked faces on both sides, expressions that spoke of disbelief, of the same kind of otherworldly experience Caelen felt himself.

And then time resumed, and nothing was as it had been.

A scream tore from Yvaine's lips, and she flung herself toward Logan, her face pale and her eyes wide, fear so palpable on her face that Caelen found his own heart stop in his chest. There were no thoughts in his mind, and yet his body moved.

Within moments, he was at her side, kneeling on the soft ground beside Logan. The man's eyes were closed, and yet, thankfully, his chest rose and fell with shallow breaths.

"Nay! Nay! Nay!" Yvaine muttered as her hands flew over her brother, touching his face, shoulders, hovering in midair as

she stared at the arrow in his chest, the wound bleeding profusely. “This canna be. Nay, this canna be. Logan!” She grasped his shoulders, giving him a slight shake, and as he groaned in pain, a breath of relief rushed from her lungs. “Logan, can ye hear me?”

Around them, the clearing had fallen into deadly silence as if all the air had been sucked out of it. Then, though, it was broken by a collective gasp of shock from the two clans as each and every man in that meadow stared at Logan, a man who had been greatly respected, even by the MacCarraig men. Caelen knew that his father had stirred up hatred for the MacLeòirs, and yet Logan had somehow managed to prove himself a fair and respectful man...

... even in times of war.

... especially in times of war.

“Ye killed my son!” Yvaine’s father cried in sudden fury, and his accusation shot around the meadow like an arrow fired, reaching every ear, and drawing shouts of outrage from every mouth. “Ye killed my son! This means war!”

For a brief moment, Caelen closed his eyes as the MacLeòir warriors echoed their chieftain’s cry. He heard the sounds of swords being drawn from their sheaths and knew that they had failed.

As much as he had dared hope before, now everything was lost. Perhaps there truly was no way to change history. Perhaps what had happened here today and what more would happen was meant to be somehow. Yet it was a sobering thought, the idea that people were not in charge of their own destinies, that their paths were guided by some unseen force. Indeed, was it true? Or had they simply not done enough to prevent this tragedy?

In the next moment, all hell broke loose as the two clans attacked one another in a frenzy of drawn swords and knives.

“Help me get him out of here.” Though in tears, the expression upon Yvaine’s face spoke of composure, her eyes determined to bring her brother to safety.

Caelen nodded, his eyes sweeping over Logan’s body as he lay in the tall grass. His eyes remained closed, and his face had grown frighteningly pale. Blood still gushed from the wound in his chest, and Caelen was loathe to see that his breaths were growing weaker.

“Take his legs,” Caelen instructed as he reached out to grasp Logan under his arms. Under normal circumstances, he would not have dared to move him. Yet as the battle started to wage around them, Caelen knew that he had no choice. He could only hope it would not doom Logan.

Because of the arrow in his chest, Caelen could not simply fling the other man over his shoulder, using his back to support his weight. Instead, he and Yvaine moved together, their eyes meeting every so often as they made their way toward the woods and away from the frenzy of the battle. Arrows flew past them, far overhead, and the sound of clashing steel and cries of agony pounded Caelen’s eardrums. Still, he did not dare look in the direction of the fray, afraid of what he would see: people he had known all his life dying on this field. Nay, it was a memory he did not wish to have. Still, he felt the heat of battle crackling in the air, unable to ignore the sounds that drew to his ears and the smells of sweat, blood, and fear that filled his nose.

The battle raged on as neither side seemed willing to back down. The MacLeòir warriors fought with a ferocity and determination that was almost frightening while the

MacCarmuigs were no less fierce in their defense. Caelen could only watch from a distance as he and Yvaine carried Logan into the woods, feeling helplessness wash over him like a wave. He had wanted to help, to be part of something bigger than himself, but now he knew it was not meant to be.

At last, they reached the edge of the forest and Caelen gently settled Logan down on the ground. Yvaine knelt beside her brother, tears streaming down her face as she watched him struggle for breath. "This is my fault," she sobbed quietly, the sounds of battle not far off. "Had I not come, none of this would have happened." Tears shimmered in her eyes as she looked up at Caelen. "He saved me. He gave his life to protect mine." Disbelief stood upon her features, mingling with a touch of anger as though a part of her was furious for what Logan had done, for that selfless act to be the cause of such pain.

Caelen moved closer and placed his arm around her shoulders, trying to comfort her in any way he could. "'Tis not yer fault, and I think ye ken that. Yer brother would never blame ye. He did what he did because he loves ye, because 'tis what family does for one another."

Yvaine crumpled against Caelen, her body trembling as she burst into a wail. The sound of Yvaine's sobs resonated in Caelen's chest, like a hammer pounding relentlessly through his heart until it shattered into a thousand pieces. Aye, he had never seen her thus.

Broken.

Defeated.

Beyond hope.

As the sun slowly eased toward the western horizon, they sat beneath the trees of the forest, unable to help Logan and equally unable to leave him. His breathing grew more labored, his eyes closed, his skin pale and clammy. Yvaine held tightly onto his hand, mumbled words of apology and regret leaving her lips until suddenly Logan's hand tightened upon hers and his eyes flew open.

They both drew in a sharp breath, and even crouched closer, her other hand cupping Logan's cheek. "Logan?"

His eyes flickered open and then closed as he strained to breathe. "End... this," he groaned, his voice barely audible. "Save... our people."

Yvaine's eyes widened, and a single tear slipped down her cheek. Caelen knew that she understood, not only what Logan was asking but that this was his final request, and it cut her deeply. Still, it also gave her strength. Caelen could see it in the way her lips thinned and her hand tightened upon Logan's. She nodded then and kissed his forehead gently. "I will. I promise."

As though finally unburdened, Logan took one last shuddering breath... and then he was still.

For a moment, Yvaine simply stared at him in utter disbelief, as though she expected to awaken from this nightmare at any moment. Then, though, silent tears began snaking their way down her cheeks until she wept bitterly against Caelen's chest.

And he held her. It was all he could do, knowing that no words of comfort would do any good, would not ease her pain or the guilt he knew she felt.

Slowly, twilight fell over the world and the sounds of battle died away. Shadows grew, claiming the world, and yet the sounds of the night whispered of life all around them.

“It was a noble thing he did.”

Caelen flinched at the sound of the voice, and his right hand instantly went to the hilt of his sword as he scanned the surrounding darkness, trying to see through the faint glimmer of twilight that remained.

And then he saw it: a shadow separating from those around.

As it moved closer, Caelen saw that it was a young woman, a dark cloak upon her shoulders. Yet even with the hood on, he saw the faint glimmer of pale hair and knew precisely who she was.

“Catriona,” Yvaine gasped as she sat up, her hand swiping the tears from her cheeks. “What are ye—?” She swallowed hard and her gaze fell to Logan’s lifeless body. “Did ye ken this would happen?” she demanded, her voice growing stronger, harder, and she rose to her feet, her gaze now fixed upon Catriona. “Did ye ken he would die?”

Caelen’s hand remained upon the hilt of his sword, although deep down something told him that no danger emanated from this woman. He could not say why she had come or why she had stayed away before, yet he could not see an enemy in her.

Catriona’s eyes held sorrow as she looked upon Logan’s lifeless body. “I ken he would play an important part,” she murmured before her gaze once more sought Yvaine’s. “Yet I ken not in which way.” She sighed deeply. “Sometimes knowledge is a curse, for it never tells us everything.”

Yvaine's lips thinned, and she swallowed hard, a touch of understanding upon her face. After all, Caelen knew that she, too, struggled with her knowledge of what would happen, frustrated that all she had were glimpses of the past, whispers told in legends. At the same time, though, much remained unclear, and they could not know what unforeseen consequences might arise from the next step they took.

"Why are ye here?" Yvaine asked, her shoulders slumped despite the fire that blazed in her eyes. Caelen wondered if it had been Logan's request that had put it there.

"I came to remind ye of yer path," Catriona replied, and for a brief second, her eyes met Caelen's.

It was an odd sensation, as though she could look deep into his soul, as though she knew him, knew him as only he knew himself. Indeed, in that moment, Caelen would have believed her to be one of the Fey.

"There is nay time to lose," Catriona went on, and her gaze swept outward toward the clearing where no sounds of battle could be heard any longer. "Ye must seek out yer people before yer father's return home." Again, her gaze seemed to collide with Caelen's, including him in whatever destiny the Fey had chosen for Yvaine. "Ye must offer them a choice as yer brother asked ye to do."

Any other day, Caelen would have been surprised to hear that Catriona knew of Logan's whispered last words. She could not possibly have overheard them, and yet she knew. Today, though, was different.

Sighing deeply, Yvaine looked down at her fallen brother. "I ken," she murmured, and the hands that had hung limply at her sides balled into fists. She raised her chin and met Catriona's eyes. "I will do as he asked me to do yet..." Her

voice trailed off, and Caelen saw her eyes misting with tears once more.

“I shall stay with him,” Catriona replied as she stepped forward and grasped Yvaine’s hands, her gaze soft as it darted to Logan’s body. “Go. Ye have my word that I willna leave him here.” Then she looked at Caelen. “Dunna part from one another. Walk this path together, side by side, hand in hand, and ye shall find the sunrise.”

Caelen nodded, though, not quite certain what meaning her words held. They sounded like a promise that if they fought their way through the rain, the sun would shine upon them once more.

Grasping Yvaine by the arm, Caelen gently pulled her away from her brother’s body. The loss of the day weighed heavily upon his heart as well, and yet he knew they could not falter now. There had already been too much death, and neither one of them would be able to live with themselves if they did not do everything within their power to prevent it from continuing thus.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

IN RETROSPECT



The sun had long since set, and the night had settled in around them as they walked. Yvaine was aware of every step taken, every blade of grass that crunched beneath her feet. Neither one of them could bring themselves to mount their horses, the thought of immobility, of stillness, of having nothing to occupy their limbs was torment. The pain of her brother's death hummed through her veins, and the ache in her heart was so deep she thought it would never ease.

Was it my fault? Yvaine could not help but ask herself again and again. She knew what Caelen had told her. She understood that there had been greater forces at work beside herself. And she could not seem to banish the image of Logan pushing her aside from her mind, of him stepping in the path of that arrow. One moment, he had been alive and well, and the next, he had lain dying. Even now, Yvaine could not quite wrap her mind around it, half expecting to see Logan walking beside her.

He truly had become her brother, had he not? Yvaine knew it to be true. Only a few short months had passed since their first meeting, and yet she had come to love him. They may not have grown up with one another, but their bond had grown swiftly. Aye, she could not imagine what this news would

mean for Rory. He would be devastated to learn of Logan's death.

Fresh tears threatened, and Yvaine felt like sinking to the ground and crawling up into a tight ball, weeping for days on end. At the same time, she cursed herself for such thoughts, knowing that they served no purpose, knowing that Logan had asked something of her.

Something important.

Something she could not ignore.

Something she did not *want* to ignore.

Drawing the chilled night air into her lungs, Yvaine glanced over at Caelen, who was walking beside her with his head bowed. He had been silent since they had left the battlefield and Logan's body behind, and she could tell his own grief was running as deep as hers. He had been with her since the beginning, since the day she had stumbled into this time, his strong and steady presence a welcome comfort even in her darkest moments. Only now he, too, looked defeated.

As they walked, the only sound was the crunch of their footsteps and the occasional call of a bird in the night sky. Yvaine tried to take in the beauty of the night around her, hoping to find some solace in its peace, but the darkness only seemed to make the pain of her loss sharper.

After what felt like an eternity, Caelen finally spoke, his voice low and tight. "Did ye see where the arrow came from?"

Yvaine's chest tightened, and she blinked back the tears that threatened to fall at the reminder of her loss. Then, though, she paused, her mind only now drifting in the direction of Caelen's question. Her feet stilled, and she turned toward him, her eyes distant, though her mind drifting back to

the moment before Logan had pushed her aside, out of harm's way. "I dunna remember," she murmured, her own voice gruff to her ears, frustration making it harder. "I only saw it once it had already struck Logan in the chest." She pinched her eyes shut to chase away the image. "I think I... I think I heard it, though. I remember that familiar whirring sound. Only I couldna place it. My mind was so focused on what was going on, and then all of a sudden—" Gritting her teeth, she shook her head. "Do ye ken who fired that arrow?"

"Nay, I didna see." Caelen's face seemed overshadowed and not from the dark of night. "I canna help but wonder if perhaps..." Anguish contorted his features, and Yvaine saw deep pain in his eyes.

"Lachlan," Yvaine gasped the moment understanding found her. "You truly think that yer cousin...?" Her hands curled into fists until her fingernails dug painfully into her palms.

Caelen shrugged, a helpless expression upon his face. "I dunna ken. Though, he was angry when I spoke to my father. He didna wish for this feud to end in a treaty. He wanted it to end in a victory." He clenched his jaw, the muscles in his face tight, and Yvaine could see the tension rolling off him in waves.

Yvaine's heart sank, and her fingers dug even deeper into her flesh. "When we all met in the clearing," she murmured, recalling the very moments before everything had fallen apart, "I remember feeling relief because I couldna see Lachlan anywhere. I had feared that his anger might taint the negotiations." She closed her eyes and hung her head, imagining the proud MacCarraig warrior slinking away, seeking the perfect position from which to shoot an arrow and

disrupt the peace summit between the two feuding clans. “But why my brother?” Yvaine murmured, hating the tears that once again stilled down her cheeks. Why was it that only now in death she realized how deeply she had come to care for Logan? “Perhaps it didn’t matter who died. Perhaps any death would have seen today’s events unfold thus.”

“That arrow,” Caelen spoke up as he pulled to a halt and his hands grasped hers, pulling her closer to him, “had not been meant for yer brother.” His deep blue eyes looked into hers, urging her to remember. “It had been meant for ye. Logan pushed ye aside. If he had not...” Again, anguish twisted his face, and the next moment, he yanked her into a tight embrace, his arms wrapping tightly around her as though he never intended to let go again.

As the night whispered around them, Yvaine and Caelen clung to one another for comfort and solace, and she looked up at the sky, feeling a shiver run down her spine like a warning, reminding her that she had almost died today.

Had Logan not pushed her aside.

As though Caelen could sense her need, his arms tightened around her, his strong embrace comforting despite the fear and pain and sorrow that crept into Yvaine’s bones with each passing second. His warmth enveloped her like armor, shielding her from any harm that might come her way. Aye, it felt good not to be alone in this, to have Caelen by her side.

Blinking away tears, she slowly pulled away from Caelen, still clinging to his hands as if they were a lifeline anchoring her to this moment. “Yet we canna be certain ’twas him, can we?” Not even for a moment did she wish to contemplate the fact that they had almost been separated that day. *I cannot*

return home, Yvaine realized then. I cannot leave him. Not ever. My place is by his side as his is by mine. Is it not so?

“I oughta have known,” Caelen murmured then, guilt now etched into his features. “I oughta have known that he...” He pinched his eyes shut, then he bowed his head, resting his forehead against hers. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry ye lost yer brother.”

For a long moment, they breathed the same air. “’Twas not yer fault,” Yvaine said then, echoing the words he had spoken to her earlier. “We tried our best. We tried to prevent any of this from happening. We couldna have known.” She broke the connection and took a step back, her eyes seeking his. “All we can do now is ensure that it willna happen again. Too many people have already died. This feud has to end.”

With a new sense of determination in his eyes, Caelen nodded. “Aye, it does.” Then he grasped her hand. “Let us ride. We will do as yer brother wanted, as Catriona instructed. We will leave this feud behind, offering all those willing a chance to begin again.” He swallowed hard. “And those unwilling...” He shrugged.

Yvaine squeezed his arm, and her heart ached for him. She knew how desperately he had fought for peace for so long. It had to be hard for him to realize that sometimes even the best of efforts and intentions could not sway everyone. After all, life was about choices. While they were both determined to choose peace and harmony, others might not. People like Lachlan might not know what to do with a life free of conflict and hatred. That, too, was his choice, one he had every right to make.

Still, Yvaine hoped that he was but one of only a few who would choose such a path. After all, in her mind memories

lingered of Clan MacKinnear, thriving and happy upon the island that had always been their home. Aye, they had to make haste and speak to their clans, their people, and offer them a chance for a new beginning before it was too late.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

FOR HER PEOPLE



At a signal from Yvaine, Caelen pulled his horse to a halt, his eyes surveying the castle before him, partially obscured by clouds that hovered above. The fortress walls rose high into the air with sharp turrets piercing the grey sky. He could sense guards on the watchtowers scanning them cautiously as they approached, weapons at the ready. Caelen knew their arrival would have stirred some suspicion. Nonetheless, they continued forward slowly, determined to see this through and keep the promise Yvaine had made her brother.

“We shouldna enter,” Yvaine remarked, her narrow gaze sweeping the main gate and the guards positioned there. “Even should they allow us inside, there’s no guarantee we will be allowed to leave.” She sighed. “Especially after what I have to say.” Her eyes met Caelen’s, and he nodded in agreement, ready to do as she asked.

Drawing in a deep breath, Yvaine sat up tall in the saddle, her flaming red hair billowing in the wind. “People of Clan MacLeòir, hear me!” she called out in a strong voice that echoed across the small distance that separated them from the castle walls. “I am Yvaine MacLeòir.” Her voice faltered for a brief moment as though the name was not truly hers. “I am one of ye, and I am here today to give ye a choice. Come out and hear me.”

Her words echoed through the air, her voice carrying farther than Caelen would have expected. Yet he was glad for it, hope growing in his heart as he glimpsed the first few people drawing closer to the castle gate, curiosity bringing them forth. The guards, though, hesitated, their hands upon the hilts of their swords or reaching for an arrow at their backs. Caelen could feel their suspicion, and he held his position and waited, not wishing to give them any cause to consider them a threat.

More and more people began to gather around the gate, cautiously inching forward as they recognized Yvaine. Caelen saw people pointing toward her, whispered words passing between them. Though still cautious, many stepped outside of the safety of the walls and slowly moved toward them.

“My people,” Yvaine began in a clear, strong voice that carried to every ear. “I come before ye today with a heavy heart.” She paused, pain over Logan’s loss once more clear upon her face.

Ignoring the urge to comfort her, Caelen watched instead as the people of MacLeòir Castle began to murmur amongst themselves, the expression upon their faces changing. He could sense their unease, the concern for what was to come.

“For generations now,” Yvaine continued, “alliances have been forged through marriages. However, experience has shown that only love forges bonds that last lifetimes. Loyalty cannot be forced, and if tried, the consequences are severe.”

Though some faces held confusion, Caelen saw others—older clans people—nod in agreement, no doubt remembering the devastating end of the two unions that two generations ago had been meant to ensure peace between the Clans MacLeòir and MacCarraig. Still, it was those counting fewer years who

seemed to agree most ardently, the expression in their eyes an echo of what Caelen felt in his heart. Aye, he, too, wished to marry for love, to have the right to choose the one person with whom he would share his life.

“Thus, a peace summit was attempted only a few days ago,” Yvaine went on, people staring at her with wide eyes, hanging on every word she spoke. “The hope was to see our people come to an agreement that would ensure lasting peace. Unfortunately, negotiations between the MacLeòirs and the MacCarmaigs have failed,” anger now tinged Yvaine’s voice, “because some insist on clinging to old hatreds and refuse to turn over a new leaf. As long as we follow those who refuse to shed the old ways, there will never be peace.” Yvaine swallowed hard. “Only bloodshed.”

The murmuring grew louder, and Caelen saw people shaking their heads in agreement. They, too, were tired of this conflict, never having known anything else.

“In the battle that ensued,” she paused, her gaze seeking those of her people, “my brother, Logan MacLeòir, was killed.”

The crowd gasped in shock, loud wails rising to the sky at the news. Caelen could feel their sorrow. Aye, Logan had been dearly loved by his people, a compassionate man who had spent all his life fighting for a better tomorrow, and who had ultimately given his life to protect someone he loved.

“I will no longer live this life,” Yvaine declared in a firm voice, yet her eyes glistened with tears. “I canna go on like this, for it would dishonor my brother’s memory. More than anything he wished to see this feud come to an end, to see his people safe, and so I have made a choice.” She lifted her chin

and met her people's eyes. "I will leave this feud behind and start over... far away from this place."

Again, the crowd gasped in shock.

Only a few months ago, Yvaine's unexpected return had been celebrated as good fortune, as a sign that the Fey looked favorably upon them. And now, their laird's son had been killed in battle. No doubt, they feared what was to happen next.

"I have made my choice, and now ye must make yers. Will ye stay... or will ye follow us?" She turned to look at Caelen then, her eyes warm and full of fire as she held out her hand to him.

With a smile, Caelen took it, holding hers gently, safely within his own as they sat atop their horses side by side, facing her people. He could sense their gazes turning to him and heard murmured voices guessing at his identity.

"This man here," Yvaine said, her attention once more with her people, "is Caelen MacCarraig."

Another gasp tore from her people's lips, and Caelen saw a few guards unsheathing their swords. Yet they remained where they were, their eyes once more turning to Yvaine, waiting for an explanation.

"I ken ye were told that he is our enemy, that his clan is our enemy, yet where has that led us?" She looked around the crowd, pausing to give them a moment to reflect. "Nay, I choose a different path." She squeezed his hand and smiled at him. "*We* choose a different path. We willna follow in our fathers' footsteps, seeking power and glory above all else. We refuse to continue to fight one another for reasons that are not

our own. We are not enemies. We are the same. We want the same.”

Caelen’s heart beat wildly in his chest as he listened to Yvaine’s words. He could not deny that a part of him wished to hear a public declaration of her affections, of her intentions to remain with him. After all, she had confessed her love for him the very moment before their clans had faced one another in that meadow. Only they had yet to speak of it.

Ever since that moment, Caelen had contemplated what this new truth might mean for them. Aye, she loved him but did that mean she would stay? A part of him still feared that once this conflict was put to rest—if it could be done!—Yvaine would return home.

Home to her own time.

A place where Caelen feared he could not follow.

“Together,” Yvaine said, her voice loud and clear and ringing with conviction, as though she had not a doubt in her mind, “Caelen and I will begin again. We will leave this feud behind and create a new life.” She looked out at the crowd, and Caelen could sense her determination, but also her hope. “I invite all of those willing to join us to meet us at the coast in one week’s time,” she announced. “That is the choice we offer ye. The same choice we will offer Caelen’s people as well. The same choice everyone deserves.”

Stunned into silence, the people stared at them, most faces marked by confusion and fear even, indecision in their eyes. Caelen understood them well. Their lives had been upended within a matter of moments, and he knew from experience that it took time to adapt.

“I hope to see ye again,” Yvaine called out. “If ye wish, meet us at the coast in a week’s time.” Then, without another word, she pulled her mount around, her eyes briefly meeting Caelen’s, and charged back down the path they had come. Caelen followed on her heel, the echo of her people’s shouts drifting to his ears. Theirs had been a bold move, and Caelen hoped with all his heart that it would bear fruit.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

FOR HIS PEOPLE



Yvaine swept her eyes over the rolling hills of the Highlands before her gaze settled upon MacCarraig Castle in the distance. Not unlike her birth father's keep, it was an imposing structure, thick with tall walls protecting its people, its stones weathered from centuries-long exposure to the elements. The sun just crested the hill behind it, and its rays cast an almost golden glow over the turrets and towers. It was a beautiful place, and yet Yvaine's heart clenched at the thought of drawing closer.

While she could not deny that part of her wished to see Caelen's home, the place where he had grown up, she could not seem to separate this place from the man who had taken her brother's life. After all, Lachlan, too, had grown up here, nephew to the current laird, and the very person who had destroyed all their hopes. Indeed, Yvaine could not gaze upon the castle without seeing her brother's lifeless body lying in the tall grass. She knew that this image would forever stay with her, and yet she loathed its reminder.

Still, there was no other way. After speaking to her own people, it was now time to invite the MacCarraigs as well, to ensure that the future would shine brighter than the past. To ensure that Logan had not died in vain.

The sun shone brightly as Caelen led the way up a winding path toward the castle gate. He had been quiet the entire journey, and Yvaine knew that he still felt guilty for what had happened to Logan. Not simply because Logan had been her brother and Lachlan was his cousin. It was not a simple matter of familial obligation. Nay, she knew Caelen felt guilty because for a long time now he had thought it his responsibility to stop the bloodshed and bring peace to his people, and in his mind, he had failed.

Terribly.

Horribly.

Aye, tension radiated from him, and Yvaine wanted nothing more than to reach out and take his hand, to assure him that everything would be all right. Yet she held back, for how could she be certain? So much she had hoped for, so much *they* had hoped for, had already gone horribly wrong. How many more people would lose their lives before a semblance of peace could be achieved? That had not been part of the legends Yvaine had grown up with, and it was a sobering moment for her to realize how much heartache and pain hid behind those glorious tales told around a warm fire.

As they rode through the fields, people looked up, slight frowns upon their faces as their eyes swept from Caelen to her. “Come!” Caelen called to them all, waving them onward, urging them to follow as they made their way up to the castle gate. “Come and hear what I have to say.”

Shivers trailed down Yvaine’s back as they rode through the open gate and into the courtyard. Guards watched them, similar frowns upon their faces, and yet their eyes were trained on Caelen, something expectant in their demeanor. Aye, they

recognized him as their laird's son, someone to whom they were loyal, someone whom they had sworn to serve.

Renewing his summons, Caelen called out to his people, his gelding prancing nervously beside Yvaine's mare as they watched people emerge from the keep, from the stables, from everywhere until they gathered together before them.

Keeping back, Yvaine watched the moment unfold. She saw people she had never met before, and yet the expression upon their faces felt familiar. These people were just like her own. People who had loved and lost, who wished for safety and peace and feared the unknown that tomorrow might bring. They were good people, people who deserved a brighter future.

Indeed, the family Yvaine called her own, her true family back home, had truly found the best path to walk. A path that did not see people separated because of clan allegiances. Instead, they had chosen a path that brought people together no matter their differences because, after all, in truth people were not that different at all, were they? Not in the ways it mattered.

Pride swelled in Yvaine's chest to be the daughter of such a family before she realized with a sudden shock that the story of her people, the story of the MacKinnears, was about to begin right here, right now.

With Caelen.

And her.

Indeed, it was an odd thought to be the daughter of a noble clan and at the same time its origin. Was this truly why she had been saved all those years ago? Why had the Fey interfered and sent her back now? Yvaine could not even begin to

understand all the twisted and shrouded ways of the world but perhaps she need not. All that mattered now was that she stayed the course.

For Logan.

For all those she loved.

Excited murmurs hummed through the crowd until Caelen lifted a hand, asking for silence. Then he spoke. “My people!” he called out, his voice strong and determined as it rang through the air. “I have returned today to put a choice before ye. So, listen carefully and then do as ye deem right.”

Slowly, with carefully chosen words, Caelen explained to his people what had happened a few days earlier when their clan and the MacLeòirs had met for a peace summit. Yvaine watched as his people listened, their eyes growing wider, not a whisper falling from their lips. She saw hope grow and rise before it plummeted abruptly the moment Caelen spoke of Logan’s death and the ensuing battle.

At this, murmurs rose into the air and grew louder, the shock and disbelief of Caelen’s people palpable. They stared up at him, stared at one another, helpless and afraid, wanting nothing more than for someone to set everything right.

“Our fathers are locked in an old battle, unwilling to see reason,” Caelen continued in a hard voice full of contempt. Still, when he turned his eyes to her and held out his hand, love shone in his gaze. “That is why *we* have chosen a different path.”

Despite everything that had happened, despite the pain that still lived in Yvaine’s heart, the moment she grasped Caelen’s hand, she felt the weight upon her shoulders lifted, her sorrow

soothed and her spirits rising once more. His hand held hers gently, his skin warm against hers.

And then, a small voice called out from the crowd, “Are ye Yvaine? Are ye the lass the Fey stole away to protect her?”

Yvaine turned to see a wee lassie standing between her parents, each one had a hand on her shoulder. Her blue eyes shone brightly in the morning sun as she gazed up at Yvaine with a mesmerized expression, as though a mythical creature stood before her.

Although Yvaine could not help the blush that came to her cheeks at the lassie’s admiring gaze, she understood the feeling. Aye, legends held power. They encouraged and gave strength, their whispered words stirring even the coldest of hearts back to life.

Caelen smiled at Yvaine rather mischievously as she suddenly found herself the center of attention. Then, he turned back to his people and nodded. “Aye, she is Yvaine MacLeòir, the lass we all thought dead. Yet in truth, the Fey only waited for the right moment to send her back to us, the moment we would need her the most.”

Yvaine stared at Caelen as he spoke these words, deeply uncomfortable to be put in such a position, to be seen as someone she simply was not. Aye, people whispered of the Fey, even Catriona had referred to them. Still, what was truth and what was not was beyond Yvaine’s ability to tell. Were they speaking a falsehood if they allowed people to believe that a greater force had interfered? She was not certain, and yet she did not wish this responsibility to be placed upon her shoulders. At the same time, Yvaine understood why Caelen had seized the moment.

People always needed something or someone to believe in. It was human nature to wish for a greater power that offered protection and counsel. Perhaps it truly did not matter whether it was real or not. Perhaps simply believing in it gave people strength.

“That moment... is now,” Caelen addressed his people. “The moment ye needa make a choice as I have made mine. I refuse to continue this feud, and thus I—” He paused and smiled at Yvaine. “*We* have decided to start over, to find a new place for our people. Together as one.”

Another round of excited murmurs swept through the crowd, some voices tentative, others loud and determined. Some spoke of doubt while others only knew hope.

“If ye wish to join us, meet us at the coast where on a clear day ye can see a glimmer of the Fey Isles across the sea.”

With these last words, a hushed silence fell over his people, and they stared at him as though he had asked them to climb the heavens and meet him upon a cloud. Still, Caelen said no more. Instead, he nodded to Yvaine and then turned his horse around and rode out the castle gate without a look back. Yvaine followed him, her heart and mind overwhelmed by everything that had happened these past few days. Sorrow and joy warred within her and she knew not which to feel.

Chapter Forty

REUNITED



Caelen and Yvaine rode hard, the wind whipping through their hair and clothing, the thunder of their horses' hooves pounding in their ears. They spoke very little, their minds and hearts focused on reaching the coast, hoping and fearing the moment they would set eyes upon it. Rarely in life, everything came down to a single moment, and yet now it did. Although Caelen had always had his doubts, he was now certain what he was meant to do. Always had he hoped to save his clan, his people, to bring them peace somehow. Now, here, this was his chance.

He could not fail.

And yet he feared that he might.

Of course, doubts remained in Caelen's heart. After all, the two clans had been divided for too long, the animosity that existed between them bred into their bones. No one even questioned anymore why the MacLeòirs and the MacCarmaigs were at war. It was simply the way of the world, part of life just like the sun rising in the east. And now, Yvaine and he were trying to bring these two people together. Was it even possible? Even should they heed their call, was there any chance for peace between them?

In moments of greatest doubt, though, Caelen thought of everything Yvaine had told him of the future. It still seemed unbelievable to him, and yet he did not doubt her words. He knew her strength and her courage, and he believed that if anyone could ensure the future it was her. That thought gave him hope and renewed his strength.

As they rode, the landscape blurred before them until finally, after two days of hard riding, the coast came into view. Caelen and Yvaine drew their horses to a stop, gazing out at the sea, breathing in the salty air. The wind whipped fiercely around them, and dark clouds hung in the sky, threatening a downpour. Still, there was beauty in this moment, and Caelen wished he could glimpse the Fey Isles in the distance.

“Look, there, by the rocks.” Yvaine suddenly exclaimed, pointing ahead. “I see something moving in the flicker of light, I think.”

At her observation, Caelen’s heart grew instantly lighter. He had hoped they would find Fergus and Gwyneth here, yet he had been afraid that something might have prevented his friend and his sister from reaching this place.

Caelen and Yvaine spurred their horses forward, and soon he made out the familiar figures of Fergus and Gwyneth, huddled together around a fire in a small cave farther down the rocky beach. Indeed, it was the same cave that he and Yvaine had sought shelter in not long ago.

Caelen smiled, wanting to see this as a good omen.

Eager for a reunion, he guided his gelding down to the beach, Yvaine following close behind. Then they charged toward the cave before he called out to his sister and friend.

As Fergus and Gwyneth noticed them, their faces lit up, and they both jumped to their feet, hurrying toward them. Caelen and Yvaine pulled their horses to a halt, and Caelen quickly dismounted, rushing to embrace Fergus and Gwyneth in a tight hug.

Tears welled up in Gwyneth's eyes as she embraced him tightly. "Ye made it," she said softly, her voice thick with emotion. "I was so afraid for ye."

Fergus chuckled. "Did I not tell ye he would be fine?" He placed a hand upon Gwyneth's shoulder, the smile upon his face speaking of deep affection.

Caelen pinched his sister's chin playfully before turning to introduce Yvaine. "Gwyneth, this is Yvaine," he said proudly, feeling the need to say more, to explain somehow all that Yvaine meant to him. Still, words failed him, and no more than a deep sigh rushed from his lips.

Grinning at him, Yvaine stepped forward, her gaze warm as she met his sister. "'Tis an honor to meet ye. I ken we have seen one another here and there at Chief Morganach's keep; yet we were never properly introduced, were we?"

Gwyneth nodded. "Nay, we were not. After all, we were raised to be enemies." She heaved a deep sigh, and Caelen noticed her shifting closer to Fergus, seeking comfort and reassurance. Indeed, a strong bond had formed between them. "Thank ye for bringing my brother back to me."

"Ye're welcome," Yvaine replied before shooting Caelen a teasing grin. "I shallna allow any harm to befall him. Ye have my word on that."

"Come into the cave," Fergus exclaimed then, casting a frowned look up at the sky as the first few drops of rain fell to

the ground. “Unless ye prefer to be soaked, of course.” He drew the horses forward, seeing them settled next to their own in a dry corner of the cave.

Meanwhile Gwyneth beckoned them forward, urging them to seat themselves by the fire. “Ye must be hungry,” she exclaimed, reaching for some bread and broth. “I’m afraid ’tis not much, but ’twill fill yer bellies.”

Together, the four sat around the fire, simply enjoying one another’s company for a few long moments. Then Fergus cleared his throat. “What news do ye bring? What news of the peace summit?”

Caelen hung his head, and he could read upon his friend’s expression that he understood. “I’m afraid it ended badly.” He rather loathed having to repeat the events of that day, for every word brought with it the memory of Logan lying on the ground, of their clansmen rushing at one another with their swords drawn.

“There is no hope for peace between us?” Gwyneth asked tentatively as she scooted closer to Fergus, slipping her arm through his.

Caelen met Yvaine’s gaze, seeing it overshadowed by fresh pain. “I’m afraid not.” He heaved a deep breath, and Fergus’s frown grew deeper, suspicion coming to his eyes. “An arrow killed Logan MacLeòir, Yvaine’s brother, and her father immediately accused our people.” He sighed. “Of course, ’tis a reasonable assumption.”

Gwyneth clasped her hands to her mouth, her eyes wide as she looked at Yvaine. “Yer brother is dead? I’m so sorry. I...” She shook her head, clearly at a loss. Of course, she was. After all, no words could ever make right what had gone so horribly wrong.

The four of them sat together in silence for a long moment, gazing out at the sea that stretched before them for miles on end. The sky was growing ever darker, heavy raindrops falling upon the beach as the wind howled around them.

“What now?” Fergus eventually asked, his expression crestfallen as well. “What do we do?”

Caelen looked at Yvaine, the mere sight of her reminding him that not all hope was lost. They had suffered, aye, and yet they were far from defeated. “We leave,” Caelen said simply, once more turning to look at his friend and his sister.

“Leave?” Gwyneth exclaimed, a deep frown upon her face and confusion swirling in her eyes. “What do ye mean?”

Caelen shrugged. “We leave all of this behind. This is our fathers’ war, not ours. We’ve tried to reason with them, we’ve tried everything we could, and they willna listen.” He reached out and grasped Yvaine’s hand, holding it tightly within his own. “So, we will go and begin again.”

Fergus stared at him. “Go where? Will they not come after us? Does yer father not already consider us traitors? In case ye’ve forgotten, last time we saw him, he locked us in the dungeon.”

Caelen’s heart grew heavy at the thought, and so, it was Yvaine who answered, squeezing his hand reassuringly. “After the failed summit, we rode out to the MacLeòir keep as well as yer clan’s home. We spoke to people and invited them to join us, to leave this war behind and begin again.” A tentative smile teased her lips, and it grew brighter as she took a deep breath. “They will come,” she said, conviction ringing in her voice. “I am certain of it. They will come and join us in this new beginning.”

“But where?” Gwyneth asked tentatively. “Here? On the coast?” Doubt lingered in her eyes. “Will they let us?” She looked at Fergus, and he slowly shook his head, knowing full well that if they were to stay here, their fathers would seek them out soon, enraged by what they had done.

“Nay,” Yvaine replied firmly. “We shall go to the islands. There, we will be safe. I promise.”

“The islands?” Gwyneth echoed, the doubt in her eyes increasing. “The Fey Isles?”

Caelen and Yvaine looked at one another for a long moment, silently considering how much to say. Still, neither one of them wished to keep secrets, to begin this new life with a lie to those closest to them. And so, Caelen and Yvaine told Fergus and Gwyneth everything. They told them about where Yvaine had been all those years, what she had seen and learned in the future. They shared with them everything that had happened since her return and watched their eyes grow wider with each spoken word. Still, Caelen could see that they believed them, especially Gwyneth with her heart for old legends. “That is the most wonderful tale I’ve ever heard,” she breathed, snuggling closer into Fergus’s embrace. “I wish I could see the time ye call home, the future of what we are about to begin.”

Hours passed as they spoke to one another, sharing their stories and planning ahead for what tomorrow might bring. The sky grew ever darker outside until no more than a few twinkling stars were visible beyond the mouth of the cave.

And then, suddenly, a shadow moved toward them, tall and swift. Gwyneth gasped, and Caelen and Fergus drew their swords while Yvaine reached for the bow and arrows by her feet.

“Halt!” the shadow barked before he stepped closer and into the light of the fire. The hood hid the man’s face, and yet Caelen knew that voice, would have known it anywhere.

“Lachlan,” he growled the moment his cousin pushed the hood back and revealed himself.

Chapter Forty-One

THE QUESTION OF REVENGE



Yvaine felt her fury rising as she stood only a few steps away from the mouth of the cave, her fingertips caressing the bowstring. She stared at the outline of Lachlan illuminated by the fire, her eyes unblinking. On either side of her, Caelen and Fergus were poised, ready to defend her should the need arise. Gwyneth stood in the back of the cave, trembling in fear.

The air was heavy with tension, and Yvaine felt her anger bubbling to the surface. Lachlan had killed her brother, and she wanted him to suffer. She wanted him to feel every ounce of the pain that she was feeling. He deserved it. He deserved far worse. She remembered well the night Caelen had first tried to spirit her away from her father's keep. Lachlan had come upon them with orders from his laird to end her life, and he had not hesitated. There had not been a shred of compassion or doubt in his eyes, and Yvaine had wondered if he truly was a man without empathy.

Yvaine finally broke the silence, her voice strained with hatred and sorrow. "Ye killed my brother," she growled, and her fingers almost let the arrow fly then and there.

The slight narrowing of Lachlan's eyes told her that he knew how close he stood to death's door, and although his face remained tense, there was no fear in his eyes. "I didna," he

growled in response, his gaze dark as it drilled into hers, as though they were the only two people there.

Yvaine wanted to scream in rage, but she forced herself to maintain her composure. She was determined to avenge her brother, and she was not going to let her emotions get the better of her. “Dunna lie to me,” she spat. “My brother is dead, and ye killed him. I was there. I saw it with my own eyes.”

Lachlan held her gaze, his expression unreadable. “I didna kill him,” he said again, his jaw clenched, and his hands tightened into fists. Still, he held no weapon, his sword and dagger still sheathed at his belt.



Yvaine felt her fury boiling higher and higher, making her limbs tremble and her heart ache fiercely. She cast a glance at Caelen, his forehead furrowed and yet his hand lay upon the hilt of his sword. Then she advanced on Lachlan, her finger tightening on the bowstring. “Ye’re a liar,” she accused, her voice trembling with emotion. “My brother is dead, and I want justice.”

Lachlan held her gaze for a few more seconds before he finally spoke. “Aye, yer brother is dead, but I didna kill him.” He said no more, not even attempting to explain himself.

Yvaine gritted her teeth, struggling with the urge to simply let her arrow fly and find its mark. Still, the way Lachlan stood before her stirred doubt, and Yvaine knew if she simply took his life, her doubt would grow every day from now on, making her wonder what he had meant to say.

“Explain yerself then,” she hissed, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw Gwyneth standing far in the back, only a shadow in the flickering firelight, fear in her eyes as she stared

at her cousin. It made Yvaine wonder how shielded Gwyneth had been from the tasks her cousin and brother had been sent out to handle.

The cave was cold and silent, the air thick with the tension of a thousand words unsaid. Lachlan inhaled a slow breath, his body still coiled tight, and yet he barely moved a muscle. “I was there,” he finally said, glancing at Caelen. “Ye ken I was. I dunna deny it. However, I wasna the one who shot that arrow.”

“Ye were gone,” Yvaine spat, her body trembling with rage and despair as the image of her brother being felled by that arrow once more held her in a tight grip. “Ye were not at yer laird’s side. I looked for ye because I feared what ye might do, what ye might say. I feared ye might disrupt the negotiations.” She heaved a deep breath. “Yet I never would’ve thought...” She shook her head, and a deep sense of guilt once more washed over her. Aye, perhaps she ought to have seen it coming. Perhaps if she had, Logan would still be alive. “Why did ye kill him? Why him?” Yvaine’s grip on her bow tightened as she struggled to remain composed.

Lachlan gritted his teeth, anger flaring in his eyes. “I didna,” he repeated, his voice reverberating with fury barely held in check. “As I said, I wasna the one to let loose that arrow. I stood near the trees on the eastern side, watching everything unfold.” He leaned forward ever so slightly, his gaze drilling into hers. “Do ye hear me? I stood on the opposite side of the clearing. I couldna have shot that arrow.”

“How do we ken ye speak the truth?” Caelen asked as he stepped forward, his arm brushing Yvaine’s shoulder as he moved, a gesture of comfort. “How can we trust ye?” His voice was hard, and Yvaine wished he did not have to be here,

to see his cousin thus accused. Yet she was glad, he stood at her side.

Lachlan looked at his cousin then, and for a moment, Yvaine thought to see a different man. There was something in his gaze that spoke of regret, of memories of days long gone by, of memories he still held dear despite the anger that had claimed his heart for a reason Yvaine could not name. “All I can do,” he finally said, “is give ye my word. Whether ye believe it is up to ye alone.”

Yvaine could not deny the fury that still raged in her heart, yet neither could she deny the doubt that slowly sneaked in. Could it be that they had been wrong? A lot had happened that day. Countless people had stood in that clearing. How was she to know that others had not hidden somewhere in the woods? Had Logan been slain by another’s hand?

Shaken, Yvaine glanced back at Caelen and Fergus, who still stood protectively close, their loyalty to her heartwarming. Still, she could not act without thought, without certainty. And so, she lowered her bow and met Lachlan’s eyes. “The last time we met, ye wished to kill me. Ye had been ordered to kill me. Now, an arrow was sent to take my life, and we’re supposed to believe that ’twas not ye who did this?”

Lachlan inhaled a deep breath, and his jaw moved as he hesitated as though suddenly uncertain whether to share whatever he meant to say with all of them. “The arrow,” he began, and his gaze shifted from Caelen to her, “was not meant for ye.”

Yvaine stilled, surprised by his words. “Of course, it was. Logan pushed me aside. He saved my life.” She looked at Caelen, a deep frown upon his face, his gaze distant as he, too, did his utmost to recall the events of that day.

“Aye, he did,” Lachlan confirmed. “He had to because in the moment the arrow was let loose, ye moved. Ye took a step to the side,” his gaze shifted to Caelen, “in front of him.”

Yvaine’s heart grew cold as she followed Lachlan’s gaze and stared into Caelen’s eyes, his own wide. “Caelen,” she whispered, her hands suddenly shaking. Aye, he had stood at her side on that day, his arm so close that it had brushed hers. She remembered that teasing tingle his touch always elicited right before her ears had picked up that familiar whirring sound of an arrow finding its way across the sky.

Caelen held her gaze then swallowed hard before he lifted his gaze to his cousin. “How do we ken ye speak true?” he echoed his earlier question, doubt in his eyes.

Lachlan shrugged. “I dunna ken.”

“Why are ye here?” Caelen demanded, stepping past Yvaine and toward his cousin. He sheathed his sword, his gaze blazing with everything that had happened between him and his cousin these past months. “Why did ye come here?”

Lachlan’s teeth ground together, the muscles in his jaw flexing. “I came to warn ye,” he finally gritted out, as though these words somehow revealed a weakness he would rather have kept concealed.

“To warn me?” Caelen shook his head. “Do ye truly expect me to believe that?” His voice was harsh, and yet Yvaine heard pain in it as well.

“Believe what ye will,” Lachlan spat before he spun around and walked a few steps closer to the mouth of the cave. “I may not always agree with ye, but I would never seek to end yer life without a bloody good reason. I thought ye ken that.” He swallowed hard, the muscles in his jaw flexing again.

“Take care of yerself,” he said by way of farewell before he turned around and walked away, quickly melting into the dark of night once more.

Chapter Forty-Two

A NEW BEGINNING



Caelen, Yvaine, Fergus, and Gwyneth stood atop the cliff and surveyed the rolling sea before them. It seemed endless, as though not even the horizon could contain it. The sky was a clear blue, and the sun shone from its perch in the heavens. Despite the slight mist that hung in the air above the sea, far in the distance, Caelen glimpsed a faint outline of the Fey Isles, the very place they all hoped to call home.

With a deep sigh, Caelen moved to take Yvaine's hand as they stood side by side, eyes directed toward their future. At his touch, her gaze met his and a tentative yet brave smile teased her lips. Aye, standing here felt different for her, did it not? After all, the island across the sea had always been Yvaine's home. What did it feel like to see it now at the very beginning of her clan's story? Caelen could only hope that they had not altered something significant, that their clans would find their way here and begin this journey.

Together.

Despite the heartbreak and loss they had suffered so recently, Caelen felt his heart swell with hope. For years now, he had feared that nothing would ever end the feud between their two clans, that they would fight one another until there was nothing left. Indeed, the thought of their fathers' relentless

hatred for one another saddened him greatly; however, Caelen knew he was not the only one who was tired of this animosity. When he and Yvaine had ridden out to their clans, he had seen it in their people's faces. They had certainly been shocked, afraid of what was to come, and yet there had been a glimmer of hope for something they had longed for for countless days.

Peace.

Harmony.

Now, finally that time had come, Caelen was certain of it, and he was glad to have not only Yvaine at his side but also Fergus and Gwyneth. Both stared at the far horizon with curiosity in their eyes and tentative smiles upon their faces as they no doubt imagined the future that awaited them. Indeed, his sister had never looked... more like herself, like the kind and open-minded sister he had always known. In recent years, she had been too worried, too afraid to truly let her spirit shine. Now, Caelen had no doubt that she would be an inspiration to all.

Together, they stood high upon the cliff top, their eyes occasionally sweeping north and south, their hearts hoping to see people joining them. Yvaine's hand in his felt tense, and Caelen knew she felt as he did.

Apprehension.

Concern.

What if no one was to come? It was a thought Caelen was certain was gnawing on all their minds. Would they need to turn back and speak to people once more? Would there even be any point to that? Still, the thought of traveling to the Fey Isles only the four of them was one Caelen did not wish to contemplate.

Another thought Caelen did not wish to consider was who had shot the arrow that had killed Logan. Although Caelen could not rightly say that he trusted his cousin, Lachlan had seemed sincere when he had sought them out the night they had arrived here. Aye, if he were guilty of killing Logan, Lachlan would not have denied it. Indeed, he would have defended himself, his motivation, argued with passion why he had done so and why it had been the right course of action. The fact that he had spoken so calmly, even looking offended at the mere suggestion, proved to Caelen that he had spoken the truth.

That, though, begged the question of who else could have interfered in such a heinous way in their clans' negotiations. Since Logan MacLeòir had been the one shot, it was a reasonable assumption that the arrow had come from one of Caelen's own clan. Yet had Lachlan not said that the arrow had been meant for him, Caelen? If it had been merely a mistake that Logan had been hit, could the archer have come from Clan MacLeòir?

Caelen's mind buzzed with questions, questions that refused to have easy answers. He did not know what to think, uncertain how to proceed. After all, this was something that could not be ignored. If there was someone out there, determined on keeping the two clans at war, who knew what this person might do next? Would he be so bold as to follow them to the island?

Caelen shivered at the thought. He remembered the legend Yvaine had told, of a traitor who sought to impede the journey of the two clans. Unfortunately, they had not been able to discover that person's identity. And thus, the threat remained.

Squeezing Yvaine's hand, Caelen sought her gaze, relieved that she was alive and well, standing beside him. He could not imagine a life without her any longer, and yet from the moment she had returned, threats to her life had been issued. One even from his own father. If she stayed, would she be safe?

Did she intend to stay? Aye, the morning before the meeting in the clearing, Yvaine had confessed her love, and yet Caelen knew that love alone sometimes simply was not enough. After all, she had ties elsewhere, family who loved her, the family that had made her the incredible woman she had become.

Again, he squeezed her hand, unwilling to ever let her go. Still, if she so chose, Caelen would not keep her by his side against her will. It would break his heart, but he would never dare break hers.

"There!" Gwyneth's joyful exclamation jarred them all from their thoughts, and as one, they turned to the north.

In the far distance, Caelen glimpsed movement. Thus far, he could make out no more than tiny specks hovering upon the horizon, yet his mind rejoiced. His people were coming. Some, at least, were heeding his call.

"They're coming!" Gwyneth clapped her hands together joyfully then all but threw herself into Fergus's embrace, making him sway upon his feet. "They're coming! They're truly coming!"

"Aye," Yvaine murmured as she turned toward him, her sparkling green eyes seeking his. "They're coming."

Looking into her eyes, Caelen nodded, the unspoken question of their own personal future hanging in the air

between them. Caelen wished to ask, wished to know, and yet this was a precious moment, and he did not dare risk tainting it with the certainty of her imminent departure.

Nay, for now, he would live in the moment and hold on to her for as long as he could.

Chapter Forty-Three

HERE COME THE MACKINNEARS



Yvaine felt overwhelmed by the sight before her eyes as she stood high upon the cliff top with Caelen by her side, witnessing their people's arrival. This was the very beginning of the MacKinnears, of the clan that was more than home and family to her. It was who she was at heart, free and independent and yet never alone.

In that moment, it was as though she could feel her parents' presence, as though they stood right behind her, one hand on each of her shoulders. She could almost see Duncan rolling his eyes at her and Keir grinning that wicked grin of his. She could almost hear her grandmother's voice telling the story of Yvaine and Caelen, of the time of the clan's beginning, as Magnus sat with shining eyes, listening as intently as she did.

Tears shot to her eyes, and yet Yvaine blinked them away, turning away from the longing that had seized her so abruptly and toward the man by her side. She squeezed his hand, holding on to him, knowing that he was the only one who could throw something in the balance. Aye, as heartbroken as she felt at the thought of never seeing her family again, she could not deny that her heart also rejoiced at the idea of remaining by Caelen's side. What was she to do?

Yvaine did not know, all that seemed clear was that soon they would cross the sea toward the Fey Isles, toward MacKinnear Island, and Yvaine would find herself tempted day in and out to return home.

If possible.

Indeed, was it possible? As far as she knew, she had crossed the barrier of time twice. Once, even without her knowledge, even without retaining a single memory of it. And then another time, by accident once more. Yet that second time Yvaine remembered as though it had happened yesterday. Could she do so again? Was it even her choice whether she stayed or left?

Perhaps that was a question for another day. Perhaps for now, Yvaine simply ought to live in the movement and enjoy all those that followed. Right here, right now, she was by Caelen's side, and with a smile, she snuggled into his embrace, his arm coming around her shoulders as the wind tugged upon her unruly hair.

Aye, this moment was perfect.

Let's forget about tomorrow, Yvaine whispered silently to herself, *at least, for a little while.*

THE END

Of course, this is not the end. It is merely the beginning. Follow the legend of Yvaine and Caelen and find out how the MacKinnears came to live upon the Fey Isles. Get your copy of [In the Coming of Tomorrow](#) now!

Read on for a sneak-peek!

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BREE WOLF



IN the
COMING of
TOMORROW

lass of legend

CHAPTER ONE - TO NEW SHORES

MacKinnear Island, Scotland 1401 (or a variation thereof)

Caelen MacCarraig stood on the windswept cliffs, breathing in the salty tang of the sea air. Before him, the waves crashed against the jagged rocks below, a wild symphony that matched the turmoil in his heart. Beside him, Yvaine's fiery-red curls danced like flames around her determined face, and her green eyes sparkled with hope and passion.

“Look upon these shores,” Yvaine urged, gesturing toward the faint island on the horizon, almost concealed in the mist that lingered upon the sea. “This is where we shall make our new home, where we will forge a new beginning for our people.”

Beside her stood Fergus, Caelen's childhood friend, his dark hair ruffled by the wind, his green eyes filled with loyalty and resolve. Gwyneth, Caelen's sister, her chestnut tresses braided down her back, listened intently, clutching Fergus's arm, her head resting against his shoulder. Aye, she shared in Yvaine's dream, hoping to find love and freedom far from the bitter feud that had consumed their clans for generations, far from the duty she had grown up with—a duty that prompted her to ignore her own hopes and wishes and agree to a marriage based on political reasons alone.

As Caelen wrapped his arms around Yvaine, he could not help but be swept up in her vision. He had been to the Fey Isles before, and yet he had never seen it as a possible home. Steeped in myths, even the howling of the wind there had always seemed eerie to Caelen. Yet in Yvaine's stories, this island was the most wondrous place. He squinted his eyes, gazing at its faint outline in the distance, knowing its rocky

shores to promise sanctuary from the bloodshed and hatred that plagued their lives. Aye, in Yvaine's memories, in the future that was to come, it was a place of peace and happiness, where every person could choose their own path, unburdened by the weight of their ancestors' grudges. It would become MacKinnear Island, named for the clan they would create together—a clan that would thrive through the centuries to come.

“’Tis been so long since I’ve been there,” Yvaine whispered as though to the wind, her voice barely audible above the crashing of the waves. Tears clung to her lashes, and yet a smile teased her lips, at first small and tentative before it grew into something radiant. “I never thought I’d be so happy to return home. I always dreamed of adventure.” She looked up and met Caelen’s eyes. “I never knew...” A tear rolled down her cheek, and she did not bother wiping it away.

Her words stirred something deep within Caelen’s heart, and he knew how torn she was, how much her heart ached for the home she had left behind, for the people who were her family. Aye, she had sacrificed much to bring them all here, and Caelen wished he knew if her heart would lead her back home.

Away from him.

As heartbreaking as that thought was, Caelen knew he could not deny her this choice. After all, being free to choose, to determine one’s own fate was the very reason they stood upon this cliff. Of course, they could have continued down the path laid out by their forebears, a path marred by blood and pain. Yet they had chosen differently. It was time to carve out a new way forward—one built on love and respect.

“I wish I could see it,” Caelen murmured in her ear, his arms wrapping more tightly around her. “I wish I could meet yer family.” Could he? Would the door to the future open for him? They did not even know if it would open for her... should she choose to go.

“Ye will see it,” Yvaine whispered, squeezing his hand as she snuggled deeper into his embrace. “Ye all will.” She smiled at Fergus and Gwyneth, still standing arm in arm. “This will be a new beginning for all of us.”

With renewed determination, they left the cliff top and began their descent to the beach below, their eyes sweeping north and south toward the people they had glimpsed from afar. Their people. People who had, like them, chosen to tread this new path. And thus, as they reached the sands, they were met by a throng of people from both the MacCarraig and MacLeòir clans. Each had brought with them the hope for a brighter future, and the courage to risk everything in pursuit of it.

“’Tis truly beginning, isn’t it?” Yvaine murmured, her eyes shining with disbelief as they touched upon all those who had come to join them. “These will be our people. United. A new clan. A new home.”

Caelen smiled. “Aye,” he breathed this one word, and yet it rang with every last hope he held dear. Today was the day. Together, they were now embarking on this new journey that would change the course of history, all of them bound by their shared desire for peace and the unyielding belief in a better life.

As the people gathered around them, Caelen could see the mixture of fear and hope in their eyes. Clutching their few belongings close, children held tightly to their parents’ hands,

uncertain of what lay ahead. Yet, they had taken this chance, and their courage would serve them well in the days to come.

“Yvaine,” a woman spoke up, her voice wavering with uncertainty. “Why are we here? What will become of us?”

Families from both clans murmured their agreement, awaiting an answer that would put their minds at ease. A young lad looked up at Yvaine, his eyes wide with curiosity and awe. “Are ye truly the lass who is protected by the Fey?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper. “Do they wish for us to go to the island?”

Caelen’s gaze shifted to Yvaine, aware of the rumors that had circled her disappearance at the age of three. Though none knew she had traveled through a portal four hundred years into the future, where she had been taken in by her future descendants—the MacKinnears—the whispers of her connection to the otherworldly Fey had persisted.

Yvaine met the lad’s gaze, her expression gentle yet firm. “I have never met any of the Fey,” she admitted truthfully. “I am mortal like all of ye. But I believe we have been brought together for a purpose—to create a new home, a place where our clans can live together in peace. We must all make this choice for ourselves, as it is our lives that we are shaping.”

The people exchanged glances, weighing her words as they considered their alternatives—to return to the feud that had torn their families apart or to embrace this new beginning. As Yvaine spoke, a spark of hope ignited within them. Many nodded along, as a newfound eagerness shown in their eyes to begin this next chapter of their lives.

Fergus and Gwyneth exchanged impressed smiles as they watched the scene unfold. Caelen caught his sister’s eyes, her own glowing with excitement and hope. It was a contagious

feeling that spread throughout the crowd as if a weight had been lifted from their shoulders.

“Let us walk this path together,” Caelen declared, his voice ringing clear and strong as he grasped Yvaine’s hand within his own. “Hand in hand, side by side, we shall create a new clan—one that values love, family, and safety above all else. Together, we shall forge our own path.” His eyes swept over the assembled crowd. “Who is with us?”

The people cheered, their voices rising together in a chorus of hope and determination as they all stood upon that beach and looked out at the Fey Isles shrouded in mist. Caelen knew few people had ever been there, most of whom had felt unwelcome, chased away and back to the mainland by some unseen hand. But did the Fey truly dwell there? Or was it no more than a myth? Caelen could not rightly say. Though, from the beginning, he had thought that there was something otherworldly about Yvaine. She possessed a spirit unmatched by any he had ever encountered, and yet she herself had only ever spoken of a mortal family who had taken her in. Never once had her path crossed that of the Fey.

Caelen led the way as he and Yvaine guided their people down a narrow path hidden by tall grasses, toward a corner of the beach where boats from Clan MacLeòir were concealed within small caves. The sight reminded Caelen of the day he had first met Yvaine upon the Fey Isles. His cousin, Lachlan, had come upon her before Caelen had stumbled upon them both, shocked to see her, for her resemblance to her family’s clan had been unmistakable. Of course, Lachlan had wanted to bring her back, use her as a pawn in the bloody game played between their clans.

Then, though, the MacLeòirs had come upon them, and a fight had broken out, during which Yvaine had slipped away. The next time Caelen had seen her had been on the shore of the island as her brother Logan had carried her away, placed her in one of the very boats now concealed nearby, and taken her back to the mainland alongside his warriors. Caelen remembered standing on the shore and watching her fade into the distance, his heart telling him even then that he was experiencing a loss unlike any he had ever known. Of course, his mind had understood only much later that he needed her by his side, that she belonged with him.

Yvaine's hand still rested within his as they stood with their feet in the sand, churning waves rolling onto the beach. The day was bright and promising, and the salty sea air filled Caelen's lungs, invigorating him with renewed determination. He could sense the trepidation that clung to the people around them like a heavy mist but also the faint glimmers of hope that flickered in their eyes.

"Here we are," Yvaine announced, her voice strong and confident as she gestured to the boats hidden in the shadowy recesses of the rocky coastline. "These will carry us across the water to our new home."

As they brought the boats forth, Caelen and Yvaine took care to assign people to each vessel, making sure that each group had at least one experienced sailor among them. The boats, though sturdy and well-built, could not accommodate everyone at once.

"Dunna worry," Caelen reassured those left behind on the shore. "We shall return for ye as soon as we have ferried the first groups across." They successfully loaded the boats and set out toward the island, its rugged beauty faintly visible on

the horizon. Caelen kept one eye on the wind and the other on Yvaine, mesmerized by the expression upon her face as the mist parted, revealing the only true home she had ever known. There was longing in her eyes and sadness as well, and once again, Caelen wondered what thoughts lived in her head. Had she already made up her mind? Did she already know if she would stay... or leave?

As they reached the shore, Yvaine jumped out of the boat, eagerness carrying her forward, while the rest of them hung back. Many people eyed the island with apprehension as Caelen himself had done the last time he had been here. There was a low howl upon the wind as though voices whispered nearby, and Caelen could not quite decide if they were friendly or not. One truth he had always known, though; although, he had never come across another soul living on this island, it did not seem—or feel—uninhabited. Was it indeed the Fey who stirred these emotions within his chest? Or was it simply his own imagination, fueled by the eerie sounds of the wind?

The sun dipped lower in the sky, casting long shadows on the sandy shore, as the first group disembarked from the boats and tentatively ventured up the beach. Yvaine stood a bit higher up, waving them forward, her eyes aglow and the smile upon her face radiant and reassuring. Caelen smiled. She was like a beacon in the night, casting a warm glow over everyone, her certainty and faith inspiring. Caelen could see it upon the people's faces as they took their children's hands and led them forward.

“Help me gather some men,” Caelen said to Fergus, who stood nearby, his features etched with quiet resolve as he, too, eyed their future home with a bit of wariness in his gaze. “We needa return to the mainland and fetch the others.”

Fergus nodded, then he turned to Gwyneth and kissed her upon the forehead. Then he sent her to Yvaine's side, his hand holding onto hers for as long as the distance between them would allow it. Caelen marveled at the sight of them, wondering how he had not seen the bond that connected them before. Perhaps it had simply been the hopelessness of their situation that had deterred him. After all, had it not been the same for Fergus and Gwyneth themselves? They had known each other since childhood, and yet only recently they had revealed their true feelings to one another in a moment when all hope had seemed lost. Aye, often enough it was these moments which brought forth the truth. Had it not also been the same for him and Yvaine?

Together, Caelen and Fergus gathered a small group before setting off once more on the journey back to the mainland. Before they left, though, Caelen pulled Yvaine aside, loathe to leave her side—even if only for a short time. “Are ye certain ye can manage without me?” he asked softly.

Yvaine raised her right brow, her green eyes sparkling with challenge. “Are ye certain *ye* can manage without *me*?” she retorted, crossing her arms over her chest.

Caelen laughed, loving her dauntless spirit. “Not certain at all,” he murmured, pulling her into his embrace, his hands slipping up her arms, over her shoulders and then into her hair. He felt her lean into him, her green eyes wide and her lips slightly parted as they breathed together. “I...” He swallowed hard, yet before he could try to find the right words, Yvaine placed a staying hand upon his chest.

“I willna leave,” she vowed softly, sincerity glowing in her eyes, “without saying goodbye. I promised ye that, and I

shallna break my word.” She held his gaze, waiting for him to nod. “Do ye trust me?”

Caelen nodded. “Aye, I do.” And it was the truth. He did trust her. Only should she decide to leave, he could not bear the thought of wasting any time he could have spent in her presence. If only he knew what the future would bring. Never had Yvaine spoken of what happened after the legendary Yvaine and Caelen had led their people to their new home upon the island. Had they lived happily ever after?

Caelen wished he knew.

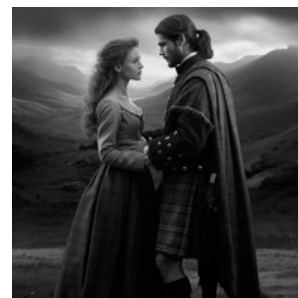
“Do ye trust me to take care of our people?” Yvaine asked, her voice lighter now, and her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Or do ye believe I will burn this place down if ye turn yer back for a mere moment?”

Caelen chuckled. “This place is already in ruins. I dunna think there is much damage ye could do to it.”

Yvaine’s eyes widened in mock outrage. “That is not verra reassuring. Am I truly to believe that ye have no faith in me?”

Though laughing, Caelen pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly. “I do have faith in ye, lass,” he told her then, savoring the feel of her pulse beneath his fingertips. “More faith than ye’ll ever ken.” Aye, he knew her strength and resilience, qualities that had drawn him to her from the very beginning.

“Take care of yerself, Yvaine,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “I will return as soon as I can.” He pinched her chin playfully. “And if I dunna find ye safe and sound, there’ll be hell to pay.”



Yvaine chuckled then freed herself from his embrace and shoved him away. “Go then, and be back soon.” The look in her eyes made it almost impossible for Caelen to turn away, to even remind himself of the next task that needed his attention. In that moment, all he could think about was her, all he wanted was to feel her again in his arms.

Later, some rational corner of his mind whispered.

Later.

As Caelen sailed away from the island, the wind whipping through his dark hair, he allowed himself to be swept up in the enormity of what they were undertaking. For years, he had fought against the endless cycle of violence and hatred that had defined their lives. Now, with Yvaine by his side, they were poised to create something new, a clan united not by blood but by choice—a family bound by love, loyalty, and hope.

Fergus steered the boat beside Caelen’s, his own gaze fixed on the receding shoreline. They shared a nod of understanding, acknowledging the magnitude of their task but also the righteousness of their cause. This was the path they had chosen, and they would see it through, no matter the obstacles that lay ahead.

“MacKinnear Island awaits us,” Caelen whispered, more to himself than anyone else. “Together, we shall forge a new future.”

[Read on!](#)



About Bree



BREE WOLF is a USA Today bestselling author and award-winning word wizard, who is rarely seen without a book in hand or fingers glued to the keyboard. Searching for her true calling, Bree valiantly battled the hallowed halls of academia, earning a BA in English, an MA in Specialized Translation, and countless paper cuts. After wandering abroad and toiling at translation agencies and law firms in Ireland, she realized her heart belonged to one

place only: the pages of a good romance novel.

With over 50 published works, Bree has crafted a myriad of intricately woven worlds where resilient heroines find once-in-a-lifetime love with complicated heroes. Through tales of heartbreak and triumph, her characters persevere to hard-won happily-ever-afters, taking readers along on the poignant journey.

Whether in Regency England, medieval castles or the drama of Highland lairds, Bree's gift is capturing romance's full emotional spectrum. Her stories sweep across landscapes and centuries but always promise hard-fought hope for heroes and heroines to find that magical blend of laughter, sorrow, passion and partnership that is true love.

A lifelong bookworm and language enthusiast, Bree is devoted to love stories that linger in a reader's heart long after the last page. Her own heart beats through every tale promising romance as the greatest adventure.

If you're an avid reader, [sign up for Bree's newsletter](#) on www.breewolf.com as she has the tendency to simply give books away. Find out about freebies, giveaways as well as occasional advance reader copies and read before the book is even on the shelves!

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