

"Donna Grant charms with an historical fantasy series sure to leave readers craving more!"
~ NYT bestselling author, Lara Adrian

A woman with purple face paint is shown in profile, looking upwards. She is surrounded by a dense forest of evergreen trees. The scene is misty and ethereal, with a soft purple and blue color palette. The woman's face is adorned with intricate purple patterns, and her hair is dark and pulled back. The background is a lush, misty forest with tall evergreen trees. The overall mood is mysterious and magical.

RAGE

A KINDRED: THE FATED NOVEL

DONNA GRANT

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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KINDRED: THE FATED
BOOK ONE

DONNA GRANT®



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

RAGE

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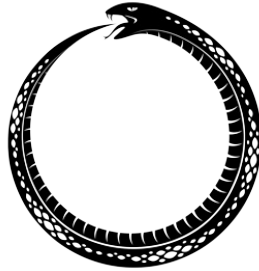
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Spring Highlands

Elin inhaled deeply as she lifted her face to the morning sun. She smiled and looked around at the glen. She had attempted to make other places her home before she found this one, but none had worked out. She felt a soft pang in her heart when she thought of the island she had found before. She had loved it there, but her past had caught up with her all too soon.

Now, Elin was nestled deep in the Scottish Highlands, far from anyone. It was a full day's walk to the nearest village and castle, and she kept far from it. Everything she needed was around her. She'd made sure of that.

She looked down at the bow in her hand and smiled ruefully. The first time she had tried to fire the weapon, it had been disastrous. Though she kept at it until she became proficient. It had been over a year since she'd used magic, and only then because she hadn't been able to fix the roof of the cottage herself.

Elin turned to look at her home. When she came across the abandoned cottage, she had been desperate for shelter from a brutal winter storm. Once the weather cleared, she finally got a good look at the structure and found that it was in decent shape, other than the roof. She'd tried to repair it herself, but

she lacked the basic skills and the knowledge. After a month of travel, she was exhausted. She wanted a place to rest and needed somewhere to relax. The cottage had only been meant for a brief respite during the winter, so she'd decided to use the spell to mend the roof.

The cottage had proven a good choice. The glen it was situated in offered the solace and isolation she yearned for. She had been content here. Happier than she had been in some time. Elin's mood dampened as she thought of her island. So much of her life had been spent hiding from the Coven. The band of witches had wanted to annihilate anyone who stood in their way—and they'd nearly done just that. Elin had thought she could set aside her past as a witch and lead a normal life. She'd thought she could pretend that she didn't have magic and get involved in a community. She had been wrong.

So very, very wrong.

She gripped her bow and adjusted the quiver of arrows on her back. Her gaze slid to the trees around her. She thought of Asrail. The once-queen of the Gira had been her closest friend. Elin didn't know what had become of the tree nymphs since the battle with the Coven. The Gira mostly kept to themselves. They looked like trees, their skin and hair just like bark, so they disguised themselves in forests where they could lure others with whispers.

The Gira were still out there, but Elin hadn't seen or heard any since the battle that had destroyed the Coven. During that battle, Elin had joined a band of Witch Hunters and the legendary Varroki warriors to defeat the Coven. That's where she'd learned that there were more than tree nymphs out there. There were snow and water nymphs, as well.

The cry of a falcon drew her attention skyward. Elin watched the bird through the branches of the tree. She was free now—well, as free as she could be. She needed to remind herself of that often. She wasn't exactly hiding anymore, but she hadn't made herself known either. Not a bad compromise.

She had thought that not using her magic would be all she needed to start

fresh with a new life. She'd learned the foolishness of that quickly enough. The Coven's sweep across Britain had left a lasting mark on everyone and everything. Those without magic were wary of any newcomers. They were superstitious, bigoted. Disdainful of anything they didn't understand—as well as suspicious of anyone new.

Still, Elin had slowly made friends on the beautiful island. Up until a little girl had become ill. Many used herbs to help the sick, but she had been the newest member of the community. So, when the child recovered fully after Elin's help, they'd immediately begun calling her a witch.

Which, she was.

Elin had tried to ignore it, but the locals became increasingly hostile. In the end, she'd snuck away during the night, thus beginning the six-month journey, moving around until she'd stumbled upon her cottage. She liked it there. A lot. She didn't want to leave, but she knew it was only a matter of time before she would have no other choice. Until then, however, she would enjoy her home.

Elin walked to the river and knelt beside it. She put a hand in the cold water that ran off the nearby mountains. The fish were plentiful, and she had become adept at catching them. Between the fish and her use of the bow, she didn't lack for meat. When the temperatures began to warm, and the snow started to melt, she discovered the array of greens and berries, as well. There was, in fact, no need for her to go to the village. Although she had gone once.

They'd thought she was a traveler, so no one paid her any heed when she bought what she needed and returned to the cottage. Other than that one visit to the village, she hadn't encountered anyone. That wasn't to say she hadn't heard the voices of those nearby. Fortunately, though, no one ventured her way.

Elin drank deeply from the river before flicking water from her hand. Then she got to her feet and turned to retrace her steps to the cottage. The nicker of a horse froze her in her tracks. Her head whipped around to the

ridge above, where a lone man sat atop a steed.

She remained hidden behind a tree. The figure was just a dark outline, too far away for her to see where he looked, but she wasn't going to take any chances. Her heart thudded in her chest as she silently prayed he would move away. Seconds passed as she waited for him to decide. The horse's head bobbed up and down, seeming almost as impatient as she for the man to ride away. Then, the animal began to walk down to the glen.

"Nay," Elin whispered.

She glanced at her cottage. Smoke curled in a thin, gray ribbon from the chimney. She would never make it inside without being seen by the rider, who was now headed straight for her home. No one had bothered her in months. Why was he here? What did this man want? Maybe if she remained hidden, he would leave, thinking he'd missed the occupant.

Her gaze left him long enough to sweep the area to see if there were more men, but it seemed to be only him. She slid her gaze back to him. He rode past her, allowing her a glimpse. His light brown hair was loose about his shoulders, with a strip of leather holding back the top half from his face. His tartan was dark green, navy blue, black, red, and white, and the sword strapped across his back wasn't there for show. She caught a glimpse of his boots. Worn but well made, proving he wasn't some peasant who held onto his family's weapon.

He grasped the reins loosely but confidently. The horse was well cared for and was, by all appearances, a pricey steed. A person could tell a lot from how someone cared for their animals. Her gaze lifted to the man's face. She managed to get a brief peek of his profile and saw that his gaze swept the area but returned again and again to the cottage.

Elin knew the Mackenzie clan controlled this land. Since the cottage had been abandoned, she had hoped that no one would mind if she used it for a bit. The problem was, she hadn't moved on as she'd told herself she would—as she should have two months ago. The area was beautiful, the game

plentiful, and it was isolated. It had everything she needed. Why couldn't people just leave her alone?

The man pulled gently on the reins to halt the animal as they reached the cottage. He didn't ride up to the door. Instead, he stopped with room enough to give him a good view of the front and sides.

"Hello?" he called in a deep voice.

Elin's fingers dug into the bark of the tree. She almost wished she was a Gira so she could disappear against the bark and keep the man from finding her. No one would. But she wasn't a tree nymph. She was a witch. Her kind had been hunted for generations, and it wouldn't stop because people were afraid of anything they didn't understand. They never stopped to consider if she was doing good with her magic or not. The simple fact that she had it was enough to condemn her.

The man swung his muscular leg over the horse and dismounted quietly. He gave the animal a pat on the side of the neck as he studied the cottage. The horse didn't budge from its spot.

"Anyone home?" he asked louder.

Elin glanced around her. She could make a run for it, but he would likely hear. The only option she had was to remain hidden behind the tree and hope the man left quickly. All she needed was enough time to gather her meager belongings and head out. The thought made her heartsick, but what else could she do?

"I mean no harm."

She could hear his brogue now. Elin slipped slowly around the tree to hide herself better. If he turned around, she didn't want him to catch sight of her. She briefly thought of using a spell to conceal herself, but she had sworn off any and all magic. How could she live a normal life if she kept falling back to using her abilities anytime things became difficult? She squeezed her eyes closed and pressed her forehead against the bark.

She had gotten lax. Too many months without anyone coming her way

had given her the illusion that she could live her life unbothered. She was beginning to think there wasn't a place for her anywhere.

And though she hated to admit it, she understood why the Coven had fought for power. If they had won, no witch would ever be hunted again. Her life would've been much different if that had happened. She could've lived anywhere, done anything.

Now, she yearned for a quiet life all to herself.

One she wouldn't get. She swallowed and peeked around the tree to see what her visitor was doing, but she didn't see him. All she saw was his horse, munching lazily on some grass. Worry shot through her. She hastily scanned the cottage. The door was closed. Wouldn't he have left it open had he entered? Maybe he went around the back? Off to the side? What about the other?

But everywhere she looked, she came up empty.

"I hope you're no' hiding from me, lass."

The voice behind her startled Elin. Her heart jumped into her throat. She spun around, her foot slipping between two roots as her ankle twisted in her rush to get away. She felt herself falling. Her gaze locked with blue eyes, and her brain froze. She waited to feel her back slam into the earth. Instead, a strong arm caught her and held her steady.

"You were hiding," he said with a slight frown.

Elin jerked out of his arms and backed away from him. His sword was still sheathed, but she had felt the strength in him. He could draw it and have the blade at her throat in seconds. Did she use her bow? No, he could knock it away easily enough. That meant she had to resort to magic. No. No, she couldn't. She had promised herself that she was finished with it.

He held up his hands before him. "Easy, lass." He spoke as if he were talking to someone with an addled mind.

She ignored him and went through her options. She could run. She knew the area. But how far would she get before he caught up with her on his

horse? Too quickly for it to make a difference. She needed him gone so she could sneak away. Again. Was that her life now? Slinking away before they could come for her as they had her mother?

“I’m no’ going to harm you,” he said slowly, calmly.

Elin almost laughed. She wasn’t going to fall for that ploy. He might only be one man, but he could still catch her.

Unless I use magic.

She clenched her teeth as the idea resurfaced. Come what may, she would no longer use her knowledge of herbs to help anyone but herself. And she certainly wouldn’t do magic.

Her mother had sacrificed herself to save Elin and her sister. Avis was dead now, having joined the Coven. Elin was on her own. As she had always been. As she always would be.

The man’s blue eyes were penetrating and entirely too intelligent. It was as if they had a light all their own. He watched her, never taking his gaze from her face. Instinctively, her magic rose, telling her that he wouldn’t harm her.

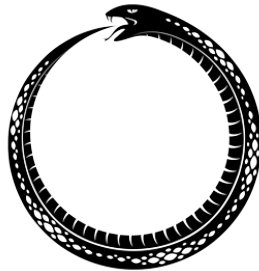
It was a gift her mother had told her would protect her. It had saved Elin’s life on many occasions. But that didn’t mean she would set aside the fear that clung to her like a spider’s web.

“I’m Rob. Who might you be?”

“Let me leave. Pretend you never saw me,” she blurted then inwardly winced, wishing she had thought of something better to say, something that would indeed convince him to leave her alone.

His brows snapped together. “A Sassenach?”

Elin glanced to the side. She could make it to the river. It was deep there, but it was her only chance.



The stark terror in the woman's dark eyes kept Rob from moving. She was like a cornered animal, and he wasn't entirely sure what she might do to get away from him. As it was, she had yanked out of his arms when he'd caught her as if his touch burned.

When she glanced over his shoulder to the river, he knew that she was thinking of running. The river moved rapidly. Even if she knew how to swim, the weight of her skirts would drag her down. He needed to back up quickly if he didn't want to pull her out of the water.

Rob kept his arms up to show that he meant her no harm. Then he slowly moved away from her. Her chest still heaved, but some of the wildness left her warm brown eyes. He swept his gaze over her face, from her large eyes and delicate features to her lips. Her dark mahogany hair hung over one shoulder in a thick plait, and she clung to the bow in her left hand as if it were a lifeline.

"Easy," he repeated.

He knew to keep his voice soft and steady when dealing with a frightened horse. He was using the same tactics with her. She wanted to leave. That much was obvious. Unfortunately, he couldn't let her. Not yet, at least.

"I need a wee chat," he told her.

Once more, her gaze darted to the river.

Rob pressed his lips together. Backing up hadn't calmed her enough. He began to suspect that the only thing that would was his departure. She needed facts. So, he gave her one. "You willna make it across the river."

In an instant, she had nocked an arrow and had it pointed at him. He had hoped she would forget the bow she carried. He'd had a chance to take it from her when she fell, but he'd been more concerned with her than the weapon. It was a mistake he now regretted.

"Leave," she ordered. Her voice shook slightly, but it didn't reach her arms that held the weapon steady. "I don't want to kill you, but I will if you stay."

She clearly meant every word. Rob sighed. When he caught sight of her hiding behind the tree on his ride to the cottage, he'd never imagined their conversation would end up like this. But he knew desperation could make people do things they normally wouldn't. And the woman seemed desperate.

"I can help," he offered.

She snorted softly. "No one can help me."

"Try me."

"Leave," she demanded in a firmer tone. "Please."

He could warn her that he'd be back with more men, but he knew that was pointless. She would wait until he was gone and then leave. He thought about telling her that he wasn't here about her staying in the cottage but thought better of it. Nothing he said would calm her now. She was the wild animal he'd thought about earlier, and all she wanted was her life and her freedom. He wouldn't stand in her way.

Rob bowed his head. "As you wish."

She moved with him, step for step, as he slowly backed from the tree and toward his horse. He let out a whistle, and his steed walked to him. Rob kept his gaze on her as he grabbed the reins and mounted.

"Good luck to you," he said before trotting off.

He didn't look back, though he wanted to. There wasn't an arrow sticking

out of his back either. She had kept her word. And so would he. Sort of.

Just in case she watched him, he rode until the glen was far behind him. Only then did he tug his horse to a stop. He turned his steed around and sat there, thinking of the encounter. She had been afraid of him, but it seemed she was more afraid of being found. That meant anyone who came upon her would get the same treatment.

The cottage was tucked away in a remote glen. It hadn't been used in nearly five years. Rob knew that no one had been using it last summer when he'd ridden past. She had found it sometime after that. Was she running from someone? That had to be the answer. A husband, perhaps? A woman alone anywhere was in danger. A woman in the Highlands, even more so. Anyone could come upon her and take advantage since her location was so far from the castle.

That would explain her hiding from him, but not her fear. That was an entirely different thing altogether. The panic and distress was something he had only seen once before. In his cousin, who had been running for his life.

"Bloody hell," Rob murmured.

He sat there for a few more minutes. He'd never intended to let her go, but he wanted to make her think that he had. She would beat a hasty retreat, which would make her trail easy to track. He could go back to the castle and get reinforcements, but he wanted to do this alone. The more men he had, the more she would likely do something to endanger her life. Too many had died recently for more blood to be spilled.

His horse snorted, eager to get moving.

Rob bent and scratched behind his ear. "I know, lad. We're going after her."

The lass was already terrified. He didn't want to reappear before she'd had time to get away—or at least *think* she had gotten away. She'd know that she had little time to run because he would be back. Rob wouldn't chase her down, though. He still wasn't sure how he was going to approach her this

next time. He had made himself visible atop the hill so that anyone in the cottage could see him. He had ridden slowly to the house and called out. And, still, she had hidden.

“We’re going to have to do things differently this time,” he told his horse before Rob nudged him into a walk.

Just as he’d known, the Sassenach was gone by the time he returned to the cottage. Rob stood inside the door and looked around. The roof had been repaired. Everything was clean and tidy. By the looks of it, she had been there for some months. Alone. A woman, alone. That gave him pause.

Not because she was alone. Other women in the clan lived alone, but there weren’t many. Those who did it chose that life and didn’t live so far from others that they couldn’t get help if they needed it. This woman clearly wanted the isolation. And he kept coming back to that.

Rob pivoted and studied the ground outside the cottage. Her footprints led directly to the river. He followed them and stopped on the banks. A glance across the other side didn’t show any indication that someone had pulled themselves from the water. No wet rocks. No grass half-pulled from the dirt from being grabbed while she yanked herself out of the river with her soaked skirts. No trampled flowers or grass as she walked away.

He looked downstream. There was a chance she’d floated, but he doubted it. The water only got faster downstream before it finally calmed, where it became shallow enough to cross. Did she know of that area? Likely not if she’d considered crossing here. But she didn’t cross here. She only wanted *him* to believe that she had.

She might be scared and reacting, but she had devised a plan. Maybe she’d always had it in case someone came upon her, but at least she was being smart about it. He grinned before turning away. He began searching the area to see where she had gone. He was a good tracker, and yet it took him longer than he wanted to admit to locate her trail. Mostly because only her tracks were around the cottage. That hindered him, but it didn’t stop him.

“Got you,” he murmured when he saw her footprints leading away from the cottage and the river. They were grouped wide apart, showing that she was running.

Rob whistled to his horse. When the animal trotted over, Rob grabbed the reins and followed the Sassenach. His mind raced with possibilities of what she, an Englishwoman, was doing in the Scottish Highlands alone. There were several scenarios, and it only made things worse not knowing. So, he quit thinking about it—or he tried to. He turned his attention to finding a way to approach her that wouldn’t spook her again. The problem was, he didn’t think there *was* a way he could do that.

He lost her trail a couple of times when she went over rocks, but he quickly found it again. She had slowed to a walk for a short while before running again. She was trying to put as much distance between them as she could. It wouldn’t make a difference. He had a horse. He could cover twice as much ground as she could.

And still, she ran.

It took him almost two hours, but he found her. Rob decided to follow her instead of approaching. When he saw that she only had a small bag with her, he thought about everything she had left behind at the cottage. Things that others would gladly steal if they found them. Yet she had left them all without a second’s hesitation.

Rob followed her for half the day. She rested only twice. If she saw someone coming, she hid. The more he observed, the more questions he had for her. There was no reason for him to trail her, other than he felt some sense of responsibility since his arrival had sent her fleeing.

He thought about his clan, his family. He thought about his responsibilities there. The reason for his visit to her. He needed to get back to them, but he couldn’t leave her. Not alone. He owed it to the lass to make sure that no one accosted her. Though he was beginning to wonder how far she planned to run—and how far he would follow her. He would have to

make that decision soon.

By dusk, she looked exhausted. She found a spot off the road in a forest for the night. She didn't light a fire. Neither did he. He crept close enough to see her through the trees, but he didn't approach. She leaned against a tree and valiantly tried to stay awake, but fatigue took her.

A light rain began during the night. His horse nickered in protest. Rob ignored the animal and remained on guard. It was an hour to dawn when his steed's head suddenly jerked up, his ears swiveling forward. Rob peered through the thick foliage to see what had caught the animal's attention. Then he saw the two men coming upon the lass from opposite sides. One had a beard, and the other had a scar across his cheek.

Rob quietly unsheathed his sword and began to make his way to them. The woman came awake when the man with the scar touched her braid. She didn't scream, didn't even cry out. She jumped to her feet and reached for her bow. Unfortunately, the one with the beard had it.

"This is nice," Beard said as he admired the bow.

Her eyes blazed with fury. "Give it back."

"Naw. I think I'll keep it." Beard smiled, half his teeth missing.

The tree was at her back, and they blocked her in. Rob maneuvered himself to come up behind the two men. He glanced at the lass and saw her anger. Not fear now. Anger. He hurried to them, knowing surprise was his element.

"This is your only warning to leave me be," she told them.

Scar grinned as he looked her over. "You're alone, lass. No one to help you."

"I warned you," she replied coolly.

The two looked at each other and laughed. Rob thought he saw something flash a bright pink as Scar grabbed her hand. The lass jerked back. Beard's big hands grasped her.

Rob bellowed as he jumped from behind a tree, but it didn't stop Scar

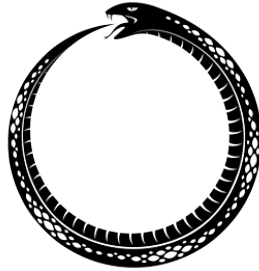
from hitting her. Her head snapped back, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth. Scar spun and faced Rob, pulling a knife from his boot. The lass then bit down on Beard's hand, causing him to drop her bow. The big man bellowed and slammed her against the tree, where she collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

Rob quirked a brow as he held his sword. "Do you really want to try that?"

"It's two against one," Scar said.

Rob grinned. "I'm game if you are."

Scar and Beard exchanged glances before turning and running away. Rob sighed as he watched them go. Then he sheathed his sword and went to the lass. He gathered her pack and the bow, securing both to his saddle before lifting her into his arms and mounting his horse.



Elin winced at the pain in her head as she came awake. She opened her eyes and blinked as she tried to focus. Light filtered through the slits of the window covers. She frowned at that. She was normally awake by dawn, but it was clearly past that.

She sat up and immediately regretted it as her stomach roiled. She carefully lay back down and took slow, measured breaths to help calm the nausea. She lifted her hand to her head only when she knew she wouldn't get sick. The instant her fingers lightly brushed the bump on the side of her head, agony and more nausea assaulted her.

It was excruciating even minutes later before the pain subsided. What had happened to her? The last thing she remembered was being out in the morning sun. There had been a rider... That's when it all came back to her. Flashes of Rob, his leaving, her running, and then the men in the forest.

But...how was she back at her cottage? And it was her cottage. She knew every inch of it. Had Rob been there? Had he seen the men attack? He must have. There was no other explanation for how she'd gotten back to her home.

She had known that someone would follow her, but she'd thought she was smart enough to make them lose her trail. Turned out she wasn't very good at that at all.

"Not without magic, at least," she murmured angrily.

She was determined to forget she had it. She wanted a normal life above all else. For people to not fear her. To be a part of something.

Yet she had been faced with an ultimatum with the men. Her magic had alerted her that they meant her harm. As it was, the knot on the side of her head was an indication of what awaited her. She should've immediately used her magic to dissuade them. But she had thought she could handle it.

She hadn't been able to fix the cottage without magic. And it turned out she couldn't protect herself without it, either. How would she have the life she dreamed of if she kept turning to the magic that'd put her in this predicament? There was no easy solution. And that was the rub of it all.

Elin sighed and slowly turned onto her side before gradually moving to a sitting position. Someone had taken off her shoes. She knew who that someone was, but she refused to say his name, simply out of spite. Though that was childish. He had not only found her, but he had also returned her to the cottage. She needed to show her appreciation. Otherwise, she was no better than those who had once created the Coven.

She swayed a little when she got to her feet but quickly found her footing. Elin went to the windows and opened the shutters. Sunlight spilled into the cottage. She shivered. It was spring, and the clear skies brought warmth but not enough that a fire wasn't needed. That was the hardest part of living so far north—the cold.

Elin turned and went to light the fire. She found wood already stacked and ready. Rob again? She had threatened him with her bow, had run from him, and what had he done? The opposite. She felt like a fool for reacting so badly. Then again, she knew what awaited those of her kind.

If he found out who she was.

She wouldn't let that happen. She hadn't handled the situation properly, but maybe there was a way for her to make it right. Perhaps this place in the Highlands could offer her the life she dreamed of—ordinary, without magic.

Elin didn't know where to find Rob, but she had a feeling he would be

back. Until then, she'd go about her day as usual. The pounding of her head made her reconsider, however. She knelt and started the fire. Then she went outside and searched for the herbs she needed to make a tea to ease her pain.

She didn't have to go far for them, thankfully. Elin returned to the cottage and soaked the leaves as she ground ginger to help with the nausea. Once the tea was ready, she took the cup and curled up on the bed to drink it. It wasn't like her to waste a day sitting around doing nothing. However, since the little she had already done had made her feel even worse, she decided to take a day and relax and think about the future.

When she ran from Rob, she'd had no place in mind. All she'd thought about was fleeing as fast and as far as she could. She moved around a lot and knew how to travel on her own. Because witch or not, it was dangerous for a woman alone. The men had startled her. That was her fault. She hadn't found a protected place to rest for the night, somewhere that shielded her. Because she had been exhausted. And, she had paid the price.

She couldn't let that happen again. Living in the glen had made her complacent. She knew to have at least one plan, if not multiple, in case someone discovered who she was. Elin liked to believe they couldn't do that if she never did magic, but she had seen women who weren't witches hung because of even the slightest transgression.

Fear and superstition. Though, sometimes, anger or jealousy made someone declare another a witch. One accuser with the right words could turn an entire village against someone they had known for their entire lives.

The sound of a horse snorting pulled her from her thoughts. Elin started to rise from the bed when Rob called out. For an instant, she wanted to pretend that she wasn't there. But that hadn't gone so well the first time.

"Please, come in," she called.

She spotted a shadow of movement near the window, then the door opened. He pushed it wide but didn't enter. Rob stood outside and peered into the cottage. When he found her on the bed, he frowned.

“I’m fine,” she told him as she motioned him into her home. “Just some pain and nausea. It will subside.”

He hesitated before stepping over the threshold. After shutting the door behind him, he took the chair near the hearth and poked at the logs with a stick. “I’m glad to see you awake. You didna stir once on the return.”

Elin winced. “Thank you for bringing me back. I assume you stopped the men before they could...do more?”

His head turned to her, and he nodded.

“Thank you.”

He bowed his head. She studied him, really looked at him as she hadn’t when they first met. There was at least a day’s growth of whiskers on his face that hadn’t been there before. It outlined his strong jaw and chin, bringing his mouth into focus. His lips were wide and full. He had a bump on his nose that signaled it had been broken at least once. Thick brows slashed over eyes that watched hers.

Handsome. Strong. Robust. Formidable. He was all those things, yet he had been gentle and kind with her—a stranger. There was more to him than she’d first thought. Granted, she hadn’t given him much thought in the beginning. He had been a threat to her peace, and she had simply reacted.

He blew out a breath, the muscles in his jaw clenching as his gaze swung to the fire. That was when she noted the dark circles around his eyes, and the fatigue that weighed upon him like a cloak soaked with rain.

“I must go. I just wanted to make sure you were all right,” he said as he wearily got to his feet.

Before she could think about it, she said, “I have a little food. Eat. Rest. You look like you need it.”

“More than you know.” Then he shook his head, briefly squeezing his eyes closed. “I doona have time.”

“You’re ready to collapse. You can take a few moments to eat.”

She carefully rose from the bed and set aside her tea as she found some

bread and dried meat. He didn't argue when she handed it to him. Rob sank back onto the chair and ate in silence. Elin returned to the bed. Despite his kindness, he still made her uneasy.

“Do you know anything about herbs? Healing?” he asked.

She stared into his eyes and lied. “I don't.”

He stopped chewing as he sighed. He leaned forward to brace his forearms on his legs and hung his head.

“What happened?” She knew she shouldn't ask. It wasn't her problem. She wanted a normal life, right? That meant keeping her mouth shut. That meant not interfering.

What about helping?

She ignored the voice and watched Rob.

“There's a sickness at the castle,” he said after several silent moments. “It's getting worse. The healer we have has done everything she knows. Those who have no' been afflicted are scouring our clan to see if there's someone else who can help.”

Don't ask. Don't ask. “What kind of illness?”

He shrugged and lifted his head to meet her gaze. “No one knows. It happened suddenly. Donald says we're cursed. I doona believe in such things.”

But Elin did. Her heart skipped a beat at his words. “A curse?” she asked softly.

“Aye.” Rob sat back in the chair. “My eldest brother and laird of our clan, Donald, was visiting a neighboring clan chief. His daughter made it clear that she was interested in Donald. The MacDonnell chief saw an opportunity and tried to persuade my brother to break off his current engagement and marry the daughter. Donald, however, is already set to marry someone else in two weeks' time. No' to mention he gave his word to his bride-to-be. The MacDonnell lass took that as a slight. As Donald and his men rode from their castle, she shouted what my brother says was a curse at him. I told him it was

nothing. Now...this." He ran a hand down his face and sighed.

Elin bit her tongue to keep from telling him that he should be worried. That this woman *had* cursed them—or knew someone who could. The possibility of both was real.

"Donald's future wife died last night," Rob continued. "My aunt the day before, and my cousin before that. We've lost other members of the clan. And...I found out when I returned that my youngest brother has taken ill."

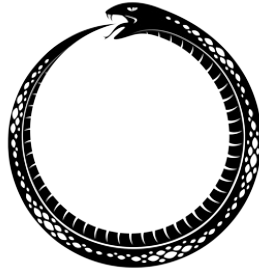
She looked down at her hands because she could no longer watch the anguish on his face. He had been gone because of her. And she had a way to help him. She knew the consequences of her actions, but she'd never be able to look at herself again if she didn't do something. Her mother had known that and still helped. Elin had to do the same.

Rob shook his head as if rousing himself. He got to his feet and gave her a wan smile. "Thank you for the respite. I did, indeed, need it." He walked to the door and paused as he looked back at her. "I doona suppose I could learn your name?"

"Elin." She owed him that, at least.

"Elin," he said as if testing it out. "This cottage sat empty for years. It once belonged to one of my father's closest friends, who preferred his solitude. He would be happy that someone has found a home here. If anyone bothers you, mention my name. They'll leave you alone."

With one final grin, he was gone. Leaving Elin there to think about the sickness, the possible curse, and that Rob was tied to the laird of his clan. If there were ever any indication that she should keep to herself, it was that. One wrong move and that impressive sword he wielded would be plunged into her heart.



Three days of hell that never ended. Rob shoved a hand through his hair, feeling helpless as he stood over his youngest brother's bed. Roddy was only twelve. Their mother had died in childbirth, and their father when Roddy was only ten. His baby brother had lost so much already. It didn't seem fair that he had been struck by this illness.

A soft knock on the door brought Rob's gaze up. A young head poked in and told him, "There's someone at the gate to see you."

"Send them away," he said. He wasn't going to leave Roddy's side.

"She willna leave. Said she would stay at the gate until you came. I didna know Sassenachs could be so stubborn. She doesna care that we have an illness here."

Rob jumped to his feet. "Elin's here?"

He didn't wait for an answer as he stalked from the room. Why had she come? Was she in trouble? Had someone bothered her? His steps quickened as he made his way to the gate. One look at his face had the guards opening it just as he reached it. He stepped through to find her standing about twenty feet from the gate, holding a basket.

His gaze raked over her. She looked hale and hearty. The thick plait of her hair lay over one shoulder as she stood there, watching him with dark eyes.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, harsher than intended.

She swallowed nervously but held his gaze. “I lied. I know a little about herbs.”

He frowned, wondering *why* she had lied. Then he realized he didn’t care. “You can help?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I have to try. Especially after what you did for me.”

Her admission was a reminder that no one knew what to do. “I’ll try anything. Both my younger brothers are sick now.”

She squared her shoulders and walked to him. Rob reached for the basket. “I have it,” she told him.

“I’m no’ letting you through the gate.”

Deep brown eyes calmly watched him. “I need to be inside to fix the tea.”

“Nay. We’re no’ allowing anyone else inside who hasna already been. Nor are we permitting anyone to leave. It’s too dangerous.”

“You forget that I’ve already been in contact with you. If I were going to get sick, I would have fallen ill already.”

“I’ll no’ chance it. Tell me what to do with the herbs. I’ll follow your instructions perfectly.”

Elin hesitated before reluctantly handing over the basket. “I’ve already mixed everything together.”

“What’s in it?” he asked as he looked at the assortment of herbs.

“The normal. Rose, lavender, and sage for headache. Coriander to reduce fever. Mint and wormwood for stomach sickness. Steep it all together in boiling water. Add some honey to help with the taste. Make everyone drink it. *Everyone*. Those who are sick and everyone who isn’t. Three times a day for two days.”

He glanced at the dark clouds overhead. It was a long walk to her cottage, and it was about to rain. But he couldn’t allow her inside the castle gates.

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him with a small smile.

Rob was about to argue when she turned on her heel and walked away. He was torn between calling her back and racing inside to begin her instructions. In the end, the welfare of the sick won out. He gave her one last lingering look before racing to the kitchens and repeating her instructions for the tea. Rob waited until the first batch was made and brought cups to both of his sick brothers, managing to get them each to drink some. Only after everyone else had had theirs did he drink a cup.

He carried out Elin's directions to the letter. And by the middle of the second day, his brothers' fevers had subsided. No one else came down with the illness during that time either.

"Who is this woman?" Donald asked.

Rob scratched the beard on his face. He couldn't wait to remove it. "A Sassenach living in Alan's abandoned cottage."

"She didna come to us," he said.

Rob shrugged. "I gave her permission."

Donald's lips compressed. "You should've told me sooner. I should thank her myself."

After the third day, his younger brothers were sitting up in bed and drinking broth. By the fourth, it seemed as if the sickness had left the castle. There were no new cases, and those who had been sick were improving.

On the morning of the fifth day, Rob saddled his horse and rode to Elin's cottage. He told himself that the anticipation he felt was because of his gratitude. Then, he caught sight of her.

"It worked," he told her with a smile as he dismounted. "Whatever you used worked. I doona understand it because it seems similar to what our healer used, but I doona care. My brothers are better. No one else has died."

She smiled. "I'm happy to hear it."

From the first moment he met her, Rob had known that she was hiding something. He wanted to ask what it was but decided not to. Fear had made her run away, and he didn't want to put her in danger again. She had saved

them, and in his eyes, he owed her. If she wanted to stay, then he would ensure that she could. “How can I repay you?”

“There’s no need.”

“I disagree.”

She glanced away. “I lied to you about being able to help.”

“You had your reasons.”

“That you’ve not asked about.”

He noted the way the sunlight brought out the copper highlights in her hair. “You helped in the end.”

“It might not have worked.”

“It did. There’s no need to worry about what might have happened.” Her look told him that it was very important. Rob debated pushing her to tell him her secret. “I doona know why you’re hiding, but you’ll be safe here for as long as you wish to stay. I’ll make sure of that.”

She looked away. “Don’t make promises like that.”

“I’m the laird’s brother. No one will question me.”

“Except your brother.”

“You saved our brothers, our clan. Donald has nothing but gratitude.”

Elin’s gaze slid back to him. “For now.”

“You’ve had others turn on you before.” He should’ve realized that sooner. Her hesitation, her caution. She was preparing for things to change.

“My mother. She helped a lord’s wife with a difficult birth. They died, and the lord blamed my mother. Said she was a witch. They hung her. My sister and I were young. We found her at the edge of town. We had to fend for ourselves after that. I’ve learned not to trust anyone.”

Rob knew that some viewed anything they couldn’t understand as evil. They hadn’t just killed a mother. They had left two children on their own without thought. It angered him, but he had seen it before—and likely would again. “I’m sorry. I hope you can learn to trust me.”

“You returned me to the cottage. I...owed you,” she said carefully.

“Now I owe you.”

Rob returned to Elin the next day with supplies. When he entered the cottage, there were two fish cooking over the fire.

“You didn’t need to bring me anything,” Elin said.

He held out the bag. “Just take it.”

Grudgingly, she accepted the bag and pulled out cheese, barley cakes, honey, and venison.

“This is too much,” she murmured in excitement as she looked at everything.

He shrugged with a grin. “I disagree.”

There was a smile on her face as she looked at him. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

And it was.

“The fish will be done soon. Would you like to join me?”

“Aye,” he said softly so she wouldn’t know how glad he was that she’d asked.

She fussed with the items before going still and looking his way. “No one else is sick?”

“None. Our healer wishes to talk to you. She says there was nothing in the tea that she, herself, hadn’t gathered. She wants to know what you used.”

Elin looked at the fish, checking them. “Nothing. Maybe it was the amounts I used.”

“She would like to know in case the illness returns.”

“It won’t.”

Elin said it with such conviction that Rob knew there was more to it than she let on. “How do you know?”

Her head jerked to him. Elin studied him for a long moment. “Just a

guess.”

Rob nodded. She wasn't ready to tell him. He turned the conversation to something else. “Are you running from someone?”

“No one in particular.”

“So, you are running?”

She sighed and pressed her lips together. “Let's just say that I like seclusion.”

“You're young. You should have a husband, kids.”

She didn't reply, only returned her attention to the fish.

“What of your sister? Perhaps the two of you together might be good.”

“She lost her way. Took a...different path. It led to her death.”

The more she talked, the more Rob knew that Elin was hiding from something. “I'm sorry.”

“Avis made her choices. I made mine.”

“If you're in danger, I can help.”

Elin glanced at him. “I appreciate the offer, but there's nothing anyone can do.”

“There's a lot I can do. You're under the protection of the Mackenzie clan. That speaks volumes here.”

She took the fish off the heat and set one on a plate that she handed to him, placing the other on hers. “You'd do well to forget you know me.”

“That isn't going to happen, lass. Everyone wants to know about the Sassenach who healed us.”

Was it his imagination, or did she go pale at his words?

Her gaze snapped to his. “They don't know where I am, do they? You didn't tell anyone, did you? Please, tell me no one knows.”

The fear he had seen when he first met her returned. He held up his hands to assure her. “No one knows.” Well, no one but him and his brothers, but they wouldn't do anything. He'd make sure of that. So, there was no need to tell her.

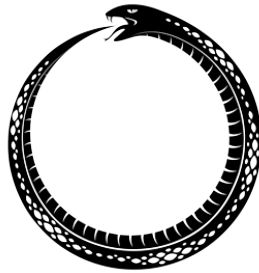
She calmed at his words. “I need seclusion.”

“You’ll have it.”

He took a bite of the fish and watched her. For someone who wanted their seclusion, she had walked to the castle and had been prepared to come inside. Nothing she did made sense, but the one thing Rob knew was that she clearly dreaded anyone finding her.

He didn’t know why she had helped to heal his clan, but he would repay that kindness by keeping her hidden.

From everyone.



Elin stood at the door of the cottage and watched Rob ride away. She released a shaky breath. Going to the castle to see if magic had indeed been used had propelled her to spell the herbs she'd gathered. She hadn't even needed to get that close to the keep to sense the magic. Based on what Rob had told her, she'd taken a chance on what spell to use. Fortunately, it had worked. The curse had been broken. And all with the witch who had cast it upon the laird and clan none the wiser.

Yet she hadn't rested easy. When Rob arrived, she'd kept expecting him to announce that he knew she had magic. Imagine her surprise when he did nothing of the sort. She wished she could've relaxed during their meal, but she had been too nervous.

Now, he was riding away again. She quickly put him out of her mind. Elin spent the rest of the day coming up with plans for where to go if she had to run again. She kept her bag near the door and never went out without her bow and arrows. Though that still wasn't enough. She decided to stash items near the locations she would head to if she did have to run.

If. That was laughable. It was only a matter of time. The longer she pretended that she was safe, the bigger the target she painted on herself. The only way she would live was to expect the worst at all times.

Though how long could she do that? She might plan for years in advance,

but there would come a time when she was sick or too old to get away fast enough. She squeezed her eyes closed as she thought about her mother hanging from the tree, the creak of the rope in the dawn, and the flutter of her mother's hair in the breeze. She did not want to die that way. And she wouldn't. If it came down to it, she would use magic to get away. Her mother hadn't resorted to magic to protect her and Avis, but Elin didn't have anyone to safeguard other than herself.

A pang went through her heart. She had no family, no friends, no one she could turn to. It was the loneliest feeling. It tore at her soul, slicing away pieces bit by bit so that she hardly noticed. The last thing she wanted was to turn out like her sister. She would rather die than allow that to happen.

There was only one place for Elin. The hidden city of the Varroki: Blackglade. But she had betrayed them to help her sister. There was no way the witches and warlocks would grant her entry, and she would never put them in a position where they had to deny her. She'd hoped by helping them and the Hunters in the final battle with the Coven that it might wipe away some of her transgression. The fact that they weren't hunting her proved that it had. But she didn't expect them to forgive her entirely.

More witches were out there, but she didn't look for them. Some might think that a good idea since they could stand together. All Elin thought about was how much easier it would be for others to learn what she was. Which made her keep to herself. Always alone.

The loneliness was a dull blade twisting with each day.

She forgot Rob and the castle, focused on herself, and watched for anyone who got too close. She kept honing her archery skills. And she did not use magic.

A week after his visit, Rob returned. She ignored the leap in her heart at his arrival. Though, after he left, she admitted that it had been nice to have something other than a one-sided conversation with the wildlife and trees. Rob didn't come empty-handed on this visit either. When he handed her a

small bag of flour, she couldn't contain her delight. In exchange, she shared a brace of rabbits.

The following week, he returned again. Then the week after. And the one after that. She kept telling herself not to look for him, but each week, she found herself scanning the hilltop, waiting to see the outline of him and his horse. And he was always there.

He brought something each time. Soap. Candles. Venison. Vegetables. And they always shared a meal and conversation.

Spring turned to summer, and Rob's visits turned to twice a week. He showed her areas around the cottage where she could find wild fruit. He took her downriver to a location that had better fishing. He also showed her the border of his clan's land.

With each visit, she found herself relaxing a little more. He never spoke about magic, never hinted that he knew anything. A friendship blossomed. He shared stories of his family. How his mother had died birthing his youngest brother, and how his father had passed a few years ago, leaving his elder brother as laird.

Rob never spoke of his responsibility, but Elin saw it. She heard it in his words and saw it in his actions. She suspected that he might have begun visiting first out of some obligation, but she truly believed that they shared a mutual appreciation for each other now. He knew she could take care of herself, yet he still came to see her. Twice a week. That wasn't obligation. That was...

She didn't want to label it. It was bad enough that she eagerly awaited his visits. She had tried to ignore the way her heart leapt each time he arrived or how melancholic she became when it was time for him to leave. She told herself that it was because she was lonely. That was the only reason.

But she knew that for the lie it was.

Rob was handsome, kind, strong, and generous. He was, in fact, someone she would've considered taking as a husband in any other life. But that could

never be. Even knowing that didn't stop her from wishing otherwise. She left that to her daydreams, and all the while, grew closer to him. The friendship was so much more than she could've hoped for. It was much more than she'd had in a long time. Otherwise, she would be back to the lonely, solitary creature she had been before Rob came into her life.

Today, he had taken her on a walk. They sat on the hillside of a mountain, heather blossoming as far as the eye could see over mountains and down into the glens. A blanket of purple covered the mountains, and it was a glorious sight. There was a loch below, the water still and as reflective as a mirror. The beauty of it kept her silent. She wanted to put everything to memory.

“You like it?”

She smiled at Rob's question. “I don't think I've ever seen anything quite so magnificent.”

“It's my favorite time of the year,” he confessed.

Elin glanced at him to find his gaze taking in the scenery. “Thank you for sharing this.”

He grinned and met her gaze. “I can no' take full credit. You would've seen them yourself when you went hunting.”

“Maybe. I'm still glad you brought me.”

“Me, too.”

Their gazes lingered. Elin became aware of it and hastily looked away as she cleared her throat. Rob reclined on his side, propped up on an elbow. one knee bent, and his kilt falling back to reveal a corded thigh. He twirled a long stem of grass in his other hand. He had his light brown hair pulled in a queue, and his sword lay on the other side of him—always within reach.

“You never speak of yourself.”

His words startled Elin. Her gaze swung back to him. “I do.”

He quirked a brow. “You doona, lass.”

That was because she couldn't tell him anything about her. Well, not really.

“I’d hoped that you could trust me by now.”

“I do,” she answered hastily.

His brows lifted. “Do you?” He shook his head. “I doona care about your past. I just want you to know that you have a place with the clan.”

She tried to smile, but her lips wouldn’t cooperate. Her heart hammered in her chest so loudly she feared he would hear it. “I hope that’s true.”

“It is. I vow it.”

Elin looked at the ground. She wouldn’t hold him to that promise. It would be wrong. He was right, though. He had told her all about his family, and she had given him very little. “I don’t speak of my past because there’s no use thinking about it. I’m alone. My mother and sister are dead.”

“What about your father?”

“I never knew him. Mum didn’t speak of him, and she died before I could ask.” Elin shrugged.

“No other family?”

She looked at Rob and shook her head. “None.”

“Then I will be your family.”

Tears stung her eyes, and emotion burned her throat. “Don’t say that.”

“I already have. You saved us. I owe you.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

He chuckled softly. “I disagree.”

He sat up and took her hand. She felt the strength in his long fingers, the calluses. He stared into her eyes, the sun making his blue eyes brighter. She wanted to tell him everything. To be honest and lay it all out. Maybe then he would leave and sever all contact. That was the only way to stop these feelings that continued to grow. But the past was full of death and betrayal.

As if reading her thoughts, he said, “Forget the past. Think of the future.”

“I confess that it’s brighter than before, but…” But she knew what would come. Eventually. It always did.

“What?” he urged.

She shook her head, conscious of the fact that he still had a hold of her hand. His thumb moved slowly across the back of it, and tingles of awareness radiated outward from his touch. Goosebumps rose along her skin, and she silently begged for more. "I know what will come."

"Then concentrate on the present."

His voice was low, soft. The way he stared at her took her breath away. There wasn't enough air getting to her lungs. She felt her pulse racing, her blood running hotly in her veins.

He was close. So close she could see the pale blue flecks in his irises. Had he leaned closer? Had she? She parted her lips to get air, and her eyes dropped to his mouth. She thought about his lips. What they would taste like, how they would feel against hers. She wanted the kiss with a desperation that alarmed her. She started to pull away, wondering at her sanity.

"Nay, lass," he whispered huskily.

Her gaze jerked to his. The desire she saw there made her stomach flutter in excitement.

"I've dreamed of this more times than you can know."

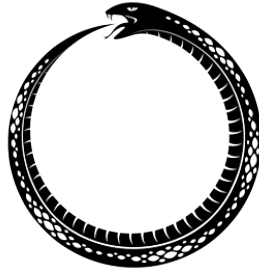
His words took away any misgivings. She didn't know when he had released her and moved his hand to the small of her back, but when he pulled her to him, she didn't resist. He softly placed his mouth on hers for a lingering kiss. His lips moved over hers as the kiss deepened. She felt his hunger, his need that matched hers.

Then she was on her back as half of him rested atop her, their arms locked around each other. Their kisses were long and hot, desire rushing through them both. It was only the sudden burst of rain that broke them apart.

Rob lifted his head and looked down at her with a grin. She returned it before he leapt to his feet and pulled her up with him as he grabbed his sword. Then they raced to the forest behind them, laughing all the while.

He halted near a tree and gazed at her. "Ah, lass."

Just as Elin lifted her face for another kiss, the whispers reached her.



Rob's body thrummed with need. However, he wasn't so lost in it that he didn't notice when Elin stiffened. He looked at her to find her gaze moving about the forest as if searching for something.

"What is it?" he asked.

She lurched away from the tree as if scalded, pulling him with her. "It's nothing."

The tremble in her voice said otherwise. He had gained some of her trust. He wondered how much more he would have to get before she stopped lying. He sheathed his sword, thinking of the kiss they shared, one they would likely still be enjoying if it hadn't started raining.

Water dripped from the leaves above them, droplets finding their way between the high limbs that shielded them from the rain. He studied Elin's face. She kept looking around the forest. Try as he might, he didn't see or hear anything. "There's nothing here."

"Not everything dangerous is easily recognizable," she whispered, then met his gaze. "Or noticeable."

He frowned at her words. She said them deliberately. If he was supposed to know what she spoke about, he'd missed the clues. Rob allowed his gaze to move about the forest, but he still didn't see any threats. He saw nothing. But, obviously, Elin did. "Tell me what you see."

“It’s what I know.”

He jerked his gaze back to her. She now stared intently at something off to her left. He followed her line of sight to a giant, gnarled oak. There could be something behind it, he supposed, but a few steps to the side showed nothing.

“Lass,” he began, his concern growing.

She lifted a hand to silence him, never taking her eyes off the tree. Rob knew these forests. He knew what dangers lurked in them, but the most feared were the men. There was a chance that another clan had ventured over the border, but he would have seen them. There was nothing out there. No sounds, no... He stilled. No sounds. The forest was as quiet as death. His skin prickled. Something was out there.

Rob went to grab his sword when Elin’s hand came to rest on his arm. He glanced at her, but she still had her gaze locked on the tree.

“We need to leave. Now,” she stated, a note of urgency in her voice.

“Tell me what you see. I’ll end it now.”

She glanced at him, her lips tight. She didn’t speak. She merely gave him a quick shake of her head. Then she wrapped her fingers around his wrist and tugged gently.

Rob let her pull him through the forest, though she was careful not to get too near the trees. He found that curious but didn’t say anything. The murmur of whispers behind him made him jerk around. Elin’s grip was unrelenting as she dragged him after her, refusing to stop.

“Wha-?” he began.

She put a finger to her lips and glared at him. He got the hint.

The walk back to her cottage was done in silence. Once they were inside, she released him and went to stand before the hearth. She wrapped her arms around herself and simply stared at the dying embers. He watched her, seeing how tense her shoulders were.

“What was that?” he asked.

She shook her head, her long, dark braid moving against her back. “You don’t want to know.”

“I wouldna ask if I didna want to know.” She remained silent, so he tried another tactic. “I saw nothing out there.”

“But you felt it.”

He clenched his jaw. Aye, he had, in fact, felt something. Not at first, though. It was only after he’d realized that the forest was silent that he became aware of...something. That was because he didn’t see a threat. At least, not the kind he was used to.

“What did you see?” he pushed.

Her shoulders slumped as she slowly turned to face him. “The past I knew I couldn’t outrun.”

“What are you talking about?”

Elin suddenly shot him a too-bright smile. “I’m just talking. I blame you.”

“Me?” He frowned, unsure of what was happening.

“That kiss.”

Just the reminder had him hard once more. The kiss he had wanted to take every time he had been with her. How many times had he dreamed of taking her into his arms? How many mornings had he woken aching to bury himself inside her? Too damn many to count. “Aye. And if you let me, there will be more.”

“I want that.”

He wasn’t stupid. She was trying to turn the conversation. And he would let her—for now. He took a step toward her and held out his arm. “Then come here.”

She took his hand. He brought her against him, his arms wrapping around her. Rob looked into her brown eyes. He saw passion there, but he also saw a hint of the fear she was trying so desperately to hide from him. He wanted to force her to tell him more, but he knew that would be a fruitless endeavor. Elin wouldn’t tell him anything until she was ready.

If she wanted a distraction, he would give her one. He began to lower his head for a kiss when he saw something flicker in her gaze. He paused and waited.

She brought her hands up to rest on his chest and briefly closed her eyes. “I’m sorry about the forest. We spoke of the past, and it brought up things I tried to forget.”

“What things?”

“There were some vile people who hurt others. My sister was one of them. They wanted me to join them, and I spent years in hiding to stay out of their reach. I found an ally. Someone who had also been hiding. Asrail and I watched each other’s backs. She was my friend. And I suppose, in many ways, a surrogate mother.”

“It didn’t last, I take it?”

Elin shook her head. “The group I hid from became too big, too strong. Others revolted against them. I was with those others, but then they captured my sister. Avis tricked me into thinking that she would walk away from them and join me, said that we could be a family again. I betrayed the second group when I released my sister.” Elin paused to lick her lips. “I ran then. From everyone. From the first group, from the second, from myself. I knew it was only a matter of time before one of them found me. I didn’t want to die that way.”

“Die?” What kind of people were these?

“I knew the two groups would clash soon. I...well, I tracked them.” She shrugged. “I joined the second group during the battle, and the first was defeated.”

There was truth in her words. Rob could sense that. But he also knew she was leaving a lot out. “Where was this?”

“Far from here. I was forgiven my transgressions. My sister was killed, and Asrail vanished. It was just me. Again. That’s when I tried to find a place to settle.”

“You found the cottage,” he guessed.

She lifted one shoulder in a shrug. It wasn't a denial, but it wasn't a confirmation either. She had run for her life, which explained why she was cautious and leery of trusting anyone. He couldn't fault her for that.

“You wanted to know my past. Well, there it is.” She kept her gaze on his chest as if she couldn't bear to look at him. “What happened in the forest, it was...I was just thinking about the past and...”

He could remind her that he'd heard something that sounded like a voice. It was a sound he'd never heard before, but she didn't mention it, so neither did he. Maybe his mind had been playing tricks on him.

Rob tightened his arms around her and rested his chin atop her head. “The past can no' hurt you now. All that is over.”

“I know.”

He let her speak the lie. Someone with such a past would need more than words. She needed action. Proof. He wanted to bring her back to the castle with him to live, but he didn't need to say the words to know that she would balk. And if he pushed? She might run again. That's how deeply the scars of her past ran. He'd worked hard to gain some of her trust. He would continue until she opened to him fully.

“You're safe here, lass. I willna let anyone harm you. Besides, no one would dare get near you with that bow.”

It brought the chuckle he had been hoping for. She lifted her head, her lips curved into a smile. He thought she might speak, but she just returned her head to his chest.

Rob stayed a while longer. He kept her talking about trivial things until he saw her relax. He glanced at the bed, knowing he could've taken her there. But now wasn't the time. She had too much on her mind. Call him selfish, but he wanted her thoughts completely on him when he took her.

Elin looked more herself when he mounted his horse and started for home. Except he looped back around when he knew she couldn't see him and

returned to the forest. He sat upon his steed and listened. The rain had stopped, but water still dripped from the leaves. All around him, the sounds of the forest were alive and noisy. He dismounted and unsheathed his sword as he went to the tree Elin had stared at. He walked around it, waiting to see something, anything. But there was nothing. Nothing on the ground suggested that anything had been there either.

He returned his sword to its scabbard and sighed. Elin's past must have mixed with her present, just as she'd explained. In all the times he'd been with her, he'd never seen her do that before. Though they hadn't talked of her past before either. Maybe he was overreacting.

Rob mounted once more and turned his steed around. As he did, the horse sidestepped nervously. He glanced over and only saw a tree. Rob frowned. The animal wasn't thinking about his past. His mount simply reacted.

Just as Elin had.

But to what?

The forest had gone quiet again. An eerie silence that warned of something dangerous lurking. Unease slithered down Rob's back. He twisted one way and then the other, looking into the limbs above him, but he saw nothing to warrant his apprehension. Finally, he clicked to his horse to start walking, which the animal did. In fact, the steed leapt to a gallop as if he couldn't wait to get out of the forest. As he rode away, Rob thought he heard a whisper again.

But he didn't stop to investigate.

When he returned to the castle, his elder brother stopped him. Donald was curious about the woman who had caught Rob's attention.

"I'm beginning to think she doesn't like me," Donald said.

Rob rolled his eyes. "Elin is shy."

"Is your interest...serious?" his brother asked carefully.

Rob stopped and faced Donald. "And if it is?"

"She's a Sassenach."

“So?”

“There are clans who would like a match with us.”

Rob had heard this before. He had even expected to have such a marriage. Then he’d met Elin. “That’s what you’re for.”

“Aye. That’s what we’re all for. The clan needs those alliances.”

“I’m no’ your only brother.”

Donald watched him for a full moment. “I could force you.”

“You could.” He really hoped his brother wouldn’t.

When warring clans wanted peace, the simple solution was a marriage between them. Donald knew he had no other choice but to accept that fate. He would get a prime match, though, as laird. Rob? His match would be good since he was second in line. If something happened to Donald before he had children, Rob would take over.

He and his brothers used to joke about how much better they had it than if they had been born girls. Now, he was beginning to see that it didn’t matter if he was male or female. He still had an obligation to the clan.

“I like her, brother. A lot.”

Donald clasped his hands behind his back, so reminiscent of their father. “I can tell.”

“Is there a reason you’re asking me these things?”

“It’s time we both marry.”

Rob let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. He feared that Donald would say that a clan had their sights on him to marry a daughter. “Then nothing says I can no’ marry Elin. We’re a strong clan.”

“That we are.” Donald considered his words for a moment. “I want to meet her. I’d like to properly thank her for what she did for us.”

“As I said, she’s shy. I’ll do my best to convince her.”

“Perhaps I should go to her.”

The refusal was on Rob’s lips in a second. He stopped himself in time, however. If he told his brother that he’d promised Elin that no one would

bother her, it would make Donald want to see her all the more. “There’s no need. She’ll come to you. As she should.”

“Aye. As she should.” Donald slung an arm around his shoulders, his face grim. “Now, come. There are many things to talk about.”

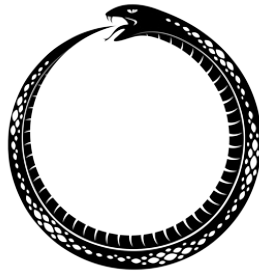
“Like what?”

“Choosing a wife. I received a missive from the Munros.”

Rob glanced at his brother. It was the first time he’d heard from the clan of his intended, who had died when sickness took the castle. That might have been the closest thing to love Donald would find, but his brother didn’t complain. Their parents had had an arranged marriage and found love along the way. Hopefully, his brother would, too.

Rob didn’t think about himself, because when he did, he thought of Elin. And the kiss that had seared him to his very bones. He knew desire. He knew lust. What he’d felt when she was in his arms exceeded both.

He didn’t want to refuse his brother or his clan, and he hoped that Donald wouldn’t put him in that position. Because there was only one woman he wanted as his—Elin.



The Gira were here. Elin knew the nymphs hadn't been destroyed completely, but she had hoped not to encounter one again. After the battle, the Gira had been decimated to near extinction.

She anxiously watched Rob ride away, mentally urging him to go faster. She had to make herself wait to return to the forest until she knew he was gone. Even then, she hesitated. He'd been curious. Would he return to check it out himself? She couldn't take the chance of running into Rob in the forest.

Elin didn't want to confront the nymphs. She knew firsthand how deadly they could be. Asrail might have been her friend, but would that matter to any of the other Gira? Elin doubted it.

The sun was sinking fast. She didn't want to be in the forest at night with the Gira. She didn't want to be near the Gira at all, but with trees surrounding her cottage, they would come if they wanted her.

Elin looked in the direction Rob had gone. She wondered if she should've told him that she had seen the Gira. But that was only a passing thought. She knew better. If she had, the conversation would've turned to what else was out there. Eventually, witches would've been brought up, and she couldn't tell him.

This was the first place in so long where she felt semi-safe. She had a friend, and possibly more, in Rob. Why risk that? Yes, there was a chance he

might accept her being a witch, but it was a slim one. And it was a chance she simply couldn't take.

Wouldn't take.

Elin walked from the cottage and slowly closed the door behind her. She glanced at the river, thinking she saw something out of the corner of her eye. Elin did a double take when she saw something dark beneath the water that was most certainly not a fish. Before she could think twice, a protection spell was ready in her mind.

The rushing river bubbled and parted as something rose from below. A form took shape, and she had to blink twice to make sure she indeed saw the bark skin of a Gira. Then Elin looked at the face. Her heart leapt with excitement when she saw that it was Asrail.

She rushed to the river's edge, elation making her nearly trip over her feet. "Asrail? Is that really you?"

The former queen of the Gira smiled softly in welcome as she walked from the river and onto land. "Aye, child. It is."

"I'm so happy to see you. I..." Elin had to blink back the sudden rush of tears. She wasn't alone anymore. Her friend had returned.

Asrail took Elin's hand in hers, the once-rough bark now smooth. "And I am very happy to find you. I've been looking everywhere."

That's when it hit Elin that Asrail had come from the river. "I don't understand. Why were you in the water?"

"The water nymphs took out the Gira. When my people tried to kill me, the water nymphs offered me sanctuary. And I accepted."

"That's where you've been? I thought you'd died."

Asrail shook her head as water continued dripping from her. "I was ready to accept that fate, but that didn't happen. The water nymphs are much different than the Gira. They don't associate with humans at all. It's a peaceful existence where I can travel anywhere through the belowground water systems."

“It’s good that you no longer have to hide.”

Asrail’s sharp gaze studied her. “Enough about me. Tell me about you. I didn’t imagine finding you still in Scotland.”

“I settled on an isle off the coast, but my past found me. I wandered for a bit, and then found this place last winter. I’ve been here since.”

“It suits you.”

Elin shrugged. “I like the seclusion.”

Asrail’s gaze sharpened. “There’s something you aren’t telling me.”

She could never get anything past the Gira. Probably because Asrail was much older. Elin didn’t know exactly how long the tree nymphs lived, but it was far, far longer than any human.

“Elin,” Asrail urged. “What is it?”

“I was determined to never use magic again. I want a normal life.”

“But?”

“A witch cursed the laird and his clan.” Elin shrugged. “The laird’s brother, Rob, is the one who found me. He’s become a...friend.”

Asrail’s smile was slow. “I think much more than that.”

“I couldn’t let them suffer. So, I—”

“Helped and used magic,” the Gira said with a nod. “No one could blame you for that.”

Elin licked her lips. “There’s more. Today, I found some Gira in the forest.”

Asrail’s brow furrowed in a deep frown. “Are you sure?”

“I saw one. I heard the whispers.”

“Did they speak to you?”

“I was with Rob. I didn’t tell him, but I urged us to leave.”

Asrail drew in a breath, her nostrils flaring. “What did their whispers say?”

“I couldn’t make it out.”

“You aren’t thinking of going to them, are you?”

“I...yes.” How else was she to get information?

Asrail shook her head once. “Stay clear of them. Let me see what I can uncover.”

“Look around, my friend. Trees are everywhere.”

“And so am I,” she stated flatly. “Let me approach them first.”

Elin was profoundly grateful for Asrail’s help, but she was keenly aware of her friend’s new life. “What of the water nymphs? Will they care that you’re interfering?”

“With my kind? No.”

“With me. I’m human.”

Asrail shot her a sly smile. “Aye, child. But you were also my friend. They know that. They also know I’ve been searching for you. They are the ones who told me you were here.”

“So, I don’t need to worry about going into the water?”

Asrail laughed. “Not unless you intend to do me or them harm. You’ll be safe. This I swear.”

Elin trusted Asrail with her life. It had just been the two of them for several years. They had formed an unlikely friendship that had benefited them both. Elin had been on her own for long months, utterly alone and adrift in a world that would never accept her. Knowing she had someone like Asrail with her once more was such a relief that she was dizzy with it.

“Oh, my child,” Asrail said as she drew Elin to her and enveloped her in a one-armed hug. “We promised to look out for each other. I’ve not forgotten that. Nor have I strayed from it. We’ll sort this out. And if you want to leave, I’ll help in any way I can.”

“What if I want to stay?”

Asrail leaned back to look at her. She smiled then. “We’ll figure that out, as well. Now, go inside. Let me find the Gira.”

“Why don’t I come with you?”

“It’ll be better if I go alone.”

The truth was, Elin was afraid that if Asrail left now, she would never return. She had once been the strongest of her kind. She was still powerful, but would that be enough if the Gira attacked her?

“I’ll be fine,” Asrail told her. “I’ll return as soon as I can.”

Elin forced herself to release Asrail. The Gira made her go into the cottage before she left, but Elin watched her from the window. Some of her worry dissipated, but not enough for Elin to rest easy. Asrail was confronting the Gira. Her people had turned on her when she allowed her son to marry a human.

To make matters worse, he had found a witch who would make him look human, too. The Gira had killed Asrail’s son and daughter-in-law for such a transgression. After, Asrail spirited one of her grandchildren away while her friend took the other.

Those granddaughters had each forged their own paths. One became a Hunter and fought the Coven. The other worked with the Gira and became their queen to fight the Coven. Elin didn’t know where Synne or Runa were, but she suspected they were both doing well. Asrail would’ve told her if it were otherwise.

Elin paced the cottage, her mind shifting from Asrail and the Gira to Rob. He would press for answers. She knew what little she told him would only placate him for so long. The problem was that she didn’t want to lie. If the Gira remained, then she would have to tell him so he could warn everyone.

Because the Gira loved to trick humans to get near them. Once a human was in the grasp of a tree nymph, there was no getting away.

The thought of Rob being caught by a Gira enraged Elin. Yet she didn’t relish explaining that there was a magical world alongside theirs. She had gotten to know him well in the months since they’d first met, but she couldn’t say for certain how he would react to such news. She liked to hope that he would accept it, but that was optimism talking, not fact.

Elin strained to hear any sounds outside her cottage, but she couldn’t

catch anything. She almost rushed to the river and called for the water nymphs—not that they would answer. She just couldn't stand not knowing what was happening with Asrail.

Something niggled in the back of her mind. She was too caught up in the present to think what it could be, though. Asrail. Rob. Her future. She paused as she thought of the kiss she and Rob had shared. She touched her lips. The day had begun wonderfully and had only gotten better, but then it had all come crashing down when she'd spotted the Gira.

Did she have a future with Rob? She'd be lying if she said that it didn't matter. It did. She cared deeply for him. She had little experience with men since she'd spent most of her life in hiding, but she wasn't ignorant of what went on between a man and a woman. She wanted that with him. Not because she was lonely, and not because he was the only one who'd shown interest.

Because she had never felt anything like she did with him.

Elin lowered herself to a chair. Some might caution that he was merely dallying with her. She didn't think so. That didn't mean he was offering her a future either. Yet if there was a chance, even the smallest one, she had to tell him everything. Didn't she?

But she wanted a normal life. She couldn't have that if anyone else knew about her magic. He might accept her, but that didn't mean his family or clan would. Where would that leave her then?

On the other hand, if she kept it to herself, no one would ever know. She wouldn't have to worry about Rob or his clan turning against her. She could, in fact, have the normal life she so desperately wanted. The only drawback would be that she would keep the biggest part of herself hidden from Rob. While she might not know much about relationships, she didn't think that would be wise in the long run.

Which brought her right back to her current dilemma. No matter how she looked at things, she would lose. At the very worst, she would have to leave the cottage. No. That wasn't true. The worst would be them trying to kill her

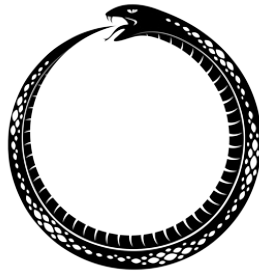
for being a witch.

However, things might work out, and she could find a future with Rob.

Elin chuckled, though it held no real merriment. “Faced with that choice, there really is only one option. Silence.”

But there *was* a third. If it came down to it, she would warn Rob, explain everything, and then flee before he had no choice but to end her life. Elin would enlist Asrail’s help in escaping. That way, she’d know that Rob and his clan were safe and armed with the knowledge. She wouldn’t get the happiness that seemed within her grasp, but she had come to expect nothing less.

The knock at the door startled her out of her musings.



Rob knew he should've waited, but he hadn't been able to get Elin out of his head. He stood outside her cottage and waited for her to open the door. It opened a few inches before she saw that it was him and swung it wide.

"Rob. This is unexpected," she said.

He saw the surprise and happiness in her gaze, which helped to ease his apprehension. "If it's too late, I'll leave."

"Nay. Come in," she said and stepped aside.

Rob entered the cottage. He'd spent his life in the castle, and yet he found the small dwelling more to his liking. It was because of Elin—he knew that. She created a comfortable, homey atmosphere with very little. It suited her. As it did him. He was relaxed here. That made him open up to her as he never had before.

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

He swallowed and looked at her. "Nay."

"What is it?"

Was it his imagination, or did wariness settle over her? "I can no' stop thinking about you."

"What about me?" she asked carefully.

He wasn't imagining it. She was nervous. But she had nothing to be concerned about. Or did she? "I've waited weeks to kiss you, and I finally got

the chance. I'm no' here asking for more. I doona know why I'm here. I just had to see you."

Suddenly, her lips were on his. He locked his arms around her as their tongues met in a frenzy of passion. He hadn't imagined it. Her taste, her kiss, it left him reeling. Winded.

Hungry.

Somehow, he found the will to end it before he was past the point of no return. His cock was hard and throbbing, yearning to be buried deep within her. Rob pressed his forehead against hers as their ragged breathing filled the cottage.

"I want more than just your kisses," he told her. "I want you. As my wife."

Elin lifted her head to gaze into his eyes. "There is much you don't know about me."

"We'll have years together where I can discover all there is. I know what I feel, lass, and there is no other for me. You feel it, too. Doona deny that."

"I do feel it," she admitted in a soft voice.

"We can live here if that's what's holding you back. We doona have to stay at the castle."

The smile she gave him was a little sad. "That's your family."

"And you would be my wife. Doona decide now. Think on it." He had pushed her too hard. He saw that now. If she answered him tonight, it wouldn't be with what he wanted.

Rob dropped his arms and took a step back. He didn't want to leave, but he couldn't stay and not continue kissing her. And that would lead to something else entirely. He only had so much control, and with the way he craved Elin, he didn't want to test it.

"Don't go," she said as she grabbed his arm.

"Lass, if I remain--"

"I know," she said over him. "I know exactly what will happen if you

stay. And I'm asking you not to go."

Rob blinked, debating the wisdom of staying. In the end, his heart and his body won out. He said nothing, but the widening of Elin's smile told him the answer had been on his face.

She pulled him to her and slowly wrapped her arms around his neck. He gazed into her eyes, desire pumping through his veins like fire. He'd never wanted anyone as much as he wanted Elin. She was independent, stubborn, and inquisitive. She was eager to learn and just as keen to teach him things. Her openness drew him, and before he knew what had happened, he found himself falling for her. Now, the dark-haired beauty stood in his arms, offering her body.

This time when he kissed her, it was slow, languid. Their tongues met and tangled, the desire that had previously taken them roaring back to life quickly. His hand moved to the indent of her waist and upward to feel the swell of her breast. She sucked in a breath and leaned against him.

She was the one who began to undress. Between kisses, he helped her remove her gown, shoes, stockings, and underthings. He had been gentle with her clothes, but he yanked off his sporran and sword, followed by his boots, his kilt, and finally his shirt.

They came back together with a sigh as they touched, skin to skin. He reached behind her and tugged the tie that held her braid. Then he shoved his fingers into her hair and freed it from its plait so that her dark tresses fell around her in soft waves.

He moved her to the bed, and Rob leaned back to peer at her body. His mouth went dry when he saw the fullness of her breasts, her nipples hard and waiting. The fire illuminated her skin, bathing it in soft light so he saw the swell of her hips and her shapely legs as well as the triangle of hair at the junction of her thighs. She was all curves and softness, and he wanted to know every inch of her.

Elin couldn't stop staring at the man before her. Rob's body had been honed by years of work. Broad shoulders corded with sinew extended to his biceps. His muscular chest tapered to narrow hips and thickly muscled legs. Nothing about him said *soft*. He was hard and powerful.

Her perusal paused at his erection between them that stood upward as if waiting for her touch. She softly wrapped her fingers around his arousal, shocked to feel the strength that warred with the soft skin.

His groan snapped her gaze to his face. The pleasure there made her want to give him more. Elin moved her hand up his length and then down. Another groan. She repeated it, moving a little faster.

"Woman," he said through clenched teeth, his eyes closed, his breaths coming fast.

She didn't stop. She was so focused on his pleasure that she was taken aback when one of his hands cupped her breast. His thumb rubbed her aching nipple, causing her legs to tremble as desire shot straight to her core.

"Aye, lass," he whispered. "That's what I feel at your touch."

She looked into dark blue eyes, drowning in the feelings swarming her.

"I have you," he said and gently lowered her to the bed.

Elin released her hold on his cock when he moved down her body. He settled between her legs, his mouth near her breasts. Then his lips wrapped around a nipple. Her back arched on a gasp when he gave a soft pull. Then his hand was on her other breast, teasing the turgid peak.

Desire soon became all she knew. It surged through her with the force of rushing rapids, sizzling and passionate. Rob's skillful teasing soon had her rocking her hips against him, seeking release. She heard a keening sound and belatedly realized it was her. Then his mouth was between her legs.

His tongue was merciless as he teased her until she shook. She gripped the covers in an effort to stem the tide of need while at the same time

reaching for it. Desire spiraled tighter and tighter. He slid a finger inside her, moving it in time with his tongue.

It was too much.

It wasn't enough.

Elin moved her hips, trying to reach the pinnacle that she knew was so close. If only she knew what to do to reach it.

A second finger joined the first. She barely registered it before her body jerked with her orgasm. She was floating. She was falling. But through it all, waves of ecstasy crashed through her, taking her higher and higher.

She was dimly aware of Rob looming over her, of something rubbing against her entrance. Then he was inside her, filling her, stretching her. A tiny prick of pain barely registered as the last of her climax faded.

His lips were on hers then. Elin tasted herself on him as the kiss deepened. He lifted his hips, sliding out of her a little before thrusting forward. She gasped at the exquisite feel of him.

“Wrap your legs around me,” he murmured.

She did as he requested and felt him sink deeper. She moaned in pleasure. Everything felt so good. She never wanted it to end.

He began to move in a rhythm of slow, deep thrusts that gradually turned faster.

She felt amazing. Rob had fought against his orgasm from the moment he entered her. He'd been surprised to discover that she was a virgin, but it pleased him immensely. Seeing the bliss wash over her when she climaxed was truly a sight to behold.

Her legs wrapped around him firmly, her ankles locked. Her tight, wet heat was driving him wild. He'd fantasized about her for too long not to be on the brink now that he was inside her.

He thrust hard and fast, sinking deep. He looked down at her to see her watching their bodies come together. The night was still young. He would make her come again and again until she passed out from the pleasure. That was what she made him want to do.

“Oh,” she said with a sigh.

A heartbeat later, Rob felt her body clenching around him from another orgasm. He clenched his teeth, but he was too far gone. He gave a shout and pumped his hips as his seed emptied inside her.

When she had wrung everything from him, he pulled out of her and rolled onto his back. He reached for Elin, but she was already moving to lay against him.

“Give me a moment, and I’ll get something for you to clean yourself with,” he said.

She kissed his cheek and rose to do it herself. Then she cleaned him. He met her gaze as they shared a smile. When she returned to the bed, she snuggled against him with her head on his chest.

“I would like to do that many more times,” she told him.

He smiled. “I was going to suggest that myself.”

“I’m glad you came back.”

Rob kissed the top of her head. “Me, too, lass.”

“Will you stay the entire night?”

“Aye.”

She lifted her head to meet his gaze. It looked as if she wanted to tell him something, but she must have thought better of it because she lay back down.

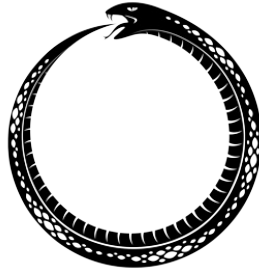
He threaded his fingers through her hair, marveling at the cool, silky texture. He stared at the firelight dancing on the ceiling as he thought about what his future could be like with Elin. When he heard her breathing even out as she drifted to sleep, he smiled. This was what he wanted with her every night—her curled up beside him.

There was something between them. At least she hadn’t denied it. That

didn't mean she would agree to be his wife. But he didn't intend to give up easily. He had no doubt that they were meant to be together. Whatever held her back, he would help her work through it while giving her whatever time she needed.

She had a violent past, but he offered her a peaceful future. He didn't want her to take his word for it, though. He would show her. Day by day. Week by week.

In the meantime, he would make it clear to his brother that he had found his bride. Donald wouldn't be happy, but Rob would stand firm. Donald wouldn't force him. Not once he realized that Rob loved Elin.



Elin felt something heavy draped over her waist. When she cracked open an eye and saw the arm, she smiled. Rob was curved around her back, his body molded to hers. She thought about the previous night and the pleasure they had shared.

“Morning,” he murmured near her ear, his voice husky with sleep.

Her smile grew. “Good morn.”

He placed a kiss behind her ear. “Did you sleep well?”

“Very.”

She felt his lips curve against her skin. His chest rumbled with a sound that said he was pleased with her words.

Elin turned in his arms to face him. She ran a finger down his cheek. He would want an answer to his proposal. She wanted to say yes, with all her heart, but she didn’t think she could. Not until she heard back from Asrail. Even then, she didn’t want to set her heart on something she wasn’t sure could ever be hers.

Rob’s dark blue eyes studied her as his smile melted away. “I doona think I like the direction of your thoughts.”

She grinned at him. “Maybe I was thinking that I didn’t look forward to you leaving today.”

He chuckled, but she could tell that he didn’t completely buy her reply.

Her heart lurched at the thought of Rob leaving and never returning.

“Who says I have to?” he replied.

That brought her up short. “I just assumed you would.”

“Why no’ come with me? Donald has wanted to meet you. I doona think I can put it off anymore.”

“And my not going makes me appear rude. I am living on his land.”

“He’s curious about you.”

More like he wanted to know who the woman was that his brother kept leaving to see. Elin worried about going to the castle, but she had to go if she wanted to remain at the cottage. “Then I’ll accompany you.”

The slow grin on Rob’s face told her how pleased he was with her agreement. “Doona be surprised if you’re asked to stay the night.”

“Will you crawl into my bed if I am?”

“Nothing could keep me out of it.”

He rolled her onto her back and kissed her deeply. She wrapped one leg around his waist, feeling his cock thicken. Rob grunted and lifted his head to peer down at her.

“No’ yet, lass. You’ll be sore.”

“I don’t think I care.”

He chuckled and rose from the bed in one fluid motion, beginning to dress. “What can I help you with this morning?”

Elin shoved her hair away from her face and sat up. “Give me time to get ready for the day. There are still some oatcakes we can eat this morning.”

“Aye. I’ll see to my horse then.”

Rob was out the door before she’d finished dressing. She saw the strip of cloth stained with blood—her blood from the night before. She had freely given her maidenhood to Rob, and she had no regrets. She could only hope that, in the end, he didn’t either.

Elin didn’t bother with shoes as she rushed to the river. She dipped her hands into the cool, rushing waters and splashed some on her face as she

called for Asrail. Elin sat on the bank and cleaned herself. She was beginning to think that Asrail hadn't heard her when the water near her suddenly began to rise. Bark emerged. Elin realized it was Asrail's hair, and then the Gira's face appeared.

"I came last night," Asrail said.

Elin glanced over her shoulder to make sure Rob wasn't near. "What did you find out?"

Asrail's lips parted. She paused, her gaze darting past Elin. "He's coming."

"Asrail, what did you learn?" she whispered urgently.

"Be careful. We'll speak soon," Asrail said before dipping back beneath the surface.

Elin huffed as she got to her feet. When she turned, Rob stood there with his horse. She walked past him and waved the wet cloth. Elin hurried into the cottage and finished dressing. She worked the comb through her tangled hair and was in the process of plaiting it when she heard another horse.

She rushed to the window and looked out. A figure was on the ridge, though she could only see the lower portion. The man wore the same tartan as Rob did, but there was no doubt that he was headed their way.

Elin tied off her hair and walked outside. She glanced toward the river where a large oak sat and saw the bark move. A Gira. How had she not seen it earlier? Elin slid her gaze to Rob. He was looking at the visitor approaching, a slight frown on his face that eventually gave way to a smile. She used the opportunity to head to the tree.

"What do you want?" Elin demanded of the Gira.

"To warn you," a female voice whispered.

Worry shot through Elin. "About?"

"There's a witch near."

The Gira didn't have time to say more as the rider reached Rob. Elin remained near the tree and watched the man dismount. He was slightly taller

than Rob but had the same light brown hair. They also had similar features. Which meant that this was likely one of Rob's brothers—she suspected the laird.

“There you are,” Rob called as his gaze landed on her. “Come meet Donald.”

Elin's legs were stiff as she walked to them. She had agreed to go to the castle, but she'd also expected to have time to brace herself for the meeting. Instead, she was barely dressed and coming face-to-face with the laird of Clan Mackenzie.

She tried not to flinch at the way Donald looked her up and down. Elin kept her chin raised. She hadn't cowed before the Coven, and she wouldn't do it now before a man—even if he had the power to throw her out of her cottage.

“Now I know why Rob stole away from the castle,” Donald said with an easy smile.

Elin found it hard to concentrate on him when she kept thinking about the Gira. She needed more information, and she couldn't get it while the men were here. “You didn't need to come all the way out here. Rob and I were traveling to you this morning.”

“It does me good to get out.” Donald's smile never wavered. “I wanted to thank you for helping with the sickness that took my clan.”

She glanced at Rob to find him watching her with a grin. Elin bowed her head. “I'm glad it worked.”

“I'm curious, though,” Donald continued. “Our healer used those herbs to no effect.”

Rob's gaze snapped to his brother, a frown furrowing his brow. “I've already asked Elin. She said the mixture must have been different.”

“Perhaps.” Donald's gaze swung to her.

Elin felt his assessing look. She knew what he wasn't saying, and her stomach churned with anxiety.

“Brother,” Rob called. “What are you getting at?”

“I’m merely posing a question.”

Elin had been prepared for this. “It was a statement, not a question. However, if it were a question, I would ask if your healer mixed the herbs as I did. Or did she give them separately?”

Donald was silent for a long moment as he stared at her. His smile was gone. She knew what he was thinking, what everyone thought. Just as she had known it would likely come to this when she helped. But what kind of person allowed others to needlessly die if they could stop it? If she had, she would be like Avis.

And she was nothing like her sister.

“Donald,” Rob said in a warning tone. “Surely, you’re no’ accusing Elin of anything. She helped when she didna have to.”

“People talk,” Donald said without looking away from her.

Elin held his gaze unflinchingly. Was this when he called her a witch? How long would Rob refute that before he sided with his brother? The offer of marriage would be retracted. Elin might have enough time to warn them about the Gira and the witch before she had to leave.

At least she was prepared this time. She would make her escape so that Rob could never find her. Because if he brought her back a second time, it wouldn’t be to return her to the cottage.

“I saw the herbs,” Rob said. “I took them from her. I touched them, and I watched them being steeped. There was nothing more to it.”

Donald suddenly relaxed, a large smile on his face that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Of course. Forgive me. I had to ask, you see.”

Elin swallowed, her heart thudding in her chest. She did see. Perfectly. This was the first accusation that wasn’t really an accusation. But others would follow. She knew her time was up, and that knowledge hurt worse than expected. She thought about Rob and the night they’d shared. The love that had blossomed. She wanted to double over with the hurt and anguish, but

somehow, she stayed upright. She kept the tears from her eyes and the screams locked within her.

“That’s the last time you do such a thing,” Rob stated. “I’ve asked Elin to marry me.”

Donald’s head jerked to the side. His body was so tense it vibrated with fury. Elin watched the two face off. To give Donald some credit, he didn’t reply. Though she could tell he had a lot to say on the matter.

Rob had spoken about how close he and his brothers were. She wouldn’t be the one to come between them. It was just another reason for her to leave.

Donald’s gaze swung back to her. “I take it you’ve already agreed?”

“I’ve not given him my answer,” she replied.

Surprise flashed in Donald’s blue eyes. He took a deep breath. “I have news, as well. I’ve chosen another bride. We celebrate tonight with our two clans.”

“Already?” Rob asked, his brows snapping together.

“I have a duty,” Donald replied in a clipped voice. “We all do.”

It was a reminder that Rob had one, as well—and it didn’t involve marrying her. Elin couldn’t be upset with that because it was the truth. She loved Rob. There was no denying that, but having a witch for a wife would only bring destruction to such a strong clan. And she couldn’t bear to see that happen. Not to Rob.

“That’s wonderful news,” she said, hoping to deflect the anger.

They both ignored her.

“Who?” Rob demanded.

“Anna’s sister, Mary. Laird Munro wants a union between our clans. It’s what is needed.” Donald’s voice was hollow, as if he were repeating words he had told himself.

Rob shook his head. “You doona have to do this.”

“Aye, brother. I do.” Donald looked at her. “Perhaps you can speak to our healer. Show her what you did so she can be prepared if we have another

illness.”

Elin bowed her head. “Of course.” Though she had no intentions of doing that. She wanted Donald gone, but she couldn’t exactly ask him to leave. It was his land, after all. “We were about to eat. Would you care to join us?”

“I have duties to see to. Rob,” he ordered.

Rob’s nostrils flared in anger as he watched his brother mount his steed and wheel the horse around before riding away. Then Rob turned to her.

“I understand,” Elin said before he could say anything. “You’re needed at the castle.”

“He shouldna have spoken to you that way.”

Elin tried to smile, but she couldn’t quite manage it. “It’s fine.”

“It isna. It’s why you didna tell me you knew about herbs when I asked.” Rob raked a hand through his hair. “Donald isna normally like this. He cared for Anna, his intended who died during the sickness. I doona think it was love, but it could’ve turned into that. Losing her was a blow. He’s no’ grieving. Instead, he’s going to marry her sister, thinking it will make things easier.”

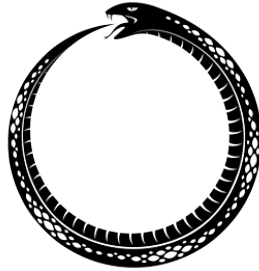
Elin let him talk. There was nothing for her to say anyway. Rob was angry on her behalf, but he was more worried about his brother.

“I need to talk to him.”

“Go,” Elin told him.

Rob gave her a quick kiss. “I’ll be back soon.”

He mounted his horse and nudged the animal into a gallop to catch up with Donald. Elin made sure he was out of sight before she turned to the tree. But the Gira was gone.



Elin raced to the river and called for Asrail. When her friend didn't appear, Elin went to the forest where she had seen the Gira the day before. She only took a few steps before she heard the whispers.

"What did you want to warn me about?"

Two Gira moved away from trees to show themselves. There were more, though Elin couldn't determine the number. She could stand against one or two, but the Gira had more power than a witch. They could easily kill her.

The Gira on the left stepped forward. "As I said, to warn you."

"About?"

"Trouble." This came from the Gira on the right. Her hair was stacked higher, a sign of an older nymph.

Elin swallowed. "What kind of trouble?"

"A witch," the younger Gira replied. "She knows you stopped her curse."

The older nymph glanced past Elin's shoulder. "She's angry."

"In other words, she'll retaliate." Just what Elin needed.

The two Gira exchanged looks. It was the older one who said, "You can stop her."

"I'm trying to live a life without magic."

The younger snorted. "You used your ability to help your lover and his people."

So, she had. Elin had known there would be consequences for that. She should've thought about the witch realizing that she was near and wanting retribution. Elin blew out a breath and shook her head. "I couldn't let them die."

"Now your actions mean *your* life might be taken," the older one stated. It was true—either by the witch or the clan. There was no way out for her. The younger Gira took another step closer. "We can help."

"How?" Elin looked the two Gira over.

It was the older who said, "We weren't part of the Gira at the Great Battle. Our home is in this part of Scotland, and when the call went out for the Gira to join the others, we ignored it."

Elin had no way of proving their story. She wanted to believe them, but that was because she wanted an ally. No. She *needed* one.

"We can help," the Gira said again. "Let us help."

Elin paused, considering the offer.

The older one tilted her head to the side. "What choice do you have?"

"None." That was what she was coming to terms with. "Who is this witch?"

Rob easily caught up with Donald. He pulled up alongside his brother but didn't speak immediately. He needed to curb his anger before he said anything.

"I see her allure," Donald said after a bit.

Rob clenched his teeth. "It's more than just her beauty. I love her."

"And what of the clan? What of the unions we can make to strengthen the clan and gain more allies? Before you mention our two other brothers, might I ask why you get to marry for love while the rest of us doona get that luxury?"

Rob nudged his horse to block his brother's, so Donald had to pull up on the reins. Rob glared at his brother. "You could marry for love, too."

"I can no'."

"You can. You choose no' to."

"Because of the clan," Donald bit out, his fury close to bubbling over.

Rob held his brother's gaze. "What of Anna? She only recently died. You've no' taken the time to grieve her loss or that of anyone else."

"Her father and I had an agreement. He has another daughter, and he's pushing for me to fulfill that agreement. We both want peace."

"Put him off."

"He thinks I killed Anna."

Rob jerked back in shock. "What?"

"He believes I'm trying to get out of our arrangement. Never mind that we lost family and clan members to the sickness. He's mourning his daughter, and he's lashing out. Unfortunately, that means we're his focus. If I doona marry his other daughter, we'll be fighting them. We've had peace for a while. Our clan is strong, and our allies numerous, but the old man doesna care. He'll come after us."

"Then we show him our strength."

Donald sighed and looked away as he shook his head. "I'll not have any clansmen fight a battle that I could've prevented."

Which was exactly what Donald was doing. Rob had to admit, he'd do the same thing in his brother's shoes. The weight of so many rested upon Donald's shoulders. Rob and his other brothers were there to bear some of that responsibility.

"Are you sure about Elin?" Donald asked, his gaze swinging back to him.

Rob frowned. There was something in his brother's voice. "What do you mean?"

"Are you sure she isna a witch?"

"Because she mixed the herbs together, and our healer didna? Aye, I'm

sure she isna. She's a good person. I've come to know her these past months. She's had a difficult past, and she's trying to make a future."

Donald ran a hand over his jaw. "Our healer tried everything. Elin shows up with a basket of herbs, and suddenly we're all healed. What if she caused the illness?"

"Tread lightly, brother," Rob warned, anger twisting within him. Elin had done nothing but help, and it infuriated him that someone—especially his brother—was blaming her.

"I'm being serious."

"Aye, and you're the one who said the MacDonnell lass cursed you."

Donald had the good grace to look away.

"You're grasping for reasons. Sickness comes. We beat it. I doona care how that happened, as long as it did."

"So, you *do* think there was more to it than just herbs."

Rob fought against the ire that flared within him. "I didna say that. You questioned Elin. How does she fit? She didna meet you until today. This is about you, brother. You're cursed by a lass who feels spurned. Anna dies of a mysterious illness, and her father is convinced you killed her, so you have to marry her sister, Mary. And you want to blame Elin?"

"You've heard the rumors about...unnatural things, just as I have."

Rob shook his head in disbelief. "About witches? That nonsense has been spoken through families for generations. I've never met a witch. Have you? It's superstitious rubbish."

"What if it isna?"

Something in Donald's voice drew Rob up short. "What do you know?"

"The story I have is one of good faith. I trust him."

"Who?"

Donald hesitated. "Archie Ross."

Rob knew him. He was a little older than Donald and had been laird of his clan for several years. Their clans didna border each other, but they had

mutual allies that had led to Archie and Donald becoming friends. “And?”

“There was a battle a few years ago. It was near the border of his clan. He heard the battle. When he got there, there wasna much but scorched earth. No’ a single body left behind. But by the looks of it, there should’ve been many.”

“Clans fight all the time. They must have taken their dead with them.”

“So quickly? Nay, Rob. It was something more. It was during the time that everything felt heavy, ominous. As if evil were right at our door.”

Rob wanted to tell his brother that he was ridiculous, but he couldn’t. He remembered that year. Everyone had stayed on alert, ready for whatever might come for them. Then, one day, that feeling just disappeared.

His thoughts then turned to Elin and the battle she’d spoken about. He had thought she’d meant a small group, but what if it had been bigger than that? What if it had been the battle his brother spoke of?

“Witches. Magic,” Donald continued. “That was what everyone said. You remember?”

He did, indeed, recall that.

“You want to know why I questioned Elin? Because I doona want to know there is a witch among us, even if she is helping. I doona want to be responsible for defending her. Nor do I want to be the one who has to decide her fate if our clan rises up against her.”

“She’s no’ a witch.”

Donald shook his head. “It doesna matter. I need you. I wish I could allow you to marry whoever you wanted, but I can no’. I should’ve told you last night, but...”

“Spit it out,” Rob demanded. His stomach clenched in dread when his brother rubbed a hand over his jaw. It was a nervous gesture. The kind that Donald made when he wanted to do anything but say what he had to say.

“Two weeks ago, I agreed for you to marry Marcia MacDonnell.”

Rob could only stare at his brother. Rage, shock, and indignation moved

through him so quickly he couldn't land on any one emotion. They roiled together violently, threatening to rip him apart—all while telling him to take it out on his brother.

Somehow, Rob kept himself in check—but just barely. “Nay.”

“Brother—”

“Nay,” Rob said louder, harsher. “I willna.”

“What of the clan?”

“You fucked up, brother. You fix it with this lass.”

“I'm trying,” Donald shouted.

Rob snorted. “By agreeing without having the decency to tell me?”

“You're never around! You spend all your time with Elin.”

“If that were the case, I'd never be at the castle. You've had ample opportunity to tell me, but you didna. You didna because you knew how I would respond.”

“I've given my word,” Donald said, his voice flat.

Rob had been angry at his brother before, but never like this. “My answer is nay. You had no right to make that arrangement before discussing it with me. I'm no' some female you get to order around.”

He clicked to his mount and ran the steed back to Elin.

“Where are you going? I need you at the castle,” Donald called.

Rob ignored him. Was this how a woman felt when told who she would marry, regardless of what she wanted? It was shite, and he would have none of it. Rob wanted to go straight to Elin, but he couldn't. Not in his current state. He needed to calm down and get his anger under control before he saw her. As for his brother, Rob had no intention of returning to the castle anytime soon.

Rob gave his horse his head and let the steed go where he wanted. His thoughts drifted as he gave in to his indignation. By refusing, he'd put his brother in an awkward position, which would cause Donald to choose one of their younger brothers. Since Roddy was still too young, the obligation would

fall to Craig. Rob didn't want any of his brothers to feel as if they had to marry.

The rub of it was that, even a few months ago, he wouldn't have hesitated to do what Donald asked. But that had been before he met Elin. Before he knew the taste of her kiss and realized how perfectly she fit against him.

It was before he'd fallen in love with her.

Their father had spoken of love. He'd told his children how there hadn't been love between him and their mother at first. They'd built their lives on mutual trust and friendship that had eventually turned to love. Rob had dreamed of having something like that. He'd never expected to find the kind of love he felt for Elin. She consumed his thoughts, his very being. There was only one way to prove to Donald that he was utterly devoted to Elin, and that was by refusing anyone but her.

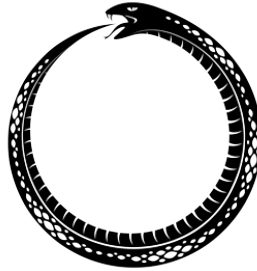
Rob hadn't believed that a love the likes of which he had for Elin existed. Bards sang about it, and poets wrote about it, but he'd thought it was just fanciful longings. Now, he knew the truth. And because of that, he wouldn't live denying himself the woman who was his match in every way.

He blinked and found himself in the forest. It was odd that his horse had brought him back when the animal had been so hasty to leave before. Rob thought about the previous day and how strange Elin had acted. He couldn't help but think about the things his brother had said about witches and the battle. He hadn't asked Elin about the skirmish she'd been involved in. Maybe it was time he did.

Rob tugged on the reins to turn his mount toward Elin's when he saw what looked like an eye on the tree. He did a double take, but when he looked again, there was nothing there. He shook his head. This was all Donald's fault. Talk of witches and evil... It was causing him to see things that weren't there.

"A tree with an eye," he said with a snort.

Yet, as he rode to Elin's, he sensed that someone watched him.



Elin knew what she had to do, but that didn't make her decision any easier. She was happy here. Then there was Rob. Handsome, kind, amazing Rob, who offered her the world. In an instant, all of that had been yanked from her. Or it would be once she ensured the Mackenzie clan's safety.

After her conversation with the Gira, Elin had returned to the cottage to find Asrail waiting. The look Asrail gave her said that she knew everything.

"You don't have to do anything," Asrail said.

"I won't be able to live with myself if I don't."

"What about what you've found here?"

"If I do nothing, I'll still lose it."

"I'll help you."

But Elin had refused her old friend. She didn't want Asrail risking her new life on a problem that wasn't hers. Even though Elin would've felt better if she'd had Asrail beside her, she couldn't do that to her friend.

Elin thought about Donald's visit that morning. There would be a celebration at the castle for his upcoming nuptials. It would be the perfect time for the witch to strike. Elin had a description of the witch and a name—Marcia. She might get there in time to stop the woman. But would she be able to do it without anyone seeing her?

Elin snorted as she stared at the flames dancing in the hearth. The witch

knew who she was. As soon as she saw Elin, she would lash out. At least, that was what the Gira had said. The nymphs had warned Elin that Marcia wanted revenge, and she didn't care who saw her get it. Elin wished she could lure the witch from the castle, but she didn't expect that possibility. That meant that many would see their encounter—and the result.

The Gira had surprised Elin by offering to hide her if she won against the witch and needed to run. Elin had agreed. If the nymphs were attempting to trick her in order to kill her, at least it would be a quicker death than what a mob would demand. She shivered at the thought, once again hearing the creaking of the rope from around her mother's neck.

Her head swung to the door when she heard footsteps approaching. The door opened, and Rob filled the space. She wanted to run to him, to throw her arms around him and let him shield her from everything. But there was nothing he could do. This was her fight. He had given her a glimpse of what her life could've been. She would repay that by ensuring that the witch couldn't hurt anyone again.

She got to her feet and faced him. "Will you take me to the castle?"

"Of course."

"Today. For the celebration."

He hesitated, his brow furrowing. "I didna intend to go today."

"You must. *We* must."

Rob closed the door behind him and walked to her. "What is it?"

"There's something I need to do."

"Tell me."

She wanted to, but she feared he would race to the castle and alert everyone to come after her if she did.

Hurt showed in his blue eyes. "You doona trust me."

"There are...things about me you wouldn't understand. I want to tell you, but it might put you in a difficult position."

"Like being a witch?"

He said it without rancor or mockery. Elin remembered how his brother had questioned what she was. Had Rob pieced it all together?”

“I take your silence to mean that you are,” he replied.

She held his gaze, wavering between being honest and lying. There were pitfalls to both.

“Elin?”

She took in a steadying breath. “My time here in this cottage—with you—has been everything I could’ve dreamed of. You were...a fantasy come to life.”

“Stop,” he demanded. “Whatever you’re doing, just stop.”

“Nothing can halt what is coming. I hope you’ll remember me fondly.”

A muscle jumped in his jaw. “You’re talking nonsense.”

“Am I?” She tried to laugh, but it came out as a croak. This was so much harder than she had thought it would be.

Rob grabbed her arms to hold her in front of him when she tried to step around him. “The battle you told me about? Donald mentioned one this morning. The laird of that clan spoke to him about it. He told Donald that what occurred there wasna natural.”

Elin’s stomach dropped to her feet like a stone. She was about to form a lie when Rob shook his head.

“Doona. I thought there was something between us.”

“There is,” she said.

“Then trust me enough to tell me the truth.”

She held her tongue. He’d already guessed. She was surprised that he hadn’t commented on her lack of denial, but she really didn’t want to lie to him. Yet putting her life in someone’s hands was terrifying. They had shared a bed, shared their bodies. He’d offered her marriage. But did that mean he would stand with her? Could she allow that, knowing his clan and his family might rise against him?

Might. They probably would. She had heard his brother’s voice, had seen

his disdain.

“If you don’t want to take me to the castle, I understand.” She stepped back, his hands falling away from her. “It might be best if you go now.”

“I can protect you.”

She smiled, tears threatening. “There’s nothing to protect me from.”

“Why will you no’ trust me? Have I no’ earned that, at least?”

Elin glanced away, but her gaze was yanked back to his deep blue eyes. “Someone did curse your family. That’s what the illness was. She wants revenge.”

“Wants?” he asked with a frown. “Not wanted. Which means, she isna finished yet.”

“No. She isn’t.”

“You used magic to stop the sickness.”

There was no question in his words. Just as when he had said that she was a witch. Yet Elin still couldn’t nod in agreement. She had been hiding her abilities for so long that she wasn’t sure she could tell him.

Rob took a step toward her, but he didn’t reach for her again. “You saved us. Even before I knew about the magic, I owed you a great debt. Everyone in the clan did, but especially my family since we were hit the hardest.”

“You owe me nothing.”

“I love you,” he said suddenly.

Elin squeezed her eyes closed. She didn’t want to hear that, couldn’t hear it. Couldn’t he tell that she was barely holding things together now? Why did he have to say those words? Words she’d thought never to hear from anyone.

“I love you,” he said again.

She refused to open her eyes. When he said the words a third time, she realized that he was closer. Then his arms went around her. She stiffened, refusing to lean against him.

“I love you, Elin,” he whispered again.

With that, her will crumbled, and she allowed him to pull her against his

firm chest. She wrapped her arms around his middle and clung to him tightly. Her life was a constant storm, but he was the steady oak that moved with the winds, bending and swaying but never toppling.

“Stop saying that,” she said.

He kissed her temple. “I can no’. I love a witch.”

She jerked back and stared at him in shock. “Don’t say those words. *Never* say those words.”

Rob merely smiled. “I know you. I know your kind heart, your gentle soul. I know the resolve that runs through you when you decide to help others while putting your life on the line. I know the fortitude you have starting over again and again. I know the longing you feel for the same future that I crave. I doona care if you have magic or no’. I love *you*.”

“You’ve not seen what fear and superstition can do.”

“No one will harm you,” he stated.

She shook her head. “You can’t promise that.”

He gave her a firm look. “Tell me everything. I want to know it all.”

Was it a trick? Was he luring her into giving up secrets that witches kept to themselves? Would he then turn it over to his brother and watch as the clan hunted her? Even if she made it away from Mackenzie land, she knew the other clans would track her down. Or...she could believe him. She could put her faith in someone not of the supernatural world and trust that he meant every word.

“In case you’ve no’ noticed, I’m no’ my brother. I have different views,” he told her.

Elin could argue that it was all for show, but she was just grasping at anything to keep from divulging the truth, to stop from admitting aloud what he had already stated. She looked deep into Rob’s eyes, the same ones that had stared down at her so lovingly as their bodies joined. His gaze never wavered, didn’t falter.

“There are two kinds of witches,” she began.

His smile was wide as he moved her to one of the chairs and motioned for her to sit as he took the other. “Go on.”

“Some witches like power. They like to show off. Dominate. To strike fear in others. That was my sister. That was also the Coven. They built their power by recruiting witches to join. Then they hunted other witches, giving each a choice: join or die.”

The smile on Rob’s face was gone. He watched her raptly. “Did they find you?”

“Nay, but not for lack of trying. I was good at hiding—though I had a friend who helped.”

“Asrail,” he said with a nod. “I remember.”

Elin licked her lips. “Asrail isn’t like us.”

“Meaning?”

Elin hesitated. Rob had accepted her being a witch. Could he acknowledge the rest?

“Doona stop now. I said I wanted to know everything. I meant that.”

“But once you know, you can never *unknow* it. There are things you might wish you didn’t know.”

He shrugged and leaned forward. “What is Asrail?”

Elin glanced at the door, wondering if she would make it if she ran. When she slid her gaze back to him, he was watching her. He said nothing, but she was aware that he guessed her thoughts. “She’s a Gira, a tree nymph.”

He blinked, going still as stone. “Tree nymph,” he repeated slowly.

“You saw something,” she said as she watched his expression go from confusion to surprise.

“Aye. Before I came here, I went to the spot in the forest from yesterday. I thought I saw an eye in the bark.”

“That’s them,” she said. “They were there yesterday, trying to talk to me.”

He nodded once. “The whispers. So, they’re allies?”

“Not exactly. Maybe. I’m not sure. They sided with the Coven, or at least the majority of them did. Asrail used to be the queen of the Gira. She’s with the water nymphs now.”

“There are more nymphs? Of course, there are,” he said, answering his own question. Then he motioned for her to continue.

“The Gira lure people to them with whispers.”

“I heard those yesterday.”

Elin nodded. “They can be vicious, and the only one I’ve ever really trusted is Asrail. Yet these Gira came to warn me about the witch. She knows about me. She knows I stopped her curse. The Gira cautioned me that she intends to get her revenge. It makes sense that she would do it at your brother’s celebration.”

“Which is why you wanted to go to the castle?”

“I’m the only one who can stop her.”

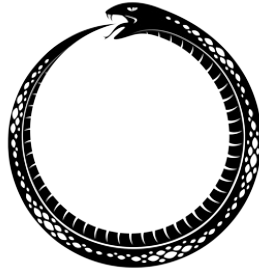
Rob leaned back in the chair, his hands on his thighs. “The witch wants revenge on my brother, never mind that he never offered for her. That means...”

His expression closed like a wall slamming down between them. Elin waited for him to continue. “What is it? What do you know?”

“I know who the witch is.”

“Then tell me where to find her.”

“There’s no need for anyone to know your secret. I’ll put an end to this,” he stated and rose.



Elin jumped up and rushed to stop him. “You can’t.”

Rob was used to protecting others. He would do that for Elin. She feared her secret getting out, and this was one way he could ensure that never happened. Once the witch was gone, no one need ever know who Elin really was. “I can, and I will.”

“I wish it were that easy,” she said with a sigh.

“You can no’ dissuade me from this. I know the witch. I’ll have her detained before she can do any damage.”

“Then you risk more people being harmed. It isn’t easy to kill a witch.”

He tilted his head to the side. “They fight back a wee bit different, is all.”

“It’s more than that.”

“Perhaps if you’d simply tell me...”

“A spelled blade can kill them.”

Rob grinned. “Luckily, I have a sword, and I know a witch who can spell it.” Then he frowned. “What about your mother?”

“The hanging. Yes,” Elin said in a soft voice. She swallowed. “Mum could’ve gotten free. She could’ve saved herself, but it would have meant the three of us running.”

“She could’ve protected all of you.”

Elin shook her head. “Nay, Rob, she couldn’t have. It would’ve meant

killing others who let fear rule them. She wasn't that kind of witch."

"So, she let you and your sister grow up without a mother? Alone? Fearful?"

"For a long time, I resented her, but now I understand why she did it. She even used a spell to ensure that her body remained intact."

Her word choice made him wonder if he'd heard her correctly. "What do you mean?"

"Witches turn to ash when they die. I learned from Asrail that it took powerful magic for my mum to do what she did."

"While I understand why you're concerned about me, all you have to do is spell my sword. As I said, no one need know of you."

Elin put her hand on his arm. "I appreciate that. More than you know. I've never...well, I've never told anyone about my abilities."

"I'm glad you shared it with me." He'd been fearful that he'd never convince her of it. Even when she never refuted his statements, he still wanted her to tell him herself. And she had.

"You've never fought witches, Rob. You've fought men with weapons. You don't have to be next to a witch for her to strike you. And even if you think she's coming for you, she may go after someone you care about instead. The only way this witch can be stopped is by me."

Rob shook his head. He wouldn't hear any of this. "Nay."

"Because you know your laird and clan will demand my death."

"But they can no' kill you."

"That doesn't mean they can't hurt me. That doesn't mean I won't wish I was dead from the things they do to me."

"Then strike back."

She smiled wryly at him. "That isn't my way."

"If it's to save your life, then I doona see what's wrong with it."

Her fingers tightened on his arm before falling away. "I have to face the witch. I need you to get everyone else away, so she only has me to focus on."

Rob wanted to argue. He tried to come up with different suggestions, but he couldn't because Elin was right about one thing—he'd never fought a witch. He'd trained for years to go into battle. If he faced the witch now, it would be like walking into a skirmish without any weapons. It would surely mean his life, and possibly that of several members of his family.

"I doona like this."

"Neither do I," Elin admitted.

He put his hands on her shoulders. "After you win—"

"You mean *if*?"

"I mean *when*," he corrected her. "Will you give me your answer?"

Her brows furrowed as her brown eyes searched his.

"About becoming my wife," he prompted.

"Oh. Do you—?" she began.

"Aye," he said, cutting her off. "I do. I love you. Remember? I thought I already stated that." He shot her a sexy grin.

She smiled in return, but he saw the hesitation there. "I won't hold you to that proposal."

"Do you care about me?"

"Aye."

"Do you want to be with me?"

"Aye, but—"

"Then nothing else matters. It's settled."

Her lips flattened. "Can I speak now?"

"No' if you're going to keep arguing."

She laughed, her face softening. "You're very stubborn."

"You've no idea, lass," he said with a wink.

Her expression sobered. "I want what you're offering with all my heart. I love you, but I don't want you to fall out with your family over this."

"I willna."

"You heard Donald this morn."

Rob wouldn't tell her the rest of what had happened after they'd ridden away. Elin didn't need to know that because it didn't matter. He wasn't hiding anything from her, but she would use it as another excuse not to be his. Rob shrugged at her words. "So?"

"He's your laird."

"I've already given my heart to a lovely dark-haired witch," he said as he lowered his head and kissed her.

She swayed against him, her palms flattening against his chest. His balls tightened as he contemplated scooping her up and taking her to the bed for more loving. Then he was reminded why they had been talking. He reluctantly ended the kiss and lifted his head to look at her. The thought of her facing any kind of threat made his heart catch. He didn't know how powerful a witch Elin was. He knew very little about witches or their magic. But he would learn. It was time he dispelled the fear of the unknown. He would begin it. It would be a long road, and there would be bumps along the way, but he would do it.

For Elin.

For them.

"Spell my sword?" he asked her. She started to shake her head, but he quickly said, "It's just in case. If there's a second witch or I get close enough."

"There were Witch Hunters," she said.

He stilled, thinking of another threat.

"They only wanted the Coven because they killed innocents. And there are more. The Varroki. Their kingdom is hidden in the Highlands. They've kept the balance of good and evil in the witches for...well, I'm not sure how long, but it's been a very long time. The Varroki warriors are powerful witches and warlocks."

"Warlocks?"

"Their magic passes to both males and females. Ours only goes to

females,” she explained.

He tugged the end of her braid. “There’s more, aye?”

“So much more.”

“You’ll tell me all of it?”

She paused for just a second. “Aye.”

“Good. You can start on the way,” he said as he moved around her to open the door.

They walked from the cottage when Elin suddenly stopped short. Her gaze was on the river. Then she looked at him.

“Would you like to meet Asrail?”

“Aye.” As if he would pass up that chance. Though he was curious about the Gira, he was also leery. Elin had said they weren’t to be trusted—generally speaking. She’d also said that Asrail was different. He hoped he hadn’t let her know how surprised he’d been at everything she’d told him. He’d never known there was so much out there. Things that lived among them, like the Gira. And witches.

He felt small and insignificant. Humans thought they were the strongest, the most powerful on the planet. When, in fact, other things could probably wipe every mortal from existence if they wanted.

Rob followed Elin to the river’s edge. She put her hand in the water and called Asrail’s name. Several minutes passed with nothing, and then he saw the water begin to part as something rose from beneath the surface.

The first thing he saw was what looked like a twisted limb. As more emerged, he saw a face and realized it was hair, not a limb. The Gira walked to the water’s edge, stopping when the water was at her knees. She looked from Elin to Rob.

The nymph’s entire body was bark. As far as he could tell, she didn’t wear any clothes. She only had one arm and watched him solemnly with dark eyes.

“So, you’re the one who has captured Elin’s heart,” Asrail said.

Rob bowed his head to her. "And she has mine."

The Gira looked him over before nodding, a smile forming to show her teeth. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure is mine."

Asrail looked at Elin and winked as she said, "And, Rob, if you hurt Elin in any way, I'll find you."

"I've no doubt you will, but that isna going to happen."

The grin dropped from Asrail's face as she faced Elin. "The Gira are near if something should go wrong at the castle."

"I know what I have to do," Elin said.

Asrail reached out a hand. Elin took it, and the two embraced. Rob saw the love between the unlikely pair. They had kept each other sheltered and alive. That bond would never be severed. Elin released her and stepped back.

"I'm also here," Asrail stated.

Elin smiled. "It won't come to that."

"You may know what to do, but that doesn't mean you should do it."

"Who else will?" Elin asked. "It has to be me. She'll come for me. I'd rather go for her."

Asrail sighed loudly. "Remember everything I taught you."

"I will," Elin promised.

Soon, he and Elin were on his horse and headed toward the castle. Rob looked back over his shoulder and saw Asrail still watching them. He spotted another Gira move away from the tree to stand next to Asrail. Elin had friends, or at the very minimum, allies. It was something his clan always sought with marriages. If he and Elin joined, then he could grant his clan that, as well. Another step on the long road to turning people's fear into facts. Just like with everything, some witches simply lived their lives and helped others, and then there were those who killed. The only difference between them and everyone else was that they had magic.

"Let me have your sword," Elin said as they rode.

Rob pulled it out of its scabbard and handed it to her. He watched as she said some words he didn't understand, and bright pink smoke-like tendrils moved from her hands to wrap around his blade. He watched until they died away, fading as if it had indeed been smoke.

Elin handed him back his weapon. She glanced at him and grinned. "Every witch's magic is a different color."

"Do you choose?"

"Not any more than I chose my hair or eye color."

He grunted. "Makes sense."

"Did that...frighten you?"

"Nay," he answered. "I'm intrigued. I want to see more. With the tea, I'm guessing you spelled the herbs?"

"Aye. I wasn't sure it would work, but I had to try something. Honestly, I'm surprised it did. I think the witch's curse was simple, for lack of a better word. Curses are generally much more difficult to break. Then again, I put a lot of magic in the herbs. Still..."

"What concerns you?"

"That the witch is young and doesn't fully understand what she is."

Rob drew in a breath. "You make it sound like that's dangerous."

"Anyone with magic is dangerous. Some hone those skills and use their power as lethally as you wield your sword. Then there are those who think they don't have to work very hard since they have magic. Some of it might even come easily to them, fooling them into believing they're almost invincible. But their lack of skill puts them at a disadvantage. Spells aren't just words. There is meaning, inflection, direction. Intention. If any of that isn't used properly, you could rip someone's legs off instead of just making them trip."

Rob thought about the witch and the curse she had leveled at his family.

"If this witch is young and inexperienced, she could react badly to me coming for her."

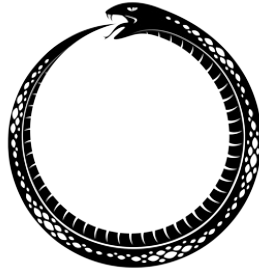
“I think that could be said for anyone, but if the Gira spoke true, then she planned to target you anyway.”

Elin looked over her shoulder at him. “If she’s young—”

“She is.”

Elin’s brow furrowed. “You do know who it is.”

Rob nodded as he spotted the castle through the trees. “Aye.”



Elin wanted to tell Rob to turn around and return to the cottage so they could pretend that none of this was happening. It was wishful thinking, of course. She would never leave Rob and his clan to face the wrath of this witch on their own.

But she wanted to.

She wanted to run and hide, to pretend that she didn't have to think about killing someone. Elin hoped it wouldn't come to that, but the Gira seemed to think it was the only recourse. Regardless of the reason, taking someone's life left a mark on the soul that never vanished. Elin already regretted so much. She didn't want to add anything to that list.

Rob tugged on the reins to halt the horse. His arms wrapped around her to hold her tight. She rested her head back against his shoulder. They could hear the bustle from the castle as people went about their day, oblivious to what was coming.

"Is she already here?" Elin asked.

There was a slight pause before Rob said, "It's possible. I'd like to talk to my brothers before we do anything."

He really meant that he wanted to speak to Donald, but Elin understood. "That's probably a good idea."

"I want to tell them everything, but I fear they willna believe it until they

see it with their own eyes.”

“Or Donald has me detained.”

A soft sigh. “Aye.”

“You can’t tell him anything, or it might hinder what I need to do. But it might be wise to see if she’s here.”

“Aye.”

Elin turned her head slightly to look at him. Rob’s gaze was locked on the castle, his body tense with dread and agitation. She wished she could take it all away from him. “Have you met her?”

Another acknowledgment, this one barely audible. Rob blinked and looked down at her. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

She wanted to tell him that she didn’t need to hear anything that made his body vibrate with tension. Instead, she waited because she could see that he needed to say whatever was on his mind.

“You know why she cursed us, aye?”

Elin nodded, remembering the story Rob had shared.

“There’s a reason she’s here now.”

She had been so caught up in thinking about the battle that she hadn’t wondered why the witch was at the Mackenzie castle. Until now. Her heart thudded painfully. She struggled to keep her breathing even so Rob wouldn’t see how the realization hurt her.

Because there was only one reason for the witch to be here.

“To make amends to the MacDonnell clan, Donald and the laird came to an...agreement.”

“You instead of him.” It nearly killed Elin to say the words. The very thought of Rob with the witch felt like someone had kicked her in the ribs.

Rob nodded woodenly. “I told Donald I wouldna do it.”

“The pact has already been made. If you refuse, you make an enemy of the MacDonnells, which means war.”

Silence. Then a soft, “Aye.”

“You can’t do that to your clan.” She couldn’t believe she was saying those words. It meant that she wouldn’t have Rob, but that had been determined before now. She had accepted it. Or, at least she thought she had. The truth, however, was very different.

“If you win and she dies, the result will be the same,” Rob said. “I wouldn’t take someone like her as my wife. Every little slight she perceived would mean retaliation. That in and of itself would do more damage. If there was time, I’d convince Donald of that.”

Elin wasn’t sure that his brother would listen to reason. Donald had preconceived notions about witches. She’d like to say that he would understand if he bore witness to anything, but she feared that might make things even worse.

“There will be a good number of MacDonnells here,” Rob continued.

“Then I’ll ensure she makes the first move. Hopefully, they’ll be there to see it. If the MacDonnells are angry at anyone, then it should be me. I want you and your clan blameless in all of this.”

“What if her father and clan know what she is?”

It was certainly a possibility. “Magic doesn’t randomly choose people. There is a bloodline. Her mother was a witch. Whether she used magic or not, I cannot say.”

“If her clan knows what she is, then...”

“I need to be careful. She’ll have warned them about me.”

Rob’s horse shifted his feet beneath them, anxious to move.

Elin knew this might be the last time the two of them were alone. It might be the last time she got to see him, though she tried not to think too hard about that. If she did, she wouldn’t proceed with her plan. But this was about more than her and Rob. This was about innocents in the castle. It was about anyone Marcia decided was in her way. Like it or not, Elin couldn’t divert from the path she was on.

She soaked up Rob’s warmth and strength for as long as she could. Once

they parted company, she would be on her own. Her thoughts turned to the witch. Marcia might be young, but she could be more powerful and end Elin's life. And if Elin did win, there was always Donald and the three clans that would probably witness the battle.

Elin swallowed and shifted to look at Rob. "I want you to promise me something."

"Anything," he said as he met her gaze.

"Don't defend me if others turn against me."

"You can no' be serious."

"I'm very serious."

"I can no' give you that vow. I'll protect you to my dying breath."

"That means everything to me. More than you'll ever know. But I've seen mobs before. I know how things can spin out of control. People you've known for your entire life—your family, even—won't act as you expect. They'll say things, do things. I know what I'm facing by doing this. You don't."

His lips formed a hard line. "I've been in battle, lass."

"This is different. Please, trust me. You want to protect me? I'm trying to do the same to you. If they come for me—or Marcia—don't get in the way. You won't be heard, nor will you be able to halt them. They'll kill you, too."

"I just found you. I can no' lose you."

She grabbed his face in her hands and smiled. "These few months with you have been the most amazing of my life. I didn't just find a beautiful place to live, I found a friend. A lover. A soulmate. I found someone who made me feel safe and captured my heart before I even realized it. I found you, my love. Everything I've endured has been worth it for the time we've had."

"It isna," he argued. "I want more."

Elin did, too. She silenced him with a kiss before he could say more. At first, he remained stiff against her, then he slanted his mouth over hers, his tongue slipping past her lips. The kiss was long and languid, full of love,

desperation, and, yes, hope. But there was regret there, as well. She briefly thought about dismounting and pulling him with her into the woods to feel his body inside hers one more time. But it would only prolong the inevitable.

She needed to go. Now.

Elin ended the kiss and looked into Rob's eyes. She smiled, putting his face to memory. "I'm happy I told you my secrets."

"Aye, lass," he murmured and kissed her gently once more.

Then she looked at the castle.

Rob said nothing as he clicked to his horse. The closer they rode to the structure, the more Elin had to fight to remain seated. So many things could go wrong. Rob's brothers could turn against him. She could be detained before engaging Marcia. The witch could catch her unawares. Or, worse, hurt others before Elin found her.

Her gaze lifted to the imposing castle as they rode through the gates. Dozens of people milled about. Men. Women. Children. Most wore the Mackenzie plaid, but there were other tartans, too.

"The MacDonnells are here," Rob murmured.

Elin scanned the faces around her. No one paid them much heed. There were too many people, too much activity. Three clans gathered in one place meant that the noise and chaos would help to hide her. But it also hid Marcia.

"There's no good outcome other than ending the witch," Rob murmured as he halted his horse. "She's already proven that she cares little for the lives of others."

"I know." And Elin did. That didn't make anything easier. But it did help.

Rob dismounted, then reached for her. She let him help her to the ground. His hands lingered, and she wanted to lean against him and take more of his strength to fortify hers that waned.

"I love you," she whispered. "No matter what happens, don't ever forget that."

She tried to leave, but he held her hand, halting her. She looked back at

him, into his blue eyes. He tightened his grip. "I love you, lass."

"Trust me."

"I do." He winked, his lips curving into a sexy grin.

She couldn't help but smile in return. His attempt to lighten the mood bolstered her resolve.

He kept his grin in place and released her. "I'll find my brothers."

"I'll be here, having a look around."

"Be careful."

Then, he turned away. She watched him weave through people in the bailey as he made his way to the steps and up to the castle door. Rob's horse nudged her with his big head once Rob was inside. Elin turned to the steed and scratched him behind the ears.

"You'll look after him, won't you?" she asked the animal.

The horse stared at her with his dark, soulful eyes and blinked.

"I know you will. How about some hay?"

She was about to lead him to the stables when a lad rushed over and took the animal. Elin could feel the eyes of others on her. Some had seen her come to the castle during the sickness, and now, everyone wanted a look at the Sassenach.

Elin kept her head high. She had a description of Marcia from the Gira. Curly blond hair, brown eyes. Pretty but not striking. Elin had hoped for something else to be able to pick the witch out of a crowd, but that's all the Gira had said. Perhaps she should've asked Rob. Then again, they'd had other things to speak about.

She slowly walked around the bailey, her gaze lingering on faces as she sought out her target. Elin found a spot where she could stand and still see the gate as well as the castle doors. She kept her gaze on both in hopes of spotting Marcia. After a while, it became apparent that the witch was most likely already inside the castle.

Elin wished Rob were beside her, but she was also glad that he wasn't.

She wondered if the Gira were near as they had promised. Their offer to help if she needed to escape had been surprising, but maybe it shouldn't have been. Asrail had shown her that not all Gira were the same. Just as not all witches or humans were. There were good and bad and everything in between for all of them.

Elin's stomach churned with apprehension. She kept her back to the castle wall so no one could sneak up behind her. While she might have come with Rob, that didn't mean others wouldn't restrain her, especially if following their laird's orders. She tried not to think about Rob or how long he had been gone, but she couldn't help herself.

But, most of all, her concern was over Marcia and the battle she knew she wouldn't be able to avoid.

Elin's gaze was drawn upward. She found herself staring at a window in the castle. She couldn't see in it, but she knew who was on the other side—Marcia.

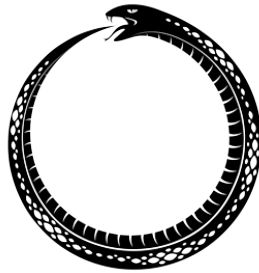
"Time to play, then," Elin murmured.

She might not be able to see the witch, but she knew what was coming. She glanced at all the innocents who would be hurt if they remained, but even if she tried to get them to leave, they wouldn't. Elin jerked her gaze back to the window. She felt her magic run through her. She had ignored it for so many months, pretending she didn't have it. Now, it was the very thing that could save everyone.

No, not could. *Would.*

She didn't have any choice but to win. Because if she didn't...

Elin didn't let that thought finish.



Rob was fast losing patience. “This is important.”

“You brought her to the castle,” Donald said, glaring. “You brought Elin. On the day that I announce both of our engagements.”

Rob tried to rein in his anger, but it became increasingly difficult. “I told you I wouldna marry Marcia.”

“The deal has already been struck.”

“You did that without speaking with me.”

“Because you’ve never wavered from doing your duty.”

Rob snorted. “There is no blame on us for what happened at the MacDonnells. We shouldna pay for that lass’s anger.”

“What’s done is done.”

“Do you even want to marry now? Because I doona think you will be happy with your next wife.”

Donald crossed his arms over his chest. “You speak of happiness and love as if they were the most important matters. Peace. Allies. *Those* are important, Rob. You know that.” He dropped his arms and turned to walk away.

“There is more to Marcia than you know.”

Donald halted and threw up his arms in frustration. “Of course, there is.” He spun back to Rob. “Let me guess. Elin told you something.”

“Nay. Marcia did.”

“Oh, really? Pray tell, what is that?”

“She cursed you.”

Donald’s nostrils flared. He strode until he stood almost nose-to-nose with Rob. “You think because I asked Elin if she was a witch that you can do the same about Marcia? She’s from a good family.”

“And Elin is English, so that makes her an enemy?”

“It makes her an outsider,” Donald snapped.

Rob held his brother’s gaze. “You heard Marcia curse you. You’re the one who told me. Then a strange sickness befell our clan, starting right here in this castle. With Anna. If you want to call anyone a w—”

“Doona say it,” Donald threatened in the same low tone their father had used when he was furious.

“You didna have a problem saying it no’ so long ago.”

“I’m sorry you willna be able to take Elin as your wife, but the matter is settled. You’ll do what needs to be done for the clan.”

Rob shook his head and calmly watched his brother.

Donald’s eyes bulged at the defiance. “You would dare defy me? You would put our clan at war with the MacDonnells? You would send our men into battle? That doesna sound like the brother I know.”

“I willna bring someone so malicious, spiteful, and vindictive into our clan. And that’s exactly what Marcia is. You just willna see it because that means you have to take a look at what’s around you.”

Donald opened his mouth to speak when a shout rose from elsewhere in the castle. Rob knew what was happening. He’d hoped to be outside with Elin before this, but his brother hadn’t wanted to listen to him. Rob raced down the stairs into the great hall, where a crowd had already gathered near the door.

He heard the gasps as green flashed. The battle had already begun. Rob roughly shouldered his way through the crowd, his brother right behind him.

When they reached the steps, he saw that Elin used her body to protect one of the stable hands behind her. People had backed away, leaving a large area where Elin and the lad stood. Across from them was Marcia, who had such fury etched on her face that Rob's heart skipped a beat.

"What did Elin do to her?" Donald demanded.

Rob didn't give his brother a look. Simply stated, "Watch before you make accusations."

Elin's gaze was locked on Marcia. Elin kept one hand on the boy and the other outstretched in front of her. She sidestepped, keeping the lad with her as she and Marcia circled each other. Elin gave the lad a pat when she was close to the stables. He rushed to the crowd, and the people quickly gathered around him in protection.

"The MacDonnell lass attacked the lad with...well, it wasna a blade. It was something else," a man said in dismay.

"She's supposed to marry Rob."

"Someone like that is only trouble."

Rob agreed with the last statement. He wanted to go out there with Elin, but his lack of magical battle experience kept him rooted to the spot. He might end up being more of a hindrance than anything else. Rob swept his gaze over the sea of faces and found Marcia's father. The MacDonnell laird and his men were staring at Marcia as if she were a stranger.

Too many people were around. Not just witnesses but also possible casualties. Rob turned back to the those near the door and began moving them away quietly and quickly. Once they were inside the castle, he turned to those on the steps. They took longer to persuade. No one wanted to look away.

Rob kept glancing at the bailey. The two women kept circling each other. He knew that Elin wouldn't make the first move. It had to be Marcia. About that time, Marcia grew tired of waiting and chose that moment to attack. The magic that flew from Marcia's hand was the same green he had seen earlier.

It shot across to Elin so fast that he was sure she wouldn't be able to deflect it, but Elin held up her hands. It was as if an invisible shield were there, turning the green ribbons back on themselves.

The shock that went through the crowd had many scurrying to safety, with others moving back to give the witches more room. Elin raised her arms and then swept each in an outward circle before shoving her hands forward. It caused Marcia's magic to zoom back to her, Elin's bright pink mixed in.

Elin had been right. There was no face-to-face battle. Witches used strategy, power, and strength—and their magic. He was battle-trained in an entirely different way. He'd never felt so useless.

“What the bloody hell?” Donald said from beside him.

Marcia let out a scream of rage as she sent another wave of magic at Elin.

Elin blocked Marcia's magic a second time, but it took more out of her than she cared to admit. The witch allowed her fury to consume her. For some, it was a good way to use their magic. For others, it put them at a distinct disadvantage. The way Marcia used her power showed that she had little training, if any at all. There was no control, no focus. There was only rage.

Yet Elin couldn't easily defeat her as she'd hoped. Marcia's anger gave her a slight advantage. Not to mention, Elin didn't want to harm anyone at the castle, so she was being cautious. The only way to stop everything right then and there was to kill Marcia. But...Elin couldn't. She wanted to get the upper hand that would allow her to confine the young witch. Would that be enough, though?

Hate and wrath distorted Marcia's appearance into an ugly visage that even had her father's mouth gaping in horror. That's when Elin knew. Marcia wouldn't stop. She wouldn't quit. Whatever drove her would keep pushing until someone stopped her.

For good.

Elin glanced to the side and spotted Rob on the castle steps, watching. That was all the time Marcia needed to strike. A flash of green soared across the bailey and struck Elin's arm. Agony lanced her. She stumbled and dropped to her knees as she fought to gather her magic and push aside the pain.

Rob started toward Elin. Marcia saw him and turned her wrath on him.

“Nay!” Elin shouted.

She didn't think, didn't hesitate. She heaved magic at Marcia. Time slowed as Elin watched the bright pink ribbons of her magic arc across the distance and slam into the witch. Marcia grunted, her body bending sideways with the force of the impact. Elin saw the pink tendrils wrap around the young witch. She focused on them. They had to hold. It was her one chance.

“Stop. Please!”

Elin refused to look away from the witch.

“Please!”

The plea was too much. Elin glanced to where the voice had come from and spotted Marcia's father. The laird hesitated to go to his daughter. Elin held her injured arm against her and got to her feet. Her magic wobbled from the pain and Laird MacDonnell's distraction. She focused once more.

“Please,” the laird begged again, finally moving a few steps to his daughter, who thrashed against the magic that held her. “She's just a lass.”

Hate still burned in Marcia's eyes. She didn't know how to get out of Elin's hold, but she hadn't stopped trying. Elin saw the witch's mouth move and recognized a few basic spells, but none were powerful enough to end Elin's magic. But that wasn't what concerned Elin. The instant Marcia was free, she would retaliate.

Against her, against her father, against Rob. Against anyone and everyone. There was too much hate, too much bitterness and hostility for there to be any other outcome.

Elin glanced at the MacDonnell laird. He couldn't even look at Marcia. She shouted for him, demanding that he get her free, but he didn't acknowledge her. Anger thrummed through Elin.

"You knew," Elin said to the laird. "You knew what she was."

He swallowed and glanced around. "I doona know what you mean."

"Not giving her proper training resulted in this." Elin pointed her good hand at Marcia. "Look at her rage. She's used her magic to get what she wants and strikes out when she doesn't get it. She cursed the Mackenzies. Do you have any idea how many died because of her?"

There was defiance in the laird's gaze when he shrugged. "I've no idea what you mean."

"You created this," Elin told the laird. "Your daughter will forever be this."

"Help her then. You obviously can."

Elin nearly laughed. She shook her head, disgusted and repulsed by the MacDonnell laird and his apathy to his daughter. "She'll only be helped if she wants it. And, trust me, she doesn't want it. She knows her power, and she knows how to use it against anyone who defies her."

"Da."

The pleading tone drew Elin's gaze to Marcia, who stared up at her father as tears rolled down her cheeks. He hesitated but eventually looked at her. Whatever he saw made him change his mind. He bent to touch his daughter.

"Don't," Elin shouted, but it was too late.

The instant the laird touched Marcia, Elin's magic moved to envelop him with the witch. Elin called her magic back so he wouldn't be harmed. In a blink, Marcia was on her feet. Green magic engulfed Elin in the next second. That's when she knew. She would die if she didn't fight back with all she had. Everyone would.

And, for the first time in so long, Elin wanted to live. Really live.

The magic struck her over and over like daggers piercing her flesh. She

didn't fight Marcia's magic. Instead, she closed her eyes and gathered hers. A spell formed in her mind as if plucked from some unknown source. She whispered the words even as wind began to howl around her. Her hair whipped at her face, lashing it with stings that reverberated through her body.

She heard Marcia scream angrily, but Elin didn't pay her any heed. Elin's magic grew with each breath. Marcia's dulled, beaten back, little by little. Marcia didn't give up easily, though. She sent another wave.

Elin's halted it. She didn't need to see it. She *felt* it. Somehow, she knew what to do, as if her mind held the answers and she'd only needed to look. The wind continued to roar, gathering force until it was the only sound Elin heard.

Bright pink flashed behind her eyelids. It moved so quickly that it was merely a bubble around her before moving to Marcia and the laird. With a few more words from Elin, Marcia's magic got swept up in the gale. Elin let it escape into the air and dissipate into nothing. She could've used it, but it was tainted, just as Marcia was, and Elin wanted nothing to do with that.

The more Marcia fought, and the more magic she used, the more Elin took. The battle could've lasted seconds or years. Elin was unaware of time, she only knew what she had to do to keep everyone safe.

Elin's eyes snapped open to focus on Marcia. Everything had a pink haze. She was no longer denying who she was. She embraced it fully, and her magic strengthened in return. Elin watched Marcia. Fear tinged the young witch's face now. Elin thought about how different Marcia's life could've been had she been taught correctly, but that time had passed. There was only one thing to do.

Elin's magic suddenly clamped around the witch with such force that Marcia staggered. Then, Elin tugged. It wrenched Marcia's magic from her. Elin could keep it and add it to hers, but she wouldn't. Even if it weren't corrupted, that wasn't who Elin was. Like the rest of Marcia's magic, she let it go into the sky, where it dwindled to nothing, to be used by no one.

Elin lowered her arms to her sides. To continue would've killed Marcia, and there was no need for that now. The wind died quickly once the spell was finished. Elin fought to stay on her feet. The only sound in the bailey were Marcia's grunts as she stared at her hands, willing the magic to come. Marcia didn't seem to understand what had happened. She continued trying to use her magic, either disbelieving or unaware that it was gone.

"It's gone," Elin told her. "You'll not be able to use magic ever again."

Marcia pulled back her lips in a sneer and lunged for Elin. Her father caught her with one arm before tossing her to one of his kinsmen. "Thank you for no' killing her."

Elin wasn't sure if what she had done was more humane than death. Marcia knew what it felt to have magic. Now it had been taken from her. That would leave an emptiness in her that nothing could fill. Add that to her antipathy and anger, and she might never find any kind of happiness or peace. But Elin didn't tell him any of that. She merely bowed her head.

Suddenly, pain exploded through Elin as something heavy slammed into her from behind. She pitched forward. She attempted to raise her hands to catch herself, but she wasn't quick enough. Instead, her face collided with the ground with a force that had her pitching toward unconsciousness. Elin fought the black dots that edged her vision because she had been attacked, and she had to get to her feet.

Move! She heard the voice in her head and rolled just as something broke apart where she had been. Elin looked over to see a wooden bench in shards. When those slivers began to tremble and then rise on their own, she knew there was another witch.

Elin scrambled to her feet. She blinked to clear her fuzzy head as her gaze moved around the bailey. She heard someone shout and recognized Rob's voice, but she didn't stop looking for the witch. Elin stood alone in the middle of the bailey, Marcia and her father having vanished into the crowd that ogled this new spectacle.

How had Elin not realized there was more than one witch? Because the Gira had only told her there was one, and she had accepted that. That could be a fatal error on her part, but there was no use lambasting herself now. She needed to find the other witch and...

A startled shout sounded from her left. Elin's head whipped in that direction to see a sword pulled free of a Mackenzie guard's scabbard. The weapon hung in the air and turned to point at Elin. The bailey fell into an eerie silence once more. Elin almost turned to face the threat, but the witch was hiding. She had made it so Elin wouldn't be able to find her easily. But the witch wanted her attention on the sword, and that was likely because there would be another attack from somewhere else.

Elin thought about the people watching her. She didn't focus on their faces. She couldn't. Mostly because she knew she would see fear and horror reflected at her. She was the one they saw. She was the one who had their attention, so she was the one who received their loathing and revulsion. Once more, she heard Rob's voice raise in anger. She heard Donald, too. There were other voices, as well, ones she didn't know, but she tuned them out. If she had a chance of surviving this, she needed to stay focused.

Another weapon was magically seized from a soldier. Then another, and another. More weapons were taken from men, from the blacksmith, from the armory, from everywhere. Women shrieked, children cried, men shouted warnings, and still, Elin didn't move.

One by one, weapons joined the first, pointing at her and hanging over the people's heads in a giant circle. Then everything grew silent again. Elin slowly turned to look at each of the weapons. Some of the men in Mackenzie tartans tried to reclaim their blades, but the witch only raised them higher. As Elin turned, her gaze slid over Rob. He had the sword she had spelled in his hand, but his brother had lost his.

Rob tried to say something to her, but Elin kept turning. The witch had to be related to Marcia. Maybe she had kept her powers to herself, most likely

out of fear. But unlike Marcia, this witch had patience. Elin had no idea if she had training, but this was an entirely different battle than it had been with Marcia. There was rage here, too, just like with Marcia, but this was different. Controlled, contained.

At least, for the moment.

The witch waited to see what Elin would do. The weapons were trained on her, but she had little doubt that the witch would alter the trajectory and impale innocent bystanders. Which was why Elin did nothing.

“Elin!”

Rob again. She wanted to turn to him, to look into his blue eyes and tell him that everything would be all right, but she couldn't do that. Because if she looked at him, she would see his worry, and it would distract her. And in that moment, people could die.

Voices rose in the quiet of the bailey. Rob and someone else. Rob kept shouting her name, and she knew he was trying to get her attention. And Donald was attempting to stop him. Elin was glad of that. She wanted Rob safe. She wanted everyone safe.

The problem was that by calling her name, Rob had drawn attention to himself. If the witch wanted revenge, then she could target Rob instead of killing Elin. Elin's heart dropped to her feet like a stone. She was prepared to die—expected it, even. But not Rob. Not his family or anyone else.

Only her.

Clouds gathered overhead, blocking the sun and casting everything in gray shadow. Elin almost shouted for the Gira, almost called Asrail's name. She knew they would come, but she didn't know if it would be enough to save everyone. It was one thing for the people to know about her magic. It was quite another to show them the Gira on the same day.

No. This was her battle. She would keep Asrail and the Gira out of it. Just as she would do everything in her power to keep Rob and the others safe.

Elin second-guessed herself about taking Marcia's magic. Would it have

been better to end her life? She hadn't thought so, and perhaps it wouldn't matter to the witch now seeking revenge. Harm had come to Marcia, which was enough for her to attack Elin.

The bailey went still and quiet as Rob's voice trailed off. She could feel everyone's eyes on her, waiting. Watching. Elin didn't know what to do. One wrong move could mean someone's death. She couldn't stand there forever, though. She wanted to look at Rob, but she forced herself to close her eyes. The witch was watching. Would she take it as a sign of surrender? That was exactly what Elin wanted her to do. She even held her arms out from her body and waited.

A breeze rustled the hair that had come loose from her braid, but Elin didn't feel the strands tickling her cheek. She was focused on her magic, sinking deeper into it like before. Letting it flow through her. Her senses sharpened, honed from one breath to the next. She used them to search for the witch.

There was a soft whoosh that could've been leaves rustling, but she knew it was a weapon. It sailed straight for her. Elin lifted a hand, halting it a few feet from her, the blade vibrating from the force of the magic pushing and pulling at it. Another came at her. She stopped the second. Four swords came at her at once. She halted them, too.

She kept her eyes closed, using her senses and magic, waiting. She didn't have long to wait. All the weapons came at her—all but one. Donald's sword spun and flew toward Rob. Elin's eyes snapped open. She stilled Donald's blade headed for Rob, keeping one hand out to ensure it didn't move again. There was a half second before the other weapons found her. She lifted her other hand, holding them immobile.

It wasn't easy. And the witch was powerful. She hadn't kept pushing the first few weapons that Elin had stopped, but she did now. The blades fought to find their mark in Elin. Sweat broke out on Elin's brow. She didn't know how much longer she could hold them off or the one aimed at Rob. She

glanced at him. His blue eyes met hers, concern puckering his brow. His lips parted to speak, and she looked away.

The more she pushed the weapons away, the more they strained toward her and Rob. Then, just as abruptly, the ones aimed at her flipped and flew toward the crowd. Screams and shouts rose from the onlookers as they pushed and tripped over each other to get away. Elin took a breath and reached out with her magic to still the weapons once more. Instead of pushing them back, though, she drew them toward her.

The blades slowed but kept moving toward their targets. She used more magic and, finally, managed to cease their journey, with several blades stopping within inches of their targets. Elin smiled as she located the witch. She was in the castle. Third floor, second window from the left that overlooked the bailey. The same window where she had sensed Marcia earlier.

You know what to do. Trust your instincts.

Elin was startled at the voice. It wasn't hers. It sounded like...her mother's. She'd thought she had felt her mother during her battle with Marcia, and she was sure of it now.

She *did* know what to do. It was the only solution. Elin let her magic shoot from both hands, the bright pink tendrils wrapping around each weapon before turning them to her. Rob shouted something. She allowed the witch to propel the weapons toward her.

Elin waited until they were nearly upon her before letting out a bellow and shoving her hands upward. The weapons flew to the sky before diverting and funneling into the window where the witch was. A scream of anger turned to shrieks of pain before silence fell.

Elin looked up at the window, her hands dropping to her sides. The threat was over. She wanted to collapse to the ground, but she had been fooled once. She waited to see if another attack came. Her gaze landed on the MacDonnells, who looked aghast at what had occurred. Minutes passed with

nothing. Finally, she released the breath she hadn't known she held.

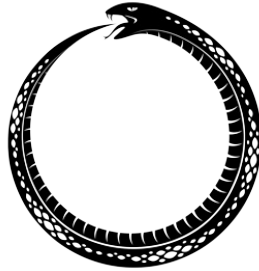
Her body ached from the assaults, but she could've sworn she felt her mother beside her, smiling. How she wished she could speak to her, but it was enough to know that she was there. Even if it were just her spirit.

Suddenly, there was another presence beside her. Elin turned to Rob. His eyes glittered with pride. She wanted to sink into his arms, but she was keenly aware of everyone's stares.

"You did it," Rob said.

She tried to nod, but suddenly, her body blazed with heat. She knew it was the injuries. They needed to be tended. It was just that she was so tired. Rob's grin vanished. She saw his lips move, but she couldn't hear what he said. Then the world tilted.

Until there was nothing but blackness.



Rob sat beside the bed, staring at Elin. She hadn't moved since he'd carried her to his chamber the day before. The fever had finally subsided. But she still hadn't woken.

There was a knock, and then Donald poked his head inside. His brother walked in when Rob motioned for him to enter. His brother stood on the other side of the bed and looked down at Elin.

"She's still no' woken?" Donald asked.

Rob shook his head. "I've coaxed, I've railed, I've even begged. Nothing."

"She...endured a lot."

"She saved everyone."

Donald swallowed and then nodded. "Aye. She did." A pause. Then, "You knew of her magic."

Rob sat back in the chair and lifted his gaze to his brother. "Only after you accused her. She told me everything. Including that there was a witch here. I knew it was Marcia."

Another pause. "The MacDonnells have returned to their lands. There willna be a wedding between you and Marcia, of course."

"That's right. There willna be because I wouldna marry her."

"Be that as it may, Laird MacDonnell understands the situation. He's

apologized for his daughter's and sister-in-law's attacks yesterday, as well as the curse and deaths from before. We've come to an arrangement that will keep our clans as allies."

Rob nodded once.

"As for my wedding," Donald said as his gaze lowered to the floor, "I'm taking some time. As is Mary. Everyone needs to deal with a lot after yesterday."

Rob's gut clenched. If there was any indication that anyone wanted to harm Elin, Rob would get her out of the castle. The two could live somewhere else. He didn't want to leave his family, but he wouldn't allow them to hurt her. "Meaning?"

"Witches are real."

"Aye. What about it?"

Donald sighed as he looked at him. "You're no' making this easy."

"It isn't hard. What do you want? To burn Elin alive? Hang her? Run her out of our borders?"

"Nay," Donald hurried to say.

Rob got to his feet. "That's the impression you gave when you first asked if she was a witch."

"It's a lot to take in."

"So, there are witches? What if there are other beings with magic out there?"

Donald's face blanched. "Are there?"

Rob shrugged. "Maybe." He had his answer about telling his brother about the Gira. He might never share that part with him. "My point is, if the witches wanted to hurt us, they could. One did. And another saved everyone. Thrice. There will be those who do evil things and those who doona, be they someone with magic or someone without. I'd rather know what's out there and have an ally than be ignorant, narrowminded, and allow superstition to rule me."

“I deserved that.”

“Aye. You did.”

Donald ran a hand over his jaw. “I didna come here to fight, brother. I came to tell you that Elin is welcome at the castle. Anytime. I’ve no’ heard anyone speak against her, but you know that fear can run deep. Our clan saw her protect you. She had a chance to kill Marcia, but she chose no’ to, and she had no choice against the other. All those things help, but I suspect it’ll take time for everyone to welcome her. She’s earned their gratitude. The trust will take longer.”

“Do you plan to stop me from taking her as my wife?”

“It would be folly if I tried because you’d leave. You’re my brother. I want you here, where you belong. Elin has my appreciation, and she’s shown she’s trustworthy. Marriages are a way to strengthen ties between two clans. Elin’s clan is that of the witches and whatever else may be out there. I can think of no better way to have that tie than by the two of you marrying.”

Rob’s shoulders slumped. He sank back into the chair and smiled. “I was going to use that argument.”

“I might be stubborn, brother, but I’m no’ stupid.”

“That’s debatable,” Rob teased.

They shared a laugh.

Donald’s gaze moved to Elin. “Does she need another witch to heal her?”

“I doona know.” Rob leaned forward and propped his elbows on his knees before dropping his head into his hands. He took a deep breath and released it. Then he scrubbed his hands over his face and sat up. “As far as I know, there isna another witch around. At least, Elin didna speak of one.”

“But there’s someone else out there who can help?”

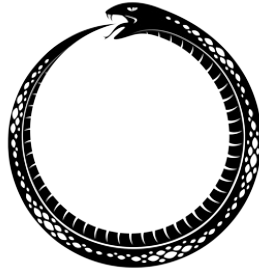
Rob studied his brother before he shrugged. “Maybe.”

“Perhaps you should go check.”

He didn’t want to leave Elin, but he also wanted to make sure she was healing. The way she had crumpled in his arms after the battles worried him.

“Aye. I will.”

“I’ll watch over her,” Donald promised.



Dreamless sleep. Elin drifted along endlessly. Each time she tried to wake, the pain in her body reminded her why she didn't. Someone was waiting for her, but his name was just out of reach. She tried to go to the light, but the darkness closed over her again, not wanting to release its hold.

The next time she surfaced, the pain wasn't nearly as bad. She heard a voice. One she recognized. He kept begging her to open her eyes. She wanted to do what he asked. She needed to see his face, to know his name. Something had drained her. Probably the same thing that made her body hurt. Just as she was shaking off the sleep, the darkness wrapped itself around her like a comforting blanket and urged her into the abyss once more.

A voice roused Elin again. It was that same deep voice from before. Another joined it. She knew both men. Didn't she? When their names didn't immediately come to mind, she didn't think on it too long. Nothing mattered. She was in a safe place. No more running. No more hiding. The endless sleep promised protection.

But...the man's voice. It made her pause. He wanted to speak to her. She felt the pull to him.

Not yet.

The darkness had too firm a hold on her. She couldn't shake it off. It lulled her back to sleep, making her forget the voice.

A hand held hers. Large and strong. She knew the presence beside her. It was the man again. Elin could practically feel his worry rolling off him. Was that for her? She should tell him that she was fine. She didn't want to burden him.

"Elin," he said, his voice low and urgent. "I spoke with Asrail. She wanted to see you herself. I brought you back to the cottage. She's here."

There was a soft sound of movement, and then someone called her name. She knew it was Asrail, just as she knew who that name belonged to. A Gira. Her friend.

"It's time for you to wake," Asrail urged. "Your wounds are healing."

Asrail wouldn't lie to her. Elin started to rouse herself. The darkness crept around her once more.

You don't like that world. Stay with me, Elin.

But she did like it. There was someone who made her laugh, someone she loved. His face began to come into her mind's eye. She focused on it, willing it to clear so she could see him.

"Please. Wake up," he insisted.

Stay with me, Elin.

The man's face came into view. Rob. How could she have forgotten? Elin shoved the voice of the sleep away and forced her eyes open. It took several tries, but she managed to take control of her body. Once she did, she threw off the clutches of the endless sleep for good.

The first thing she saw was Rob. He had dark circles under his eyes, and it appeared he hadn't shaved in a few days. The smile that split his face made her heart sing.

His blue eyes crinkled at the corners. "I knew you'd come back."

"Hi," she said with a smile.

Rob caressed his fingers down her face. "Hello."

Movement behind him caught Elin's attention. She looked over his shoulder to find Asrail. The Gira bowed her head in greeting.

“It’s good to see you awake,” Asrail said.

Elin sat up and felt her muscles rebel at the movement. “How long have I been unconscious?”

“Three days. Asrail wanted to look at your injuries, and I couldna bring her to the castle,” Rob said.

Elin thought about how easy it had been to be in the endless sleep, how it had seduced her into staying. Now that she was awake, she couldn’t remember why she had allowed herself to be swayed.

“You triumphed,” Asrail said, breaking into her thoughts.

Elin thought about Marcia and the other witch. “I took a life.”

“She gave you no choice.” Rob’s voice was harsh, anger tingeing it.

Elin swung her gaze to him. “There’s always a choice.”

“She had everyone in the castle targeted,” Asrail said. “Just as Marcia did.”

Elin remembered how a blade had been headed for Rob. That was when she’d gone from stopping the witch to contemplating her death. When the witch targeted everyone else in the bailey, she’d sealed her fate.

“Who was she?” Elin asked.

Rob met her gaze. “Marcia’s aunt. Laird MacDonnell told us that he knew about his wife’s magic but said that she never used it. He hadn’t known about his sister-in-law because she hid it. As for Marcia, everyone was too afraid to do anything.”

Elin almost asked if the aunt had taught Marcia, but it didn’t matter. None of it did anymore.

“I’ll leave the two of you now.” Asrail headed to the door. She paused and looked back at Elin. The smile she gave was full of happiness.

After Asrail left, Rob turned his head back to Elin. “How do you feel?”

“Tired still, but the pain has diminished.”

“The wounds are healing nicely.”

Elin wanted to keep the conversation on safe topics, but she knew that

wouldn't last for long. They had to talk about what'd happened. And what it meant for Rob's family and clan. She looked away from him. She wasn't imprisoned, but that didn't mean she would be accepted.

"You were magnificent."

Her gaze snapped back to him.

His eyes blazed with truth as he grinned. "The sheer power that you wielded... I've never seen anything like it before. I've also never been so terrified in my life." The smile faded. "I thought you were dead so many times. Each injury was like I felt it myself. And when the weapons flew at you..."

"I know," she said.

He swallowed and glanced at their joined hands. "When you said you were a witch, I didn't realize what you meant. I'm glad I got to see it. All of it. I'm in awe. Of you. Of your magic. You should never have to hide that."

"You know why I do."

"Fear." His lips twisted. "Aye."

She wished she hadn't said anything. She didn't want to talk about his family or the clan or what they thought of her. She didn't want him to have to choose because she wouldn't allow him to pick her. He had a family. She, better than anyone, knew how important that was. She would never do anything to jeopardize that. Never.

Rob chuckled and sheepishly looked at her. "Seems Donald has seen the benefits of us marrying. He wants to tell you himself how grateful he is for what you've done for us."

"What?" Surely, she couldn't have heard right.

Rob shrugged. "My brother is intelligent. He knows he was wrong, and he admits to letting his fears rule him. He also knows that having you in the family will be a boon."

"I doubt everyone feels that way."

"Maybe no', but they got to see what you're capable of. You showed

mercy to Marcia when you didn't have to. You only retaliated when you were assaulted, and they targeted others. They also know it was you who cured the illness. You've indebted yourself to the clan. And, aye, some might still hold onto fear, but you'll win them over."

It was her turn to laugh. "Will I?"

"I know you will."

Elin wasn't sure what to think. It was almost too good to be true. Everything she yearned for was right here, waiting for her. She knew not everyone in the clan would accept her, but the knowledge that they knew who she was, and that the laird welcomed her went a long way.

"I thought you'd be more excited," Rob said.

"I am. It's just..."

"You're thinking about the future."

Elin nodded. "I did something good now. What happens if I don't do something they expect later? Or, worse, what if I try and can't help?"

"That's for then. No use worrying over something that may or may not happen."

Maybe. But...still. "They could still turn against me."

"Donald is laird of this clan. He has welcomed you into the castle. He's praised your efforts and announced his gratitude and trust. He's made it as clear as he can what he expects of the clan. If you become my wife, it will solidify all of it."

She saw the question in his blue eyes.

"Someone will always be dissatisfied with things," Rob continued.

"They'll want someone to blame."

"Which will be me."

"If anyone thinks you can not protect yourself, then I'll remind them of the battle that was witnessed by all."

Elin's lips curved into a smile. She couldn't help it. He always knew exactly what to say.

“You’ll also have the protection of me and my family, and that goes a long way.”

She squeezed his hand. “What about the other clans?”

“They’d be fools to try anything. It wasna just our clan who witnessed things. Two others did, and they’re allies. You’ll be safe, lass. I give you my word.”

She wanted so desperately to believe him. “If I...if I marry you and we have children...”

“You’re thinking what if we have daughters and the magic passes to them?”

“If I have daughters, the magic *will* pass to them.”

Rob shrugged. “They’ll have you to train them. I’m sure Asrail will be around, as well. Every argument you have, I have an answer. The only thing you need to decide is if you want to spend your life with me.”

“More than anything.”

“Then it’s settled.”

“It isn’t. I worry ab—”

Rob held her gaze and firmly said, “Stop. There will always be something out there that could ruin things for us—for anyone. I love you. I doona want anyone else but you by my side from now until the end of my days. Do you want the same?”

There was only one answer. There had only ever been one answer. Maybe he was right. She should stop thinking about the *what-ifs* and focus on what was there now. If anything came up—because it would, that was life—she would face it with Rob standing beside her.

“Yes,” she replied.

His arms came around her as he pulled her into his lap. “We’re going to have an amazing life.”

Elin smiled up at him. “Can it start now?”

“It already has.”

“What’s next?”

“Whatever you want.”

“You.”

His eyes darkened with desire. “Always.”

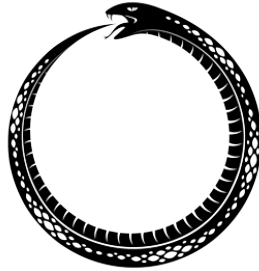
Elin shrieked in surprise when Rob stood and lifted her into his arms. When he turned around, there was a wooden tub filled with water, tendrils of steam rising from it.

“Asrail said we’d need that once you woke.”

Elin laughed. She would have to thank her friend later. Once she was in the bath, she sighed in delight. As much as she enjoyed it, she didn’t stay long. She quickly washed her body and hair, removing the past few days. Rob watched from the hearth, his eyes darkening with each passing moment as he took off his boots.

When Elin finished and stood, Rob strode forward, shucking his kilt and shirt as he did. Then she was in his arms, his mouth on hers as the passion took them.

EPILOGUE



Four months later...

Elin couldn't believe her life had turned out so wonderfully. She had Rob. She touched her stomach. And she'd just found out this morning that they were having a baby. He was so excited that he'd stopped and told everyone he knew.

She walked out of the castle and searched the bailey for her husband. Her smile faltered when her gaze landed on a familiar face she'd never thought to see again. His green eyes were locked on her. She almost didn't recognize him because his hair was shorn to his shoulders, and he had grown out the sides that used to be shaved to show his tattoos.

Elin made her way down the steps toward him. She halted before the Varroki warlock. Upon closer inspection, more than his hair had changed. The man before her was haggard, his face gaunt and strained.

"I heard rumors," Armir said, a hint of a smile on his lips. "I had to see for myself."

Elin swallowed and saw Rob approaching. She held out her hand to her husband and waited for him to reach them before she said. "It's true. Rob, I'd like to introduce you to Armir. He's one of the Varroki I told you about. Armir, this is Rob MacKenzie."

The two clasped forearms in greeting.

“It’s good to see that you’re happy,” Armir said.

Elin nodded, but she couldn’t stop the concern that continued to rise.

“Has something happened at Blackglade?”

Armir shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. I left.”

“Left?” Then Elin understood. In the battle with the Coven, Malene, the Lady of the Varroki and the woman Armir loved, had disappeared. There was only one thing that could make Armir leave his beloved city, and that was Malene.

He lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “Don’t pity me.”

“I’m not,” she said hastily.

“She’s out there somewhere, and I’m going to find her.”

Rob said, “If you need anything, doona hesitate to let us know. You and anyone from Blackglade are welcome here. Always.”

Armir studied Rob for a long moment before he bowed his head. “Thank you.”

“Come in,” Elin said. “Have a meal with us.”

She thought Armir might refuse when he hesitated, but in the end, he sighed and nodded. Just as they were turning to go into the castle, Elin thought she saw a small white owl fly over the bailey.

It made her think of Asa and her pet owl, that she had been able to communicate with. Elin’s thoughts turned to the Witch Hunters and the others at Blackglade. Perhaps it was time to mend those fractured friendships and solidify allies. Just in case.

Thank you for reading **RAGE!** I hope you loved Rob and Elin’s story as much as I loved writing it. Next in the Kindred: The Fated series is **RUIN.**

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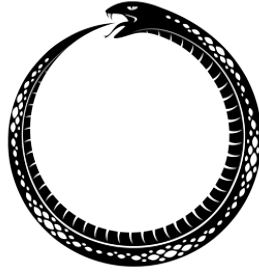
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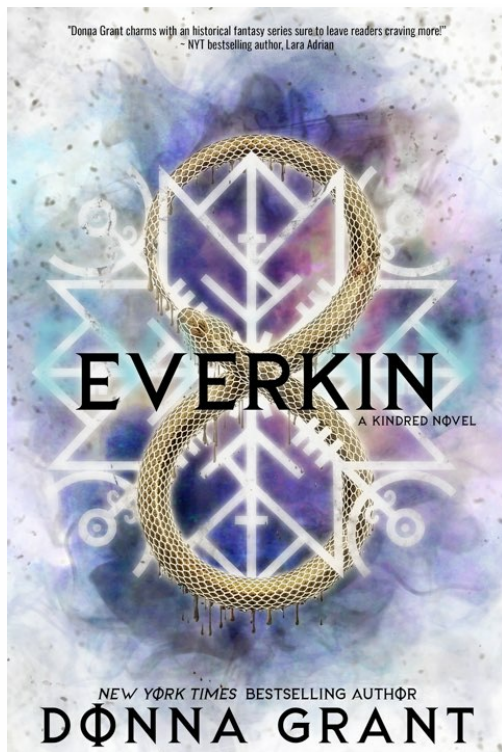


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New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author Donna Grant® has been praised for her “totally addictive” and “unique and sensual” stories.

She’s written more than one hundred novels spanning multiple genres of romance including the bestselling *Dragon Kings*® series that features a thrilling combination of Druids, Fae, and immortal Highlanders who are dark, dangerous, and irresistible. She lives in Texas with her dog and a cat.

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