



*Some promises
are forever...*

An
Functioned
BRIDE



Highland Heartbeats

AILEEN ADAMS

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AN AUCTIONED BRIDE

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AN AUCTIONED BRIDE

Book Four of the Highland Heartbeats Series!



Hugh McInnis, trying to escape the past and the present finds himself at an auction, his attention fixed on a Norwegian beauty intended for the highest bidder. He wished he could say what possessed him to bid on Dalla.

Dalla was intended for a convent—punishment for disobeying her father—until her uncle intercepted her journey and put her up for auction.

A stubborn quiet Norwegian woman and a grumpy Highlands man have no business traversing the landscape. Not together, anyway. Yet, that's exactly what they are forced to do.

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Hugh McInnis sat atop his horse amidst the foliage of the forest, watching. The scent of earth and pine wafted over him, a gentle breeze stirring pine boughs and rustling leaves of black alder, mountain ash, rowen, and birch.

Down in the meadow, he spied a massive and ancient wych-elm tree, its massive trunk and root system surrounded by a thick overgrowth of broom and gorse. Twigs danced, and leaves trembled.

He closed his eyes for a moment and lifted his face to the late afternoon sky, inhaling deeply, relishing the scent of earth and forest. With the passing of each gentle gust, all grew still, the forest falling silent around him until the breeze brought it to life again.

He lowered his face and opened his eyes, a slight smile playing around the corners of his lips as he continued to watch.

He remained on the rise for several minutes, studying the terrain.

A creek ran down the rise nearby, edged by closely grown trees as it meandered to the north, then curved lazily around a small rise before disappearing off to the east. To the north and west, forested hills rose, blocking his view of the gently undulating land that would eventually fall toward the sea.

The air felt warm and humid.

And he remembered.

As dusk fell over the land, he would see brief flashes of heat lightning off to the east. The setting sun would bathe the area in a soft orange-red glow.

This far north, four long days of travel from Duncan manor, the landscape was rougher, more jagged, filled with hardscrabble granite, from small granite pebbles and stones just beneath the surface of the dirt to giant, monolithic spires that rose like fingers, their jagged edges softened by growth of moss and lichen over their hard surface.

Just below, in a shallow dip of land, he spotted the remnants of the thatched roof partly caved in. He lifted an eyebrow, surprised that it was still standing after all these years. He hadn't been back in fifteen years.

He grunted softly.

In their youth, he and his twin brother, Derek had run away from their home on the outskirts of the Duncan lands, away from a brutish father, thinking they might eventually join the army of Scottish soldiers fighting against the Norsemen.

First though, they would have an adventure.

He and Derek had loved their mother, but their father was a different story. Hugh and Derek had run away from home when they were fourteen. They'd headed northeast, toward the seacoast of northern Scotland. They'd found this small meadow more than a day's ride toward their ultimate destination and decided to stay for a while.

It'd taken more than a week to construct the hut, where they wintered before deciding to head back south, back home, finding the harsh climate unfavorable, unable to even plant a tiny crop.

Upon their return, they'd learned of their father's passing. Their mother had moved closer to the Duncan manor, in the village not far from the manor house, for a greater sense of protection from marauding enemy clans.

Hugh remembered the day that he and his brother had ventured to the manor after reuniting with their mother. They had come to give their fealty to the laird.

It hadn't taken long before Phillip Duncan, the laird's son, and his younger brother Jake, challenged them. He and Derek, hardened by months of living a hardscrabble life in the wilderness, were more than a match for Phillip and his brother. The brief bout of fisticuffs had ended in a draw.

After, two of them sporting bloody noses, Jake sporting a black eye, and Derek a split and swollen lid, the four had become fast friends.

Until now, Hugh had remained with the Duncans. Derek had not.

Nearly two years after their father's death and their return to the Duncan lands, Hugh and his twin had a falling out.

Hugh had never told anyone what had prompted his brother to leave. Nor had either of the Duncan brothers asked. He knew that if and when he told the story, they would listen, but they would not pry into his private business any more than he did theirs.

After his brother had left, Hugh had little time to miss his him. He'd undergone rigorous training by Duncan clansmen and fought by their side against warring clans over the years.

The summer he had turned twenty-five, he and his good friend, Maccay Douglas, had been put in charge of the defense of the Duncan lands and stronghold.

Phillip took over as clan leader upon his father's death, and Jake had gone off to war, fighting against the bloody Norsemen.

Nearly two years ago, Jake had returned home, near death from a terrible sword wound in his thigh. It was then that Phillip had ventured south with Hugh and Maccay, seeking a healer from the lowlands who had the reputation of being supremely gifted with her poultices and herbal remedies.

They had kidnapped Sarah MacDonald and brought her, kicking and scratching, the entire way back to the highlands. Despite her anger, her compassion for the wounded and suffering won out. She healed Jake, no thanks to Ceana, their local healer, who had actually attempted to poison Jake for refusing to marry her.

After that fiasco had been settled, and with little prompting, Phillip had returned south to retrieve Sarah's younger sister Heather, from the clutches of their often drunk and abusive stepfather.

Jake, two years younger than Phillip, had fallen in love with that little hellion. Then, just recently, and quite unbelievably, Maccay, his best friend, happy-go-lucky Maccay, had saved a girl with no memory from certain death in the forest and ended up marrying *her*!

With each match, Hugh had felt increasingly alone. Not that they ignored him, which they didn't. But as he'd watch the newlyweds whispering and smiling and kissing, sharing their lives with one another, he wished...

He didn't want to recall what he'd lost. It was too painful. He didn't begrudge his friends their new lives, but he did envy them. Would he ever feel that kind of love again? The whisper of a kiss, the joy of companionship that needed no words to flourish? It felt odd to be away

from Duncan manor and from the friends that he considered as close as any family could be. Still, he had to get away, if just for a little while. He had some thinking to do.

His horse shifted beneath him. He frowned in contemplation. Had this been a good idea, or would it only lead to greater dissatisfaction? It wasn't that he wasn't happy on Duncan lands or in his position. It *was* home. It would continue to be. Still, after everything that had transpired over the past year, he'd grown increasingly unsettled, not dissatisfied, but left with a sense of wanderlust. He hadn't felt that way since he and his brother had ventured to these parts so many years ago.

When he needed to clear his head, it was usually enough for him to wander off into the foothills north of the manor, to spend a night or two away up in the mountains.

This time, however, he knew that he needed to return to his roots. What compelled him, he wasn't sure, but he was a man who understood instinct, and his instincts had told him that he needed to get away, if just for a little while.

Hugh was certainly happy for his friends, and he treasured Sarah, Heather, and Maccay's new wife, Alis. But their happiness, their loves, their marriages, and their love-besotted eyes only reminded Hugh of everything he had lost.

Thoughts of Elyse had crept ever increasingly into his thoughts, reminding him of happier times. His Elyse, with her silvery-white blond hair, fair skin, and bright blue eyes... he had been the first of them to fall in love.

Unfortunately, just when he was working up the courage to ask for her hand in marriage, she had been taken from him. By a wild boar. A savage and painful death. And he hadn't been there to save her. The guilt tore at him. He would never get the image of her ravaged body out of his mind.

So, while he didn't begrudge Phillip, Jake, or Maccay for finding love and beginning new lives, it only left him feeling more alone, triggering the rise of memories best left buried. Not only memories of his beloved Elyse, but memories of his brother.

Wasn't it time to let bygones be bygones? To forgive and move on? Or was it too late—for both? Was Derek even alive? Hugh had come north to find out, and if possible, to bridge the gap that had left the two of them estranged for so many years.

As he thought about it, those feelings had grown stronger by the day. When he saw the bonds between his friends, their wives, and their relationships growing stronger day by day, their love deeper, their loyalty steadfast, he had reflected on what he himself lacked in life. He felt alone.

So, he had told Phillip that he needed to go off by himself, just for a little while. Phillip had not asked why. The four of them were so close he probably didn't need to. He had simply nodded and told him to transfer his duties to Maccay.

It was midsummer now, and Hugh had told Phillip that he would return by the time the leaves fell to the ground. Why he had ventured so far north, nearly to the northeastern coastline, he wasn't sure, but it was the only place he knew where he would find the solitude he was looking for.

Maybe he wanted to touch his past, relive the memories he had of better times, when he and his brother had been inseparable.

Of course, he could've gone somewhere closer to Duncan lands, but he had felt the tug of the coast.

To the west of Duncan lands lay the lands and domains of several enemy clans, and he had no desire to venture toward the lowlands. So, to the north it had been.

Heaving a sigh, Hugh nudged his horse forward, his body swaying lightly with the movement of the horse's as his mount carefully navigated the downward slope, hooves digging into soft loam, or striking rock buried just beneath the surface of the soil.

He continually swept his gaze through the forest of trees, cautious for any indications of danger. This area was isolated, but the passage of more than a decade could have changed things considerably. Just over that rise beyond the grove of trees could be a house or even a village for all he knew. Then again, he saw no sign of rising smoke from evening campfires, cooking fires from a village, nor sounds of life.

As he neared the hut, he studied it with dismay. Though weatherworn, and with one section of a wall sagging slightly, the structure was in relatively good condition. It had weathered the northern Scottish climes well. He smiled, thinking of happier times with his brother as they'd built the place, constructed of rocks stacked one atop the other to about waist high, the spaces in between chinked with mud.

The hut was constructed in the shape of a broch, or roundhouse typically constructed of stone, although on a smaller scale. The broch dated

back centuries in the highlands, and were typically huge round fortifications much like a keep or tower of a castle. Of course, theirs had not been nearly so large nor magnificent, perhaps twelve paces wide in diameter.

He dismounted, tied the reins to a close-growing alder, and cautiously walked toward the structure. It wouldn't surprise him if some wild animals had made the place their own over the years and the last thing he needed was to surprise a bear or a boar, let alone a skunk or two. He listened, but heard nothing from inside that indicated the presence of any animals.

Placing his hand almost reverently against one of the stones, he felt a surge of emotion. It'd been thirteen years since he seen his brother. The last he'd heard, from Jake actually, was that his brother had indeed gone off to fight with the Scots against the Norwegians.

Hugh had actually run into Jake before he'd been wounded and returned to Duncan lands. Jake had word from another clansman a few years ago that his brother was now in the shipping business and owned a couple of ships that carted goods between England, Scotland, and France.

He was glad that his brother had survived his battles and moved on to make a good solid life for himself. Hugh had done much the same with the Duncan clan. Still, there was that a bit of envy he felt for his brother, for his intelligence in starting a shipping business. Not that he was interested in shipping, or starting a business. He liked being in charge of Duncan security forces, protecting the villagers, the manor, and his loved ones. He didn't want to do anything else.

Ducking his head, he stepped inside the hut, glanced around, memories flooding his brain. Images returned, of roasting a rabbit over a fire with his brother, of wrestling and laughing, of talking about what they would do when they were grown men...

It looked like some wild animals had perhaps wintered within its walls, and it smelled of damp earth, but in a matter of days, he knew he could repair the thatched roof and brace up that sagging section of wall.

He sighed, muttering to himself, making a list of things to do, and then realized what he was doing. He shook his head in disgust. Only a few days spent alone, and he was already talking to himself.

He grunted.

He decided he wouldn't start on any repairs until morning. It was already growing close to dusk. He needed to bring in the few supplies left in the pouch tied behind his saddle.

His horse could forage nearby, and then he would bring the gelding inside the hut for the evening. While he wasn't concerned with finding food, he was a good hunter, he would have to venture to the village that he knew lay a couple of days away to the east, located near the coast, for other supplies. Flour, salt, some grain for his horse, and perhaps a blanket or two.

Though summer, he remembered the nights up here always grew cool. He kicked at a few scraps of animal dung. He would need to chop some firewood, repair the wall, the roof, and create some type of shelter and holding pen for his horse—unless he just kept him inside at night.

He looked forward to the physical labor, and, stepping outside, glanced up at the sky. Twilight had come to the small valley, the dying rays of the sun casting the craggy, rock-strewn hills surrounding him into varying darkness of shadows. The hoot of an owl in the distance and echoing through the trees brought a smile. His horse stomped restlessly, blew heavily, and shook his mane.

“All right, don't get impatient,” he said, giving the horse a friendly slap on its rump.

By the time he had found enough forage for his horse, brought him inside, darkness had fallen.

Hugh sat cross-legged, back resting against one of the walls, a small fire in front of him casting undulating shadows on the wall. His weapons close to hand, he acclimated himself to the sounds of the woods surrounding the hut. He knew that in a matter of days he would be familiar with the way the wind blew, the sounds it made as it sifted through the trees, the sound of wolves, owls, and night creatures echoing off the rocks.

Tonight though, he knew that he would sleep restlessly, alert for every snap of a branch, every gust of wind.

He would watch his horse, the flick of his ears, as good as any sentry at detecting scents that he couldn't.

His sword close to hand, he closed his eyes, leaned his head back against the wall, and drifted into a semi-wakeful state, allowing the memories of years past to meander through his brain.

In less than three days, Hugh had completed his initial repairs to the hut. He'd patched the roof, not waterproof against a deluge, but good enough for a moderate rain. He'd chopped down two small trees deeper in the woods and used the smaller branches for a stack of firewood, its sturdier portions to brace the wall from inside. He had constructed a lean-to that would shelter his horse between two close-growing trees to the side of the hut. It was visible from the doorway, which would be adequate to protect the horse from the north winds.

He had even fashioned a small corral, using the natural thickness of the undergrowth, clearing some brush away, and constructing a framework of other small saplings that he had chopped to contain the gelding.

The gelding wouldn't run off; he wasn't concerned about that, but was more interested in providing a bit of protection for his horse against not only the elements, which could change at a moment's notice, but wild animals.

The morning following his arrival he'd carefully walked around the area, looking for any trace of fresh animal or human tracks close to the hut. He found none. The few animal signs he spied had been left earlier in the spring. Still, he knew enough not to take the lack of animal sign tracks for granted. His and his horse's scent would carry for miles on the wind, and sooner or later, wild things would come to investigate; perhaps a wolf or two, maybe even a boar.

By the third day, he was satisfied that the shelter was sturdy enough to provide him adequate shelter for a couple of months.

He had run out of supplies. The previous evening, he had snared a rabbit for supper, but he also knew that he needed to venture to the village on the coast for the additional supplies he would need for his short stay.

The following morning, he would ride east toward the coast, toward the small village that he remembered from his and his brother's stay. The village was named something like Argyll or Agryl. He would load up on supplies and perhaps even stay long enough to enjoy an ale or two.

Maybe, he would even ask around, see if anybody had heard of his brother. Unlikely, as he remembered that the village was very small. But, it was situated on the coast and enjoyed a small harbor, and news and gossip traveled fast in sea towns.

It was one of the reasons why he'd come. Maybe he would be able to find his brother, but if he couldn't, well, he would have to be satisfied that he'd tried.

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No! *This couldn't be happening!*

It must have been the hundredth, maybe even the thousandth time, that Dalla had told herself that from the moment it had happened, but every day brought something new—some new anxiety, a new fear, a new heart-pounding dread.

A rope tied four or five of them together, she wasn't sure how many exactly, the short distance between each keeping them clustered together. Blindfolded, her hands were tied behind her back with another, shorter piece of rope, much like the others. Her wrists were chaffed, blistered, and throbbed with pain. Since they'd disembarked a ship earlier in the morning, she and her unfortunate companions had been kept in a storeroom of some type of small business. It sounded like a tavern.

The room smelled like ale, mold, and rotten straw, which she felt on the floor through her thin, soft-soled shoes made of leather.

Several of the women in the room wept softly, their voices ravaged from their screams, wails of protest until they had no voices left.

Dalla was afraid as well, but tried not to allow herself to give in to her growing anxiety. If she started crying or screaming, she feared she would never stop.

The smell of dead and rotting fish, accompanied by the shouts and ear-blistering curses of sailors, and the odor of the brackish sea invaded her nostrils. They had come by sea, kept locked in a small, nearly airless room in the keel of a ship as it rode the rugged seas of her beloved homeland of

Norway and made its way toward the Scottish coastline. The room had soon grown vile with the stench of human waste, urine, and vomit.

Despite her fear of the coming hours and days, she had heaved a sigh of relief when they'd been released from the ship's hold and allowed topside. Even the ill odors wafting upward from the harbor waters were a blessed relief from the stench of their holding cell.

From the deck of the ship, they had been led up a cobble-stoned path to a wooden structure. She smelled the damp wood, felt the rough-hewn boards scrape against her arm as they'd been roughly shoved into a door from what she thought was an alley. At least it smelled like an alley, not much better than the hold of the ship where they'd spent the last several days.

A little while ago, a man who smelled even worse than the storeroom in which they were held had come to get them. They emerged from the structure and into the warm sunshine.

Oh, how good it felt on her face! Never again would she take the sunshine for granted.

All about them, she heard the sounds of activity; carts pulled across cobblestones, the scruff of boots on boardwalks, the hoots, hollers, and more than a few vulgar suggestions shouted in their direction.

Bloody Scots!

Her heart pounded, and she stumbled, wincing as her toe caught the edge of a stone beneath her foot, but she held back a wince and concentrated on maintaining her balance. If she or one of the other women fell, they would take the others with them.

How long had it been? It seemed like forever, but she knew it was just days ago that she had been kidnapped. She constantly worried about her companion Megan, and prayed that she was safe. It still seemed impossible that this had happened, but she had to accept it.

Hands tied behind her back, that dirty, smelly rag tied around her eyes, she stumbled along with a number of other young women, probably looking much the same as they; faces pale, dresses dirty and smudged, perhaps even torn. Her hair was probably as tangled as theirs, but she bit her lip to prevent it from trembling with fear.

Every second since that awful moment when she had been grabbed, slugged across the jaw, and tossed over the shoulder of some big brute of a

man, pounding ineffectually on his back, she had gone through the incident in her mind over and over again.

Since that moment, her eyes had been covered, but she still had her ears. She listened, desperate to learn why this had happened... why had she been kidnapped.

She strained to recognize a sound, a voice that would provide her with some clue. She sought to distinguish the smells of the men around her, their captors.

She and her companion had been attacked just before twilight, walking along one of the many meandering paths that wound their way through the massive gardens of her family's estate in southwestern Norway.

She had never, not once, worried about her safety on their estate, not as a member of the royal family. Her mother's side was linked to the royal lineage, not terribly close to the throne, but enough so that she could be considered part of the inner circle, though she preferred to stay on the outside of that circle.

She only attended court when her presence was demanded, perhaps twice, maybe thrice a year. She thrived in the rural environment, not particularly comfortable, nor content with how those closer to the throne spent their days, dealing with politics, making bargains, and on more than one occasion, betrayal.

No, for her court life was the epitome of boredom, at least for women. How utterly wasteful were the days spent fussing over wardrobes and hairstyles, the needlework, the soirees and gatherings that lasted until the wee hours of the morning. No wonder some of her compatriots laid abed until the early afternoon!

Not the life for Dalla. No, she loved to be up with the sun, roaming through the forests surrounding her father's estate. Riding the horses during the occasional fox hunt, or just riding through the countryside enjoying the beautiful vistas and brisk air.

She had spent most of her life living at the estate in the countryside, at her father's rural residence in a low and secluded valley not far from the western shores of the southwestern peninsula in the lowlands between Stavanger and Kristiansand. It was a land of towering, steep mountains interspersed with fjords, all of them wild and beautiful. Throughout her ordeal, she had kept the images of them in her mind, terrified that she might never see them again.

If she had been closer to the throne, she might've worried about her safety, but surely, her position in the royal family wasn't enough to put her in danger. She'd been mistaken. Why else would she have been kidnapped and thrown into the hold of a ship with other unfortunate female captives. What would happen to them, she didn't even want to contemplate. Still, if she'd been kidnapped for political reasons; perhaps for ransom, she surely would have been kept isolated in a castle somewhere, not bound and tossed, blindfolded, into the hold of a ship that she discovered was bound for northern Scotland. But if not political, then what? It was no secret that her father, Alfred Jorstad had made many enemies in his lifetime. Revenge? His brother, Amund Jorstad, had also been involved in numerous, somewhat questionable dealings with not only his fellow Norwegians, also the English, and the French, and scandalously enough, with the Scots themselves.

Unfortunately, Dalla had no way of knowing if anybody even realized she was gone, especially if Megan had not survived the attack. Poor Megan. She spent much of the time at the countryside estate with her companion and the house staff, her father and uncle often gone to Oslo to deal with business, royal obligations, and so forth. She rarely paid attention to their comings and goings.

With no love lost between herself, her father, or her uncle, and not for lack of trying on her part, she doubted that they would even display much concern over her sudden disappearance. Her father had never shown any affection toward her. As she grew older, she realized that he blamed her for his wife's death during childbirth. When Dalla was a young child, he'd often left her to her own devices, which perhaps was the reason she'd grown up with the reputation of being a wild child, often disappearing for hours on end in the meadows and forests surrounding the estate.

It was only when she had her tenth birthday that he hired a companion for her, to teach her how to be a lady, to read and write, learn English and French, and of course, to groom her for her eventual marriage. It was when she'd turned fourteen years old that she learned that her father had betrothed her to Manfred Gundersen, a man thrice her age, of German ancestry. Some type of business deal, she was sure. She had met the man once, had been immediately wary of him; the way he looked at her, his dark green eyes roaming speculatively over her blossoming body. She had mentioned

her unease to Megan, who confided in her that Gundersen had already lost two wives to illness, and that he was a notorious rake.

By the time she was sixteen, her father had insisted that she marry the man, but thank the heavens, he had died falling from a horse a month before the deed was to have been done. After that, her father had tried to push her toward one man or another, but she'd purposely behaved so badly that none of them wanted her. Why, what decent man would want to marry such a willful woman; one who thought nothing of riding bareback, one who eschewed the gentler arts of cooking and needlework for digging in a garden or tending the falcons with the falconer, down to cleaning their cages.

Scandalous. That's what her father called her behavior.

By the time she'd turned nineteen years old, well past marriageable age, he'd put his foot down. He'd arranged yet another marriage, this time to a distant member of the royal family from the paternal line; one who lived far away from the court on one of the hundreds of small islands dotting the northern coastline of Norway.

She and her father had gotten into a terrible argument about that, and she'd refused. As a result, he threatened her with sending her to a convent. Dalla had considered running away, but run away to where? With what? She had no access to her inheritance, if there was any left of it, and she certainly couldn't go running to the court.

Dalla had ultimately decided that living in a convent was preferable to being forced into a loveless marriage with any of her father's choices for a husband.

She was to have been sent away to a convent in northern France at the end of the month, but she'd been kidnapped just days before her departure. And what about Megan? Had she survived the attack? Dalla's heart grew heavy, thinking about her companion and friend, a woman barely ten years older than herself. Though Megan had been hired to fulfill her position as part governess and part teacher, she and Megan had soon grown into fast friends, so close that Dalla looked at her as a beloved older sister.

What if she—

They were roughly guided down several wooden steps into a room. A room filled with men who now hooted, whistled, and made rude, vulgar comments. Was that all these Scots could do?

At the women's appearance, the room full of boisterous, rough voices rose, along with the clanking of tankards, both wood and pewter, by her ears, against wooden tabletops, more crude suggestions, and rumbles of laughter.

"Get over there, against the wall!"

Dalla understood English well though it was obvious her fellow captives did not. She tried to obey, but the women stood clustered in confusion, bound and sightless.

A rough shove against her shoulder propelled her forward. She gasped and stumbled with the others until she walked into a wall. Reaching behind her with her fingers, she felt its surface. Rough-hewn wood planking. Beside her, she heard one of the other captives weeping.

"Hush," she soothed, speaking in a low, soft tones. "Don't let them see you afraid. It will only amuse them."

She stood as tall as possible, ignoring the empty, churning feeling roiling her stomach, making her want to vomit. She disregarded the buzzing in her head, the myriad of questions racing through it. She could not think about the future and what would happen to her. She had to concentrate on here and now.

Her heart pounded so hard in her chest she was amazed it didn't burst. Blood pulsed in the vein in her neck as she stubbornly lifted her chin and turned her face toward the crowd. If she hadn't been blindfolded, she swore she would have stared at them, pretending a calm bravery that she didn't feel deep inside.

Vile Scotsmen!

There was no love lost between the Norwegians and the Scots. They had been at war for years, longer than she could remember. At that moment, fear engulfed her. She wanted to cry, to scream, and to rail against her circumstances. More than anything, she wanted to feel Megan's comforting arms wrapped around her.

She had no one else to yearn for. Not her father, who barely tolerated her existence. She—

"All right, here's the first one!"

Another roar ensued.

She heard a woman's stifled scream from nearby. Her heart sank, even though she had suspected they were to be sold to the highest bidder. The abject reality of the situation caused a new ripple of fear to race up her

spine. They were Norwegian captives. For sale to the uncouth, vulgar, and wild Scots. Behind her blindfold, she briefly closed her eyes, uttered a prayer for strength.

Amidst the woman's terrified attempt to cry out, she heard a slap; a hand against a cheek, which stifled the woman's scream but failed to smother her weeping.

“She's got all her teeth! Fine figure of a woman, ain't she?”

Another yelp from the woman and she could just imagine the animal pinching her. If he laid a hand on Dalla like that, she would thrust upward with her knee and hope that she caught him in the groin with it. She might be beaten for her insolence, but no one was going to—

She heard the clinking of coins and money was exchanged.

Ale-addled voices, one bidder trying to top another, elicited a cacophony of sound that soon grew into a steady thrum. She tried to remember. Was she the third or fourth woman in the line?

It took every ounce of strength she had to keep her expression calm, to not start screaming in panic as each woman ahead of her was eventually bought, cut loose from the ropes, and, from what she could hear, literally pushed into the crowd amidst the raucous laughter of men, accompanied by the shrieks and cries of the women.

A rough hand grabbed Dalla's upper arm and shook her.

Her heart dropped, and her stomach balled into a tight knot of dread.

Her turn.

She fought back the urge to shriek and bit her lips to prevent it. Her heart thundered now, her pulse racing so fast she was surprised she didn't faint.

“And here's a lovely lass. She's got all her teeth too, and look at that hair! Cuts a fine figure of a woman, she's got to be—

The room again erupted with the sound of bidding.

Tankards slammed loudly onto wooden table tops.

She heard the shuffling of feet.

The place stank of body odor, vomit, ale, and leather. In the midst of the voices barraging her ears, she, as well as others in the room, took note of the deep, booming, voice.

“She's mine.”

The words had been spoken loud enough to be heard among the rabble, but with a tone that immediately silenced the room.

She swallowed.

The room suddenly grew quiet.

She heard the sound of movement, feet moving forward, not boots, but leather against wood. And then she felt a man's presence only a short distance from her. His scent wafted toward her. He smelled of horse, pine, and, oddly enough, the earth. She wanted to back away but stood her ground.

Nevertheless, her ears rang so loud now, her head swimming with wordless terror, her heart pumping so hard, she barely managed to hear the quiet words the man spoke to the one holding so tightly onto her arm.

She felt another hand reach out for her other arm, not terribly harsh, but oh, that hand was so large, easily wrapping around her forearm.

She shuddered.

Again, money was quickly exchanged, evident from the clinking of coins.

“Cut her loose.”

She felt a brief tug on the rope at her waist, and then the jarring sensation of a knife slicing through the rope binding her wrists.

And then, without further ado, the big hand slid down her forearm and grasped her hand, firmly, and tugged.

Dalla hesitantly followed, knowing that he led the way through the crowd. She tripped over something and nearly fell before she regained her footing.

As it was, she slammed into her... her buyer's back.

He felt hard, huge and muscular.

The crowd erupted in laughter.

Instinctively it seemed, he wrapped his arm around her, catching her, keeping her on her feet while he growled to the man who had obviously attempted to trip her.

“You want to lose that foot?”

Again, the words were spoken quietly, but with such an underlying threat that once again, the boisterous group quieted.

One hand wrapped around her shoulder now, he guided her out of the tavern. She cringed at his touch, but blindfolded, allowed him to guide her outside.

Once they stepped outside and the smells of the men inside was replaced by the smells of the docks, the harbor, and the sea, she felt the

blindfold being removed from her eyes.

She squinted against the brightness and ducked her face, but almost unbidden, then turned to look up at the man who had just bought her.

Their eyes locked as her head tilted upward, her head barely reaching his chest.

And then, as if suddenly realizing that she was no longer bound, she bolted.

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For several moments, Hugh watched, bemused, as the lass lifted her tattered skirt and fled down the cobbled street, passersby staring with wide eyes as she flashed a bit of ankle and small, dainty slippers.

They looked from the fleeing woman to Hugh, the structure behind him, then either snorted, shook their heads, turned and spat, or otherwise went about their business.

Where did she think she was going to go? Who did she think was going to help her? The port town was a dangerous place for a woman, let alone an unaccompanied one. With a sigh, he turned to trail her, following the flash of her simple pale blue cote, parts of her cream-colored chemise showing through several tears in the cote's skirt as she disappeared through a narrow cut between two buildings a short distance away.

She had nerve.

He started to laugh, but then realized to the fullest what he had just done. He had bought a human being.

What had compelled him to take pity on any of those women? The Norwegians and the Scots were at war. He'd just happened to be in the tavern when they were brought in. He'd been startled at first, but then he'd seen her, a petite woman a head shorter than the rest, but standing taller than any of them.

Was it because of the way she'd lifted her chin in wordless defiance? Was it her long, blonde hair, that thick braid draping over her shoulder that reminded him so much of... or was it her beauty, which was not difficult to

see beneath her dirt-smudged face, her dirty gown, nevertheless a bit finer than the plain homespun of a peasant.

He paused at the entry of the alley through which she had disappeared, picking up his pace to a slow trot. She was headed toward the pier, but she would find no help there.

Seconds later a cacophony of shouts and a broken off scream prompted him to pick up his pace.

He took a turn at the back of the alley and behind the wooden storehouses, weaving his way between stacks of crates and wooden barrels until the alley opened up into the docks by the shore. It stank of dead fish and aromas of foreign and exotic spices and dried meats from who knew where.

Two ships were docked nearby, their ropes creaking, furling sails flapping gently in the breeze coming off of the ocean. The water in the harbor was fairly calm, lapping gently at the shoreline and pier.

A short distance ahead, he saw her, captured in the arms of a sailor around her waist, two of his cronies gathering around, all reaching out to touch her hair, her face, her—

“Let me go, you filthy dogs!”

She struggled mightily, swinging her arms, her tiny hands balled into fists. One of those small fists managed to strike the nose of the man who held her, resulting in a startled shout, and a resulting burst of laughter. Her feet lashed out too, and the heel of one foot stomped down hard on top of the foot of the sailor touching her hair.

“Don't touch me, you dirty Scot!”

Hugh paused only a moment before he approached the trio of sailors. “Release her. She belongs to me.”

He spoke quietly, but firmly.

The men, and of course, his new... whatever she was, turned to stare at him.

Everyone froze for several seconds, before she started to struggle again and the sailor, arms still wrapped tightly around her waist, lifted her off her feet to avoid her kicking legs.

“Let me go!” she grunted with exertion, twisting and bucking in his grasp.

One of the other sailors laughed, stepping between his friend and Hugh. “If she belongs to you, why is she running away from you?”

“That is no matter of yours,” Hugh said. “Give her to me.”

He reached out a hand though he knew that they wouldn't relinquish their prize quite so easily. He turned his attention to the young woman, for the first time getting a good look at her.

Her eyes were ice blue, almost gray, her dark pupils dilated with furious emotion. A small nose, nostrils flared, also from emotion. Her lips slightly open, displaying white, healthy teeth. Even held tightly against her new captor, she struggled, twisting this way and that, her braid swinging with her movements. Her hands, still balled into fists, continued to strike out.

He couldn't tell how old she was, but she was a fierce little thing, and she wasn't afraid of fighting, wasn't afraid of the ramifications for doing so, he determined then and there that no matter what happened, she was going to be a handful. He took a step forward, his head slightly lowered, glaring at the man who stood between them.

“Move.”

The sailor didn't, and in the next moment, found himself lying flat on his back, gasping for breath as Hugh stood over him, one foot now placed on the center of his chest.

He glared at the other sailor, who quickly shrugged and headed in the opposite direction. Hugh then focused his attention on the man who held the woman, both eyeing him warily.

“You really want to do this?”

The man opened his mouth to speak, but just then, the wildcat of the girl lifted her arm, elbow bent, and smacked the back of her fist into his face.

His lip split open. With an angry growl, the sailor flung her to the ground and swung back his foot to kick her.

Like his companion, he soon found himself on the ground as well, although this time Hugh crouched, pressing a knee into the center of his back, his other hand grabbing a handful of dirty, grimy hair. He was prepared to smash his face into the rough planks of the dock, but paused when he saw the flash of color darting past his vision.

With a sigh, he quickly released the sailor and once again found himself in pursuit of the lass, who didn't seem to know when to give up.

Admirable, but he was growing impatient.

She darted around the side of a building. He rounded the corner seconds later and halted.

She stood a mere twenty feet away as she turned to face him. She was in a dead-end alley.

He calmly watched her, his legs slightly wider than hip-width apart, arms crossed over his chest. He said nothing, but merely lifted an eyebrow.

She'd spoken English, but with an accent, so he knew that she would understand him. He didn't necessarily want to frighten her more than she already was, but the day was advancing, and he had things to do. He had already purchased supplies, loaded them onto his horse, and then had decided to enter the tavern for a mug of ale before he left the village.

"Come," he said simply. "Or I will leave you to the sailors." Of course, he wouldn't, especially since he had spent nearly all of his money, but she didn't know that. But he wasn't about to keep chasing her. "You have nowhere to go. No one will help you here."

She stared at him, chest heaving with exertion, a myriad of emotions crossing her features; anger, wariness, and for certain, fear. Her features pale, her hands still clenched into fists, she appeared indecisive.

He could only imagine what she felt. He had questions of his own. Who was she? Where did she come from? How had she ended up on a ship as a captive to be sold to the Scots? Despite the animosity between the Scots and the Norwegians, he nevertheless felt a small surge of pity for her. What must it be like to be kidnapped from your homeland and carted off to—

It struck him that was exactly what Phillip, the Laird of the Duncan clan, had done with his Sarah, now his wife. If they hadn't fallen in love and ultimately married, what would have become of *her*?

"I'm not going to hurt you, lass, but I'm not going to stand here all day, either. Make up your mind."

Finally, after several more minutes of staring at one another, the woman heaved a sigh and took a few steps forward.

Hugh extended his hand, palm up, indicating that he wasn't going to hurt her.

She approached the ignored the hand, glaring up at him, her hands held at her sides, though still fisted. She looked like she would bolt at any sudden move.

"You run away again, and you'll regret it." He spoke softly, and hoped that she wouldn't force his hand. He had never laid a hand on a woman, and he wasn't about to start now, but then again, she didn't know that.

Abruptly, she offered one stiff nod and crossed her arms over her chest, refusing to break eye contact.

He was amused.

She was not.

“What is your name?”

She remained silent.

Having had enough, he reached for her arm.

She tried to turn away, but he warned her once again. “Come with me.”

He tugged on her wrist, and she unfolded her arms, reluctantly following as he led them out of the alley. The sailors were gone. While he didn't exactly have to drag her, she was resisting. He gave her that. She was a tiny thing, her head barely reaching his chest, but he knew she was going to be a handful. Why had he bought her? No use worrying about that now.

“What's your name?” he repeated.

Again, she refused to answer. No matter. He wanted to get out of the village and back to the mountains, although what he was going to do with her then, he had no idea. Still, he couldn't just sit by and watch her be sold off into slavery, prostitution, and who knew what else. There was something about her that had sparked his interest, his sympathy, and his compassion.

He led the way past numerous buildings, past gawking eyes, more than a few snickers, and one man, who took one look at her and spat.

It wasn't until they neared the edge of the village that she seemed to notice the small structure with a cross on top of it.

She dug in her heels and tugged.

“Where are we going?”

Her voice was soft now, tinged with hesitance.

He gestured with his free hand. “Up to the church.”

“Why?” she asked, frowning up at him.

“To get married,” he said simply.

He'd made the decision as they emerged from the alley. All he'd wanted was to come north, to spend some time by himself, to maybe find his brother. To get away, if just for a little while, from newlyweds and the flurry of activity regarding the impending birth of the laird's firstborn child. How had he ended up saddled with this small yet fire-spirited Norwegian lass, let alone decide to marry her?

“I'm not marrying you!” she snapped, trying to jerk her arm from his grasp. “I'm not marrying any filthy Scotsman—”

“Your mine now,” he reminded her. “Your shelter, your food, and your safety are up to me. And when we go back to the highlands, you can either come as my wife or my slave. Which is it?”

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Dalla stared up at the rough-looking man, for the first time noticing his hazel eyes, flecked with specks of gold, the laugh lines at their edges, the way the sun glinted off his long brown hair.

He was muscular and burly with chiseled features, a wide nose, and strong jaw. He wasn't handsome, but he wasn't ugly, either. At the moment, his lips were frowning.

She wanted to bolt again, but he had threatened to leave her in the village, and she was smart enough to know that she had nowhere to go, no one to turn to, no one who would protect her. He had followed her after she'd run from him at the tavern, and he had confronted those disgusting, stinking sailors who had temporarily captured her. But who was going to protect her against *him*?

He hadn't hurt her, yet. But... but marry him? She shook her head. "Why? *Why* would you want to marry me?"

"I don't, not really, but the decision is yours. You come with me as my wife or as my slave." He offered a slight shrug. "It makes no difference to me."

"But... but you don't even know me! I don't know you! I'm Norwegian. Your Scottish. *We're at war!* It's not proper—"

He chuckled then, a deep, rumbling sound that started deep in his chest.

"Proper? Take a look around you, lass. You're a captive, sold into slavery by your captors. I bought you. You are mine to do with as I see fit. I'm giving you the opportunity to come with me as a decently married woman, one with the rights that marriage—"

“*Pshaw!*” she snapped. “Women have no rights, whether through marriage or not!” She pulled her arm from his grasp but remained rooted to the spot, arms akimbo, fists balanced on her hips now. “I may be a captive, but I am no fool!”

He stared at her. She stared back. What was he thinking? His features offered no hint as to his thoughts. As yet, he had not harmed her, but based on her experience, men only had so much patience. She could tell this one was running out of it. Still, her stubborn streak showed itself.

“I would not marry you if you were the last—”

“Fine then,” he interrupted, once again snatching at her wrist. His big hand enveloped her wrist and then some. “You belong to me anyway.”

She tried to resist his tug, tried to dig in her heels, to prevent him from turning and striding back toward the village. Panic engulfed her. She cast a quick gaze down at the village, the sea beyond, the uncertainty, the fear swelling inside her. What to do? What to do!

“No! Wait!” she stalled, trying to think.

He had to give her a minute to think! Since the moment that she'd been struck on the jaw, a burlap bag yanked over her head, then tossed over her kidnapper's shoulder, she had not been given a choice. About anything. Now she was. Not a good choice, but nevertheless a choice.

He stared at her, his gaze unwavering, waiting.

“A moment,” she sighed. “Please.”

Should she choose marriage to this complete stranger, this Scotsman, or slavery? Weren't they the same thing? She had never had a serious beau, had never experienced feelings of love, had never experienced true affection other than to Megan.

She had known women who'd gotten married. They were treated as less than men, to do what men wanted them to do without any say so. To her, marriage meant nothing more than a miserable life spent in close proximity to someone that you could not agree with, could not even respect. And yet what was her recourse? Slavery.

“What's the difference?” she grumbled.

His frown deepened. “What do you mean?”

“Both of the choices you just gave me result in the same, at least as far as I am concerned,” she said, perhaps foolishly, but she was fast gaining the impression that he would not hurt her as long as she didn't push back too hard. At least not yet. Maybe, if she made his life miserable, he would

choose to let her go. Maybe choosing to go wherever it was he was going as a slave would be a better option than being legally tied to him in marriage forever.

“Make your decision, woman,” he said, calmly.

He was growing impatient. Then again, she was a good Christian girl. The thought of going anywhere with a man, much less as a slave, to do whatever he chose with her—but he would have rights to do as he pleased if she became his wife as well. She grew frustrated and shook her head. “You are not giving me any choice!” she said, stomping her foot against the ground.

He lifted an eyebrow, amusement dancing in his eyes. “And what other option would you suggest, considering that I purchased you legally, and I have a bill of sale stating such?”

She didn't know whether it was his amusement or if he was genuine, but what would it hurt to throw in a third option? “Perhaps we can make a deal?”

He grinned. “And what would you propose?”

Her mind went blank. She hadn't really considered... that he would actually even consider another option. What could she broach as a bargain? She was without rights, without a homeland, without any means of survival. What if—

“You're coming with me, whether you come as a slave or a wife,” he finally said. “It makes no difference to me. Either way, you belong to me, and you have nothing with which to bargain.”

“Oh, but I do!” she said, an idea forming in her head. “I come from...” She paused.

Maybe it wasn't a good idea to tell him about her history, her link to the Royal Norwegian family. Maybe such knowledge would not bode her well after all. In fact, he might use it against her—

“Well?”

She sighed. She had no options. Nothing with which to bargain. As a slave or as a wife, she would be subject to his whims, no matter what they were. He could abuse her, take her to his bed, treat her in any manner he saw fit, and it wouldn't make a difference. Not only that, but she had no way of contacting her family in Norway. As far as they were concerned, she had probably been kidnapped and killed. It didn't matter that she had been on her way to—

“Come along then,” he said.

Once again, his hand wrapped around her wrist. Not too tightly, but enough to prevent her from attempting to once again bolt. With heavy steps, her heart thumping dully in her chest, she followed him up to the small church on the rise. Maybe she should tell him the truth. But that probably wouldn't sway him, either. He had paid for her, probably with what little coin he had.

She cast a quick glance up at him. His gaze was focused on the church, his expression resolute, not glancing down at her, not likely caring that she had been on her way to a convent, sent there because she had refused to marry a man chosen by her father.

Dalla had been prepared to take vows of chastity, had resolved to never finding love, having a family of her own, growing old with someone who knew her soul. He probably wouldn't care that she was terrified, that she didn't want to marry him, that all she wanted, more than anything in the world, was to go back home.

None of those things were going to happen. She had been kidnapped. Who was behind it, she didn't know, but it didn't much matter, did it? She was here, having crossed the sea to arrive in Scotland. She didn't even know where in Scotland. All she knew about Scotland was that it was a land of rugged landscape and uncouth, lawless, and warring clans.

She had seen one Scotsman in her life before arriving on the shores of this dirty little village, and the sight that had held her eyes had terrified her. The man had sported wild, tangled long hair, a bushy beard, and heavy, bushy eyebrows. His teeth rotten, he had spoken a harsh, unintelligible language, but his hatred had shown in his dark brown eyes as he showered his Norwegian captors with curses.

As they neared the door of the church, a priest wearing a long, dark brown robe tied with a piece of rope stepped from its entrance. He watched the two approaching, expressionless. He, a man of God, would certainly save her and offer her sanctuary. Wouldn't he?

His hand still firmly gripping her wrist, her captor stopped before the priest and offered a nod.

“You need to marry us.”

The priest glanced from the highlander to her, then back again, offering a brief nod.

Dalla's eyes widened in surprise. No questions? Nothing? Then again, if such occurrences happened frequently in this godforsaken village, what was she to expect?

Her captor tugged her inside the small confines of the church, its bare plank walls broken by two narrow windows. Overhead, the thatched roof looked dry and dusty. Four long benches occupied each side of the interior. With increasing dread, she walked down the aisle between them toward a small table bearing a small wooden cross. A far cry from the beautiful chapel on her family's estate—

“Name,” the priest asked her captor, reaching for a large book situated in a small cubbyhole in the wall. He then withdrew a small bottle of ink and a quill.

“Hugh McInnis,” he said, watching as the priest scribbled his name with a quill dipped into a small ink bottle and wrote the name in the book.

The priest looked at her. “Name?”

She didn't answer.

The priest looked at Hugh with a lifted eyebrow and sighed. “Does she speak English?”

He nodded. “She does.” He turned to her, frowning. “Give the man your name.”

She thought it best not to test him much further. “Dalla. Dalla Jorstad.”

The priest scribbled her name beside that of her captor, Hugh.

She tried to turn her mind away from what was happening; to picture her home, the lush green of the fjords, the image of her mother's portrait, smiling. She'd always pretended that her mother could see her through that portrait, and that she smiled down at her with encouragement.

Dalla tuned out the droning voice of the priest as he said the words of holy matrimony, her mouth growing dry, her heart pounding, her head spinning.

And then, in a matter of moments, it was over. The priest extended the quill pen toward Hugh and he wrote his name, large and bold, at the bottom of the marriage decree. He then handed the quill to her. She didn't reach for it. Signing her name to that document would seal her fate.

“If you can't write your name, simply make a mark,” the priest said.

Dalla gave him an angry glare, then quickly prayed for forgiveness. He was a priest. Still, what kind of a priest would marry two people without even asking if she was willing? Even in a harbor town and port cities such

as this, with prisoners and slaves arriving, shouldn't he question demands for quick marriages? Shouldn't he have even asked her whether she was willing?

Her mind raced. Who had done this to her? And more importantly, how was she to ever find her way back home?

She watched Hugh bend forward, prepared to make a mark on the paper for her. She snatched it from his hand, scowling.

"I can write my own name," she grumbled.

Angrily, she wrote her name on the paper, every stroke of the tip scratching against the parchment paper sending a toll of dread through her. She finished with a flourish, gave her new husband a glare, and tossed the quill onto the parchment. A blob of ink splattered the paper, marring a portion of her name.

It didn't matter. She had just lost her identity, her namesake, and her homeland. She was, in the eyes of God, regardless of the lack of tradition, irrevocably bound to the Scotsman named Hugh McInnis.

But if he thought she would acquiesce to this farce of a marriage without putting up a fight, he was sadly mistaken.

Hugh had lost track of how many times he asked himself what he was doing. Not only had he spent a good portion of his remaining coin to purchase Dalla—he shook his head at the thought, he had purchased a *human being!*—he had also spent a goodly part of what remained on an old mare that she could ride as they left the village and ventured back toward his temporary home. What he was going to do with her after that, he wasn't quite sure.

They'd been traveling since dawn, and the horses moved slowly up the base of the hill, the wind gusting gently through the long grasses and myriad of tall, rocky spires dotting the low valley they'd just left behind.

He missed the silhouette of the Grampian mountain peaks of his home, especially Ben Nevis, under whose shadow stood Duncan Manor. He didn't particularly care for this land of erratic dales and gullies, fields and bogs, the near constant rising of misty tendrils of fog, often bringing with it a smell of rotting vegetation and heather and other brackish plants, half-rotted in this damp, humid landscape.

In the distance, he heard a dull sound.

He paused his gelding as Dalla's halted beside his.

"It's only a red stag," he explained. "It's coming to the end of their rutting season."

He could understand her trepidation. The aggressive, moaning-like roar of the red stag was intimidating, especially on such a damp and miserable overcast day such as this.

The morning had started out fairly well, the gray and pink shreds of dawn oozing deeper red as the sun came up in the east. Before heading higher into the foothills, they had to cross the 'valley of mire', as he had named it on his way to the coast; a desolate area of marshy water, quagmires or bogs, many of them hidden by grassy meadows that look deceptively firm from the distance, but could disappear from beneath one's footing in the blink of an eye.

Occasionally, tors—in Scottish Gaelic known as *tòrrs*, or *crag*s in the Welsh tongue, created of free-standing rock jugged upward some tall, others square and short. Some looked like man-made cairns while others jugged up from the landscape, creating lone peaks—tables of rock—that appeared out of nowhere in the middle of a plain.

“Keep your horse behind mine and don't veer away from my path,” he warned. “The ground is treacherous.”

He should have just stayed at home, back with the Duncans. Dealing with what was going on there was certainly not more difficult than the bit of trouble he'd just gotten himself into. What had he been thinking?

If only he had stayed at the hut. If only he hadn't ridden into the village that particular day. If only he hadn't seen the expression on Dalla's face when she'd been paraded out in front of the boisterous crowd. If only he hadn't felt a frisson of emotion, of compassion for her as she stood in front of that group of rowdy sailors and farmers, merchants.

If only...

But he couldn't stand by and watch her being sold to any of them. And what of the other women? If he had been able, he would've bought them all. If he had been able, he would have sent them all back to where they came from.

But he hadn't, and he couldn't. Not even with Dalla. There was something about Dalla Jorstad that had immediately attracted him to her. She was a petite little thing, but she had more spirit than any of the women standing beside her put together. Only she had stood straight and tall, her shoulders back, and her chin up. If her eyes had not been blindfolded, he was sure he would have seen them bright with fury and indignation.

A while later Hugh glanced at her, sitting quietly on the mare, for the moment at least, clinging tightly to her mane.

He held the tether of her horse, not trusting her ability to ride alone. She was either very inexperienced with riding, or she was afraid of the animal. She didn't offer any explanations, and he didn't ask.

For a moment, he thought she had fallen asleep, her body relaxed, her chin resting on her chest, her body swaying with the movement of the horse as the mare picked her way along the path of his own horse. But no, her eyes were open, and he caught her glancing his way, then quickly darting her gaze away, toward the woods in the distance.

He stifled a chuckle and shook his head.

They had left the village hours ago, and she had yet to utter a word. He knew she spoke English, or at least some but was obviously unwilling to communicate. For the moment, she wasn't trying to escape, but he had no doubt that she was thinking about it. If he'd been in her position, he would too. He didn't want to tie her up, but he would if he had to.

“Don't try to escape,” he spoke softly and slowly to ensure that she understood. “You will find no one to help you, and the forest is filled with dangers. You're safer with me.”

She said nothing, but once again, he saw her gaze dart his way. She didn't want to talk? Fine with him. He didn't want to talk either. What he *wanted* to do was go back to yesterday. He should have just gone hunting. If he had, he wouldn't be in this predicament. The more he thought about it,

the more irritated he grew. With himself. With her. With everything. He sighed.

Maybe he would take her back with him to Duncan Manor, ask the laird, Phillip Duncan, and his wife Sarah, how he could go about returning her to her country.

There was no love lost between the Scots and the Norwegians, but she was one small woman. What could she do? He knew nothing of her background, her history, or how she'd ended up as a captive bound for Scotland. Until he knew more, she would be his problem and his problem alone.

The trail back to his makeshift hut grew rougher and steeper as the way took them ever higher into the foothills, interspersed with steep drop-offs, deep gullies, and an occasional precipice.

In between these hillocks were the damned bogs, some in plain view, others hidden beneath grasses and reeds.

Soon, her horse was forced to follow directly behind his, the trail narrowing as they rode up a steep slope. Single file, they made their way upward.

He glanced back occasionally and noticed her gaze riveted to the often-treacherous trail they followed, higher and higher, the fingers of her hands clutching the mare's mane so tightly her knuckles had turned white.

She was frightened, as anyone with any common sense would be, not only due to her situation, but the treacherous terrain.

All he knew about Norway were passing comments he'd heard from those who had been there: relatively flat except by the coastline, though toward its interior the land grew more rugged and mountainous. He'd heard it was a land of glaciers and fjords, the eastern part of the country filled with rolling hills and valleys and rich soil for farming. High mountain ranges scattered the north.

"Where are you from?" he asked over his shoulder, thinking to distract her from her fear as well as gain some information from her.

To his surprise, she mumbled an answer.

He turned in the saddle, eyebrow lifted. "What?"

She looked up at him, her features stiff, her eyebrows lowered. "Near Stavangar," she muttered, then raised a defiant eyebrow. "You are familiar with my country?"

He shook his head.

Her sarcasm was not lost on him, and once again he couldn't help but admire her spirit, much as it annoyed him.

She might be a captive, but she certainly wasn't cowed. Not yet anyway. He said nothing more as he focused his attention on the trail, his mount slowly picking his way up the slope, the ground beneath loose with stones and soft soil.

Beneath him, he felt the gelding's muscles bunch as he struggled upward. He tightened his grip on the rope for the mare, and wrapped it around his hand.

The nag was much older than he'd preferred, but his choices had been few. He heard the mare struggling and resolved that when they reached the top of the slope, they would rest.

His horse slipped, and Hugh instantly prepared to leap off the gelding's back to facilitate the climb, but it proved unnecessary. He couldn't say the same for the mare. Not far from the top, the old broodmare stubbornly refused to continue.

In fact, the sudden balking of the mare nearly pulled Hugh from his own saddle. He quickly glanced behind him, glaring at his captive, but she was doing nothing more than hanging on.

Hugh took pity on the mare and gestured for Dalla to climb off. She stared at him in dismay, glancing at the steep slope on her left, the rather drastic precipice to her right.

“Off?” she asked, eyebrows lifted in dismay.

Hugh nodded and quickly dismounted, slapping the gelding's rump. The horse continued upslope.

His hand still grasping the lead rope to the mare, he lifted his free hand toward Dalla.

“Give me your hand.”

She hesitated for a moment. Then, with obvious reluctance, she released her grip on the horse's mane and reached for his hand.

He clasped hers tightly as she dismounted, trying to maintain her balance on the steep slope. He then released the mare's rope and slapped her on the rump. The mare followed his gelding upward, albeit more slowly, while Hugh and Dalla followed on foot.

The fine mist that had started to fall an hour ago grew heavier. The clouds grew grayer, thicker, and dropped closer to the ground. They

wouldn't make it to his camp in the distant mountains for another day. He'd have to find shelter out of the coming rain for the night.

As if to buttress his belief, a flash of lightning brightened the sky, followed by a stunning crackle of thunder that rumbled and echoed its way over the landscape. The mare neighed softly and tossed her head in alarm. His gelding, used to loud, sudden noises, didn't react.

He turned to find Dalla struggling to keep up, her thin leather slippers struggling to find purchase on the now slick trail.

Hugh frowned.

She was ill-clothed for bad weather, or for travel for that matter. He shook his head, looking uphill, urging the horses forward. He breached the rise, barely winded as he turned to wait for Dalla to catch up. She'd been cooped up in a ship's hold for how long? Not given much to eat, certainly. He would need to remedy that, or he'd end up with a sick captive.

She scrambled upward, eyes riveted to the ground, as if determining where she would place each footstep before she did so. While he appreciated her caution, she was also moving much too slowly.

“Come, Dalla, you're almost there, and then we can find some shelter.”

She sent a glare his way as she reached for a stubby clump of brush on the side of the slope to aid her steep ascent. Her chest heaved with exertion, and her limbs trembled, but she bit her lips, and kept pushing on.

In a matter of moments, she also reached the crest, her breath escaping her chest in short, harsh gasps. She leaned forward and rested her hands above her knees.

“We'll find shelter before this mist turns into—”

Too late. The clouds burst, and a delusion of rain pelted down. Within seconds he was drenched, as was Dalla.

The rain felt icy cold, bringing with it the smell of white pine, damp loam, and a myriad of other scents of the lush, forested wilderness that opened before them. At least they had managed to traverse the flatlands and those dangerous bogs before the rain came down.

He inhaled deeply, relishing the scent of pine on the air as he quickly made his way through a stand of pine and birch trees, the ground soft beneath his feet. He followed a faint deer trail, hoping to find some thick shelter, or if they were lucky, a cave in which they could take shelter for the night.

The rain came down harder, pounding on his head and soaking them both, the raindrops fat and heavy. In minutes, tiny rivulets began to wind their way downhill through the trees, and in areas not covered by pine needles or leaves, the ground soon grew saturated and slippery.

The horses ducked their heads, but plodded steadily behind Hugh, holding both reins now. Every once in a while, he glanced over his shoulder to find an increasingly angry-looking Dalla, her hair now plastered and hanging in dripping tendrils around her face, her pale blue gown darker in hue, hanging shapeless and heavy, the bottom hem dragging in the mud.

Her mouth was slightly open, her lips trembling with the growing chill in the air. He had to find shelter, and soon, or she would definitely fall ill, especially after—potentially—weeks of captivity and a rough sea crossing, and likely no more than watery broth and stale bread for sustenance.

He pushed forward, searching the landscape for an outcropping, anything that would provide—

A startled cry jerked his attention away from the landscape and back to her.

She had lost her footing, teetered for balance, arms swinging wildly as she tried to regain her footing.

He let go of the horses and stepped toward her, arms extended, trying to catch her before she fell, but he didn't get to her in time. She landed face down on the now muddy ground.

Hugh reached her a second later, but she was already scrambling to regain her footing. She shook off his helping hand, glaring up at him, tears shining in her eyes. Or maybe it was just the rain. Her jaw set, she growled low in her throat. The entire front of her gown was caked with mud, and so was most of her face.

He shook his head, unable to halt his grin. His amusement triggered a burst of anger as she let loose with what he could only imagine were curses ground out at him in her native language.

He didn't understand a word she said, but they certainly didn't sound like they were extolling his virtues. Hugh reached again for her arm, and though she struggled to yank it from his grasp, he tightened his grip.

“Stop fighting me,” he snapped. “There's a cave, up there, at the base of that slope. Do you see it?”

She stared up at him for several moments, her mouth set with a stubborn pout, the rain pounding down around them.

Finally, she turned in the direction he pointed, searched a moment, and then offered a stiff nod.

“Go. I will bring the horses.”

He gestured her forward, and she hurried toward the cave, almost hidden in a cleft in the great mass of rocks rising nearby. The lip of an overhang a man's height extended over the opening.

She scrambled beneath it and dropped to her hands and knees to crawl to the very rear, maybe a few feet deeper than the height. She sat and pressed her back against the rocks, pulling her knees close to her body before placing her forehead on her knees, burying her face from his view.

A surge of pity swept through him, but he brushed it away. He had more important things to think about at the moment, the least of which was finding some shelter for the horses, and then lighting a fire, if he could find any dry tinder, and then, food.

Dusk approached quickly, hastened by the heavy cloud cover. The reality of his situation struck him anew. He never had any problems weathering a storm, nor going without food nor warmth for days on end. But had Dalla?

He shook his head, once again regretting that moment when he had plucked the coins from his pocket and bought this stubborn, willful, and angry wildcat of a woman.

He had a feeling that she would be more trouble than she was worth.

“Take off your clothes.”

Dalla stared up at him, mouth dropping open. While she considered herself fluent in English, she was sure she had misunderstood. “What?”

He extended his saddle blanket toward her. “It's a bit damp, but it's dryer than your clothes. So, take them off. You'll catch your death. You can hide under this until they're dry.”

With that, he dropped the blanket to the ground beside her with one hand, a crumpled handful of clothes that looked to be a pair of breeches and a long-sleeved tunic beside it.

She scowled. She had no intention of disrobing one item of clothing from her person. If he thought she would—

“Do it!” he snapped. “I paid good money for you, and for a horse. I will not let you waste it by becoming ill, or worse yet, dying on me.”

For several seconds, she stared up at him, flabbergasted. How dare he speak to her like that! He was nothing but a barbaric Scotsman, and a highlander too, and she was a member of the royal family of Norway. Why, she should—

“Either you take those clothes off yourself, or I'll do it for you.”

She looked into his eyes and took in the hardness of his jaw and realized that he just might possibly do just that. She heaved a sigh and then looked down at the clothes at her side.

Dalla darted one more glance up at him, but he'd already turned his back, legs slightly spread, arms crossed over his chest as he stood slightly

hunched, so he didn't knock his thick noggin on the roof of the cave.

He stood near the lip and water seeped over the overhand, making its way along the pitted rocks above him and dripped. He didn't seem to notice, or even care that fat drops of rain pattered down on him, dripping down the back of his head and down that thick, strong neck. With his arms crossed like that, the seams of his tunic looked near to bursting, his muscles bunched and tense with what could only be aggravation.

Muttering with exasperation, she stared at his back until he abruptly walked off into the woods, mindless of the rain. She stared after him in dismay. Where was he going?

A moment of panic surged through her. He wouldn't leave her out here by herself, would he? She calmed her fear, snickering at her own foolishness. Maybe he was just taking care of nature's needs... which she also needed to do, come to think of it. No, he was looking after the horses too. He certainly wouldn't be going far, not with all of their supplies and the horses still nearby.

Still, she stubbornly sat, unmoving, as if frozen with indecision. But she didn't have a decision to make, did she? She had to do what she was told or suffer the consequences. She was in a tenuous situation, no doubt about it. She had to watch her mouth, a challenge in the best of times. She couldn't push him too hard, or he just might hurt her, or worse, kill her. It probably wouldn't bother him a bit. After all, she was the enemy, and he was a bloody Scot.

He had complained about the cost of buying her. She cringed at the word. She had been bought. Her spirits sagged even lower, but with an effort, she pulled herself out of her despairing thoughts. Nothing she could do about it now. She had no idea where they were, and though she was loath to admit it, he was right. Who was going to help her? She had no knowledge regarding the local geography. Arriving in these foothills had been treacherous. More than once she had felt the ground slightly give way to the weight of her horse.

Bogs, he called them. Quagmires. He had told her that if she fell into one, it would swallow her up. Was he telling the truth? She didn't want to put it to the test. More than once she had seen skeletal remains floating on the surface of those muddy holes, the decaying carcass of a deer half in and half out of one, as if it had died trying to scramble to freedom.

No, she couldn't take the chance. Could she?

What if—

“I thought I told you to get out of those wet clothes.”

She startled as she looked up and saw him standing in the cave opening, head and shoulders again slightly stooped.

He carried an arm full of small branches. They looked dry, much to her amazement. He tossed the wood onto the ground nearby and took a threatening step toward her.

“I don't want to tell you again.”

“I—” The heat of a flush warmed her cheeks as she gestured outside. “I— I need to—”

He stared at her a moment, then nodded. “There's a tree near the entrance. Go there and no further. I'll be watching.”

She flushed again. “You can't—”

He shook his head with impatience. “I won't see you actually—just go. I will only see your shape—”

“But—”

“Go! Before I change my mind and watch you the entire time!”

She swallowed back a sharp retort, rose, her wet and mud-flecked gown heavy and uncomfortable. She stepped by him, refusing to cringe as she passed, then ventured beyond the overhang. She looked to the right, and there stood the bloody tree.

Fuming, she stepped behind it, back to him, yanked up her skirts and squatted. She'd never been so humiliated in her life, but at the moment, all she could think of was relief.

In a matter of moments, she stalked back into the cave and resumed her former position, glowering as she stared at the walls, the small pile of supplies, the blanket and the clothes he had dropped at her side.

“Take those clothes off,” he said, his voice soft though firm. “Now.”

She turned to stare. She herself wanted out of her sodden gown, but when she was naked, she would be that much more vulnerable. She tugged the blanket closer to her body. If he thought—

He watched her for a moment, eyes narrowed, and then seemed to realize. He lifted his eyes upward, shaking his head.

“Don't be daft, woman,” he grumbled. “I'm not going to touch you. But I am warning you. If you get sick because of your own foolishness, I'm going to leave you where you lay. Is that clear enough?”

Yet another surge of heat warmed her cheeks. He wasn't going to... he wasn't going to take liberties with her. At least, she didn't think so.

Could she trust him? A shiver jolted her body. Biting her lip to prevent herself from expressing her wrath and frustration, she began to fumble with the heavy fabric of her gown. Her fingers felt numb with cold and had lost their usual nimbleness, but she forced herself to undress.

He turned his back to her and began to lay a fire.

Within moments, she had managed to slide the wet dress down over her shoulders while at the same time trying to hold the blanket to cover her. She snuggled the bundle of fabric past her hips, and then her feet. It lay in a wet ball, soon to be followed by her chemise.

Her captor hunched down before the fire, his back still to her, slowly placing sticks on it, his gaze riveted to the landscape around them.

She huddled under the saddle blanket, naked, staring at his broad back and the way the muscles played over his shoulders as he tended the fire. The glowing light of the fire cast a slightly reddish tinge to his hair.

Muttering softly to herself, she donned the breeches, way too big, but at least they were warm and dry. Warily, she lowered saddle blanket from her shoulders, baring her upper torso as she arranged the tunic to slide over her arms and down her shoulders. The cold, damp air touched her skin, caused a shiver of goosebumps. Quickly, she slid the tunic over her head, threaded her arms through the sleeves, and quickly fastened the leather thong at the deep vee in the front of the tunic. She snuggled it tightly shut.

As for the trousers, well, if she stood, she would just have to hold them up, or they would slide down to her ankles. Begrudgingly, she admitted that she felt a bit better and warmer, though she would certainly not acknowledge that fact to that Scottish brute. She felt her lagging spirits rise.

As she shoved the horse blanket aside to reach for her sodden clothes, her captor stood, his back still toward her.

“Are you done yet?”

His impatient, condescending tone triggered yet another unwise fit of pique. Her frustration boiled over. She gathered the pile of wet clothes in her hand and heaved them at him. Her blue gown landed on his left shoulder and then slid ever so slowly toward the ground. Her cream-colored chemise landed on his head.

The sight prompted a horrified shout, half laugh, that erupted unbidden from her chest as he spun, whipping the undergown from his head, his

expression startled, angry, and... and then, much to her surprise, he reached up, snatched the undergown in his hand, glanced at it, then at her, but said nothing.

It was at that moment that she realized that he wasn't going to hurt her. He wasn't going to beat her, and he wasn't going to... he wasn't going to accost her.

At the same time, she realized by the look that he gave her that he was not a man to be trifled with. Odd, but his behavior, his expression, and that taciturn silence seemed to acknowledge her emotions. She might have gotten away with it this once, but that look was no doubt a warning that she would not be getting away with it again.

He stooped down, keeping his eyes on her, and plucked her gown from the soft dirt on the floor of the cave. Casually, he shook both the gown and the chemise, then draped them over outcroppings of rock just inside the cave.

She stared, appalled that her underclothing had not just been handled, but was in clear view of the—

Overhead, a loud crack of thunder startled her. She quickly reached for the saddle blanket and huddled under it, pulling it up to her shoulders as she watched him rummage in one of the leather satchels he'd brought in.

He pulled out what looked like a piece of dried meat and handed it to her. She stared at the disgusting sliver of sinewy meat, then up at him. He shrugged and started to turn away, but she snatched her hand from underneath the roughly woven blanket and took the strip of meat.

Her fingers brushed against his. Warm, strong fingers. A shiver ran through her that had nothing to do with the damp chill in the air. He said nothing, but settled himself cross-legged, leaning back against the rough rock wall as he retrieved another strip of meat from his satchel and began to chew on it. Occasionally, he glanced at her, but for the most part he simply stared outside the cave opening.

What was he thinking? She had no idea. Though his features remained expressionless, his eyes constantly shifted, darting here and there, as if watching for something. What? Wild animals? Dangerous people intent on robbing and killing? She grunted. All the people in this forsaken country were wild. Heathens with the manners of a guttersnipe.

Then again, this one... this Hugh, had not laid a hand on her in anger, not yet.

The rain pounded down, broken only occasionally by the crackle of the fire, burning low just inside the opening, casting undulating shadows of light against the shallow cave walls.

Dalla tried to rest but couldn't. She glanced over at him minutes later and saw that his eyes were closed. She tensed. Was he asleep? He wasn't going to tie her up? He wasn't afraid that she would run away? He was right that she could not expect to plead for mercy or help from the natives. They hadn't seen anyone since they'd left the small harbor town anyway.

No one would help a Norwegian woman, an obvious captive... but she was wearing men's clothes now. Ill-fitting men's clothes, but maybe, just maybe, if she escaped, she could convince them that she had been kidnapped, which was the truth, but they didn't have to know from where.

She spoke English and could tell them she was from the English countryside down south, or even France. Any of these Scottish highlanders who managed to speak even rudimentary English would certainly not be able to identify a lack of geographically proper accent, would they?

But first, she had to get away.

She glanced outside, watching the rain. She didn't look forward to venturing out into that rainstorm, but the rain *would* cover her tracks, making it more difficult for him to follow. She glanced again at the huge, slouching man, relaxed now, his head dipping toward his chest.

Dalla tested his attention by shifting her position. His eyes half-opened, heavy-lidded as he glanced at her, then closed them again. If she waited long enough, an hour perhaps, he would be fast asleep. Then again... she glanced at the pieces of kindling and wood he had brought in for the fire. She spied a length of a pine branch roughly the thickness of her wrist, measuring the length of her forearm. It looked like a good, stout piece of wood.

Did she dare?

How could she not? The further they ventured from the coast, the further her hopes of escape or freedom waned. The deeper they ventured into this wild countryside, the greater her chance of never escaping, never finding her way back.

She yearned to escape and return home and scowled at the thought. Were they even looking for her? She couldn't remember how many days she'd been gone. Maybe her father had already given her up for dead, not

overly upset with her loss. No, it wasn't homesickness for her father that drove her thoughts now, it was anger and vengeance.

She would find those responsible for her kidnapping, for ordering her to be sold as a slave. If she could escape from her captor and somehow manage to get herself aboard a ship bound for the continent, she knew she would gradually make her way home. Dressed as a boy, it would be easier. She would crop off her hair if she had to. Muddy her face like a street urchin. But somehow, someday, she would return home and discover who had been behind this horrible, unthinkable deed.

And they would pay.

Her decision made, she waited, frozen, maintaining an easy breathing pattern as she pretended to sleep. Her captor shifted his position once or twice, but grew increasingly relaxed. She heard a soft snore. Now was her chance. She didn't know if she would get another.

Heart pounding, she shifted position, ever so slowly, taking care to carefully lift the saddle blanket from her body, her eyes riveted to her captor every second.

It seemed to take forever to remove the blanket and lift her body up onto the balls of her feet, holding up the too-large britches with one hand and reach for that stump of wood with the other. Finally, she wrapped her hand around it, clasping it tightly. Heart pounding, her mouth dry, her muscles protesting her slow movements, she paused to glance once more at the sleeping man. Lips pressed tightly together, forcing her nerves to settle, she lifted her hand and raised her arm above her head, prepared to strike.

The moment her arm descended downward, he opened his eyes.

She uttered a soft cry of surprise as he stared at her, his eyes wide just before the chunk of wood struck his forehead. With a low groan, he slumped back, blood streaming down into his closed eyes.

She stared in horror for several moments, then saw the pulse throbbing in his neck. She hadn't killed him.

While relief flooded through her, she abruptly turned and dashed under the opening of the cave and into the rain-swept night.

She began to run.

Hugh slowly opened his eyes, confusion setting his heart to racing. His head throbbed steadily. He slouched down against the wall of the cave, his neck at an uncomfortable angle and slowly lifted his head, wincing at the pain pounding anew in his skull. The fire had died down to nothing more than glowing embers.

What...

He glanced toward Dalla and froze.

The saddle blanket lay bunched halfway between the low fire embers and the cave wall. She wasn't there. For several seconds, it didn't make sense. Had she stepped outside to relieve herself again? Certainly, he would've heard her movements. He groaned and shifted position, his head protesting. He lifted his fingers to his forehead, eyes widening when he felt the tender lump, the stickiness, and then lowered his hand, only to find his fingers stained with blood.

Realization dawned.

Ignoring the pain shooting through his skull, he lunged to his feet, careful not to smack the back of his head against the low ceiling of the cave as he peered down at the ground around the fire. He spied small footprints leading out into the rain. One of the pieces of firewood he had brought inside the cave lay on the ground nearby, the tip of one end reddened with his blood.

Cursing, he stared into darkness, his heart pounding with fury. At her. At himself.

The rain had eased to a light mist, though he still heard the drip of moisture falling to the ground from the trees surrounding the cave opening.

The horses!

He dashed out of the cave, cursing himself for not tying her up, for thinking that such a tiny woman wouldn't have the courage to attack him, nor even attempt to escape. He had seen flashes of her temper, but where did she think she could go? She was in Scotland, surrounded on three sides by the sea.

Surely, she wouldn't be foolish enough to attempt to make her way south... surely, she couldn't possibly think that she could traverse the hundreds of miles from the northern coastal region to the border of Scotland and England to the south.

Then again, maybe he shouldn't have underestimated her in the first place. He cursed his foolishness for taking pity on her. For feeling sorry for her. Dashing through the trees, he rounded the hillock to the side of the cave where they had taken shelter, and slapped at dripping pine branches, muttering low under his breath.

Hugh glanced up at the clearing night sky, at the clouds drifting with the breeze, carrying the storm to the southeast. How long had he been unconscious? How far had she gone?

He had warned her about the bogs, but she had ignored him. As he rounded two large boulders and peered into the darkness, he heaved a sigh of relief when he saw the shifting, shadowy hulks. Both the horses were there, his gelding as well as the older mare.

Dalla probably hadn't wanted to take time to search for them, even though she would have known they were close by. She obviously wasn't an experienced horsewoman—she'd preferred to strike out on foot. Foolish, foolish female.

Maybe she had assumed that tracking her on horseback would be easier than tracking her by foot. Even with the rain, the weight of a horse would have tracks deeper than any petite woman. Maybe she wasn't so foolish after all.

He paused, thinking. He was tempted to take his gelding to go in search of her, but the treacherous landscape would be especially dangerous, not only because of the darkness, but because the ground was now soft, many of the peat bogs would look much the same as the ground around them.

For all he knew, she was already at the bottom of one of those bogs. He cursed himself yet again for his foolishness. Some captain of the guards he was, allowing such a little slip of a woman to get the best of him.

With another grunt of frustrated anger, he returned to the cave, reached for his short sword and his leather saddle bag and slinging it over his shoulder. The leather bag held not only sparse amounts of food, but two flints, a short, coiled piece of rope, and a collection of herbs in a smaller leather pouch that Sarah had insisted he take with him in case of injury or illness.

He paused at the cave opening and reached for one of the sticks in the fire, biting back a groan of pain as his head throbbed again. He lifted the stick, its edge glowing red as he passed it just above the ground in front of the cave opening. The rain would have washed away most of her tracks already, but if he could get an indication of her direction, that's where he'd start. Muttering low under his breath, unable to quit cursing himself for his stupidity, and hers, he found one footprint a short distance from the cave opening, headed northeast.

Northeast? She was headed back the way they had come. That confused him. Surely, she knew that no one in the village would provide her aid. She would be recognized—but no, he had given her a spare set of breeches and a tunic. While they had enveloped her diminutive size, she did look much like a ragamuffin in them. She could disguise her features with dirt, tuck that long braid of hers under the shirt, and maybe, with muddy features, she just might pass as a young boy.

In the cities, the site of homeless urchins was nothing unusual. If she got very lucky, she might even be able to talk her way aboard a ship bound for her home country, or perhaps down south to the coast of England or even France.

As he darted away from the cave into the damp and misty night, water still dripping from the boughs of trees overhead, he felt true concern. It wasn't just the money he had spent on her nor the horse. It wasn't even his embarrassment over her ability to overcome him in the cave and escape. It was the land itself, treacherous enough as it was in the daytime, but at night, even more so. The wet, boggy ground, the muddy quagmires, the mist hiding steep gullies, dropping away abruptly from underfoot, not to mention the animals, proved extremely dangerous.

Once in a while, a half-moon peeked from behind clouds skittering across the night sky. He glanced up, gaining his bearings as he found a constellation that told him he was headed in the right direction. Of course, the lass could have changed direction at any time, but he knew that she would be more likely to stick to a certain path, maybe using the shadowy outlines of ragged tors or other landmarks to guide her.

He had no doubt of her intelligence. Throughout their travel during the day, he had gazed back to find her studying the landscape, occasionally looking behind her along the deer path they had followed. Not much of a path really, more like a simple direction.

He nodded with grudging approval. While he hadn't thought of it at the time, he realized that she had not only likely been taking stock of any landmarks she could find as they ventured west away from the coast, but she had enough foresight to glance back behind her, to see what those landmarks looked like from the other direction.

A grudging admiration nudged into his thoughts, but with every step, the jarring pain caused by the injury to his skull reminded him not to be too forgiving. He proceeded onward, his feet carefully picking their way through the marshy, mushy ground. Occasionally, when he smelled the steamy, gaseous odors erupting from a bog nearby, he moved forward more cautiously, carefully placing one foot down before putting his full weight on it. Occasionally, the clumps of grass he stepped on dipped beneath his weight.

He moved slowly, but if she was smart, so too would she. Quagmires dotted this low valley. Dalla could not have picked a *worse* place to launch an escape attempt. In fact, he would be surprised—

He heard a sound off in the distance.

He froze, cocking his head slightly as if that would help them hear that sound better. A red deer? The cry of a wolf, or possibly the loud grunt of a boar? He waited, creeping softly forward, one hand on the handle of his short sword, tucked into his waistband, waiting for something, anything, that would give him an indication of where—or what - that sound come from. Nothing. Perhaps it had just been the sound of the wind moaning through the valley, or—

He heard it again.

It was not the wind, nor the distant roar of a stag. It was a human cry, one filled with fear.

He hesitated only a moment, then cupped his hands around his mouth, filled his lungs, and shouted.

“Dalla!”

He waited, holding his breath as his voice echoed through the trees off to the right and bounced off the rocky outcroppings to the north, then floated down the small, narrow valley into the distance. Nothing.

Then, dimly, to the east, he heard the cry again. He headed in that direction, resisting the urge to break into a run or hurry his steps. He had no doubt she was not far, maybe a few hundred yards at the most.

He walked twenty paces, then paused to call out again.

Her answering shouts sounded closer. He slightly adjusted his direction and carefully proceeded. The landscape was dotted with boulders; some small and about the size of a human head, others jutting upward, casting weird shadows into the mire. Finally, he broke into a small clearing, standing in the shadow of a large, shoulder-high rock. There, maybe twenty yards away, he saw her, struggling in a bog, sunken down to her chest, arms outstretched and trying to reach for shrubs and clumps of grass at the edges.

“Stop!” He ordered. “Stop moving!”

In her panic, she gazed at him, shaking her head, still struggling, as if trying to wade through the thick, cloying, slippery mud in her effort to reach the side of the bog she had fallen into.

“I said stop, you're making it worse!” he repeated, his tone harsh. “Listen to me, Dalla, or you're going to sink down even further!”

Her wide eyes latched onto him, her mouth open in panic.

He spoke again, softening the tone of his voice to keep her calm. “Now, don't make any sudden moves, but very slowly, lean back, like you're trying to float on the surface.”

She stared at him a moment and then shook her head. “I can't—”

“Do it!” he hissed. “Slowly now,” he said, stepping closer, carefully placing his feet as he did so. “Very, very slowly.”

She gave a brief nod, saw swallowed hard, keeping her arms raised slightly above her head, then stopped struggling and leaned her shoulders back, very slowly, as he had directed, her shoulders and head ever so slowly angling toward the surface of the bog.

He knew it was going against every instinct she had to not struggle, to trust him, to lean back rather than continue striving to reach for a clump of grass or anything to pull her out.

He'd fallen into one of these once, many years ago, when he and his brother had first ventured into these northern highlands. He knew what to do. He slowly swung the saddle bag from over his shoulder and placed it on the ground. He reached inside for the short piece of rope. He often used it to tie his gelding to a tree or as a hobble, depending on his needs. It was a bit shorter than his own height, but perhaps it would do.

He wrapped one end of the rope around his hand, his grip tight as he slowly made his way around the lip of the bog, again carefully placing and testing one footfall after the other, testing his weight and surface below.

He made his way around the rim of the bog, now facing her back, her head and shoulders slightly perpendicular to the surface.

“Dalla, I want you to reach very slowly over your head with your left hand. Slowly now.”

Ever so slowly, she obeyed, lifting her left arm over her head, turning slightly to look at him.

“Don't try to look at me. Don't move anything but your arm. Keep your movements very slow.”

She followed his instructions as he uncoiled the rope, gauging the distance between his position and her outstretched hand.

“I'm going to throw you the end of a rope. Don't reach for it. Don't lunge for it. Don't try to grab for it. I'm going to try and make it land between your head and your shoulder, draping over your chest. Do you understand?”

“Y—yes,” she replied.

“Remember. Don't grab for the rope if it doesn't land between your head and your outstretched arm. Do you hear me? Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she choked out.

He gave the rope a gentle toss, but his first throw was a bit off. The end of the rope hit her head.

She cried out, jolted.

He warned her again. “Try not to move. It may take a few tries, but I'm going to get you out of there.”

She said nothing.

He tried once more, tugging the rope back toward him, coiling it loosely again, and then made another toss. This time the rope bounced against the back of her left shoulder.

He shook his head. He had to try to get a little bit closer. Even a few inches would help. He crouched down onto his knees, looked for a solid chunk of earth that he could brace his left hand on, bearing the weight of his upper torso, giving him the few inches forward he needed. After testing several unsuitable spots, he finally found one. His knees planted, his left hand bracing his upper body, he tried again.

This time, the few inches he had gained proved beneficial. About six inches of rope landed between her head and her upraised arm, draping over her chest. He heard her catch her breath, a half sigh of relief escaping her throat.

“Very slowly, Dalla. Very slowly, reach for the end of the rope with your left hand, grab onto it, and then do the same with your right hand.”

Her garbled cries echoed loudly now. The clouds continued to clear. Even as she reached for the rope, ever so slowly as he had instructed, he saw her torso dip another inch or two deeper into the bog. She began to panic.

“Stop!” he ordered. “Slowly, Dalla. Slowly.”

She was weeping softly as she slowed her movements, wrapped the fingers of her left hand around the rope, then in small increments, repeated the process with her right.

He nodded with satisfaction. “You holding on tight?”

“Yes,” she gasped.

“I’m going to start pulling you out. Don’t fight me, don’t try to help me. Just let your body relax. You understand?”

Another gasped reply in the affirmative.

He took a deep breath and gently tugged on the rope with his right hand, the left still braced on the ground. She couldn’t see his face, couldn’t see his frown. She was stuck but good.

His head pounded, and his muscles strained as he tugged harder, trying not to jerk her body, but slowly eased her backward over the surface of the bog.

“Let your body relax, like you’re floating on the surface of the water,” he said.

Despite what must have been intense fear, for once, she listened to him. She hung desperately to the rope, letting him do all the work. After what seemed like endless minutes, he felt the mud release its grip on her lower torso with a muffled, popping sound.

Hugh straightened, and grasped the rope with both hands now, leaning backward, careful to keep his own movements steady, maintaining tension on the rope as he ever so slowly eased her backward. Her head nearly rested on the surface of the bog now. Every muscle in his arms and shoulders strained and tensed as he leaned further backward, twisting the rope around his hands as he gained the slack.

Finally, with a last gurgling *slurp*, the bog released her and most of her torso now floated on the surface. Moving faster, keeping the tension on the rope, he stood and continued to pull her closer to the lip of the bog, hand over hand.

Finally, she was close enough to reach down and grab her.

He wrapped his hand around her small wrist.

The moment his hand touched her arm, she began to sob.

Seconds later, he pulled her out, dragging her onto the clumps of grass at the lip of the bog, her chest heaving as soft, mewling sounds escaped her throat.

Exhausted and gasping, Dalla heaved a groan of relief as she emerged from the muddy bog. She felt two firm hands grip her upper arms and lift her upward.

Relieved, glad to be alive, surprised that she hadn't sunk below the surface, thinking that she was doomed to die, lucky that he had even found her, she flung herself at Hugh and wrapped her arms tightly around his waist.

Though chagrined, humiliated, no—mortified—she couldn't help it. He had saved her life. He could've just let her flounder, watched calmly from a distance as she sank ever slower beneath the surface.

He stiffened.

It was then that she realized to the fullest what she had just done. She stepped back with a gasp, face upturned.

He stared down at her without any expression whatsoever. Then, without warning, he stooped slightly, clasped his hands around her waist and lifted her upward.

She found herself hanging upside down over his shoulder, his muscular arms clasping her legs to his chest, just behind her knees, her upper torso dangling down over his back.

She pounded her fists against his rock-hard buttocks. Her gratitude forgotten, she felt only a surge of humiliation.

“Put me down! Put me down, I say!”

She felt a harsh slap, heard the smacking sound, and gasped in dismay. He had just spanked her!

“You insufferable oaf!” she cursed in her native language. “You—”

“You will hold still, or you’ll find yourself back on your arse,” he threatened.

Her momentary appreciation for his saving her life had rapidly ebbed, and along with it so too did her hopes of escape. Her heart thudding with the remnants of panic and her near escape from sure death, and the reality that she was once again a captive, *and* that her chances of escaping again were slim, tore through her, leaving her shocked and uncertain.

“You’re a fool, racing headlong into the night like that,” he said, his English accented heavily with his Scottish brogue. “You were less than ten minutes from dying, from drowning in that bog, do you understand that?”

Again, she said nothing, bouncing harshly against his broad shoulder, every step he took prompted a gasp of air to escape her chest. She grit her teeth and tried to lift herself up by bracing her hand against his lower back. Again, she felt the smack of his hand against her bottom.

“You hold still,” he said again, his tone now filled with more anger than before. “I’m not going to warn you again.”

“I was just trying to balance myself—”

“I told you to stop moving, and I told you for a reason. Do you want to send us both toppling into another bog?”

She said nothing, but reluctantly allowed herself to sag, arms hanging down, her now tear-streaked face turned to the side as she watched the ground pass beneath his feet.

The rain had stopped, the night darkened still more, broken only occasionally by a quick glimpse of a half-moon, a cool breeze wafting over the grasslands. The chill tore through the now mud-caked clothes she wore, sending ripples over her skin. Maybe she had been foolish, but certainly, he couldn’t blame her for trying, could he?

And she did realize how close she had come to dying. The moment the ground had given way beneath her, that moment when she cringed, expecting to bounce harshly against the ground only to feel herself sinking, had filled her with despair. Her hopes of escape dashed, she had struggled mightily to right herself, to try and make her way to the edges of that bog, because she desperately wanted to live. Despite her situation, despite her captivity, and despite the knowledge of the betrayal that had carried her to this land in the first place, she wanted to live. Fiercely wanted to live.

She also realized that if her captor—Hugh—hadn't found her when he did, she would be gone by now, no trace of her left to mark her short existence. The idea infuriated her. She resolved at that moment, slung roughly over her captor's—her husband's—shoulder, that she would do what she had to do to survive.

Because in the end, her ultimate goal was not just escape, but to learn who had betrayed her.

And why.

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Once again Dalla sat with her back huddled against the wall of the cave while Hugh built yet another fire. Once more, he had told her to take her clothes off.

Exhausted, mentally and physically, she didn't have the strength to argue. And yet again, covered with that saddle blanket, she pulled off her muddy, wet clothes.

This time, he crouched near the fire he had rebuilt, two long sticks thrust through the legs of the breeches he had given her. He held them above the fire, trying to get them dry enough so she could put them back on. It didn't matter that they were muddy. Draped over a rock bulging from the side of the cave, her tattered gown and chemise were still drying.

She tried not to stare at his broad, naked chest nor his bulging biceps, nor the way the muscles in his back rippled every time he adjusted his position. He crouched on his haunches, his strong, long thighs limber and flexible as he shifted his balance from one leather-bound foot to another.

Occasionally, he glanced back at her. He caught her staring. She quickly dipped her head, hiding the warm flush in her cheeks.

No, she couldn't admire him. It didn't matter that he was handsome, or that he had saved her life. He had bought her! He had forced her into a farce of a marriage. She was his captive, no matter what that piece of parchment in his saddlebag said. He had bought her—owned her—as easily as he had bought the mare for her to ride.

But Dalla Jorstad was no man's possession, and she refused to—

“I don't intend to hurt you, Dalla,” he said, speaking softly. “But if you try to escape again, if you risk my life or the lives of my horses, things will not go easy on you. Do you understand?”

Those were the first words he had spoken since they'd left the bog and slowly made their way back to the cave.

She hadn't spoken either.

He stared at her and lifted an eyebrow.

She muttered her understanding but not liking it one bit. She'd been quiet and subdued, accepting, for the moment at least, her circumstances. She would wait and watch. And when the time was right—

“Don't even think about it,” he said calmly, turning back to the fire and flipping the sticks around, now drying the other side of the pants before he turned to her again. “Tomorrow evening, if we have no more *delays* or difficulties, we'll be at the hut where I have taken shelter. I had planned on staying for a few weeks, but under the circumstances, I might have to—”

“You mean you don't live up here?” Her curiosity had once again gotten the better of her.

One of her many not so good habits, this insatiable curiosity of hers. Her father barely tolerated it, and she'd often been teased her about it by others who told her that most women didn't bother with such trivial matters. They didn't understand. But Dalla had always been a curious individual, one constantly looking to find answers to her many questions about the world around her, about human behaviors, to understand everything.

He shook his head. “I came up here to...” He sighed and turned away. “I live further away, in the Grampian Mountains. Do you know where those are?”

She shook her head.

“Do you know any part of Scotland? The geography, the trees, how to live off the land? Do you know our animals, our people, or our clans?”

Again, she shook her head. She noted the look he gave her. Instantly, her temper rose, but she bit her lips against a sharp retort.

“Then you are a bigger fool than I thought. You will be safer with me, I can promise you that.”

He gestured with his chin toward the landscape outside of the cave. The darkness had lifted slightly, and she knew dawn was not far away.

“This is a dangerous land, Dalla. It's filled with wolves and wild boar and snakes. And those are just the animals. Many of the clans in the

highlands have fought with one another for generations. There's plenty of edible plants out there, but just as many that are poisonous. How did you plan on surviving out on your own in a strange land?"

She said nothing for several moments. Of course, she had thought of that before she smashed him over the head with a stick.

She finally answered, her voice soft. "Have you ever been a captive? Sold like an animal and then told that you belong to someone else?"

He didn't answer, and she didn't expect him to.

She lifted her chin. "Of course, I tried to escape. Wouldn't you?"

He studied her for several moments and then slowly nodded. "Aye, I would," he said firmly. "But not until I had studied the lay of the land, prepared for a journey with food, water, and a good sense of direction."

Well then. She remained silent.

"You can accept your fate, or you can continue to fight against it. It makes no difference to me. I'm just telling you once again, that you *are* safer with me than you are out there on your own."

She said nothing, knowing instinctively that what he said could very well be true. But it would never stop her from trying.

She would bide her time.

And when the time was right...

As Hugh had estimated, they arrived at the hut just before dark on the second day after leaving the cave. Once again, wearing the breeches and tunic he had given her—she had eschewed the torn gown and its undergarment—he had helped her off the mare and taken her inside, then bound her hands and feet, not taking any chances.

She had not said a word since they'd left the cave. He had no doubt that she was waiting and watching for another chance to escape and while he felt saddled with the burden of her care and safety, what he had said was true. She was safer with him than she would be wandering through the region on her own.

She looked exhausted, physically and emotionally, dark smudges under her eyes marring her cheeks, her face pale. She refused to eat more than a small piece of dried meat and take some water. As she sat down on the pallet he had made for himself before leaving, her back leaning against the wall, he saw a faint trembling in her hands. Whether that trembling was caused by physical exhaustion or emotional anxiety, he wasn't sure. Either way, it would likely take a couple of days for her to recover her strength. If he had to force her, he would make sure that she ate.

He told her to stay put, to sleep, and then he turned and left the hut. He entered the woods with his bow and quiver of arrows, thinking to kill a couple of rabbits to make do with the few potatoes he had bought in the coastal town. He'd bought the supplies before he stopped for that ill-fated mug of ale, and the supplies would not last long, sharing them between two people.

If he planned on staying here more than a few days, he would have to venture deeper into the woods, kill a deer, perhaps gather some berries, and dig for roots to provide for the both of them.

He paused just inside the tree line, and then turned to watch the hut for several minutes. He heard no sound from inside, saw no indication that she was going to try to escape, but even with bound hands and feet, he wasn't taking any more chances with her. He wouldn't put it past her.

He shook his head, wondering what Phillip and Maccay would say when he rode back to Duncan Manor with this spirited, somewhat reckless, and defiant young Norwegian bride in tow.

He sighed, turning his back on the hut and venturing a short distance into the woods.

Squirrels darted up ahead, gathering seeds and scampering about. He paused, gazing up at one, nibbling on a pine cone, tail twitching, as if daring him to shoot it. He wouldn't. He didn't like squirrel meat. He barely tolerated rabbit, but he would take what he could get this close to the hut.

In a relatively and surprisingly short period of time, he headed back to the hut, grasping the hind legs of two fat hares. In less than an hour, he would have them skinned, cleaned, and spitted, roasting over the fire pit with two potatoes buried in the ashes to bake.

At the structure, he paused outside the door, dropping the animals into the dirt by the threshold. He stepped inside to find Dalla sound asleep on her side, hands tucked under her cheek.

She looked like a child, huddled up like that, knees pulled up toward her chest. He studied her features, thinking at first that she was just pretending to sleep. After marking the steady rise and fall of her chest, her relaxed fingers, he realized she was indeed asleep.

She was lucky that he had been the one to purchase her. He would not hurt her. He had no idea what he was going to do with her, but for the moment, she was safe from harm. He had heard about the fates of other female captives from other lands; the rough, hard, and often painful existence they were forced to live with some Scottish clans as well as captains of ships who would take the women on board, use them, share them with the sailors, and then more often than not, toss them overboard when they were done with them.

With a quiet sigh, he stepped outside, skinned and cleaned the rabbits, then settled to prepare their supper. He built up the fire, created a spit, and

soon the aroma of roasting rabbit meat and potatoes filled the interior of the hut. Both his gelding and the mare were hobbled outside under the trees, but he would bring them in before nightfall. Dalla could have the pallet he'd made up on the far wall, and he would make do with a blanket in front of the doorway on the floor. For his own safety and peace of mind, he would continue to tie her up at night.

Without thought, he lifted his hand and gingerly touched the lump and the cut on his forehead, shaking his head, already hearing Maccay's laughter as he related how he'd gotten the cut, which would certainly scar. He had underestimated the girl... his captive... his wife, but he wouldn't do so again.

Occasionally, he tore off a small piece of roasting meat to test its doneness, finally satisfied that it was edible. He glanced toward Dalla to wake her up, but found her lying as she had been, though her eyes were wide, alert, and watchful. Her expression was blank, no indication of what she might be thinking as she stared at the roasting rabbits. Her nostrils flared slightly, and then he heard the loud rumble of her stomach.

"I'm going to untie you," he said quietly. "And you are going to eat. You are not going to run. Understood?"

She stared at him a moment, then, slowly sitting up and leaning against the side of the hut, she nodded. He was pleased, but didn't react. Maybe she wasn't as foolish as she appeared. Then again...

They ate in silence, both assessing one another. He knew she was tired and not just physically, but emotionally. Truth be told, so was he. He wasn't used to being responsible for someone else, at least not like this. It felt exhausting.

How could Phillip, Jake, and Maccay actually *want* such a personal, interconnected, and responsible relationship with someone? He had no issues with protecting the people of Duncan Manor, nor the inhabitants of the nearby village or the lands surrounding the Duncan lands. That was his duty. He'd been doing it for years.

But having to be constantly watchful, concerned, or trying to anticipate what Dalla was going to do from one minute to the next was overwhelming, almost to the point where he found himself growing increasingly agitated and irritable. Not only at himself, but at her. And then, just when his emotions reached the brink of outright anger, he looked at her, at the color

of her hair, its length, her features, and once again caught a vague resemblance to his Elyse.

He brooded in silence, not wanting to compare the two women. Elyse had been special. Very special. He had given her his heart, the only woman he had ever felt affection for. Elyse had been a gentle soul, almost shy around others, but when they were alone, or with friends like Maccay, she was more herself, laughing often, her eyes sparkling with excitement and enthusiasm for what the day might bring.

Maybe that's why he had bought Dalla. Imagining Elyse in such a horrific situation had made him feel sick to his stomach. Maybe it was the surge of protectiveness that he had always felt for Elyse that had prompted him to plunk down his precious coin for this obstinate, stubborn, and foolishly courageous young woman.

The thought of daring to strike him before running off into the night and then nearly losing her life in the bog prompted him to shake his head in consternation. This one had a strong instinct for survival. He just hoped that such instinct would not prove to be not only her undoing, but his.

He glanced up, not really surprised to notice that she also watched him, as if looking for signs of something; weakness maybe? Weariness? The possibility of him letting his guard down? That he would not do, even if he had to sleep with one eye open. She had already tried to escape from him twice, and he was sure that she would try again. At the same time, he knew that he couldn't keep her bound hand and foot the entire way back to Duncan Manor—unless he had to.

And that was another thing. He'd come up here to be by himself, to put his thoughts in order, to seek out his estranged brother, to... it didn't matter anymore. He couldn't stay up here in the wilderness very long. Their supplies wouldn't last, the weather would grow colder, and he couldn't imagine how difficult it would be to not only to take care of himself as the weather grew worse—and he would not have difficulty doing that—but a female as well. This hut, though acceptable for him, would not be for long, and especially not for a woman still recovering from whatever it was she had been through.

Even now, a chill breeze made its way through the chinks in the stones and down from the hastily repaired roof, causing the flames of the fire to dance, leap higher one moment, burn low to the ground the next. In a couple of weeks, maybe even sooner, snow might fall, and then what?

He didn't want to take the chance of being stuck so far with a woman, and a captive, unwilling bride at that. Travel would be just about impossible as the mountain passes grew choked with snow, dangerous with sleet-filled rainstorms that would loosen boulders and rocks from high above, sending them crashing into the gullies, ravines, and gorges below.

He finished eating.

Dalla plucked the last bit of meat from the leg bone of the rabbit he had given her, served up on a small slab of bark from one of the trees near the hut. Her eyes grew heavy-lidded and her shoulders sagged. She was filthy, as was he, but in the morning, they could both bathe in the river. They could take turns, and she could wash her dirty, mud-streaked clothing as well. They would spend a couple of days here, resting, recuperating, and filling their belly, and then he would head south.

Back to Duncan Manor.

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Early the following morning, before the sun had made its way half past the eastern horizon, Hugh woke Dalla and told her to take off her muddy clothes. He held a blanket in one hand and gestured behind the hut as he told her about the small creek there, where she could bathe and wash her clothes.

She stared at him, as if unable to comprehend.

He explained again, slowly. “Your clothes are filthy. So are you. Go down to the creek, dunk yourself in a couple of times, and clean yourself, and your clothes.”

She frowned. “You want me to bathe in my clothes?”

He shrugged and lifted an eyebrow. “If you want to, you can, but I wouldn't recommend it,” he said, fighting back a tone of weary sarcasm.

“You want me to take my clothes off?” She shook her head in refusal. “I can't... I won't undress in front of you—”

He held back a sigh. “Fine. Then you can bathe with your clothes on.”

“But that would be silly,” she said. “Neither I nor the clothes would get clean doing it that way.”

He said nothing for several moments. His patience was wearing thin. Was everything with her going to be a debate or an argument? He had to bathe as well, and he had plenty of things he needed to accomplish today.

He gestured toward the northwest. “There's another storm coming. It's going to get colder as the day progresses. It might even snow.” It probably wouldn't, she couldn't know that. “Either you bathe now, or you can remain

in those dirty clothes, your skin covered with bog mud, and the bugs that dwell in it.”

“Bugs?” She glanced down at her arm, pushing back the dirt-smudged sleeve, staring at her skin, caked with smears of dried mud. She looked up at him, her expression uncertain. “Bugs in the mud?”

He nodded, crossing his arms over his chest. There weren't any bugs that lived in the mud. How could they? They wouldn't be able to breathe or survive. But then, she didn't know that. “They are like the bugs that bother animals, make them scratch,” he shrugged. “Just stay well away from me and my horses.”

With that, he turned his back, preparing to toss the blanket onto the floor.

“Wait!” She said, quickly rising to her feet and snatching at the blanket, eyeing him first, and then the small meadow beyond the open doorway. “I will bathe. Do you have to watch me?”

“You will have your privacy, but you won't be free.” With that, he stooped and picked up the length of rope that he'd used to pull her from the bog. It wasn't very long, maybe the height of two men, maybe three, but he wasn't taking any more chances. “I will tie you—”

Hands now on her hips, the blanket dragging on the dirt floor, she looked up at him, frowning. “How am I supposed to bathe with my hands tied?”

He growled, the sound moving upward from the base of his stomach. His head hurt. He strove for patience, cursing under his breath. “I will tie only one hand. I will hold onto the other end, standing with my back turned. You will bathe, but I will not take a chance on you running from me again.”

“I won't, I—”

“I do not trust you, Dalla, to keep your word. And until I do, which is questionable in the near future, you will do as I say. If you do not like being tied up every time we go outside or while you are sleeping, I would suggest that you accept your situation, take what I offer with gratitude and dignity, and don't make my life any more difficult than it already is.”

She stared up at him for several moments, her expression not difficult to read. Her look wordlessly conveyed a combination of anxiety and annoyance, her eyes narrowed, her foot tapping softly against the dirt floor, her lips pressed tightly.

Nevertheless, despite her brave and often brazen expressions, he also saw the pulse throbbing in her neck, her chest rising and falling with what he can only imagine was the fear of uncertainty.

So be it.

Slowly, he bound one of her delicate wrists with one end of the rope, then gestured with his chin outside the hut.

“Go.”

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Dalla walked out of the hut in front of Hugh, hugging the blanket to her chest as she slid past him, her heart thudding in her chest. When would these indignities end?

So far, Hugh had kept a respectable distance, but now, tied to him by a rope in order to bathe? How was she going to accomplish that without baring herself to his view? Could she count on him not to look? Did she dare ask?

She snickered.

Imagine, her, a captive, requesting that her captor not peek while she disrobed and bathed. She could just hear him laughing.

She followed his murmured directions as they made their way around the hut and down a short slope, at the bottom of which she now distinctly heard a low trickle of water bubbling over rocks. By the time she broke through the brush, Hugh close behind, she stared at the stream in dismay. And relief.

She hadn't told him that she couldn't swim. A Norwegian who didn't know how to swim, and living right next to the fjord? He'd think her foolish—or touched in the head. Unable to learn? Would he then think that she wasn't worth keeping, that she—

“What are you stopping for? As you can see, it's not a raging river. It will be easy to bathe in. A bit cold surely, but suitable.”

He was right. It wasn't a raging river. It wasn't much to look at, maybe half a stone's throw across, and it certainly didn't look deep. The water *might* come up to her knees.

She frowned.

How was she supposed to bathe in something so shallow?

She turned to him and saw him watching her with an implacable expression, arms once again crossed over his chest, one hand grasping the twisted rope. Dalla glanced between him and the water, gurgling right there beside her left foot. In a fit of pique, she decided that she would just do what she had to do and hope that Hugh did not turn into a barbarian at the side of exposed skin.

She stood staring up at him in defiance as she started to disrobe, first kicking the filthy slippers off her feet, then reaching down to unfasten the overlarge breeches.

His eyes widened in dismay as one piece of clothing after another landed at her feet.

The cool morning air brushed against her bare legs, raising goosebumps. When she reached for the tunic, prepared to pull it over her head, he stiffened and turned away.

She quickly pulled the tunic over her head and stepped into the water. Its icy coolness sent a shiver up her spine, but she sucked in a breath and quickly sat in it, legs outstretched as she quickly began to splash water over her filthy body.

Cold... so cold!

She clamped her jaw tight to prevent her teeth from chattering. Despite the frigid temperature, however, she felt grateful to wash the days and weeks of dirt and mud from her body. Ridding herself of the memory of the ship's hold as the grime disappeared from beneath her fingernails and the stench of the tar and oil from the keel was scrubbed away.

Her back was to him, but she felt the gentle tug on the rope tied around her wrist as she moved her left arm, dipping into the water, splashing it on herself, then rubbing a handful of sand that she'd scooped from the creek bed to scrub harder at her skin. Quickly she washed until soon her flesh was pink and riddled with goosebumps, her teeth chattering. Her fingers grew numb with the cold, but she still had to wash her hair. Lifting her knees, she held her breath and dunked her head forward, her scalp tingling and shrinking as she began to scrub at her scalp, her hair growing hopelessly tangled as it flowed downstream. She came up for air once, then repeated the process one more time before she couldn't take it anymore. Her entire lower body felt numb. Above the waterline, she shivered violently. Her

fingers ice cold, her face nearly frozen, she finally lifted her torso upward with a gasp, hair hanging down over her face.

Suddenly, she felt arms around her, lifting her from the water. She immediately began to struggle, but then realized that she was encased in the blanket, held against Hugh's strong, warm body.

She couldn't see his face, her dripping hair covering her face and draping over her breasts. She could only pray that he hadn't gotten much of a glimpse of her either. But she did have to admit, even to herself, that his warmth, his stature, and the inescapable feeling of support that she gained from him was pleasant. He tightened the blanket around her and then, much to her dismay, she found herself lifted into his arms as he quickly strode back to the hut.

He said nothing as he entered and lowered her to the ground in front of her sleeping pallet. The loss of his warmth made her feel suddenly cold, and alone. She shivered violently as she knelt on the ground, huddled into a small ball.

Grasping the edges of the blanket close to her, she repositioned herself, her legs folded to the side. She lifted her head and snaked one hand upward from under the blankets to separate her hair from her face. She watched as he quickly built a fire, not looking at her, not saying a word. Soon, a fire blazed in the fire pit that he had dug the night before.

Only then did he look at her.

“Move closer to the fire. Open the blanket to warm your skin.”

She was about to object when he made a slashing motion with his hand in the air.

Her words stilled in her mouth as he stood on the other side of the fire, hands on hips, his expression severe.

“You will not argue with me. You will dry yourself off quickly.” With that, he rummaged in his belongings, pulled out the sorry looking gown she had worn on the ship and tossed it over his shoulder.

She stared up at him, taking in the dark expression that came over his face.

“I will go bathe and quickly wash the clothes. You will *not* run.”

She stared after him in dismay as he disappeared out the opening of the hut, scrambling as close to the fire as she dared. Keeping one eye on the doorway, she opened the blanket, holding it open around the side of the fire,

inviting the warmth of the flames to warm her body. Gradually, her shivering eased.

His last comment annoyed her. Where did he think she was going to run without any clothes? Foolish man. Stupid highlander...

Unbidden, she recalled the feeling of hard, sinewy muscles of his chest and abdomen pressed up against hers, the strength she had felt in his arms, the unmistakable bulge of muscles as he held her close, carrying her back to the hut.

He was neither foolish nor stupid. He had saved her life, twice now, once when he had purchased her, and then when he'd saved her from the bog. Despite her circumstances, despite the knowledge that she was a captive with no will of her own, she did realize that her life could be much worse than it was at the moment.

As to what would happen in the future, only time would tell.

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Two days had passed since they arrived at his hut in the middle of nowhere. The craggy, intimidating and dangerous looking landscape around them dampened Dalla's urge to attempt another escape—at least not yet. Where would she go? It wasn't just her fear of the bogs that caused her to hesitate. She didn't feel like she was surrendering as much as she was cautioning herself to wait. To watch. She knew now that to escape without a weapon and supplies would be foolish. She needed to learn more about these wild lands and the people inhabiting them. Hugh's knife, rope, and horrible-tasting yet sustaining, dried meat would also be necessary. The problem was that he carried his weapons with him or kept them nearby at all times. The rope was typically wrapped loosely around his waist throughout the day, tying the horses at night.

She could probably make do without the rope, but not without at least one weapon and some food. She had no idea what types of plants in these northern climes of Scotland were edible and which were poisonous. Most of the berries from the shrubs had been plucked by native animals in preparation for the oncoming winter. Hugh had dug up some wild onions from the ground in the near woods last evening, but she couldn't sustain herself on wild onions.

With a sigh, she sat on a portion of a fallen tree trunk near the edge of the meadow before the hut, the sunshine warming her face. She found that she much preferred wearing the tunic and breeches over her gown, not only for movement's sake, but for comfort's sake. Her gown was horribly stained and torn. Not yet in tatters, but filled with holes and a few ragged seams.

Eventually, something would give, and the dress would fall apart. Besides, the breeches and tunic Hugh had given her were warmer.

Hugh was nearby, she was sure of it.

At the moment, she was not tied up.

He'd stepped into the trees only moments ago, ordering her to stay put. He had his bow and quiver of arrows with him, and his ax, tucked into his waistband on one side, his knife on the other. He had all the weapons, and she had nothing.

The land was wild and intimidating, but oddly beautiful at the same time. The rich scent of pine, spruce, and shrubs filled her senses. Birds chattered high above in the trees. A squirrel scampered down a nearby tree trunk, nearly upside down, its tail flicking as it looked at her. It edged a little closer and then began to chatter.

Despite her worries, despite her uncertainties of the future, she smiled at the squirrel, making a short chattering noise with her tongue in reply.

The squirrel froze, then flicked its tail, turned its head slightly, its eye watching her carefully as it chattered again.

She offered another soft clicking of her tongue in response.

Ever so slowly, she turned her head and glanced at the ground, saw some type of a nut nestled into the pine needles at her feet. She reached down at with agonizing slowness to pick it up, and then slowly extended her hand, palm upward.

She leaned down slightly so that her hand hovered a short distance from the ground.

In idle curiosity, she waited, unmoving, to see what the squirrel would do.

They chattered softly with one another for several moments.

Finally, the squirrel edged downward toward the base of the tree, and ever so slowly, pausing every few steps to sit up, look at her and twitch its tail, approached. Much to her delight, the squirrel neared her hand, placing one of its small paws on her fingers. In a flash, the squirrel plucked the nut from her palm, tucked it between its teeth, flicked its tail once, then raced back up the tree.

Dalla laughed softly, watching as it climbed ever higher into the branches until it found a suitable one beyond her reach upon which it could sit back, then began nibbling on the nut, tail flicking.

Smiling, she turned from the tree, startled to find Hugh on the opposite side of the small clearing, watching her.

They stared at one another for several moments.

He was an enigma to her, this strange highlander, showing kindness one moment and harsh annoyance the next. Yet not once, not since the moment he had purchased her, had he raised his hand against her. She still wasn't sure what to make of that, and truth be told, was waiting for something to happen. He appeared to not have any interest in her, other than watching. He had not made any advances toward her. Yet. What she had expected when she'd been sold was quite a bit different than she was experiencing now, but how long would the reprieve last? Sooner or later, like all men, he would do as he wanted, and she would have nothing to say about it. She had no doubt of it.

Like her father.

While they had never had a particularly close relationship, Dalla had gotten an increasing feeling over the years that her father wanted nothing to do with her. Her obstinacy and refusal to marry his choices had only worsened their tenuous relationship. It was for that reason that he had told her she would be going to the convent, not that she particularly minded. Men were all the same, doing what they pleased, when they pleased, and as they pleased. Women had very little say in what happened to them.

She was married now, to a Scottish highlander, with little say in the matter. Men had always controlled her life, but only to the point where her existence served their ends. Her father's insistence that she marry a man of his choice—and it seemed any man would do—was not for her sake, but for his and the dowry he would receive. The connections. The power. She mattered naught to him, nor it seemed, to other members of the family, not one of whom had stepped in to provide her with options.

She watched as Hugh turned and once again disappeared into the woods. This Scottish highlander... would he be different than other men? A noise escaped her throat. All men were the same. All of them taking and rarely giving. At least in her experience.

She sighed, continued to sit on her log, the sun rising ever so slowly, occasionally disappearing behind clouds gathering once again from the northwest.

She shivered.

It seemed as if rain, thunder, and lightning were a constant presence up here in these wild lands.

She missed the fjords of her homeland.

Would she ever see them again?

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Hugh had retreated into the woods, but still kept his eye on Dalla. The way she sat there, her serene expression hiding her true thoughts, reminded him so much of Elyse.

He scowled. She wasn't Elyse, and she never would be. He had watched with interest as she seemed to have communicated with the squirrel that crept ever closer.

And then, much to his amazement, a young red deer emerged into the small clearing a short distance away. It was a young male, the barest of antler nubs jutting up from his skull. This one was young indeed, not nearly the size of a full adult, which could grow as large as a young pony. It must've come down to graze because of the recent bad weather.

He watched as the young buck twitched its ears toward Dalla, frozen in place. He moved only his eyes, standing in the shadows of a spruce pine, watching her. She and the deer stared at each other for several moments.

Hugh remained frozen. It would have been the perfect opportunity for him to notch an arrow into his bow. That deer could feed them for several days. But he would not do that. Not after watching her with that squirrel first, and now that deer. Not only would doing so likely trigger animosity, but knowing her stubbornness, she would probably refuse to eat any of the meat.

After a few minutes, the deer calmly walked away, flicking its tail, ears twitching as it disappeared back into the woods.

Dalla stared after it for a moment and then looked up into the sky, a forlorn expression on her face. He had intended to go hunting, but now that

she was in a reflective, if not pensive mood, maybe it would be a good time to approach, perhaps encourage her to talk about herself and how she had ended up as a captive bound for Scotland.

Slowly, he emerged from the tree line. After a moment, she noticed and stiffened, turning to stare, as wary of him as the deer had been of her.

He noted the change in her demeanor, hands folded in her lap, the softness disappearing from her face, uncertain now.

Her only movement as he neared her was a definite swallow, an indication of her sense of unease.

He couldn't read her expression as he stopped in front of her, watching, wondering if she would bolt or stay put.

She sighed and stayed put, looking up at him, one eyebrow lifting slightly.

“I have some questions.”

She said nothing, but continued to stare up at him.

“I know your name, Dalla Jorstad, but I know nothing about you or how you ended up here. You will tell me.”

She said nothing for several moments, and then finally replied. “Does it matter?”

He frowned. “You are my wife now. It matters.”

She made a face and turned away, but otherwise didn't move.

He abruptly sat down on the log beside her.

She stiffened more, glanced askance at him, the frown deepening, but didn't move. She was stubborn and willful, but he could be stubborn too.

He looked up at the sky. Not yet noon. “I will remain here, and so will you, until you tell me.”

And so, they sat. The minutes, and then the hours passed. The sun had reached its zenith and dipped toward mid-afternoon before she finally huffed a disgruntled sigh, and turned to stare at him.

“Don't you have anything to do?”

He shook his head. “I'm still waiting.”

He caught the uncertainty on her face. Likely asking herself why she should tell him anything, why it even mattered. He wasn't quite sure himself, but they were married now, for good or naught, and he wanted to know. He and Elyse, after they had gotten to know one another a little better, had shared much together. He witnessed the camaraderie between Phillip and Sarah, and Jake and Heather. Even though Maccay's marriage

was still new, there was kinship between them as well. He admitted to himself that he wanted that. He wanted that sense of companionship, of knowledge, of trust with his new if unwilling bride. Due to their circumstances, he couldn't expect her to trust him completely, but maybe in time, she would.

Finally, she relented. She started hesitantly, pausing for brief periods of time between short bursts of information.

“You know my name. My... my mother died a long time ago, when I was a young child. My father seemed to resent me for that.”

He bit back the urge to ask questions. He would let her tell her story first.

“He has mostly ignored me for most of my life, until this past year. Several months ago, he told me that he had arranged a marriage for me. I refused. He was not pleased. Eventually, he informed me he would send me away, to a convent in France.”

Her tone was cool, detached, but as Hugh glanced at her hands, he saw she clasped them so hard in her lap that her knuckles had grown white with tension. It was obvious to him that she was holding back her true emotions. A convent? Her father had threatened to send her to a *convent*?

“I didn't really mind the idea of living in the seclusion of a convent.” She offered a slight shrug. “At least that way, I would be away from my father's ever-growing disapproval, as well as that of my uncle. My uncle has his eyes set on furthering his own importance with the crown... there is no doubt that my father shares his aspirations as well, hence the attempt to marry me off.”

She abruptly paused and sucked in a breath.

He looked at her now pale features and frowned. “The crown? Why would he think that any marriage you entered would further his purposes with the crown? Unless he is pushing you to marry a member of the royal family. Is that it?”

She didn't reply for several moments, but then, shoulders slightly slumped, she shook her head.

“Then what?” he prompted.

“I am a member of the royal family.”

He stared at her for several moments, stunned. “*You* are a member of the Norwegian family?”

She nodded.

He was struck dumb with amazement. The Duncan clan was no stranger to the feuds between the Scots and the Norwegians. Jake had been injured in the Battle of Largs, fighting under Scottish King Alexander III, son of King Alexander II, and grandson of William the Lion. Alexander II and King Hakkon IV of Norway were only a few years apart in age, and both had feuded and warred with one another for years over land disputes.

“My family did not live at the royal household, but my father and uncle were—and are—still involved with much of the political aspects. Even so, it's my maternal line that has the closest relationships and connections to the throne. Even after my mother died, my father continued to make his presence known at court. I always felt he was forever trying to ingratiate himself with my mother's side of the family, but I distanced myself from it. However, my uncle must have likely assumed that any marriage, and ultimate issue from that marriage, would precede him, at least in opportunities to inherit more power. I am sure that my uncle was behind my father's arranging a marriage with me to a man who was unlikely to produce an heir.”

The more Dalla told him, the more Hugh grew angry at people he didn't know. Was it possible that Dalla's own father and her uncle would treat her that way? Of course it was. The machinations of those who sought power usually exhibited few scruples, if any.

“So what happened? How did you end up being kidnapped? And why?”

She shrugged. “I can only make suppositions, as I truly don't know. My companion Megan and I were walking one evening when we were accosted. I still don't know...” She paused, swallowed, and took a breath. “I still don't know what happened to her. She might be dead.” After a brief pause, she took a breath and continued her tale, her voice as calm as if she commented about the weather. “A hood was placed over my head, and I was tossed over a man's shoulder. I was taken to a seaport, bound and gagged, and dumped in the hold of a ship. After several day's travel on the open seas, I arrived at that seaport and was put up for sale. You bought me.” She turned to him. “And you know the rest.”

He found it hard to believe her story, but no one would make up a tale like that. Someone had betrayed her, treated her cruelly, and likely hoped that she would disappear forever.

“Would you let me go, to return to Norway?”

He frowned. "And why would I do that? So that whoever arranged for your kidnapping and sailed you into captivity, perhaps even death, could have another chance at it?" He shook his head. "Someone obviously wanted to get rid of you, Dalla, and now you ask me to send you back?" He frowned. "No. I will not."

She said nothing for several moments. "I'm not sure why anyone would believe that I posed a danger to them or their political aspirations, if that was truly a reason." She shook her head, looking off into the distance. "I have no interest in becoming an active member of the royal family. Nor would I want my child to be embroiled in such goings-on."

"Due to your station, you have little choice in the matter, or so your father believed. And yet somebody believes that either you or your issue would be a threat to them." He looked at her, eyes narrowed. "Would your issue be in a direct line to inherit the throne? Or to have political power and influence?"

She scoffed. "My mother was a sister to the king's younger brother, by a stepmother. As such..." She shook her head. "Still, since when does a woman have any influence over the decisions of a man? I may have a royal blood flowing through my veins, but that doesn't give me extraordinary powers. I am not a queen, nor even a princess. What possible influence..." She paused again. "My mother died when I was a child. I have been to the royal court less than a handful of times in my life. My father purposely kept me away from all that. During my youth, I thought it was to protect me from the... the dangers of being a member of the royal family. As I grew older, I realized it was because he wanted to prevent me, or so I must assume, from growing closer to my mother's side of the family, most of whom have taken up residence either in the royal household or at their estates within the environs of Oslo."

Hugh's frown deepened. The ramifications of her tale were sobering indeed. Chances were that, if someone had deliberately tried to have Dalla killed, and found out that she was still alive, her life could still be in danger.

He had come this far north to try to find his brother, and now he was... he realized that he could not drag an unwilling companion into any of the northern coastal cities as he looked for Derek.

For several seconds, he felt a great surge of resentment toward her for making such a mess of his life, but he quickly tamped them down. None of this was her doing. While he was not responsible for her kidnapping, he did

take responsibility for purchasing her. He could not blame her for that. But what of his brother? Would he have to give up his search for Derek before it even got started?

He realized she was speaking again, and focused on her, pushing his own concerns into the back of his mind, at least for now.

She offered a wan smile, glancing at him. "I know my father and my uncle often ventured to Oslo, but exactly what importance they hold in the government or the royal family, I really don't know."

Hugh wasn't sure he believed that. Wouldn't any member of the royal family, no matter how distant from the throne, at least be aware of the influence their family members had at the royal court? He knew nothing of politics, his experience with leadership was limited to his laird, Phillip Duncan.

"It seems, Dalla Jorstad... or more correctly, Dalla McInnis, that you are truly better off with me, than back in your own homeland."

That comment didn't appear to please her in the least. Her frown, her grunt of displeasure, and the flush of color in her cheeks as she turned to him was unmistakable.

"But I don't want to be here. I don't want to be married to you or any other man!"

The color in her face deepened and her displeasure and frustration was palpable. She unfolded her hands and crossed her arms over her chest, shaking her head as she spoke sharply.

"I don't want to be any man's wife, whether it be a Norwegian or a Scot! I am no man's chattel! I will be no man's slave! To be treated as no more than a piece of property or an animal! And you... and you can't..."

Abruptly, she stopped speaking and turned away, her chest heaving with emotion, her voice tremulous. She swallowed thickly.

He glanced down at the grass beneath his feet, idly plucking the stalks as she struggled to regain her composure. He could not imagine being in her position. Likely, the man responsible for her kidnapping had hoped that she would disappear forever. More than likely wanted her dead, but didn't want to be personally responsible for such a demise.

"What is your father's name, and that of your uncle?"

"Why?" she snapped, turning to him.

He saw the pulse pounding in her neck, her heightened color, her wide eyes, either with fear or hostility, more likely a combination of both.

Although he spoke calmly, he felt anger burgeoning inside him at the thought of someone treating their own family like that. Then again, look at what happened with Alis... abandoned in the middle of the wild forests near the Duncan lands. She still had not regained her memory of her former life.

While the Duncans had learned that she had been abandoned by the MacGregors, an enemy clan, for much the same reason—refusing to obey the dictates of her laird. Alis, much like Dalla, had refused to enter into a betrothal arranged by her father. It was certainly not common for women to refuse such dictates, he couldn't blame them.

He had bought Dalla for a reason he had yet to determine, exactly, but he also felt the saddle of responsibility settle heavily on his shoulders. As a man, he had a right to own property, and as a man, he also had the overall power over her, much like her father had. That he wouldn't force her to fulfill her duties as a wife was beside the point. No, he couldn't blame Dalla her feelings. It had been his decision to buy her. It had not been her decision to be kidnapped, sold as a captive, or bought and then forced to marry him.

“My father's name is Alfred Jorstad,” she finally replied. “And my uncle is Amund... Amund Jorstad.”

He nodded, now at even more of a loss than he had felt minutes ago. Knowing the truth, or some of it at least, gave him pause.

He studied her face. “Surely, someone will be looking for you?”

She snorted. A most unladylike snort, as she turned to peer at him. “Who?” she asked, her voice filled with sarcasm. “My loving father? My caring uncle?”

“But surely, someone in your family will notice that you are missing?”

“My family has made our home on the southwestern coastline of the country, away from cities, Oslo, and the politics and goings-on of the royal household. Other than the servants and other household staff of my home, it is doubtful that anyone will notice my absence.”

“But surely—”

She shook her head roughly. “You don't understand. I preferred it that way. After my mother died and I grew older, I realized that my thoughts, my ideas, nay, even my complaints, were rarely heeded by my father or my uncle. Not to say that no one cared for me, because I honestly believed that the household staff did, as I did them. Nevertheless, I maintained a relatively solitary existence.” She turned toward Hugh with a distant yet

emotionless mien. “So no, I don't believe anyone will particularly care about my absence, when it is noticed that is, although I do believe that my father, out of social correctness rather than any emotional attachment to me, will initiate a cursory search.”

Hugh scowled. “So it wasn't common knowledge that your father had ordered you to a convent?”

She shook her head. “Only Megan knew—” She frowned, her eyes wide as her face lost some of its color. She turned to him, eyebrows lowered. “Which makes me wonder... and dread, what has happened to Megan, my companion of these many years?”

She grew silent and refused to answer any more questions, seemingly more disturbed about what happened to her companion than about how she had been treated by her own father. He decided at that moment that he needed the advice and guidance of his laird, not only as the leader of the clan, but as one of his closest friends, and a man he trusted. Phillip would know what to do about this situation.

Even so, he recognized his responsibility. He had married Dalla, and as such, he was from this moment forward responsible for her health, her well-being, and her safety. He would take that responsibility seriously.

She was his wife, no matter what had prompted their marriage.

That evening, Dalla lay on the makeshift pallet that Hugh had made for her, watching the dull glow that remained of their fire in the center of the hut. Beyond that dull glow lay Hugh, right in front of the door. He was on his side, facing her, arms crossed over his chest, his head resting on the saddle blanket for his horse. He hadn't moved in quite some time and was snoring softly.

Her mind racing, she couldn't sleep despite her weariness. The conversation she'd had with him earlier in the afternoon had caused her more anxiety than she had let on. While she'd told Hugh only the most basic parts of her history, she had an unsettling fear that it wasn't over. She tried to convince herself that Megan had escaped her kidnapping unscathed, but try as she might to convince herself of it, she couldn't quite make herself believe it.

While she suspected that her uncle was likely behind her kidnapping, she couldn't completely ignore the suspicion that her father might also have had something to do with it. She couldn't believe he would do such a thing, but her father was a man who was not to be trifled with. She had gotten away with much in her youth, but mainly because he ignored her. While there was no love lost between them, Dalla felt a nearly overwhelming sense of betrayal, of disbelief that her father might have been involved. Could he have wanted to rid himself of her forever?

She doubted it. No, her father wanted her to marry, close to the royal family, or at the very least, someone rich so that he would share in her husband's new wealth. She had no inkling of the Jorstad current family

finances, but her father was always looking for ways to increase their coffers.

Was it possible that Hugh was right? Would someone find out that she was alive? If her father or uncle found out—and they were involved in the kidnapping—that she had made it to the Scottish coast alive, then been sold into captivity, would they attempt to find her? Perhaps make an overt attempt on her life? No, they wouldn't dare venture to Scotland. Not personally. Would they?

She didn't think so. After all, if her uncle or even her father wanted her dead, wouldn't they have just kidnapped and killed her outright?

She sighed softly.

Did it matter anymore? She was far from home, in a strange country, now married to a Scottish highlander. She shook her head, thinking that never in her life would she have thought this is where she would find herself. Kidnapped. Sold. Married to an enemy Scotsman. Why? What was it that her uncle or her father feared from her? And if it wasn't her uncle or her father, then who? There was no one else that would have built-up such animosity—

It couldn't be Manfred Gundersen, the older German her father had betrothed her to the first time. He was dead, killed in drowning accident. There had been a couple of other attempts to marry her off, but nothing had ever come of them. She had made sure of that. But perhaps one of her intended fiancés had held a grudge, resentful that the match had not taken place, thereby losing a potential connection to the royal throne in return for opening their own coffers?

Could it be? She tried to remember the names of those supposed suitors. There had been two serious negotiations underway after Gundersen had died, spoiling her father's original plans. What were their names?

Think!

Brynjar... again, a middle-aged man over twice Dalla's age. Brynjar... she couldn't recall the rest of his name. And then there was Dag... she didn't recall his surname either. She should have paid more attention, but there was nothing to be done about that now.

She debated whether or not she should tell Hugh about the failed arrangements. Although she hadn't thought much about it at the time, it was possible that her actions, and the difficulties she caused with her refusal to

enter such marriages, had caused her father such embarrassment that he had taken steps to make sure that it never happened again.

Was it all possible that someone from her mother's side of the family, closer to the throne, had been aware of what her father was doing? Could that knowledge have threatened his years of hard work and attempts to ingratiate himself within the closer circles of the royal family, to gain more power?

She should have paid more attention, been more aware of how her actions might reflect on the family reputation, at least in regard to the male side of it. A woman refusing to marry? Typically unheard of, but because of her connection to the throne, perhaps her father hadn't wanted to push too hard, at least in a sense where his actions were made obvious. Her father was not related by blood to anyone in the royal family. No, his sole connection to them came through her mother. But she, as a direct descendant, a blood relative, now that was different.

She closed her eyes, her head spinning. Political machinations, plotting, subterfuge... she despised it all, which was only one of the reasons why she had never minded living so far from Oslo, uninvolved in politics. She had neglected her royal duties, had declined to become part of the royal household—and live in Oslo when she'd come of age. Had her stubborn refusal led to this?

She gazed around her at the interior of the hut, surrounded by the wild and treacherous landscape of the Scottish highlands. Sleeping on the floor of a hut with a man who was now her husband guarding the entrance to make sure that she didn't escape.

She finally realized that she had nowhere to turn, nowhere to escape. No one to help her. Even if she did manage to find her way back to her homeland, who could she trust?

Despair settled like a shroud over her shoulders, prompting her to close her eyes and dip her head, fighting back the pain and the rejection that surged through her heart.

While she wasn't yet ready to surrender her future to this Scotsman, she realized, for the time being at least, that she was relatively safe.

For now.

The following morning, she woke to find Hugh standing in the doorway of the hut, back to her, looking out over the landscape.

The sun had not yet risen, but the shade of the predawn sky indicated that it was imminent. She sat up, brushing her hand through her tangled hair. Her movement drew his attention, and he turned to glance at her over his shoulder.

“I came north looking for my brother,” he stated simply.

She froze, looking up at him as she considered his tone, lacking any emotion whatsoever. He didn't seem angry, just... resigned?

She said nothing.

“Given the circumstances, I don't think it would be wise to be traveling with you in plain sight, especially in light of the fact that you are quite an unwilling companion.”

She saw the frown of displeasure burgeoning on his brow, the frustration. Her heart skipped a beat.

He looked displeased. What was he going to do?

She swallowed her fear and watched him as he casually leaned against the side of the doorway. Waiting for him to continue.

For several moments, he remained silent, just staring at her.

She couldn't read his expression, other than that slight frown.

“And, given the knowledge of your circumstances, I'm beginning to think that even lingering in this area is ill-advised.”

Why was he talking like this? Was he trying to make her feel guilty? Guilty for something over which she had no control? A fit of resentment

surged upward.

“So go look for your brother,” she said, feigning a lack of concern. “I’m not stopping you.”

His frown darkened.

Perhaps that wasn’t the wisest comment she could’ve made, but he couldn’t possibly blame her for the situation, could he?

“I am, obviously, in no position to stop you from doing anything you want to do,” she continued, determined not to be afraid of this man, her husband. “If you want to find your brother, find your brother.”

Why was he looking for his brother? Didn’t he know where he lived? Were they close or distant? She failed to tamp down her curiosity.

He lifted an eyebrow. “And if, by some chance, whoever ordered your kidnapping, and possible murder, found out you were still alive? What then, Dalla? Would you announce to the entire northern region that you’re alive and well? With your distinctive appearance, the color of your hair, the scene you caused by running away in the village? You know how villagers and sailors talk.” He shook his head. “Then again, maybe you don’t. But I’ll tell you now that news of your presence... the silver-haired Norwegian beauty bought by a Scottish highlander... has made its way up and down the coastline.”

He thought she was beautiful? She shook her head, not allowing her thoughts to stray in that direction.

What he said was true. If someone was looking for her, perhaps to ensure themselves of her death, news of her appearance could pose problems not only for her, but for Hugh.

Did she care? She tried to tell herself that she didn’t, but she knew she would be lying to herself. Yes, they were enemies, politically at least. But he had saved her life twice now, and he treated her fairly well, and he had yet to raise a hand to her. She knew very well that she could have been much worse off. Much worse.

For an instant, and an instant only, she felt bad for him, but then her curiosity got the better of her. “Why are you looking for your brother?”

“Because I want to see him,” he answered simply, shoulders stiffening.

There was more to it than that. “How long has it been since you’ve seen him?”

“Why do you care?”

Now it was her turn to lift an eyebrow. "I don't, not particularly, but if you're going to blame me for not being able to seek him out, then I think I have a right to know, don't I?"

They locked eyes for several moments, and then he sighed. "It's been over ten years," he began, his voice soft. "After my father died, my brother and I made our homes on Duncan lands, in the shadows of Ben Nevis. The Duncans are a powerful clan. My brother, Derek, wanted a different life, and I wanted to stay, to serve as a warrior, protector, of the Duncans. A few years ago, my mother passed away. Recent circumstances... well, changes actually..." He shook his head. "Anyway, I felt it was time to find him. Not only to let him know that our mother has died, but to perhaps restore the relationship we used to have."

"What caused the rift between you two?" She had no idea why she even cared, but she did. She had always longed for a sibling, someone with whom to share her deepest secrets; secrets that she had not even shared with Megan, despite their close friendship.

"It wasn't really a rift, just that we both wanted different things, I suppose."

"And your brother... you think he's living in one of the seaports?"

"Jake, a good friend of mine, saw him a while back, said he had started a shipping business to the north."

"And you don't know where?"

He shook his head and shrugged. "I had planned on searching the villages along the coastline. If he's still alive and doing business, someone will surely have heard of it in one of the seaports along the coast."

She said nothing. What could she say? While she knew it wasn't her fault that she had interrupted his search for his brother, she tried to imagine what he might be feeling. Disappointment? Resentment?

"In a few days, we will return south, to Duncan lands. I must go hunting today. A deer would provide sufficient food for most of our journey." He pushed himself away from the door frame, crossing his arms over his chest once more. "Do I need to tie you up inside the hut, or will you promise to stay put?"

She definitely didn't want to be tied up, but could she promise to stay put? Even if she managed to escape, where could she go?

"Now answer my question. Do I need to tie you, or will you stay put?"

She scowled up at him before muttering her reply. "I'll stay put."

He nodded in satisfaction, but as she watched him prepare for his hunt, she was forced to ask herself a question.

Would she stay put or would emotion override logic?

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It was mid-afternoon before Hugh returned to the hut. The cool bite in the air heralded the potential for early snow, and he knew that he should start making preparations to head south sooner rather than later.

It had taken him longer than he had anticipated to track, and kill a small red deer, but it would do to sustain them for now, and he could start drying more meat for their journey. He carried the animal over his shoulders, hunched under its weight as he paused at the edge of the clearing, hovering in the shadows at its edge as he gazed toward the hut and the small meadow beyond.

He didn't see Dalla. He frowned, sensing a bad feeling. The bad feeling increased as his gaze swept the trees on the other side of the meadow and then ventured closer to the hut.

He noticed that the woods were quiet, more than they would normally be from his simple and brief passage. No birds chirped in the trees, no squirrels scampering and frolicking, looking for morsels or nuts strewn on the forest floor, as was usual this time of day.

He remained just inside the tree line, searching the shadows, looking for anything out of place. Nothing. A very gentle breeze barely drifted through the long grass in the meadow, and the tree stump upon which he and Dalla had sat before was now empty.

After several minutes, he decided nothing was lurking in the trees beyond and ventured toward the hut.

He peered inside, then cursed softly when he saw that the horses were gone.

Gone!

He quickly glanced down, saw the imprint of horse hooves in the dirt surrounding the doorway. The deer slid off his shoulders and landed with a dull thud in the dirt by the doorway. Had she really done it? Had Dalla really left, taking his horses with her?

In disbelief, he quickly walked around the hut and down to the banks of the small stream, searching up and down, but saw no sign of her, nor any recent indication of her passing. Nor those of his horses.

He returned to the hut, following the prints of his horses as they headed around the other side of the hut and into the woods.

His confusion grew.

Two possibilities existed. The first that, for some reason that he couldn't fathom, she had taken the horses out of the hut, perhaps to allow them to graze in the small meadow and they had gotten loose, and she had chased after them.

The other possibility, and the more likely, was that she had actually left and taken his horses with her.

If that was the case, chances were that one of the animals would have been let go. Was she an experienced enough rider to take one and hang onto the tether of the other? Had she pretended to be an inexperienced rider on their journey, to confound him at a later time, when she made good on an escape attempt?

His anger growing, he ducked inside the hut and saw that his saddle and the saddle blankets were still inside. His confusion only grew. At that point, he was leaning toward the first possibility, but again, it made no sense. She didn't go near the horses. Especially his. His gelding was skittish around anyone but hi and would never allow her to ride him.

His heart began to pound as his temper roiled. He shouldn't have trusted her enough to leave her alone, unbound. He should've tied her up.

He stood outside of the hut for several moments, his gaze once again sweeping through the trees. Then, in an ever-increasing arc, he followed the tracks of his horses deeper into the tree line. He saw no human prints. As he studied the tracks and ventured deeper into the woods, he noticed something else. The horses were separated by a short distance, and while they were both heading in generally the same direction, they weren't traveling together. That either meant that she was riding one and had let the other go, or the horses had been released, perhaps spooked to run off.

More questions.

A short distance further, the horses separated, one of them heading higher into the hills, the other toward the east. Gauging by the size of the hoof prints, his gelding had headed east, downslope rather than higher into the foothills. While chances were that *if* Dalla chose to ride one of the horses, it would be the older mare, he also knew that time was of the essence. His horse wouldn't go far.

Hugh began to trot, weaving his way among the trees, slapping branches out of his way, his gaze continually scanning the ground, following the trail of his horse.

Perhaps an hour later, he reached the top of a hillock, crowded on all sides by pine, alder and yew trees, hampered in his efforts to follow a trail by thick growths of sweetbriar, creeping willow, and gorse. He looked down into a small and narrow valley, the gray slopes of the mountain rising to the north, a field of scattered boulders below, the valley floor gradually dropping away to the south that would eventually meet the bogs. His heart thumped in dread at the thought of his horse becoming mired in a bog, to eventually succumb and drown.

The thought infuriated him, and his anger with Dalla grew.

Grumbling, he noticed a slight indication of movement to the north, near the base of the mountain. He peered more closely into the shadows cast by the mountainside and felt a huge surge of relief when he saw his horse grazing near the base of a tall, finger-like boulder canted at an angle into the ground.

He quickly made his way down the hillside, whistling softly. His horse heard his whistle, lifted its head from grazing, ears flicking forward, tails swishing, and then with a soft neigh, trotted toward him.

His concern for his horse was alleviated, and he sighed and chuckled as his gelding lowered its head and brushed its muzzle against his chest.

Hugh took a few moments to scratch behind the gelding's ears and pat its neck. Then, grasping a handful of the gelding's mane, he leaped onto his back.

He would backtrack and follow the mare's trail until he caught up with Dalla. He had no doubt whatsoever that he would. She was no match for the highlands, but he and his horse were. And when he caught up with her...

In less than half the time it had taken him to find his horse, he found the trail where the mare had separated from his gelding.

Overhead, thunderclouds were building, fast and dark. Why would she head up rather than down? Especially with the weather turning? It seemed an unnatural direction for the mare to go, north and higher into the hills rather than following the gelding downslope.

He slowed down his pace, carefully following the trail, which grew sparser the higher he climbed, and the rockier the slopes became. What had compelled Dalla to go this way? Before he could determine an answer, he saw a sign; a definite scuff mark of hoof against stone. Had the mare slipped? Had Dalla fallen off?

He stopped his horse, dismounted, and carefully looked around. There, near the base of a tree trunk, a splotch of blood on the base of the pine tree, staining the bark a darker color. Not a lot, but enough. She'd fallen off. Standing close to the trunk of the tree, he gazed around, seeking any movement, listening for any noise.

Nothing.

The fact that it was so quiet didn't bode well. It meant either a predatory animal or humans.

Pulling his ax from his belt with one hand, reaching for his knife with the other, he crept slowly forward, his gaze scanning the dried pine needle and leaf-strewn ground around him, then he lifted his gaze to scan through the trees, rocks, and so many other possible hiding places.

He placed his feet carefully, trying to avoid the dryer leaves and pine cones.

Where was she? Where was the mare? After studying the area for several moments, he slid his ax back into his belt and reached for his horse's reins.

Guiding him, walking slowly, he ventured deeper into the forest, pausing every few steps to listen. Was she injured? How badly? What if she—

A noise prompted him to freeze.

It only lasted a brief moment, and he couldn't identify what it was or from where it had come. The only thing he recognized was that it was different. It didn't belong in a forest. It came from a higher level than that upon which he stood.

Ever so slowly, he inspected every rock, every tree that grew on the slope rising above him. Huge, tilting boulders interspersed with hardy birch and pine-dotted the slope. Undergrowth, wild-growing ferns, and briars

grew interspersed with one another. He scanned even higher toward the trees, the seemingly solid rock walls of the mountain rising above, and decided she couldn't possibly have gone there.

So where was—

He heard the noise again, so soft it could have been a short breath of wind, the sound of a pine bough brushing against another high above, audible one moment, gone the next.

Once again, he eyed the boulders and the growth of brush interspersed among them. His gaze riveted on the briars, knowing that if it were he, the briars would be the most unlikely, the most uncomfortable, and therefore the best place to hide. But a hiding place for who? Dalla or a wild animal? Perhaps even a boar?

He glanced back at his horse, watching him, not appearing alarmed. If his horse had caught the scent of boar or bear, his ears would have been pointed forward, his muscles shivering with the anxiety of a hunt.

He took a chance.

“Dalla,” he said, softly, keeping his voice low so as not to carry and echo off the rocks above.

Nothing.

He put away his knife, and tied his horse to a low tree branch and proceeded further, his ax held at mid-level, ready to use, while his left hand reached once again for the knife.

“Dalla” he hissed a little louder.

He heard another noise and this time was able to identify it as coming from the briars, its branches trembling ever so slightly. He quickly rushed forward, still keeping an eye on the landscape around him and spoke again.

“Dalla, you come out of there right now.”

He didn't raise his voice, purposely kept it calm, tamping down his anger and frustration. First things, first. She needed to get out of there.

“I can't.”

He couldn't fathom the relief that swept through him upon hearing that short, soft answer. It was at that moment that he realized she could have been gone forever, lost in this wilderness, dying slowly of starvation and exposure. Even worse, she could have been dead, falling off her mare, striking her head on a rock, or falling over the edge of a precipice.

And then his mind assessed the tone of her voice. Fear. Pain.

“Are you hurt?”

“I’m stuck.”

His emotions askew, he peered deeper into dog rose shrubs, seeking her. Wild roses in the highlands were no doubt beautiful, most appearing with small pink flowers, sending their lovely aroma downslope, but up here, they grew wild, tangled among themselves, creating thickets on the hillsides that could be difficult to penetrate.

It was a good hiding place, if one didn't mind getting scraped up by their sharp thorns. He couldn't see her.

He crouched down and tried to make openings in the long, branching vine-like protuberances, many of them curving back on themselves and forming circles or arches.

Unfortunately, the majority of the stems contained sharp, wickedly curved, reddish-brown thorns, effective in protecting its delicate flowers from rummaging animals. Not only that, but the thorns enabled the plant to grasp onto the most unlikely surfaces including rock and tree trunks, attaching themselves as they gripped, their stems climbing ever upward.

“Hugh, I can't get out. You're going to have to help me.”

He paused and located the source of her voice, just beyond an unusual growth of a deeper red rose, small and puckered in the cooler air. He would—

“These wicked thorns have captured my clothes, and I can't—*ouch!*—can't get myself loose.”

He heard shuffling in the midst of the tangled growth.

“Just hold still,” he muttered, his irritation with her now growing.

She was alive.

Now he could be angry.

He began to hack at a few of the branches with his ax and soon managed to create a small hole down near the ground. He saw a foot. A bare, white, foot with a wicked looking scratch along its outer edge. He cursed. What had prompted her to go running off with his horses like this? He should punish within an inch of her life. He should—

“I didn't run away, Hugh.”

He grabbed her ankle, and she muttered a soft yelp as his hand easily encompassed the joint.

“Cover your face,” he ordered.

He heard nothing for several moments.

“Is it covered?”

A muffled response.

“Hold your arms as close to your body as you can. The only way I'm going to get you out is to pull you out. You're going to get scratched. Keep your face covered.”

Another sound, again muffled.

He found and grasped her other ankle, then positioned himself to pull.

“One... two... three!”

He pulled, as hard and as quickly as he could.

At first, the shrub didn't want to release its grip upon her, but then, with the sound of rending cloth and a squeal from her, it did. His first tug exposed her breeches as far as her knees.

The thorns had torn the leg, and he caught sight of a shapely calf. He shook his head and pulled again. The second tug pulled her out far enough that he saw her hips. Unfortunately, he could also see several tears in the breeches now, slowly oozing blood.

Once again, he cursed under his breath. He leaned down, saw that she was doing as he told her, elbows clasped close to her body, arms and hands covering her face.

“One more pull, and you should be out. Keep your face covered!”

He barely heard a muffled *yes* beneath her hands.

He repositioned his feet, wrapped his hands around her knees, and with one, mighty pull, extracted her from the bushes.

The sight that met his eyes was not what he expected. The tunic, torn and dirty, her arms scratched and oozing blood, her hair a tangled mess, her hands still covering her face, dirty, scratched, one of them showing a bruise on the outside of her palm.

He crouched down, quickly scanning her body for more serious injuries. She didn't remove her hands from her face.

“Look at me,” he ordered.

She refused, but sat up, shoulders hunched forward, head still buried in her hands.

She trembled.

“Dalla, look at me.” Fighting back his frustration and impatience, he reached for her hands.

Though she tried to prevent him from doing so, it didn't take much for him to pull those petite, finely boned, yet surprisingly strong hands from her face.

Her expression startled him.

Dried tears had made paths down dusty cheeks, streaking their trails down her cheeks. A reddened nose and wide eyes swimming with tears.

He frowned. "Are you hurt?"

She didn't answer, but then, wordlessly pointed to her right knee. He looked down at it.

It wasn't twisted at an awkward angle, and he didn't see any blood, but when he touched it, she winced. He carefully palpated the joint with his hand, much as he would be tending to his horse's fetlocks.

When he gently squeezed the outside of the knee, she winced.

He shook his head. She either had a very bad sprain, or she had managed to pull a muscle or ligament. It was at that moment that his anger once again began to burgeon.

"What were you thinking? Did you think you could run from me, survive in these highlands all by yourself?" He took a breath, trying to tamp down his rising anger. A pulse pounded in his neck, and his head throbbed with emotion. "And take my horses? Both of them?"

Her eyes widened even more, staring up at him now, in not only fear, but dismay. "But I didn't!"

He frowned, not understanding as he gestured around them. "What are you doing out here?"

She swallowed, took a breath, and replied. "I was in the woods, behind the hut and near the stream. I was gathering some nuts for one of the squirrels... you saw the one that—"

He slashed the air with his hand. "Tell me what happened."

"I saw some men—"

"Men?" He frowned. "By the hut?"

She gingerly shook her head, a clump of hair that had loosened from its braid hanging alongside her cheek. He barely resisted the urge to brush it away and tuck it behind her ear.

"I saw them a little bit down the hill. Three or four of them. Two of them looked like—they looked like you. Dressed like you. Scotsmen," she mumbled. "Long hair, beards, wearing leathers and tunics."

Hugh didn't have a beard, but he gave that some thought. Since he had arrived at the hut he'd shared with his brother so long ago, he'd seen no sign of inhabitants in the area. He wasn't aware of any clans claiming this land,

but it had been a long time since he'd been here. He could understand why she had run. She continued.

“One of them was dressed in finer clothes, as he came from a town—”

They both heard the noise at the same time.

He quickly stood and turned, both ax and the knife at the ready, his gaze scanning every bit of the landscape around them. He had to get back to his horse. Something was out there, and it wasn't anything good.

The noise had come from a distance, like a rock hitting another. He quickly turned and looked down over his shoulder at her.

“Can you walk?” He didn't wait for her to answer, but reached down to help her up.

While she managed to stand, her face lost its color, and a most definite grimace of pain marred her features as she placed even the slightest bit of weight on her right foot, he had his answer.

“Climb up on my back,” he said, hunching down.

“What?”

“Quickly, Dalla. Climb onto my back! Make no noise!”

She scrambled onto his back and clasped her arms around his shoulders, clasping her hands together at the base of his neck. She wrapped her left leg around his hips, the injured leg to a lesser degree.

“We have to get back to my horse.” He felt her nod and then she buried her head against his shoulder as he quickly darted through the trees, again careful to make as little noise as possible. A short distance away, he found his horse, no longer grazing, but looking downslope, ears twitching in that direction.

He quickly lowered Dalla off his back, and then immediately swung her up onto his horse. He followed, climbing up behind her.

Just as he turned his horse away from the trees, prepared to climb higher, a *wisp* of sound flew past his ear and hit the tree just beyond them.

He looked to find the shaft of an arrow vibrating from the tree bark. A chunk of bark shot off from the pine tree beside them, grazed by another arrow, causing Dalla to utter a gasp of alarmed surprise.

He felt several pieces of bark strike his arm as he urged his horse forward, hunched down over her as she huddled in front of him, protecting her as best he could while his horse lunged upward.

He felt the gelding's muscles bunching with the effort, scrambling for purchase on the steep slope, over rocks and tree roots.

Shouts from below echoed up into the hills, reverberating off the walls.
He had rounded a cluster of pine interspersed with birch before he felt something warm on his thigh.
He glanced down and cursed.
An arrow had pierced his thigh, and he was bleeding.
Badly.

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Hunched over the neck of the horse, climbing upward, hanging desperately onto clumps of the horse's mane, Dalla tried to stifle the panic that threatened to rise, before it ripped from her throat in a terrified scream.

Why?

Why was this happening to her? What had she done, against her family, against God, to deserve such hardships?

She felt the warmth of Hugh's body hovering over her, so close that his chest pressed against her back, arms wrapped around her while he guided his horse.

He offered a stalwart sense of security, of protection; but what was one man alone against three or more who would likely be carrying not only quivers full of arrows, but swords and axes?

And who was that better-dressed man with them that she had spied before disappearing into the woods?

She had run away from the hut, ignoring the pain of stones beneath her thin slippers. Behind, at the hut, she'd heard the sound of shouts and then the horses galloping away. Where was Hugh? What would he think when he returned to find her gone? What would—

A soft grunt behind her caused her to stiffen and cast a glance over her shoulder. Her eyes widened in alarm when she saw Hugh's face.

What—

She glanced down at the leg beside her, saw his leather breeches drenched in blood. Oh Lord. help her! She saw the shaft of an arrow

protruding from the center of his thigh.

“Hugh! You're—”

A brilliant flash of lightning lit up the sky, seeming to rise from the ground itself.

Seconds later, a crash of thunder crackled overhead, echoing between the spires of rock through which they climbed and then rumbling even further down through the narrow valley.

Just over the rumbling, she heard the sound of voices, not far in the distance. There were catching up to them! But who were they and what did they want?

And then, horror of horrors, Hugh suddenly toppled from the back of the horse. The gelding immediately stopped, prancing nervously around his master.

She slid off as well. Taking a chance that the horse wouldn't go far, she slapped its rump, shimmying quickly away just in case the gelding decided to show a fit of temper toward her.

He gazed at her a moment, then trotted away, weaving its way among the rocks until it disappeared. She prayed that he'd come back, but not too quickly.

She glanced down at Hugh, half-conscious, lying on his side in front of a cluster of shrubs. She had no idea what kind, but they were thick and leafy. The ground felt damp beneath her feet—one bare, one foot still wearing a slipper.

It started to rain, big fat drops at first, then mellowing into a gentle, steady rain.

She placed a hand on Hugh's shoulder and leaned down close.

“I heard voices,” she said, speaking close to his ear.

Suddenly, he lifted an arm and flattened her onto the ground beside him, holding her close.

At first, she struggled, but then, noticing his pain and the firm shake of his head, she stilled. Her heart thundered in her chest as she heard the snap of a twig not far away.

“I saw them go up this way.” The voice was thick and heavy with a Scottish brogue.

“Find them! They can't get away!” That wasn't a Scottish voice, that accent was English.

What was happening? Were they looking for Hugh or her?

They both lay still, hardly daring to breathe.

She glanced at Hugh's face, saw that his eyes were closed. At first, she thought he was unconscious, but then she saw the grimace of pain in his expression. She noted that the arrow had fully pierced his thigh, perhaps a hand's width of the shaft with the bloodied arrowhead protruding from a point along the front of his thigh, having entered from behind.

Another flash of lightning, followed again by a rumble of thunder rolled across the gray sky.

Dalla tried to make herself sink deeper into the soft, loamy soil beneath her, praying that the attackers, whoever they were, didn't see them through the shrubs. She heard them moving around, and then, ever so gradually, the men moved away, and the sounds disappeared. They remained unmoving, listening.

All was silent, save the sound of the rain pattering onto the tree leaves and then dropping to the ground with soft plops. A cool, wet breeze ruffled her hair. Without moving, she glanced down to find Hugh tightly claspng the shaft of the arrow in his leg, blood continuing to ooze through his fingers. With a grunt, he grabbed the arrow protruding from the front of his thigh with both hands, and gritting his teeth, broke the shaft with a garbled cry of pain. He lay back, panting.

"Pull it out," he finally murmured.

What? He wanted her to pull out the arrow? She gazed down at him, eyes wide with fear.

"Do it... I can't. Pull it out. In one movement. You... must pull with all your strength."

"But—"

"Do it now!" he hissed.

She scrambled back, took a deep breath, and then grasped the shaft still protruding from the back of his thigh tightly with both her hands. Then, biting her lip, she yanked. Hard.

At first, nothing happened.

"Harder!" he gasped.

She put her back into it, and in one, hard tug, the arrow slid free, caked with blood and—

Dalla landed hard on her backside, barely squelching the urge to throw up. Hugh lay stiffly, panting for breath. He either felt it was all right or was too weak to protest.

“We have to find some shelter,” she said, the statement obvious. “I’m going to look for shelter, or at least somewhere we can hide and take care of your leg,” she said, again leaning close to his ear.

He barely managed to shake his head. “No... wait... too dangerous...”

This time it was she who shook her head. “If I don’t do something about that wound, you might bleed to death, and soon!”

Without waiting for his reply, she quickly scrambled away, hiding behind a nearby tree as she slowly rose to her knees, peeking this way and that.

Rain pattered onto her head, and cold drops trickled down her neck. She ignored the pain in her own leg as she tried to stand. When she placed even the slightest weight on it, a shaft of pain jolted upward, but she could bear it. She would need a crutch of some sort. Looking around, she found a fallen tree branch, maybe half as tall as she was, but it would do.

Grabbing onto it, she lifted herself upright, placing most of her weight on that stout piece of wood. Another almost blinding flash of lightning and crackle of thunder exploded overhead.

At first, she cursed the rain and the storm, but then realized that it would, although uncomfortable, provide them with a benefit. The rain would hide any trace of them or any trail they left.

Wincing and trying to ignore the pain with every step she took, she sought a hiding place, preferably one that would take them out of the rain. She looked for a cave or an indentation in the rocks, something with an overhang. If she had to, she’d look for low-hanging tree branches from one of these huge pines that might at the very least offer some shelter from the weather.

Upslope, she saw a slit of shadow, dark black, behind the growth of some type of berry bush. Most of the berries that remained were dried up and withered now, so late in the season. She brushed a few branches aside, stumbling forward to take a better look at the gap in the rocks. It was perhaps twice as wide as she, and as she studied it, she realized that it widened gradually. It wasn’t deep, but it would be enough to hide them and keep Hugh out of the rain while they determined the severity of his injury.

As quickly as she could, she scrambled back to his location. If anything, he looked worse than he had just moments ago. Her heart sank, and fear burgeoned. What would she do if something happened to him? Where would she go? She swallowed her panic and focused on him.

Painfully, she got down on one knee and placed her hand on his shoulder. He opened his eyes and looked up at her.

“I found a small cave—or almost a cave, a short distance away, but it's going to be difficult—”

“Help me up.”

Her nerves frayed, her heart pounding, fearful that those men would come back at any moment, Dalla reached for Hugh's uplifted hand. Bracing herself on her good leg, she tugged, while with a groan of effort, he managed to get himself up onto one knee. He breathed heavily, trying to hide a grimace of pain, without success. Not thinking twice about it, she shuffled forward, still using the stick of wood to brace her injured knee.

She bent under his arm, wrapping it around her shoulders. She didn't expect to be able to hold his weight completely, but she could help. They made a fine pair, didn't they? She with an injured knee, him with a wound bleeding in his left thigh.

It seemed to take them forever to scramble their way upslope. The rain caused the dirt to grow slippery, but at the same time, she was grateful for it because it hid the trail of their passing. They had barely gone twelve precarious steps before Hugh stumbled to a halt, leaning heavily against a tree trunk.

“Just a moment,” he muttered. “Need to catch my breath.”

She wasn't arguing. She needed a rest too. Her knee throbbed, and she could just imagine what Hugh's leg felt like. Blood saturated his pant leg now, and she feared that if he lost much more, he would die, right in front of her eyes.

He pushed away from the tree and they scrambled higher, deeper into the trees, sometimes pushing their way through the thick underbrush, winding between the close-growing birch and pine.

His breath came in harsh gasps. Every step seemed shorter, more difficult.

Finally, she spied the cleft in the rock. “There!”

He didn't look up, just told her to make their way toward it. A gust of rain-drenched breeze blew past them, sending shudders through her body. Drops of rain trickled down the back of her neck and underneath her tunic. Garnering the last of her own strength, she wrapped her left arm around his waist, grasped her makeshift crutch more firmly in her hand, and tried to urge him forward. If he stumbled and fell, she would never get him back up.

They had reached the rock wall, Hugh grasping one edge of the gash in the rock, when suddenly, he toppled forward, now half in and half out of the opening. He took her down with him, and she also toppled, grimacing in pain as she fell on her injured leg. Both of them lay gasping for several moments, exhausted.

“Can you crawl inside?” she finally asked.

No answer.

She looked up at his face from where she lay and saw that he was unconscious or very close to it.

“Hugh!”

Again no answer.

Groaning, seeking a strength that she didn't know she had, she crawled past him on her side, trying to protect her injured knee. Then, sitting behind him, her legs straddling his shoulders, she reached forward and grasped him under the arms, thinking to pull him further into the cave. Her first effort proved fruitless. He didn't move at all.

“Hugh, you've got to help me! Please!”

She tried again. This time, digging the heel of her good foot deep into the dirt, tugging and leaning backward with all her might, she managed to move him a short space.

He lifted his knees, dug his own heels in, and her next effort proved more fruitful. By the time she brought him completely into the interior, she was gasping for breath, her arms trembling, every muscle in her body throbbing with fatigue.

They both lay still for several moments, breathing heavily. While it was warm and dry inside, she still had to deal with his wound, and quickly. She glanced at the overlarge tunic she wore, saw that the bottom had been torn in several places by the brambles she had hidden within. Twisting, she managed to tear off a good section of the bottom.

Hugh rolled over and lay on his back, his chest rising and falling, staring upward into the darkness of the cave.

She spoke while she worked. “I've got to bind the wound in your leg. Stop the bleeding.”

He nodded slightly, and she maneuvered herself closer. Carefully, trying not to cause him more pain, but knowing it was inevitable, she shoved the piece of now doubled-over cloth under his thigh, then brought it around in preparation to tie the edges together over the wound.

But she needed more padding, something to soak up the blood. She tore off another strip from the tunic, now reaching just past her waist. She folded up the piece of cloth into a thick pad and pressed it onto the wound, ignoring the groan that resulted. Dalla wrapped the edges of the other piece tightly over the padding and tying it as firmly as she could. This also elicited a low groan, but Hugh didn't move.

And then she realized why.

He had passed out.

The faint light that ventured into the cave opening from outside barely provided light, but as she stared at his leg, she didn't see any fresh blood oozing from the wound.

She leaned back, staring through the opening and the bramble of bushes that hid the cleft in the rock wall.

Were they safe here? Would they be found?

Dire thoughts raced through her head.

He was seriously wounded, and she didn't know how to help him. And if he died, what would happen to her?

Dalla wasn't sure how much time had passed since they'd made it to the shelter in the rocks, but it seemed like forever.

The bleeding in Hugh's leg had stopped, but he had not yet regained consciousness. She knew next to nothing about healing. Without Hugh able to provide any guidance, she wasn't sure what to do next. Had it nicked a blood vessel? Even though he wasn't bleeding on the outside anymore, she didn't know if he might be bleeding on the inside.

She listened carefully, straining for any sound of the voices of their pursuers beyond the cleft in the wall, but other than the sound of the rain and the occasional rumble of thunder as the storm moved south, she heard nothing.

The air smelled rich with the scent of pine, wet dirt, and a rather musty smell that she assumed came from the cave itself. Perhaps it had served as a den for wild boar, or a bear, or some other wild animal.

She explored the cave floor with her eyes with what minimal light there was, unable to find anything with which she could make a fire, even if she knew how.

Her helplessness appalled her. She could not identify edible from non-edible plants in these wild lands, and was not educated in the least rudimentary basics of healing, and...

Well, she had plenty of faults, but there was a couple of things she *could* do. She could try to make Hugh as comfortable as she could. She could maybe start a fire, if she found any dry kindling after the rain, which was doubtful.

Then again, she was hesitant to do even that, however, worried that the glow of firelight might be visible from downslope, or that the breeze would carry the scent of the fire to whoever had attacked them.

As she sat in the growing darkness, listening to Hugh breathe, catching her own breath every time his breath hitched, she began to take stock. Her knee throbbed relentlessly. Numerous scratches, some of them surprisingly deep from her own misadventure in the thorny brush, constantly served as reminders of her own foolishness.

Other than that, and the fact that she was extremely frightened, she was in good health. But Hugh, he was another matter entirely. Every once in a while, a severe shiver took hold of his body, to the point where his teeth chattered. It frightened her.

At one point, she reached forward to touch his forehead and found it warm. Fever warm. She berated her sense of helplessness.

In the waning light of day, she studied his profile, and despite the danger of their present situation, admired his handsome features. He looked so much less intimidating at the moment, the angles of this face were less defined, almost... vulnerable. He was vulnerable. Vulnerable to fever, to bleeding to death, to dying of exposure...

“Stop it,” she muttered to herself.

“What?”

The sound of his deep voice startled her, and she gasped, then collected her senses.

“I think I stopped the bleeding in your leg, but I fear you're developing a fever.” She paused. “I don't know what to do to help you.”

He said nothing.

“We have no water, no food. Any kindling I find outside is going to be wet and will only smoke, even if I knew how to start a fire.”

Again, he said nothing.

“And even if I did manage to start a fire, I'm afraid that whoever is—or was—following us will see it or smell the smoke in the air.”

The sound of the quick moving storm had moved south, only dull rumbles and occasional flashes of lightning now. It was quiet for several moments, and then he spoke.

“Carefully, take a look outside. The rain should have washed... our tracks away, so don't make any fresh ones.” He paused, grimacing in pain. “Use your eyes only. Look for my horse. He should be nearby.”

He didn't say anything after that, and when Dalla leaned closer to look at him, she saw that he had fallen asleep again. Even if she did see his horse, then what?

She would never get Hugh onto it, not in his condition. Even moving him would threaten to start the bleeding again and she didn't think he would survive that. Then again, if she *could* catch his horse, she could find her way back down to the hut, gather their supplies, what little food there was there, and bring it back.

Slowly, she crawled to the cleft in the wall, staying low, peeking through the branches of the shrub that hid the opening. She didn't see or hear anything. Using the wall as support, the rock solid and slippery with rain beside her, she slowly stood, favoring her injured leg, still keeping her body hidden in the cleft. While she could see a little further, she didn't see anything but trees, shrubs, rocks, and the mountain spires rising above. Ugly looking clouds gathered above. Such an unforgiving and wild landscape.

She took a step beyond the opening, balancing herself on the rock wall while remaining behind the brush, moving off to the right. She sought any kind of movement, but nothing was out there. Nothing moved, save the tops of the trees, still waving slightly in the breeze. Leaves shivered in the cooling air, the heavy plop of raindrops falling from their uppermost limbs.

She caught a shadow of something from the corner of her eye and turned toward it, her heart pounding. What if those men were still out there? What if they had found their hiding place?

On closer inspection, she realized that the shadow down below in the trees didn't move like a man. At first, she thought it was a deer, but it was too large. Then she recognized Hugh's horse.

Hugh was right! His horse had come back!

She quickly hurried back into the cave to tell Hugh, but he was still sleeping or unconscious. She couldn't rouse him.

They had supplies back at the hut. If someone was truly after her, or him, they certainly wouldn't expect them to go back there, would they? She wouldn't have to get too close to it to determine whether it was occupied. If it looked deserted, she would return to it, grab as many of their supplies as she could, and then return to the cave.

Gently, she nudged Hugh's shoulder.

Nothing.

She tried again. “Hugh!”

He groaned in response.

“Open your eyes, I need to tell you something.”

He seemed to struggle for several moments, and then she saw the glint of his gaze in the near darkness.

“What... what is it?”

“Your horse is down there. I'm going to go back to the hut, get our supplies—”

“No... too dangerous.”

“Look, we have no food, no water, and you're badly injured. We can't make a fire. We need blankets. I'm going.”

She moved away from him, but he reached out and grabbed her wrist, his grip surprisingly strong in spite of his current condition.

“No, you must not. I just need to rest.” He paused to catch his breath. “My horse will come to me. He will not come to you. You don't know how—”

Dalla didn't want to argue with him, and he was in no position to argue with her anyway.

She would be careful. She *had* to be careful. If she managed to get herself kidnapped—again—Hugh would die alone in this cave. No one would ever know what became of him or where he was. He would never find his brother, never return to his friends or the place he came from, the Duncan lands, of which he spoke with such a sense of pride and belonging.

At that moment, as Dalla rose, prepared to risk her life to help him, she realized that she had begun to grow fond of him despite his rough ways. Despite her situation. Despite the fact that he had bought her, and then forced her to marry him. But, she reflected, he hadn't hurt her. He had injured her pride a time or two, but he'd never hurt her. He'd saved her life. Twice.

And at the most selfish part of her being, she realized that without Hugh, she too, would be lost.

Taking a deep breath, using the piece of wood that had served her well as a crutch so far, she made her way to the opening once more, took another careful look around, and then, stepped carefully away from the cleft in the rock wall, trying to step on rocks and damp pine needles as much as possible to avoid leaving footprints in the soft soil.

She ventured away from the safety and security of the cave opening, her heart pounding. The cloud cover had broken up a bit, leaving her to believe that it was closer to mid-afternoon than evening. Once in a while, the sun shone through the clouds, sending rays of whitish light shimmering through the tree limbs.

Off in the distance, she marveled at a rainbow. Moving slowly and carefully, she made her way down the slope and off to the north a bit, toward the place where she had last seen Hugh's horse. She hoped that she could get the animal to come to her, and that it would trust her enough to let her get on its back, but she wasn't sure. Hugh had said that without him, his horse would not allow her to approach, but it had to let her!

Finally, she caught sight of the gelding, watching her, a short distance through the trees, ears tilted forward, tail so long it nearly swept the ground. She spoke softly, approaching slowly.

"It's okay, boy," she spoke in her native tongue. "I'm not going to hurt you. But Hugh needs us right now, and in order to help Hugh, you have to help me."

She closed the distance between them, and the horse twitched its tail but still didn't move. Whether it was responding to her voice, or mere familiarity, she wasn't sure. When she stood maybe two arm's length away, she paused and slowly extended her hand toward it, palm up.

"Come on, boy, come closer. I need you."

The horse stood still, blew a short, grunt of breath through its nose, and then, lifting its head, ears still pointing forward, approached, one slow, hesitant step at a time. She continued to make crooning, soft noises, not moving, doing her best not to show fear.

Finally, the horse was close enough for it to sniff her hand. Its muscle was soft and fuzzy, nuzzling at her hand. She kept it flat and her fingers together so that it wouldn't take a nip at her fingers.

"That's a good boy," she soothed. "I'll try to find a treat for you," she said. She reached out to stroke its head and scratch lightly at the starburst of thick, white growth of hair between its eyes, and then along its strongly muscled neck. Foregoing her makeshift crutch, she gently raised her hand and grasped his mane.

"You're going to let me climb on you," she said, stepping closer, using the horse for balance now.

To her surprise, it stood unmoving, accepting the touch of her hands with only a slight shiver of its powerful shoulder muscles as she stroked his withers, his neck under his mane, and his chest. "You're a good boy," she crooned. "Now, I'm going to get up on your back, all right?"

The horse stood still. She was surprised that she had even gotten this far and breathed a soft sigh of relief. Now the challenge would be to get on his back. He was huge. She didn't have the strength, nor the ability to grab a handful of mane with one hand, take a semi-running leap to swing herself up onto his back, so she would have to do it the hard way.

Wrapping her hand around a chunk of his long mane in her left hand and placing her hand as far up on his back as she could, she tried to lift herself upward. No good. She sighed with frustration as the horse skittered a bit to the side, away from her.

"It's all right, it's all right," she soothed. "Let's find a place where I can make it easier."

Glancing around, she saw a cluster of logs a short distance away. Still holding onto the horse's mane, she tried to prod it in that direction. At first, he didn't follow her crude instructions, but eventually, he did.

"Come on, boy, good boy. Only a little way to go."

At any moment, the gelding could bolt. She began to hum softly, a Norwegian lullaby. The horse flicked its ears and seemed to settle. Maybe he did like the sound of her voice. Maybe he liked Norwegian better than the harsh, guttural Scottish words that Hugh usually spoke. She shook her head.

They approached the rocks, and she tugged on his mane.

"Okay, boy, let's try again."

She tried to shift him into position, and finally managed to hang onto his mane with one hand as she stepped onto a large rock with her good leg. She would still have to make a bit of a jump to throw herself partly over the horse's back, but when she was there, she felt sure she could scramble astraddle without falling off. Only one way to find out.

"Okay, I need you to hold still for me, all right? We have to help Hugh."

The horse stomped impatiently, flicked its tail, and then blew another short breath from its muzzle. Now or never. The horse grew fidgety.

Quickly, she tightened her grasp on the clump of his mane in her left hand, placed her hand on its back as she had done once before, and then,

still favoring her injured leg, leaped upward. She managed to land halfway across the horse's back, her feet dangling, her torso precariously balanced.

The horse shied a bit to the side, nearly spilling her to the ground. Ignoring the pain in her injured leg, she managed to scramble higher and swung her leg over. She was unbalanced, and the horse uncertain, still scampering sideways, but she once again resumed singing the lullaby which seemed to calm him.

“Good boy,” she soothed, leaning forward to pat his neck. She grabbed his mane with her other hand and leaned her body forward. “Go on now,” she cajoled. “Come on, let's walk.”

The horse merely stood, twitching his ears at the quiet sound of her voice. Riding this half-wild horse without saddle and reins was going to be quite a bit more difficult than what she was used to, which was a gentle mare, sidesaddle, reins, and... w

Well, nothing to be done about that now.

Squeezing her thighs tightly around the barrel of the horse, she tugged on its mane, urging it to go in the direction she wanted, tapping with her heels. He moved off. Again, she heaved a sigh of gratitude. This was a smart horse. Then again, maybe it just wanted to return to the hut, maybe even to the mare, who maybe, just maybe, might have returned.

With one backward glance toward the cleft in the rock wall that she could barely see, she faced forward, her eyes casting to and fro among the trees, doing her best to keep the horse to a sedate walk as they headed downslope. She let the horse lead, knowing that the gelding was more likely to remember exactly where the hut was than she did. The last thing she needed to was to inadvertently run into the group of highlanders, and that strange English man who had tried to kill them.

She still didn't know who they were or what they wanted, but she had a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach that somehow, in some way, news had gotten back to the one it was who had ordered her kidnapping in the first place.

And now they were following her, and when they found her, they would make sure this time that she was dead for good.

Hugh watched Dalla disappear from the opening of the cave, though he tried to get up and stop her. His body refused to do his bidding. Even his voice failed him. He glanced down at his leg, cursed, and fell back, weak as a baby. Unable to protect Dalla, unable to even protect himself.

He lay gasping, forcing back the blackness the clouded around the edges of his eyes, and felt for his knife and ax. They were there. Why hadn't she taken his weapons? She should have taken his weapons!

A myriad of thoughts raced through his head, none of them good. He lay wounded, weak from loss of blood. Dalla was out there, defenseless, and someone had tried to kill him, or her, or both of them.

Pain shot through his leg, and he closed his eyes, then forced them open. It was too easy to fall asleep, as weak as he was.

Dalla said that she had seen highlanders, at least based on her description of their appearance and clothing, and another man dressed in better clothing, but what did that mean? Was she assuming that it was a foreigner? There were plenty of Scottish who did not dress like highlanders, especially in a large city. What would be the purpose of an Englishman traveling all the way from England to southern Scotland and then making his way up-country and into the highlands?

It didn't make sense. She must've been mistaken. She must've seen highlanders, maybe with perhaps some city dwellers, perhaps from the east along the coastline, or maybe even Moray Firth to the northwest.

It grew more difficult concentrate, to push back the edges of blackness the threatened to pull him down into painless slumber. He focused his gaze on the opening in the cave wall. Perhaps they had seen a young lass out by herself, unprotected, and thought to take advantage.

But no... he could not make such a mistake in assuming... she said that she had seen them from a distance, and had hidden, so they couldn't have seen her first and then given chase. They had found her trail and then given chase, or else... or else someone had followed their trail from the seaport... perhaps someone who had not taken kindly to Hugh winning his bid to pay for her for himself.

He sighed, confused, unable to make sense of it. They were in trouble, the both of them. Without him, she would die out there in the wilds, perhaps be kidnapped again, to a fate worse than he even wanted to contemplate. She could become lost and at the mercy of the wild animals. Unbidden, the memory of finding Elyse all those years ago tore through him, prompting a groan.

Even if he was to survive his injury, they were without horses, and winter was fast approaching. He had told Phillip he would return before the first snowfall. And if he didn't? He had no doubt that Phillip would send others, accompanied more than likely by Jake and Maccay, to find Hugh, but they didn't know where he was. All he had told them was that he was venturing north toward the coast. He couldn't recall if he had even mentioned to them his idea of trying to find Derek.

No, if he didn't return to Duncan lands by the first snowfall, there was little chance of his ever returning at all.

He couldn't stop the darkness from encroaching, and finally surrendered to its gentle, soothing waves, pulling him beneath the surface, easing the pain, erasing his worries, and providing him with the rest and the deadness of mind he so needed.

A throbbing pain woke him. After struggling several moments, he managed to open his eyes. His arms and legs felt like dead weights. He couldn't move if he wanted to. He saw nothing but darkness. Alarmed, at first he thought it was because something had gone wrong with his eyes, but then, off in the distance, he heard the hoot of an owl and realized it was night. What time, he knew not. He felt chilled, shivering, wincing with the pain that the shivers caused. Time passed, and he drifted off again.

When he next awoke, he felt as if his body burned. He had a fever. He had the presence of mind to wish that Sarah was here. She would heal him, make him a brew, a healing poultice for his leg, and in his mind, he heard her voice, softly cajoling one minute, then the next, threatening him to open his eyes and fight the pain to take some broth.



THE NEXT TIME he woke and opened his eyes, he was surprised to find that daylight streamed through the crevice in the rock wall. He turned his head and regretted it as everything spun crazily around him. He froze, his eyes riveted to the crevice, waiting for the world to settle around him. The throbbing in his leg had eased slightly. He still felt warm, flushed with heat and knew that he still had a fever. There was nothing he could do.

Birds chirped in the distance.

Then he heard another sound.

The sharp snap of a stick, not far away. Out of place.

He tried to sit up, alarmed that he was only able to lift himself up a few inches before collapsing back onto the ground. It was then that he realized that a blanket covered him, and his head rested on his saddle. What—

His eyes darted toward movement approaching the gash in the rock wall. He tried to reach for his knife but was damnably weak. His heart pounded, his ears ringing. He had to defend himself...

A shadow skewered the opening, and all he could do was stare, waiting for the delivery of the death blow.

Instead, his blurring vision recognized the form that crouched as it slid inside the opening and sat down cross-legged before him.

“Dalla?” he croaked. His voice sounded scratchy and dry.

A hand settled on his shoulder.

“Don't try to move, Hugh,” she said. “If your wound starts bleeding again, I may not be able to stop it this time.”

Confused, he closed his eyes, then opened them again. “Where... what have—”

“I found my way down to the hut,” she explained, speaking slowly, her eyes focused on his. “I found your horse. Agnarr and I brought back your belongings and some food—”

“Agnarr? Who is Agnarr?”

Her face flushed with color. “I named your horse.”

He stared at her a moment. “Why?”

“Because I couldn't keep calling him *horse*, could I? He should have a name. A good name—”

Hugh frowned, about the only movement he could muster without causing pain. “What does it mean, this Agnarr?”

“In the old language,” she began hesitantly, “In the old tongue of my country, it means... it means terror—”

“You named my horse *terror*?”

“No, no... No, today, the name means two things, the edge of the sword, and warrior, put together.” She straightened her back and nodded, as if proud of herself. “It is an honorable name. A proper name.”

He glanced at her clothes, her torn tunic, and then remembered her injury. “Your leg?”

“It's feeling much better, thank you,” she said formally. “The last couple of days, giving it rest—”

He frowned again. “Days?”

“Yes. This is our fourth day here.”

Stunned, he could only stare at her. “How...”

“There is a small stream nearby. I've been feeding you cold broth from those strips of dried meat that were in your hut.” She made a face. “The deer was bloated and full of flies, so it was useless. I brought back your saddle, the blankets, and the pouches that you had filled with berries and wild vegetables. We have made do.” She glanced down at his leg. “Your wound is healing, but you must careful not to move around too much. It has... I am not sure of the word. It has begun to cover itself, but I don't know what is happening inside. If you move around too much it might start leaking again.”

He had underestimated her. She was not nearly as helpless as he had thought. “You have done much. You have saved my life, and—”

“You have saved my life as well, Hugh,” she said softly. “I will be honest. I could not let you die.”

He did not ask her to explain. He knew just as well as she did that if he died, she likely would have died as well. While she had been intuitive enough to find his horse and her way back to the hut, and bring back with supplies, what would she have done if such was not the case? Besides, whoever those people were—

“Did you see any sign of—”

She nodded. “They had found the hut. I saw their tracks around it before they followed yours... or perhaps mine, after I fled. I am not sure. But it must have been after you were wounded, or you would've seen some sign of them when you came back from hunting. Is that right?”

He frowned again. “Of course. There were no tracks around the hut when I returned from the hunt.” This was not good. They were searching for her. He knew it. “Have you heard...” Had they tracked her back here? Had they found his horse? Would they—

“I have hidden Agnarr in the shelter of rocks surrounded by trees. They should not find him. I have covered my tracks between the stream and this cave. Yesterday morning, I did hear some shouts, but no one has ventured close.” She paused. “I believe the storm washed away most, if not all of our trail. But they are still out there, searching.” She lowered her head, then looked at him. “I am positive they are looking for me.”

He nodded. “And they have enlisted some clansmen to help,” he finished. “Word travels fast. If they are offering a reward for you, there will be more involved.” He paused, thinking, trying to come up with a plan.

After several moments, he nodded. “As soon as I can travel, we will go north. To the coast. We will never make it back to Duncan lands traveling over land. We will go by sea.”

She frowned, confused. “By sea? But how—”

Derek. “We will find my brother. He owns—or did, anyway—some ships. He can take us through the channels, between the coastline and the Orkney Islands, and then down through the North Minch along the western coastline. We can make landfall at any of the points along the northwestern coastline and make our way to Duncan lands from that direction. Those hunting you will not expect that.”

“But how will we find your brother?”

That was the only flaw in his plan. How indeed.

Finally, he spoke. “He will find us.”

But would he help?

Dalla wasn't at all sure about Hugh's plan. While she understood his concerns about somebody looking for them, or her rather, the thought of returning to the coast filled her with misgivings. She wasn't sure why.

Surely, along the coastline, she might have a better chance of escaping and finding a way to get back to her native Norway. Then again, should she, or would she, be willing to take such a chance?

She glanced down at Hugh, sleeping now, still recovering from his wound. She had something else to consider. Her growing fondness for him. Out here in the wilderness, just the two of them, they were forced to rely on one another. And he had saved her life, and she had saved his. That put them on equal footing, didn't it? And while she was still his captive, and his somewhat unwilling wife, she didn't want to see him get hurt again, or worse, at least not for her sake.

Nevertheless, she couldn't help but worry. What if his brother refused to help them? As far as she knew, Hugh didn't have a lot of money, perhaps a few coins left tucked into that leather pouch tucked away among his belongings. She had lifted it and surmised that he had very little, without even peeking inside. While the thought had briefly—very briefly—flitted through her mind that she could use that money to bribe someone to help her, she had to be realistic. No one was going to help her. And even if she did manage to get back home, what then?

If his brother didn't help, would that coin be enough to hire someone else to take them by sea to the western coastline, where they would still

have to trek inland to reach Duncan lands?

Questions ran rampant through her mind, over and over again. The more she thought about it, the more she realized that her kidnapping had not been a random act. Someone wanted her to disappear. *Had* that someone been her father or her uncle? Someone else? She didn't know.

She sighed and pushed her disparaging thoughts from her mind.

It was mid-afternoon, the sun was shining, and they needed food. She decided to go down to the stream she had found a couple of days ago, around the rocky cliff face and perhaps a quarter of a league distant. Maybe, if she were fortunate, she would catch a fish. She had found a fishing string in Hugh's belongings, which she had rifled through at one point when he was unconscious, not feeling the least bit guilty about doing so. It had a finely wrought hook attached to one end. The string and hook might be rudimentary, but they would suit her purpose. As far as bait, well, maybe she could dig up some worms along the bank. She had fished much of her life, and had no doubts that she could catch something. While she wasn't particularly fond of eating raw fish, she knew that they could do so, and it wouldn't make them sick as long as she cleaned the fish properly.

Before leaving the opening in the cave, she carefully peered around at the landscape. The underbrush nearby remained still. The trees growing in solitary places along the base of the cliffs and those dotting the slopes moved only with the gentle afternoon breeze. Nearby, a butterfly floated and fluttered about, looking for pollen. A bit further on, near the base of an elm, a squirrel dug for a tasty morsel near the base, occasionally stopping to glance around, flick its tail, then return to its task. Other than the slight breeze, the air was still. No hint of wood smoke from distant campfires, no voices echoing against the rocks—just stillness.

She carefully made her way down to the stream, ever conscious and alert to the sound of horses or voices. Nothing but the twittering of birds, an occasional scolding from a squirrel and the nearby gurgling of the stream met her ears. The sun shone warmly on her back, soaking into the depth of her muscles, easing the strain she had felt over the past days caring for Hugh, worrying that he wasn't going to survive.

She felt so tired, not only physically, but emotionally. Her slumber had been understandably fitful, constantly waking to make sure Hugh was breathing, and no footsteps were approaching their hiding place. Last night, it had gotten chilly enough that, while he slept deeply, she had lain close to

him, soaking in his warmth. Despite the saddle blanket and the one other blanket she had brought back from the hut, the lack of a fire kept them both chilled to the bone.

She sat down on the banks of the stream, hidden in the underbrush growing close to its banks. The stream was maybe two stone throws wide, but it didn't look deep. Its surface was smooth, glistening with brilliant spots of sunlight. A few rocks in its center caused low eddies that rippled gently around them, and tiny waves rhythmically lapped onto the shore.

Here, the landscape was filled with underbrush, but as the slopes rose, towering close growing and towering pines overshadowed the steep slopes of the mountains and the granite spires hovering along the hillsides. In the distance, to the east and north, she saw another mountain range, only the tips of the mountains now glowing an orange-red color with the late afternoon sunlight. The rest of the valley spread away, wreathed in shadow.

Relieved that all seemed calm, she ventured close to the water, digging her hands into the soft soil where the water lapped at the silt. To her pleasure, she did find an earthworm and quickly stabbed it onto her fishing hook, then tossed the string and hook as far as she could into the water. She wished she could venture into the stream itself. It didn't look to be particularly fast running, but she was afraid to expose herself, not only to the cold waters, but to anyone lurking up in the higher elevations who might see her.

For a time, she relaxed, soaking in the warmth, closing her eyes and just listening to the sounds of nature around her. She felt a tug on the string and gently snapped it toward her. She felt the tug again, then slowly pulled it in, a smile lifting her lips as she pulled a medium-sized fish from the water.

She grabbed the slippery fish, pulled the hook from its mouth, then, cringing, slammed the fish down hard on the dirt beside her to quickly kill it.

She dug for another worm, slid it onto the hook, and tossed the string in again. And waited. The sounds reminded her of home, and a surge of painful homesickness rose inside her. She opened her eyes and shook the memories away. Had those fjords ever been home? Truly home? A place to live, certainly, but her ideas of home were now forever jaded. The same was true of—

She heard a sharp snap of a stick in the near distance and froze.

An animal?

Her heart thumping, she quickly tugged in her string and pulled in her legs, quickly backing into a thicker growth of shrubs by the bank, careful not to rustle or shake them. She couldn't see much, but her ears strained for another sound. For several moments, she heard nothing. Had that been a stag stepping on a stick, coming down to the river to drink? A branch falling off of a tree? It could have been.

She hadn't seen—

She caught a whiff of something in the air, frowned, and then recognized it.

Wood smoke.

Where was it coming from?

Ever so carefully, she inched forward, hoping she would be able to peer through the leafy branches of the undergrowth without causing too much of a disturbance. She moved in increments, careful to watch where she placed her hands and knees.

Finally, she was able to creep low enough to the ground to slide forward on her belly. Barely peeking her head past the growth, she first looked downstream, then up, every movement slow so as not to garner attention.

There!

Just before the river rounded a bend to the north, perhaps a half a league in the distance, she saw movement. Two men, dressed in rough clothing and leathers. One of them led a foursome of horses down to the stream to drink. Her eyes widened in dismay as she recognized the mare that Hugh had bought in the village.

It was them!

Somehow, out of coincidence or by following their sign, they had figured out the direction that she and Hugh had escaped.

The man with the horses was joined shortly by another, and then another. At that moment she realized it was the same group of people—three men wearing rougher clothing, native Scotsmen, and there, standing near the edge of the trees, gazing down at the water, stood the other man, dressed in nicer clothes.

They were too far away for her to recognize any of them, but when the man wearing the town clothes moved, striding toward the water, she recognized his walk. She felt nausea rise in her throat as her heart thumped in dismay.

A myriad of emotions swept through her.

Uncle Amund!

No doubt about it. It was her uncle.

Anger—anger such as she had never felt before, surged like a hot fire deep in her belly. The kidnapping had elicited emotions of fear, uncertainty, and the terror of impending death. The voyage in the ship had also evoked an emotional maelstrom, but the anger that she felt at this moment bordered beyond hatred.

Her hands closed into fists. She fought the urge to stand up and confront her uncle, knowing that to do so would be the epitome of foolishness. Doing so would likely mean her impending death, and Hugh's.

She closed her eyes, trying to gain control of her breathing, trying to soothe her shattered spirit, to tamp down that fury that threatened to overcome her better judgment.

Now she knew. No question, no uncertainties, no lingering doubts. The only question that remained was whether her father was involved. Uncle Amund rarely did anything without consulting her father. But this? Then again, her father had never been especially close to her, nor concerned about her welfare as long as she stayed out of his way.

She shut down her mind, not even wanting to contemplate the two of them coming up with this horrid plan to get rid of her.

The convent. Had that even been true or just a ploy to take her away from the estate without triggering her or anyone else's alarm? She shook her head and then looked away from the now despicable and stomach-churning sight of her uncle and ever so slowly, eased her way back into the underbrush.

Dalla constantly looked behind her, watched where she placed her feet before she slithered back further. She snatched the fish she had caught and continued to ease away from the shoreline. It took quite some time to make her way back up the slope and finally gain the shelter of a nearby boulder. Only then did she realize she had left marks on the ground. Her heart still pounded. She had no way to erase those marks she had made. Any slight noise might be heard above the bubbling of the water and garner their attention. Would they find her trail?

She tried to brush away the marks closer to the boulder behind which she momentarily hid, and hunched low to the ground, then quickly made her way back to the cleft in the rocks. She did the best she could to cover her trail, but she couldn't count on that. She doubted that the men would

stray far from their camp with dusk approaching, but she wasn't going to assume anything anymore.

By the time she made her way back to the opening in the wall, her thoughts were racing, her hands trembling with anxiety and fear.

She saw that Hugh was awake, trying to lift himself up on his elbows. Every day he had grown a little bit stronger, but it still took a great deal of effort for him to even sit up, leaning his weight against the rocks behind him.

She stood just inside the opening, staring at him, not sure what to think, what to say, or what to do.

He glanced up at her and then frowned. His muscles tensed as his gaze riveted to hers.

“What is it?” he asked softly.

“It is my uncle,” she finally mumbled, her voice harsh with pain and a heavy sense of betrayal. “It *is* my uncle who did this.”

He frowned. “How do you know—”

“We have to leave, Hugh. They're out there... they're out there!”

Hugh stared in startled dismay at Dalla, who stood shadowed in the opening in the cleft in the wall, but even from the shadows, he could tell that her face was extremely pale.

Dark circles of worry under her eyes became more evident. Her wide eyes, easily visible, the pulse throbbing at the base of her throat alarmed him.

“Take a breath, Dalla.”

She heaved in a deep, shuddering breath and let it out, ending with a half-sob. She clapped a hand over her mouth, blinking back tears. Her reaction forced him to sit straighter, ignoring the pain throbbing in his thigh. He had begun to recover, but it would be a while before he was back to his old self. The fear on her face, the terror, only reinforced his frustration that he wasn't fully capable of protecting her as much as he would like.

“Take another breath, let it out slowly.”

She did.

“Now tell me. What has happened?”

She took another deep, shuddering breath, then pointed behind him, into the rocks of the mountain.

“I went down to the stream to fish. Of course, I stayed in the underbrush where nobody could see me. I don't know how much time passed, but then I smelled wood smoke. Very carefully, I found a good vantage point and saw four men, although there could be more. I didn't stay long enough to find out—”

“Four men. What were they doing?”

“It looked like they were making camp. Several in rougher clothing, like you, Scottish clothing and leathers,” she said, gesturing toward his clothes. “Then I saw our mare—”

Anger surged through Hugh. “Our mare? Are you sure?”

She nodded. “I'm positive. She was tethered with their horses near the trees. They were making camp in a small space between the trees and the riverbank.”

He bit back an urge to confront the thieves. He had paid his good, hard-earned coins on that horse, but without knowing more about the situation, he didn't see a chance of getting her back.

He looked up at Dalla. “Go on.”

“As before, the men who were chasing us, the ones who hurt you... I saw the man in town clothes, or city clothes, or whatever you call them here.” She paused and swallowed. “And I recognized him.”

Again, her features transformed. She wrapped her arms around her waist, as if holding her insides in. She hunched forward slightly and made an odd, gasping sound.

He waited.

“Hugh, I recognized my uncle... Uncle Amund—”

She couldn't speak anymore, her shoulders shaking with quiet sobs. She lowered her face and covered it with her hands. She stood there, trembling, silently crying. The sight surprised him. She had been through so much already and he barely saw her shed one tear. Then again, being betrayed by one's own family, knowing for a certainty that they were trying to kill you... he took a deep breath, trying to plan.

“Gather our belongings.”

“But Hugh, you're still very weak. How can we—”

“You said they're camping on the river. To the northwest?”

She nodded.

“My gelding is on the east side of this rock face, isn't that right?”

Again, she nodded.

“We have to go, now.” He glanced down at the items on the dirt floor around him. “Take it all; the saddle, the blankets, and don't forget the water bladder. We can fill that later. He nodded at the dangling from the fishing string. And that.” The leather pouches that had been packed with wild vegetables and wild berries were empty now. He pointed to them. “And those. Leave nothing behind.”

A shadow fell over the cave opening, and Dalla glanced uncertainly outside. “The clouds are coming in again, and it's growing near dusk. Traveling in the dark—”

“We don't have a choice. Now gather the things.”

She immediately bent down to snatch up the empty pouches and the water bladder, slinging it over her shoulder by its leather strap. She gently pulled the horse blanket from his legs, and the one she'd been using from the ground nearby. She draped both over her shoulders. She reached down for the saddle while he struggled to stand, bracing his hands against the wall behind him as he dug his good foot into the ground and pushed himself upward.

She hurried toward him to help, but he brushed her off. “No. I can do this. Go take those things to the horse—Agnarr—and move quickly and silently. I'm right behind you.”

And he was, just after reaching for his ax and knife on the floor beside him. He gained his feet, but precariously, his leg throbbing with pain and threatening to give way beneath him when he put weight on the ball of his foot. Hugh took a step forward and gritted his teeth, fought the pain, fought the buzzing in his head, and the darkness that threatened to creep around his eyesight.

No! He would not succumb to the pain.

They had to get out of here before they were discovered. Dalla's life depended on it. So did his.

It took him quite a few minutes to meet Dalla where she had tied his gelding. Agnarr. He had to admit that it was a fine name for a fine horse. The gelding blew softly at the sight of him, and Hugh gave him an affectionate pat on his neck.

Dalla was in the process of smoothing the saddle blanket over the horse, the saddle leaning against her lower calf. To his surprise, he noted that Agnarr stood placidly while Dalla did these things, murmuring something to him in her native language. It sounded like a song. Whatever it was, his horse, who normally stomped, blew, and showed his teeth when anyone tried to approach him, even his good friend Maccay, stood calmly while Hugh's new wife saddled him. She had apparently found some way to tame the beast in him.

Hugh's respect for her burgeoned. She had taken care of him during his illness. She had made a thin broth with the leftover vegetables and berries

he had found, soaking the remnants of the dried strips of meat in it before she fed him. She'd cleaned his wound. He wasn't even annoyed that she had obviously gone through his belongings and found his fishing line. She had caught a fish. She wasn't as helpless as he assumed.

He hung onto Agnarr's mane while Dalla moved to grab the saddle, but he spoke softly, halting her. "I'll do that. You keep watch."

Dalla turned her back to him, half-hidden as she stood behind a tree, her gaze searching the landscape nearby and then further out. Her face shone even paler in the waning sunlight of day, and he couldn't help but imagine what was going through her mind.

While he struggled a bit, he one-handedly flung the saddle over the gelding's back, and then balancing the bulk of his weight against the barrel of his horse, managed to secure the saddle, then grabbed a fistful of Agnarr's mane and leaped up onto his back.

"Hand me the things." He would rearrange things later, but for now, they had to concentrate on getting out of the area.

He took the extra blanket and draped it over his lap in front of him. The empty pouches followed suit, their leather straps draped over the rise of his saddle in the front. Without further ado, he extended his hand for Dalla. She clasped her fingers around his wrist, looked up at him, and nodded.

In moments, she sat behind him on the horse, tucked closely behind.

"Wrap your arms around my waist. Try not to move around too much; you're sitting on his kidneys, plus he's carrying both of us. We'll have to stop more frequently to give him rest and allow him to graze."

She nodded her head against his back. She leaned close, and he felt her breasts pressed up against his torso, her arms tightly grasping his waist, her thighs touching his.

A host of feelings and emotions flooded through him as he tugged Agnarr's reins from the tree around which Dalla had wrapped them. Fear for Dalla, rage for him. The highlanders had stolen his mare, were obviously after his bride, and now forcing his hand. They were canvassing the area, looking for signs to determine which direction they were traveling. The Scotsmen would probably tell Dalla's uncle that they would most likely turn south, heading for central Scotland, away from the coastline.

While Hugh's original intention had been to seek out his brother for a reunion of sorts, having to do it under his present circumstances, wounded

and with a woman—his bride no less—and being hunted, had thrown his plans into disarray.

Softly, he clucked to Agnarr and tugged on his reins, turning his head northeast. It was slow going as he carefully guided his horse through the darkening forest, careful to keep him away from stones which a hoof could graze against, the sound echoing loudly in the growing darkness.

They topped a rise as the moon rose, giving him just enough light to look for the safest way down a rather steep slope dotted with curiously twisted rock spires. To the east lay the mire and bogs, but directly to the north rose rocky cliffs, spires, and canyons, looking dark and menacing in the growing darkness.

He studied the landscape for several more moments, then decided that the best route would be to hug the base of the cliffs, while at the same time trying to avoid the softer, mushy ground of the bogs. While he preferred to move toward the middle of that area, toward softer ground, he didn't want to take the chance of his horse stumbling, or of the light of the rising moon casting its light down on them. It would be slow and treacherous going, but they had no choice.

He swore under his breath, wished once again that he had never left Duncan lands, that he had not gone into the tavern for a mug of ale, that he hadn't... he sighed.

No use bemoaning what had already happened. He had to focus on one thing, and one thing only. Protect Dalla.

Then find his brother and hopefully convince him to provide them with some form of transportation to the western coastline of Scotland, where they could eventually make their way back to Duncan lands, losing their pursuers along the way.

Hugh and Dalla traveled through the night. Dawn was just beginning to brighten the sky to the east, the air chilly and damp with moisture. He felt the weight of Dalla's sleeping form against his back and straightened to offer her more support.

During the night, he passed her the other blanket, which she had wrapped around herself and him, grasping the edges in her hands, again clasped around his waist. His leg throbbed with pain, an ever-present sensation that, though unpleasant, he had by now grown used to. Throughout the night, he had not felt the wound open up nor the hot trickle of blood, but he still moved carefully.

They had dismounted twice during those long, dark, cold hours to take care of nature's needs, and allow Agnarr to empty his bladder and graze for several minutes while they stretched and carefully moved around. Dalla moved stiffly, her movements jerky. He wasn't sure if that was because of her physical exhaustion or her emotional trauma, perhaps both. For his part, and holding on to a tree branch, he took a few steps in each direction, gritting his teeth against the bolt of pain that jarred every muscle in his body when he put his weight down on his injured leg.

He had to do it. Sarah, the healer back home, had done much the same—had insisted on it actually—with Jake after he began to recuperate from the wound in his own thigh that he had received during the Battle of the Largs. That wound had refused to heal, no thanks to Ceana poisoning Jake, but eventually, Sarah had been able to mend the wound and cleanse Jake of the poisons swimming through his body. And then, much to Jake's

annoyance and muttered grumblings, Sarah had forced him out of bed and made him take several steps to his bedroom window and then back again before she would allow him to once again lay down. She had told him the movement would prevent his muscles from dying, leaving his leg useless.

Sarah was a force to be reckoned with, but, as it was turning out, so was Dalla. For such a tiny thing, she did have courage. She had not abandoned him. Of course, it would have been foolish of her to try. He gave her more sense than that. She had cared for him, something that he would never forget no matter how things turned out.

“How far to the coast?” she asked softly.

He shrugged. “We should get there in another day or two.” He hobbled his way back to the horse. “When we get there, you will say nothing, understood? You do not open your mouth, you do not say a word.”

She looked at him as if she were going to protest, but he lifted a hand, stopping her.

“If anyone asks, you are my wife, but you are mute. Wearing those clothes and riding with me, I doubt anyone will question that. But if you speak, they will know you are not a Scot, much less from the highlands. Understood?”

She nodded. “Hugh...?”

He frowned. “What?”

“This brother of yours... how long is it been since you have seen him?”

He glanced at her, preparing to leap onto the back of his horse. It took a huge amount of effort and not a little bit of pain.

“Too long,” he muttered.

He situated himself in his saddle and then once again reached down for her. Soon, she settled behind him as before, draped the blanket around her shoulders, and they continued on.

“Are you close, you and your brother?”

“I haven't seen him in many years. It doesn't matter.”

“But what if he doesn't want to help us?”

“He may not like it, but he will,” Hugh grumbled. “Now enough questions.”

“But if he doesn't want to, what are we going to do? How can you make him?”

“I will not have to make him. And even if he doesn't want to, he *will* help us.”

“But how—”

“We are brothers. Besides, he owes me.”

“Owes you? Owes you for what?”

“For saving his life. Now, enough talk.”

He guided Agnarr to the northeast, his gaze continually scanning the landscape, now glowing purple, pink, and varying shades of bluish black as the sun peeked its dome over the easternmost horizon. The air felt sharp, clear for the time being anyway. The long grasses of the dale through which they rode were heavy with the morning dew.

Despite his confidence in responding to Dalla's questions, he really was not sure how this brother would react to his sudden appearance. But Derek did owe him. Hugh had saved his life, not long before Derek had left the clan for good. They'd been out hunting on a beautiful, warm spring morning. Snow still dogged shady areas and along the slopes of Ben Nevis looming high overhead.

Derek had just taken aim on a massive stag with his bow and arrow. The moment he released his arrow, burying it deep just behind the shoulder and dropping the stag with one shot, they had heard the noise.

An unmistakable noise in the highlands, and most especially from those always wary of the encroachment of warring clans. The sound of a stone hitting another, often inadvertent, caused by a horse hoof, a misplaced step, or even an outright challenge.

Hugh had spun around and stepped in front of his brother, his own arrow nocked in his bow. He recognized two of the bloody Orkney clansmen, both with arrows aimed toward them, ready to let loose. Hugh had let out a shout, released his arrow, watching the satisfaction as it buried itself into the chest of one of them.

Derek, who had been jogging toward the fallen stag, spun around and stumbled with a curse. Hugh quickly reached for another arrow from his quiver, nocked it, drew back, and let that arrow fly before the second Orkney recovered from his surprise—his mistake.

Derek had told him that someday he would repay his brother for saving his life. They both knew and quietly admitted that while Derek was the better hunter, Hugh was the better warrior. His quick thinking, his excellent skills, and his uncanny ability to sense danger had saved them both.

The sun broke over the horizon, bathing the land in a soft, yellow glow.

He inhaled deeply, relishing the scents floating in the air, enjoying the feeling of Dalla's torso pressed close against him, the warmth emanating from Agnarr's back. If it weren't for the fact that Dalla's uncle obviously sought her death, and the fact that unknown clansmen were helping them, he might almost have enjoyed the morning.

He kept Agnarr close to the hills, remaining in the cool shadows of morning, not wanting to leave obvious signs of their passing if at all possible. Toward midmorning, they topped yet another rise. There, way down below, stretched a rocky coastline. The wind blew the scent of salt water into the air. Agnarr blew restlessly, then shook his head.

Dalla roused from her half slumber and, resting her chin on his shoulder, also looked toward the eastern horizon.

“Now what?”

He barely spared a glance in her direction as he pointed toward the south. “I see smoke from early morning fires. There's a town over there. I will find a place for you to hide and then I will ride into town and see what I can find out.”

He felt her stiffen behind him.

“You want to leave me here? Alone?”

This time, he did twist slightly in the saddle to look at her. He nodded. “I will go down alone, into this town. I will find out if I can learn anything of someone hunting a Norwegian captive. And then I will ask about my brother. I will come back for you.”

He had changed his mind about bringing her into the town with him, at least for this first foray into a coastal hamlet. He was hoping that he could mingle with the villagers starting their morning chores, or the seafarers readying their lines and nets along the coast. He wasn't even sure if this town had a dock, but sooner or later, he knew he would learn where his brother had his shipping company. If he was lucky, he was close. If not, well, he would worry about that later.

To his surprise, he felt Dalla squeeze her arms tightly around his waist.

“Hugh, please don't leave me here alone. Not again.”

Her words surprised him. Again, he turned to look at her. “You think I'll just leave you out here in the wilderness by yourself? Let the wild animals or those people after us have you with no fight?”

She shook her head. “No, it's not like that. It's... well, it's...”

He moved his hand and unlaced her fingers from around his waist. Then he grasped her forearm, nudging her over the side of the horse.

“What? What are you doing?”

He didn't like the tremor of fear he heard in her voice. What was happening to her? She'd been so brave up until this point.

“We're just dismounting, Dalla.”

She allowed him to lower her to the ground and he followed. He held onto Agnarr's reins with one hand and reached for her hand with the other.

“What is wrong?”

He couldn't help but notice the way she looked at him, not with hatred or anger, but... concern? He did acknowledge that the two of them had been through quite a time since that moment he bought her, but what was she—

Tentatively, she reached a hand toward him and placed it on the arm holding hers. “I don't want to be left alone again,” she said softly. Firmly. “In that cave, with you so injured, I felt so... so alone.” She straightened her shoulders and looked at him, her expression almost fierce. “I am your wife now.” She gestured with her chin down toward the coast and the distant sight of buildings. “Where you go, I go. I will not open my mouth. But please, don't leave me alone again.”

He frowned. What was this? “I will leave you with a weapon—”

“Hugh, you don't understand.”

No, he didn't, and he wasn't sure, if she didn't start speaking more clearly, if he ever would. What was she—

Suddenly, she took a step closer to him, placed her other hand on his shoulder, then leaned up on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. Her lips felt soft and warm against his stubble, and for the first time since he'd acquired her, he acknowledged the stirrings of desire, or least feelings that he was willing to recognize.

He tried not to think about it, the growing attraction and respect that he felt for her and her courage. She could've left him to die, but she hadn't. Then again, he could've left her in the bog to die, and he didn't do that either. When he looked at her now, he no longer saw images of Elyse, but he did see Dalla Jorstad McInnis, a woman whom he respected and, if he was to admit it to himself, one he admired for her often stubborn, brash, and even haughty attitude.

He sighed and turned his face toward hers, then lowered his head and kissed her, his lips meeting hers, gently, ever so tenderly at first, unsure how

she would react.

To his surprise, she met the pressure of his lips equally. Almost shyly, she broke off the kiss and then rested her head against his chest. He let go of her arm and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, and she did the same with her arms around his waist. The moment lasted only briefly, but it was enough.

It was enough.

They stood that way for several moments while his thoughts raced. This changed everything. She was not his slave, not his captive, not his wife in name only.

He liked the feeling of her head resting against his chest, the way her shoulders pressed into him, seeking whatever it was she sought. It had been a long, very long time since he had ever felt this way. So long since he had held a woman in his arms like this. He of all people knew how very short and uncertain life could be.

He understood now.

She didn't want to be left alone because she worried about him, felt a connection to him and truth be told, since the injury, he had begun to feel much the same.

Two stubborn people, both refusing to express themselves until absolutely necessary. He lifted his head, looking off into the distance, imagining how Maccay would chuckle over his stubbornness to recognize what he had; what he'd had since the moment he had pulled out his pouch of coins in that tavern only days ago.

“All right, you may come with me. But you must not utter a word. Understood?”

The smile she gave him warmed his heart.

“I understand.”

Dalla had been wrong. With Hugh's arms wrapped tenderly around her shoulders, she realized that she had been wrong. Not all Scotsman were animals. Not all highlanders were barbarians.

Of course, she'd only known Hugh, so she had very little to go by, but at the same time she realized that she had allowed her prejudices to grow against any reference to Scots in Scotland, much and as it was likely that the Scots did the same toward the Norwegians.

She sighed, listening to Hugh's heartbeat, enjoying the warmth of his torso, sensing every minuscule movement of his musculature as they stood, wrapped in one another's embrace. Was this the beginnings of love? She didn't know. She'd never been in love before. Affection? Maybe. Likely. Maybe even stronger than affection. She'd never felt this way before toward any man. All she knew was she didn't want to be left behind again, and then as Hugh's wife, willing or not, she felt that her place now was by his side, not hiding.

Abruptly, he released his grasp and gently nudged her away from him, hands on her shoulders, gazing down at her face.

"We have changed," he said simply.

She nodded.

"This is good, but it does not remove the dangers. Your uncle wants you dead. For what reason, I do not know, but it will be dangerous for you to be seen with me. You have an unforgettable face."

As though to emphasize, he stroked his fingers along the side of her face, tracing her jawline, then nudging her chin upward to maintain eye

contact.

Her heart skipped a beat, and once again, feelings for him burgeoned, but she couldn't define them. Not specifically. It was all so confusing, but at the same time thrilling. And yet... and yet behind it all lay the aura of danger. This was no game.

"I am not sure which is riskier... leaving you out here somewhere, or taking you into a town with me."

"Let's go find your brother," she said simply.

After all, either they managed to escape their pursuers, or they did not. Either way, she decided that it would be best for them to meet the dangers together.

He offered a nod, then once again mounted his horse, pulling her up after him.



FINDING HUGH'S brother was not as easy as it originally sounded. By mid-afternoon, Hugh and Dalla rode into the third seaside village, garnering curiosity with her appearance, a woman dressed in man's clothes, riding double as they were, strangers to the area.

She returned gazes coolly, without hesitation, not arrogantly, but showing no sense of intimidation either. Acting like a Scot.

In every village, Hugh guided Agnarr down to the seaside, their buildings, and short docks, asking for Derek McGinnis. Sometimes, when he needed to go inside a tavern, she waited outside with the horse. He would always return moments later, his frown growing ever deeper with each one. In the last town they'd passed through, a little larger than the one they now entered, he had been directed to a structure close down by the beach where waves rhythmically slapped the shoreline, gently rolling in. The structure served as a shipping company of sorts. There, he inquired once again for any information about Captain Derek McInnis or his ships.

This time, Hugh had been fortunate. He was directed up the coast, and now they approached yet another small village whose name she couldn't pronounce let alone understand. It nestled along the shoreline of a small inlet or harbor, its shores dotted with rocks. An unlikely location for any

shipping business, as the water here certainly didn't look deep enough to accept the draft of a goods-laden ship.

Nevertheless, Hugh paused his horse on a hill looking down into the village, dotted with thatch-roofed huts, and down closer to shore, bustling activity. As they headed downslope toward the activity on the beach, they rounded a small hill, and it was then that she saw two ships anchored out to sea, beyond the breakwater. That made sense, but if the ship was loading or unloading goods, its location and the need for smaller boats to transport those goods to shore seemed foolish. Why not just have the goods transported to a better port city?

At any rate, she shrugged off her curiosity and her questions, not really concerned about how these coastal Scots did their business. What she did feel was a nearly overwhelming sensation of loss and homesickness as she inhaled the sea air, felt the salt against her skin, the breeze coming off of the sea wafting through her hair. The sudden pain that caught in her chest was so overwhelming she nearly gasped.

As they had ridden from village to village, Hugh had clearly grown more discouraged with each failure to find his brother.

She attempted to break the ever longer growing silences by asking him about his brother. At first, he seemed extremely reluctant to talk about him, but as they rode, and he spoke more of their early years, she saw an occasional smile. He carried regrets, she was sure of that, but who didn't?

And then she asked the question that had cornered the bulk of her curiosity. "Why has it been so long since you've seen him? He still lives in Scotland, isn't that right?"

"I believe so," he sighed. "Although I'm not sure anymore. I'm just going by what Jake told me. He saw my brother a few years ago. Derek told him that his contract with the King of the Scots had expired and he was starting a shipping business along the coast. I would've assumed that meant Scotland."

"So you two went your separate ways. You stayed with the Duncan clan and he ventured to the sea."

He shook his head. "When he left Duncan lands, he fought with the Scots against your countrymen," he shrugged. "That's when Jake saw him. Jake was a soldier, wounded at the Battle of Largs, then taken to a small town after he was wounded. It was there that he saw Derek. At the time,

and Derek was running supplies to the coastline, breaking through barricades set by Norse ships in the sea.”

Dalla knew little about battles and conscriptions, soldier's obligations, and so forth. She did know that the Norwegians and the Scots had been at war since she was little, and so she declined to comment on the continued warfare between them. What she did know was that running a blockade was a very dangerous and risky endeavor. Then again, if Hugh's brother was anything like him, she supposed it wasn't surprising.

“You haven't seen him at all in the intervening years?”

Hugh shook his head. “There was a letter or two in the beginning. But then those too stopped.” He offered a shrug. “Until Jake saw him, I didn't even know he was still alive.”

Dalla instinctively knew that Hugh was probably struggling with doubts. Could they find his brother? And even if he did, would the man help them? He could be out to sea. He could be dead now for all Hugh knew.

Their fourth visit to a coastal village proved as fruitless as the first three. By this time, dusk had begun to settle over the land.

“It's growing late. We should find shelter.” He turned the horse away from the coast and into low rolling, brush-covered hillsides until he found a likely spot sheltered from the ever-present sea breezes.

She felt exhausted and was happy for the rest. To her surprise and discomfort, he handed her down from Agnarr but remained mounted. She looked up at him in question.

“Stay here. I'm going to ride back to the village and buy some food. I saw a tavern back there. I'll go ask about Derek and return shortly.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but then decided she would rather stay where she was. Her legs and back ached from riding the horse for hours on end. The place Hugh had chosen was sheltered and secluded, hidden by brush, the combination of sand and soft dirt beneath her feet providing a warm cushion upon which she could lay and rest her aching bones.

With a sigh, she sank down to the ground, grateful for the brief respite. “You'll be back before dark?”

He nodded. “I'll be back before dark.”

And with that, he turned his horse and rode away.

Dalla watched him go, trying to ignore her worries, thinking only to take advantage of this time to rest. How far they had yet to go, how far they

would have to follow the coastline before they found his brother, was uncertain. She also worried about her uncle. Had he found traces of them back at the cave in the wall of rocks? Had they found their trail and followed them to the coast?

She was not naïve. What she still didn't know—and perhaps didn't want to know—was whether her father or anyone else in the extended royal family was involved in her kidnapping. She knew one thing. Her uncle couldn't take the chance of anyone finding out. Therefore, she knew without a doubt that he would not cease looking for her until her body lay cold and dead at his feet.

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Darkness had nearly fallen over the land when, finally, Dalla heard the sound of a horse approaching. A short-lived grunt followed by a tired whinny prefaced Agnarr's appearance as he wound his way among the bushes toward her resting place, where she had remained for the past couple of hours, growing increasingly worried about what was keeping Hugh.

The relief that surged through her when she saw Hugh surprised her with its strength.

She rose and smiled, reaching for the two dried fish dangling from a string that he handed her, but then she saw the look on his face.

Immediately, she felt a chill. "What is it?"

Before answering, he gestured for her to sit down. He quickly unsaddled Agnarr, tied his reins to a nearby shrub, and then took the fish from Dalla's hand. With his knife, he cut off the heads and the tails, and fins, tossed them into the shrubbery, and then twisted each fish in half, handing two pieces to Dalla while he also kept two pieces for himself.

"My brother is at the next seaport, maybe a day's ride from here."

Dalla brightened as she gazed down at the fish. "That's wonderful news—"

He nodded and then continued. "In the tavern, I was asked from whence I came. Nothing unusual about that, a newcomer in many parts. I told them I came from inland. Then a man spoke to me... a man sitting in a dark corner of the tavern."

The tone of his voice did not bode well.

Dalla swallowed, her appetite suddenly gone. “What did he say?”

“He wanted to know if I had seen a young, blonde-haired woman, a Norwegian lass, traveling with a highlander.”

Dalla glanced down at the fish, not wanting to eat anymore, feeling sick to her stomach. But she knew she had to. She took a bite out of the fish, careful to avoid the fine bones, made herself chew, then swallowed. “He was a Scot?”

Hugh nodded. “It appears there's quite the reward for your capture. To be honest, I'm surprised that sight of you at the other two villages we passed through didn't provoke any trouble. The man gave a good description of you.” He glanced at Dalla, bit into his own fish, chewed for a moment, then spat out some bones. “Word is that you're a spy—”

She gasped. “A spy?”

A sensation of horror swept through her. She had no doubt what would happen to her if she was captured now, no questions asked. No one would believe anything she had to say. She felt the fish she had swallowed roiling uncertainly in her stomach. She gazed down at the rest of it, and then up at Hugh.

“You must eat.”

She said nothing.

“Apparently, from what I was able to discern, of course following some innocent yet interested questions to the man, the reward is sizable, offered by a foreigner, most likely your uncle, although how he has managed to gain the trust of the highland clans in search for you, I have no idea.”

Dalla thought a moment, plucking strips of meat from the now tasteless fish and chewing thoughtfully, despite a nearly overwhelming urge to spit it out. “My uncle has money. Plenty of money. He also knows people in powerful positions. I am not at all surprised that he has managed to bribe his way this far inland, nor his ability to promote the... interest of the highlanders to capture me.”

Neither one of them said anything for several minutes. Hugh finished eating his fish and tossed the rest of the bones into the shrubs. While Dalla did manage to choke down one of hers, she wordlessly handed the other to Hugh. He shrugged, ate the fish and then tossed those bones into the shrubs as well.

“We will camp here for the night. A cold camp I am afraid, but nothing we can do about that now. Tomorrow, we will move quickly, staying in the

foothills whenever possible, before we get to the village where my brother has made his home base. From what I learned, he now owns three ships, supplying cargo from France, England, and Spain to Scottish cities and outlying islands, and then back again.”

Dalla couldn't help but worry. What if Hugh's brother was of the same attitude as most Scots? What if he refused to help them? What if he hated her on sight? What then?

It was as if Hugh read her thoughts.

“Try not to worry. If my brother will not help us, or cannot, I will find a way to get you home, away from the clutches of your uncle and those who want you dead. My laird will help us, of that I assure you.”

Home. The word evoked both fear and hope within her. Sadness that she would never return home to her native Norway, nor her beloved fjords. She knew that now. Perhaps she would eventually adapt to life here in Scotland, building a life among the Scots.

Chances were, however, that she would never be accepted, nor truly trusted, as long as her country and theirs remained at war. It boded a discouraging and disappointing future for her.

“Come, let us get some sleep. Tomorrow will be filled with its own dangers and worries. For tonight, we will sleep. Tomorrow, we will worry about tomorrow.”

Hugh bedded down and then gestured for Dalla to join him. He wasn't sure if she would, but much to his relief, she lay down next to him. He placed his arm under her head and then held her close. He felt her trembling against him, but she said nothing. Much to his surprise, she reached her left hand over his torso to grasp his right, and held it over his stomach.

A feeling of contentment surged through him. Despite the danger, and in spite of the uncertainty that tomorrow would bring, this was a start. He also knew, deep down in the depths of his being, that he would do whatever he could to keep her safe.

He tried not to display his deep concern over the fact that there was now a bounty on Dalla's head, and most likely, on his as well if he was captured with her.

The animosity between the Scots and the Norwegians was fierce. He would not betray her by claiming he didn't know who she was. Her accent would ultimately give her away. It was imperative that she understood how important it was that she not speak if they were seen together. Up until now, she had done well, but tomorrow would bring new dangers and new threats.

He knew where to find Derek, in a village about a day's ride up the coast. A moderately sized seaport on the northern outcropping between Moray Firth and Spey Bay. The village was unfamiliar to Hugh. Now all he had to do is convince his brother to help them. If possible, he wanted his brother to take them by ship around the northern tip of the country through Pentland Firth, then down along the western coastline into the Minch. From

there, they could possibly venture into Loch Broom, making landfall at the southeastern point of the loch and then make their way overland from there through the mountains, and southeastward toward Ben Nevis and the Duncan lands.

Even if they did manage to get that far, the overland travel would be dangerous, as they would need to venture through the lands of enemy clans such as the Orkneys and the McGregor's. It seemed impossible, but they had no other options. With so many looking for Dalla in this region as it was, he seriously doubted that they would get far before someone picked up on their trail. The bounty was huge. There was no longer any doubt in his mind that Dalla's uncle wanted her head and would be satisfied with nothing less.

For now, he wanted to appreciate the feeling of her lying next to him. He heard her breath, low and regular, convincing him she was fast asleep. For days, she had not complained about her situation or her fate. He couldn't imagine the thoughts and dreams swimming in her head.

One thing he did know, and that he had not lied about. Whether Derek helped them or not, he would find a way to get Dalla back to Duncan lands. After that, Laird Duncan, Jake, and the others could figure out what to do and how to keep Dalla safe. It wouldn't be the first time they had sheltered a woman in dire straits. If anyone understood his predicament, it would be Maccay. Though their situations have been entirely different, Alis had also been a marked woman, one who could have easily have been killed if not for the Duncans providing protection, to the point of breaking a truce with enemy clans.

And if that didn't work, Hugh would take Dalla somewhere far away from Duncan lands, away from the place where he had spent most of his years in the shadows of Ben Nevis. If he had to go to France, he would do so.

The conviction of his determination and his growing feelings for Dalla gave him strength. The strength of knowing he was doing the right thing.

She not only belonged to him, but she was his responsibility now.

He took that responsibility seriously.

The following morning dawned cold and chilly, with a thick fog rolling in off the sea, cutting visibility down to just over a stone's throw. While that was good for Hugh and Dalla because they could leave the area under cover of the fog, it also triggered new dangers. He didn't know the coastline, didn't know the hiding places, the potential for where an attack might come. And though he was sure that Dalla had not been spotted in this town, she had been with him in the few before. She had kept herself covered in the blanket as much as possible, but...

He knew that gossip would travel faster than they could, so they would have to push themselves and his horse to reach Kincarny before day's end. Then, if his luck held, his brother would be there and not out to sea somewhere.

Nevertheless, as Hugh saddled Agnarr, jumped on, and helped Dalla onto the horse's back, he was already planning for a worst-case scenario. If he didn't find his brother in Kincarny, he would have to go inland again. Toward less populated areas where rumors wouldn't travel as fast. He could survive even the harshest that the wilderness had to offer, but with winter coming on, he just wasn't sure whether Dalla could.

For a while, maybe a few leagues, he kept his horse to the coastline, hugging sand dunes, keeping the sound of the ocean in earshot. As the fog began to burn off, he headed further into the rugged foothills.

It was rough going at times, to the point where Agnarr had to carefully pick out the route in the pebbles and rocky base of the cliffs rising above.

He also knew that his horse was tired, bearing the weight of both of them. He'd stumbled more than once yesterday.

Another sobering thought. The thought of something happening to his beloved gelding prompted Hugh to slow his pace even though he wanted to push forward.

As the day wore on, the weather changed. Heavy cloud cover moved in from the sea, from the northeast, bringing with it a biting icy chill. He constantly found himself looking over his shoulder, watching for signs of anyone following them.

Soon, Dalla did the same. Her grip on his torso tightened. He felt her fear and occasional quiver. He could say nothing to ease it. By the time the dull glow of sun burning through the clouds reached its zenith, they were both on edge. They had barely spoken five words to each other since they left their hiding place near the beach.

Then, in the distance, he saw tendrils of smoke rising into the cloudy sky, now growing ever darker, another fog bank rolling in.

“Is that it? Is that Kincarny?” she asked.

He nodded.

The sight of the town provided a sense of relief, but at the same time, uncertainty. His heart began to pound at the thought of reuniting with his brother, and he grew tenser as they made their way closer to the town, which from here looked deserted. A light rain began to fall, cold, icy, and uncomfortable. The breeze kicked up, and soon, the rain came down harder. Not a downpour, not yet, but Hugh wouldn't have been all surprised if it started to snow.

By the time they reached the outskirts of the village, Dalla had done her best to cover herself and her hair with the blanket, once again wrapping her arms around his torso, clasping the edges of the blanket in front of him as well.

Inside the blanket, it was like he'd been enveloped in a warm cocoon. He felt the pressure of her forehead against his back. She obviously didn't even want to look around. Probably for the best.

The village wasn't as big as he had expected, but was larger than the past two through which they had traveled. A cluster of thatched-roof houses hugged the steep hillsides rising from the shoreline. Larger structures, some with thatched roofs, some with roughhewn planks, nestled along the shoreline.

In the distance, in a small harbor, several ships were anchored, rocking gently with the waves. Several small piers jutted out into the water, fishing boats and other small craft were tied to it, bobbing up and down on the waves.

Then Hugh spied a wooden building, outfitted with its own small pier behind it. On the wood was painted a sign.

McInnis Shipping.

Hugh's heart gave a leap of excitement. He straightened in the saddle and urged Agnarr in the direction of the pier. The building lay horizontal to the shoreline, and he spied a large door at the closer end, probably intended for loading shipments in and out of the structure.

Two men stood near the small pier, talking; one gesturing, the other pointing to one of the ships in the harbor. Then the taller of the two disappeared into the building.

Hugh guided his horse toward the man, who turned when he heard the horse approaching.

The man took one look at Hugh, and his mouth dropped open.

"I'm looking for Derek... Derek McInnis," Hugh said. "Is he here?"

The man continued to stare open-mouthed and Dalla shifted her position, peeking over his shoulder.

The man looked from Hugh to Dalla, then back at Hugh, and then finally nodded. He had just turned to call into the building when the man Hugh had seen earlier stepped out into view.

Despite his fear, despite his hesitance and his uncertainty as to what would follow, Hugh stared as his brother emerged from the small warehouse.

"Derek."

Dalla gasped when Derek turned toward them, staring at him with the same sense of bewilderment as he stared at his own brother.

She waited with bated breath for his brother to say something, to display some sign of acknowledgment. She wasn't the only one.

"You're twins!" Dalla stammered, her breath warm against his ear.

"Well, look who's here," Derek said, stepping closer, his eyes riveted on Hugh, then turned to what he could see of Dalla's face.

Dalla's grasp on Hugh's torso tightened still more.

Derek strode closer, eyes narrowed, a frown marring his brow.

“From what I understand, brother, you are a wanted man. And so is your lovely Norwegian bride.” He turned abruptly and headed back into the warehouse, calling over his shoulder. “You two come inside where no one can see you. I don't need to borrow any more trouble than I already have.”

With that, Hugh quickly lowered Dalla to the ground, following close behind, his heart pounding, barely able to hide the grimace of pain as the damp air irritated the wound in his leg, prompting him to favor it.

Holding tightly onto Dalla's hand, just in case she decided to bolt, he limped toward the warehouse.

The moment they passed through the threshold, the door slammed shut, and he turned to face his brother.

Hugh stared at his twin, while Derek stared back. Dalla glanced at Hugh, his eyes were wide and dazed, and he wore an almost tentative smile.

What did he expect? To see his brother as he had been when they had last looked upon each other's faces? Did his twin brother look so much older than he remembered?

Other than Hugh's longer hair and Derek's sun-darkened skin, the two were indeed identical. The same faint lines at the corner of the eyes, the stubbled cheeks, the experience and of life lived shining behind those eyes. Their build was the same although Derek was perhaps a bit less muscular, his loose-fitting canvas pants tucked into high leather boots and his long-sleeved, flowing shirt disguised his actual build. Nevertheless, the width of the shoulders, the muscular hands, the narrow waistlines and long legs; they were indeed the same.

Dalla froze, waiting for one of them to say something, to express some emotion. Something.

Finally, it was Derek who lifted an eyebrow, slightly tilted his head, as if not quite believing what he saw. Then, very briefly, his gaze flicked toward her and then back to Hugh.

"I heard rumors about a highlander who came to the coast and bought himself a Norwegian slave," he said, his voice thick and gravelly.

Dalla felt her stomach clench as his gaze turned to her, assessing, almost... accusing? She stiffened.

“A Norwegian lass who not only has a bounty on her head, but on the man who bought her.”

Hugh offered a small shrug. “You happen to be talking about my wife.”

A bark of laughter erupted from Derek, but an instant later the humor had faded, and he narrowed his eyes at his brother.

“I didn't even know if you were still alive, Hugh.”

Hugh nodded. “And I often wondered the same.” He looked around the interior of the warehouse, stacked with wooden crates and bulging canvas sacks. Hundreds of dried fish hung in bunches from leather thongs from the rafters. “You've done well for yourself.”

“Aye, I have,” Derek nodded.

Dalla felt confused. These two hadn't seen each other in years, and yet this was like no reunion she had ever witnessed. The two brothers seemed awkward with one another. Hesitant. Wary.

She stood to the side and slightly behind Hugh. Would Derek let loose with a shout and betray his brother, and her? What would—

“I was sorry to hear about Elyse,” Derek murmured, gesturing toward a cluster of boxes of stacked against a wall. “Sit.”

Hugh took her hand and guided her toward the boxes.

She sat, relieved to sit on something that wasn't moving for a change. She kept a wary gaze on Derek, who stared at her with curiosity, taking a spot across from his brother. The two couldn't stop staring at one another.

“Explain.” Derek said, knees spread, arms crossed over his chest, waiting, his gaze darting between the two of them.

Hugh glanced down at the floor, slowly shaking his head before looking up at his brother. “I came for two reasons...”

“The first then. What brings you to the coast, so far from the highlands of your heart?”

Hugh offered a slight frown but not of anger. “I came to find you... to tell you that...”

Derek lifted an eyebrow, waiting.

“Our mother passed away.”

Derek didn't blink, didn't move, didn't breathe. After several moments, he dipped his head and uttered a soft sigh, and whispered words that Dalla couldn't make out.

When he looked up at his brother, his face had lost some of its color and the pulse in his neck throbbed. He offered a nod. “You buried her well? In

the lands she loved?”

“Aye,” Hugh said. “She is at peace on the land of the Duncans.”

“Good... good,” Derek said, his voice soft. He inhaled and then straightened. “And the second reason?”

“I was feeling a bit nostalgic,” Hugh began with a shrug. “Everyone's getting married, and I was feeling a bit... stifled,” he began.

“Who got married?” Derek frowned.

“The Laird—”

Again, Derek let loose a hoot, slapping a hand on his knee. “Phillip got married? To who?”

“Long story,” Hugh said. “And then Jake went and married her sister—”

“Jake married too?” Derek asked, eyes wide with dismay. “Whose sister?”

“Phillip married a healer from the lowlands named Sarah. Jake married her younger sister, Heather.”

Derek lifted a calloused hand to scratch at the stubble on his cheek, amusement on his face. “Will wonders never cease...” He returned his attention to Hugh. “Go on.”

Hugh sighed. “Just a couple of months ago, Maccay also married—”

“Maccay?” Derek laughed again. “You mean he actually found a lass who could put up with him?”

Hugh closed his eyes and nodded. “Yes. He did. And now the laird is expecting his firstborn, Heather and Jake are also due to become parents, and—”

“So many changes,” Derek mused, his gaze once again passing between the two. “And you? You never married after... after Elyse?” He looked at Dalla. “Until now?”

Dalla glanced at Hugh. Who was this Elyse? Obviously, she had meant a lot to Hugh, and even his brother, whom he hadn't seen in years, seemed surprised that he had not married. She did her best to maintain a calm expression, while inside, and quite unexpectedly, she felt a twinge of... of uncertainty. Hugh must've loved the woman very much. Would she ever experience love like that? With Hugh? One that was lasting and enduring over the years?

“No, I hadn't,” Hugh said, his tone impatient. “That's why I was feeling a bit—”

“Left out?” Derek asked, grinning.

“Annoyed,” Hugh admitted, like his brother, crossing his arms over his chest. “I needed some... I just wanted to get away for a while, and I decided to come north, to see if I could find that meadow and the hut we built...”

Derek's expression changed, grew softer. “Is it still there?”

Hugh grinned. “Aye, it is. I fixed it up a little bit, and—”

“So how did you find *her*?”

Again, Hugh gave his brother a look. “I'm getting to that, Derek. I went into a seaside village to get some supplies. I stopped in a tavern to get a mug of ale and...” He glanced down at Dalla. “They paraded in half a dozen women, Norwegian captives.”

Derek nodded, apparently understanding. “And she caught your eye?”

Again, Hugh closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, then sighed.

Frustration?

What? What had caught Hugh's attention when it came to her?

His next words tightened the knot in her stomach.

“Her hair reminded me...”

Derek gave her an appraising gaze and slowly nodded. “I can see. Her hair is the same color.” He studied his brother, then turned to Dalla. “Why is there a bounty on your head? Are you a spy as people are saying?”

She was too stunned by the direct question to reply.

Derek glanced at Hugh.

“Let me guess, she doesn't speak English very well?”

Dalla stiffened. “I speak English,” she said simply. “And the bounty on my head, and now on Hugh's, is because—I believe—my uncle is the one who arranged my kidnapping. I am no spy, sir. He tried to kill me, he tried to kill us, and Hugh was wounded—”

Derek's gaze darted to Hugh's leg, where the old bloodstain on the fabric was still obvious. “How long ago was this?”

“A little over a week ago,” Hugh replied. “We were staying at the hut in the meadow... a foreigner with several highlanders attacked us.”

Derek frowned. “From which clan?”

“I don't know,” Hugh answered simply. “I didn't recognize any of them, and we're certainly too far from Duncan lands for it to be—”

“The Orkneys or the McGregors,” Derek interjected. “But you can be sure that word travels fast. You're trying to return to Duncan lands, aren't you?”

Hugh nodded.

“And you can't travel overland because every clan between here and there will be looking for your head, and hers,” he said, glancing once again at Dalla. Derek leaned forward, hands resting on his knees. “And so now you've come looking for me. Now you have found three reasons to seek me out.” He paused. “Let me guess, you want me to take you on one of my ships around the coast rather than traveling overland.”

“Yes.”

Hugh waited several long, endless moments, though Derek said nothing.

Dalla watched his expressions, but he gave nothing away of what he was thinking.

Would he help them? Or would he send them away? Hugh sat silently beside her, on the outside appearing relaxed, but she could imagine that he was asking himself the same questions as she asked herself.

Suddenly, she realized that Derek was again staring at her, hard.

“Why does someone want you dead? Is it your uncle?” Before she could answer, he glanced at Hugh and then back at her. “You have put my brother's life in danger, even if inadvertently. If I am to help you, and I haven't decided that yet, I need to know everything.”

And so, after glancing at Hugh and receiving a nod, she told Derek everything. She also told him that she was related to the Royal Norwegian family. He rolled his eyes at that and uttered a disgusted grunt. She ignored it and continued. Her father didn't seem to care for her much, and if her suspicions proved correct, her uncle was behind the kidnapping. She admitted that she had seen her uncle with the highlanders, ensured that he was behind the attack, the bounty, and spreading the word of her presence in northern Scotland.

Without a word, Derek rose, and with his back to them, paced the interior of the warehouse.

She watched him, hardly daring to glance up at Hugh. His hands lay loosely open on his arms, still crossed over his chest, but he looked almost... relaxed. He watched his brother closely, but not with anger, nor impatience.

She couldn't quite define the look on his face. Glad to see his brother alive and well after all these years, despite the circumstances? Despite the trouble that she had brought on them all, but through no fault of her own?

Not a loving or affectionate word passed between them. Indeed, they reacted as if not a day had separated them. Was this normal? She didn't

know. She had no siblings with which to compare. But twins? She had heard that twins were somehow connected, if not in body, then in spirit. She had heard that they could think each other's thoughts, respond without words being spoken. That obviously wasn't true, but perhaps there was some link, some connection that bound them together, even though miles or even years separated them.

Finally, Derek ceased pacing and strode back to the two of them, his steps sure, his expression still blank although she did see the tightening of his jaw. He stopped a few paces away, gazing at Hugh.

“Tell me of your plan.”

Hugh offered a shrug. “Through the northern channels, down along the western coastline among the Orkney Islands, then through the North Minch. We can make land at any point, as far as you can take us, and then we will make our way overland to Duncan lands from the west.”

Derek turned to pace again, muttering softly under his breath. He paused by the large open doorway and shouted to someone outside.

“Broc! Bring that horse in here!”

Dalla watched as the man she had seen earlier dart through the doorway and begin a soft conversation with Derek. He wore heavy cloth breeches wrapped tightly around his thighs with leather thongs tucked into soft leather boots. A large dyed green tunic draped from his shoulders to his thighs, snugged to his waist with a thick leather belt into which was tucked a wicked looking dirk. Beneath the tunic, he wore a roughly spun dingy white linen shirt. He led Agnarr into the warehouse, snorting and pulling impatiently, finally letting out a soft whinny when he recognized Hugh.

“Go to the tavern and tell Malvern that I wish a small keg of ale. Learn what you can of any talk or rumors involving these two,” he said, gesturing toward Hugh and Dalla.

Broc gazed curiously at Hugh, then back at Derek, and nodded, retreating from the warehouse and closing the door behind him.

Hugh rose and moved toward his horse, stroking his neck as he turned to Derek. His brother said nothing.

She watched in growing trepidation, as for the first time, Derek displayed emotion. A dark frown appeared on his face as he approached his brother, slightly shaking his head.

“You've got yourself into quite some trouble, brother,” he said. “And you have managed to drag me into it.”

Hugh said nothing, but again nodded.

Suddenly, Derek chuckled, placed his hands on Hugh's shoulders, and gave him a slight shake. "Just like old times, eh?"

With that, Hugh smiled, and the two broke into soft laughter. Hugh wrapped his brother in a tight hug, which Derek returned. "If it's a fight they want, we'll give those bastards a fight, but on our terms, not theirs."

Dalla gathered that the interaction implied Derek's agreement to help them. And yet, despite her relief, she felt another layer of guilt lay upon her shoulders. Now she was putting both brothers into danger. Risking their lives to help her.

She didn't want this. Had not asked for it, and yet, these two Scottish brothers, whom just a few weeks ago, she would have thought of with distaste and abhorrence, were now helping her.

She was nothing more than a Norwegian captive and yet—no, she realized the truth of the matter. She was no longer a Norwegian captive. She was the bride of Hugh McInnis of the Duncan clan of the highlands.

For the first time in her life, she was beginning to understand these Scottish people and their fierce loyalty to their clans.

This was more than brother helping brother.

Even though Derek had left Duncan lands long ago, she realized, without it having to be said, that he would always and forever belong to the Duncan clan.

Hugh watched his brother speaking quietly to Broc— his partner or his first mate, or whatever he was—after he returned from the village. So far, neither he nor Derek had broached the topic of their estrangement so many years ago.

One of them had to do it. Especially since Derek was risking his life to help him.

Derek frowned and glanced occasionally over his shoulder where Dalla waited. She fidgeted, as if trying to make herself comfortable. He knew that Derek would help them, and was in the midst of preparing his ship for a short journey, but he didn't underestimate the trouble that he could be bringing down on his brother in doing so. Hugh wished there was another way, but he couldn't think of one.

He glanced at Dalla, now sleeping fitfully, half-sitting, half-slouching on top of the grain sacks. He had to admit it. He had to admit the reason for this mad scramble to the coast, rather than risking a chance of traveling overland. He was growing more attached to Dalla by the day, but he struggled with conflicting emotions and not a little bit of guilt when he thought of Elyse. He had given his heart to Elyse and never imagined that he would ever feel that way about anyone ever again, but the more time he spent with Dalla, the deeper his feelings grew.

They were both strong in different ways. Both had overcome life's hardships, and both, despite those hardships, did the best they could. While he certainly didn't know Dalla as deeply as he had known Elyse, he knew that the feelings he experienced now were true, and gave him hope for a

future. And yet that future was dulled by the thought that in the next hour, the next day even, she or he could be dead.

And now, for helping him, Derek might also pay a hefty price. Hugh had so many questions for his brother, so much catching up to do, but there was no time.

Derek had said that they would leave after nightfall, in secrecy, but he still had to prepare the ship for travel. That would garner attention, no matter how careful he tried to be. That's what worried Hugh. He wanted to help, although he couldn't. To show his face in daylight would be to invite disaster.

They had already disagreed about his horse. At first, Derek had balked at taking his horse aboard.

“Do you know how difficult it is to get a horse on board a ship and into the hold, let alone keep the animal calm in rough seas?” Derek grumbled, shaking his head.

“But you can't leave Agnarr behind!” Dalla had said, eyes wide with concern.

Derek frowned, glancing between the two. “Who's Agnarr?”

“The horse,” Hugh and Dalla answered at the same time.

Derek gave him an odd look. “You named your horse Agnarr?”

Hugh sighed, and glanced at Dalla. “She did.”

Derek said nothing after that, merely shook his head and gestured toward one of the grain sacks. “Will he eat oats, or does he have more discerning tastes?”

Hugh grinned, although Dalla, not familiar with his brother's humor, had frowned with misunderstanding. He'd had to assure her that Derek was merely joking. Then again, noting Derek's present expression, Hugh wasn't sure that he was.

“He will be no trouble,” Hugh assured him.

Derek finished talking to Broc, stood for a moment, staring outside, then turned to look at Hugh before gesturing him over. Hugh glanced down at Dalla, now asleep, and approached his brother.

He appeared agitated, rubbing the back of his neck. Agitated about his sudden appearance in his life? Dragging a woman along with him, both now with bounties on their heads? It appeared that Derek wanted to say something, but wasn't sure how. Hugh decided to get it out in the open.

“Change your mind, brother?” he asked simply. “If you have, just say so. No hard feelings.”

Derek glanced at him with surprise? “Change my mind, no... it isn't that.”

Hugh waited, but Derek seemed reluctant to say what was on his mind. Hugh asked the question that was on his. “Why did you leave like that? In the middle of the night, without a word?”

Derek tensed, his eyes narrowed as he frowned. “What? What are you talking about?”

“You left Duncan lands... in the middle of the night.”

Derek shook his head. Impatient. “No, brother, I did not leave in the middle of the night, sneaking away like a thief,” he said. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked at Hugh. “I talked about my leaving plenty of times before I did. You only had eyes and thoughts of Elyse on your mind.”

“But why did you leave?” Hugh asked. “At the time, at least as far as I can recall, you didn't say why.” He paused. “Was it something I did, Derek? Was it because I fell in love with Elyse and didn't... we didn't... did she come between us?”

Derek shook his head with a gentle smile. “She did not come between us, brother.”

“Then what?”

“Nothing but my own burgeoning desire for adventure.” He shook his head. “You seemed—and still do—so perfectly content to live with the Duncans, to serve them, to live among them. But I wanted more than that. I told you I wanted to become a soldier, a sea captain, something, *anything* that was different from the life we led with the Duncans.”

Hugh tried to remember, to recognize that moment in time when his brother was not nearly as content as he had been. He could recall no defining moment, no specific circumstance or incident that triggered Derek's departure.

“Don't look so worried, brother,” Derek said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “It was nothing that passed between us, no words, no argument that compelled me to leave. We may be much the same, but in other ways, we are very different. I asked you to come with me, remember? You chose to stay.”

Did he? Hugh didn't remember that. Perhaps there were plenty of things that he did not remember. Over the years, and especially after the traumatic death of Elyse, he had filled in those blank areas, the lack of memories, with what he assumed was true. So there had been no estrangement? No wedge driven between the two of them other than his brother's lust for adventure? He looked into his brother's face, his expression somber and still.

“You've had a good life, Derek? Here by the sea? With your shipping business and your seafaring? You've found everything you're looking for?”

Derek smiled again. “Not everything, brother,” he said. “But I am not yet ready to be tethered down with the yoke of marriage. You, on the other hand? I think that marriage will suit you well.” He glanced meaningfully toward the sacks of grain where Dalla slept. Then, he straightened and shrugged, as if he'd had enough of introspection. “We'll leave as soon as it's dark,” Derek said softly. “We only have a crescent moon tonight, so we'll have to venture farther from shore. With the approaching storm, I want to be out far enough to make sure that we don't hit the shoals to the west.” He said nothing for a moment, watching Hugh, as if trying to read his mind. “Are you sure this is the way you want to do it?”

“No,” Hugh answered honestly. “But I can't think of another way that will keep us out of arm's reach of her uncle and those with him.”

“Take no offense, brother, but are you sure you can trust her? Are you sure she is not a spy as the rumors say?”

“She isn't a spy, Derek. I was in the tavern when she was brought in, bound and blindfolded, directly from a room where the women had been taken after leaving the ship.”

“She speaks English well,” he said, still doubtful.

Hugh nodded. “She has been well educated.”

Derek stated the obvious. “As a member of the royal family, she is bound to garner attention sooner or later when the truth is told. Even if... even after you arrive on Duncan lands, what are you proposing?”

Hugh sighed, struggling with a sense of impatience. It was understandable that Derek had questions, but he didn't have the answers to such questions. “I haven't even gotten to the point where I can plan that far ahead,” he admitted. “First, I want to put some distance between us and her pursuers. If what she says is true, that her uncle and perhaps even her father

is behind this attempt on her life, well, she may just have to permanently disappear, if you get my meaning.”

“Aye, I do,” Derek nodded. “It is unfortunate, brother, that our reunion has to be under such difficult circumstances. I have many questions for you.”

“And I as well,” Hugh said. “But it is good to see you. You are doing well for yourself.”

Derek grinned, tilting his chin in the direction where Dalla slept. “And I hope I can say the same for you after all this is over.”

After all this was over. When would that be? Would the trouble and the danger and the threat against Dalla's life be over once they got on the ship and away from the coastline? Would it be over if they made it to Duncan lands? He wasn't sure.

“I will ask one more time, Hugh. Is she worth it?”

He turned to his brother and gave him a solemn nod. “She saved my life. She is worth it.”

Derek nodded. “Then wake her and bring her to me. I have questions for her.”

At first, Hugh hesitated, wanting to ask his brother what he wanted with Dalla, but then he nodded. His brother was risking a lot to help them. He had shown no outward animosity toward his somewhat unwilling bride. It made sense for his brother to want to talk to her, perhaps learn more about her uncle and her father.

He strode toward Dalla, his gaze sweeping over her slumbering figure. She looked so young, so innocent to have to endure what she had. Then, he stiffened. He would not feel sorry for her. Life was hard for all of them, filled with challenges. This was hers. He couldn't do anything about her past, nor his. What they had to do now was focus on the here and the now, escape her uncle and reach a modicum of safety on Duncan lands. If safety was not to be found there, they would find it somewhere else. He shook his head just before he reached down to nudge her awake. If he hadn't gone into that tavern when he did, what would he be doing at this moment?

He sighed and realized Dalla looked up at him in startled dismay before calming. No, he didn't regret going into the tavern for that mug of ale. He was glad that he had. She was his now.

“Come,” he told her. “Derek wishes to have a word with you.”

“About what?” she asked, swiping at her eyes, casting a wary glance toward Derek.

“He did not say, but he is helping us, so the least you and I can do in return is to cooperate with him, don't you think?”

She nodded, rose, swept her fingers briefly through the hair that had fallen from her braid and framed her face, glanced down and brushed straw from her clothing. Then, with only a little hesitance, she strode toward Derek.

Hugh watched, ready to jump in if it appeared that Derek said or did anything that he didn't like, but his brother, clasping his wrists behind its back, simply looked down at Dalla, and spoke softly to her, with an occasional nod or shake of the head from Dalla.

He couldn't get over the fact that he was once again reunited with Derek. They had so much catching up to do, and he had so many questions for him, but they couldn't take the time, not now.

Preparations for the sail were being completed in haste, and as Hugh watched Derek and Dalla, he hoped their escape from the region would go as planned, without difficulty. Then again, he wasn't naïve. They were in a dangerous predicament; one that he had involved his brother, albeit reluctantly.

By the time Dalla returned to him, Derek had disappeared outside.

Hugh heard him shouting to his crew, preparing his ship for sail.

“What did he want to talk to you about?” Hugh asked her quietly as she neared his side.

“He wanted to know what kind of man my uncle was, and my father.” She paused, frowned in thought, turning to glance between Hugh and the half-closed door of the building. “I still can't believe this is happening. I don't think your brother believed me when I said I wasn't sure of the reason why my uncle would stoop to such drastic means, or why he wants to get rid of me.”

Hugh could understand that. It was a difficult scenario to imagine, but then again, he and Derek didn't belong to a royal family. “Anything else?”

She nodded. “He wanted to know if I was truly married to you. I told him that I had signed the document making it so.”

He simply nodded and gestured for her to sit on a nearby bale of hay, then he turned to watch the activity as his brother, Broc, and a few sailors

entered, grabbed a box, some fish, or kegs, thinking that he could at least help with loading supplies.

Hugh beckoned for Derek and offered to help.

“I don't want you to be seen outside of the building until the moment we board ship. My crew is just about ready. I'll tell you something though, Hugh. I don't like sailing off into the darkness into an approaching storm, no matter the reason. You keep a careful watch on her and your horse. I will not be distracted.”

“Understood,” Hugh said, concerned by his brother's tone of voice. In it, he heard worry, and once again a surge of regret built inside him. He'd had such different expectations for his reunion with his brother. “Derek, I want to thank you for—”

“Don't thank me yet,” Derek interrupted, turning to shout a direction at one of his sailors. “You can thank me when we get to where we're going in one piece. If we do.”

“Derek—”

Derek turned to him and once again and offered a grin. He placed both hands on his shoulders and Hugh returned the gesture. Just like old times. They locked eyes, and Hugh realized that no explanations, no regrets, no guilt was necessary.

Derek clapped him on the shoulder. “What say we have another adventure, eh?”

Hugh grinned as well, the burdens of his heart lifted, at least momentarily. This was the way it should be, the way it always should have been. He and his brother, together. Maybe, just maybe, if they managed to reach the western coast of Scotland and then once again made their way overland to Duncan Manor, Derek would agree to stay for a while. Maybe a month, maybe more. But even if he decided to go back to the sea, Hugh knew that the time he spent with his brother now was... it was like old times. The two of them against the world.

Only now, the stakes were great and potentially deadly.

“Let me get back to it. We'll be ready to launch within the hour.” Derek gestured over his shoulder with his thumb. “You go take care of your bride. I have a feeling she's a bit hesitant.”

Derek moved off while Hugh turned to Dalla, sitting quietly on a bale of hay, her fingers idly playing with the end of her braid. She had a faraway

look on her face, and even in the dim light of the building, he saw her pale features.

He hadn't thought of her hesitation, what setting foot aboard a ship might do to her. Fear, the memories of being kidnapped and thrown into the hold, and now, once again, she would be asked to stay in the hold while the ship rocked on the waves.

He stepped toward her. "Dalla, Derek will do his best to make sure that we reach our destination in one piece. As you know, however, there are no guarantees."

"I know," she said without looking up. "I'm sorry that I am ultimately to blame for all of this—"

"No, you are not. Did you ask to be kidnapped?"

"No."

"Did you ask to be sold as a captive?"

She looked up at him and slowly shook her head.

"Did you have any indication that your uncle wanted you dead, or even in your wildest dreams, that he would do this to you?"

Again, she shook her head.

"Then none of this is your fault." He shrugged. "This is often the way of life, the unexpected, the risks, the dangers. I have been confronted with many such dangers in mine, in my position of guarding those of the Duncan clan, and serving under the laird. But you have not. I would venture to say that this... situation, is one of the most daunting you have ever faced. Am I correct?"

She looked up at him and nodded, her eyes glistening with tears. "I am afraid."

"And you have every right to be. Only a fool would not. be"

Her eyes widened. "You're afraid, Hugh?"

"Aye, I am afraid of something bad happening to you, or to my brother. For myself...?" He thought a moment. "For me, being afraid is a good thing. It prevents one from being headstrong and foolish, from allowing emotions to override common sense."

She offered a half-smile. "It didn't seem to have quite the same effect on me, the couple of times I tried to escape you, and most especially when I fled into the bogs."

Hugh shrugged. "Often, we act on instinct. Your instinct was to get away at any cost. And yes, it could have led to your death, but it didn't. And

you learned from it, did you not?”

She nodded. “I—”

A shout from outside cause both of them to stiffen and turn toward the doorway.

Moments later, Derek appeared with Broc.

“Riders are coming into town,” he said, gesturing toward Dalla. “Broc has listened to the rumors that your presence is known. Now more strangers arrive, and I fear it may be her uncle. We must board and sail immediately.”

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Hear t pounding, Dalla stood at the threshold of the doorway, Hugh's arm wrapped around her waist.

Derek stood outside, halfway between the building and the small wooden dinghy rocking on the beach. He motioned for them to hurry, but she hesitated. She didn't want to go on that ship. She was afraid, more afraid than she had let on to Hugh.

Despite what he said, despite the fact that it made sense, she didn't quite believe it. That everything would be all right. She didn't want to see Hugh or his brother hurt. She couldn't imagine Derek or the other crew members *not* feeling some sort of resentment toward her for putting them into this predicament.

The moment she passed through the door, the wind, which had been nothing more than a breeze when they entered, now blew her hair and clothing wildly. The sky was dark, few stars to be seen, the moon barely a crescent to be seen before it skittered behind fast-moving clouds. In the distance, over the sea, lightning flashed. Moments later, a low rumble of thunder followed.

She thought about digging in her heels, yanking her grasp from Hugh's hand and running, but she didn't. She couldn't. These men were risking their lives for her, and she would not cause any more trouble than she already had, even if it meant climbing aboard that ship bobbing on the waves out in the harbor. Even if it meant having to stay down in the hold of the ship while on a stormy sea.

In the dinghy waiting at the shoreline, sat two roughly dressed sailors manning the oars, already struggling to keep the tiny bow facing toward shore. Derek and Broc hurried them along.

She glanced up at Hugh. "What about Agnarr?"

"He's already aboard," Derek said, raising his voice above the gusting wind. "Hurry!"

He turned to Broc, who climbed into the dinghy first, grasped Dalla's hand, and with Hugh's help, lifted her aboard, and sat her down on the floor of the boat without her getting wet from the waves. Dalla's heart in her throat now, she grasped the side of the rocking dinghy tightly, her pulse thundering, a sensation of nausea rising in her throat. The sea was so rough...

"Get aboard!" Derek shouted to Hugh.

Hugh quickly scrambled in, found a place to sit next to her, followed by Derek, who sat near the bow. In moments, the two seamen heaved the oars, pulling away from shore; the incoming waves wanted to keep pushing them back toward the beach.

"Come on, lads, put your backs into it!" Derek shouted. He turned to Dalla and Hugh. "Get down, as far down as you can get!"

Hugh wrapped his arms around her shoulders, and then pulled her against him as he half crouched, half lay in the bottom of the boat, on top of the boots of the rowing sailors. Above them, Derek's gaze was riveted on the shoreline.

In the far distance, south of the building in which Derek plied his business, she saw a few lights glowing from the town.

She tried to swallow her fear, tried to ignore the roiling waves which to her, threatened to spill them into the ocean, to be tumbled back toward shore. She clamped her jaws tight to prevent herself from screaming out her fear.

"It's going to be all right." Hugh's deep voice rumbled in her ear.

For several brief moments, she believed it, relished the fact that he was holding onto her, enveloping her with his warmth and strength. For the first time since she had been kidnapped, she felt fortunate that it was he who had bought her. She leaned into his warmth, seeking the solace her spirit desperately needed.

Soon, she heard a distinct sound over the cacophony of the increasing storm. She looked up to the sight of Derek's ship looming over them. Derek

grabbed hold of a rope that had been lowered from the side, holding the dinghy next to the rocking ship. A rope ladder was tossed overboard. One of the seamen who had been manning the oars grabbed it and held on.

“Up you go!” Derek shouted, pointing at her and then upward.

Dalla stared at the rope ladder, the surging sea, the rocking boat, a sense of surreal disbelief causing her mouth to drop open. How could she do this? What if she slipped and fell, which was certainly not out of the question due to the rough seas.

“Go, Dalla! I'll be right behind you. We must hurry!”

She swallowed her fear and allowed Hugh to gently push her toward the ladder. She grabbed the roughhewn rope of one of the makeshift rungs and held tightly. Except, her fingers didn't seem to want to work.

“Move, lass, move!”

That shout came from Derek.

Eyes wide, heart thundering so hard now she felt it pounding in her chest, and the blood ringing in her ears, even above the sounds of the storm, Dalla let go with one hand, reached up to the length of rope above her, and then another. Soon, she was able to place her feet on one of the rope rungs below.

Hugh grasped her around the waist and urged her upward.

“I'm right behind you! Climb as fast as you can and don't look down!”

The words prompted her to do just that.

Below, the sea roiled, black and terrifying all at once. She might be Norwegian, but she was no seafarer. A dip in the pond on her property was all the experience she had with water. She could fish and wade, but she didn't know how to swim. She took that moment to say so.

“I don't know how to swim!” she screamed above the howl of the wind and its salt-laden water spraying into her face. “Hugh, I can't swim!”

It was as if no one heard, or cared.”

“Climb!” Derek shouted. “Hurry!”

“I'm right behind you!” followed Hugh's voice.

Trembling with fear, her hands soon growing numb from the growing cold and icy spray of the salty ocean water against her exposed skin and drenching her clothes, Dalla did as she was told.

Hugh was close behind her, his arms reaching for the sides of the rope ladder at her waist level. She knew she wouldn't fall, not with Hugh so close behind.

Reach, grab, step up.

Reach, grab, step up.

She ordered herself to reach, step up as quickly as she could make herself move, and soon, felt hands reaching down to grab her forearms, lifting her physically up the remaining distance.

An overwhelming surge of relief flooded through her as she sank down onto the deck, her knees trembling so that they refuse to hold her up.

In moments, Hugh was at her side, sweeping her up into his arms and quickly making for the opening in the deck. A ladder descended into the hold.

“We have to go down! Quickly now!”

The next thing she knew, she was being lowered into the dimly lit hold in the stern. A single lamp, swinging with the movement of the ship offered barely any light.

She stared at the lamp that swung back and forth from a rope stretched across the hold. A small, quickly constructed platform of planks served as a makeshift stable for Agnarr, who whinnied and snorted when he spotted her, stomping one massive hoof onto the boards beneath him.

She managed to grab hold of the wooden ladder and made her way down the last few steps as Hugh quickly followed.

Extending her arms, trying to maintain her balance, she quickly made her way toward the horse and wrapped her arms around his neck. She attempted to soothe the wide-eyed horse, though her own voice was choked with fear.

“You're going to scare him even more,” Hugh said, scratching Agnarr just behind his ear and giving him a pat on his neck. “Why don't you sing to him instead?”

She stared at him in dismay. Sing? He wanted her to sing? She didn't think she could, but then she looked up into Agnarr's wide, rolling eyes, recognized his own fear, and nodded.

Even though her voice was shaky at first, she began to sing in her native tongue, softly, soothingly, and before long, Agnarr settled somewhat, as did she.

Soon, she heard more thumps, and recognized the sound as the anchor. She heard the shouts and a slap of fabric catching the wind as sails unfurled. Ropes creaked and groaned, sailors shouted orders to one another, and soon, the ship's movement changed from rocking side to side to rocking from bow

to stern. She knew enough about sailing to know that the approaching storm would make it difficult to raise the sails without adjusting the positioning of the ship, but Derek was an accomplished seafarer, of that she was sure, and soon she felt forward momentum.

Unfortunately, it was that very momentum that caused the renewed hitch in her voice, which softened to a mere whisper as she continued to stroke Agnarr's neck and withers, his muscles quivering beneath her touch. She tried to shut the memories of her previous ocean voyage from her mind: the terror, the filth, the abuse that had occurred to a couple of the women along the way, the coarse language, the laughter, the lack of food, water, and even the stench of the waste bucket that they were forced to use—and empty over the side—during the journey.

Hugh stood next to her and Agnarr for several minutes, and then Derek halfway descended the ladder, a troubled expression marring his handsome features.

They had to go back? A shiver of fear weakened Dalla's legs once again, and she leaned against Agnarr for support. Had he changed his mind?

“We have to get far enough out to avoid the shoals,” Derek informed him. “It's going to be rough until we do, so you'd both best sit and brace yourselves.”

Rougher than this?

The storm sounded like it was right over them now, the flashes of lightning and the rumbles of thunder so close, the rumbles seeming to last forever. She barely had enough spit in her mouth to swallow.

“Riders with torches are making their way from the village toward my warehouse.”

Dalla felt an overwhelming sense of horror, regret, and grief. It was her uncle. She had no doubt of it. But how did they—

“How would my uncle know we were here? Why would they even think to go to your brother's warehouse?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“If your uncle learned that you were put aboard a ship to be sold as a Norwegian captive, he would have been able to find out which ship and where it docked. Then it would just be a matter of sending in spies to ask questions. Where did the women from that ship go? What happened to them?”

She stared at Hugh in growing dismay.

“And then, it would be a simple matter to learn that you had been bought. By me.” He shrugged. “A few more questions and he would have eventually spoken to the preacher who married us. Likely he even saw the document with our signatures. Learned my name.” He glanced at his brother. “And his.”

Dalla clung tightly to Agnarr's mane to prevent herself from sinking to the floor in despair.

Derek might never be able to return to the village, nor to his warehouse. And all because—

“I have no ships in the harbor. My other two are on their way to France, and there's nothing of value in the warehouse now.”

“Derek, they could burn it down—”

“Let them, and they will feel my wrath.” Derek's expression darkened with anger.

Dalla couldn't help it. She couldn't hold back the tears. This was all her fault. Her fault!

She crumpled slowly onto her knees, a hand wrapped around Agnarr's fetlock, trying in some way to help keep him calm despite her own rising despair and regret.

Neither Hugh nor Derek said anything to her, and in a matter of moments, she heard Derek climbing back topside. Hugh sat beside her, saying nothing.

Blinking through her tears, she glanced at him, saw his own thoughtful expression, the frown marring his lips, and new that he too was uncertain.

The storm grew closer, the ship tossed more violently, and Agnarr was forced to adjust his footing against the roll of the ship. He whinnied and stomped until Hugh soothed him.

Hugh turned to her. “Relax your body,” he said. “Allow it to move with the movements of the ship.”

She tried, she really did, but she was so frightened...

Then, from above, over the crash of thunder and the sound of waves slapping against the wooden hull, she heard a noise.

At first, she didn't recognize it, but then, as she and Hugh looked at one another, she finally identified what it was.

She frowned, stared up at Hugh in open-mouthed dismay. “Is that your *brother*?”

After a moment, Hugh offered a short laugh. “Aye, it is!”

Dalla turned toward the opening above, saw nothing but darkness. Still, over the sound of the storm, the creaking of the ship, she heard laughter.

Curious, Hugh quickly rose and climbed the ladder. Though she didn't want to move, her curiosity also overcame her. She quickly climbed the ladder, holding tight, just to the point where she raised her head over the deck.

Her eyes wide with dismay, she looked toward the stern in amazement.

There, at the helm, Derek stood, shaking his fist at the dark, night and stormy sky, swearing and then barking harsh laughter as the waves tossed his ship about, salt water spraying over the deck.

All she could do was stare.

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“**H**e's gone mad!” Hugh gasped, staring at his brother was a mixture of concern and horror.

Dalla also stared. No, he's not mad... he's a warrior.” She turned to look up at him and placed a hand on his forearm. “He's a warrior, just like you.”

He glanced down at Dalla, his wife, and saw the confidence of her gaze as she stared at Derek. He turned to his brother and realized she was right. How often had *he* himself felt that way? That he was doing something out of normal behavior, though without any concern or anxiety. Reacting, not over-thinking it. This storm certainly drew forth such feelings, even in him.

He quickly climbed the remainder of the ladder and, legs spread wide against the roll of the ship, arms outstretched against the wind and the heaving deck, made his way to his brother. Hugh latched onto the back of Derek's coat, then faced him, both of them now grinning, and then he too, started to laugh.

How could he have forgotten how good it was when the two of them stood together? When the two of them were together, nothing could challenge them. They each had their own strengths and weaknesses, of course, but together, they were a force to be reckoned with.

“We have to keep away from the shoals!” Derek shouted, pointing.

Hugh turned to look at the dark outline of the land and sea, saw an occasional dark area, but couldn't tell the difference between the ocean and rock.

It was too dark, the waves spraying huge gusts of salt-laden water over the deck. He felt something tug on his left arm and looked down to find Dalla clutching it tightly, the wind whipping through her hair as she too gazed toward the shoals.

She looked frightened, but not cowed. Her face shone white in the darkness and took on an almost surreal glow when the moon managed to peek its face through the blowing clouds.

“Go down below!” he shouted. “It's not safe up here!”

“I want to stay with you!” she shouted back. “Agnarr is fine now. He's more comfortable, and he's all right!”

Fine? “How did you get—” He shook his head.

He supposed it didn't matter how she had gotten his spirited war horse to calm down. As long as Agnarr wasn't panicking, that was the important thing.

A cry from above startled Hugh, and he looked upward, toward the mast rising and swinging dizzily into the night. Someone was up there?

Derek shouted to the man Hugh could barely see, straddling a small wooden platform halfway up the mast. “Report! What do you see?”

Beside him, Dalla also looked upward, but then quickly down, holding her head in one hand, the other still tightly grasping his forearm. He knew immediately that she was unfamiliar with the deck of the heaving ship.

“Go below!” Hugh shouted down at her again, the wind howling, capturing his words and pulling them away after he barely got them out of his mouth.

She didn't respond, but merely shook her head, tightening her grip on his arm, standing so close to him, her arm was anchored around his bicep now.

He knew arguing with her at this juncture would be pointless, so he allowed her to press against him. He widened his stance a little more and tucked her body in front of his, protecting her, if only a little bit, against the surging force of the sea, the rocking ship, and the occasional spray of seawater. At intervals, the ship's deck dropped from beneath their feet, eliciting a gasp from both of them, but Derek seemed not to even notice.

“Ship following!”

A loud, extensive curse erupted from Derek's throat, and he turned to Hugh. “No one is crazy enough to go out into the storm without a good

reason!” He turned his gaze to Dalla, salt water dripping from his hair, then looked back to Hugh. “They must want her quite badly.”

Dalla, eyes wide with fright, gazed between the two of them. “What are we going to do?”

Derek turned to look behind him, and so too did the others. It was then that Hugh saw dim lights, flickering on and off, as the other ship danced on the waves, coming around from the north side of the harbor, following their same tack.

Dalla's uncle Jorstad had either mightily bribed a sailor to take his boat into the sea in pursuit of Derek's, or merely commandeered it; Hugh wasn't sure. Perhaps it was her uncle's own ship. How else would he have gotten from Norway to Scotland anyway? He quickly turned to look down at Dalla.

“Does your father or your uncle own a ship?”

She stared up at him, and he saw the moment that she realized what he was thinking. Her eyes widened still more, tendrils of hair plastered against the side of her pale cheeks by the salt spray. “Yes, they both do! But Hugh—”

He turned to Derek. “Can you tell what kind of craft they're sailing? Is it faster than yours?”

Derek turned to his brother with a scowl. “I may haul cargo, brother, but my ships are custom-designed, by me no less, to give me speed when I need speed!”

“But Derek—”

“Listen to me!” Dalla shouted over the wind, then ducked her head against Hugh's chest as a wave crashed over the bow of Derek's ship, pelting them with a wash of frigid, salty, foamy ocean spray. The moment it passed, she looked up, staring first at Hugh and then at Derek. They each have one or two cannons aboard!”

“What?” Hugh frowned.

“My father and my uncle both have a ship. They are mounted with cannons!”

“How many?” Derek shouted over the storm.

“One on each side and one in the bow!”

Suddenly, as if to assess the new danger in the pursuit, the three turned to look over their shoulders.

Hugh grumbled low in his throat as he saw the dark outline of a two-mastered ship in close pursuit. They were not that far behind. The ship must have been rounding the small peninsula, even as Derek had prepared his own.

A shout rose from the man sitting on the platform above. "They're closing distance!"

"Trim the sails!" Derek shouted to sailors, a small crew of maybe five.

Nevertheless, they scrambled to follow his orders, though Hugh wasn't sure why. Wouldn't trimming the sails slow them down rather than gain them the speed they needed to outrun the pursuing vessel?

He turned his brother and was about to ask that very question when Derek grinned at him.

"The shoals are just ahead. I know these currents like the back of my hand. With this wind, and the sloppy tide, we should just barely miss the northernmost rocks, but them?" He gestured over his shoulder with his thumb. "They likely don't know that those shoals are there. They're staying closer to shore than farther out to sea to avoid fighting the open winds. They won't be able to trim their sails in time to avoid them!"

As the sails were pulled in on Derek's ship, Hugh glanced behind and saw that the pursuing ship was gaining.

Then came a flash of orange, followed by a loud boom heard even over the crashing waves.

His heart leapt into his throat just seconds before a cannonball tore through the railing at the stern of Derek's ship.

Dalla screamed.

Derek cursed. "He'll pay for that!" He grabbed the thick, well-worn handles of his ship's wheel and turned it sharply to the right. The wind buffeted the ship, but seemed to, with the new direction, propel the boat forward at an alarming speed.

Dalla clung even tighter to Hugh's arm.

The cannonball had barely skimmed over the surface of the deck, likely a measuring shot, but if Derek didn't get more distance between them, the next one might put a hole right in the middle of his ship. He imagined Agnarr down in the hold, likely terrified, and turned to insist that Dalla go down below decks and comfort him.

Just as he was about to tell her that, she released her grip on his arm, apparently thinking the same thing.

She started for the opening in the deck to go down as another cannonball whizzed over the foc'sle, barely missing two of the sailors.

Derek shouted. Hugh cautioned Dalla to be careful, and all the while his gaze was pulled inexorably toward the shoreline, where only now he saw the white caps produced by waves crashing against previously unseen shoals.

“The shoals!” he shouted to Derek. “The shoals!”

“Aye, brother, I see them!”

Hugh watched as Derek jerked hard on the ship's wheel and the rudder slowly turned the bow of the ship away from the shoals. Nevertheless, he felt a rough buffeting further down, and could only pray that the rocks didn't rip a hole in the hull of the ship.

Another boom of a cannon sounded, this time much closer and much louder.

“Down!” Derek shouted.

As one, he and Derek flattened themselves onto the deck as a cannonball shot over their heads, taking a chunk out of the mast and two of the spokes of the ship's wheel before flying over the other side of the ship.

Hugh stared at his brother in dismay. Did he have the gift? How could he have known—

“I did serve in the army for a while, remember?” Derek asked, both of them still flattened on their chests on the deck, their faces merely a hands width apart. “I'll never forget the sound of an approaching cannon shot.”

In the next moment, Derek leapt up, grabbed the ship's wheel, and continued to pull hard around, pointing the bow of his ship out to sea.

A brief flash of lightning illuminated the skies, the roiling waves, the jagged rocky shoals, and in the distance beyond, the landscape of the shoreline. Hugh sat up and watched in dismay, even though he heard the sound of screaming and shouting.

He glanced behind and saw the ship pursuing them lurch dramatically upward, then crash downward.

Then, a sound he'd never heard—it wasn't the thunder, it wasn't the sound of waves crashing against the shoreline.

Derek whooped. “She's on the shoals! She's breaking up!”

Hugh's heart pounded, his face pelted with salty ocean spray, his clothes now drenched in frigid water as he clung to the base of Derek's wheel, staring in horrified wonder as the ship, perhaps only a league distant, came

to a sudden and spectacular halt as the rocks of the shoals savagely tore open a portion of the ship's hull. It came to a stop so suddenly that the stern rose slightly before the ship tipped slightly to port, leaning dangerously over the jagged edges of the rocks.

Hugh witnessed figures jumping ship, heard the terrified screams of those trying to leap toward salvation, the calls of the wounded and dying.

He saw movement out of the corner of his eye and noticed Dalla peeking above the deck. She was trying to come topside again.

He shouted at her. "No, Dalla! Stay there!"

A crash of thunder swallowed his words. She kept scrambling upward.

"No Dalla! Stay there!" he shouted again. He released his grip on the steering column and started to scramble in her direction. "Dalla, no! Stay there!"

"Hugh! Hang on! I'm making a sharp turn!"

Hugh glanced at his brother, saw him roughly maneuvering the ship's wheel, legs spread wide, his sailors immediately grasping for ropes, rigging, or something solid to hang onto.

Hugh, on his hands and knees, stared at Dalla, who had continued to climb upward and had just reached her feet and turned to look at the ship splintering onto the shoals.

She stood frozen for several seconds, the wind, the rain, and the waves lashing her.

She turned to him, the smile on her face fading when she realized what was happening.

At that very moment, as she also scrambled for something to hold onto, a wave crashed over the mid-deck.

One moment, she was there.

The next, she was gone.

The force of the wave knocked Dalla off her feet and took her over the side. She barely managed to grasp a lungful of air before she went over and was pounded down into the frigid waves, her body spinning, plunging, ever deeper, the current tugging her this way and that, as if it strove to pull her apart.

She didn't know which way was up, which was down. The salt water burned her eyes and she squeezed them shut, her arms reaching out, seeking for something to grasp onto.

Nothing.

The waves carried her where they would. Soon, her lungs began to burn with their need for air. Her ears rang. White stars danced in front of her closed eyelids. This is how it was all going to end? Was this how she would die? In a violent sea, perhaps crushed upon the rocky shoreline or swept out to sea, never to be seen again? No! She had to fight. She had to live. She wanted to—

At that moment, she realized that she wanted to be back at Hugh's side. Desperately.

The water kept pushing her downward, but she cupped her hands and kicked her legs, trying to find a current. Her lungs felt as if they would explode at any moment.

Just a few seconds more!

If she could find the surface, she knew she would have a chance. She didn't know how to swim, but if she could kick her legs and bat her arms

enough to keep her head above water, she hoped she could grab another mouthful of air.

Already exhausted, her body battered by the water, she felt herself surge upward, thanks to the waves. Her head broke the surface, but the hair in front of her eyes, the darkness, the height of the waves around her and, a short distance away, a wickedly jagged rock jutted toward her.

She gasped in a quick lungful, sucking in salt water at the same time. Choking, slapping her hands at the water, trying to keep her head lifted, she hoped and prayed that the next wave wouldn't slam her against that rock.

Another wave crashed, pushing her down again. Down, ever downward.

Her air lasted only a few seconds, and once again she began to feel the burning in her lungs. The frigid temperature of the water made it difficult to move, and soon, a sense of lethargy swept through her, making it hard to move. She knew what it was.

A combination of the cold, fatigue, the utter sense of hopelessness. She wouldn't give up, not until the last bit of strength left her body. Weaker than before, she tried to make her way again to the surface, but she couldn't find it. The ringing in her ears grew louder. So too did the harsh pounding of her heart, pumping so hard in her chest she felt it pushing against her skin.

Bubbles began to escape her lips. She knew, instinctively knew, that her struggle was over.

She would disappear, just as her uncle wished, never to be seen again, never to be heard from, and no one would ever know what happened to her. Except for Hugh, and now Derek.

She prayed that they would survive, that Hugh would make it back to his beloved Duncan clan, find happiness—

Something strong wrapped itself around her upper arm. Tugged hard. Then a hand grabbed at her braid, pulling it, propelling her upward. She didn't fight, didn't struggle. Had her hair become entangled in a piece of driftwood, a piece of wreckage from the other ship? Her brain fuzzy, her thoughts confused, she relinquished herself to her tomb, to the sea. She respected the sea, and feared it as any logical human should.

Suddenly, her face burst from beneath the waves. She swallowed several mouthfuls of water, struggling to open her eyes. Had she been pushed to the beach? Something was still holding her, grabbing her by her hair, pulling her.

She gasped, saw the arm, and knew.

She'd been saved!

Hugh had dived over the side of the ship to save her!

Her hopes soared. Her heart pounded with relief, love, and devotion as she looked—

Not Hugh.

Derek.

She stared, unable to speak as he clasped her braid in one hand, his arm wrapped around her waist, the other powerfully propelling them back toward the rocking ship.

She continued to stare, speechless. He flipped her over, and she now floated on her back on the waves, Derek side-paddling and kicking his legs, taking them back to the ship.

Shouts.

In her peripheral vision, she saw a rope thrown overboard. She turned once again toward Derek.

“I can swim better than Hugh,” he laughed. “And besides, I've never had a sister before. I think you just might be worth saving.”

And then, as blackness, cold, and fatigue raced through her body, she thought she dimly heard the sound of laughter—Derek's crazy laughter.

On the edges of her consciousness, she felt herself flung over a shoulder, her arms and legs dangling limply in the water as Derek climbed the rope ladder that had been flung once again over the side of the hull. Moments later, hands reached down and plucked her from his back. She felt herself floating in a warm grasp, a tight, warm grasp.

“You're all right, you're all right...”

Hugh repeated the words over and over again, hugging her so closely to him that she could hardly breathe. She didn't care, not at all. She felt his head bent close to her ear, his stubbled cheek pressed against hers. Warmth. He was so warm!

Even though they'd both been battered by the cold sea air, he was still much warmer than she.

“Get her below deck,” Derek ordered. “Get her clothes off. There are blankets down there. Put her against that blasted horse of yours if you have to. Keep her warm!”

She was lifted, and then once again carefully lowered down into the hold of the ship. She barely held onto consciousness, her body shivering uncontrollably, her teeth chattering. She didn't even have the strength to

open her eyes. She felt herself placed down on a small bed of straw and nearby, a source of heat provided delicious warmth. She reached out a hand, thinking she would make contact with Hugh and instead found herself grasping one of Agnarr's legs. The horse offered a short neigh and then she felt him nuzzle against her arm as Hugh laid her against the gelding's belly and shoulder. She smiled.

"You're going to be all right, Dalla," Hugh said. "I'm going to get these wet clothes off, and I have a blanket. You'll be warm in a moment."

She didn't have the strength to protest.

In a matter of moments, she was divested of clothes. She grumbled against the chill, heard Hugh ordering Agnarr to give him some room, and then quickly wrapped her in a blanket, and pulled her onto his lap, cradling her close, allowing her to soak in his heat, and rest against his strength.

She fell into exhausted sleep, but it only seemed like moments before she woke to find herself still lying in the bed of straw, Agnarr close by on his feet, head bent low and his muzzle nudging her shoulder.

She heard a chuckle and opened her eyes, blinking several times. They felt scratchy and tender, most likely from the salt water. She tried to speak, and the raspy sound that erupted from her throat was also likely due to the salt water she had swallowed.

"Don't try to talk," Hugh said. "You're going to be all right."

She looked at Hugh. He gazed at her with worry while beside him, Derek crouched, that maddening grin lifting his lips.

"What's..." She winced, swallowed with difficulty and tried again. "What's so funny?"

Derek chuckled and then gestured toward his brother, then back down at her. "Maybe there's hope for the two of you yet," he grunted. He glanced at Hugh and then down at her, his grin widening. "You should've seen this poor sod the moment we realized you'd been swept overboard."

"What did you expect me to do?" Hugh turned with a frown to his brother. "She's my wife!"

"Aye," Derek laughed. "I forgot. She's your *wife*." He turned to wink at Dalla. "I do believe, lass, that my brother has fallen in love with you. It took one look on his face for me to realize that, and that's why I jumped into the water after you." He gestured between the two of them. "I'm the better swimmer, more experienced." He tilted his head toward his brother. "He would've ended up drowning you both."

Hugh sent an angry glare toward his brother. "You were just closer, that's all," he said.

Dalla watched the gentle bickering between the brothers, knowing that it wasn't bickering at all. They were just trying to make her feel better, and it was working. She turned to Derek. "Thank you... for saving my life." She swallowed. "Now I suppose I owe you." She glanced at Hugh. "We're still even."

He smiled at her, a genuine, heartfelt smile that touched her heart. She knew then that the two of them had a chance to make a good marriage. However, her thoughts soon soured, and she looked at Derek. "The ship?"

"Battered to pieces," he said with a nod of satisfaction. "Found bodies floating around after we got you back aboard, and then I headed out to sea, well away from the shoals."

"My uncle?"

He shrugged. "I didn't see any survivors. Bits of flotsam, some rigging, pieces of the ship, some body parts, but no more than that."

Was her uncle dead? Could it be possible? With relief, she realized it was. While she never thought she would have felt such an emotion over the death of a family member, she certainly hoped so. "It's over then?"

Hugh nodded. "It seems so. We've seen no sign of any pursuers, not on the shoreline, nor behind us."

It was at that moment that Dalla realized that the ship wasn't pitching, the wind wasn't howling, the thunder wasn't booming and crashing. She frowned. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Couple of days," Hugh replied. "We'll be making our way northwestward, then down along the western coastline of Scotland. With good weather, Derek said we should reach landfall in about a week."

She glanced between Derek and Hugh, her thoughts once again uncertain. "And then?"

"And then, we're going to pay the Duncan clan a visit," Derek nodded, winking at Hugh. "A long-overdue visit."

EPILOGUE

SIX WEEKS LATER

A light snow fell outside the Duncan manor house, but inside the great hall, a huge fire burned.

The table was laden for a feast, laughter floated around the room in celebration. A threefold celebration.

The first, the return of Derek McInnis with his twin brother. Before they had even reached the manor, the small group of travelers had been intercepted by Maccay, who stared in disbelief for several moments, then let out a whoop of joy.

“Hugh! You're alive!” He'd only then turned toward his companion, and his eyes had widened as he stared for several moments, his mouth moving but no sound emerging. Finally, he croaked. “Derek? Derek! You're alive, too!”

The two brothers chuckled, and then Maccay's gaze landed on Dalla. He looked between Hugh and Derek, and then a smirk appeared as he winked at Derek. “And you have quite a lovely lass with you, don't you?”

He nodded. “I do, but she's not mine. She belongs to Hugh.”

Maccay blinked, then frowned, as he turned to Hugh, then glanced again at Dalla, then back at his best friend. “Explain.”

Hugh grinned. “Maccay, I would like you to meet my wife—”

Another joyous whoop escaped Maccay, and he threw back his head and laughed. “I knew it! I knew it! And where did you find her?”

An awkward glance passed between Hugh and Dalla, but it was she who answered. “Actually, he bought me as a captive, then he forced me to marry him.”

Maccay stared at the three of them, his amusement fading. He turned to Hugh with a frown of confusion. "You mean you... you *made* her marry you?" Again, he glanced at Dalla. "Where are you from? Your accent..."

Hugh glanced at Dalla, thinking to answer for her, but she gave a slight shake of her head, lifted her chin, straightened her shoulders as she sat atop the mare that Derek had bought for her, and of course, a massive black stallion for himself.

"I am from Norway," she told Maccay calmly. "And yes, he made me marry him." Then she smiled. "And I am ever so glad that he did." She reached for Hugh's hand, and he took it and gave it a squeeze.

Maccay shook his head, not quite understanding, but accepting. "And you thought I was the crazy one marrying a woman with no memory," he muttered.

Hugh laughed. "Let's go to the house. Everyone there?"

"Everyone and then some," Maccay said with a wink.

Hugh had very little time to wonder what he meant by that. Soon after they entered the manor house, Phillip and Jake laid their eyes on Hugh, welcoming him back with boisterous shouts of relief.

Their eyes widened when they saw Derek stride in behind his brother, and then the hall soon turned loud and full of laughter, with much clapping on the back, and shouts for a celebration. Agnes scurried out of the kitchen to see what all the commotion was about, took one look at Derek, and then squealed in delight, rushing toward him, arms open.

Derek bent down, lifted the woman into his arms and swung her around several times, eliciting more squeals of laughter.

"Ye devil, Derek! Oh, it does my heart good to see that you are alive and well." She looked at Hugh and smiled. "The brothers are together again." She turned to the laird. "I shall prepare a feast. A celebratory feast, yes?"

Phillip grinned and nodded, casting a curious gaze toward Dalla, but just about the time he broached a question, a baby's cry from the stairs leading to the second floor captured their attention.

Hugh glanced upward in surprise as Sarah came down the stairs, carrying the squalling baby in her arms, shaking her head with abject embarrassment.

She saw Hugh and squealed in delight, much as Agnes had, and hurried down the stairs.

Hugh, standing next to Dalla, could only stare at the tiny bundle in her arms, the infant's face red with emotion.

Hugh grinned and turned to Phillip. "Remind you of someone?"

Roars of laughter followed and abruptly, Sarah placed the infant in Hugh's arms. "Let's see if you can do something about this. She's got quite a set of lungs, and I can't seem to calm her down, and neither can Heather."

Hugh uncomfortably cradled the baby in his arms, staring down at the red face, the tiny fists, the open mouth squalling for something. "Hush little one," he grumbled. "I don't understand your language."

"May I?"

All eyes turned to Dalla as she gave Sarah a questioning gaze, holding out her arms for the infant.

Without hesitation, Sarah nodded, and Hugh gratefully placed the screaming infant into her arms.

Lowering her head and singing so softly her voice almost whispered, Dalla began to sing a lullaby in her native language to the infant, much as she had sung to his horse.

Within moments, the baby's squalling reduced in volume, then to a few hiccups, and then quiet wonder as she stared up at the face hovering above her.

Everyone stared at Dalla, but she gazed down at the infant, unmindful of the multiple pairs of eyes on her.

Hugh swallowed and then made the announcement.

"Laird Phillip, Jake, Sarah, this is my wife, Dalla."

In the midst of congratulations, another young woman emerged from upstairs, her belly slightly round with child. "Hugh! You're back!"

Heather flew down the stairs and flung herself into Hugh's arms, then only then noticed Dalla staring at her with open-faced curiosity.

"Hello," she said with a slight flush in her cheeks at her behavior.

Dalla nodded.

"You are Hugh's wife?" Again, Dalla nodded. Heather placed her hands on her shoulders. "Well then, welcome to the Duncan clan."

Hugh wanted the explanations done and over with. He stated the facts quickly and bluntly. "I bought Dalla on the coastline. She's Norwegian. I made her sign a paper marrying us, and she is my wife." He glanced at Dalla, holding the now quiet baby, rocking softly back and forth. "And I love her."

Dalla looked up at him, her eyes shining with tears. Then she turned to those gathered around him. "And I love Hugh as well. And if you'll have me, I too will consider myself a member of the Duncan clan."

Over dinner, the entire story was told.

Then the attention turned to Sarah, calmly holding her baby as she sat by Phillip, gazing at Hugh and Dalla with a sense of satisfaction. Finally, she spoke. "It's about time you found yourself a bride, Hugh. You will make a good match."

"What's the baby's name?" Dalla asked.

Sarah glanced at Hugh, then Derek, then down at her little girl, then back at Hugh. "I named her after someone very near and dear to the Duncan clan, and most especially to Hugh and his brother. Someone I never had the honor to meet. In loving memory and in the hopes of dreams to come. Her name is Mary. After their mother."

Hugh stared at Sarah, swallowing past the lump suddenly growing in his throat. Finally, he spoke. "Thank you, Sarah. It is a good name for your firstborn. Congratulations." He turned to Jake and Heather. "Soon, little ones will be taking over the manor house," he commented. He looked at Phillip. "And what have you to say about that, Phillip?"

Phillip shrugged. "The more, the merrier!"

Everyone laughed, and then the attention turned to Derek. Phillip spoke, his tone somber. "We've missed you, Derek. It's good to have you back on Duncan lands again. How long can you stay?"

Derek gazed at the familiar faces around him, plus the new additions since he had left. Everyone happily married, procreating, beginning new traditions.

"I'll stay the winter, if you can put up with me that long," he grinned. "But come spring? I will return to the sea... to my shipping business. Until then, we have some catching up to do, don't we?"

"Indeed we do, brother," Hugh clapped his brother on the back. "Indeed we do."

Phillip, the laird of the Duncan clan, raised his mug of ale. "To the Duncan clan... growing with no signs of slowing down!" he shouted.

"The Duncans!" came the answering roar, followed by laughter.

AFTERWORD

I hope you enjoyed An Auctioned Bride! I can't wait to bring you the next book in this series!

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