

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

FATED

Lexi Ander

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

FATED

By Lexi Ander

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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FATED

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Photo Description

A scruffy shirtless bald man in a red, green, and white kilt is standing with his feet apart looking up. He has tattoos on his upper right chest, and his arms.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Please help this poor Laird. He's a warrior and a leader, always alone. Now he's fallen in love with the enemy and his clan won't allow it. Please don't make him time travel, but he can shift for sure.

Hugs and please make sure he has an HEA. He deserves one. This is for Kevin and his incredible highlander addiction.

Sincerely,

Lucy

Story Info

Genre: historical, paranormal

Tags: men in kilts, non-wolf or -cat shifters, mythology, alternate world

Word Count: 31, 344

Dedication

For Kevin, Lucy, who have taught me to never say never. I swore I would never write a historical and look what happened. I hope your Scottish laird meets your expectations. Special thanks to Alison. This wouldn't have been half as good without her magic.

Author's Note

Writing a true historical set in the 12th century requires the author to be a bit of a poet. The cadence of the speech has a certain lyrical rhythm to it. Alas! I'm not a poet and this is not a strict historical because there are the hints of magic, of mythical wonder, shifters, and living curses. I chose the period because I needed a plausible time period for the pagan, Roi. It never crossed my mind to consider language of the period as well. I would have loved to write this as historically accurate in both the time period and the language, but there just wasn't enough time to do both. You will find that the language is from the 14th century and before. All other elements are as historically close as I could get with the short period of time I had for research. I hope you enjoy the story as it is.

NOTE: A lexicon of the old UK English used in this story can be found at the end.

FATED

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CHAPTER ONE

1164: the Battle of Renfrew

~Laird Ewen Meinnear, Thane of Malcolm IV, King of Scotland~

The red haze of berserker rage crowded the edges of my vision. By strength of will alone, I held the beast at bay. Since the battle began, my men and I had pursued the banner of Somerled, King of the Isles, only for the sly snake to slide through our fingers. However on this day, the scarlet-clad pagan Somerled kept close to his side broke away from the King of the Isles, seemingly quite determined to meet us on the battlefield, to all appearances leaving Somerled no choice save to follow him. I surged forward, my beast catching the scent of the man we needed to kill. In my haste, I almost became separated from my king, Malcolm IV, and my men.

The pagan in the flowing red robes wore no clear armour. He wielded his sword and shield with a fierceness that closely matched my own. Ere I could cross swords with him, the golden-haired warrior turned aside, and there ere me stood Somerled himself. Young Malcolm, King of Scotland, came up on my right. Under his steel helm, Somerled's eyes glowed with an ambitious light when he spotted Malcolm. Little did Somerled know he would have to go through me to kill my king.

Over these last many days of battle, we had watched Somerled. Those of us who fought beside Malcolm assembled at the end of each day to share our observations. The King of the Isle was kept within a circle of soldiers and he rarely lifted the sword in combat. I was well ware that the man I faced was fresh and not battle weary. Even so, he still would be no match for me and the beast contained under my skin.

The instant I stepped ere Somerled to face off with him, I caught the scent of another. The beast and I raised our upper lip and bared our teeth, the

berserker haze that stayed at the edge of my vision during battle darkened and spread as the creature within me sought to go to the protection of the source of the amazing scent. The tight control I held over the beast's actions slipped away, leaving me utterly animalistic in mind, even if not in body, as I engaged Somerled with a single-minded savageness that caused my kinsmen to give us a wide berth.

At all times I exercised tight control over the beast within me, but in battle, I am not able to keep him bridled. When the animal fury grips me, I always come away far more drenched in blood than a common warrior, the bodies of the fallen mauled almost beyond recognition by my sword or axe. At times I lost myself so utterly to the animal I could not recall my actions. I endlessly worried I would strike down friend or family instead of the foes who faced me on the bloody field. Such was the outcome of the old lore of my people, of vows, curses, and battle rage.

I did not recall what I did or how long we fought.

The berserker rage I rode into battle with suddenly vanished. Never ere now had my inner animal been calmed so quickly or effectually. More oft than not, it took time for the rage to turn to calm, my kinsmen making sure I caused no harm once the battle finished.

The beast that shared my skin went from combative to curious in the blink of an eye, soothed and contented. My arms and shoulders tingled and ached from prolonged excessive exertion. I gulped air as sweat stung my eyes. The sounds of battle rang in the air about me, a noise I never wanted to remember but always dreamed about in the dark of night. Wounded and dying men alike cried out in sorrowful wails. The sound rivalled the fiercest of banshee singing. Ravens added their sharp cries to the discord as they circled above or hopped among the bodies. I did not want to take these memories back to my family or my quiet forest, though I knew I would never truly be free of them.

As I strained to catch my breath, shocked at the sudden withdrawal of the beast, my gaze took in the details of the waning battle. Somerled's invading soldiers retreated now their king and many of his lords lay on the field of battle. Ere me lay the headless body of Somerled mac Gillebride, King of the

Isles, his body armour dented and cleaved in twain, as if parted by the powerful blows of an ogre or giant.

Malcolm moved up next to me and gazed down at Somerled. My kinsmen of Clann Meinnear loosely surrounded us to protect the king against a random attack, for all that the battle seemed to be over.

The red-robed warrior approached us with caution. I admired the heart of the foolish but fierce golden-haired man. Every day he wore flowing robes instead of armour, yet strangely never seemed to suffer injuries. The pagan advanced toward us slowly, his blue gaze unerringly locked on mine. Not knowing of his intent, I shifted my feet, readying my shield and sword to engage this new enemy even as he caused me to think of Granfather's tellings of the old ways.

Plaited golden hair lay in one long thick rope over the warrior's shoulder. Tattoos marked the fair skin of the man's face although the design could not hide the scarring that started at the right temple, flowing down the cheek to the neck. The pagan wore a short, tiny, cropped patch of hair, lighter than the colour of his braid, on the lower part of the chin. His upper lip, neck and cheeks were clean-shaven.

Eyes so blue they called to mind the land of ice in the far north held me transfixed as the man dropped his weapons and knelt on the ground on the far side of Somerled's body. His arms stretched wide, held out from his body, he finally broke eye contact when he bowed his head and bared his neck to me. With his king now dead, this man willingly gave his life for me to take. As I drew in his scent, my beast yowled and chuffed. This smell, this pagan, had both instigated a savage berserker rage and then soothed the beast. A long-ago journey with my granfather once again tickled my mind. I looked back upon the warning. Many years had passed with naught coming of Granfather's words that I had begun to doubt.

The man kneeling ere me might be the man Granfather had foretold, whose future was yoked to mine, and yet I could only stare, dumfounded. Instead of ending his life, I scrambled to find a way to save him. Not able to, I

unwillingly stepped forward, raising my sword for the killing blow I did not believe I could give.

“Ewen, enough,” Malcolm’s tired voice called to me and I glanced over my shoulder. My king stood within the circle of my kinsmen, war-weary and sallow faced. Chosen as Thane over Loch Raineach two years ago by Malcolm IV, King of Scotland, I spent my days in battle nigh him. I knew only I had the power to protect him. At twenty-four, Malcolm appeared as a man twice his age, and he had been in poor health for as long as I had known him. If I was weary, then he was doubly so, because he insisted on fighting uncaring of his malady.

“Enough blood has been shed this day. The king of my enemy be dead by yer hand. The battle be over and we hae won. Take the pagan, he be yers to dae with as ye will.”

I breathed a silent sigh of relief but held onto a stern mask. I smelled Cinead, my cousin and clann chief, approach. Lately his scent had been mingled with the sour scents of the deceitful *Inglis*. With each visit to Glasgow, Cinead spent longer and longer periods of time, weeks turning into a month or two, beguiled by those who would test the loyalty of a Scottis to his king. Cinead foolishly believed none but his most trusted knew of his purpose. He forgot he could not deceive my nose.

Ever since Malcolm chose me as Thane, Cinead reeked of envy when he entered my presence. He laughed and clapped my back in a show of solidarity but I knew he searched for a way to be rid of me without being labelled kinslayer. In the meantime while he plotted, Cinead reminded me in many costly ways that I owed him my fealty. He pushed my tolerance and patience to the very edge with this new arrogance.

“Pagan doog,” Cinead spat, removing his steel helm. His dark hair tumbled loose from the tie at the nape of his neck to hang tangled in his face. He wore armour of better quality than that of his own kinsmen, with a coat of chainmail over the leine-croich, while *his* men wore segmented leather plates and bracers at *my* expense. We entered Glasgow to trade, not ware of the battle brewing west of the burgh. I could not in good conscience allow my kinsmen to enter

battle clad in a mere leine and leggings. Cinead felt no obligation, spending coin only on his own defence.

“He be worthless and will only befoul yer house and name. Kill him and let us find some good drink and wench to warm the bed.”

I froze, my beast roaring to life at Cinead’s words. He had ordered me to destroy a gift of the king ere witnesses. I turned, giving my back to the foreigner, relying on my instinct that this man would not raise a hand against me, and faced Cinead. The men from my house outnumbered his two to one. As chief, Cinead’s position commanded the respect of the men of Clann Meinnear, but even so, he had stepped over his boundary of authority with this newest demand of me.

Malcolm had turned to leave, however he halted when he heard Cinead’s careless words of scorn for his generosity, his brow furrowed in a deep frown. If need be, Malcolm would be my witness if Cinead and I came to blows. I did not relish a fight so soon after the battle, even so I declined to allow Cinead to force my hand with regards to the pagan.

Keeping my voice calm, I replied, “I think no’, cousin. Ye cannot command me to destroy my ain property and a present of the king. I shall keep the warrior and take him into my home to attend me as a manservant. I hae nae quarrel with ye, Cinead Meinnear, nathless the fate of this man lies in my hands, no’ yers. This be no’ up for debate. Dinnae force my hand on this matter. Ye hae overstepped yer authority ere witnesses. It be my right to demand homage for the lack of honour ye hae shown me this day. Yer manners stink of *Inglis* influence.”

Cinead’s cheeks puffed out and his eyes grew wide with anger. I dismissed him with a wave of my hand and addressed the men of my house.

“Edan, Olghar, gather the men and the wounded. Reap whit ye can from the field of battle and make sure homage be given to Malcolm. We leave for home at the morrow’s first light. Hae all able-bodied men begin the preparations. Donn, Arailt, attend me. We will escort Malcolm back to his tents.”

Glancing back at the pagan, I met his ice-blue gaze, waiting as Cinead stormed away. His men reluctantly trailed behind him, well ware they could not escape Cinead's fit of temper until the end of the day. The more Cinead acted out, the closer the clann came to choosing a new chief. I only hoped it would be ere Cinead did something harsh and cannot be forgiven. As it was, he would exact from me a costly homage for denying him. He wanted me dead and I knew not why.

I faced the kneeling man, giving him the full weight of my stare. "I be Ewen Meinnear, Thane of Loch Raineach. Whit be ye called?"

"Roi mhic Leoid." His voice was low and accented, the sound of the rounded tone of one who spoke a tongue foreign to their own. The pagan, Roi, carefully watched my every move as if he thought I would change my mind and suddenly claim his life. His scent lay heavily woven with that of deep despair, not like any scent I had tasted ere now.

"Ye heard my words. Ye be my manservant now, only first I wid hae yer vow ere ye keep company with me and my king. For many days I hae watched ye. Ye hae never been far from Somerled's side."

"No' by choice," Roi said but did not speak further.

"Then it will be nae hardship to swear an oath to me. I be no' a hard master. All who live under my protection know me to be an even and fair man. Ye give me an honest day's work and in return, I shall give ye an honest wage. If ye refuse to give yer vow then I shall be forced to see ye shackled and guarded like a common criminal. Yer choice."

For a short while, I thought he would gainsay my demand. Those blue eyes appeared to see through me, his countenance one of a person who did not understand what had just befallen him. My patience thinned as my body began to feel battle weary. Ere I could snap at him, Roi began to speak in a language, sounding much like Gaulish, it may hap Eburones or Tulingi. I had not heard those tongues spoken since travelling with Granfather as a boy. I had no need to worry for Roi soon translated.

“My shield in defence, my sword for redress, my arm in labour, my mind in council, my fate be now bond to ye. Yer life ere mine, yer house ere mine, yer kin ere mine, all of this I avow.”

I stared at Roi, scenting the air about him carefully, only sensing honesty. “Then rise and pick up yer weapons, there be much to be done this day.”

The man climbed to his feet, full of wonder and may hap a little stunned. I moved to the king’s side, ready to grab his arm if it appeared his strength would fail him. I feared that, with the decline of his health over the last few years, Malcolm would not be long with us.

Behind me, I heard Arailt address Roi, not unkindly but in warning. “Dinnae think him weak because he has shown mercy. If ye seek to cross him, judgment will be swift and he willnae be so merciful.”

I almost tripped when Roi replied, “All of my life, I hae waited for the guardian. This day, I was supposed to die hereupon this field. I can nae more raise a hand against him than I can against myself.”

CHAPTER TWO

~*Roi Iain mhic Leoid*~

Ere the Battle

Three times twelvemonths. Three long years of torment I endured under the thumb of Somerled mac Gillebride, King of the Isles. All the machinations, all of the labour I put into ending my servitude to Somerled and it was at hand. After all of that time, I patiently waited for his downfall while he twisted my gift and forced me to *see* for him. His yearning for power knew no bounds yet I applied great patience, knowing there would be an end to the oppression I experienced by his hand.

For days, as we battled Malcolm's army, I attempted to manoeuvre Somerled in the direction of Malcolm's standard bearers against his desires. The time of Somerled's undoing was oft within my grasp, only Somerled continuously declined to cross swords with Malcolm.

Until this day.

Cerridwen, Goddess of dark prophecy, whispered in my dreams last night. When I woke, I knew this forced servitude of mine would soon be at an end. Somerled actively avoided combat with the King of Scotland because any who challenged Malcolm were quickly and efficiently dispatched by the men who steadfastly defended him. This day would be different, for they would seek out Somerled and I would ensure the King of the Isles met them.

I rose and dressed in the crimson robes commissioned when I turned nineteen. The garments were the only possession I had saved from the fire that destroyed my Goddess's temple. Now, almost ten years later, I wore them for my final day in battle. A beacon to those who sought to bring Somerled down and as a poetic touch to the first vision I had *seen* of the warrior who would claim my life.

I had seen the visage of my dark warrior countless times ere now. Awake or sleeping, the visions cared not for my activity or where I happened to be

when they came upon me. My first vision of the highlander occurred when I entered the temple at the urging of my mother. The instant my bare feet touched the cool stone floor, I had been carried to a bloody field of battle. The clash of metal, the moans of the wounded, and the smell of the dying, all of it dulled and muted to my senses.

There were two things that stayed with me from my first clear vision. The prevailing amount of blood, the colour a vibrant red. The elixir of life, that whereat allowed us to live, created a carpet of crimson beneath my feet. The second thing that held my thoughts was the warrior, dark of hair and strong of arm. The man fought like a newly caged beast. He appeared to glow with an inner power as if part of him struggled to be free.

And he was *glorious*.

Over the years, I was given many visions of the warrior and slowly came to understand my life would end the day I met him. When I saw him ploughing through the soldiers this day, he looked as noble as I knew he would be, with his long, dark hair tied back beneath his helm, his sword glinting in the waning sunlight. A black bear was tooled on the front of his hard leather breastplate. My highland warrior fought with a single-minded tenacity, eyes glowing a bright golden-brown.

When Somerled lay dead on the ground and I knelt ere the warrior offering up all that I was, I had finally found peace. Unbeknownst to my fellow priests, somewhere over the years I had come to care deeply about the singular and violent man of my dreams.

That he would be the one to deliver me to the next life seemed right. *Fated*.

And yet, he spared me. Suddenly, I was set adrift. For as long as I could call back, I knew what would come. This day I was supposed to die. All the signs were there for a new beginning by my warrior's—Ewen's—sword. Now I stumbled about blind, rudderless, with no purpose. The only thing familiar in this dark landscape was my highlander.

Emotions buried long ago when I had first entered Cerridwen's temple threatened to overwhelm me. I had woken from the first vision confounded

and affright, closed in by serious, stern-faced priests, to grasp clearly I had been cast aside. As one touched by Cerridwen's blessing, my mother left me to the mercy of the priests. They made me an acolyte and trained me for priesthood, all the while waiting for the greatness the gift would bestow on the temple. There, I quickly learned to hide excess emotion lest it be used against me.

I glanced toward the man who had challenged Ewen and pressed for my death. His light of otherness abounded with the portents of trouble. The sight caused a wave of soothing ease to wash over me. I retained who I was, my *sight*, even though the course of my fate had changed.

Dropping back from Ewen and the king, Arailt and Donn followed suit, crowding against me. Understandably, they did not allow me to be more than arm's length from them, not that I cared. I ignored the intimidation and distrust in their countenance. "Ewen's kinsman,"—I tilted my chin toward the man—"he means Ewen harm. I behold much envy about him." I kept my voice low, yet the way Ewen cocked his head made me wonder if he had heard me anyway.

Donn closely resembled Ewen, with shoulder-length dark hair and a modest beard. Brother or cousin, either way I thought him for a close relative. Arailt had lighter colouring, milky-white skin lightly freckled on the nose, and waist-length red hair. Both he and Donn had an aura of power about them, similar to Ewen's, only not pinched with pain, as Ewen's appeared to be.

"If I didnae know ye arrived on the boats with Somerled, I wid accuse ye of seeking to cause discord within our clann," Arailt commented. I kept my visage blank, cursing my loose tongue. Ewen's clann chief planned to harm Ewen. Someone needed to guard against such treachery. Ewen kept these two close for the king's defence. I had believed them to be his most trusted men. It may hap I had been wrong.

"Intrigue, seeing, was this yer purpose in the service of the King of the Isles?" Donn's gaze turned judging as he noted the tattoos on my face.

Discovery of my singular abilities more oft than not resulted in violent actions from men. They feared what I could do, what I knew. Those who yearned for power sought to bribe me to read those of their acquaintance. Others studiously avoided me, throwing salt when I walked by in an attempt to dispel evil spirits. For the most part, in Somerled's court, I had been ignored by everyone but him and a few of his close allies or lords and lordlings.

I halted mid step, desperate to change the course of their interest even as my mind became blank. I waited with caution for their response. Would these men of Ewen's be of the same ilk as the others?

"Answer," Donn snapped impatiently.

I could not. My heart dropped in my chest. The frail hope that this new path would be better than my old life began to crumble, snatched away like dust on the wind because I kept my silence. Why had I said aught at all? Ewen. He was involved. He saved my life; by doing so, I became obligated to him. I gave my vow.

"Arailt, Donn!" We all glanced to Ewen. He and the king had stopped. They watched the three of us curiously. "Dinnae lag behind. There be much we hae yet to fulfill ere gloaming."

Off to the right, three men rose from among the dead and dying, their gazes trained on Ewen and the king as they moved stealthily towards the two. At once I reacted, afeared words would cause confusion and lead to Ewen and the king being wounded. Ewen's countenance changed from curious to alarm as I approached them at a run.

Arailt and Donn bellowed a warning I could not quite understand. Ewen responded by pushing Malcolm to the ground. He covered the king's body with his own, a shield brought up to protect them from a blow. An ancient battle cry, both a call for death and prayer for life, left my lips as I leapt over the two prone figures. The ravens feasting on the dead launched into the air in a dark thick mass, cawing loudly as they swirled about us.

The speed and power of my leap slammed me awkwardly into two of the fighters as I bashed them with my shield. The third man I caught with the hilt

of my sword on the nose, his face caving with the crunch of bone ere I took one of the other two men to the ground with me.

A boot caught me in the lower ribs as I struggled to rise, stealing my breath away. I lost hold of my shield and the robes wound about my legs. Trying to roll away only brought the man under me along. The fighter had lost his weapon only to pull a belt knife. This close, my sword became useless. I grasped the man's wrist to stop the knife from slicing my throat open while I landed a blow to the warrior's chin with my other fist.

A roar sounded yet I dared not divert my eyes. Ewen and the king had two kinsmen to ensure the king's safety. I ignored the tumult and the piercing cries from the ravens. Struggling to keep from being stabbed, we continued to roll as I fought for a grasp on the dagger. My enemy rolled onto something that caused him to lose attention and jerk awkwardly. I took advantage, driving the knife to its crudely coloured hilt into the man's chest ere I quickly moved away. In a weary fog, I searched for a weapon. Two more cutthroats needed to find death at the tip of my blade.

Someone gripped my upper arm from behind. I turned, ready to fight, and lost all advantage. With lightning speed, both of my arms were twisted up behind my back and I found myself looking up into Ewen's dark-amber gaze, my chest flush with his so that every ragged breath I took pushed me into him.

It was not until then that I beheld his lips moving and yet I heard only the rushing wind. Blinking, I shook my head in confusion. Slowly, other sounds began to become clear.

"There ye go. Calm down. All danger be past." The words were low and gruff, right on the edge of a growl, oddly soothing instead of alarming me.

My eyelids fluttered closed at the sound of Ewen's voice. Of all the times I had seen the man in my dreams, I never heard him speak until this day. Gods above. How he affected me. What would he do once he knew I preferred men to women? Surely, he had obligations, a wife and children. Even if he did not turn away what I could offer, where would I fit in this noble guardian's life? I knew I no longer belonged anywhere, nathless I wanted to belong to him, be

with him, stand by his side. And yet, I dared not speak of it, for I feared he would not understand. How could he? I had known him all of my life but he knew me not at all.

But to taste him, only once... I would ransom a nation to be able to freely do so.

I opened my eyes to behold his gaze locked onto me. His dark eyes, lined by thick sooty eyelashes, lightened to a soft brown-green hazel. Long, straight pieces of dark hair escaped the leather thong holding back the ebony locks. His skin was covered in sweat. Grime spattered the closely cropped moustache and beard.

The corner of his full lips lifted in a half smile. My groin began to feel heavy with need at the sight. “Ye will dae well, pagan, a fine addition to my house.”

Ewen released me, his palms sliding up my arms ere they came to rest on my shoulders. I stamped down on my need, for the robes would not be able to disguise my rising desire for long. Ewen’s nostrils flared and his pupils expanded ere he took a quick step back.

No one loitered within hearing, leaving us alone. Arailt and Donn, along with the king, were gone. The air was filled with the cawing of the ravens as they hopped about and over the corpses. If Ewen noticed the birds watching us instead of gleaning morsels from the field of battle, he said naught. They were the eyes of The Morrigan. Who they took interest in, whether it be he or I, I knew not. I made the sign of the battle blessing. Removing the correct rune from my belt pouch, I flipped the stone onto the field ere gathering my sword and shield from the ground.

He crouched over the bodies of the would-be murderers, fingering their ribands, the colour identifying them as men of Malcolm’s soldiers. “This makes nae sense. Why wid they beset the king now? The battle were already won!”

I snagged a heavy coin purse off one and glanced inside ere passing the leather pouch to Ewen. “It be possible the target was no’ the king.”

Searching the other two bodies, I came back with similar purses with the same heavy weight of gold and silver coin. It was a small fortune, more than a soldier would earn for more than a twelvemonth of work. I ignored Ewen's stare, refusing to meet his probing gaze.

“Ye believe I were the target?”

I scowled at the two heavy purses in my fist, weighing what exactly I should make known to him. “I huvnae been in yer presence long. Still, even I could tell there be those who hae issue with ye. I spent three years in Somerled's court reading people. If they sought only the king's life, they wid hae ensured he was alone—no' with his best men.”

We both stood at the same time. The day had been long. Weary in body, I wanted to be away, not hereupon the reeking field of battle. My head spun and sight blurred. When I blinked, Ewen had grasped my arm to steady me.

“No' much longer and we both can rest.”

CHAPTER THREE

Ewen

By the time I walked Roi back to camp, Donn and Arailt had handed Malcolm off to his personal guards. They assured me the wains would be ready to pull out in the morn.

Earlier, Malcolm had graciously offered us the use of his officer's bathing tent, whereat I accepted. I sent Arailt and Roi through to bathe while I saw to last minute trifles. Even at the late hour, the victory celebrations continued, and they probably would until sunrise. Donn and I, finally done for the day, looked forward to a soaking. We stepped into the deserted bathing tent, the warmth and humidity enveloping us upon entering.

"Ye huvnae heard a word I hae said." Donn began to disrobe. Our armour had been removed earlier, leaving only our tunics and leggings, although we retained our sword belts. After the sly ambush earlier, all of my kinsmen were on edge.

"It be no' apurpose, brother. Much weighs on my mind." I pulled the leather shirt over my head and laid it to the side. We each had brought a change of clothes with us to the tent, mine being the only clean ones I had left. We would not be able to launder any garments until after we reached home.

I had commanded Arailt to find clothing for Roi after the pagan declined to retrieve any belongings from Somerled's tents. I wondered if he did not wish for me to see something, may hap how he lived, or evidence of how he served the Somerled. I cared not what the reason. I declined to take him across country in those crimson robes. The crude red colour would draw every outlaw and robber between us and Loch Raineach. I grew tired of bloodshed and did not wish to invite more.

"There! Again!" Donn accused. "Whit holds yer thought?" He stepped into a large, round waist-high wooden tub that could easily seat six men.

Ere I got into the water, I placed the shaving kit Arailt retrieved for me earlier on the stand next to the tub. “I hae been thinking about what Roi said this afternoon. He believed I were the murderers’ target, no’ Malcolm.”

“As I told ye ere now, he beholds whit other men dinnae.”

I sank down into the lukewarm water and sighed. Many days in battle and there was not a place I did not hurt. “I dinnae know why ye believe him gifted. He admits to nae such affliction. Natheless, he seemed sure about his calculation. If Somerled’s court be half as corrupt as I hae heard, then Roi’s judgment of the matter might be closer to the truth than I wid wish for.”

“Dae ye dare to trust him?”

We passed a lump of lye soap back and forth as we washed. “He smells...” I could not place my finger on the exact wording.

Granfather’s long ago words stayed fresh in my mind. He said one day I might meet a man who bore the markings of the old gods on his visage. He would be familiar to me, call to my inner self as an old lover or friend would, even though I knew him not. Bear would act unlike himself in the man’s presence.

This foreigner would have the ability to undo the heinous act of a long ago ancestor, Reginald the Wicked, who trapped a bear spirit under his skin becoming the first werebear. All of Reginald’s descendants were accurst, never able to leave the forest for an extended length of time ere becoming afflicted with a longing, that if ignored, would drive us mad.

I had never confided to anyone what he told me about our origins. When I was young, I did not want to believe I needed help to free my people. I had been born with the strongest will and the strongest bear spirit. Forsooth, if we were cursed, together Bear and I would break the binding. We did not need aid from an outsider to do so. The older I became, the harder it was to believe the elder’s mythical tales. Until the day came that I altogether quit believing in any of the tellings of the curse.

With the arrival of the pagan, I was once again made to think of Granfather’s teachings. After a day ruminating over what I called up of the

lore, I still did not believe my granfather's foretelling to be true. Even though Roi showed signs of being more than he appeared to be, he was only a man. Bear might desire to claim him but even so, that did not mean Roi had the power to save us whereat by the same token destroy who we were as a people. According to the legend, when the curse lifted we would be separated from our animals for they would then be free. What good were we without our bears? No, what I had seen in Roi so far was not the portent of ruin for my people.

Donn stopped scrubbing and stared at me, bringing me out of my dark musings. "Simply because ye cannot shift dinnae mean ye cannot glean information from Bear," my brother admonished.

The men and women of Granfather's bloodline shared their bodies with the spirit of a bear. Each bear revealed their name to their human, except for mine. He withheld from me his name, so I simply called him Bear. Everyone thought this was the name he had given me, not ware of my fight. My kinsmen shared an equal relationship with their bear spirit, I did not. Bear either ignored me or took over in battle with berserker rage.

"Bear be infatuated with him," I acknowledged. "Even now I struggle with him. He has no' been this active since I was a boy." The confession released a tension within that I had been not ware of.

As my brother, Donn knew of a few of the problems I had with Bear, but not all. I feared confiding too much because every now and then I saw his disapproving countenance when he believed I was not ware. He believed in the old ways, accepted as truth the ancient tellings, even the ones promising the return of the guardians. Considering we all were guardians of the Caledonia Forest, Granfather's claim made no sense. Donn's gave credence to the lore and my doubts of it were points of strife between the two of us that from time to time threatened to tear us assunder.

"Granfather warned our animals wid become attached to certain people. Methinks there be nae a rhyme nor reason why. Lannah's attached to Simon because he be quiet while Tomas's bear likes Aimili's ability to climb trees," he pointed out.

“Whit wid Caitriona think?” I did not speak of her oft. I was surprised I did not choke and stumble over her name as I had done in the past.

My brother’s amber eyes softened. “She knew the clann’s heritage ere she agreed to be yer wife. She may hae been human but she accepted our ways. Our human side can choose a spouse just as our bears can choose a companion. At times the two be no’ the same person.” Donn ducked under the water to rinse his hair and then wiped water from his eyes.

“Be ye concerned because Bear chose a male companion, or dae ye feel guilty? Ye be widowed and ye hae been for over a twelvemonth. The time for mourning be past. Yer love for Caitriona willnae be lessened simply because ye hae found Bear’s companion. She wid want ye to be happy. Look at Granfather. Seoc became his companion after Granmother passed. Ye know he loved her yet he adored Seoc deeply, albeit no’ unlike the deep feelings he held for Granmother.”

I nodded in agreement only to hide my worries. “Bear’s reaction to Roi be strong. He attempts to overwhelm me if I dinnae hae a firm hand on him.”

“Yer strangle hold causes Bear to turn a deaf ear to ye or to fight. If ye deny him his companion, yer bear could withdraw altogether,” Donn warned.

Donn left the tub and dried off. After clothing himself in clean garments, Donn grabbed the shaving kit and came to stand behind me. I leaned back and waited as he created the shaving lather ere taking the shears to my hair.

Donn stared down at me, his face unreadable. “Will Roi be open to being a companion to ye? I sense he be unlike others, though that dinnae mean he wid consider ye for a lover if it be no’ in his nature.”

“I scented arousal this day when he came nigh. The way he watches me, as if he be expecting—something. I should wait until he comes to know us. He shall be living under my roof, and sooner rather than later, I need to speak to him about the clann’s heritage. He makes keen observations. Even if he consents to being in a companionship, it will come to naught if he cannot accept our bear spirits.”

Bear grunted, unhappy with my answer. He seemed sure of Roi's acceptance and wanted Roi to himself—now. The certainty of Bear's belief had become stronger the more time we spent with the pagan. I would almost say my bear knew Roi, save that was not possible as his memories were my own. I was sure we had never met.

I declined to admit to Donn the attraction I had for Roi stirred guilt within me. I know not if Bear's attraction to the pagan swayed my own. Roi seemed familiar to me and yet again, I blamed the sensation on Bear. For so long my actions had been unhindered by Bear's opinions. Now, with him active, I had trouble divining which emotions belonged to him and which to me. In part, I was overjoyed Bear had come alive but it took double the willpower to exert my command over him. I was afraid if I eased my grip on Bear, he would overwhelm me as he did in battle. What I would come to feel for Roi had to be me and not Bear, otherwise I could not be happy with Roi as companion.

As if understanding my concern, Bear withdrew, becoming almost dormant again. I was left with the keen understanding that everything I had blamed on Bear's power over me did not leave with him. As Donn removed my beard and shaved the hair from my head, I struggled to admit to interest in someone since the death of my spouse. God help me if the arousal I scented upon Roi earlier had been for me. If he was willing, my resolve could very well crumble.

Bear seemed to watch me struggle, yet his emotions, his opinions, were hidden from me once again. I wondered if I should be concerned by his smug satisfaction when I silently lamented his absence.

I ducked under the tent flap. My scalp felt cold and chapped, I ran the palm of my hand over the smooth skin. Donn had done a good job of shaving my head and face. I felt naked, the coolness of the evening air causing the skin to prickle.

It did not take long for my sight to adjust to the dim interior of the tent. Without delay Bear rose up and demanded I search out Roi. I did not fight the impulse. In the back corner, Roi lay burrowed in the mound of hides and furs

where my scent would coat him from head to toe. Bear made small grunts of satisfaction.

Undressing, I quietly climbed in between the hides. Accordant to habit, I would not travel this burdened, save the trip to Glasgow with Cinead meant a couple of weeks sleeping under the stars. Those like me, who could barely stand the press of the city, paid a farmer to allow us to pitch tents on his land outside Glasgow. With Somerled's invasion, our purpose had changed from trading to war. The shelter of our tents became a luxury among an army of so many.

The many layers of furs trapped heat and protected us from the cold ground. Sliding in next to Roi, I could not stop the tremble as our bare skin touched. I had not been so close to anyone since Caitriona passed. Bear desired to rub against the man, wrap about him, and hold him close. It may hap I was not the only one who missed having someone in my arms at night.

Roi moaned in his sleep, rolled over and moved into my side. His long blond hair looked white against the dark furs. With gentle fingers, I pushed back the strands and gazed at the scar on the right side of his face.

The burn was extensive, going from the hairline of his temple all the way down to his neck. The scar was thick, wrinkled, and paler than the rest of Roi's skin, whereat told me the injury was old. The skin about the eye pulled up only a bit. The burn was far enough from the outer crook that the skin had not healed gathered in the corner, narrowing the eye and affecting his sight.

With my fingertips, I traced the line of the tattoo, starting at the base of the ear, arcing up over the cheek to a point ere coming back down and connecting to the top of the ear. The design resembled an upturned, curved blade with three dots along the centre. From the hairline of his forehead to between his brows were two deep Vs. Dots filled the space between, with a fine scrolling of woad along the outer edge. Starting at the corner of his eye were swirls of lines and dots that brought to mind the wakening bud of a flower, new and watchful. Roi's scarring did not allow him to grow a full beard. It appeared he kept his cheeks and upper lip shaved on a regular basis, allowing the hair to

grow only on his chin. I was not used to the look but I found I was not opposed to the style.

Roi's muscular arm wrapped about my chest and a thick thigh wedged between mine. As he moved, Roi made enticing noises that caused my groin to tighten. I drew him closer. Bear demanded I check Roi's scent. Sniffing, we found only our smell upon him. Roi's nose nudged my ear ere Roi finally settled down. I did not believe I would sleep, though no sooner did I close my eyes than I fell into a light doze.

CHAPTER FOUR

Roi

I woke in the early hour of the morn trapped under a large snoring body. At once, panic flickered as I tried to place my surroundings. The events of the day ere pushed past the terror, only it did not help me to bring to mind the bald male who sprawled on top of me. Did I mistakenly climb into a tent not belonging to Ewen?

Striving to extract myself without rousing the man, I shifted to move out from under him. The soldiers were celebrating heavily last evening. I did not want this one to wake and know he had not tumbled into bed with one of the camp's women. Honest blunder or not, violence would ensue.

A low grumbling growl caused me to halt and tense. My body shamefully responded to the noise. I laboured to hide my arousal in Ewen's presence. Now here I was being made to think back to the many times I had denied myself the tender touch of another. I should have taken myself in hand last eve to relieve the tension, yet I had imagined being caught and all desire fled.

The man began to sniff at the crook of my neck and I went from partially aroused to aching with need. There would be no way I could get out of this without a fight. The large strong arms clasped about my torso constricted, holding me tighter as the man rolled his hips, digging a steely manhood into the flesh of my hip.

"Roi." The voice was rough with sleep but I recognized Ewen in that one spoken word. The matter had not changed. If he woke he would not look kindly on a man in his bed. Natheless, I was well and truly trapped.

Ewen continued to sniff my skin. At any other time, the soft puffs of air ghosting across my neck and chest would stir my blood. A warm tongue licked along the skin where my collar would lay, raising the skin to gooseflesh. I fisted the hides underneath me to keep from pushing back against Ewen as he rolled his hips again.

“Roi.” This time Ewen sounded harsh and full of agony.

I waited for Ewen to wake. When he raised his head and stared down at me with clear hazel eyes, the strain left my body. The dread leaked away and I became pliant under Ewen’s firm body.

“Tell me, dae ye—will ye—accept me?”

I should argue for time. There were things I needed to tell him, explain to him... but I had only ever wanted him. Would he understand what I am—who I am? Would it even matter?

In the end, I declined to deny him. With a boldness I oft lacked, I grasped his hips and ground my aching erection into him. The “Aye, please” I intended came out sounding like a groan. Ewen nipped my chin, pulling lightly on the short hairs ere burying his nose back into the crook of my neck.

What was I doing? I barely knew this Ewen who hovered over me. Dreaming about him every night had given me little insight to the man. The suspicious side of me wondered if my boundaries, my loyalties were being tested by the gods. The part of me drifting and scared, that foresaw my death yesterday, wanted to take the pleasure Ewen offered. To confirm I lived because I could not behold my future any longer.

I knew I should slip away, leave, because in all reality I belonged nowhere, especially not here, with him. Instead of planning an escape, searching for a way to return to my island and what was left of my people, I waited for Ewen to take me in any way he would. Because—to be able to play out every dark desire, to taste every part of him, wrestle him, submit to him and ravage him—gods above—I grasped clearly I would do aught to stay with him.

Releasing my hold on common sense, I rode the wave of ecstasy Ewen built between us with his open-mouthed kisses, his sensuous licking, and the grinding of his groin against me. I whispered pleading words as he grasped my hard column and stroked my length in time to the mind-numbing swivel of his hips until I spilled onto his hand. Ewen bit my shoulder as he grunted, his warm seed coating my belly.

As our heavy breathing sounded softly throughout the tent, his broad palms stroked my side down to my hip. I sought to soothe the skin where I had gripped him roughly, at the same time learning the lines and strength of his body. Would this be only the once? The release of stress after a successful battle? I hoped not, but life, of late, had not been particularly kind to me. If this was the only time I could hold my highlander, I would take it and deem myself rich, for in his touch I had found peace.

Ewen grabbed a square of linen from beside the fur pallet and wiped us clean. Not wanting to pull away or stop touching, I ran my fingertips through the dark hair on his chest. Over the left side of his breast, atop his heart, lay the tattoo of a Celtic knot, the symbol of the beginning and the end, a call back to the timeless nature of the spirit. The image of a dragon went from his left elbow up the bicep and over the edge of the shoulder. On the inside of his arm, below the elbow, a red star as large as my palm stood out starkly against his skin. When I ran my thumb over the symbol, Ewen jerked away as if I had burnt him. I wanted to make an apology but I knew not what for. The quiet breaths of awkwardness changed when someone scratched at the tent flap.

“Ewen, the Jews be on their way.”

“Give a bit to dress, Donn,” Ewen called back.

I shivered as the hides were pulled back and cool air invaded our cocoon of warmth.

“Arailt found clothing for ye.” He handed me a modest stack of garments that had been sitting nigh the foot of the pallet. “There be leggings, a tunic, boots, belt, and a kilt. The tartan be plain, yet once we arrive home, I shall hae one of my sett made for ye.”

A lump formed in my throat. I had lived such a long time without a family. The temple and the ever-present priests were certainly never such a haven. Even though I would be a servant in his house, it would be the closest I would come to having a home since my mother deserted me on the threshold of the temple.

The spark of flint and steel startled me into action. Someone had business with Ewen. I had heard of the bankers, the Jews the Norse brought over the seas to be money handlers. It would be unseemly for them to catch me in his bed. I pulled on the linen tunic that fell to mid-thigh and quickly wrapped the leather leggings, using *snaoim gatrain* knots to secure the garters hidden by the hem of the tunic. Wrapping the great kilt became cumbersome, then confounding.

“Huvnae ye worn a kilt ere, man?” A hint of humour touched his voice, his strong hand gently moved mine to the side as he patiently taught me how to wrap the garment.

“I be a priest of Cerridwen of the Temple of the Moon. I hae only worn her robes,” I confessed.

Ewen’s hands stilled after he buckled the belt. I glanced up to catch him staring at me with an odd countenance. “A warrior priest of old? Then Cerridwen must be proud of ye, at least until ye wore red robes into battle, making yerself a beacon for those who wished to kill ye.” A hint of anger tinged his voice, his hands fisting and wrinkling the woollen material.

My checks grew warm. “The colour was so I wid catch yer eye.”

“Why?” he finally asked. “Why wid ye want to draw my sight?” The beginnings of distrust moved into Ewen’s visage until a cold mask looked down at me.

“Because it was yer destiny to deliver the killing blow to Somerled.” Any hope that Ewen would be accepting of my gift crumbled to ashes even as Ewen continued to gaze at me with cool regard.

“How wid ye even know whit my destiny entailed?”

“I told ye, I be a priest of Cerridwen. She be the Goddess of the moon, of wisdom and understanding. She be the keeper of the cauldron of the underworld, and Goddess of dark prophecy.”

“Whit else dae ye know about my destiny?” I did not answer. “Whit about yers? Am I to die by yer hand?”

“No. I will never lift a hand against ye. I know naught else of yer life.”

“Why be that?” Ewen spat angrily. He wanted answers, some of which I could not give to him.

“Because I, too, was to perish by yer hand yesterday in battle. Ye hae changed yer fate utterly as surely as ye hae changed mine.”

He did not believe me and I wished I could take my confession back. He would have found out at some time. I wanted it to be my telling, nathless I had underestimated Ewen’s acceptance.

Ewen withdrew, emitting a low growl. What had I wanted him to do? He reacted the same as many of the others who uncovered my secret. I let myself believe this—he—would be unlike the days before. Suddenly I ached for the familiarity of my life on the island and the sameness of routine.

Scratching at the tent entrance put a halt to our conversation and any reply he would have made. Donn stepped through the flap and sniffed. The playful grin slipped when he noticed the strain between Ewen and me.

Behind him entered another, shorter man wearing a small red cap. His thick, curly midnight hair did not quite reach his shoulders and was matched by a full beard and moustache. His dress was that of a person of modest wealth. “Good morn, Ewen Meinnear of Clann Meinnear. I be Hiram Resnikov and I hae brought whit ye requested for yer children and yer estate.”

Ewen turned his back to me and drew the banker into the corner furthest from me, no doubt for privacy. Donn stepped into my line of sight and I sighed. Why did I bother to hope anymore?

“Whit happened?” Donn demanded in a low whisper.

“Whit always does when those like ye discover whit I be.”

Donn looked to be puzzled. “Whit be ye?”

“I be naught, simply a servant of Ewen’s house.” I turned, dismissing Donn, knelt next to the pallet and began breaking down the bedding. Ewen wanted to leave at first light. I needed to make sure his tent and belongings were packed up.

Donn knelt next to me. “Explain yerself.”

I ignored him and continued to roll and tie the furs. Movement was the key. If I stopped, I would crumble under the weight of my wretched sadness doubled. So, I worked studiously and kept my countenance blank. After an instant of odd sniffing, Donn began to assist me. The kind gesture almost too much save that I swallowed down the choking emotions I did not have a use for.

Belonging. I belonged nowhere. At that point, I hated myself for wanting what I could never have.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ewen

Bear struggled against me all morn. The sorrow and despair in the air about Roi burnt my nose every time I passed by. I did not intend to hurt him, yet his words alarmed me, and even though Bear argued that Roi's scent was free of deceit, my human side took time to sort through what Roi's words signified. By the time I agreed with Bear, the damage had been done. The interior of the tent had been packed and loaded onto the wain with Roi nowhere to be seen.

Curiously, I could not locate Donn either.

Too many duties came ere I was able to search out either man. I wanted the kinsmen of my house away from Cinead's barely hidden hostility.

We had originally travelled to Glasgow with my cousin, Cinead. He wanted to commission masons to add a wing to his castle and I needed to purchase supplies. There, we became caught up with Malcolm and Somerled's battle. Planting season quickly approached and I needed the oxen and all the able bodied men in the fields.

Arailt took a couple of men to pay the warehouse where the wains were stored and bring back my purchases. I took the small amount of time between his departure and return to search for Roi as I wanted to reassure him. When Arailt rolled up with the heavily burdened carts, I had not yet found him. I fumed over Roi and Donn's absence. Kinsmen quickly hastened out of my way as I checked the loads.

We had purchased wax, carded wool, whale oil, salt, seed, pepper, exotic spices for cook, apothecary supplies, few pieces of fine dishes, second-hand silk handkerchiefs the ladies would disassemble and make lace from, and last but not least, ribands for my girls. Loot from the field of battle had been stashed in the space left.

Arailt brought about my grey-speckled courser, his charcoal mane and tail brushed and tangle free. The warhorse towered over the regular horses yet he

had to stomp a couple of times as if to preen in front of them. Kinsmen not riding one of my horses were either paired up to drive one of the three wains or would walk.

“Hae ye seen, Donn... or Roi?” I laboured to make the question casual to hide my growing worry about the absence of my brother and future companion.

Arailt was not skilled at hiding his smirk. “They be coming this way.” He notched his chin to a place over my shoulder.

Turning slightly, I glanced over my shoulder to behold Roi riding in front of Donn on the horse, the two speaking spiritedly until they noticed my steady gaze. A low rumble shook within my chest. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Arailt move away quickly. I had been churlish all morn and beholding Roi riding within the circle of my brother’s arms did naught to improve my temper.

Dropping my reins, I stormed over to Donn’s rouncy. Bear bristled at the sight of Roi with Donn. Roi’s eyes widened in alarm as I strode toward them. I clamped down on Bear and kept command. It would not do to scare Roi and cause more damage than I already had.

“Roi, please go wait by my horse.” I gritted my teeth as he delayed. I understood his unwillingness; I thought again our earlier conversation as well. How was I to make amends when my brother was forefront in his thoughts?

Donn helped Roi slip down from the horse and it took everything I had to keep from gnashing my teeth at the familiar way my brother touched him. The weight of my kinsmen’s gazes pressed upon me, no doubt curious as to my ill-temper and the new man joining to my household. Soon I would have to reveal Roi as my bear’s companion. They would want to celebrate, nathless I first had to broach the issue with him. His actions this morn, along with his claim, told me he would have accepted me. After what I had said, I was not sure what his response would be now.

When Roi was safely out of hearing, I glared at Donn. “Whit dae ye think ye be doing? I hae been looking for the two of ye.”

Donn leaned down, his flinty stare matched my emotions. “Getting him away from ye,” he spat talking over my heated response. “He be yer companion and whatever ye said or did caused him to pull into himself. I convinced Roi to grab his belongings from Somerled’s tents, whit was left of them at least, to give ye time to decide.” I had not noticed until then the bundle tied to the back of Donn’s mount.

“To decide whit?” I ground my teeth together, angry that my brother urged Roi to do something he had adamantly declined to do ere now.

“Be ye gaunnae ignore the gift given to ye? Can ye accept who he be? If no’, then move aside.”

I was stunned. “He told ye...”

“It took some coaxing. I be surprised he trusted me at all, but aye, he told me his story. Ye be blind. All of the bears be reacting to Roi. If ye willnae claim him then ye must allow the others to court him.”

I cursed ardently under my breath. I had noticed my kinsmen’s reaction to Roi, yet thought naught of their eagerness to assist him. As the new man of my household, naturally they would be curious about the king’s gift. I glanced back up to Donn and caught him watching Roi with a somewhat wistful countenance.

“He smells of the moon and the stars, of the air at the summer solstice when the faerie magic be heavy in the air.” Donn sat back up on his horse and stared down at me with hard amber eyes. “I wid be one of those to woo him, even fight for him.” With a click of the tongue, his horse moved forward to where Roi waited.

What a bitter brew my brother had given me to swallow, and not a word of it false. I had reacted poorly. Now I had to persuade Roi to trust me, to consent to be my companion. If Roi could not forgive me then I would have to step aside and allow him to choose from among my kinsmen.

I waited as Donn spoke to Roi. The delay gave me time to bargain with Bear, who felt threatened by Donn’s doting. The fault for this tangle could be laid wholly at my doorstep, not my brother’s. I promised Bear I would win

him back, sensing that if I failed, he would withdraw as Donn had warned. I might not be able to change like the rest of my family, nonetheless Bear's spirit lived within me. Losing touch with him would be the same as losing a part of me.

When Donn sat up, I approached them. Roi regarded me with wariness. I gave him my best smile and thought of how he looked earlier that morn. The responding blush and slight widening of his eyes gave me hope. "I wid like for ye to ride with me." I breathed in his scent and Bear grumped at the traces of Donn's intermingled with Roi's.

Roi stammered but he did agree after a short time passed. Feeling as if I had won a small victory, I shouted for all to mount up as I untied my new courser. The horse was black with white forelegs. Accordant to habit, I would not have two warhorses, but I claimed the animal after one of the battles. Having tested the mare many times, I found her to be mild of temper and quick to respond.

Presenting the courser to Roi to ride, I smiled widely with pride until I noticed the horror on his face. "Whit be it?"

He regarded the horse with a countenance that said he thought the animal would eat him alive. "I... I dinnae ride well."

I would have scoffed but Roi had become an odd shade of green. "Then ye can ride with me."

He dropped his head and gripped the wide leather belt at his waist until his knuckles turned white. "I cannot. I wid embarrass myself. It wid be folly on my part for I cannot be close to ye and no' give meself away. Shame meself and ye. Whit wid men think? I widnae befoul yer house or yer name. If ye permit, I shall walk."

"I wish to speak with ye at length while we travel. I cannot dae so while I be up there and ye be down here. I refuse to bellow at ye for all to hear. If the horse frightens ye, then ye can ride with me. I will skewer any man who maligns my name or kin," I reassured him.

The man glowered at me. “I nae be afeard of the horse. I shall ride the beast to keep ye from—” Roi snatched the reins out of my hand and gave the horse a baleful glare.

I pursed my lips to hide a grin. “I acquired the animal as loot. She has a smooth gait and of good temper when she be no’ challenged by another horse. The pompous arse who owned her used a wooden saddle tree with a horsehair covering over the seat.” Unlike my own saddle of wool and leather with the slightly curved seat, the knight’s saddle lifted the rider above the horse’s back. “If ye wid like, I can lead the horse and ye can hold onto the saddle-bow.” Roi turned and glared at me. “Until ye be comfortable,” I added quickly.

Roi blew a forceful breath out of his nose ere nodding his head. Confounded, I watched as he mounted the horse in one fluid motion but said naught more. The mare shifted and stomped as the additional weight settled on her. He paled slightly and gripped the arching wooden front of the saddle.

I quickly mounted my grey-speckled courser, retaining the reins to the mare. With little other discussion, we set off with the three wains trailing and a dozen riders hemming them in.

“I ask yer pardon for my behaviour this morn.” Roi’s face closed up and he turned away until I could only behold the profile of his scarred right side.

With naught else to steal my thoughts, I could discern certain aspects of his injury I had not noticed ere now. The series of marks that from a distance appeared to be single wound were not meant to disfigure him, only maim him. Someone had been careful not to take his sight or hearing yet did as much damage as they dared without killing him. Even then, if the wound had become foul from the burns, which oft happened, he would have died no matter how careful his tormentor had been.

Dismayed at the keen understanding, I struggled against an impotent rage. I could not alter Roi’s past. The man’s future? I hoped it would lie with me. Bear may have prodded me to awaken but we both were drawn to him. “I were surprised and reacted poorly. I need ye to understand that I... there be something... I be unlike other men ye hae known. The clansmen of my house

be special, separate from other clans. That which distanced us from our kinsmen would inspire others to assail us. I be responsible for their lives. We be cautious of who becomes ware of the qualities that set us away from others.”

Roi glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. “I wid never give yer secret away, even if I knew it. I know how life can be when people dinnae understand ye. I widnae cause ye or yer kin the suffering committed by men who hold such foul ideas.”

“I admit I dinnae understand yer gift, Roi. I hope one day ye will trust me with yer ain secret. I wid never reject ye for whit or who ye be. My people be born with a gift of their ain, and I pray ye will be accepting of their true nature. Already my kinsmen hae a high regard for ye. More than one be waiting for me to blunder and lose ye. If I be rejected then they can pursue ye.”

He scowled, his countenance turned unbelieving as he fully faced me. His stunning blue eyes held my gaze. “Yer kinsmen be accepting of such pairings?”

“Most of my people be accepting, aye. There be a few who widnae be kind with their choice of words when they vent their cause of offence, yet those who reside on my land willnae speak against us. There be much for me to explain. It shall be three days ere we arrive home. I hope by that time I will hae answered all of yer questions.” We halted the horses next to the ferry landing. Donn dismounted to speak to the ferryman about passage.

Dismounting first from the courser, I raised my hands to assist Roi down. He may not have needed my help yet I wanted the excuse to touch him for a short time. When his feet firmly touched the ground, I stood staring into his ice-coloured eyes. How quickly he had ensnared not only my beast, but the man as well. It may hap I should be alarmed. Granfather had always told us only fools fought the instincts of their beasts. I almost did earlier, allowing alarm to overwhelm me instead of relying on the calm assurance of Bear.

Did I miss Cairtriona? Aye. I wid continue to miss her, even so, life did not end because she passed on to the next. I lived close to a year as a man half

dead, only beginning to pull out of the consuming grief at Yule. Now ere me stood the companion Bear wanted, a man who had shaken me awake and sparked a desire in me I thought lost. My beast assured me that with a little time, I would find myself growing fond of Roi. I could not disagree because Roi felt familiar to me already, as if we had already spent countless hours together.

Bear sniffed, wanting to touch, so I gave in and ran my fingertips down Roi's forearm. "I hope ye can answer a question for me now." I kept my voice low, yet emotion caused the words to break.

Roi leaned toward me. I took a chance, stepping closer until our chests touched and our breath mingled. Roi did not move away. His head tilted to the side as he gave a deep sigh, his eyelids sliding closed.

"Will ye please forgive me?"

CHAPTER SIX

Roi

I wish I knew why my fate changed, why my vision did not come to pass. Unlike the other prophetic dreams sent to me by Cerridwen, the one of my death had always been hazy. The only clear aspects were Ewen standing over me, raising his sword with both hands over his head. Never did he glance down or meet my gaze, merely stared at something over my shoulder.

Why, for the love of the gods, had I been spared?

Did I care anymore?

This morn, his touch caused me to spill my seed. This day I rode boldly at his side. Now he asked me for forgiveness already given.

Mother always told me I was more tender-hearted than the other children. The young men of the burgh teased me for soft emotions ere heading off to find their fortune. But as adolescence grew into manhood, they came to understand the value of hearth and home. More than one youth returned from high adventure in search of someone to care for and hold every night. The desire for a home at times held more than one meaning, but the outcome, the contentment men searched for stayed the same.

The priests thought I outgrew these soft childish feelings that Ewen brought to the surface. I had buried them deep within me, never giving voice to what I desperately wanted after I came to understand I would never be granted the boon of a family of my own. Such emotional ties would have killed me in Somerled's court; his supporters would have seen such as a weakness to exploit. I wanted to trust Ewen with the heart of me, nathless trust was a leap of faith I could not afford to give—for now.

Would I forgive him for his actions and suspicions? If only the man knew me. "I dinnae know that ye need to ask, for I believe I shall always forgive ye." Why could I not be quiet about this man? It was not in my nature to lie, instead I had learned quickly to turn questions aside or ignore them. Yet with

Ewen standing close and gazing at me as if I were one who mattered to him, I had forgotten how.

“I want ye to be mine,” Ewen whispered so low the wind almost stole it away.

“All my life I hae been yers.” Even after this morn, I could not keep from confessing the truth to Ewen. I cursed myself for a fool. No matter where I was or what happened, Ewen Meinneer unknowingly held a piece of my soul.

Rough fingertips ghosted over the unblemished skin of my left cheek. “Sometime soon ye will hae to share whit ye mean.”

I broke the gaze and swallowed thickly as we unwillingly broke away from each other. Forgiveness, I could give. Revealing the depths of my secrets? I would hold my tongue for another day.

Together, we readied the horses and wains to be loaded onto the ferry. I beheld Ewen’s kinsmen, who had been naught but kind to me since my arrival, gave me encouraging nods and knowing grins when they caught my gaze. Donn patted me on the back as he walked by and Ewen appeared by my side, drawing me away with him as Donn released a rough laugh.

“Donn dinnae want me.” I sought to reassure Ewen yet he still shot steely glares at his brother.

Other than a restless horse, the crossing of the Clyde River was quick and uneventful. A short time ago, I had arrived at the mainland by ship. The land here smelled unlike that of the islands. Even the wind differed, carrying curious sounds from birds we did not have on our small patches of rocky land. Would I ever again behold the place I had been raised? Draw into my lungs the salty sea air or hear the crash of water on the cliffs? I was in a way afeard. Everything seemed new and changed from what I was used to. Although being with Ewen made a dream come true, I felt lost. This new life promised to be wholly unlike the old one. Would I be able to make changes to who I am in order to fit in?

Teams of two oxen were hitched to each wain after the ferry touched the opposite shore. The roads closer to Glasgow were well kept, yet further out,

away from the city, the path became so rutted I was thankful for the narrow, uncomfortable saddle. The road began to rise up into the mountains. Copses of aspen, birch, alder, and rowan dotted the landscape. The closer we came to the mountains, the thicker the trees became until the forest seemed to swallow us. Visibility went from great distances across fields to a couple of horse lengths. I cared not for the closed in feeling the dense wood brought.

Questions had nagged at me all day that I loathed to put voice to. Ewen and I had found a balance I lacked the desire to disrupt. However, with the uncomfortable distraction of the new surroundings, it looked as though I had not kept my visage clear.

“Whit be on yer mind?”

I did not relish speaking of my discomfort with mist-filled woods so I turned to my thoughts of Ewen’s home. “Who awaits yer return? I know no’ where we be going other than the highlands.” Who filled Ewen’s bed? Wife? Lover? Did I want to know? I would not presume the morn’s activities meant he wanted my warmth next to his through the night.

“I hae a modest estate on the west end of Loch Raineach, in the heart of the Caledonia Forest. I be responsible for ninety and three souls.” Ewen’s voice dropped low and became tinged with sorrow. “I hae been widowed now for a little over a twelvemonth. Caitriona gave me four children. Two boys, Eumann and Gibidh. Two girls, Brigid and Una.”

His eyes suddenly appeared older, haunted by what he relived while answering my question. He might be widowed, still the sound of his sorrow spoke of deep affection. My heart ached for him. I would wipe away his grief if I could. To lose a loved one was a hardship I would save him from, had such power been gifted to me in Cerridwen’s temple.

Not knowing how to console Ewen, I moved the talk to something neutral and on the surface inane. “Why did ye shave yer hair and beard?”

Ewen ran a palm over the dark stubble of his head, the skin lighter than his sun kissed cheeks. “It be tradition among the leaders of our family to shave the hair after a conflict that drew blood. The ritual brings to mind the blessing of a

new beginning, that we be victorious and alive, albeit changed by the encounter. Shaving the hair shears off the negative energy so we dinnae carry the venom of word or deed back to our homes and kin.”

“That be a good ritual. It helps to re-establish harmony.” It may hap Ewen’s kin kept to the old ways more than other clans.

“But leaves the head cold and chapped.” Ewen’s hazel eyes sparkled with humour. I was pleased I had steered him out of the dark memories of mourning.

“It may hap I should follow suit and shear my hair.” I pulled on the thick braid that fell over my shoulder to mid chest. The priests did not shear their hair unless a new comer seeking shelter brought in lice or some other pest. I had been fortunate, although I did have it trimmed on occasion.

“I forbid it.”

I snorted a laugh that caught in my throat when I glanced up at him. His vehemence and the haughty glower was that of a man who gave instructions and others followed without question.

Ewen’s pupils dilated as he spoke, the black swallowing the bright hazel. “If ye wish to be cleansed, there be other ways of doing so. But yer hair, it stays untouched.”

I swallowed thickly. “I understand.”

The rest of the day passed rather quickly. I hearkened as Ewen spoke of his estate and his kinsmen. I noticed that even though he addressed me, a wall of sorts built between us. The laughing light, the teasing, and the visage of lust that crossed his face every now and then went away. Left behind was a blank countenance and straight, stiff back. I knew not what word or action caused him to withdraw. The distance Ewen placed between us caused me to feel set adrift, lost and inexplicably alone. By the time we stopped for the night, the easiness between us had turned aloof and cool.

We journeyed until it became too dark to travel safely. We pulled off the road at a place already cleared by others and containing a blackened fire ring.

Ewen assigned duties to everyone aside from me. When I asked, he brushed my question away with a non-answer.

I had never been idle, even in Somerled's court where I learned not to rely on others for help. The castle servants never served me unless Somerled instructed them to do so. I may have stayed in a suite close to the King of the Isles but I was never waited on. I ate cold meal remnants standing in the corner of the scullery. I laundered my own bedding and clothes, all the while dodging unwanted advances. More than once, I had slept in a disused stairway or out-of-way nook because someone had picked the lock to my room.

So I assisted Ewen's kinsmen with the horses and hauled water from the high stream, stumbling over rocks and roots that caught by my feet. I would have to make peace with the hostile spirits of the wood if I did not want to end up with a broken neck. After brushing down and feeding the horses, I gathered kindling for the fire and assisted setting out the furs for bedrolls. Ewen's kinsmen did not seem to mind that I wandered from task to task. Ewen had set me away from the other men. I spent the last three years separate from those about me and it was frustrating that some things stayed the same when so much had changed.

After we made a quick meal of bread, cheese and dried beef, I claimed a fur for myself, not knowing where Ewen would have me. Men lay down to sleep, others walked into the dark forest to stand watch. Dry grit pricked my eyes and a huge yawn cracked my jaw. When Ewen did not return to camp, I gave up waiting and burrowed under the heavy coverings.

I had to wonder about the state of Ewen's wealth. He had not brought it up and I thought it impertinent to ask. The furs, the tents, the wains and horses, all of it heralded a life of privilege. I had known both prosperity and poverty. I had witnessed the deeds of men who had more good fortune than sense of honour, yet Ewen did not portray himself like the self-important mongers of Somerled's court. Unfortunately, they were the only basis with which I had to judge the rank of others of wealth. Ewen's kinsmen were humble. I had not seen such character on landed men ere now.

I woke later when Ewen added his pallet and covering to mine. The air was cold and moist when Ewen lifted the fur to lie next to me. Oddly, Ewen's clothes were cool, yet his skin seemed warmer than mine.

"Ewen." The timing was wrong but he had dodged me all eve and I needed to ask the question while I had the chance.

"Aye, Roi," he mumbled into the back of my neck, sounding half asleep.

"Whit position dae I serve in yer household?"

Ewen breathed deeply. I thought him asleep when he suddenly answered, "Ye be the beast's companion."

The time I spent mulling over Ewen's confounding words must have been longer than I thought. When I asked Ewen what a beast's companion did, he snored loudly. It seemed I would not acquire an appropriate answer until the morn.

Wriggling out from under Ewen's arm, I stumbled to the edge of the low firelight, blinking rapidly in order to see into the dark woods. I would not go far. I had learned my lesson earlier hereunto the hazards of the forest floor. I simply needed discreet cover to relieve myself. Some did not need privacy, unless in the proximity of the fairer sex. I had been raised among priests in Cerridwen's Temple of the Moon. Being a pagan did not mean I was heathen as well.

Finding sufficient cover, I leaned against the tree. Somehow, my kilt had become askew, hanging longer on one side than the other. After all, I had mimicked Ewen's kinsmen who crawled into their pallet fully clothed. I had slept fully clothed ere, simply not in a kilt. The clothing of the island people had been heavily influenced by their Norse and Gaelic ancestors. I was beginning to believe my robes and simple breeches had less material than the infernal kilt.

Finally not encumbered, I sighed as I released my water and stared out into the forest. I wondered again what the duties of a beast's keeper were. I understood highlanders were a pastoral people, cattle mainly, would I be accountable for all of Ewen's animals? What made him believe I could handle

animals? I knew not what to do with them, other than stay out of their way. Give me a sword, medicinals, wood to carve, or even a small garden plot, I knew my way about those. I was an excellent fisher and could skilfully repair many types of nets. I did not believe I would be fast enough to chase cattle about.

Try as I might, I could not say I was thrilled with my new position, which I was woefully unready for. It would be a huge disaster, I was sure of it. As much as I enjoyed spending time with Ewen and getting to know the man, I could not picture myself being happy as a beast's keeper. I had spent too much of my life helping others and being useful in a dozen ways.

When Somerled and his Christian followers torched my temple, all my scrolls and the few fiercely guarded books we had were destroyed as well. I missed reading, and it appeared I would not be in a position to be able to do so again. Instead, I would stink of animal and dung if Ewen desired to come to me. I wrinkled my nose in repugnance. Knowing what I did about health and apothecary, I tended to be careful of personal cleanliness.

I shook off and settled the kilt into place. One of the leggings had sagged to right above the knee and the lacing of the soft boot had come undone. I ignored them. Camp was not far. I would need the firelight in order to figure out how to retie them both.

The sigh I exhaled carried, seeming louder than I had intended. Living past my fated death, travelling down this strange road to a new destiny I could not decipher, both discomfited and confounded me. An utterly new view greeted me and lately I found myself lost in the unknown. I was accustomed to being a priest, keeper of the temple of my Goddess. In what manner did a highland Thane live? What were the customs of his people? I wished not to disappoint Ewen, though my lack of knowledge and skill guaranteed I would.

A noise sounded off to my right. I had been staring off into the dark, not really seeing aught while my mind turned over my circumstances instead of rushing back to the safety of camp. All my life I had lived by the sea. The Northmen were fond of telling hunting tales and describing the predators of the forest. My imagination supplied a collection of wild beasts that would

rather eat me than ignore the ignorant fool who dared piss in their wood. The rustling came again, now between me and the muted glow of the campfire.

A large animal walked along the edge of campfire's dim light, nose to the ground as it sniffed much like a hunting dog tracking a scent. I held my breath as my heart sought to beat its way from my chest. Glancing about, I became aware of the harsh truth that I left sword and dagger in camp. For truly, naught my gaze touched herupon could I use to defend myself with. My body bade me to run but my mind called back to all of the tellings from hunters who said I would die if I did.

Hope quickened my blood when I spied a huge old tree that even someone as out of place as I could climb quickly with little trouble. The sprawling branches were my only hope. If I called out, the creature would be on me ere Ewen or his kinsmen could discover me. I had no hope of overcoming the beast unarmed and I could not slip away on foot. A sickening thought that mayhap the creature might climb the tree as well dulled my growing hope. The large round shape lifted its head toward me.

I ran.

I imagined every Northman I called friend laughed at me as my legs pushed me toward the haven of the tree with my mind's eye holding the vision of a huge boar pursuing me. Or it mayhap be one of those big cats with teeth longer than my fingers and claws able to cut open my soft belly with ease. Behind me came the harsh, appalling noise of breaking branches and disturbed forest litter as the creature gave chase.

I leapt and struggled up onto the lowest branch, too dismayed to glance behind me to behold where the animal was. I climbed up a few branches until there was sufficient distance between me and the forest floor ere I chanced a look. The creature sat at the base of the tree. I had yet to call to mind what the animal might be, and even though I harboured a pinch of desire to know, I would not be dropping down to check breed or gender of said animal no time soon.

The loose legging was lost, along with the boot. I bled from a couple of places but in the dark they did not appear to be deep. I did not think I had gone far, nonetheless when I searched for the glow of the fire, I found naught. I dashed away the thought of calling out for help when I imagined every hungry animal gathering under the tree to devour me. I would wait for the creature to wander away and then run back to camp. When I glanced down again, the dark beast still sat at the base of the tree, from time to time letting out odd grunting noises.

The rain started as a fine mist and worked its way up to fat heavy drops. I curled up against the main trunk of the tree and pulled the top of the kilt about my shoulders and head. I wondered, briefly, how I would endure this new yet curious way of life.

I dozed lightly, bone weary but too afeard of tumbling from the tree to truly rest. Each time I glanced down, the animal lay at the base. The barest lightening of the cloudy sky heralded the dawning of a new day.

“Be ye gaunnae stay up there all day?”

I startled awake, clutching at the rough bark to keep from pitching forward off the branch. Ewen stood below staring up at me. He was bare-chested, wearing only his red kilt, leather greaves, and boots. His feet were spread a measure length from each other on the muddy ground as he gazed up at me.

Afeard for his safety, I searched for a sign of the beast. “Ewen, it be no’ safe,” I hissed down as loud as I dared. “There be a large animal...”

Behind Ewen appeared a huge black bear, the muzzle a golden brown. I pointed with burning dread, fear gripped my throat rendering me not able to speak. The bear stood on its hind legs and gave a mighty bellow that made the hair on my arms stand on end. Ewen calmly turned to gaze at the beast.

“Dinnae wait for it to eat ye!” I bit out. Why did not he move? My mind was split between descending down the tree and fetching Ewen up or climbing further up myself.

Ewen laughed. “That be the reason ye slumbered in the tree?”

Were all highlanders this carelessly reckless when it came to wild animals? Was there a trick to taming the beast I was not ware of? Ready to bellow a bitter speech of foul curses at Ewen for his odd behaviour and unwarranted laughter at my acute sense of self-preservation, another more lightly coloured bear came barrelling out of nowhere to hit the looming black bear. The two collapsed in a blur of limbs. First there was churlish noises of rancour and then the two beast gave forth sounds of pain. Ewen stood and grinned fondly at the thrashing creatures. How had I missed the signs of lunacy? He seemed perfectly normal—until now.

I had faced armed men at the threshold of my temple, held a centre of calm when I braved the threat of flame as Somerled's men scathed my visage. I fought for days in a battle with over fifteen thousand men to come away without a wound or mark. Yet never had I felt this terrified. I understood that part of the fear was the unknown; I had always seen the path I needed to take and now the visions had dried up, leaving me oddly vacant. Some of the dread came from the new customs and people, the uncertainty of my obligations, the strange life I would become well-acquainted with, and some from the understanding that I had little know-how to live this new life away from the sea. I was ware of all of this yet my mind's reasoning was firmly intent in closing down, allowing the base needs to be brought forward and to take over my deeds.

I climbed further up the tree, looking for a way to escape, a place of safety, firmly intent to place more distance between me and all else that no longer made any sense.

“Roi, whit be ye doing? Where be ye going?”

I missed the sound of the waves against the beach, the smell of the salty air. I would never behold or hear another storm come across the water. Watch the sun melt into the ocean.

“Roi, ye hae to stop.”

Trees like this one did not grow on the islands. I had never been in a grove, much less a wildwood. The sight strangled my senses, made me feel as if my

nose was pinched and a hand blocked the breath of my mouth. Rather than drowning from water, I was choked by the harsh colours of this new landscape that pressed in on me. No, no forests on the islands, only carpets of greenery and stubbly rocks with flowing beds of flowers in the summer. There was no temple there now either, it had been burnt to the ground.

“Roi!”

The scream of anger halted my mad thoughts. When I glanced down, Ewen appeared much, much smaller than ere now. The branches under me swayed in the breeze, rocking me and soothing my frayed nerves.

Ewen lifted his hand, fingers curled toward him, once, twice, in a come-hither gesture. “I need ye to come back down.”

The two black bears had stopped fighting and they too stared up at me. Why would I climb down? The bears’ manners were off. Was the forest enchanted? Had I by chance stumbled onto a sacred place and this was the reason for Ewen’s ease? I had heard tellings of the faeries, such as the Gille Dubh, yet I had never been sure if I believed the wild and unlikely tales. Not to say that I doubted all, that which for the most part, went unseen. After all, I received visions of the future from a goddess and read most people’s intent at a glance. Who was I to dismiss the impossible when I myself had performed the unlikely?

Below me, the form of the bears began to change as they both stood on their hind legs, taking on the shape of men until Donn and Arailt stood in the place of the two animals. Stricken dumb, all I could do was stare. There were no words of wonder, for my mind went utterly blank and my limbs began to feel heavy and blunt.

“Roi.” The anger fled from Ewen’s voice. “Wid ye please come down?”

The branches continued to sway in the wind in a gentle rocking motion. Freed from the rough and harmful thoughts by the calm of this high place, I grasped how bone weary I felt. After a long, wet, night without sleep, my hands and feet were chilled. And then I noticed her, a tawny owl, on a branch not too far from my precarious perch. She had a rounded head and a rounded

body no bigger than a pigeon. A dark ring of feathers surrounded her face and eyes, the colour mainly reddish-brown above the paler ones.

Cerridwen's bird of prey watched me as if she waited for me to grasp a matter of great weight. Why was she there? Why had Cerridwen left me in the land of the living? The bird and I spent a long while staring at each other. The tilt of her head signified she waited for me to listen long enough to become ware of that which would answer all my questions.

Then I understood. Not all of the confounding chaos of being inland, but enough—simply enough to give me a peace of mind. “Thank ye,” I whispered, not wanting those below to hear me. “Thank ye for reminding me there be more than whit I perceive with the eyes.” Without words, Cerridwen's silent messenger told me I had not been cast away again.

Leaving the height of the tree with a kilt wrapped about me, would not be as easy as coming up had been. Half way down, the dead branch under my foot made a sudden sharp sound and gave way, leaving me hanging, swinging by one hand from the limb above.

Ewen called my name more than once talking quickly, even so I could not listen to him and climb at the same time. Unwrapping the sodden kilt, I dropped it to the forest floor, leaving me clad in simply a boot, a legging, and a thigh-long linen tunic that did naught to help keep my stones and breech covered. The kilt hindered my downward climb, snagging on branches, and would have caused me to fall.

A warm, rough hand grasped my bare ankle as I hung from the last limb and I heaved a sigh of relief. I believed Ewen when he vowed he would catch me. I let myself fall into Ewen's and his kinsmen's awaiting arms. I glanced up at the tree, amazed I had in sooth climbed the tree, made it up to begin with, and then down without breaking a limb—or my neck. Cold and weariness caused me to tremble. A dry kilt, not my own, wrapped about me.

Ewen roughly massaged my numb hands, the fingernails chipped, torn, and an alarming shade of blue. Donn and Arailt loomed close about us, their

countenance one of worry. At a point in my descent, they had dressed, whether truly or falsely, they appeared unchanged from who they were yesterday.

“Ye stubborn man. Why did ye dae that?” Ewen cupped my face, drawing my gaze to his.

I was angry with this man, albeit too stunned to speak of my displeasure. I chose to answer the question instead of causing a scene. “There was nowhere else to go.” I had not meant to run, it was not an action I would be proud of.

“I didnae mean to scare ye.” Donn’s cheeks flushed a rose pink. “I thought Ewen told ye about us. When I came across ye when I were making the rounds I didnae look for ye to run and climb a tree.”

“He told me of a special gift, yet no’ about the black bears. Methinks there be a great many things I dinnae know about all of ye.” I barely kept the frost from my voice. It was not Donn’s fault I had not been warned.

“Why did ye no’ come and call for me earlier?” Ewen demanded, ignoring my ire.

He may as well ignore me, I held no status with him or his kinsmen. A gift of the king, may hap a willing gift, but a possession natheless. I broke away and stumbled toward where I believed the camp to be. Along the way, I came across my leather legging and my boot. I snagged them off the forest floor without stopping. Ewen, Donn, and Arailt trailed behind, the chatter between them easy to follow.

“Too many large animal scents on the wind.”

“Both humans and doogs,” Arailt added.

“There were a lynx that came through. I thought the small cats had been gone from the forest for some time. She moved away from all the smells left by the men, staying a distance watching us. I could no’ chance leaving Roi alone if the men were close. Neither could I call for help and give us away.”

Reaching the camp, I saw the bedrolls had been taken up, the oxen hitched to the wains. I approached one of the wains and leaned against the step as I began to wrap the legging.

I interrupted their suppositions. “Be all of yer kinsmen like Donn and Arailt or only those who carry the essence I behold with my eye about some of ye?” My tone was churlish.

Ewen halted in front of me, his countenance alight with wonder. “Be ye saying ye can see the bear’s spirit?”

I glanced between the three of them, examining the ethereal light that clung to them. “No’ all of yer kinsmen hae the light of other.”

“Which ones?” Arailt asked eagerly.

“The first day we met, the man who told ye to kill me and those who left with him. They carry no mark that I could see, yet everyone here does.”

The corners of Ewen’s mouth spread in a huge grin rife with smug satisfaction. “Ye can behold the spirit of our beasts.”

My anger with Ewen stayed fresh and hot. I knew of no reason why he would seem to be pleased with himself. Did my absence not cause him concern? Had I let my awe colour this man in an unwarranted hue? Did I misread all the many visions I had been given over the course of my lifetime, the very same ones I used to mark his character? It may hap, I misunderstood the warning of my imminent death. I had assumed I knew him. I began to believe I had been wrong.

“I spent the night up in a tree in the cold and rain. I be weary and I dinnae think I could sit atop a horse without losing my honour by falling off.”

Ewen jumped in. “I wid ensure yer safety.”

I stared at Ewen. I would rather walk, as dead on my feet as I was, than ride with him. I think he saw the thought in my countenance for he withdrew, his face falling.

“If it be all the same to ye, I wid rather find a spot in one of the wains and rest for a bit there.”

“If that be whit ye want.”

“It be.”

Ewen hesitated as if he would say more but then thought better of it. Pursing his lips together, he withdrew. Donn and Arailt's expressions became subdued as well. Too tired to make peace with them, I climbed aboard the wain. I knew I should ask after that which made them part bear, learn more about the people I would soon come to live with. Yet my anger burned hot when I thought back, he could have told to me at any time in the last day. That they had not served to prove Ewen and his clansmen did not deem me worthy of their trust.

Indeed, why should they? I would need to continue to remind myself I was a new comer, a stranger, in their midst. I may foolishly feel connected to Ewen, nathless, in essence I was simply another soul he had become responsible for. He might like me enough to share his bed from time to time, but I was not a confidant. I would not make that mistake again.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ewen

Roi dozed off in the last wain. Bear desired to stay close, however Roi was displeased enough to shun my company. To keep Bear satisfied as to Roi's safety, I ordered Arailt to ride close and guard him. Even so, I could not resist the temptation to drop back and speak to one of my kinsmen so that I could behold with my own eyes how he fared while I mulled over his words.

I struggled with Bear. It felt as if I had been since Roi knelt at my feet. He would have me pursue Roi like a man besotted. Although I had come to respect Roi, found him pleasing to the eye, and I felt as if he were a long-time friend, Bear was more ardent than I. I sought to hold Roi at arm's length because I knew not where he would fit in my house, with my family, or in my life. I hoped we would become friends as well as lovers, and may hap, after some time, a type of fond devotion. Not mindfull of my unwillingness, Bear demanded I give more than friendship and casual fondness. Was I ready for the type of obligation Bear demanded I give to Roi? I was mature enough to know there were many levels to love. I believed I had a great consuming love with Caitriona and the loss had left my heart in tatters. In many ways, the person I had become was the ragged remains of the person I once was.

Then I woke alone that morn and was faced with absolute dread. Roi's scent was old, telling me he had been gone for some time. The brief thought that he had stolen away in the night, leaving me alone, again, made me clearly understand that whether I wanted to be or not, I did not wish a life without Roi. Unknowingly, I had become bound up in him more than I thought I could be with my shattered heart. The panic I underwent was mine, not Bear's. I had fooled myself into believing I pursued Roi more for Bear's sake than my own. The sharp fear clawing at my insides while I hunted for him told me another story.

Yesterday, as the day went on with Roi riding beside me, my heart shuddered each time his eyes glowed with delight. And when he smiled at me

with easy mirth, I became frightened. Caitriona's death knock me for whirl. I called to mind how the loss stole the light of the day from my eye, leeches away the joy I held for each of my children, leaving the core of me withered and blackened. It took more than a twelvemonth for me to begin to recover. I could not withstand another such onslaught of sorrow. So, I withdrew from Roi as the day wore on. Last eve I stayed away for as long as Bear allowed ere seeking him out.

Now the distance I so desired the night ere had come to pass. Roi declined to be in my presence and I despised it. How did one man crawl under my skin in a few days' time? I wish I could speak to Granfather about companions because I was lost.

Donn pulled his horse up next to mine. "Quit scowling so. Ye be distressing our kin."

"I dinnae know whit I be doing."

My brother stayed silent for a while ere asking, "Why did ye no' tell him about yer bear? I wid think that of all people he wid understand and no' accuse ye of being an abomination. Explaining our heritage should hae been easy and yet ye left him in the dark. Were ye trying to frighten him off or dae ye no' trust him? If it be a matter of trust then place him in shackles and retain this distance he has placed between the two of ye."

I shot an angry glare at Donn yet he ignored me.

"I feel guilty for scaring the man up a tree when he knew no' that we patrol in our animal form. I shall find some way to make it up to him. If ye be gaunnae place him in shackles, then I will pay for his freedom when we arrive home. He shall become an honoured member of my household and taught our heritage as I woo him to my bed."

"Guard yer words, brother, ere ye overstep yer bounds."

Donn reined his horse in closer until his thigh pressed into mine. "Companions be precious," he snapped. "Dae ye think being here be easy for him? We be unknown to him. He be an islander, has been all of his life. How dae ye think he finds this place? Ye be responsible for his wellbeing and he be

floundering. Any with eyes can behold his struggle—except for ye. Take care of yer bear’s companion or I will keep my promise and take him from ye.”

“How? I know no’ whit I be supposed to dae,” I snapped back angrily.

Donn gave me a derisive sneer. “Yer *beast* knows. No wonder ye cannot shift. Ye ignore the needs of yer bear. Did ye listen to any of Granfather’s teachings? Dae ye think ye be the only one he told the lore to? Ye hae spent yer life forcing it behind ye because ye believe ye know better.” My brother snorted in barely concealed loathing before he prodded his horse and rode away to ride ahead of the wains, his back stiff and straight.

I wanted to be angry with him. I wanted him to be wrong. Even so, Donn did not say aught that was untrue. I had struggled with my bear, ignored him, and imposed my will upon him since the incident at the beginning of the tenth year of my life. Bear had a fit of temper and I lost my grasp on him. That was the one and only time I came close to shifting. Granfather had been the one to push Bear back. After that incident, my bear never came forward for the change. Not to say he had an absence of opinion, only that I held an iron grip over him.

Since Roi had come into our lives, Bear had become restless, pushing at the boundaries I set on him long ago. From then until now, outside of the field of battle, Bear had never been so assertive to the point I laboured to keep him in line. No one else struggled with their animal, yet neither were their beasts as strong as mine. If I lost my grasp on him at the wrong time, the outcome would be ruinous to my kinsmen and exactly the kindling the clann chief needed to be rid of me.

The activity of my beast was not the only issue. I seemed to be out of my depth, or out of practice. I did not believe I had floundered this much since... a soft snort of irony escaped. Cairtriona. My undertaking to court her had been nigh as disastrous.

When the sky darkened to the point sight would be hindered, I ordered the men to make camp. Roi climbed out of the wain to assist with unhitching the oxen. I stayed close even though he ignored my presence. Bear wanted to hold

the man but I knew not my reception. I searched for something to speak to him about. Something as mundane as the weather and the coming growing season would have been sufficient. Even so, every single time I opened my mouth, the words dried up and drifted away.

After a cold meal, Roi laid out his bedroll. I placed mine next to his. He picked up the bedding and moved it across the campfire. My bear bade me to have patience. Keeping in mind Donn's harsh words, I hearkened to his wisdom. We watched Roi settle in for the night ere we crept over, sneaking our bedroll next to his. Hastily I crawled under our covers, snatching him back down when he laboured to rise.

"Please, hae patience with me. I be sorry I hurt ye. I be out of my depth. I promise I shall explain everything to ye soon."

He lay unyielding against me while I buried my nose his hair, inhaling his scent as my bear grunted with pleasure.

He turned and gazed at me, his blue eyes unreadable. "I still be angry with ye."

"I know, I deserve it."

His eyes softened. Hesitantly, Roi placed a palm on my stubbled cheek. "I wish I knew where my place be in yer world? I dinnae see how I fit."

"Yer place be with me."

Roi merely sighed. "We shall see."

I rolled onto my back, pulling him with me and settling him as firmly against my side as he would allow. Never ere now had I counted how fortunate I was to have kin such as the men about me. Holding Roi as I did now was not done in the open among the other clans. Some clans ignored such couplings as long as the interactions were kept behind closed doors, other clans banished kin.

Not all of my clansmen would react as these men did. The clann chief, Cinead, would not be accepting, for all that our lands were as separate as they could be under the circumstances. With him and the followers true to him, we

would have taken care because, as Roi pointed out earlier, they were not like us and did not understand the bond we had with our companions.

Roi did not believe me when I assured him his place was by my side. I knew he wanted me. Bear could smell his arousal, yet I had given him no reason to trust me. Ere sleep claimed me, I understood what I needed to do. My bear hummed, content for once, agreeing with my chosen course of action. I prayed the effort would not be too late.

The next morn, I saddled our two horses and put together several days' worth of provisions. "Ye be in charge until I return, Donn."

My brother stood behind me, his countenance a blank mask when I glanced over my shoulder. "Whit be ye gaunnae dae?" he inquired.

"I took yer advice and hearkened to my bear. He wid like to take Roi to his den."

"He may no' belong in our world."

"I know."

"Ye be willing to give him up if need be? Send him back to his home?"

"I shall dae everything in my power to keep that from happening... yet if it be whit he wants..."

Donn clasped my forearm and pulled me in for a quick embrace. "Leave behind the leader ye be and allow yerself to be the man I know ye were meant to be."

Roi approached the two of us, nervously eyeing the two horses.

"Ye and I will be travelling in another way than the wains," I explained.

Roi clasped Donn's forearm and said, "May the tides of fate favour ye."

Donn glanced at me in wonder. Neither one of us had heard that old salutation in a long time. Roi's words gave me hope. It may hap he was not as out of place as he believed.

Roi gave me a weak smile as I helped him onto the black mare. I quickly mounted and we headed down the road at a faster clip than we had travelled over the last couple of days. The wains were slower and had set the pace ere now. Roi seemed to keep his mind solely on riding, the colour of his skin remaining as pale as milk for some time. After a while, he appeared to relax, the set of his shoulders and back becoming less rigid.

We came to a crossroads of a sort. It was an old game trail that lead deeper into the Black Wood. The mare naturally fell in behind my gelding on the narrow path. As the track slowly climbed the slope of the mountain, the sun ducked in and out of the clouds. A fine mist clung to the forest floor in the lower areas.

The forest was waking from winter slumber. Ground foliage sprouted hints of new green. About us the birch, ash, rowan and alder were interspersed with cypress. We stopped about midday to rest, water the horses, and eat a cold meal of cheese and salted beef. Once Roi became more at ease with the woods, he began asking questions about the type of plants that could be found in the area.

“Whit did ye dae in the temple?” All the conversation up to this point had been about me and my kinsmen. Although I enjoyed Roi’s interest, I had not been as diligent in coming to know him.

“I were the temple’s seer.” His ice-blue gaze glanced up to mine and then quickly away. I smiled hoping to sooth him. “The visions be given to me by the Goddess Cerridwen. The priests record whit I saw.”

“Yet ye handle a sword very well and ye be skilled in the properties of plants and herbs. It be easy to see, ye be a man of many talents.”

Roi blushed at my praise. “It be a good thing too. The priests wid hae yielded to my every wish if I had allowed them. As a boy, I sparred with the children of the Northmen. A few became friends and taught me all I know of weaponry and battle. I learned apothecary from the oldest of the priests, helping him with the care of the sick or injured brought to us.” A soft dreamy smile across his lips. “And when I could get away, I went fishing.”

“There be fish in Loch Raineach. Ye will hae to teach me.” I had been fishing ere now and was not very good at it. He did not need to know that... yet.

The rest of the afternoon passed in comfortable silence. About the final bend of the game trail, the forest opened to a glenn. A thatch-roofed cottage enclosed by a waist-high stone wall that had once held a scullery garden not far away. Beyond lay a sprawling area where we planted barley and buckwheat. Along the furthest edge ran a river that tended to flood from melting snow in the spring. After harvest, the cattle would be brought up to graze in the mountain glenn.

Roi glanced about with interest. “Where we be?”

“There be many things I needed to speak to ye of and I dinnae know where to start. I thought it wid be easier if I brought ye to the beginning. This be the area where my kin first settled.”

“How long has the cottage been here?”

“As I understand it, since ere my great, great gransire’s time. We be tasked with the care of the Caledonia Forest, tied to the woods until it be no more. The cottage has been rebuilt a few of times. Each generation added something new—the garden plot, the fencing—until we grew too large in number and moved over to the loch. We maintain this as a shieling for the herdsmen.”

“I dinnae understand why ye brought me here.” Roi wid not meet my gaze.

“I wanted to acquaint ye to my heritage. My bear wants ye—I want ye as our companion, however ye willnae understand whit that means or whit I be asking of ye. Ye huvnae said aught, but Donn believes ye be lost, adrift may hap with all that has changed. I huvnae anchored ye to us—to me. I hae been struggling as well. I thought that if we spent some time alone and came to know each other and... this be my bear’s way of taking ye to his den.”

Roi frowned. “Why?”

I looked out over the meadow, searching for the words that would best convey what I wanted to say. “I believed I wid be a widower for the rest of my

life. Since Caitriona passed away, I hae simply been existing from day to day. I love my children and my kin, yet something in me died with her. I never thought I would find someone else I could adore as much as I did her. For truth, the prospect of having someone else to love scares me because I know no' if I could continue to exist after another loss. I thought I would rather have a half-life than live with joy again.

“And then ye fell to yer knees at my feet. My bear roared in my ears, shaking the foundation of the life of ease I thought I wanted. He demanded I shield ye and drag ye home with me. Ye woke me from simply of being, yer very presence promising that I can dream again, live again and—I be scared. If I come to love ye, even a little, ye wid hae the power to tear me asunder. I sought to shield myself. And yet, when I woke alone the other morn and ye were gone, I know now I wid rather take that chance, and hae ye in my life for however long ye will stay, than hae naught at all.

“Tell me I no' be too late, that I hae no' ruined all regard ye had for me.”

Roi's shoulders relaxed and he boldly met my gaze. For the first time since we woke together in the tent on the edge of the Renfrew field of battle, his eyes held open desire. “It be dark soon. Show me the cottage and I shall put food together for us to eat while ye take care of the animals.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Roi

I dismounted the horse without planting my face in the soil. If I had fallen, I doubted I would have cared. The events of the last couple of days, along with Ewen's confession, left me in a daze. I wondered oft since I first looked into Ewen's visage why would I be spared my fate, handed over to the one person I had yearned for all my life, only to be dropped into a life of despair. As harsh as it may be, I would have rather spent a short and painful lifetime in the bowels of Somerled's dungeon than live a natural life within arm's reach of my heart's desire, not able to touch it. I deserved more than scraps of Ewen's affection and I had almost believed that was all I was worthy of.

Now he offered more and I was afraid to accept. To have a chance at a life with him, without fetters by dark perceptions from his kinsmen because I am male, was more than I could hope for. Yes, everything about me was unknown. Could I learn a new way of life?

I followed Ewen toward the cottage. The building was more narrow in width than length, the two ends rounded instead of square with outer stone walls. Inside, the stone floor was slightly dusty save naught a good sweep could not remedy. The exposed beams of the steeply-pitched roof were dark with age yet well kept and finely carved. The hearth was wide and deep, the table and chairs made of wood and antler. There were six cupboard beds wide enough to fit two or three adults each.

I checked the ticking of the mattresses. After he brought in our bundles of provisions, I bade Ewen help me move the best one to the bed closest to the hearth. While he cared for the horses, I lit a fire in the hearth, located the crockery, and started our evening meal. Afterwards, I drew water from the river and saw to a much needed wash, for I smelled of horse and sweat. Hoping an airing would help, I hung the kilt from a couple of hooks by the cupboard beds. The leggings were leather, so the best I could do was brush them out. The tunic, on the other hand, I scrubbed clean and draped by the fire

while I saw to my own bathing. By the time I concluded washing up, the linen was dry and I slipped it over my head as Ewen stepped through the entry.

I turned when I heard the heavy door shut. He stood within the threshold, his wadded kilt hanging from his finger tips, his tunic and leggings sodden, clinging to him like a second skin. The dark hair on his chest clearly seen through the wet garment. The stubbled growth of his chin and head stood out strongly against the deep flush of his cheeks. His gaze wandered hungrily over my body as he licked his lips. Never ere had another man gazed at me as if he would devour me. Always the encounters were in dark, out of the way rooms, quick and fleeting. This—Ewen—was unlike the others. This was not about lust or the simple need for release. If I was not careful, I would lose my heart to Ewen Meinnear.

“Here, ye must be freezing.” I grabbed the linen sheet hanging nigh the hearth that I had used to dry off. Crossing the room to him, I took the kilt from him and gave him the cloth. His steady gaze held mine, and as I watched, the hazel colour was swallowed by warm dark amber. These were the eyes that first greeted me on the field of battle, yet I was not afeard. “Take off the wet garments and hang them by the fire. I’ll find something to wrap ye in while yer clothing dries.”

I pushed Ewen toward the warmth of the hearth and carried his kilt over to the cupboard beds. I peeked under my arm as my trembling fingers sought to hang the garment on the hook. Ewen removed his wool leggings and then his wet tunic, hanging them next to the hearth. My mouth went dry as I gazed at his form. I did not behold all of him in the dark of the tent. I only had the memory of touch and even then, I had been too afraid to do much lest I break the spell as we slaked our lust against each other.

At the time, I had been happy with the little I learned of Ewen’s body. Now, as I drank in the lean hard form of his back and the powerful legs dusted with dark hair, I hungered for more. He used the linen sheet to remove excess water, the light of the fire giving his skin a golden glow. My heart beat like a wild drum in my chest as my groin tightened to the sight of him.

Glancing away, I turned my thoughts to properly attaching and hanging the kilt, keeping mastery of my arousal. There was no hiding my manhood as it pushed out the tunic, may hap if I put on the kilt, the heavy garment would hide the evidence of my desire.

“Roi.” Ewen’s low, rough voice sent a shiver down my spine. “Yer hair be wet. Come dry it by the fire.” If I turned, he would behold what he did to me. I would be clay in his hands, yielding to the lightest of touches. “Please?”

I turned, shielding my groin from him. At the table, I took an ivory comb out of my satchel and grabbed a stool to set next to the hearth. The meal was finished and I pulled the crock off the fire, filling a bowl for Ewen and then myself. A quick search came up with a couple of wooden spoons ere I set his meal on the table. I moved back to the fire, setting my bowl on the floor to cool while I sought to work the tangles from my hair.

Ewen, the sheet wrapped about his waist, grunted and gave me a look of restless craving ere he moved a heavy, antler armchair next to the stool. My gaze kept straying to his chest. I wanted to run my palm over the dark hair there. He was not heavily furred, simply enough to heat the blood.

The noise of a hard rain could be heard from where we were. I tore my gaze from his tempting form to labour at detangling my hair. I was sharply ware of him settling in the chair behind me. When his rough hands ghosted across the back of my neck, I stilled. He pulled the damp hair and comb out of my hands, asking without words for my consent. I tilted my head back for him. He ran his palm over the crown, lightly touching along the edges of my temple ere his fingertips brushing the edge of the scar.

“I wid take this pain from ye if I could.”

I opened my eyes to behold him leaning over, gazing down at me with soft amber eyes. “I dinnae mind the marks anymore. I wid gladly suffer the torment again if the path led me to ye.”

Kissing the top of my head, Ewen settled back and ran the comb through my hair, working out the tangles. “I wish I knew how ye know me.”

Looking back on the last confession I made in his tent and the resulting cold shoulder, I did not feel the need to reveal that one secret. “First tell me of yer people, yer bear.”

Feeling guilty for evading his question, I turned my head and kissed the palm that caressed the damaged cheek. Behind me came the sound of a strangled inhale. Turning on the stool until I could see Ewen, his visage a mixture of wonder and desire as he gazed at the hand I had kissed. My mouth was suddenly dry and I swallowed a few times and cleared my throat.

“We share our bodies with the spirit of a bear.” I gave Ewen my back as he lifted the comb. “As ye hae seen, my kinsmen can take the shape of the bear, yet I cannot. Bear be here but...”

“Be there a reason why yer bear willnae emerge?” Did he know that his eyes changed? I had noticed the change when he stepped into the cottage and suspected his bear was close to the surface. Why did he not come out altogether?

“I almost changed once. Granfather took me on a trip, a journey all future leaders take with an elder, to the cradle—the place where we first came into being. I were very young and my bear strong. My weakness almost exposed Granfather and me to others who wid destroy us. My gransire pushed the spirit back, nathless since then he willnae answer the call to change. Granfather said it happens at times with the strongest spirits. There be still a chance that he will come forward, yet I dinnae believe he will.”

What Ewen and his bear endured on a daily basis left me speechless. For his bear to be caged, able to look out but not able to emerge and for Ewen to behold his brothers change, yet never be free himself, how tormented would that life be?

“I sensed that no’ all of yer kinsmen be like ye. As I said yesterday, I can see those who hae the light of other.”

“Cinead, our clann chief, were born of the line belonging to Granfather’s brother, Manus, who were born without the bear’s spirit. Manus grew to envy Granfather and took his household to make a home at the other end of Loch

Raineach. Cinead believes that we be cursed. He wid be rid of us yet he be no' willing to be called kinslayer. Never allow yerself to be alone with him," Ewen warned.

"He wanted ye to kill me." I called to mind Cinead's command as I knelt at Ewen's feet.

"Aye, he did. He were trying to prove his power over me though he didnae stop to bear in mind that he were commanding the destruction of a gift from the king. His open scorn of Malcolm dinnae bode well for his future."

"He plans to trap ye, turn yer kin against ye. That be whit I saw out on the field of battle. He wid behold ye dead."

Ewen's hands parted and gently combed, slowing in their care of my hair. Ewen did not yell in outrage or demand answers, some of which I would not be able to give. Being a seer could be a blessing or a curse. At times what the visions revealed was obscure and confounding, the meaning only becoming known as the event occurred.

Interestingly, Ewen made no demands, he did not question how I knew some of his kinsmen did not have the bear's spirit. Instead, he combed my hair and bade me to turn on the stool to face him. His dark amber eyes, the bear's eyes, gazed out with such longing.

"Our beasts choose companions much like the human wid choose a husband or wife. At times both the human and the bear choose the same person, at other times no'."

I thought I understood. "Ye chose Caitriona as yer wife, natheless yer bear didnae. So yer bear wants me to be his companion?" My gaze slid away from him, a bitter laugh escaping ere I could call it back. "When ye first told me that my purpose in yer household were to be the beast's companion I thought ye wanted me for a herdsman. I no' be good with animals and I... it dinnae matter whit I thought." As I spoke, what this meant, what Ewen said threatened to crush me with a horrible truth I did not want to admit to be true.

"I were enamoured with simply being in yer presence, overjoyed to spend time with ye, the man I saw in my dreams every damned day of this miserable

existence. Ye should hae killed me on the field of battle, Ewen. That death wid hae been more desirable than this life. I wid hae accepted ye and yer bear, yet ye dinnae... Why did my Goddess allow me to be plagued every single night of my life with glimpses of ye? I dinnae understand!" I shouted as I stood, knocking the stool over in my need to get away from Ewen. I could not stay seated with him close enough to touch.

"I hae watched ye grow from a boy to a man. I know yer visage so well I could fashion yer likeness in clay with my eyes closed. Why?" I screamed at the rafters, my chest hollow, eyes burning with impotent rage.

"Roi," Ewen sounded desperate and I cared not.

"Ye only want me for yer bear, never for yerself, never for me," I spat. The walls felt as if they were closing in on me. I could not breathe and so I charged toward the door.

I had to leave, get away from the pain of defeat, of lost dreams. I was such a foolish man, believing in the impossible. I did not call up going through the door. The rain was heavy and cold, stinging with every fat drop. I trudged away from the cottage, each step harder than the one ere until I could go no further. Tilting my head toward the night sky, I closed my eyes, the very essence of my soul leaking from beneath my eyelids.

A bellow of rage and fear filled the night. "Roi!" I thought it likely I would be tossed onto the muddy ground. Rough hands gripped the sides of my face, forcing me to gaze into Ewen's fevered eyes. Even now, I could not leave him.

"Ye lied." My voice sounded dead, without emotion.

"Naw, I didnae. My bear chose ye for all that, dae ye no' see? I chose ye, too. I've been trying to understand why I feel as if I know ye. Since the first time I laid eyes on ye, ye were familiar to me. I knew no' why then, yet now I dae. Ye hae watched over me, always beside me, guarding me. Please dinnae leave me now. I need ye. I think I always hae."

And then he kissed me. I did not fight him. I opened, tasting his lips and finding the flavour of him so much more than I had dreamed. He drank down my moans as if they were nectar from the gods, plundering my mouth until I

was giddy and breathless. When he broke away, we both gasped for air. I shivered, which caused him to growl and grab my arm to guide me back to the cottage. I had not gone far, only a dozen strides from the door ere I could lift my feet no more.

He closed and bolted the door behind us ere he began to disrobe me, pulling the sodden tunic over my head. “Whit were ye thinking running out in the rain?” His gaze flicked up to mine then quickly away. Catching up the linen sheet crumpled on the stone floor, Ewen began to dry me off.

After an instant of silence, he drew in a deep breath and caught my gaze again. “I refuse to live my life without ye by my side. However long it takes to convince ye, I shall prove to ye that I want ye. Starting now.”

Unlike the kiss outside, with its burning demand, he brushed his soft lips gently against mine, a breath of a touch, as I grasped his arms for balance. Each time he broke away, it was to whisper I was his, how he wanted me, begging me with both eyes and tongue to stay. I tried to keep up the feeble walls I had erected against him but with each vow, every soft touch, he stole away a little bit of my uncertainty until my soul lay bare in his hands.

“Promise ye willnae leave me,” Ewen begged, sucking on the cord of my neck, a hand fisted in my hair while the other pressed at the small of my back so that I was flush against him from chest to knee. I could feel every inch of him, his manhood a hot brand on the flat of my stomach.

“Ewen,” I breathed.

“Promise,” he growled.

“I could never leave ye.”

“Oh, thank God.” The words were choked, barely heard above the pounding of the heavy rain. This time I kissed him as I had wanted since the instant he went from being a wistful dream to reality.

CHAPTER NINE

Ewen

My kinsmen did not urge us against learning, examining our sensuality as youths as long as we did not cross the line and become dishonourable. Maidenhead, lost through piercing of the body of either the girl or boy, was kept intact if you did not wish to be handfasted at once. The bears could sniff out such deeds and no amount of excuses would save the youths a quick trip to the closest elder or kirk.

It had been many years since I had lain with a male. We had been eager youths with merely one goal in common, to empty our stones as oft as we could. Then I met Cairiona and fell in love, dedicating my life to her happiness.

Naught and all things about Roi brought to mind those youthful trysts. His body was the same only in the most basic way that made Roi male, and there the likeness ended. His mature form was full and strong, not the harsh angles of a growing young man. What I felt when I touched him made me think back on the hushed wonder of a new thing. It may hap, in many ways, I would discover something novel about Roi or even about myself. Possibly, with this union, both of us would be reborn new men.

Roi kissed me as if he was starved and I the only one who could fulfil his hunger. I walked him back towards the bed he had arranged for us and laid him down on the fresh linens. His hair spread out under him like spun gold, the strands damp once more from the rain. The tortured visage I had seen when he stared up at the sky was not one I ever wanted to behold on him again. Neither one of us would be leaving this cottage until he understood I would not be giving him up.

I buried my nose in the crook of his neck and breathed in deeply ere I licked across the base of his neck to his shoulder. The new growth on my chin rasped against his skin, leaving a pink blush behind as I kissed down his body. Golden, almost colourless, hairs covered his upper chest though not his

stomach. A thin trail ran within the hollowed valley of his belly to his groin. I brushed a thumb over his nipple causing him to gasp, my name falling from his lips. When I pressed the flat of my tongue over the pink nub, suckling gently, Roi writhed under me.

His form was lean yet strong. This was not the body of a priest but of a warrior. Certainly not the body of a woman, with plentiful mounds and soft curves. Slowly I learned his body, seeking for what caused him to demand more or made his breath shudder when he breathed out. He laughed when my tongue dipped down into his navel. Joy mixed with desire suited him, making his ice-blue eyes glow with life.

I settled between his legs, gazing intently at his cock and thinking the boys of my youth had never been so well endowed.

“Ewen?”

Roi appeared nervous and I grinned for him. “It be a long while since I took a male into my mouth, much less had a man in my bed,”—I glanced up at Roi—“no’ counting ye and our encounter outside of Glasgow. I were half asleep and striving to make ye feel good and... I hae been dying to touch ye ever since.”

“Whit be the difference between then and now?” Roi did not seem sure he wanted to know the answer.

“The difference be I want to make ye forget all who came ere me. I want to be the only man ye take to yer bed from now on. I want to give ye more pleasure than ye hae ever known.” I rubbed the stiff hair of my chin against the inside of his thigh and Roi moaned softly. “I be afeard that if I fail, I shall lose ye.”

Ere he responded to my confession, I grasped the hard length in front of me, the skin soft against my rough fingers. I pressed the flat of my tongue at the base of his shaft to lick up to the prepuce, pulling the skin covering the head back to reveal the flared tip. The scent of his musk filled my nostrils, causing my bear to shift and roll within me. His desire for my possession of Roi felt like a shove.

I suckled the head, ran my tongue about the ridge, and was rewarded with a bit of his sweet essence. His shallow breaths and sharp gasps made me bold enough to discover more of what would cause him not to be able to stop filling the air with the stormy sound of his voice. His hips moved, pushing his cock further into my mouth until I grasped him firmly. Never had my blood burned as it did now. My cock was so hard I ached to the point I rutted against the linen to find a little ease. I sucked and licked with a pent up fervour, as if I had been caged and now was set free.

Roi's hands clutched the sheets when I took his stones in hand, rubbing and rolling the lightly-furred sack as I lost myself in the taste on my tongue, the feel of him in me, the way his manhood pulsed with pent up need. I laboured to bring him pleasure until he made sounds of impatience.

"Ewen." Warm palms caught my face and I rolled my eyes to gaze up Roi's body to behold his ice-blue eyes, stormy and so dark with desire they were nearly black. "If ye dinnae stop, I shall spill my seed. I want... I want..."

I slowly pulled off his cock, sucking until my cheeks hollowed out, his eyes fluttered closed, and his neck arched. With a final swirl of the tongue, I kissed the tip. "Ye want whit, Roi? Tell me," I rasped.

His gaze met mine again, his laboured breath of soft pants made me yearn to crush those full lips under mine. "I want ye to spill while ye... I want ye to breach me." His shy countenance was one I had not yet seen on him ere now. "Some prefer no' to dae such things. I understand if ye wish to dae something else."

My mouth went dry. "I hae never taken the maidenhead of another man." Roi's gaze slid away, I could see him struggle to be content. I would abate his torment. "Ye will hae to show me whit to dae. I dinnae wish to hurt ye."

His gaze returned to mine. Hope and desire returned to his visage. "Wait here." He slithered out from under me and dashed to the hearth.

He returned with a small clay pot that he secured in the corner of the wooden bed frame. Silently, he bade me lie on my back. The way his gaze roved over my body, the shy touches as he ran his fingertips through the

spattering of hair on my chest caused my nipples to tighten. His heated gaze rested on my groin. The way he gazed at me made me pant with growing need.

Roi straddled my hips, and I gripped his strong thighs, more nervous than I could call to mind of being ere a coupling. He leaned over me, his face almost touching mine. A golden curtain of hair slid like a waterfall about us. I licked my lips and his gaze followed my tongue ere dipping down and stealing a tender kiss, and then another, and another. I would give him as many kisses as he wanted.

He swallowed the low noise I made when he gripped my shaft in his slick hand. My hips bucked upward into his grip. When he tore his mouth from mine, I gave a piteous cry and would have been ashamed save the smile he gave me made me forget why. Roi moved until my cock pushed against him, that dark secret place I would never dare to go without his consent. I gripped his hips tighter as I fought the sharp need to thrust, instead watched him.

I beheld his tender almost adoring countenance and lay very still, appalled at the thought of harming him. He bore down slowly, his tight heat stealing my breath away. Roi's eyes squeezed shut, his face twisting into a grimace as he shivered. He panted, the sound low and harsh to my ears as sweat formed on his forehead.

My hands moved to cup his firm buttocks, holding him firmly in place. "Nae. Stop, Roi. I be hurting ye."

He opened his eyes and gazed intently down at me, blinking a few times. "It be scarcely a bite of pain that will leave quickly. It has been a span of time since I hae had a lover of any—" My churlish growl ceased his words.

His body eased under my hands and he began to slide down my length again. This time his mouth sagged open, his eyelids fluttered closed as his breech connected with my hips. His body gripped my cock like a glove of the softest leather, so taut, so incredibly perfect. His palms rested against my upper chest as his body slid up the length of my shaft, slow and sure. The breath burned in my throat overcome with all that I felt, stricken dumb. I stayed as still I could, watching with a heated gaze as Roi took his pleasure.

The warmth of his body became a delicious torment, causing me to yearn for more. More of him. More of us. More of the touch that caused a growing fire to burn my blood. I wanted to thrust, to take him, to possess him, yet I worried my lust and eagerness would harm him. I would never forgive myself if I did.

His name spilled from my lips as he moved on my cock, swivelling his hips, his fevered stare pinning me in place. I ran my palms along his thighs, the feel of muscle moving under the skin, the hint of power, of strength prodded my lust until I gripped his hips so hard I knew they would bruise.

“Tell me, Ewen, who dae I belong to?”

“Me,” I ground out, my restraint weakened by the sly glint in Roi’s eyes.

“Am I yers?”

“Aye,” I snarled.

He leaned in close and whispered into my ear, “Then prove it.”

It was as if I had been unleashed. Growling, I rolled him, clutching him to me as I loosened the firm hold over my body and pushed further into him. His fingertips dug into my shoulders as his legs wrapped about my waist. His delighted laughter turned to sounds of gasping moans as I thrust with swift speed into him. He arched, meeting my hips with every move, our bodies working in accord.

Never had I felt aught like this wild, consuming heat. No matter what I did, he matched and met each move. We fit together so well I began to wonder how I had lived for so long and not known I was but half of myself. Roi grasped his shaft, eyes glazed as he began to stroke. My stones drew up against my body, heat gathered in my groin warning of the coming release.

“Roi,” I gasped. His name on my tongue sounded, low and harsh. I needed him to spill so I could watch as he split into pieces. For of me, only me.

His head slammed back into the bedding, the cords of his neck drawing tight as he arched against me. His mouth formed a quiet O as his arse clamped down on my cock and his seed painted our bodies. I could not hold back and thrust as far as I could into Roi to release into him as I was pulled asunder

from the inside out. Marking him. Claiming him. My bear and I snarled, grasping Roi as my hips jerked, his name a litany that fell from my lips over and over as he stroked my sweat-slick back.

My bear hummed with bone-deep joy. I did not call back to a time with him being this happy—ever. Rising up on my elbows, I gazed down at Roi's flushed and damp face. His skin held a healthy rosy glow and his visage of open tenderness caused warmth to bloom in my chest and a riot of spring butterflies to flutter about in my stomach.

Gently, I withdrew my softening cock. The fear of being close to someone I could lose had been changed for the dread of Roi leaving me to go back to his temple and his goddess. "I hae never been jealous of a deity ere now."

My confession lit his features with delight. The scar hindered the lift of his lips, causing the right side to appear slumped compared to the left yet I did not believe he could be more appealing.

"I wid be remiss if I didnae point out that Cerridwen's visions be whit led me to ye, a gift laid at yer feet." The teasing light in his gaze dimmed.

"Then she cannot hae ye back. I know ye must miss yer home and if I were a better man, ye wid be allowed to leave if ye desired. I find the thought of ye no' by my side too crippling to think on."

Roi trailed his fingertips lightly down the side of my face. "Hae no' worries. I be yers. For better or worse, I will stand at yer side."

I buried my nose in his hair, feeling a small bit of shame at my weakness, yet Roi's calm comfort overwhelmed and pushed aside those dim, errant feelings. Finally, I rose in search of a cloth and the bucket of water. I tended to Roi, cleaning the seed from him as I stole sweet tender kisses.

Crawling into bed beside him, I drew a fur over us. "Dae ye ever wonder that the death ye thought ye wid hae by my hand meant the closing of yer old life in order to begin anew with me?"

“It may hap ye hae a point.” Roi chewed on his lip, his brow furrowed in thought. “I be a seer, always. Cerridwen has no’ withdrawn her blessing or power over me, otherwise the light of other wid be hidden from me.”

I caressed the dip at the base of his neck. Gooseflesh formed under my fingertips. “I doubt no’, for deities rarely forsake their people unless a grievous trespass forces the break. It dinnae mean ye cannot serve her from the hearth of my home.”

“Ye wid allow me to...” Roi’s mouth moved yet no words came forth.

Frowning, I replied, “I shall no’ remove ye from her. Yer faith be yer ain and no’ for me to command.”

“And if yer kin should ask, whit then?”

I chuckled. “Ye hae seen us, Roi. We, too, be unlike the rest of our kinsmen, no’ men nor beasts. We simply be better able to hide it, be all.”

His neck became red. “I be sorry.”

“For whit?”

“For thinking the worst earlier. It were unfair, after ye had told me why ye wanted me to stay ere then. I were afraid.”

I rolled onto my back, pulling him with me, urging him to settle against me with his head on my chest. “I take the blame, for I pulled away when ye needed me the most. How could ye know I were no’ pulling away again?” I brushed my lips over the top of his golden head. “I swear by the time we leave this cottage ye will know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I intend to keep ye by my side. I hope ye will come to be at ease with me and trust me to answer yer questions.” Roi’s hand lightly stroked my stomach. If I had not spent my seed a few mere breaths ago, another part of me would have been begging for more of his stirring touch.

“Inside my home, ye be my equal. My kin will greet ye as my *hain*, my husband. Donn will hae told those who be willing to hear about me finding my companion. They shall want to meet ye and come for a *Cèilidh*. My home shall be brimming with well-wishers for many weeks.”

I grinned at his startled countenance. “Spouse...” he breathed.

“Ye will hae to keep in mind that outside our home, in the company of guests and callers, or with kinsmen who dinnae share a spirit, those ye must be wary of.”

Roi met my gaze. “*Hain.*” This time he said the word with firm surety, as if he was beginning to believe.

“Aye.” And he wid make a fine husband.

CHAPTER TEN

Roi

I cried out to the rafters, arching my back off the table as Ewen thrust into me, every now and then brushing against the spot that made my body sing. The heels of my feet perched on the edge of the table. My legs spread as far as they would go, with Ewen filling the space between them, his gaze watching every move I made.

Mercy of the gods, he looked as though he glowed above me. He leaned down, bending me nigh in half, and taking my mouth in a soul-searing kiss. He ate my cry as I came hard. My vision dimmed and my breath caught in my chest. Ewen reached his own pleasure soon after, breaking the kiss to stare down at me with his bright hazel eyes, jaw clenched as a deep groan pushed out from between his lips.

His weight crushed me to the table; I could barely breathe and did not mind. Breath coming in ragged gasps, I ran my hands down his sweat-slick back to the top of his arse ere beginning again at his shoulders. Finally he released my legs and I wrapped them about his waist.

Ewen started sniffing again, a sound I came to connect to his bear. The creature oft looked out of Ewen's eyes yet Ewen seemed not ware of. I did not speak of what I saw to Ewen. He spoke of his bear being wilful and yet I sensed no ill will from the creature. I could not help wonder why the animal would not emerge, as curious and possessive as I knew him to be. Ewen's light of other was still coloured with pain and I knew not what caused it. I would watch and learn more ere I decided what to do.

He and I stayed at the cottage for many days and nights, all were filled with now-familiar touches. We seemed not able to get enough of each other. I dreaded the time we would leave regardless of my desire to behold his home and meet the rest of his family. Our time together was coming to an end. For now, I revelled in having him all to myself.

When he stood, I groaned. I was quite stiff and needed his help to rise from the table's surface. The room strongly smelled of musk and man from our many couplings. I had never been as happy as I was here at the cottage. It may hap I would be able to convince Ewen to come up here again for a few days.

On shaky legs, we made our way across the room to the hearth. Ewen wanted to sleep next to the fire so we devised a thick pallet a safe distance away. We fell onto the furs in a riot of laughter. With lingering caresses, we cleaned each other. My skin felt raw in a few places from the stiff hair on Ewen's chin, not that I minded since it brought forth in my mind the one who possessed me so thoroughly. There was another part of me that loved how the beginnings of Ewen's new beard began to turn soft. I looked forward to the time when the hair would grow out enough so I could part it with my fingertips.

"On the morrow we head home. My children shall adore ye." He placed himself between the door and me, curling about my body until there was no space between us.

"I admit I be nervous about the reception of yer other kin." My own siblings and parents were faint memories of a time ere the temple.

"Nae. They will understand yer importance to me and my bear, and shall want to hold a party to celebrate our joining." I hoped he was correct. I would do what I could to win them over and ensure Ewen's happiness.

"Sleep now. We shall leave after the sun rises. The ride will take most of the day to cross the mountain."

Nervous as I was, I knew sleep would come. He and I had been very demanding of each other since the first night of coupling. Our nightly lovemaking had no end and left me utterly drained of strength. My eyelids grew heavy as I stared at the coals of the fire and the days of demanding lovemaking caught up with me. I would miss being able to slake our lust as oft as we wanted, waking each other in the night to start all over again, then sleeping late into the morn.

The first couple of nights I was afraid I would wake to find this all a dream. I spent hours watching him sleep, the banked fire of the hearth casting long shadows that showed signs of being a portent of dark times to come. Surely, the gods would not take him from me after all that had happened. I fell asleep believing I was spared for a reason.

The dream began the same as it had hundreds of times ere now. I knelt ere Ewen except the red robe was now a belted kilt and tunic. Ewen did not glance at me, only stared in despair behind me, his hands fisted about the hilt of a short sword as he slowly began to raise the blade over his head.

Most times these dreams did not come with sound, yet I clearly heard soft crying. Not able to help myself, I glanced over my shoulder to behold four men holding a young girl of eight or nine. She wept, huge sobbing breaths shaking her small body and by the look on Ewen's face, he knew her.

The door to the cottage stood wide open and two more men crept up behind him. The situation appeared to be hopeless. My gaze sought out his in time to see him mouth, "I be sorry." The world about me slowed to a crawl as Ewen began to bring the sword down.

I startled awake, gasping as I gazed about the room with rising dread searching for strange men. The crying of the child ringing through the air of the cottage followed by a whispered command that my foggy mind strove to grasp a hold of and fix in my mind.

I had not been given a vision since crossing the firth with Somerled. Although I read the glow about people, my night's sleep had been my own and not plagued with the presage of deeds that would soon come to pass.

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I rolled out of the pallet and began to stoke the fire. With speed I found the last of the oats, placed them in the crock, and added water ere I moved the crock close to the coals to cook. As I moved, sore muscles called to mind the time spent with Ewen. I doubted we would be that active once we made his home.

I stretched again, added the last of our salted beef to the pottage ere searching out our clothes. In the cottage, it had become easy to wear only

minimal attire since we were always taking them off. We passed time wrapped in furs unless we needed something from outside.

By the time the pottage was ready, I had wrapped the leggings and pulled the tunic over my head. Ewen sniffed then groaned as he rolled over and lifted his head. His gaze searched the room, finally coming to rest on me.

“Will ye no’ bestow upon me a kiss to start the morn, husband?” I cherished the knowledge he enjoyed calling me husband. I hoped it was a sign he would come to care for me somewhat in the future.

I grabbed Ewen’s clothing and crossed the floor, laying our kilts over the back of Ewen’s favourite chair. “First dress while I pull the pottage from the fire.”

Ewen grumbled, but began to pull on his clothing and move our nest of furs to the cupboard beds. I managed to dodge his lips until we both were fully attired.

“Ye did that on purpose,” he grumbled.

“Aye.” I grinned against his mouth. “If ye were no’ fully clothed a kiss wud lead to me keeping ye here another day.”

Ewen’s hands clutched the belt at my waist, holding me close when I would have pulled away. “Whit a shrewd man ye be. It may hap we shall stay anyway. This day. On the morrow. Whit difference will another night make?”

I pressed my forehead against his. “As much as I wud love to keep ye to myself, ye dae hae obligations. It dinnae mean we cannot come here at another time for a tryst in the future.”

He sought another kiss, this time with a half-hearted grope. I gave him a playful shove, ignoring the blush that heated my cheeks, still unused to his single-minded craving for me. I grabbed two sword belts to buckle onto him, one on each hip.

He chuckled and sought to avert me from buckling on the second belt. “One be enough, Roi. We be only a day’s ride from home. No one for us be out here. We be well within clann territory.”

I bit my lip to keep from replying. The messages of the dreams were told to no one outside those dedicated to Cerridwen. There was a steep price to pay for revealing what I knew. Besides, the vision could take place on the morrow, or a twelvemonth from now. With the dream so fresh in my mind, I had allowed myself to react when I should not have.

“As ye say.” I laid the sword and belt on the table and turned to see to my pack. Ewen stayed quiet, which turned into an awkward silence. “I shall attend to the horses.” On quick feet, I retreated out of the cottage into the early morn light.

The sky was overcast, promising rain later in the day. A half dozen steps toward the low rock wall, it dawned on me that I heard naught. Halting, I glanced about at the now familiar scene of the glenn stretched out ere me.

The trees swayed in the wind and yet no sound reached my ears. I should hear the water of the river, the song of the morn’s birds. Naught. Turning in a circle I began to count, the figure rose so high there became no reason to count their sum.

Ravens.

Hundreds sat in the naked boughs of the trees, their numbers so thick the new green of spring was utterly hidden by a pallet of deep black. All about the cottage, even on the slope of the thatched roof, the birds perched still and eerily quiet, their beady black eyes trained on me. Waiting.

I swallowed thickly. For the first time in my life I had something—someone—precious to lose.

As soon as the child’s scream pierced the air, I turned on my heel and ran toward the sound. My sword slapped against my thigh as my gaze searched for whence the cry came. A young girl with long black hair and clad in a simple kirtle broke through the tree line, glancing behind her ere running toward the cottage—and me.

With my scarred and tattooed face, I had been told more than once I appeared quite fearsome, and yet this child reacted as if she knew me. When I caught her up, she clung to me as if she had found her fondest toy, and buried

her face in my loose hair. I silently cursed that I had not tied it back ere I left the cottage.

I turned and dashed as fast as I could, burdened as I was. The ravens simply watched from their perches. “If we become separated, ye run to the cottage and lock yerself in and hide. Dae ye hear me?” I felt her nod her head.

I almost made the wall enclosing the cottage when I glimpsed two men sneaking about the side. I would not be able to get the child within the cottage ere they spotted us. Dread crawled up my spine as I turned toward the pen where we kept the horses. I could put her on one... I ran full force into two brigands. The child was torn from my arms and she screamed at the top of her lungs.

A violent shove landed me on my back on the ground where a solid kick to the ribs stole my breath. The new comer unsheathed my sword and, for an instant, I thought he would end me right then. Instead, both he and the man holding the child quickly stepped back, joined by two more who came from the tree line.

I rose to my knees, holding the girl’s gaze, signalling with my hand for her to wait while I addressed the men. “Whit dae ye want?”

The man closest to me look upon me with great scorn. I did not raise my arms in time to deflect the kick that caught me in the side of the head, knocking me flat on my back again.

“We dinnae answer questions from a Godless man.” He spat ere moving away.

From near the cottage came a roar so great, the air shivered with the power behind it. “Roi!” Ewen’s voice sounded guttural, my name barely plain.

Blinking the spots out of my vision, I rolled onto my stomach, rising once more to my knees to face the cottage and Ewen. He stormed toward me, the sword I had placed on the table earlier clutched in his fist. I wiped at the warm blood that dripped down my face.

His roving amber gaze took everything in with one sweep ere pinning the men with a stare that promised a painful redress.

“Brigid.” A growl punctuated her name.

The girl cried harder. “I be sorry, Father.”

He did not reply. The men I had spotted about the side of the cottage came forth, Ewen not ware he had been flanked.

“State yer business ere I decide to tear yer heads off for bringing harm to my family.” His grip on the naked blade flexed. He still wore the first sword I had belted to his hip. All I had was the dirk tucked in my belt.

I glanced over my shoulder. “We be here to deliver a message to Ewen Meinnear,” claimed the one holding Brigid.

“Spit it out, man, and get on with it,” Ewen prodded, his anger barely held in check.

“There be a price for defiance, Thane of Raineach. Slay the pagan and yer daughter will go free. If ye choose, again, to keep the heathen, the price shall be yer daughter’s life.”

I could sense his rage, his visage one of violent fury. Slowly Ewen’s face turned hard and unforgiving, yet when he glanced down at me only despair shadowed the depth of his eyes.

“Ye be making a habit of kneeling at my feet, Priest of Cerridwen.” I said naught, yet glanced with a purpose at the men stalking him, praying he would see and understand. “This day no’ be turning out as I had anticipated. Ye, on the other hand...” Ewen hefted the spare sword he had declined to wear, yet had grabbed off the table ere he left the cottage. “I trust ye,” he added in a soft voice.

“The Morrigan sent eyes to watch the field of battle.”

He raised his gaze, finally noticing the quiet ravens. “Then we shall give her a battle worth beholding.”

Ewen stared over my head, the dead eyes deceiving as his bear pushed forward, trapped, nonetheless ready to unleash the berserker rage Ewen spoke of. He wore the very same countenance when he faced Somerled on the field of war.

Grasping the sword double-fisted, he raised it over his head until the tip of the blade pointed down behind him. I grasped the dirk at the front of my belt and withdrew it. My body relaxed as I locked away all thought, all feelings, searching for the centre of calm where I floated, waiting for his move.

His face flushed with strain as he hurled his blade as he would an axe. The instant the sword left his fingers, I launched backwards, rolling arse over head to come to my feet next to the man holding Brigid. He stared wide-eyed at the sword sticking out of the chest of the man next to him. The ravens took flight, filling the air with their cawing as I tore Brigid from the cutthroat's grasp.

“Run!”

I thrust my dirk into the throat of the man who had held her, any command he would have given lost. The instant of shock and wonder passed and the other men burst into movement. I swung my left fist at the skewered man. He stumbled out of reach, which was all I needed to grasp Ewen's sword and plant my foot in his chest to dislodge the blade. He fell to the ground in a heap, the light of life fading quickly from his eyes.

Ere I could bring the blade up, a backhand caught me across the head where I had been kicked. Stumbling back, my vision turned hazy and spotted. Half blind, I turned and brought my blade up in time to narrowly catch the one coming down on me.

I fought like a man possessed. Ewen and his daughter counted on me. I would not fail them. An earlier glimpse told me the cottage door, open when Ewen exited, was now closed and hopefully barred. I did not catch sight of Ewen or the other two manslayers.

Dropping low to the ground, I sliced the cords at the back of one foe's knee. His leg no longer holding him up, he fell to the side, howling. Ere I could catch my balance, a well-placed kick to my hip caused my leg to buckle

and I went to one knee, blocking a thrust ere grabbing the man by his stones through his kilt with my free hand. A sharp pull and twist caused the villain to drop his sword. My next slash gutted the man.

Blundering to my feet, I kicked him in the chest, pushing him to the ground as he feebly strove to keep his insides from bursting forth. The one I had crippled by slicing through the meat at the back of his leg sought to crawl away. He glanced over his shoulder at me as he clambered away weakly, fear stretching his face tight.

The calm about me shattered. The ravens continued to circle, calling loudly to each other. Fury flooded my veins, pushing away the lethargy dragging at my limbs. I stalked toward the would-be murderer, kicking him in the shoulder to roll him onto his back. He glared at me with open malice.

“Pagan,” he spat. “Yer soul will burn in the bowels of hell.”

“I serve a goddess. Ye can keep the fires of hell for yerself.” With all my might, I buried the sword in the man’s chest. Either my foot slipped in blood or my legs gave out from being drained of strength, I know not which landed me on the ground, heaving for breath.

The ravens quieted yet continued to circle like a black cloud in the sky above. The would-be murderer I had gutted, moaned piteously behind me. I needed to end his misery and then track Ewen. I prayed he stayed unharmed.

Wiping the blood from my face, I breathed through the spinning of my vision. I grasped the hilt of the sword that protruded from the man’s chest, intending to use it to help me in rising when the flock of ravens landed all at once, becoming a thick ebony blanket spread about me in a wide, unbroken circle. The silence became thick and heavy. I froze waiting for what would come next.

A low, growling chorus rumbled, rising in volume until the air shivered with the angry noise. Almost two dozen black bears of many shapes and sizes came forth from the tree line. Their heads were low to the ground, gazes trained on me. I let go of the sword hilt and waited. I would not raise my hand in defence, not against Ewen’s kin.

The bears circled scarcely outside the blanket of ravens, each roaring and lunging. That the birds did not scatter at their presence confounded the bears. One lost patience, striving to breach the line of the ravens only to be swarmed and assailed by a half dozen ravens intent on driving him back. The bear yowled as if he'd been stung, which served only to incite the others who all began to press into the circle of ravens, intent on reaching me.

“Nae! Stop!” Brigid’s pale face twisted with fear as she ran from the doorway of the cottage to me. The ravens parted, allowing her to come through untouched. She barrelled into my side, nigh knocking me over as her arms wrapped about my neck. I held her the best that I could as she buried her face in my neck and cried.

The bears backed away. “Donn? Arailt?” One of them had to know me. “Will one of ye search for Ewen? He may need help.” I could not bring myself to feel ashamed for the pleading tone in my voice. I had a burning need to know of Ewen’s wellbeing, yet knew if I left the safety of the ravens I would be slaughtered.

The bears rocked from side to side on their front paws and I wondered if they might not be able to understand me. I thought Donn had been able to in his bear form though I never asked, only believed it to be true.

Two bears broke off from the group and lumbered toward the cottage as the others began to harass the ravens again. A bellow, louder than all the noise made by Ewen’s kin, came from behind me. I glanced over my shoulder and the strain left me as Ewen strode toward us. I placed a palm on the back of Brigid’s head to keep her from beholding the two heads held by their hair in Ewen’s fist. With an angry toss, the heads were hurtled at the bears closest to him as he bore down on them with great speed. Power from his bear rolled across my skin in a soothing tidal wave.

“Father!” Brigid ran to him. The ravens launched into the air with a sudden cry and flew away.

Ewen caught his daughter up in a tight embrace. I searched for serious wounds on him and was relieved when I did not discern any. As he

approached, I slowly rose back to my feet on shaky legs. Catching me under the arm, he hefted me up the rest of the way and then crushed me to him.

“I think I want to go back to bed,” I mumbled. I could not think again why I had been in a rush to cross the mountain. Ewen simply laughed and clutched me harder.

EPILOGUE

Roi

Our horses stood side by side as we looked down the side of the mountain onto Loch Raineach. Ewen's nine-year-old daughter, Brigid, straddled the horse behind me, holding onto my wide belt. Somehow, I had become her hero even though I had really done naught save comfort her the best way I knew how. Ewen simply looked on with pride and grinned slyly when Brigid insisted on riding with me and not her father.

I did wonder why she trusted me so readily. "Donn came to the house and told us the story of the savage warrior priest father's bear chose as a companion." Her small fingers ran over the outlines of my facial tattoos. "I be glad I found ye at the cottage."

We had stayed another night at the glenn. Both Ewen and I had small wounds to tend. His kin had transformed to human at his angry command and had to answer for their ill will toward me. Arailt and Donn were not among those who tracked Brigid. Most knew of me only by word of mouth and thought I had conspired to kidnap Ewen's daughter. I had never seen him so furious and, for a small while there, I thought his bear would come forth. Many contrite apologies were made and I accepted them. The countenance on Ewen's face told me he was not appeased. I vowed to speak to him later on this and soothe him.

The manslayers wore what Ewen's kin referred to as *bumbee* tartans, fabric woven to resemble a clann tartan yet not belonging to the clann. Ewen sent word to the Robersons, in the east, to notify them someone wanted to frame them for theft of his daughter and murder. Also, whoever sent the men did not warn them of the clann's otherness. I was ware of who put together the skirmish and I believed Ewen was too, although I refused to be the one to name the man without proof.

Now, as we stared down at Ewen's home and the burgh about the castle, I prayed I would be ready for what would come next. People stopped what they

were doing when they caught sight of us. I glanced at him. He cut a fine figure, sitting tall on his grey-speckled courser. Half the bears ambled in a staggering line ahead of us. The others surrounded him as if he were a beast-king of old. A niggling fragment of memory from long, long ago almost made me believe he could be.

I once thought my fate would be to die by his hand. Now I understood fate had placed me in Ewen's path so I could learn to live. Who am I to argue with fate?

THE END

Lexicon

Ain – Own

Aye – Yes

Be – Is, are, am

Burgh – Township

Cèilidh – /'kel or Kay'lay/ dance, social gathering. A Scottish Gaelic word for “visit”, as these began as informal gatherings in individual homes.

Crock – earthenware pot

Dae – Do

Didnae – Didn't

Dinnae – Don't, Doesn't

Doog – Dog

Gaunnae – Going to

Gille Dubh – /Geel-yuh Doobh/ Guardian spirit of trees

Great kilt – a kilt that is longer, usually reaching to the shin

Hae – Have

Huvnae – Haven't

Kirk – church

Kirtle – a long ladies dress

Leine-Croich – saffron shirt, war shirt, worn by ancient Highlanders

Nae – No

No' – Not

Sett – the colour and pattern on a tartan

Shieling – summer dwelling on a seasonal pasture

Snaoim Gatrain – special knots used to tie garters

Whit – What

Willnae – Will not

Wid – Would

Widnae – Would not

Wench – Women

Ye – You

Yer – Your

Author Bio

Lexi has always been an avid reader and at a young age started reading (secretly) her mother's romances (the ones she was told not to touch). She was the only teenager she knew of who would be grounded from reading. Later, with a pencil and a note book, she wrote her own stories and shared them with friends because she loved to see their reactions. A Texas transplant, Lexi now kicks her boots up in the Midwest with her Yankee husband and her eighty-pound puppies named after vacuum cleaners.

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