



Passion's Hunger

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Chapter One

Flames blazed in the fireplace, spitting orange, yellow and red sparks up into the chimney. It was an early autumn evening, but with the dark clouds spiraling in from the north, it felt as if the promise of snow would come earlier than usual this year.

Sitting at one of the many tables that adorned the great room, Tambre polished her sword with gentle hands. The sword, a gift from her brothers for her eighteenth birthday, could only be described as truly lovely, a piece of art. It was just as long and as heavy as the other knights' swords in the castle, but hers was special. On the hilt was an engraved delicate rose intertwined with thorns and tiny leaves. Made of gold and designed from an actual rose which curled around her hand and fit to perfection, she adored the piece and would always treasure its true sentimental worth.

Upon receiving her sword, her mother had scolded her three brothers, telling them that ladies did not have in their possessions swords of any kind. Needlework and culinary graces was what her daughter needed more than a sword. She eventually relented to her daughter keeping the sword, but only under the gentle urging of her husband.

Tambre sighed and finally leaned the sword upon the wall next to the massive fireplace, making sure it would not fall into the fire. Perhaps on the morrow she would hold it to the throat of her intended, demanding to be let out of this ridiculous betrothal that neither of them wanted. It had been arranged years ago by her father when she was only two, still a babe. Her hands curled into fists, and if any who knew her well was around her this late in the eve, they would have run in the other direction. Her anger was well known, and it was directed at one man whom she had never met, had never laid eyes on before. The sole object of her disgruntlement.

She had to find a way to get out of this mess. If she did not want a husband, why must she go through with this redundant farce? Why not leave? She stopped, laughing humorlessly as she placed her hands upon her hips, shaking her head at the silly notion. Her father would have her ass, is why

Frustration turned her lovely face into a mask of fury as she pondered further her plight. Oh, think. Think. She already had one plan in place, but felt that she needed at least one more. Aye, add more wood to the fire. There must be a way, some miracle, to spare her from an

unwanted marriage. She began pacing again, mumbling to herself. And all the while, every single thought that she could think of was the vivid image of an overweight man with warts upon his huge, bulbous nose and an unattractive, smelly appearance. She shuddered involuntarily, thinking with all the power of her soul that she must relieve herself of this ridiculous situation.

Elwain of Lockbourne observed his daughter from the shadows of the unlit stairs. He knew what was in her thoughts. How he wished that he could tell her that she did not need to go away with her intended. But, a man of his honor, he would keep the betrothal intact. Tambre needed this union. She was well past the age of marriage. Aye, it was time. She would have nothing to fear from her betrothed. He was a giant of a man, much like his father, with gentle green eyes and long black hair. He was very handsome, he supposed, at least he had been when Elwain had seen the man last no more than two years ago, but he was not quite sure if his daughter would accept any of that. She had always said that she would never wed a man she did not love. He sighed, shaking his head wearily.

He gazed at his daughter's profile, deep in thought. She was a very beautiful woman, and so much like her mother. Her waist length golden hair hung in a large mane of natural curls, framing her face much like the pictures of God's angels he had seen. Her eyes were a deep blue, almost black, and when she was angry, they could spew out a raging blaze of fury from their depths. He smiled at that thought. Her betrothed would indeed have to be a very strong man to control her outlandish ways.

He turned to go back to his bed chamber, but paused when he heard Tambre swear loudly. Looking back down at her, she was pacing in front of the fireplace, thinking. Elwain almost laughed out loud, but caught himself just in time. Indeed, her betrothed will assuredly have his hands full.

Merrik of Farlynn was faring no better. He sat in his bed chamber, in his favorite chair in front of a cheerful fire. He was glad that something was cheery, for he was not. On the morrow, he would ride in the early hours of the morn to gather up his intended and bring her to his home. With the autumn winds as crisp as they were today, mayhap he should order the cart be made ready for her to ride in during the trip back to his home.

He curled his lip at that thought. Already he was tending to her comfort. Nay, he would not. He would let her ride in those ridiculous contraptions that the gentler sex rode upon when they journeyed to and fro. Mayhap when they reached his home, she would not be able to stand for a month of Sabbath days.

Merrik drew his brows down. He would not be cruel in that way. He sighed and made a mental note to order the cart be made ready to go on the morrow. The door to his bed chamber burst open then, shaking him out of his unwanted thoughts. With loud footsteps and much noise in trying to keep quiet without success, his five brothers strode over to where he sat.

"Pitiful looking, isn't he?" Gernald asked sympathetically of the other four siblings. Gernald was the oldest of all the brothers, and having been wed for five years, he thought that, mayhap, he could give his sour looking younger brother some well needed counsel.

"Aye, that he does," Broswin agreed with the hint of a grin on his lips. Broswin was the next oldest brother and, by his own choice, had not wed because he had not found any woman worth spending the rest of his life with. He did feel a small amount of empathy for his younger brother and thought that it was better Merrik than himself. Poor man. His brother would be in his prayers this very eve.

"Tsk, ts," sympathized Gray. This brother looked most like their mother with his blond hair and light blue eyes. He had wed a serving maid he had met in a tavern on one of his many outings. She was a comely wench, with flaming red hair and great brown eyes. He rather liked the bliss of wedded life and would try to curb his brother's way of thinking the worst.

"Not to fear, brother of mine," slurred Thorn, who was the fourth brother of the lot and well into his cups. "I 'ave a rem'dy ta ya sit'ation." He was weaving back and forth unsteadily, and nearly fell into the fireplace had Merrik not caught his arm to steady him.

Smiling, Luther, the last and youngest of the brothers, gave Merrik a wink. "Aye, we bet you do, Thorn, but alas, none of us can out-drink you, my brother, to even begin to understand what your remedy may be!" With those words barely out of Luther's mouth, Thorn promptly fell to the floor in a drunken heap.

Merrik let out a roar of laughter. "We had better put him abed and tuck him in before he wakes the entire castle and brings the wrath of Father upon all our heads!" He smiled as Gernald and Gray lifted Thorn and carried him out of the chamber.

Broswin and Luther seated themselves on the floor across from Merrik. They regarded him with humor in their innocent stares, and hid their smiles well, or so they thought. Their poor brother looked as if he would like to be anywhere but in his own bed chamber with gloomy thoughts of his upcoming union.

"I am glad to be the sole subject of your humor," Merrik ground out a little too harshly than what he intended. "How would one of you like to take my place instead, hum?"

With that comment, both brothers wiped their smiles immediately off their faces. Nay, they would not like to take his place, even if their lives depended upon it.

Trying to lighten the mood, Luther grinned devilishly. "What? You do not want to wed your intended and..." The look that Merrik heaved upon him had his mouth snapping shut suddenly.

"Nay, I do not want to wed. And I do not understand why I must be the one who has to do this dastardly deed. None of you have betrotheds, or are even thinking about the matter." Merrik stood and went over to the window across the room. He gazed out into the pitch black night, seeing nothing. The night was as dark as his thoughts, and he smiled somberly.

"I would take your place if I could brother, but with Father set on the idea of you being the one to wed, well...I don't see how any of us can change his mind." Luther wrapped his cloak more tightly around him when Merrik turned and gave him an icy stare.

"But," Broswin intervened, "there is always the possibility that the union can be one of—" He stopped and shrugged. "Convenience." At Merrik's raised brows, he continued. "Father has given up on Gernald and Broswin to give him grandchildren right away. You are his only hope at the moment, being that he feels you are the lustiest of us all. Just give him a couple of grandsons, and he will be happy. You will have done your deed, so to speak, and your wife—" he raised his eyebrows, "—will be occupied with other things. Mayhap you can even take a mistress to ease your unwillingness to bed your wife any further."

Merrik turned back to the window and glared out into the darkness. "Mayhap you are right in your way of thinking. A couple of brats to occupy Father, and my...wife, and a mistress for myself." He knew he spoke a lie. He would never take a mistress to bed when he had a wife. It was against everything he had ever been taught by his mother, God rest her soul. Mayhap if he could just get through the next few weeks, things wouldn't be so bad.

He closed his eyes for a moment, hoping to send away some of the resentment he felt towards the girl he was to wed. Hell, he had never even seen her before! All his mind drudged up was an image of a witless woman with a dull life and a face that beauty had passed by altogether. His father said he had seen the girl when he was just the ripe old age of ten, but that was too long ago to remember. Things could change in twenty years.

He shivered involuntarily. *My God, what am I about to get myself into?* Dread filled his soul as he prayed fervently for a miracle. Perhaps if he could get the woman alone, to plead his unwillingness of wedded bliss, he may be able to break this union with no hard feelings on either side. His mood lightened somewhat as he began to search his mind for a way, a plan, to rid himself of a loveless bonding. There had to be a way. Think, think!

Chapter Two

Tambre woke to a chill in her bed chamber. Where on earth was Millie? She should have stoked the fire long before now so that she could get up and bathe and...

Tambre groaned aloud, plopping her pillow over her head. Today was the day that she dreaded most of all. Today *he* would be here to gather her up and take her to Castle Farlynn. Mayhap if she claimed a headache, everyone would understand and just let her stay in her rooms for the day.

Not bloody likely. She sighed dejectedly. Hellfire and damnation to this whole jumble of frustration. That would never work.

She could see it now. Her father would be pounding on her door, demanding to be let in. He would summon the midwife, who would look at her with sympathy, but would never nay-say what her father wanted to hear. She would pronounce her in good health, and then her father would haul her up to set her below stairs to greet her betrothed, over his shoulder, bound and gagged, if need be.

Tambre sighed miserably. No one could stop this awful thing from happening. It was sure to rob her of her much needed freedom, and she could not abide by that regrettable issue. Unfortunately, her mother would be of no assistance. Her mother thought that the union should have taken place years ago. She was only twenty and five. Well past the marriage age, true, but still able to make her own decisions on any count.

She sat up in bed then. That's it. She would refuse to wed the barbarian, and just stay here with her family. Mayhap her plan with Kollif would further her intended's hopeful repulsion toward her. Her shoulders sagging, Tambre prayed for it to be so, but just like wishing for rain upon a cloudless day, she immensely doubted the possibility. Dejectedly, she pried herself from the bed, readying herself for the day's events to start and be over with.

Maggie burst into the room suddenly with a wild eyed look, slamming the bed chamber door behind her. Her mop cap was askew and her face was streaked with what appeared to be mud. Wisps of her graying hair straggled out from underneath her cap. And, she was out of breath.

Tambre, concerned for her maid's wellbeing, jumped from her bed in alarm and raced to Maggie's side. She led the maid over to the nearest chair and sat her down. "Maggie, what in heaven's name is wrong! You look as if you've seen a ghost!"

Maggie, having caught some of her breath looked wide-eyed at her ward. "He is here, my lady!"

"Who is here?" Tambre asked patting her maid's arm to comfort her.

"*He* is here! Your betrothed! He arrived earlier than what was expected this morn. Your father is below stairs trying to occupy him and his party while I get you ready to be presented to him." She jumped from the chair, and turned toward her ward. She sat back down weakly, throwing her ward a worried, tired look that betrayed her thoughts. Her wry expression told Tambre that she knew the rules would go out the window if this girl had anything to do with the events of this day.

Tambre felt bile rise in her throat and her limbs became weak. *No! Not so soon!* It was not even sunrise yet; almost, but not yet. She couldn't let *him* think that she slept this late every morn. Well, she did, but *he* didn't need to know that. Shaking herself out of her weak-limbed state, she whipped into action. Thinking wildly of what to do, she paced to and fro in front of her maid.

Maggie closed her eyes as if praying to God. She was about ready to voice her opinion of Tambre's normal hair-brained schemes when the girl whipped around to face her with a most mischievous look on her face; one that boded the receiver of her thoughts ill.

Maggie immediately shook her head. "Whatever you are thinking, you can count me out. I am still getting those awful brooding looks from your father since the last time you talked me into something foolish. Your father would have my neck in a noose if you do something crazy again while under my charge. He would have your neck as well." Maggie stood up and put her hands on her plump hips. "Get you ready, girl. Make haste! We have not a moment to spare."

Tambre crossed her arms over her chest. "Nay, I will not make haste until you go and fetch me my sword. I left it by the fireplace last eve."

Maggie stubbornly shook her head again. "Nay, I will not. Your father specifically instructed me that you were to wear a gown, and not your man's garb, as he put it." She sighed at Tambre's unrelenting look. She threw up her hands in surrender. "So be it! I have tried to

save the skin of your backside, but this time you are on your own. I will get your sword, but after that, you can dress yourself." She left the bed chamber mumbling something about hoyden girls who would wind up with stripes from a whip across their asses, and promptly slammed the door with a resounding bang.

Below stairs, there was an abundance of bustling activity as the tables were pulled from their resting places along the walls in the great hall and moved in neat order about the room. Benches quickly took their places as well, while busy maids placed tankards of honeyed wine at every available seat. It would be a full castle this day. No one had expected this large of a party to descend upon them before first light.

Elwain, along with his three sons, Derrick, Tristan and Galwain, entertained the visitors the best that they could. There was a hearty greeting between the two old friends, neither having seen the other for more than two years past.

"It is good to see you again, old friend!" Ian of the clan Douglas bellowed, as he took Elwain's hand in a firm shake. He grinned broadly, showing even white teeth. He was the same height as Elwain, only broader through the chest and shoulders. They wore their hair in the same fashion, braided to their waists and tied with a band of leather. His green eyes shone with affection. While Ian was known for his dark good looks, Elwain was just as well known for his blond hair, blue eyes, and too handsome features.

"Ian! My friend!" Elwain grasped his friend's hand, and then pulled him to his chest in a welcoming hug, each clapping the other on their broad backs.

Ian stood back and eyed his friend with mischief. "Our long awaited day is finally here. We will take the gift of your daughter and bring her back to my castle to ready her for the union with my son." He looked over his shoulder then, and spied Merrik flirting with one of the scullery maids, who was warming to his attentions with great enthusiasm. Narrowing his eyes at his son's disrespect, he all but bellowed his name across the room.

Merrik looked at his father innocently. Seeing the rage that fairly burst from his eyes and across the great hall, he turned and gave the comely maid a smile of promise, then wound his way through the throngs of people until he reached his father's side. He could not help but smile at his father's drawn down brows, and looked to Elwain, his soon to be father-in-law. "My

thanks to your hospitality, my lord. 'Tis a very fine castle you have."

Elwain grinned at the middle son of his good friend. "'Tis welcome you are here, Merrik. Your family can treat this castle as if it were your own." He marveled at the good looks of the man who was to wed his daughter. He knew in his heart that some day, mayhap not right away, the two would come to grow fond of each other, possibly even love one another. He dared to hope.

Out of the corner of his eye, Elwain spied Maggie, and turned to greet her and Tambre, whom he had thought was nearby. Maggie only nodded at him rather quickly, jerked the sword from its resting position by the fireplace and nearly ran above stairs, dragging the heavy piece behind her. He was about to bellow a command, when he remembered his rudeness to his guests and turned to face them.

"My apologies. I thought that I had caught a glimpse of my daughter. I, however, was incorrect. I am sure she shall be down shortly." Elwain grimaced slightly, and raised his eyes to the ceiling. What fool thing was she going to do now? He prayed for strength this day, and he prayed for his daughter's ass that would be beaten if she tried to escape the castle or harm her betrothed in any way. "Allow me to introduce my sons to you, Merrick."

Tambre paced impatiently across her chamber floor. She had bathed and gotten dressed in a hurry, only to wait on the one item that would complete her outlandish attire. She flinched when she thought of what her father would do when he saw her. She put the thought quickly out of her mind as she stepped lightly over to her bed chamber door, opening it a crack. Peering out into the dimly lit corridor, she spotted Maggie, half dragging, half carrying the sword behind her. Smiling, Tambre went out to gather the heavy piece of metal from her maid.

Maggie took in her ward's clothing, and did not bother to say a word. Narrowing her eyes, she let Tambre take the sword from her, watching in amazement as the girl hefted it up and into the sheath on her side.

Tambre leaned down, and kissed the maid's check. "Thank you," she said simply as she turned on her heel, and strode back into her chamber.

Maggie made the sign of the cross in front of her, praying for Elwain's strength as well as Shelia, Tambre's mother. Turning quickly, she vacated the area before Elwain could catch up

with her.

In her bed chamber, Tambre grabbed off her bed a thick woolen cloak lined in red velvet. The cloak was warm and heavy, and fell into becoming folds around her frame. Thank goodness it was floor length, sweeping behind her in a two foot train. It neatly hid her attire to perfection, and she smiled wickedly. If she planned this right, she would be waving good day to her betrothed before night fall. Nodding her head in satisfaction, she opened her chamber door, peering out cautiously. It was quiet with not a sound from either end. Silently shutting the door behind her, Tambre made her way to the north wing of the castle.

Merrik was quickly becoming bored with his father's talk and excused himself from the room, making an urgent request that he be pointed in the direction of the privy. It would seem that Elwain's sons were bored with the surroundings as well, for all three of them jumped on the first chance they got to exit the great hall. As did Merrik's five brothers. Once out side in the inner bailey, all of the men heaved a sigh of relief. The air was crisp and cold as they gathered their cloaks around them, all of them making small talk while walking toward the north end of the castle.

At just the right moment, Merrik happened to catch a glimpse of scarlet and mumbled, "What the devil?"

This drew the immediate interest of the others. Following his lead, they cast their eyes up to the second story window, which was hanging open. A rope, which barely reached the ground, was hanging out the window, and a figure wrapped in scarlet was shimmying expertly down. About twenty feet from the ground, a curse was heard, obviously a female voice, and Tambre's three brothers looked at one another in apparent humor. She was definitely stuck on something, and could get no further.

Merrik eyed the figure for a moment, and turned to look at his three future brothers-in-law. "What, may I ask--" he said, raising an eyebrow. "--is *that*?"

Derrick, Tristan and Galwain all said in unison, "Your betrothed!" They truly did feel sorry for the poor fellow, but their wide smiles belied their intended sympathy.

Merrik's five brothers burst out laughing, but sobered when he shot them a look of death. He turned his attentions back to the scarlet clad figure, wriggling now in an attempt to untangle

herself. Merrik winced as another round of curses was heard from above. Never had he heard such language come from a lady.

Derrick clapped Merrik on the back, trying to ease the man's plight. "I would like to give you my sincere apologies for what you are about to get yourself into." With those words spoken, all of the men bellowed their laughter outright.

Merrik, on the other hand, was not amused.

Tambre heard laughter from below and tried to maneuver her way around to get a look at what was so amusing. Twisting a little too far, one of her hands lost its grip on the rope, and she felt herself falling toward the ground. Biting back a yelp of surprise, she waited for her bottom to promptly meet the ground. Instead, strong arms encased her with a warmth she could feel all the way to her bare skin. She could see not a thing, for during her fall, her cloak had all but swallowed her entire head, gathering around her neck and nearly cutting off her supply of breath. Wriggling unsuccessfully to maneuver the thing all the way over her head so that she could at least see, the arms tightened around her, and she stilled for a moment.

Merrik was in awe of the shapely figure he held in his arms. Long, lean legs were encased with snug fitting knee-high black leather boots. From under the top up the boots came a soft shade of green britches that went up over a flat belly to encase a slim, shapely waist. A wide, black leather belt adorned with a gleaming gold buckle surround that tiny waist. And, if he was seeing correctly, a sword hung from the belt, its handle a delicate imitation of a rose intertwined with vines. The shirt was of home spun white wool, something that a stable boy would wear, but this was clearly not a stable boy. Two of the most finely shaped breasts he had ever seen rose and fell with labored breath as she began to squirm around once again trying to get her cloak off her head.

Merrik raised his brows in interest at the bit of female fluff he held in his arms. She looked delicious, from what he had viewed thus far, and a small grin lifted the corners of his mouth as he gently set her on her feet, allowing her the opportunity to untangle herself. He could not wait for the first glimpse of her face, for if it was anything like the body he had just gazed over, he would be apt to say that this union would not be so bad after all.

Tambre struggled with her cloak, almost landing on her bottom as she lost her footing

twice, cursing the frippery of women, and vowing to shred the blasted cloak into lint when she freed herself. Finally, she gained access to the outside world. Her golden curls were tousled over her face, and hopelessly tangled beyond normal repair. Irritated with the whole mess, she flipped her head back suddenly, sending the golden curls flowing in an arc over her head, and down her back. Her eyes blinked at the sudden light that surrounded her, and she closed them briefly to set her bearings straight once more.

Merrik drew a quick breath, never before seeing a girl as lovely as this one. She was a vision to behold. Her hair was a true shade of gold, like the jewelry in a woman's jewel chest. It sparkled and gleamed, even in the snarled mess, looking as soft as kitten fur. Her face was flawless, creamy white, with tiny eye brows that rose in perfect arches above her closed eyes. Her nose was delicate and finely sculptured, as if an artist had molded it himself. Her lips were parted slightly, and he glimpsed white teeth behind sensual lips that were a slight shade of red and made for kissing. He surprised himself with these thoughts. In fact, he had been hoping to come here today and get the girl alone to see if they could devise a plan to break the betrothal. He did not like that plan too well now, for she was just too damn lovely to even think about...what was he thinking?

He did not need nor want a wife, even one as lovely as she. Of course, he immediately tossed that thought out of his head as soon as a set of the deepest sapphire eyes he had ever seen landed on him with all the force of a rock slide.

Tambre was taken aback by the man who stood before her. He was very tall, broad of shoulder, and his massive chest looked like it was nearly ready to come bursting out of his tunic. He was slightly dark skinned, perhaps from being out in the sun over the summer, and his deep black hair hung in waves over his shoulders, falling nearly to his waist. He was, by far, the most striking man she had ever set her eyes upon. Tight black britches encased his muscled legs like a second skin, and she watched in fascination as ripples moved along the front of one thigh. His knee high, brown leather boots were shiny and flawlessly made, encasing his muscled calves to perfection.

Sighing with disappointment that her appraisal of this wondrous man had come to an end, she allowed her gaze to travel slowly up his body once more, lingering most unlady-like at his groin area, and finally coming to rest upon his face. She sucked in her breath suddenly, knowing

that she must have died and gone to heaven. How could she have merely gazed at his face before? This man was a sight, to be sure, for he was more than just handsome, he was beautiful. His mesmerizing emerald eyes held hers captive, and she wanted so desperately to breathe on her own once again before she had the embarrassment of fainting dead away

Merrik's lips curled into a smile, showing even white teeth and dimples in both of his cheeks. He had liked the way she had observed his body, taking in his physique with a critical eye. He wondered if he had passed her inspection. "Are you unharmed?" he asked as his eyes roved over her form with an aching slow observation of his own.

When Tambre finally found her voice she barely got out the breathless words, "Aye, I mean, nay... I am fine," before her heart started pounding in her chest once again.

Tristan approached his sister, and when he finally gained her attention after several long moments, he smiled like a cat that had just eaten a huge mouse. "Tambre, may I present to you your betrothed, Merrik of Farlynn."

Chapter Three

“What say you,” she barely whispered before she felt her face turn a blazing shade of crimson in her mortification. She peeked around her brother’s shoulder to look at Merrik, and then back at her brother, giving him an apparent look of murder. She swallowed hard and felt like kicking Tristan for his smug look, but instead she raised her head high, and stepped around her brother to confront her betrothed.

“My lord Merrik.” She was about to curtsy when she realized how ridiculous that would look in boy’s britches, so instead, she pulled out her sword, kneeling on one knee. Placing the tip of the sword in the ground, with both hands over the hilt, she bowed her head.

Merrik felt his heart do a little flip at her pledge of fealty to him. Her golden hair hung over her slim shoulders to brush the ground beneath her. He raised his brows, and thought how he would love to get her all alone, just the two of them, when he heard his father bellow from the main castle doors.

Tambre’s head jerked up, and she gave one last look to Merrik before she got to her feet and sheathed her sword. Picking up her forgotten cloak, she swung it around her shoulders; clasping it together at the neck with the diamond encrusted broach her mother had given her two years ago. She pulled her hood up over her head and gathered the cloak around her as she headed toward the main castle doors, not looking back. Her three brothers surrounded her, as if they knew she was to be in some kind of severe reprimand once her father found out how she had behaved this morn.

Merrik watched her go as regal as a queen to greet his father in a deep curtsy. He turned to look at his five brothers, who still stood by his side. They were in awe of the girl just as much as he was. She had said not a word to them, and they were charmed beyond mere reasoning.

“Aye, Merrik,” Broswin whispered, “I shall take you up on what you said last eve. I will take your place and wed this one. She has my heart already.”

Merrik looked at Broswin were the sworn enemy. “Nay, you will not. Tambre is to have a union with me and so she shall.” He stalked off toward the main castle doors and his father’s waiting glare.

All five brothers looked at one another. Merrik had just said something that none of them thought they would ever hear the man say. He *wanted* this union. And who could blame him for wanting it? Tambre was indeed a rare find, and more beautiful than anything they had ever seen in their lives.

An hour later, the dining hall was filled to capacity. Sitting beside her mother on the main dais, Tambre glared down into her lap. As soon as her mother had seen her in her britches, she had nearly jerked her by her hair to her bed chamber where she had given Tambre the tongue lashing of her life. Now, sitting here beside her still fuming mother, Tambre eyed the scarlet velvet gown with distaste. She may have relented to the wearing of this thing, but as soon as her mother had left her bed chamber, Tambre had immediately taken off the stiff slippers and put her comfortable leather boots back on. No one would even guess she was wearing them under her gown. The scarlet piece had so many folds of material with such a long train, that she could barely walk. But she smiled, thinking that her mother was none the wiser. The boots only made her feel secure from the possibility of slipping to her death down the stairs.

Still smiling, she raised her eyes to look at the crowd that had gathered in the hall. So many people were here that the rough kitchen tables and benches had to be brought in to accommodate everyone. The noise was almost deafening as the excited talk about her betrothed filled her ears.

She looked around the hall until she spotted Merrik leaning against a wall talking with one of his brothers. He smiled at something that was said, and caught her looking at him. His smile deepened as he bowed gallantly to her. Tambre was indeed spell-bound by his dark good looks, as were all the other women who had gathered here today, she noticed with a distrustful gaze to those who stood around her.

Merrik kept his eyes upon Tambre for a few moments longer, until he was poked in the ribs by one of his brother's elbows. Jerked back to reality, he glared at Gray.

"Tell me, Merrik," Gray grinned knowingly. "Does she meet your approval? If I were you, I would hold onto that one as if she were the most precious of gems, lest someone snatch her away."

"No one will take her away from me, Gray," Merrik ground out from behind gritted teeth.

"She is my intended, and so shall she remain."

"Besides, Gray," Thorn spoke up, "she has already pledged her fealty to Merrik." He smiled. "My God, what a lucky fellow you are."

Merrik gritted his teeth again, ready to strangle each of his brothers, but was held off from doing just that by Broswin's words.

"I would not worry overly much about your brothers who tease and taunt you in jest. I would worry more about that love-sick swain who looks as if he could swallow your beautiful betrothed whole." Broswin inclined his head to the table where Tambre was sitting. He took a sip from his tankard, waiting for Merrick's reaction.

Merrik spun around on his heel, nearly yelling his clan battle cry at that moment. What Broswin said was true. The well dressed man at Tambre's side was indeed looking like the shunned lover. Was he? This would be something to discuss later with the lady. As for right now, he wanted to make himself known to this man who was all but slobbering down Tambre's hand as he held it in his own, a little too familiar for his liking.

Not taking his eyes off of the two, Merrik made his way to the dais and behind the chairs, to stop only a few feet from Tambre. He heard her say something undetectable to the young swain at her side, and the man smiled lovingly at her. He would like to throw the man on his ass out the main castle door, but this was not his castle and therefore, he could not. That did not mean he wouldn't, if pressed.

He moved closer to Tambre, and when she detected his presence, she turned, casting her deep sapphire eyes upon him as her brows rose in surprise. She grinned after a moment, and he returned her smile in kind. Lord, she was beautiful, more so than she had been but an hour before. She stood, and curtsied to him, bowing low. He noticed that her hair had been bound in a thick golden braid down her back, and he made a mental note to tell her that he liked it unbound best, in wild disarray. She was defiantly working her way under his skin. That scared him to death.

Tambre breathed in the scent of him when he reached down and took her hand in his to pull her upright once more. His hands were rough and calloused from hard work and sword fighting, no doubt, but they were gentle against her skin at the same time. He smelled of musk, not overpowering, but subtle as it lingered enticingly with the smell of leather. She decided that

she liked the mixture; raw, exotic, sensual. When her eyes meet his, she felt her flesh tingle all the way to her toes. She almost had to sit down, but that would mean letting go of his hand, and she did not want to do that. She would suffer. He looked at her so intensely that she felt as if she could not breathe. Oh, how handsome he was. But remembering the way they had first met that very morn, she lowered her eyes, feeling her face become scorching hot in her embarrassment.

Merrik leaned down to whisper next to her ear, "Why do you look away, my lady? Am I displeasing to your eyes?" He liked her subtle viewing of his person once again, particularly the way her eyes seemed to scorch a path across his flesh.

Tambre's head shot up, and drew in a quick breath. He was so near to her, all she had to do was lean a little to the right, and kiss him soundly. Shocked at her own sensual thoughts, she cleared her throat and whispered back, "Nay, my lord, you are not displeasing to my eyes. I think you are the most beautiful man I have ever seen." That revelation did not help any with her shame, although Merrik laughed softly at her remark. She continued on quickly, trying to dispel the horrible memory. "I was just thinking that I wish we had met under different circumstances this morn." She lowered her eyes to hide her plight.

Merrik took his other hand, and tilted her face up to his. He smiled as he whispered, "I would not have changed a thing. I was glad that I was able to save your...behind from a sure bruising." His smile deepened as he remembered the enticing body he had held within his arms and how fine she had felt.

"Ah, but you were not present in my chamber above as my mother dealt out my punishment." She grinned at him, and then whispered conspiratorially, "My bottom is bruised beyond repair, my lord. So much so, it pains me to sit for more than a few moments!"

He laughed outright, as she stood before him with a mischievous smile playing about her lips. Bringing her hand to his lips, he kissed her softly, allowing his eyes to linger upon hers. She was just too lovely for mere words, and he could only imagine the enticements she would bring to his bed. Straightening, he let go of her hand, and turned to the man standing behind Tambre, listening in on their conversation.

"Oh, how rude of me, Merrik. Please allow me to introduce to you my dear friend, Reginald." Tambre smiled warmly at her friend when he nodded to her betrothed.

"So, you are the man who is taking my dearest friend away from me." Reginald laughed

at Merrik's scowl. "It would seem that the best man has won. Many have pined away for this beauty, but she would have none of us." He leaned forward and whispered rather loudly, "She claims that she is saving herself for her one true love, but she never has given us a name. We do, however, have our own suspicions on who it truly is, but she has held her tongue on the issue."

Merrik looked at Tambre, noticing how she had pinkened slightly at Reginald's words. Her one true love? Who would that be? "I can assure you that she will be in good hands. My family has waited some time for this union, and I am being forced to see it through."

Tambre shot Merrik a cutting look. It sounded as if he wanted this union as much as she did, which was not at all! Why did that disappoint her so much? She cast her betrothed another seething glance. She forced herself to look happy and turned her attentions to Reginald. "You are more likely pleased to be rid of me! Alas, you shall have no other female around to beat you on the jousting field!"

"*Touché!*" Reginald swept her a most formal bow, but he was grinning the entire time. "My guess is that you shall be using another jousting field afore long."

"Oh, aye, I hope to be." Tambre looked at Merrik, who was glowering at her. Why on earth was he looking at her that way? She raised delicate brows at him in challenge. "Do you find it offensive for a woman to be part of your training field exercises? I hope that you do not, for there is nothing I love more than to fight."

Merrik looked like he was about to spit a reply, but then thought better of it. Instead he simply said, "'Tis up to you. You will be your own keeper at my castle. What you do with your time is up to you." He paused for a moment and then narrowed his eyes with a slight grin. "And what I do with my time is my own dealings." He bowed to her, nodded slightly in Reginald's direction, and strode off in the general path from which he had come.

"I do hope it was nothing that I have said." Reginald tried to hide his grin but failed miserably.

Tambre turned to her friend, and smiled brightly. "Nay, I do not think so. My guess would be that he is set against this union as much as I am. Men like their freedom to roam. Wives only get in the way of that roaming." She turned and watched her betrothed make his way back to his brothers. He stopped along the way to seize a tankard of hot spiced wine, and gained a tempting smile from the serving maid in the process. Tambre wanted to sling the tankard of

wine she held in her hand at his head! Damn him for his too fine looks and for making her feel this frustration.

Chapter Four

When the morning repast was finally over, Tambre felt as if she had just been put through some type of iron wills test. Most of all from the serving maids who had made sly suggestive remarks to Merrik, and then from Merrik himself who seemed to enjoy the bold attentions he was receiving. No one seemed to notice this but her, and that just made her feel all the worse. Twice she wanted to kick him under the table with her booted foot to give him a rude awakening at just how bold he was behaving. She left his side in a disgusted mood even before the meal was actually over so that she could escape to her bed chamber and change into her riding wear. She and Reginald, along with Tristan and Galwain, were going out for a ride, this being her last full day of freedom. She dreaded the sunset of this eve, and hoped that it would go on for an eternity.

Sliding her arms into the white woolen shirt she had worn earlier, and then pulling back on her boots, she was heading down the hall in a matter of a few minutes. She heard a muffled giggle from a room nearby and just as she passed, she happened to gaze in. What she saw stopped her in her tracks.

There was the serving maid, Winna, and she had her hands on Merrik's chest. She had her head tilted back with her chest thrust forward, blatantly displaying a fine view of her bosom. Tambre snorted. As if you could miss *those*!

He looked up with a startled disgruntled look, and immediately put the maid away from him.

"Forgive me for my intrusion," Tambre smiled with sincere humor, and almost laughed outright as the serving maid started to shake slightly. "Please make your self at home, Merrik. If you should need anything further, I am sure that Winna will be more than happy to accommodate you." With that, she turned on her heel and continued down the hall, keeping a tight grip upon the hilt of her sword. Damn him! In her own home he would flaunt his infidelities in her face. She was glad she had walked away from his presence when she did. Her palm itched to pull the sword from its resting place at her side and plunge it into something. His flesh would be a good start.

Merrik cursed himself for thirty kinds of a fool. He had not known the maid was in his chamber until he had opened the door, and she nearly knocked him down with her overbearing attentions, her skilled hands all over him at once. He was about to send her on her way when he heard Tambre outside his door. He was hoping that he and Tambre could get off to a brand new start, but now it appeared that this little scene had put a kink in his plan. Looking murderously at the maid, Merrik said not a word as she made haste to pass him and all but ran down the hall, crying that Tambre would surely cut her heart out this day.

He slammed his door shut, and cursed again as he went over to his chamber window, looking down into the inner bailey below and wishing that his intended had not seen the tryst the maid had obviously anticipated. He spotted her almost immediately, with her golden hair shining in the sun, and her man's garb looking wondrously enticing upon her slim frame. Reginald was holding the bridle of her horse for her, smiling as she came to his side. She returned the smile and kissed his cheek.

And the beast was not just a horse, a mild-mannered roan that ladies usually rode for pleasure, but a warrior's mount that one would take into battle. He was a monstrous thing, white as snow with a huge head that nodded up and down as Tambre approached him. He snorted, shaking his head and pawing at the ground until she got near enough for him to nuzzle her hair lovingly. Merrik could see her beautiful smile as she patted the great head of the war horse, and then produced an apple for it to munch on. With the apple gone in one gulp, the horse leaned down on its front legs, far enough for Tambre to easily jump on his back. He straightened when he knew Tambre was seated, and was then prancing about playfully, waiting for her to give him the reins and let him take her to wherever he wanted to go.

He stared in wonder at the girl who was soon to be his wife. She had mastered the great affection of a war horse, could shimmy down the side of a castle as if she did it on a daily basis, could supposedly wield a sword as well, if not better, than any knight, and had, he noticed, the attention of every man in the inner bailey watching her. That fact did not settle too well with him, nor did the fact of her riding off with Reginald. The man seemed to have a superior link to Tambre, and he doubted that it was just friendship as she had stated earlier. He drew his brows down as his eyes narrowed upon the foppish swain, thinking that the man was just too familiar with his courtesy. It irritated him that she could just go riding off with anyone she pleased, as if

she did this type of thing on a regular basis. That notion would be rectified immediately.

Tambre let Majesty have his head as soon as they were clear from the castle. Majesty flew over the ground like a huge bird swooping in on its prey. Within just a few moments, the others in the riding party were left far behind, as rider and horse became one. Tambre closed her eyes as she leaned over the horse's massive neck and let the wind whip her hair wildly, taking it out of the neat braid and flying it behind her like a tournament banner of pure gold. This was the only time she felt like she was actually free, free from the hustle and commotion of the castle, free from her own body, and now, free from him. This was what it was like to live the life of a warrior, to go and be whatever you wanted, if only just for the day.

Majesty slowed to a trotting pace after a while, his breath returning to normal, as he made his way to an outcropping of trees in the distance. Tambre straightened and smiled as she patted Majesty's neck.

"'Tis always that we end up here, my love. How could I guess?" She laughed as Majesty snorted in response. "I know your true passion lies but a few paces away. You will be eating all the apples that your belly can hold in a few moments. 'Tis a wonder that you are taking your time getting to your heart's yearning."

Walking now, Majesty slowed to a stop under an apple tree and leaned down so that Tambre would be able to reach the ground safely. Right away, he scooped up two whole apples, swallowing them after one loud crunch.

Tambre loved this place just as much as Majesty did. Not far from the apple trees were all kinds of berry bushes, bare now that the birds had picked them clean. There were black walnut and pecan trees, almost bare now as well, with squirrels and chipmunks gathering what they could to take back to their burrows to eat during the long winter months ahead. And just past the trees there was a stream which flowed toward the east fed from the mountains in the distance. Its water was clear, reflecting the bright blue of the fall sky, its quiet tinkling sound soothing over her soul to calm her.

As she walked slowly, leaves crunched beneath her feet and fallen twigs cracked loudly as they were stepped upon. Gray and brown colored rocks were scattered every now and again along the bank of the stream, which made good resting places to sit and gather a cool drink of the

best water she had ever tasted.

Sitting down on a large gray rock, Tambre unbuckled her belt, which held her sword securely to her side. She leaned it against the rock well within reach in case she needed it and drew her knees up under her chin, wrapping her arms around them to hold them close to her. The gentle noise of the stream was consoling, and she gazed across the flowing water as it bubbled and spun away, going along in its journey. She saw her reflection then, and almost laughed out loud. Her hair was a wild, wind whipped mess, and she could see that her cheeks had pinkened during her ride. Lord, to live like this out in the open with not a care in the world. Aye, 'tis what she needed. No worries and, she thought bitterly, no husband.

Merrik's handsome face swam into view beside her reflection in the crystal clear water and she stuck her tongue out at the image, thinking that she had conjured him up from her mind, mocking him for the brute he truly was. She started to giggle at the thought of him trying to maneuver his massive frame over the little rocks that stuck up from the water's surface. He would try to balance himself so as not to fall in the freezing water, only to fall head first before he reached the other side of the bank. Aye, it would serve him right!

"And what are you laughing so gaily about?" The words were softly spoken and held a hint of amusement.

Tambre yelped in alarm, instinctively latching onto her sword, and whipping around to face her unknown opponent. She had the tip of the razor sharp blade just a hair's breath away from meeting the flesh of his throat before Merrik knew what to do. He stood still as he regarded her with wide eyes. Not in his life had he ever seen such speed, nor such a steady hand. The blade did not waver one bit, thank God, as it was held to his gullet. He feared that if he made the slightest move, the thing would slice him wide open.

Tambre's narrow eyed gaze was traveling the surrounding area with lightening speed before it came to rest back on Merrik's shocked features. "What the hell do you think you are doing? Do you realize that I could have just killed you?" She spat out the words venomously, wanting to do just that. "Have you not a care?"

Merrik swallowed uneasily as he looked down the blade at her. "Could you please remove the sword from my throat?"

The ragged whisper was all that Tambre needed to realize that she still held her sword

steadily at him. Slowly she let it drop to her side. Still, she looked at him as if she would run him through if he said or did the wrong thing.

“Just what are you doing here, Merrik? This is *my* place. I do not want you here.”

He looked at her breasts with the luscious swirls of tangled hair flowing about them, her men's britches and shirt that hugged her to perfection, showing every inviting curve of her flesh, and thought that she could never look as beautiful as she did just now. Her brow was furrowed in her anger, and she gripped the sword with a white knuckled fist. Her face was a light scarlet shade as her anger began to show through, and her eyes were a deep sapphire in her annoyance. And it was at that very moment that he decided she was his, whether she liked it or not. He took a step toward her, and she brought the sword up again to warn him away.

“Tambre, I meant no harm. I was only trying to find you so that,” he eyed the sword warily, but continued. “So that I could explain what you saw in my bed chamber earlier. I—”

He had to take a quick step back as her sword took a threatening outward approach just past his mid section. The little brat was trying to do him harm. He looked at her in disbelief.

“You do not need to explain anything to me,” she bit out as she took another swing, this time at his head. “Nor do I want one.” Again she swung, but this time she did not miss. The sword sliced neatly into his under tunic sleeve, and drew blood. She did not even wince or look as if she was sorry for doing what she had just done. She had meant to do it! “You have said so yourself that you will do what you please. And I shall do the same. But know that I have no desire to ever wed a man who would intentionally flaunt his bed partners in my face.” Again she swung out, missing his ear by a fraction of a breath. “I will never tolerate infidelities, sir.” Her sword blade did contact his other arm this turn. Bright crimson flooded over the slice in the material as she narrowed her eyes, ready to take another swing.

“Damn me!” He grabbed his upper arm, and winced as the pain began to spread along his shoulder. “What in the hell did you do that for? I—”

Once more she swung out, and made a connection with his hose, just above the left knee. That cut was deeper than the one on his arm, and bright scarlet blood jetted out over his knee, down into his boot. His anger turned tenfold then. Not caring about his wounds, he made a lunge at her and ended up bashing his ribs on a huge rock as she lithely side-stepped his advance. She turned around quickly and pushed him on his back with her foot to send him sprawling into

the edge of the stream, face first.

Not wasting a moment, and having his man's pride hurt at the same time, he jumped to his feet, making another advance on his little hellion. This time, he had a nick to his left cheek as a reward, and a bruised shoulder as he landed flat against a huge oak tree. Cursing a string of oaths, and now so blinded by anger he could barely see, he advanced toward her again.

"So help me God, Tambre, when I get hold of you, you will pray that I had not!"

She saw the look in his eyes change from mild irritation to full blown anger, and she turned and ran to the stream, skipping across the stepping stones quickly. She made it to the other side of the bank long before he fell into the water, so she was able to witness his slipping descent into the freezing liquid. Thinking that she had better go while the getting was good, she put two fingers in her mouth, blowing a high pitched whistle. Merrik was struggling with his slippery footing, cursing all the way, as she leapt upon Majesty's back, still holding her sword.

Daring a final look down at her betrothed before she bid him adieu, she smartly saluted him with her sword, honoring him a wink and a jaunty little smile before she was off and running, leaving laughter in her wake. But she did not head in the direction of the castle. That was the last place she wanted to be, and most likely the first place he would go to find her. Instead, she headed off to the south just as fast as Majesty could fly.

By the time Tambre did return to the castle, it was well past the noon hour, and she hoped that she was not in too much trouble as she slipped from Majesty's back. She patted the horse lovingly on his neck, and leaned her head on his nose as she quickly scanned the area for danger. Seeing nothing that could pose her harm, she sighed with relief and kissed the destrier's nose. He whinnied softly, which brought a smile to her face.

Looking into the big blue eyes of her horse, Tambre rubbed his nose softly, and let him be led away by Talbit, the stable boy. She told him to give Majesty an extra helping of oats this eve, and turned wearily toward the castle, squaring her shoulders for the assault she knew to be inevitable from her father. Merrik most certainly had voiced her deplorable behavior to all who would listen by now, and the mere thought slowed her steps just slightly.

Along the way to the inner bailey, she saw one of Merrik's brothers who waved her over to him. She hesitated only for a moment as she began walking toward him, watching him

guardedly and keeping her hand upon the hilt of her sword.

Thorn grinned wickedly at her, appreciating the little smile she gave him in return. When she stopped in front of him, and raised her brows in question, he almost gave way to his unbridled mirth. This little slip of a girl had bested his barbarian of a brother.

Sensing no danger from Thorn, she crossed her arms over her chest. "Did you wish to say something to me?" she asked innocently.

Thorn eyed her delicious form draped in men's clothing, and thought what Merrik would do to him if the man could read his mind, so he put his eyes on something safe; her lovely face. "Aye. 'Tis a wonder you made it back in one piece when my brother seems to have made it back in pieces."

Her lips twitched as she held back a gulp of laughter. "Oh? Then I am to take it that he made it back all by himself? In fair health?"

That did bring a shout of laughter from Thorn. "Aye, and a very angry fair health, I should inform you. I believe he only cursed your name thrice as Father was sewing up his wounds."

Tambre blanched. Sewing up his wounds? Dear God, what would she do now? He would no doubt want to turn her over his knee and blister her good. She had not meant to cut him that deep. But she would place a wager that he would never believe that tale.

Thorn saw her distress, and soothed her worries. "Have no fear, my lady. He has been fully warned by Father that he is to seek no revenge on you whatsoever for his callous actions, which I believe Father thinks he deserved. However, for your own safety, my brothers and I have decided to protect you from the ogre. We will be watching his every move from here on out until he calms himself down." With that said, Thorn offered her his arm so that he could escort her the rest of the way to the castle.

Chapter Five

Once inside the main doors of the castle, Tambre profusely thanked Thorn for his gallant escort and, after giving him her most gracious smile, she fled above stairs to her bed chamber where she slammed the door behind her, locking it for good measure. Leaning against the huge oaken panel, she closed her eyes and let out a huge sigh of relief. Safe at last.

Opening her eyes, she felt the chill of the room surround her and decided to make a cozy fire to sit by until she felt safe enough to leave the security of her rooms. Having finally lit the logs, she sat back on her folded legs and gazed into the bright light. This day had not turned out as she had hoped. Nay, 'tis going to be some hell to pay and she knew who the debtor would be. Her! She wrinkled her nose and brushed away the thought, for Merrik did not scare her one whit. Her father or brothers would not let harm come to her, nor would Merrik's brothers. Feeling better, she stood and went to get her sword, which she had set by the door before she locked herself in.

Pulling the finely honed metal from its sheath, she winced when she saw the dried blood on the edges here and there. Seeing that made her feel very bad for her actions, and she even thought about penning an apology to Merrik, because she knew that if he saw her in person, he would surely try to strangle her. She ran her finger tips lightly across the metal, and whispered a heartfelt apology to him before she laid the sword by the fireplace, and went in search of a cloth to clean it with.

"Would you like to use my other arm to clean your blade? Or better yet, how about my other leg?"

She gasped as Merrik stepped out of the shadows to confront her, his face a mask of fury. Oh, my! Was she in for it now! She was not afraid of the hateful look he cast at her, but she was afraid of what he would do to her when he got close enough. She decided to keep as much space between them as possible. And she knew it would be utterly foolish to try and grab up her sword. He would be on her in a flash. She backed away from his advance slowly.

Merrik had waited there for her for nearly two hours, going through in his mind what he would do to her when she returned. Wringing her beautiful neck was the first thought, and then

turning her over his knee and beating her ass red was another. Slowly he advanced on her, like some kind of wild animal, admiring her for showing no fear towards him. He smiled.

"I have been waiting here for some time, my lady. I did not think you would ever return. But finally you have." The words were softly spoken.

His words chilled Tambre to the bone. She swallowed. "I-I..." She stopped and swallowed. "Why are you here?" *Oh, that was brilliant*, she mentally kicked herself. She knew exactly why he was there.

He only smiled. He took a step forward as she took one back. She was not watching where she was going, and it pleased him that she was backing herself into a corner, literally, without even realizing that she did it. She would be at his mercy soon.

Tambre did not say another word as she continued to move slowly backwards. When she touched the coolness of the stone wall behind her, she knew that she had made a grave mistake. Her eyes widened in realization.

Merrik smiled when she finally realized what she had done. She looked lovely with her golden hair in sweet disarray, and her eyes wild with the thought of what was to come. Now, 'tis time to go in for the kill. And this time, he would have the upper hand.

Tambre thought wildly as to what she could do to fend him off. Only one thing came to mind. Biting her bottom lip, she put her hands to her sides with calm ease. She could not believe what she was about to do, for never in her life had she been this desperate. She tilted her head and closed her eyes slightly, giving him a smile full of mischief. Reaching for the bottom of her tunic, she quickly pulled the thing up and over her head, leaving her chest bare as the day she was born. She felt her nipples harden into nubs as the cold air swept over them. She looked directly into Merrik's eyes, and saw the break that she was looking for.

Gathering up all her strength, she placed her hands upon his rock hard chest, and hesitated. She looked up at him again, and almost laughed out loud at the opened mouthed expression upon his face. She hated to do this, but...pushing with all her might, she moved his massive bulk off balance, and he landed with a resounding thud on the stone floor at her feet.

Darting over him, she clutched the tunic to her chest, and ran like hell for the door. She had it unbolted, and was running down the hall to safety before Merrik regained his senses.

When he did, he raised his head off the floor, and looked at the open door in surprise. He

threw back his head, giving a great roar of laughter. The little hellion! She had bested him once again. Only this time, he did not mind it at all. Nay, not at all! Except for the fact that he believed his back side would be black and blue come the morn!

Tambre was sitting on the side of the jousting field later that afternoon, watching the men practice their war games. She was dressed for the part as well with her own set of chain mail, hauberk, helmet and armor, a set that she had obtained from a very naked young English knight who had decided to bathe in her stream. He had been by himself, having been separated from his group, and promised her that he would never return to her lands if she would spare his life. She had, feeling sorry for him, but warned him not to stray into her section of Scotland again.

She had sent him on his way with his under tunic and wool hose as his only possessions. She had kept his boots, but had afforded him the luxury of keeping his horse. She only wore the chain mail and hauberk now with a soft white under tunic, and an over tunic that matched that of the others from the castle: deep blue with an emblem of a rearing red horse on the center of her chest. Her hair was twisted into a knot at the back of her head so that when she put on her helmet, it would not get in the way.

The bright blue of the sky brought unseasonably warm temperatures this day, and she swiped her arm across her brow to wipe off the beads of sweat that had accumulated there. She plucked at the green grass around her, deep in thought, not really paying attention to the combat play, for her thoughts centered around one thing; Merrik.

Having only known the man for not even a full day, she felt as if she had known him a life time. His dimpled smile, his shiny black hair, muscled frame and long legs...but most of all, it was those intense emerald eyes that ultimately had her breathless. He could become a true friend to her if only their marriage had not stood in the way. Mayhap there could still be that chance. Her mother and father seemed as if they were the best of friends. She smiled to herself. It just might work.

Bringing her out of her musing, Tambre finally acknowledge her brother's yell and stood. She wrapped her belt around her slim waist, checking to make sure her sword was in a comfortable position. She put her helmet on, and started crossing the field to where Galwain, Tristan and Derrick stood within a group of twenty men.

"Martine, you will go on the field with Tambre." Derrick laughed at the man's wide eyed stare. "Come, now. 'Tis your turn."

The other men clapped Martine on the back as he pulled his helmet into place and finally withdrew his sword, holding it at his side with a look that said he hoped to God that she would go easy on him!

Tambre nodded her head once to indicate that she was ready, and advanced with a thrust at her opponent. Her style of fighting was her own, and she never held her sword with both hands at one time, as this would only cause her to exert all of her energy and strength out of both arms. Instead she felt it better to switch back and forth, relieving one arm when the other became cramped. Although her frame did not indicate her strength, many who watched her for the first time were amazed at her agility and fancy side steps that kept her opponents guessing. Aye, she had been taught well!

This was what Merrik thought when he and Thorn came to stand by Tambre's brothers to watch the match. She was very good, he thought as he raised a brow at her prowess. She moved with lightening speed, something he knew from first hand experience. Her quick movements kept her from getting seriously injured many a time, but her wit and stamina kept her alert.

"Merrik, welcome," Tristan said heartily as he came to stand by his soon to be brother-in-law. "She is amazing, is she not?"

Merrik nodded his head. "Aye. Who was her teacher?"

"We all were, along with one of our cousins. Some of us had expertise in certain areas, so each of us taught her what we knew the best."

"And that can make for one hell of a woman," Thorn grinned as he continued to watch her. He had seen his two brother's wives do this sort of thing but not to this capacity. "Do you make it a habit to teach all of your women to fight?"

"Nay, 'tis all we can do to contain one woman, let alone a whole castle full." Tristan looked at Merrik knowingly and grinned.

Merrik laughed. "I will wager that you were probably sorry you did teach her so well." He continued to admire her gracefulness. He could tell that her opponent was ready to give in, for he had been sliced upon long enough.

Tambre bowed gallantly to Martine, pulling off her helmet to praise him on his form.

They shook hands and Tambre, feeling better than ever after a fight, stuck her sword in the ground, leaning an elbow on the hilt. She smiled to all the men around her, issuing a challenge for anyone who would take it.

Merrik stepped forward immediately to accept. He smiled when he saw her wince. “Aye, lass, I will accept this challenge.” He bowed deeply to her, and then turned to accept a sword one of the men had offered to him. He weighed it in his hands for a moment before he nodded his approval. He turned to face his challenger with a grin.

Chapter Six

Tambre watched Merrik jauntily approach her. She groaned inwardly. She had not seen him among the men before she had issued the challenge, and now she felt pressed to accept his dare lest she look like a fool if she declined him. Oh, this fellow was much too full of himself. When he got close enough so that she was certain only he could hear her words, she smiled, saying softly, "So, you did not get enough earlier, eh?"

This seemed to infuriate him, which made her laugh gaily, as she turned away to put on her helmet and pull her sword from the ground. In an instant, he was advancing toward her with determination.

His thrusts were much stronger than what she was used to, and when their swords connected for the first time, it left a jarring pain in her arm. Damn, but he did that on purpose, she thought furiously. She quickened her movements, making a few marks with the tip of her sword on his bare arms as she toyed with him, enticing him to come at her. She marveled at the rippling muscles that flexed and relaxed with each movement, almost becoming mesmerized by the sensual display. Bringing her attention back to the task at hand, and becoming angry that he had made her mind wander dangerously, she made a sudden move to the right, and brought her sword down over his forearm, breaking the skin. She had not meant to do that, but she was sure she could never convince Merrik otherwise, given the murderous look he threw in her general direction.

Seeing the blood drip from the wound on his arm, Merrik looked slowly upward, admiring her attire on the way until he reached her smoky sapphire eyes. She was taunting him! She was truly a vision, and he wished he did not have to do what he was about to do, but if she was insistent in the fact of consistently slicing him to ribbons with her sword, then so be it. Whipping out quickly with his free arm and clamping it around her waist, he raised her off her feet with ease, delivering to her a resounding smack upon her bottom. She weighed next to nothing, and he held her easily even as she started to squirm around and demand to be let go.

Sounds of the other men's laughter needled Tambre's indignation to no end. How dare he make a fool of her, and in front of her own friends? Narrowing her eyes to slits, she drew

back her foot, and promptly kicked him smartly in the shin. She knew it had to hurt very badly, not only because he loosened his hold immediately, but because of his sudden yelp of pain. With her avenue of escape open wide for her, she quickly twisted out of his hold and set her feet back on solid ground.

Merrik could not believe the lengths to which this little hellion would go to free herself from a situation she wanted no part of. He had many battle scars already to prove that theory. And the laughing in the background did not help to ease his man's pride either. He growled, limping forward, intent upon getting the best of her before she completely did him in.

Tambre witnessed his slow but sure advance, heard his growl of anger, but paid no heed to it. She was going to show him that she was not some weakling of a female to be toyed with. She thrust her sword toward his mid section, and was caught off balance by his move to block her. She fell to her knees, breathing hard as her sword slipped from her grasp. The sword was kicked away from her without delay, and she was left defenseless. Or so he thought, poor, delusional soul.

He did not see it coming. Tambre swiftly pushed out her feet, nearly standing on her hands, and caught him in the jaw with a hard kick of her booted heel. When her feet hit the ground, she kicked out again, only this time she swiped them quickly behind his legs, pulling forward with amazing strength. He fell flat on his back, stunned. With his eyes closed, mentally checking for broken bones, Merrik felt the razor sharp tip of her blade at his neck. He opened his eyes slightly, and lay motionless.

She stood above him, breathing deeply to regain her composure. Her helmet had come off in the recent shuffle, and her hair glittered down her back and over her shoulders. The beads of sweat on her face looked like tiny diamonds, and she brushed them away with the sleeve of her under tunic. He had to blink twice to make sure he was seeing correctly. She was smiling.

"You are a very worthy opponent, Sir Knight," she complimented him, further raising his displeasure at being, yet again, caught unawares by her skills. "You have given me quite the serious entertainment this day." She grinned at him, wishing he would just give up and leave her alone for good.

Merrik smiled back. Damn her. "Nay, 'tis you who are the worthy one. I suppose I should never underestimate you again."

She let her sword drop to her side, but kept a firm grip on the handle. "Nay, you should not." With that said, she turned about on her heel, and started walking toward the crowd of men who were already congratulating her on her win.

Merrik leapt to his feet and, taking only two long steps, he tackled her from behind, positioning himself so that he took most of the shock as they hit the ground together. He heard the air whoosh out of her mouth when they landed.

She lay still beneath him as he whispered close to her ear, "And you, my lady, should never think that I give up so easily." He breathed in the scent of her hair, and knew that it was jasmine. It suited her. He rubbed his cheek along the contours of the left side of her face, and reveled in the softness of it. He stifled a groan of longing, and felt himself grow hard as he laid full length along the backside of her frame, daring a light kiss upon her cheek. She was soft and warm, compliant under him as his thoughts turned to a more sensual view of how she would feel under him, bare skin to bare skin. She lay that way until she felt the hardness of his desire throb next to her thigh, and began to wriggle beneath his weight. He smiled, giving her a low growl as he rolled off of her.

Still lying upon her stomach, she rose up on her elbows, and looked over at him. She was about to give him a tongue lashing for his boldness, when the look he bestowed upon her stilled her lips. His eyes were a deep, striking emerald, slightly closed. His full lips were curved into a smile, which brought out the dimples in his cheeks. He had a faint black stubble on his face, and she thought that it made him even more attractive, more sensual. His hair was lying in waves around his face, pooling on the ground beneath him as he leaned on his side and rose up on his right elbow. His scent filled her nostrils so that all she could smell was him. Closing her eyes, she breathed deeply. It made her tingle all the way to her toes.

"Tambre," his voice was soft as he spoke her name. He liked the sound of it as it rolled off his tongue. "I can see that our lives will never be dull."

She grinned, opening her eyes to give him a look of content. "I am glad that you see past my rebellion, and know that I mean no true harm."

"I am not sure you speak true on the harm that you have delved out to me this day, but what say you to calling this a draw?" His smile was genuine, and endearing.

"You do not like to lose, do you?" She bit her lip to keep from leaning over to kiss him.

Now, where on earth did that thought come from? But she knew. She was hopelessly attracted to this too-handsome man, thinking that she could lose herself within his eyes if she were not cautious.

"I would wager that neither do you."

"True, but I have never lost, so I do not know what it is like to be the looser," she teased him softly. "Besides, I think that you are my one true match."

He liked her words. *My one true match*. He did not dare even to ask himself why at the moment. "Indeed, I shall hold that admission to my heart."

The last meal of the day was a loud affair that eve. A literal feast was served on behalf of the betrothal couple who sat beside one another at the main table. There was roasted pig and mutton, each with rich gravy dripping from the meat. There were breads of all flavors and sizes, complimented with creamy herbal butter. Potatoes, beans and carrots ran in abundance from serving dishes. Candied sweets and pies adorned one entire table, along with pitchers of milk and ale. Mulled wine was served for toasting, but the harder spirits were kept out of the site of the ladies. That would be saved until later as the celebrations took a new turn once the ladies were tucked away in their chambers for the night.

Tambre sat back in her cushioned chair and groaned. She had eaten so much that she could scarcely breathe. Merrik seemed to have an endless hunger, and she wondered how much he did actually eat in a day's time. Sipping from her tankard, she let her eyes roam freely around the hall. Her mother and father were keeping Lord Ian well entertained, she mused as she saw and heard the shouts of laughter coming from their table.

Then suddenly, all became quiet in the hall as the main doors crashed open, and a beefy looking lot from the Clan Wallace made their way into the room.

Tambre's eyes widened suddenly, and she winced as every sword in the place was drawn and made ready for a fight. She groaned as she looked into a pair of light jade colored eyes from across the room. They twinkled merrily, and the handsome face that accompanied those piercing orbs smiled warmly. Kollif!

"Tambre, my love." Kollif bellowed to the quiet hall. "I have come for ye, my heart! Come! Let us be gone from here!" His massive frame was covered in animal furs along his back

and chest. He wore a tartan kilt in the well-know red and black plaid of the clan Wallace. Knee high brown boots encased his muscled calves, and the belt around his middle carried all sorts of weaponry. His hair was a reddish-blond color, and hung to his waist unbound in deep waves of thick silk. He certainly looked the part of the abductor.

Tambre had to bite her tongue as she viewed him lovingly. Dear, sweet Kollif. Her savior and her dearest friend. He had actually come through for her.

Merrik looked down at her then, and his face became a mask of fury. She was smiling at the handsome brute of a man with a besotted look on her face. Was this her one true love? Rage filled him as he turned his narrowed eyes back to the warrior who now stood before him.

Kollif held out his hand to Tambre as his lips formed into an endearing smile. "My love," he whispered. "I have come to take ye away. Come with me now, and I shall take ye to my holdings where ye will want for nothin'."

Tambre rose slowly, and placed her hand in Kollif's as her lips twitched in mischievous delight.

Merrik growled, and sidestepped in front of her, setting his body between the two. "She will be doing nothing of the kind. She is mine." His voice gave no room for argument, as the words were spit from his snarled lips. He held his sword at the ready, daring the man to make his move.

"Nay, she is not. She be my love, now and forever." Kollif raised one slim brow over his snapping jade eyes, daring the man before him to say him nay. He frowned at the man, and rested his hand on the hilt of his sword casually.

Tambre raised her hand to cover her mouth lest someone see her grin. Kollif was playing his part very well. She admired his determination, wondering if he would draw his sword against Merrik. This made her step forward and around Merrik so that she could let Kollif know that he need not continue the act. Her father's bellow stilled her in her tracks before she even had the chance to utter one syllable.

"Kollif Wallace!" The sound reverberated off the rafters of the castle, nearly shaking the tables where they sat. "What are you about, man?"

Kollif grinned at Tambre but did not turn to face her father. He kept his twinkling eyes upon her face.

“My lord. I am here to collect this lovely treasure and take her away from the perils of this ogre who calls himself her intended.” His grin deepened, and he raised his brows at her. “My lady, ‘tis lovely ye are this day. Yer beauty grows with each passin’ moment, and it makes my heart break each time I see yer face an’ know that ye be not mine yet. Take my hand, and let us be gone. I promise to love ye the rest of my days.”

Merrik moved to stand in front of Tambre once again, leaving little space between the two men as they stared eye to eye at one another. “I have said you nay. She is mine, and I will not release her to anyone, least of all to you. Take your leave before you find yourself hurt. Or otherwise.”

Tambre moved to place a hand on Merrik’s sleeve. “Merrik, this is all a misunderstanding. If I could—”

Merrik’s voice snapped like a whip when he growled out his words to her, still keeping his eyes on the man before him. “I care not for what you have to say. Tell your lover that I mean what I intend to do.” Although his voice was low to keep the conversation private, it still stung like the bite of a whip.

Tambre felt like reaching up and slapping Merrik’s handsome face. Her eyes narrowed dangerously, and she wished for her own sword right now. “I will not have you talk to me in such a manner. And he is not my lover,” she hissed at him. Her hands curled into fists, wanting to strike him in the nose for his disrespect.

“Tambre!” The tables did shake then with the bellowing of her father’s booming voice. She sighed and looked over Merrik’s shoulder to the reddened face staring at her. She blanched and quickly looked at Kollif.

“Say me nay, my lovely lass, and I shall leave ye in peace. Although my heart shall never mend from yer rejection.” Kollif was nearly laughing his words now, and he had to applaud her for going through with this farce. From the sound of her father’s voice, he had better take his leave, and do so quickly. He would hate to be in her boots right about now.

“Kollif, stay your blade, and take your leave.” Tambre rose up, and kissed his cheek softly, whispering for his ears only, “Methinks I am going to get the beating of my life, and I would not have you here to witness the dirty deed. Thank you, my friend.”

Kollif threw back his head and roared with laughter. He truly did wish her well. And

judging by the look on her father's face, as well as the fury on her intended's face, she was going to need all the well wishing everyone could give her.

"Ye have broken my heart with yer words, my love. But if ye should find that ye need a real man, ye know where to be findin' me." He turned to Merrik and delivered a ferocious look in his direction. "And I will be watchin' ye. If ye be treatin' my love badly, I will be comin' fer ye. An' it will be ye who are hurt. Or otherwise." He bowed to her then and, with a smile upon his face and a quick wink, he took his leave with his men in tow.

Chapter Seven

The look on Merrik's face matched that of her father's. Tambre stood between the two with her head bowed, waiting for the detestable conversation to end. Lord Ian was there as well, looking somber with a frown across his face. She fervently wished the floor would open up and swallow her entirely. But that would be too much to ask for.

"I shall not hold you to our betrothal arrangement, Merrik." Elwain looked at his daughter crossly. "With the antics that were brought here today, I would expect nothing less."

Merrik turned furious eyes toward Tambre, and replied quietly, "Aye, she is old enough to know better, but still she acts the child."

Tambre's head shot up at that remark, and she narrowed her eyes at him. "None of you have even let me explain why--"

"We need no explanation, Daughter." Elwain cut off her words sharply. "You have treated your betrothed with disrespect and utter scorn. I am most disappointed in you." He did not even bother to look at her when he said the words.

"I would have a word with your daughter in private, if I may." At Elwain's nod, Merrik grabbed her arm none too gently and ushered her to the stairs, taking them two at a time, pulling her behind him. Once out of site from the hall below, he released his hold on her arm. He did not look at her when he stopped in front of his chamber door and opened it, allowing her to pass through first. The look on his face was not friendly, and Tambre shivered as she passed over the threshold, and into the dark space.

Hearing the door shut soundly behind her, Tambre gulped back a shout of terror as she turned suddenly and realized he was right behind her, putting them chest to chest. She could feel his warm breath upon her cheek as it tickled her flesh. She swallowed and waited for the assault to begin. When he did nothing but stand in front of her, she broke the silence with a sigh.

"Beat me if you must, but know that I will defend myself from you." She raised her chin a notch and looked him in the eye, her gaze unwavering. She could see his eyes clearly now, for they blazed with a fire that made her gulp back her next smart reply.

Merrik's lips twitched with his sudden humor, for he believed that she would defend

herself, or die trying. He cleared his throat and continued to stare down at her lovely face, the emotions upon his own face belying the humor that he felt.

Tambre rolled her eyes in irritation and crossed her arms over her chest, becoming agitated with his silence. Her eyes were adjusting to the dimness, and she could now make out pieces of furniture in the room. She could also see his features. They seemed to be carved of stone. "Are you not going to reprimand me? Or at the very least break our betrothal?"

Ah, there it was. Dare he ask?

"And do you wish for our betrothal to be broken, my lady?" He inhaled her lavender scent even as the softly spoken words crossed his lips. He had thought once that jasmine suited her. Now he knew that he much more favored the lavender as it assaulted his senses and brought vivid images of her bare breasts to his mind. She looked as delicious as she smelled. He leaned into her slightly, rewarding himself with an excellent view of her full breasts straining under the velvet fabric of her deep blue gown. "Am I that displeasing to you?"

"Oh, nay," she answered quickly, and then smiled at him. "I find you most pleasing. I told you already that I find you beautiful." She tilted her head to the left. "What happened with Kollif was planned weeks ago, before I had ever laid eyes upon you." She smelled the scent that was his and closed her eyes slightly. "He was to be my way out of this betrothal if I found you lacking in any aspect." She uncrossed her arms, and placed them boldly upon his hard chest, holding him back from her face. Again she smiled.

"And did you find me lacking, my lass, in any way?" His lips brushed her cheek gently, as her arms relented to the pressure of his body. He brought his hand up to smooth back the curls from her face and felt the softness of the tresses as they brushed against his hand. He was becoming deeply aroused and knew that her constant teasing of his emotions this day had set him on the edge. He remembered the treasures she had exposed to his gaze, and a low groan escaped his mouth. He kissed close to her sweet lips this time, wanting to take them fully, but wanting to hear her answer.

Tambre swallowed, and whispered next to his mouth, "Nay, my lord. You lack in nothing. In fact, I find that you have an over abundance of desirable attributes."

Merrick grinned next to her lips, and then looked into her eyes as he leaned his forehead on hers. "Then you wish not to break our bond? You wish to become my wife?" He cupped her

face with his hands, kissing the other cheek. He could feel her breathing increase and knew that her heat was rising, as was his.

"Aye, your wife." Tambre ran her hand up the side of his arm and curled it around his neck. His hair was soft against her hand, and she grasped a lock of his hair, twisting it around her fingers. "But I would understand, too, if you did not want me." She hoped that her voice did not sound too expectant. She had told him that he was to her liking, but she just did not wish to be wed to anyone. She anxiously awaited his reply.

"I think I shall keep you, although you will need to bend to my will." He tried to kiss her then, but his lips met thin air.

Tambre leaned back from his face and snorted her disbelief. She curled her lips into a smile when he peeped open his eyes to give her a steady look, obviously irritated from the missed opportunity of a sensual kiss.

"I will bend to no man's will, and if you think that you shall be any different, then you are mistaken, my lord." She pushed at his chest, and his hold tightened. She frowned then, giving him a look of disapproval.

"I am quite serious." His words begged her to dispute him.

"So am I." She pushed on his chest harder this time, and was rewarded with a further tightening of his hold. "Let me go. I wish to be done with this, and 'tis obvious that we cannot agree on much of anything." Her deep blue eyes narrowed on his handsome face, her gaze piercing.

Merrik raised his brows. So, she thought to be done with him already? After he had witnessed a sampling of what treasures she held? He gave a short bark of laughter. He released her then, but went to lean upon his chamber door, slipping his hand behind him, and snapping the lock into place silently. He crossed his massive arms over his chest, and his legs crossed at the ankles. He regarded her with humor bright in his pale emerald eyes.

She looked at him wearily. What was he up to? She crossed her arms over her chest as well, and tapped her booted foot on the stone floor in agitation.

"I will assume that you have gotten your fill of me today, sir, therefore relinquishing your bond to our betrothal. In fact, I get the feeling that you do not want this union at all." She tilted her head to the right, smiling at him. "Surely we can come to some type of mutual agreement. I

sense that you do not want to give up your grip on your bachelorhood as of yet, obviously, if what I witnessed with the maid this morn was any indication. And my father has said he will most agreeably release you from this match. What say you?"

Merrik's smile deepened as he put a hand behind him, and pushed himself from the chamber door. He knew that she intended to make the mishap with the maid a threatening blow to him. However, it did not work. He moved forward steadily until he came within inches of her body. He could feel her heat, smell her scent, and it drove him to madness! He would love taming this lass.

Tambre raised her brows at him. His dimples were adorable, and she felt the heat from his body as it surrounded her in its tight grip, rendering her motionless. Her eyes delved into his, and she saw a spark of fire that sent delicious chills down her spine. He moved closer, but she stood her ground. She placed a restraining hand upon his chest, and gave him a small shove. He did not move away, but stayed where he was.

Merrik watched the different emotions that crossed her lovely features. There was no fear, only annoyance, as she relented with a sigh, and took a step back away from him.

"I would have your answer, sir." She breathed in his scent, and wished she had not. He made her want to kiss those lips that still held their smile. His black hair hung over his shoulder, draping across his chest to his waist. It shone in the dim light and she knew it to be as soft as it looked. She brought her eyes back to his, and nearly gasped at the passion that blazed there.

"I will keep the bond, my lady. You are a treasure that I will enjoy taking." He reached out and gently touched his fingertips to her curls. They were soft, and he felt a need to bury his hands in the luscious mass and kiss those sweet lips. "You must know that I will never release you to another willingly." He dropped his hand to his side and leaned against the thick poster at the end of the bed.

She turned to look at him. Lord above, he was handsome! And with the roguish smile placed upon his lips as he leaned casually against the bed, she knew that their bond would not be wanting for lustful stimulation.

"My lord, why would you want this bond knowing that I do not?"

"You may not want this union right now, but you will." He smiled, bringing his dimples to full display upon his cheeks. "I can assure you of the fact."

“And how can you assure me of that? Do you have some plan to curve my relentless displeasure of this thing?” Her voice held a humor that reached her twinkling eyes.

He wanted to tell her that he did, and that she would soon find out. But he remained silent as he moved toward her slowly, taking in her lovely deep sapphire eyes that had his blood smoldering for a true taste of her sweets. Stopping directly in front of her, he leaned down slowly and captured her lips with his own. The jolt that went through his body was astounding and he grasped her by the shoulders, pulling her into him.

When he leaned down to take her lips with his own, Tambre thought the whole world had gone insane. She felt like it, anyway. Never had she let a man take such liberty with her person. But she liked the way his lips felt upon her own, how soft they were, and how expertly they caressed. It left her feeling that she had no bones in her body, and she grabbed him around the neck to steady herself.

Merrik pulled her closer and deepened the kiss, teasing her tongue with his own. He could tell she had very little experience with kissing, and that led him to believe that she was just as inexperienced in the art of lovemaking. Aye, his little test of her virtue pleased him. It puzzled him at the same time. Why he did not jump on the chance to break this betrothal was beyond him. Mayhap it was the game they played. And he was enjoying it too much to let her go. He could not wait for the next round to begin.

Tambre felt her body respond to his ministrations. His hands roved over her back to curl into her hair. Timidly, she brought out her own tongue, putting the tip into his mouth. His velvety tongue laved over hers softly and she felt the hot flame of desire move into the center of her body. Her breathing increased and a long, seductive moan escaped her lips, rumbling from deep within her chest. His hands reached her breasts, and she felt the blaze of fire they left in their wake. She felt a lustful craving stir within herself and she instinctively moved her hips over his hard thigh.

Pulling his lips from hers slightly, he leaned his forehead against hers, calming his ragged breathing. He felt the seductive way her hips moved over his hardness, how she still continued to move slowly over him. She moved her arms to his neck and held onto him, pressing her body further into his own. He could feel her nipples, hard and erect, against the straining material that covered them. He grasped the shoulders of her gown and pushed it down, feeling the bare flesh

pull free from its binding. He groaned as his hands touched her heat, felt the hardness of his own body pulse with the pleasure. Taking his lips from hers, he leaned down and pulled one soft nipple into his mouth where he suckled and laved it gently.

Tambre sucked in her breath at this new sensation and felt the liquid heat flow through her body. The sensation was intoxicating and she threw her head back, craving a deeper release as she moaned his name.

He pushed her gown down over her waist and past her hips, to let it puddle at her feet. He was surprised, and immensely pleased, when he felt no undergarments. Soft skin met his palms, and as he leaned down to touch her center with a delicate stroke he felt her luscious wetness. She moaned once more as his stroke became bolder, allowing him greater access to her succulent heat, moving her legs apart slightly, guiding his hand over the soft velvet that he touched.

He heard her whisper his name once again and knew that the deep desire that emanated in his own soul reflected in her moans of passion. And when she grasped his hand, one of his fingers slid easily into her tight center, making her gasp with the wondrous feel. She moved her hips over his finger as she looked at him and licked her lips, the deep passion she felt crossing over her face in a wave of forbidden truth. She called out to him softly, beckoned him with her movements, her wet heat, her tongue that licked over his bottom lip.

And it was his downfall.

Picking her up in his powerful arms, he laid her gently on his bed. Her passion filled eyes looked at him pleadingly, and he made quick work of shedding his own clothes. When he pressed his bare body next to hers, a jolt of pleasure so intense went through him that he nearly forgot his head, wanting to plunge into her without thinking. He did not want to take her like a heathen, but wanted to love her softly as she deserved to be loved. He parted her thighs and slowly entered her, a growl of pleasure rumbling in his chest. She was tight and so very hot that he had to hold back lest he hurt her. She filled his senses, making him forget everything around him save for her, and the intoxicating smell of their lovemaking that surrounded them.

Tambre felt his manhood touch her center, and she opened herself for him. The sensations that drove through her body left little room for her to think clearly. She knew that she was about to embark on a journey, one that would land her in a whole different world. And she

was ready, craving this moment more than she had ever wanted anything in her life. The heat his mouth had brought to her breasts had gathered into a holding point, and she sought a release to the pent up desire that ached in her center. When he entered her fully, she gave a small cry of pain, but it quickly diminished under his slow, caressing movements.

Merrik felt his heart lurch at the offerings this woman had given to him. She fit him perfectly, and he was truly amazed at the heat that surrounded him. She felt wonderful to him, and when she cried out in her pain, he had given her a whispered apology; sorry that he had hurt her. But the pleasure that replaced the pain made her blossom beneath him, opening herself freely, and begging him for more. Pulling out of her velvety softness and then plunging forward into the sweet abyss that was her, he continued on and on, hearing the moans of her pleasure match his own. He kissed her lips and felt the urgency in her as she wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him further into her desire, a desire that whimpered his name, called out to him in a blaze of undeniable lust and achingly slow rapture.

He felt her hands cling to his body, exploring where they may. He enjoyed her touch, the feel of her silken hands upon his bare skin. And when she looked at him in marvelous astonishment as her release was finally set free, he closed his eyes and felt the delicious pulsing surround his manhood. He found his own release, so great it was, and it left him completely spent, utterly breathless. It was unlike any other experience he had felt in his life, and he wondered if the woman was a sorceress, for she had entered his soul, filling his spirit with her presence.

Tambre lay under his weight, and her mind screamed her agony at what she had just done as the realization came crashing in around her. For the first time in her life, she had lost. She had lost. Never mind that she had felt the most wonderful sensations ever, all her mind screamed was the betrayal of her body, given freely to a man who made her blood sing with tantalizing eagerness.

Chapter Eight

Curling her right hand into a tight fist, Tambre swung out at Merrik, striking him just under his left eye. Her aim was true to its mark.

Merrik let out a yowl of surprise. "What in the name of--"

Tambre took another swing, this time finding her mark on his bottom lip. She leapt from his bed and pulled the gown on over her head with one furious jerking motion. Rage filled her eyes, pouring fire from the very depths of her being, bidding him to come at her. When he made no move, she cursed and turned from him. She headed for the door, unlocking the thing and yanked it open. She intended on finding her father and demand that he break the betrothal. It shut with a loud bang as his hand reached over her head, slamming it back into place. She turned around to face him with a seething look.

"Release me from this chamber," she fairly screamed at him.

His eyes bore into hers with an intense foreboding. "I will not. You are mine now, and here is where you will stay." He felt like strangling her lovely neck, but thought better of the action. She had a hard punch, and he did not want to provoke her any more than he had to. He almost smiled at the pain under his left eye, and below on his lip. Almost, but not quite.

"I am not yours! Nor will I ever be!" Her anger brought forth another round of punches, this time on his belly. "Release me!"

He grabbed her wrists in one of his hands to still her motions, pulling her into his embrace with the other, and laid his chin atop her head. Her breathing was labored, and she cursed under her breath as she ceased her struggles. His lips curled into a smile, and he closed his eyes, feeling her soft breasts strain tightly against his bare chest. Only when he heard her breathing return to normal did he gaze down at her bowed head. He gently tilted her face up to his, and was immediately lost in her hypnotic sapphire eyes.

"You must know that I will never let you go."

Tambre closed her eyes, taking a deep, calming breath. He made her want to scream! Besides the fact that he had given her the most brilliant feelings that she had ever experienced in her life a few moments before, she still wanted to wrestle him to the ground and beat him within

an inch of his life. She laid her head on his chest, wrapping her arms around his waist on impulse. He did feel so fine in her arms, with his hard, muscled chest pressing against her with solid clarity. Each ripple and corded plane of his unyielding body brought her the knowledge that he bore the strength of at least three brawny men, making her smile at the thought. He certainly had shown her how a man loves a woman completely, without reservations of any kind, how his body had enticed her to see only him, and willingly deliver her innocent virtue into his waiting and eager hands.

She sighed as she looked up at him then, studying his handsome face. Did it matter that she would have a husband? He had said so himself that she could do as she pleased, so why did she fret so? She could still do her work, and he would pay her no mind. She smiled at him. There were some advantages to this. Aye, truly there was! Slowly, her fingertips ran over his bare chest, and she smiled slightly as his manhood came to life, throbbing along her thigh. She nearly purred her contentment at his response to the simple gesture. This may not be all that bad, she thought to herself, as her teasing continued with languid ease. He seemed to enjoy this act as much as she did, and she knew that she would be a very dutiful apprentice to his teachings.

Merrik looked at her suspiciously as her fingers played deliciously over his flesh. He had never met a woman that could give him such an incredible feeling one minute, and then try to beat the hell out of him the next. She was looking at him with curiosity now as she smiled at him, and his warrior's instinct bid him beware. But, damn, he knew what sweet heaven she had given him a few moments past, and all he could think of right now was how luscious her heat would feel.

Elwain grimaced at the stern look upon Merrik's face as the man came to stand before him. His dark hair was slightly mussed, and upon further inspection he noticed that the man sported a bruise under his left eye with his bottom lip cracked and slightly swollen as well. He raised his eyes heavenward, and prayed that his daughter was still alive and well.

"My lord, I would have a private word with you." Merrik had to hide his smile at the man's worried look. He feared for his daughter's well being, and with good reason, but he needed to put those fears to rest.

"Most assuredly, Merrik. Will you join me outdoors? It seems that my castle is fairly

bursting at the seams, and I would wager we will be quite alone out there.” At the man’s nod of agreement, Elwain led the way.

Once outside, Elwain walked a short distance away from the main doors before he stopped, and turned to smile at the other man. He waited for him to speak.

“My lord,” Merrik began earnestly. “I have spoken with your daughter. She and I have come to a mutual... agreement; one that I think will work out for us all.”

Elwain nodded, and bid Merrik to continue.

Merrik cleared his throat. “Although your daughter’s displays today were unforgivable, I find myself intrigued by her sense of individual dependence.” He did smile then, but winced when a sharp pain cut through his bottom lip, remembering well her tight fisted assault. “And I doubt we will ever have a dull moment.”

Elwain snorted loudly. “Trust me, my boy, you will not!”

“She is a very beautiful woman, and I must confess that with her strength and her iron will, we will clash, most generally, on every subject.”

“Which is why I will not hold you to your bond,” Elwain sighed, and turned to look out over his vast holdings, as far as the eye could see in all directions. “She is as strong-hearted as any warrior I have ever met, and just as belligerent.” He smiled over his shoulder at Merrik. “I will hold no hard feelings, Merrik. I will understand why you would not want her hand.”

“On the contrary, sir, I still wish for this bond.” By the saints, nothing could keep her from him at this point.

Elwain turned to look at the man before him with wide eyes. “You do?”

“Aye. As I have said, we have come to an agreement. With our betrothal still intact, I shall be leaving in one week, as planned. And Tambre shall come with me.” He knew that he would not even consider leaving the beauty behind. He would keep her by his side for as long as he could. And that included forever.

Chapter Nine

Letting her eyes adjust to the pale light emanated from the moon high above, Tambre whistled low in warning as she spotted the richly appointed carriage crest the hill. She grinned as she pulled the mask over her face, setting it into place with little trouble. Pulling the sword from her side and, urging her brown mare forward, she set a quick pace, hearing the others fall into place behind her. This carriage had no guards about it, and she thought that however small the treasure she would find, it would still aid a cause worth fighting for.

The English thought they were smart to outwit the kinsmen of Scotland by secretly taking the English lords to stolen castles in the dark of night, hiding like the worthless bastards they truly were. Then a troop of English knights would ride to the castle and protect it from a country that they were to eventually overtake, to someday bring to English rule. They took and took, and now Scotland would take back a small amount of what it had lost.

Tambre pressed her heels into her mare's side and spurred the mount quicker. Her anger at the English invasion was just about all she could bare in her torn and ravaged country. Justice would prevail, she swore it would. Pulling her mount to a stop a few yards in front of the carriage, she shouted the Wallace clan's war cry. She smiled when she saw four of her men easily overtake the carriage, and bring it quickly to a stop. Slipping past the prancing matched team of horses that drew the carriage, she clicked her tongue as she jerked open the door suddenly. A torch was thrust into her hands, and she peered inside cautiously.

A bit of fluff proper English lady, along with her gentleman husband sat in the furthest corner, huddled together, and staring back at her with wide eyes. Putting on her thick Scottish brogue, she broke the silence.

"Get ye out!" When they made no move to follow her order, only looked at her with wide eyes, she became angry, and reached in to pull first the lord, and then his lady out of the carriage by force.

"Well, Masit! Are you not going to defend your property from this rogue?" The lady's high pitched squeal raked across Tambre's nerves like grating metal upon metal.

"Be ye quiet! I seek any treasures that ye may 'ave an' then I be on me way."

The lord cleared his throat quietly and demanded, in gentle words, to be left alone. "I say, my fellow. You will not touch our things. The wrath of the English army will be upon your brow." His eyes widened again as he realized that he had spoken out of turn, to a true ruffian no less, and took a step back suddenly even as his wife pushed him forward.

Tambre turned narrowed eyes upon the two, and spat on the ground at their feet. "Bind ther' mouths shut!" She turned back to her search for jewels or coin, and whatever else she could find of value. Not seeing anything out in the open, she took her sword, and started slicing the cushioned seats of the carriage.

"You beast!" The lady shouted in rage. "How dare you destroy my carriage! Stop this instant!" She turned to her husband, and demanded that he stop the man, grasping the poor fellow's arm, and pushing him forward.

Tambre knew she was getting close to finding what she sought just by how shrill the woman's voice had become. Making a final cut into the one cushion, and allowing the horse hair stuffing to settle down, she peered under the seat, and was rewarded with two rather large chests that appeared to be full of gold coin. She threw back her head and laughed. What riches they had found this night! Her cousin would be so pleased! She called for two of her men to pull the chests from their hiding place as she set about cutting the other cushion across from the first one.

The lady screamed from behind her gag, and raced forward as the thief pulled the jewel chest from under the second cushion. The woman then tried to pull the chest from the thief's grasp, and succeeded in gaining her clutches around the biggest part of the thing. She stared the bandit in the eye and dared the man to lay a hand upon her.

Tambre was not impressed with the outburst in the least, and cuffing the woman upon her cheek, she brought up her booted foot to push the woman back out of the carriage, gaining full possession of the chest again. The lady landed with a harsh thud upon the hard ground, and a small laugh escaped her as she turned back to dig further under the cushion for more prizes.

She heard the woman curse at her, and she grinned when she felt the presence of an even bigger jewel chest further under the seat. A king's ransom was in her hands, and she knew that the coin was to pay some of the traitors of her own beloved Scotland for turning in troublemakers, and other countrymen who just wanted to defend their own keeps and families. Stepping out of the carriage, she looked around, and noticed that her men were already upon the

backs of their mounts, waiting for her. With one final look about, she bowed gallantly to the lady, and jumped upon her mount's back after handing the two chests to one of her men.

"Scotland thanks ye, English dogs tha' ye be!"

They were gone as quickly as they had come, laughter following in their wake.

Merrik could not sleep. Tambre consumed his thoughts, and he felt the need to go to her now and make love to her again. He groaned as he thought about her sensual body under his, and pushed the coverlet from his heated form. He sat up, and decided to hang his head out the window to breathe in some cooling fresh air, hoping that the cold would calm his ardor. With the window open wide, he breathed in the air, but stilled as a movement caught his eye by the stables. The figure whistled softly, and strolled toward the main doors of the castle. Pulling a hood from its head, Merrik blanched when he realized it was Tambre. Anger filtered through his body. Was she just returning from a lovers tryst? As he slammed his legs into hose and yanked open his door to watch for her, his mind tried to reason with the outlandish thoughts that popped into his head. An image of her in her lover's arms was more than he could bear, and he prayed for strength. Never had a thought brought such anguish to his heart. He waited for her in muted silence, biding him time.

Tambre walked silently up the dark steps, and down the corridor that led to her chamber. She felt his presence, and smelled his scent long before she set eyes upon his face. He leaned casually on his door jamb with his massive arms folded across his chest. The glint in his eyes bid her warning to his mood of obvious discontent, and so she stopped within inches of his body, kissing him soundly. She heard his surprised moan, and then felt his strong arms tighten around her waist. His strong hands smoothed over her back, and she moved her hips in a slow, sensual motion over his throbbing hardness. She even moaned herself as the sensational heat flowed from her body to his, and then back again.

Merrik felt her passion, saw it glowing in her eyes, as she spotted him waiting for her in the corridor. He tasted her velvety soft mouth, and laved his tongue over her own, knowing that she had not been with another man. He moaned when she sucked softly upon his tongue, reaching a hand between them to touch his hard chest, and rub gently.

Tambre knew she teased him unmercifully this eve, but she did not care. When she had

seen him, a spark of fire had gone through her, and all she could think about was his hands and lips upon her body. She knew it was the thrill of the raid she had just been on and she moaned softly, wanting him to know the deep desire he brought out in her. She pulled her lips away from him, and leaned her forehead against his own to catch her breath.

“My lady, do not tempt me so. I would like nothing more than to take you to my chamber and love you well.” He kissed her softly. “Go from me now lest I do just that.”

She smiled, curling her fingers around a lock of his hair as she breathed deeply of the scent that was his. Raising her eyes to gaze into his, she knew that if she did not go now, she never would. His gaze held hers for what seemed an eternity, caressing her with the tantalizing emotions she saw in the depths. “I tempt you, Merrik, for I wish to feel your hands upon my body. Diminish this ache I have for you, and then I will go and leave you to sleep.” She kissed him softly and felt him pick her up and carry her into his chamber, shutting his door quietly behind him.

He did not take her to his bed, for he did not think that he could make it that far. Instead, he pulled the tunic from her head quickly and pushed the hose from her legs as he spun her around to bend over the back of the sitting chair that stood by the door. He entered her from behind and felt the rocking sensations jolt across his body. His groans mixed erratically with hers as he tried to slow his pace for her sake. He managed to contain himself somewhat, and pulled her back against his chest as he felt the hardened tips of her breasts tease his fingertips.

He kissed her neck and groaned his pleasure as she reached between her legs to caress him with silken palms. He felt her pulse around him, finding her release, and felt his own push forward abruptly in a burst of raging liquid heat that brought a delicious ache to his belly. He thrust into her, heard her moans of gratification and felt the evidence of her passion surround him. As he slowed to a stop, he ran tender fingers down the length of her back and loved how her flesh felt like the rarest of satins.

Tambre sighed and closed her eyes as she placed her arms around his neck from over her head. She felt his silky hair and moaned at his soft nibbles across her jaw line, making her shiver from the sensual touches. She turned in his arms and brought her bare chest next to his own.

“You have given me a true satisfaction, my lady.” He kissed her lips soundly and then rested his forehead upon her own. “Go now, lest I keep you in my chambers and never let you

see the light of day again.”

Her deep sapphire gaze delved into his soul, and she said not a word as she pulled the hose back into place and held her tunic over her chest. She opened the door, stepping into the dark corridor and made her way silently to her chamber.

Merrik watched her go. He smiled as the silken curls of her hair swished gently at her waist, tantalizing him with wicked seduction in the way her hips moved. When she reached her chamber door she opened it, allowing the light to wash out into the hall where she stood, bathing her in a light of muted crimson. She looked back at him, letting the tunic fall from her chest, and he groaned as he saw the outline of the bare, round orbs that begged for his attention. It was an obvious invitation, one that he was not about to let pass by. He grinned as she stepped into her chamber, leaving the door open for his admission, for his pleasure.

One week later, Tambre strode back and forth in front of her fireplace, hesitating only once to stare into the fire, but then continued on. Merrik was all that occupied her mind of late, and she thought of how his seduction of her mind and body still lay evident in her heart. Aye, he had won. But what she intended to do to even the score would have him writhing beneath her, and she smiled wickedly. She had learned that he liked a gentle touch, so she thought that she could handle that. But there had to be more. Her eyes lit up then as she buckled her sword around her waist, heading down to the great hall. What better way to gain the information she sought in the ways of seduction than from a most reliable source: the castle whore.

Embra was no beauty, to be sure, but what set her apart from the other women, and what made the men beg for her attentions, was the skills that she had in the art of love. She had the solution to her quandary, and she hoped that the woman was not busy this day. She needed some answers, and she needed them fast! She made her way outside through the kitchen rooms and then picked up her gown at the hem, running to the edge of the bailey. The small cottage was bright and cheery on the inside, and as Tambre took a seat to wait for the woman, making known her presence, she thought quickly that her father would most assuredly frown on her being seen in the company of the woman. She shrugged. It mattered not. She was only here as a student and would, with any luck, leave with a head full of erotic treasures.

When Embra entered the room, a sensual smile curving her lips, her brows rose with

merriment. Her ample hips swished under the tight fabric of her under tunic as she stopped before Tambre, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Tambre, you know your father would have your hide if he knew you were here."

"I am quite aware of that fact, but I had to come and see you."

"And to what do I owe the pleasure of your company this eve?" Embra swished over to a side table, pouring a deep red liquid into two small earthenware cups. She handed one to Tambre, smiling. What was this one up to now? She smoothed back her dark hair, and waited for the woman to speak.

Tambre took a sip of the liquid, finding that she rather liked it. It was sweet, and had the taste of juicy ripe berries. She turned her attention back to the woman who stood before her. "I have come to seek your knowledge."

"My knowledge?"

"Aye. I wish for you to teach me this art of love. I want to make my intended scream my name." She grinned. "But not from anger. From desire."

Embra was clearly shocked. She shook her head, and let go a small tune of laughter. "Pardon?"

"I want to seduce Merrik." Tambre drained the cup she held, wishing she had more. She looked at Embra expectantly, and waited for her response.

"I don't know what to say, my lady. I have never had anyone ask this of me before." She cleared her throat, and went to refill both of their cups.

"I know 'tis a strange request, but I wish to please him." She took the cup offered to her, and smiled. "I want him to remember the things I do to him."

Embra smiled. So, the little vixen is starting to fall for the man. She had seen him from afar, and what she had seen was enough to know that he was made for loving. He was tall, very handsome, and broad of chest. Any woman would want to bring that one pleasure. She held out her hand for Tambre to take, deciding that she would tell this little hellion everything she could.

"Come, my lady. I have a book I wish to show you."

Tambre followed the woman into the dimly lit chamber that she knew had pleased many a man in her father's keep. The sweet smells of lavender and vanilla filled her mind with sensual longing, and she tried to focus upon the task at hand. She nearly ran into Embra's back

as her mind started to clear, and she quickly took a few steps back.

Embra leaned over a small table, reaching behind a hidden panel on the backside of the table. Her hands grasped around a thin book as she pulled the thing from its hiding place, and cradled it next to her breasts, finally turning to face the other woman.

“This little treasure has made many a man happy in my arms. It is only filled with pictures, and a few written bits of well placed advice here and there, but its pages will give you what you seek, lass.” She smiled as she sat on the edge of the bed, and patted the empty spot next to her, encouraging Tambre to sit beside her. When the other woman had nestled next to her, she opened the book to the first page, laughing as Tambre gasped in surprise.

Tambre stared wide-eyed at the picture of a woman taking the engorged member of her man into her mouth. Never would she have imagined the prospect! She intently read the caption below the image, as a slow smile began to curl the tips of her mouth upward. It vividly explained the act with detail, leaving nothing out. Her face flamed with embarrassment as she looked at Embra with a grin.

“Do not be embarrassed, lass. This is a book of how to please a man beyond his wildest imaginations. Let this book, and all it contains, give you the knowledge that you seek.” She smiled then. “Your lord will not be disappointed!”

Tambre nodded, and looked down as the pages continued to turn. With each one, she felt a need grow inside of her to seek her intended out and throw him upon his back to love him well! With the embarrassment gone now as the erotic images of touching his well honed body with her lips, fingertips, and tongue settled into her mind, she could not wait to seek Merrik out and partake in some of these sensual acts. One image depicted how the tip of ones tongue laving softly along any part of a man's body would have the quick effect of a fire blazing hot in his eyes and send a surefire lust coursing through every vein in his body.

Embra gave her little bits of information as well, things that she had learned on her own along the way. Satisfied that the lass had enough knowledge to send her and her betrothed down a lustful path of sensual seduction for a very long time, she sent Tambre on her way with her newfound knowledge and wished her the best. She knew that the handsome man would soon be bowing at his intended's feet, promising her anything her heart desired!

Merrik stood by the fireplace talking to his brother's when he saw Tambre enter the great hall by way of the kitchen. She walked slowly, searching for something, and he smiled when he realized that it was he she sought.

Coming to stand before Merrik, Tambre tilted her head back slightly, and whispered his name. She then boldly leaned forward, placing a gentle hand upon his hard chest. Her breast purposely touched his arm, and when her lips touched his neck as the tip of her tongue laved his skin, she felt a quickening in her own chest as well as the suddenly rapid beating of his heart under her hand. Her face was hidden by his dark hair, and she nibbled his earlobe as she whispered next to his ear.

"Merrik, you have awakened a heat in me." Again she nibbled his lobe, and she heard a low growl in his chest. Good! "Take me to the fire you have shown me." She ran her tongue slowly down his neck, and then back up. "I ache for your touch." She stepped away from him, giving him what she hoped was a seductive smile, and then walked over to the dais and sat down, smiling at him from across the hall.

Merrik was fully aroused by her little display. He could not believe that she had been as bold as this with her father sitting just a few tables away! He was glad for the long tunic that he wore, for his desire would be put forth for all to see. He swallowed, and could not take his eyes from her lovely face.

Broswin clapped his brother on the shoulder. "I see that the lady has an eye for you. Do you wish for her hellish ways to be bestowed upon you for the rest of your days?" The teasing tone made Merrik smile.

"I do."

Merrik left his brothers then to make his way to the seat next to Tambre.

Tambre could not believe how well this was working. From just a few whispered words and a small caress, she had put passion in his eyes. Well, it did not count that she had become aroused while administering the attentions either. Her lips curled up at the ends as she watched him approach her. He held a tankard of wine in one strong hand, and even as he took a drink, he kept his eyes on hers over the rim. She smiled a greeting at him, all the while sticking the tip of her tongue out to run along her bottom lip. She heard him growl as he sat down.

"My lady." He leaned over to her ear, and said softly, "I would cure your ache. My

hands would stroke every inch of your enticing body.”

She gave a small gasp, and felt her insides jerk with the erotic thoughts that filled her head. She turned his way, and brought her mouth to his ear where she ran the tip of her tongue up his neck, over to his lobe, letting him hear her small moan of pleasure. Her next whispered words sent fingers of delicious pulsings to her own center. “And while you use your hands, my lord, I shall use my tongue to bring forth such a great cry from you as none other you have ever known.” She felt him shudder, and as she leaned back in her chair, she pushed her breasts forward so that he received a very generous view from the low cut neckline of her gown.

Merrik had to catch his breath. What new game did she play with him now? It was obviously one of seduction. And he found that he liked the way she looked at him with those sensual sapphire eyes full of tantalizing promise. He viewed her barely covered breasts and saw the nipples hard and erect under the light green velvet.

He leaned over to her whispering, “I will take my own tongue and suck your nipples until you begged my sweet mercy.” He appreciated her quickened breath, but it was how she lowered her eyes and brought her hand to the apex of her own thighs, giving an erotic moan as she stroked over herself once through the material of her gown that completely undid him. He growled and wanted nothing more than to throw her over his shoulder and carry her up the stairs to his chamber, only to bury himself deep within her warmth. He knew she would be hot and wet in anticipation of the sweet seduction he would give to her.

“Damn, woman! Have a care!” He leaned toward her, and caught her eyes as she gave him a half-lidded look. Her eyes were the color of midnight now and he saw that she was just as aroused as he was. Whatever little game she played suited him fine. Never had he had a woman to seduce him in public before. Of course, he had never known a woman quite like her. Ever.

“Merrick, you fire my blood, and,” she paused to lean toward him, her lips a breath away, “I would have you come to me this night. Tell me you will. I long to have a pleasurable eve spent in your arms, one of lust and desire lighting your eyes. Even now I feel myself growing wet with the anticipation of your entry into the heat I save for you alone.”

Merrik swallowed. “Lass, you have fired a true blaze in my heart with your lustful words of enticement, but the game you play could be very dangerous. For us both. I would know of your true intent.”

"I play no game, my lord. 'Tis as I have said; you have given me such an intense heat that I wish to fire the flame. All I think about when I set my eyes upon you is the blaze of lust I see in your eyes, and the unnerving feel of your touch. Your caress leaves me breathless with wanting." She leaned forward then, not caring who saw her, delivering to him a sensually soft kiss, laving her tongue slowly over his own. She pulled away slightly, and gave him a slight smile. "My intent should now be clear, my lord."

He served her a very shameless look then, one of sincere wanting. "Then, aye, I shall come to you this eve. And I will love you till morn."

She nodded, and placed her hand over his as it touched the arm of her chair. "Then I go above now to ready myself. Do not tarry overly long, my lord. The passion I feel for you has only just begun. The ache grows stronger with each breath I take, and I would have you in my arms to quench this raging heat that will overtake me soon." And with that she leaned over, and kissed his cheek gently as she afforded him one last soldering look before she made her way to the stairs. Gently swishing her hips in a side to side motion as Embra had shown her, she happened a glance at Merrik over her shoulder, smiling at him seductively as she continued on her way.

He watched her go and thought how this woman, whom he had known for not even a full week, had worked herself under his skin and into his soul. The lust he felt for her went far beyond the quick tumble in the hay he had always been used to. Aye, the use of a woman's body to curb his desire was not what he felt now. Not this time. This was more than he had ever bargained for, more than he had ever imagined. He was terrified, for giving his heart to someone had never crossed his mind before. Not until now.

Chapter Ten

The seduction of Merrik had certainly gone very well. She had second thoughts about how bold she had been to him and wished that her feelings had not gotten the better of her tongue. But she did not mind. She wanted his attentions and it made her feel warm, like molten heat, when he gazed at her with those pale emerald eyes. Aye, she wanted him again, and this time she swore to be the one who did the seducing. Embra had told her well. Maybe a little too well.

Tambre swallowed the surprise at what she felt and quickened her footsteps. She opened her chamber door and stepped inside, leaning on the heavy wooden panel. She closed her eyes briefly and felt again his lips on her own. The remembered sensation still sent delicious tremors to her middle, and she wondered why she felt the way she did. Never before had a man moved her to this point. Shaking herself from this revelation, she immediately felt that her chamber had grown chilled. As she stepped over to the fireplace to add a few more logs to the glowing embers, she saw movement out of the corner of her eye, and she drew her sword quickly, searching the dim room, thanking God the blade had been at her side. She sighed her relief when she seen the form of the only man who could fill an entire window opening.

“William! You should know by now that sneaking up on me will bid you ill.” She replaced the sword to its sheath, and unbuckled the belt, placing it in a ready position by her fireplace as she went over to the giant of a man, and hugged his waist. “’Tis happy I am to see you.”

Sir William Wallace looked down at his cousin, and grinned. A beauty to be true, he took her hand in his, kissing the top.

“My lass, Tambre.” His green eyes sparkled at her with mischief. “I have come to see you off with your intended, but as it turns out, I have a price upon my head now, and I did not think that showing my face here today would be of a good idea.”

Tambre laughed as she pulled the man to the only chair that sat in front of the fire. He sat down gratefully as she went to open her bed chest, and pour them both a goblet of red wine.

“I was wondering if I would see you before I left. I wanted to let you know that Kollif and I had gotten into a little scuffle a few days ago with a rich English lord and his lady.” She

handed him the goblet, and took a sip from her own. "We have gotten quite the bounty this time. It would seem that the lady's fortune was hidden under her seat. But we were able to relieve it from her, quite willingly, I might add."

Laughter rumbled in William's chest. "I bet she did!" He laughed outright. "Most willingly, my ass! Kollif told me that you had to bound and gag the wench and pry it from her clutches!"

Tambre grinned. "Well, I do not like to tell tall tales." She sat on the floor before him, laughing out loud herself. "Now that you mention it, she did seem to have a bit of trouble releasing the goods to us. She was quite angry as I recall."

"Angry is not a word I would have used." William grinned down at her. "But 'tis not the reason for my visit, although I thank you for the riches to the cause." He took a sip of his wine, and then continued. "I know you will be leaving on the morrow, and I wanted to let you know that I will be moving on to the south now. I may not see you for a while but I have been told where your new holdings are situated. I will see you again soon."

Tambre nodded. "And I will continue on, William. With the area being new, I may find a bigger lot for the picking. The English pigs will know that we mean business."

William admired her strength, and her passion for his cause. A cause for their freedom. For Scotland's freedom! "I have a small token for you. 'Tis a present that I have held for some time. I am just glad that I am able to give this to you now." He pulled a bundle from under his tunic, and handed it to her.

The red and black plaid of the Clan Wallace greeted her eyes. She smiled. It was a sash, to be worn over her shoulder, and clasped with a broach at her hip. It was worn with age but she did not care. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. The broach was the clan motto 'Pro Libertate – For Freedom' spelled out over a round circle medallion. She got to her feet, and hugged the man around his neck.

"My thanks. They are beautiful." She slipped the sash over her head, and clasped the ends together with the broach. "I shall cherish these, Cousin."

He admired her truth and fervent fight for their cause. Freedom was not to be taken lightly, as he well knew, and it made him proud to know that she was with him. And not just because of his family ties. Her own dear mother was his cousin, and although not as active in

this station as her daughter was, he still held a tenderness for her, and always would. He stood then, and folded his massive arms around her form. Leaning down, he kissed the top of her head, smiling.

"I must go now, my lass, but know that I shall be with you in spirit as you are wed." He leaned away from her, and raised his brows. "Tell me, is your intended handsome? And will he treat you well, do you suppose?"

Tambre smiled. "He is more than handsome, cousin, he is beautiful! I shall have a time fighting all the wenches off of him, I dare say." She paused as she stood back, crossing her arms over her chest. "And he better treat me well. You know that I would never tolerate cruelty from any man."

William nodded, satisfied that she could take care of matters on her own. "'Tis good that you rest my heart on this subject. I would worry for you if it were otherwise."

"I would have it no other way. But do not worry for me. Although I find this whole ordeal to be to my disliking, I do not think that having a husband will stand in our way."

Merrik, having cracked the door to Tambre's chamber just then, heard the words in disbelief. He had thought to continue with their conversation, wanting to know how the seductive actions she displayed a few moments before had never been brought forth earlier than today. He obviously had his answer. Had she been with this man before she had sought him out in the hall below?

His heart twisted with the pain of finding her in what appeared to be a lovers tryst. The man was a huge beast, and when he wrapped his arms around her, she disappeared from his view. He thought once to burst into the room and demand to know what goes, but decided against the quick emotion. He closed the door silently, and retreated to his chamber, locking the door, his anger reaching nearly to a boiling point.

Going over to the fireplace that burned a small fire, he leaned on the mantle and closed his eyes. He did not want to believe what he had just seen, and the rage he felt in his body consumed him. His eyes hardened to stone, and his hands bunched into fists. Never had he been so out of sorts, and never had he felt such a hate well in his soul. She thought to best him at everything, but he would show her who would rule.

The little vixen would understand that she was his and his alone! He would never release

her to anyone! After tasting the sweets she had to offer, he knew he would fight a king's army to keep her by his side. Determination stole into his veins then, and he marched over to his door, yanking the thing open, and slamming it against the wall with a loud thump as he did so.

He burst into her room with fury written on his face, so blinded by his rage that he could barely see their images across the chamber. The giant was still there, and he turned with raised brows to see who had interrupted his moment alone with the beauty he still held in his arms.

"Unhand my betrothed." The words were fairly spit out from between gritted teeth. He slammed the door behind him, and drew his sword. "She is mine, and you should know that I will fight to keep her." His words were quietly spoken, but held the determination of his stance. She had had three suitors come to her in one week! Enough was enough!

William released Tambre, and turned around to face the angry man. He was as she had described. His face was very handsome, and his dark hair hung to his waist in disarray. His eyes were narrowed, but he could see the intenseness of the green gaze, and the sword he had clenched in his strong fist did not waiver. Of a muscular build, he knew that this one would keep his cousin from harm.

"Merrik, what in God's name are you about?" Tambre stepped around William to face him. "Put your blade down. He is my cousin."

Merrik let his sword drop to his side after a moment's hesitation. "Your cousin?"

She stepped up to him, and put her hands on her hips. Her eyes were narrowed upon him, but spit daggers into his flesh just the same. "Aye, my cousin. Sir William Wallace."

Merrik blanched, and sheathed his sword. He wished he had not been so forthwith in his actions now. He looked at the man again, and thought how handsome he was. And very, very tall. The man had to be over six and a half feet, and weigh roughly three hundred pounds or more. His hands were like huge plates of armor, and he cringed to think that the man could have crushed him to bits if his mind had been set.

"Merrik. I was wishing my cousin well in her forthcoming union." William crossed his arms over his chest, smiling. "She has told me that you are hot of temper, and I have now seen that first hand."

"My lord. 'Tis an honor to meet you." He stole a look at the woman who still stood in front of him, her eyes blazing her rage now. "And I am not hot of temper. But I will protect and

keep safe whatever is mine. Against the devil himself, if need be.”

William's rumble of laughter brought Merrik's eyes back to his face.

“She will be a handful for you, to be sure.” He laughed again at Tambre's soft cry of outrage. “And I am relieved to know that she will be well cared for.”

Merrik inclined his head. “I will always look over her. But my apologies to you, Sir Wallace. I would leave you to continue as I take my leave.”

“Nay, do not go. I was just saying my farewell.” He held out his hand to Tambre, and she let him lead her to the large window. “I think you have met your match, my lady.”

She grinned, keeping a tight grip upon his hand. “*I know* I have.”

“He will keep you safe. And you should thank your father for this union. He has made a good choice, I think.”

She nodded, and then rose up on the tips of her toes to hug him around his neck. “I shall miss you, my sweet William. I will watch for you at my new home. Please do not make it so very long.”

“I will try not to.” He kissed her cheek tenderly, and then released her. Stepping over to Merrik, he held out his hand.

Merrik grasped the huge hand in his own, and immediately felt the strength that the man held.

“My lord, I trust you to keep her well in hand, and hold her from harm. She is a gentle and kind woman, although you would need to delve deep into her soul to find those attributes.” He paused as he looked at the man in front of him intently. “I would not see her hurt in any way.”

“She will not be hurt by my hand, Sir Wallace. Of that you can be certain.”

“And as for Kollif Wallace's display a few days ago, do not take what he has done to heart. He was doing the lass's bidding.” His words held the humor that his eyes emanated. They sparkled with a mischievous merriment. “He has been severely reprimanded, but I see in her eyes that she has no desire to leave your side now. Hold her to you, Merrik, and love her. She is a feisty one, but loyal to the end. She will give you much heartache, but she will never dishonor your name.”

William released the man's hand, and knew that the man spoke true. Merrik would not

do harm to his cousin. He felt confident that his cousin would be leading this man on a merry little chase of her own, and he prayed for the man's sanity. He truly did wish them well. He left quietly, down the back stairs and through the kitchen area, thinking all the while with a smile that the union would be a great one. He looked forward to bouncing many of his cousin's babes upon his knee.

Chapter Eleven

Tambre spit fire from her eyes as she went to stand before him. His pale green eyes were apologetic, and his lips pulled into a sheepish smile.

"My apologies, lass." He bowed before her, and then met her smoldering gaze. She was not happy.

"I cannot believe that you have thought the worst of me. Even when you have taken my innocence, and know full well that I have been with no man, save yourself." She put her hands upon her hips and strode forward, coming to face him fully. "Do you mistrust me so much? I know that you have not known me before this week, but I must assure you that while I am to bond with you, I will have no one else. Not now, not ever. I value your honor with the utmost loyalty."

He reached out a gentle hand, and smoothed the curls from the side of her face. "It lightens my heart to hear you pledge your virtue to me alone. I will never let my eyes play tricks upon me again. I will take your word and know that you have given me the expression of your fidelity." He took her hand and placed a light kiss upon the top.

Still, this did not sit well with her. "I will let the matter pass this time, but you must understand that when I pledged myself to you, I meant it. I did not do so lightly. And consider yourself fortunate that I am agreeing to this union at all."

He released her hand as she stepped away from him and eyed her with curiosity. "And if I would let you out of this bond with me right now, would you allow that to pass?" He held his breath as he waited for her to answer. Even if she said him nay, it would not matter. He would never let her go. He only prayed that she would be with him of her own free will. He looked at her hopefully.

"Nay, I would not." She turned from his probing gaze, and went to stand in front of the warm fire. "You have taken my maidenhead. I would be ruined for any other man who would find interest in my hand."

He stood behind her then and grasped her shoulder with his strong hands. "I took your maidenhead because I wanted you to be mine and mine alone." He whispered this next to her

ear, and he felt her shiver slightly as the sensations drifted through her body. "I would do so again. Make no mistake that I will hold you to me for as long as I am able to draw breath."

She believed his words. They sent delicious shivers down her neck and into the center of her being. She leaned back against his hard chest, feeling the steady rise and fall of his breathing. His hands moved down over her arms and back up to cross over to her breast. A small moan escaped her lips and she turned in his arms, wrapping her own around his neck, pulling his lips to hers. The seduction had started once again, and she recalled the pages of the book that Embra had shown to her. Vivid images of passionate lovers entwined in all positions of worship brought an idea to her mind. Boldly, she placed her hands on his chest as she began to rub softly. Moving further down slowly, she unbuckled the belt that held his sword and let it drop quietly to the floor.

Merrik felt his breath quicken at the thought of her seduction coming to pass. He pulled her head back up to face him and delved his tongue into her mouth. She tasted sweet, and he knew she had had wine to drink. He was surprised that she had unbuckled his belt, sliding it quietly to the stone floor. It surprised him further that she roved her hands under his tunic and pushed the thing from his head just now. She then began to work on his under tunic, tossing it aside as well. Bending down upon her knees before him, she kissed his belly, running her tongue along the waist of his hose. He sucked in his breath as the sensation of utter delight filled his groin to near bursting. Ah, she was a daring lass, brassy and reckless, but he liked what she did to him and he loved how she made him feel.

Tambre slid one slim finger inside the waist of his hose as she pulled one side down, and then the other. She gazed up at him and smiled as the look of erotic pleasure crossed his features. She reached to the front of his hose and began to massage his engorged manhood. His growl of pleasure went through her mind blissfully as she pulled his hose further down, releasing the proof of his passion. It was hot to her touch, throbbing under her fingertip. She felt herself becoming aroused at the site of his pleasure. Remembering the image she had seen in the book, she timidly touched her tongue to the underside of his manhood and slowly, softly ran it along his entire length.

Merrik thought he would lose his mind. He was now totally convinced that she was a sorceress. The games she played at this moment were sheer torture. He ran his fingers through

her silken hair, not wanting her to stop, finding much enjoyment in what she did to him. The little hellion had been holding back on him.

When she reached the tip of his manhood, she brought the head into her mouth, laving it with her tongue all the while sucking gently. Another growl of pleasure passed his lips along with a shudder that ran through the entire length of his body. She was off to a very good start. She continued to lave his member with her tongue, going so slowly that he thought he would lose his mind, until he begged her to stop and let him take her to her bed.

His head fell back as he attempted to maintain control. Shaking himself, he looked down at her. "Lass, if you do not stop, I think I will have a need to throw you onto that bed and ravish you completely."

Merrick did not wait for an answer as he hauled her into his arms and carried her over to the bed. He stood her on the floor and quickly pulled the clothing from her body. When she stood before him naked and proud, lovelier than anything he had ever seen in his life, he was astonished at the rare treasures she offered to him. Her breasts rose and fell rapidly with her passion, and he pulled her into his arms for a heated kiss, one that had her leaning weakly against his body. He picked her up and placed her on the bed. He then joined her there, pulling the coverlet over them both.

Tambre pushed Merrick back against the sheets as she crawled on top of him and settled herself over his hard length that pulsed with his excitement. It was her turn to cry out her pleasure as he filled her with the fervor she so desperately craved, had wanted for her own. She rocked her hips over him, slowly so as to make the seduction last as long as she could. She closed her eyes, lost in the sensations. He felt wonderful inside of her, and she groaned as his hands went to her breasts, which swelled with passion. The flames of her desire heightened to a blazing inferno, and still she continued the slow but eager assault.

Merrick turned her under him then as he could no longer bear her tantalizing performance, and grasped her firm bottom as he raised her knees to his waist. He heard her moan his name and clutch his back tightly, digging her fingernails into his flesh in her enthusiasm. He thrust into her time and again, coming nearer to his release. She felt like the finest of silk as she surrounded him with her grasping heat, pulling him further and further into the sweet boundaries of her sensual hunger.

Her thirst of him was as great as his own, and he could only continue to give in to her pleadings, thrusting deep within her silky desire that had spun an unbreakable web of lust around his heart. She cried out her pleasure as her desire sent pulsing waves over his manhood, ultimately releasing him of his own pleasure as well. He felt the liquid heat of her surround him and he buried his hands in her hair, kissing the sweet lips that begged him never to stop. His thrusts slowed to a stop and he smiled as she grasped his buttocks, pulling him tighter against her as she ground her hips teasingly over his own. She ran her hands up over his back, finally smoothing his hair from his face.

They were quiet for a long while, their tender kisses the only communication between them. He rolled his weight from her body, and she followed him, throwing her leg over his hip, pulling him close to her chest. She kissed his face a thousand times over, and he wondered how he had ever lived without her. She was his, now and forever, their hearts to beat as one.

He slept then, in her arms, and woke to the dim light of the fire a few hours later. It was chilled in the chamber, and he kissed her as he moved away from her warmth to put more logs into the ashes that still held hot tiny embers. As he stood and looked at the cinders licking flames over the logs, his spirit, his very soul was full of contentment. The woman he was to wed filled his heart with a deep longing and made him lightheaded with her closeness. He felt the grip upon his heart tighten, being pulled from his chest by her hands, and knew that he would love her for the rest of his days.

He mused that it must be the lovemaking they had shared that had his emotions whispering the perception of sweet love, but he knew it was not true. He did love her with a true passion that he had no understanding of before now. He wanted her by his side every minute of every day, and he wanted to love her as often as he could. She was to be his wife, and he wished that it were so now, knowing in his heart that he ached to hear her say that she loved him, too. He sighed his happiness, allowing it to fill his heart to overflowing.

He looked at her sleeping form and his heart lurched at how lovely she was. In time, he knew that he could make her love him. He knew that he could.

Tambre stretched and kept her eyes closed as she inhaled the scent of their lovemaking from just hours before. She reached over and found him gone from her bed and, upon further

inspection, from her chamber. She laid her head back, opening her eyes, and felt a smile curl her lips at the corners even as she felt the disappointment of his absence surround her. She felt her heart become full of a new emotion that even she did not think she was capable to have for a man. It was a spark of love, and it filled her with wonder. Closing her eyes, his handsome face formed before her, a seductive smile upon his lips. She smiled again, and bit her bottom lip gently as she recalled the passion they had shared. She moaned, thinking how sweet it had been, wanting more of the same even now.

Getting herself up, she pulled the coverlet from her body and shivered as the chill of the chamber enveloped her. Going over to the fireplace, she placed two logs on top and stood nearby as the heat finally reached her. Pulling her velvet gown over her head once again she sat in her chair before the fire and gazed into the licking flames, thinking of Merrik.

Merrik viewed her from the open chamber door, watching as she curled herself into the chair, bringing her knees up to her chin and wrapping her arms around her legs. She rested her chin upon her knees and he felt the constant longing for her stir in his chest. He wondered if he would always feel this way, as he did now, and knew that he would. How could he not? She was his life now, a truly passionate woman that was his alone, and she always would be. He closed the door behind him silently as he made his way to stand in front of her.

She looked up at him with a grin as he walked into the room. He knelt on one knee before her, grasping her hand in both of his, bringing it to his lips for a tender kiss. His eyes intent upon hers, he reached out a hand and brushed the golden curls from her lovely face.

"I have brought some bread and wine, lass." His whispered words softly caressed her face as he leaned into her for a sweet kiss.

It took her breath away. He pulled back and smiled at her, then stood. She watched as he placed a tartan cloth of green and blue upon the floor before the fire. His clan colors. He then went and got the small repast, settling it upon the cloth in a neat fashion. Reaching a hand out for her, she placed her palm next to his gladly as he pulled her to her feet, and led her to the cloth. She stared into his pale emerald eyes for a long moment, not wanting to lose contact with his body. She reached out a gentle hand to touch his face, sliding her fingertips down his neck and then over his chest.

"My thanks." Her words swept over his body, caressing his soul. She leaned into him

then, not hungry for the bread or wine but hungry for his touch, a touch that would send her to the repast she so dearly craved, one that she desperately wanted. Her lips touched his softly and she felt his arms enfold her within his power, holding her, not letting her go.

He felt her urgent need, and knew that his was just as great. Would he ever get her out of his soul long enough to regain his own thoughts? He hoped that he never would. She was all that mattered to him now, and after slowly sliding her gown from her sensual body, he picked her up into his arms, carrying her to her bed.

He kissed her gently and softly, bringing forth new emotions that mingled with their passion's flame, encasing them both with the untamed heat of their heart's desire. Her need of him was immense, and he held on to her, filling her with his devotion and a love that encircled his heart, his very soul.

Tambre whispered his name as her hands roamed over his chest, feeling the muscles tightening under her touch. And as her need to be closer to him grew, she felt his hardened chest press into her own, rubbing her gently, softly, willing her nipples to stand erect and ready for his heated strokes, the sweet assault of his hot tongue. His long hair hung over his shoulders and she laid her head against the softness of the dark, silken waves. She closed her eyes as his mouth took in one nipple and sucked softly, even as he whispered her name over and over again, encouraging her passion to take flight.

She ran her hands over his shoulders, squeezing the tight muscles and moaning her pleasure as his tongue trailed down over her belly and into the silken folds of her center. She spread her legs wider as she gasped her pleasure, wanting him to take her offering with no barriers in his way. His tongue was hot velvet, laving over her swollen flesh and dipping inside to taste of her sweet nectar. She tossed her head from side to side, whispering his name, begging him to take her, to sedate the ache of longing that tightened her body, waiting for the wondrous release that would be hers.

Merrik laved his tongue over her soft flesh and felt her heat emanate around him. Her scent drove him to near madness, seeming to surround him, setting his mind on nothing but loving her. He parted from her long enough to pull his own clothing from his body and then lowered himself over her. He came into her outstretched arms readily and dove into her heat with an urgency that left him breathless and wanting so much more. She surrounded him with

her love, her very heat, a heat that had his head spinning and his senses begging for more.

He felt her place her long legs around his waist and he began to kiss her ravenously, even as he grasped her firm bottom, pulling her tighter into him, making her sweetly devour his entire pulsing length. She felt so delicious, tasted so very intoxicating that he felt as if his breathing would never slow, that he would never want any other taste upon his tongue but her ever again. Her hands roamed over his back and down to his own bottom, where she forcefully pulled him into her, groaning with the tantalizing sensation again and again until he burst forth with the powerful feelings of the complete sated hunger of his lust. She pulsed lusciously around his hard length and he knew that during their heated moment of passion, she had given him all of herself, holding nothing back.

Tambre gazed into his passion filled eyes and cupped her hands around his face. He still lay atop her, but she did not want him to move. She tenderly kissed his pliant lips, and when she looked at him again, she knew she was not alone in the emotions that raged through her very being. She had lost more than just a battle of wills. She had lost her heart as well.

"You have my heart, Merrik," she whispered next to his lips as she smoothed her hand over his hair, brushing it from his face. She did not care if his feelings mirrored her own. It was enough to know that he enjoyed their time spent together as much as she did.

Merrik's heart stopped suddenly, and then began to beat rapidly in his chest. Had she just professed her love?

"Lass, if you offer your heart to me, I gladly accept. I shall cherish it for an eternity." He kissed her softly, looking into her deep sapphire eyes. "I offer you my own heart, for you have held it since I first laid eyes upon you."

She wound her arms around his neck, smiling at him. "I will treasure it always."

And she showed him exactly how much.

Chapter Twelve

The next day, Tambre was up and outdoors before the castle had even started to stir. She knew that this was her last day to go to the places that she held so dear to her heart. Riding Majesty at a break-neck speed, she let the destrier have his head. On his own, the destrier came to an outcropping of trees and stopped suddenly, snorting loudly into the white mist that clung heavily around them.

Alarm filled her as she placed a hand on his neck to soothe him, while her other hand pulled the sword from her side silently. She had learned that the instincts of her destrier far outreached her own. If he had heard a sound not normal, then she had better heed the warning. Slipping from his back, she quietly took two steps. She stopped when Majesty gave a great snort, shaking his head. She heard the hoof beats before she could actually distinguish from which direction they came, and a deep, cold dread filled her being.

William came before her suddenly, his face a mask of pain and sorrow. He held a hand to his chest, and when he looked down at her, blood poured from a wound under his hand, turning the snow white tunic he wore a deep crimson.

"William!" Tambre rushed forward, and tried to reach for his outstretched hand. It seemed that for each step she took onward, his destrier took two steps back. She screamed his name again, and dropped her sword, running now.

William was shaking his head sadly, yelling for her to go before they came for her. He pulled tightly upon the reins and the destrier reared, flailing his massive hooves in her direction.

Tambre screamed his name once more before his body was set upon from a group of crows that swooped from out of the mist, their great black wings hiding his form from her sight. She swung out suddenly, realizing that she had dropped her sword, so she moved forward, grabbing at the crows with her hands and twisting the wings until she heard the bones crack. She continued on and it seemed for every bird she would disable, two more would come in its place.

William's anguished cries of pain brought her suddenly from the dream with a jolt.

Her body was covered in a cold sweat and she felt drained of energy as she sat up in the comforts of her own bed. Covering her face with her hands, she breathed deeply to calm the

rapid beat of her heart. The dream had certainly been a terrifying nightmare. She dashed the horrible scene from her mind. She became aware that a fire crackled in the fireplace nearby so she threw the coverlet from her body, and went to stand naked before the warmth.

Leaning on the mantle for support, her eyes closed slowly as her breathing returned to normal. What an awful way to wake to a new morn! Relief flooded her mind as she finally released a small laugh and opened her eyes to stare into the yellow fire. Never had she been so frightened. She shivered suddenly and realized that she still stood naked in the chilled room. She pulled the coverlet from her bed and went to stand in front of the fire again, her eyes staring straight ahead as the dream replayed in her mind...over and over again.

Coming down to the great hall to break her fast, Tambre immediately saw Merrik and a flood of emotions went through her. When their eyes met his face sported a deep smile, bringing out his deep dimples and making him too striking for words. She inhaled softly, giving him a grin and a quick wink.

He walked toward her and came to a stop less than a foot away, taking her hand and bringing it to his lips.

"Lass." His smile was endearing and his eyes held a desire of lusty hunger that made her nearly gasp out loud with want.

"My lord. I see that there is an appetite about you. Come, sit by my side and let us break our fast together."

He nodded his acceptance of her offer, knowing that there was more to the invitation than just food and wine. He seated her and then took the chair beside her as his heart skipped a beat at the smile she bestowed upon him. She was lovely, dressed in a pale gray woolen gown that was cut low at the neck and showed off a generous display of full breasts. He tried to turn his attention to the food, but that was not what he wanted for his repast. He wanted her taste upon his tongue, and nothing would stop this ache of passion's hunger but her.

They ate fresh bread with butter, slices of ham and cheese with a tankard of wine shared between the two of them. Tambre looked at him over the rim of the tankard and slowly took a drink. She licked her lips enticingly, for his benefit, and then set the tankard back in its place

upon the table.

"It would seem that you are still hungry, my lady. Is there anything that I can bring to you to stave the raging need I see in your eyes?" He leaned forward, kissing her cheek softly.

"There is. I would ask that you bring me the desire I see upon your face, the one that matches what I feel in my heart. If you can accommodate my wishes, then, yes, take me to my chamber and love me well, my lord." Her eyes delved into his, and she gave him a half smile. "I would tempt you to take what I offer. 'Tis not something that I give to you without a condition, however."

Intrigued, he raised his brows at her. His dimples appeared in his cheeks as he conjured up the image of her beneath him, lost in her passion. He leaned next to her, lightly kissing her neck just below her ear.

"You have made my blood boil, Tambre. And I would accept any condition you set before me, for I find my need of the sweets you offer a delicious temptation I am willing to feast upon. What would you do if I hauled you over my shoulder in front of every being in this great hall and carried you to my chamber where I would give you such sweet love, you would be begging me to give you the release you sought. Again...and again...and again."

"I would not say you nay. I would even grasp your hand and pull you after me in my haste to see the deed you promise done." Her smile deepened, and she watched as his eyes became a deeper shade of emerald. "I would not hide my desire for you, not now, and not ever."

Feeling his own desire heighten with her seductive words, Merrik placed his hand over hers, squeezing lightly. "Then take my hand, my lady, and lead the way, for I am full and hard with my wanting. Have a care, though. My father watches both of us now as I speak."

Tambre gripped his hand and smiled as she stood, pulling him up after her. "I care not who watches us. You are to be my husband. And why should a wife not desire her own man? Why do I need to hide this maddening obsession you bring out in me?"

Merrik hid his smile as she pulled him behind her in her quest to make it to the stairs that would lead them on their path to ecstasy. Side by side they walked until they were out of sight of the throngs of people in the hall, making their way above. After reaching the landing, Tambre pulled the hem of her gown up in her hand and took the stairs two at a time. A deep rumble of laughter escaped his lips as he followed her quickly to her chamber, where they bolted the door

from the inside to keep intruders out. They did not want to be disturbed.

Heated kisses started the path to another place where they left the real world behind. Shedding their clothes quickly, they melded together in body and mind, taking their passion onward.

Tambre pulled his lips down to hers as she wrapped her arms around his neck, pushing him backwards until he touched the edge of the bed. Running her fingertips over his chest, she pushed him suddenly, and climbed on top of him, straddling his hips as he landed suddenly on the bed. She moved over him like liquid silk, leaving not an inch of his flesh untouched or laved by her tongue. His taste upon her tongue made her hungry for the throbbing shaft that she took between her lips and suckled softly.

His moans of pleasure filled the chamber, and she found herself on her back abruptly, as her legs were being parted. She felt his fingers roam over her wet flesh softly, and then delve inside to find the heat of her being. There he stayed, slowly moving in and out, making her wild with the seduction his hands played over her. She moaned with the pleasure he brought to her, raising her hips to meet his fingers, those luscious fingers that smoothed over her time and again, to bring such melting delight to her soul.

Merrik touched her center, feeling her heat, her splendid wetness, and he groaned his pleasure at the thought of what awaited him. She encircled his hardness, pulsing around him as he plunged into her softness, nearly spilling his seed as he did so. He stopped with a harsh breath and waited as he kissed her sweet lips, whispering into her ear that she was his. When he felt that he could go on, he started slowly, making sure she felt every inch of him as he withdrew and then slid smoothly inside time and again. He smiled as she wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him roughly into herself, moaning her desire for him. He felt her hands drift slowly over his back as she kissed his neck and left a path of fire across his skin.

Tambre wiggled her hips enticingly in a circular motion, bringing forth a sensation of true enjoyment. His weight upon her body felt good to her and she grasped his firm buttocks, pulling him into her harder. He felt like a fire inside of her and she whispered his name, telling him to give her the release that she so desperately needed. She pushed him to his back and took control, moving over him with a steady rhythm until her cries mingled with his as they both felt the wonderful jolt of pure pleasure that coursed its way through to their very cores.

Merrik gathered her into his arms and he kissed the lips that had given him such pleasure moments before. She was becoming his entire life and it alarmed him to think that she held such power over him. He grinned to himself and thought that the power did not bother him as much as if he should ever lose her. He held her tightly to him then, not wanting to let her go.

Gathering her possession into two trunks, Tambre wistfully looked about her chamber one last time. She would miss this castle, but knew that her visits would be often. Being only a one day ride away, she felt that if the need arose she could be here within half that time.

She pulled her cloak tighter about her form and closed her eyes. She was going to a new dwelling, a new life; one that she would share with Merrik. She smiled as she opened her eyes. What new adventures would befall her was only in one's imagination, and as she turned to head for the chamber door she felt the need for those new adventures.

Giving her mother and father her farewell was harder than she thought it would be. Tears sprang to her eyes as she hugged her mother closely to her. She was her friend and she would miss the gentle reprimands.

Standing in front of her father, her look became one of abatement. Remembering what William Wallace had told her, she smiled.

"My father," she began softly. "I wish to thank you for this union. I feel that Merrik is my true match, and I shall love him for an eternity."

Elwain pulled his daughter into his arms and closed his eyes. "I am glad that you have seen the man for who he truly is. He will be good to you, and I do hope that you will not pain him overly much."

Tambre gave a small laugh, turning twinkling eyes to her father's face. "To keep the spice of life, I fear that small pains will be in my agenda for some time. He will expect no less, I would wager."

Elwain roared with his mirth, and hugged his daughter once more. "We shall see you in a fortnight, my dear. Stay safe." He kissed her cheek and sent her on her way.

Saying farewell to her two brothers was harder than she expected as well. Tristan had elected to accompany her to Farlynn Castle and would stay as a guest until the union of his sister took place. Derrick and Galwain promised to follow her in a week's time so that they could be

sure of her safe surroundings as well.

Merrik waited for her, holding the reins of Majesty as she turned from her family and made her way through the throngs of well wishers. Coming to stand in front of him finally, she gazed at him with those deep sapphire eyes that promised him happiness beyond his wildest dreams. She grasped the reins from his hand, giving him a gentle caress as she did so, and bounded up on the destrier's back, looking down at him with a look of sensual longing.

He swallowed at her intent and then laughed at her mother's outrage in her dress. Under the well concealing cloak she wore a tunic of dark green with hose in the same shade and an under tunic of deep blue. His clan colors. Black boots encased the slim legs to her knees and the ever present belt that held her sword was strapped around her waist.

Merrik appreciated her attire, for to him she was breathtaking. She pleased him by wearing his colors and he promised himself that he would see her spread out upon his plaid this very eve. He knew she would look stunning with the soft cloth draped around her body...and nothing beneath. He cleared his throat then and saw the obvious spark of naughtiness that lit her eyes.

"My lord, do you wish for me to change my attire?" She leaned over the destrier's neck to whisper into his ear, "I have seen the longing in your heated gaze, and it warms my body. I would strip bare and ride, for the heat you send my way will keep the chill from my flesh this day."

"Although I would wish for nothing more, I must decline." He placed a soft kiss upon her lips and smiled at the resounding cheers around them. "I am to be most selfish and keep the lovely treasures you hold all to myself. I fear I would have to use my blade like a madman to fend off the ones who would try to taste of your sweets. Those sweets I will save for myself."

She sat straight in her saddle then and smiled down at him. He was so very beautiful and she felt her heart fill with a desire for him that was immense. Seeing the look in his eyes, she made a plea.

"My lord, surely there is breathtaking scenery that you would wish to show me on our journey. I would welcome the diversion." Her meaning clear, she waited for his response.

"Aye, there is. As I am sure there are parts of your surroundings that you would have me see as well."

“Just a short pace up the road. ‘Tis a place that you will never wish to leave.” Her eyes burned into his as the invitation was clearly spoken.

“I shall follow you, my heart. But make haste! What you have described sounds too good to be true. I wish to see for myself and linger a while, if we dare.”

During the journey, Merrik and Tambre had stolen away twice to sedate the passion that nearly consumed them both. Their lust for the moment brought them a satisfaction of the love that whispered in their heads and stole the breath from their lungs. Neither wanted to continue on, but wanted to stay in each others arms and caress the aches that heightened their desire.

With a promise to spend this eve in his arms, Tambre was satisfied that the longing and want she found in his touch would soon be hers for an eternity. His smoldering kisses left her heart beating fast in her chest, and when he had exposed his wonderful body to her gaze as he lay her down upon his plaid to make love to her again, she felt a new sensation as her mind conjured up wickedly erotic images of how she would seduce him this night. She thanked Embra in silence as she was swept away from this world to a new place where nothing mattered but him.

Farlynn Castle was massively huge, and Tambre gazed at the place with wide eyes. It sat upon a craggy mountain of rock, appearing to have been carved out of the hard substance. There were two inner baileys and a huge outer bailey that she knew she would get lost in if she did not take care. The massive gate tower let down the iron bridge over the natural bog that surrounded the castle as the party was spotted from miles away. The horses' hooves clanged loudly on the iron and Tambre stared in wonder at the place that was to be her new home.

The castle itself was just as impressive. It rose four stories into the sky and as she tilted her head back, she hoped that her chamber would be on the second story. Just if the need arose to make a quick escape, she assured herself. The four steps that led up to the huge entry door were worn with age but still in excellent condition.

Merrik grasped her around the waist, and set her on the cobbled stone that lined the front of the castle. His eyes lit with his satisfaction that she found her new home to be very pleasing. Taking her arm, he led her up the steps and through the huge door.

The great hall loomed before her with massive exposed rafters and tables filling the place to capacity. A huge fireplace occupied the center of the room and she looked in amazement at

the huge round base of gray stone that lifted upwards to the ceiling and then disappeared out the roof. There was a fire blazing now, and it could be seen from every direction, emanating heat throughout the area. Behind the fireplace, a set of hand honed stone steps led to the second story, disappearing behind the rafters.

Merrik bowed before her and welcomed her to her new home, his eyes alight with a promise of making her happy for the rest of her life.

On the second level, Tambre was shown to her room, a large bed chamber with a smaller sitting room to one side. The bed was massive, and as she looked at the size Merrik came up behind her, whispering into her ear.

"This is where our chamber will soon be. As soon as we are wed, I shall join you here." He kissed her cheek and grinned. "I will be spending my time here before we wed; however, this shall remain between us."

She turned in his arms, and a smile lit her eyes. "Even after today's journey you still have not been sated?"

"Have you, my lady?"

"Nay, I have not." She bit her lower lip, and looked again at the bed. "I fear it is too large for only one person. And if you could manage to be here in the eve every night, it would make me feel," she turned a seductive gaze his way, "so much more at home."

He leaned down and captured her lips with his own. It was meant to be a quick kiss, but instead it turned out to be one of breathless abandon. Her arms went about his neck to feather through his soft hair, running her hands over his back, feeling the sinew and strength of him.

Not wanting the endearment to end, Merrik sighed as he parted from her, the look in his eyes a promise of sure ecstasy when next they met.

He led her up to the third level where all of his brothers' chambers were, including his own and his father's, and then up to the fourth level. That floor housed the knights with higher stature and boasted an armory where they could store items not in use and also a mark for the expert bowmen. It was also used as a look out point and as they stepped out onto the roof towers, Tambre caught her breath at the site below. She could see to the very horizon in three directions. The view was absolutely lovely with the forests and serf homes scattered here and there. Large fields were being worked in as serfs gathered the late wheat that would be stored for

the winter use. Apple trees lined one side of the first bailey, and busy workers climbed to and fro collecting the sweet fruit.

“’Tis beautiful,” Tambre breathed after a few moments. “I have never seen anything so wonderful. I feel I could reach up and touch the sky if I have a mind to.”

“This has been in my father’s family for as long as the Douglas Clan goes back. It was built to withstand the perils of fight and weather with very little maintenance. It is my home.” He looked down at her when she turned to smile up at him. “It is your home. And it will be the home of our children.”

Tambre’s smile deepened and she tilted her head to the left, viewing him with a critical eye. “I had not thought of children.” Her eyes held a mischievous glint in the deep blue depths as she continued. “I dare say that I could be carrying our first child right now, being that you have seduced me more in one day than I can count on one hand.”

Merrik, threw back his head, and roared with laughter. He felt his heart fill with joy at the thought of her belly swelling with his seed. Their child. “Perhaps it is so. But if not, we shall enjoy the trying.” Laughter bubbled up in his chest then. “Again and again, if need be!”

Chapter Thirteen

The noon meal was a social affair as everyone, it seemed, wanted to meet Merrik's intended. Tambre smiled so much that her face hurt, and she was glad that she had changed into a more respectable gown of pale blue velvet. The names that swam in her head as every man, woman and child was made known to her made her head hurt. Merrik stayed by her side, greeting each person by name and Tambre felt a deep affection for him by everyone he introduced her to. He held on to her hand and did not let go until they were finally seated at a small table by the west wall.

"My lord, 'tis wonderful that you have so many here who adore you." Tambre took a long drink of her wine, and set the tankard back in front of her. Her eyes scanned the great hall, amazed at how many bodies could fit into the room. She spotted Tristan across the hall conversing with Merrik's brothers, glad that he seemed to be enjoying himself. She turned her attention back to Merrik and smiled at his passionate gaze.

"The only adoration I care for is from you." He leaned over and whispered into her ear, "I would have you now, my heart, but alas, my father watches closely and will not relinquish his gaze until this eve when he knows that you are safely locked into your chamber."

"Well then, I shall just have to thwart his well thought of plans. After the pleasure I have found in your arms, I would have them wrapped around me every chance that I can beg you to do so."

"No begging is needed." His gaze turned daring as he leaned forward and kissed her lips softly. "I would do so freely."

"Merrik!"

The bellow of his father brought a smile to her lips as she looked at him over the rim of her tankard. "I believe he watches a little too closely."

Merrik stood and went to his father's side, leaning over the table slightly but still keeping his eyes trained upon Tambre across the hall.

Tambre took that moment to look around the hall at all the people that she had met earlier, but could not recall any names. She knew that it would take some time for her to get

acquainted with some of them, and others she knew she would not see again at all. One man in particular stood out from the rest and she viewed him with interest as he stood talking with another clansman. He was tall and wide shouldered, with short cropped red hair, and steel gray eyes. He had seemed familiar to her, and she searched her mind to try and remember where she had seen him before.

"I step away for a moment, and I catch you looking at other men in my short absence." Merrik stood behind her with his hand upon the hilt of his sword.

Tambre raised her brows as she looked up at him. "Oh, my lord, you are mistaken." Her grin was infectious and he finally smiled at her, his dimples popping out in his cheeks. "I just happened to see that man over there and he looked familiar to me. I believe I have seen him at Lockbourne, but I was not certain."

Merrik took his place beside her once again, shrugging. "I do not know who that one is. Although for him to pass through these walls, he would have to be the friend of a clansman that my father knows. Very few are permitted to come and go as they please." He looked at her, and leaned over to whisper in her ear, "My father says for me to try and control the lustful looks that he has seen upon my face since the day before."

"Well then, I suppose we shall need to occupy our time in a different manner."

"And you have an idea, I suppose?" His eyes twinkled with the thought of being alone with her that eve, and all other ideas would most undoubtedly mean very little to him at the moment. "Tell me what is on your mind, fair maiden. I shall deliver it to you with the utmost chivalry."

"I wish to see your training field. My sword is above in my chamber, and I feel lost without the thing hanging by my side." She lowered her eyes and smiled, thinking how the people at Farlynn would react to her attire.

"That can be arranged, lass. But for right now, I see my two brothers approaching with their wives in tow."

Tambre followed Merrik's gaze and saw that Gernald and Gray each approached. She stood when they came to stand in front of their table and she grinned at the small, petite women.

"My lady, may I introduce to you my lovely wife, Crysteline." Gernald gave a warm smile to the petite woman at his side.

Tambre caught her breath at the woman's face, for she was truly a vision. Her hair was left unbound, hanging to her knees in waves of the richest chestnut color she had ever seen. The woman's eyes were kind; the vibrant color of a deep green matched that of her velvet gown. And when she smiled, her face took on the glow of an angel.

Crysteline bowed her head formally. "My lady Tambre." Her voice was melodic, and soft. "Welcome to our home. I am sure you will be very happy here."

Tambre smiled, and inclined her head. "My thanks."

"And this is my hellion of a bride, Reanna." Gray smiled proudly as the buxom red head at his side gave him a quick jab in his ribs.

"Pay no heed to his words, Tambre." Reanna gave her a mischievous half smile. "He has not yet seen my true rebellious side as of yet. But when he does, he will rue the day he asked for my hand!"

Tambre laughed along with the others and decided that Reanna was more like herself; a true hellion. The woman was a rebel, for sure, and it nearly emanated from the snapping deep brown eyes and the lazy smile upon her lovely face. Her flaming red hair fell in huge curls down her back and she stood with a stance of ever alertness, ready for an attack.

"And I am sure that Merrik will be feeling that way soon as well." She smiled at him, and then laughed at his raised brow expression.

"I have been put through quite a bit from you over the last week and a half, lass. I am sure to keep those words in my mind, but be warned that my wrath will keep you in check."

Tambre snorted a small laugh which had his brothers grinning from ear to ear. "Your wrath will do little to curb my nature. You above all people should know that by now."

When Gray explained how the two had first met, and how the wrath of Merrik had left him with several stitches in his forearm, both women laughed, but it was Reanna who leaned forward and gave her a warm smile.

"Gray has been taught many a lesson as well, my lady. He hates that I can position my bow and arrow at any mark, hitting the target true every time. I best all of his clansmen on the training field."

"Aye, that she does!" Gray agreed, and planted a warm kiss upon his wife's red lips. "She has made us quite rich with the coin she has gained from her contests."

"Truly?" Tambre was intrigued. "I was just requesting a tour of the training field from Merrik. I would love to see it."

"Then let us all go and change." Crysteline suggested. "I have a need to go there myself."

As the three women walked away chatting about the weapons of choice that each had, the three brothers looked from one to the other, smiles lighting their faces.

"I think Tambre shall be very happy here," Gernald stated as he clapped Merrik on the back.

"Aye, and I think that all three of us are in deep trouble." Merrik's smile deepened as he crossed his arms over his chest, watching Tambre disappear up the stairs.

Tambre's smile broadened when she saw Tristan approach. She took off her helmet and set her blade tip in the ground. "Did you come to participate, or did you come to observe?" She stood at one corner of the training field having just finished sparring with Crysteline. Since her arrival at Farlynn several days past, the three women had accompanied one another to the training fields every day and were becoming the best of friends.

He kissed her lightly on the cheek and looked over her shoulder as Reanna took an arrow, sending it through the center of the target. "I prefer to watch."

She grinned and turned to Reanna when the woman called her name. "I will be just a moment." Turning back to Tristan, her eyes narrowed suddenly at his stern countenance. "What is amiss?"

"There is a man at Farlynn who has asked about you. He is speaking to Merrik in private."

"Who is he, and what does he want with me?" She irritably brushed back the strands of hair that floated before her face.

"I do not know. Perhaps you should inquire." He shot her a look of concern, and lowered his voice. "I believe he works for the English obtaining information about the robberies from innocent travelers."

Tambre gave a short laugh and grabbed her sword out of the ground, sheathing it and turning towards the castle, Tristan close at her heels. This was something that she dare not miss

out on.

Merrik regarded the man who sat across from him with a frown. "I am sure you are mistaken."

"I can assure you that I am not. And you have said so yourself that you have only just met the wench not two weeks before." The smile upon the face was sardonic. "How could you even say me nay on this? You could not have known."

"I will not let you take her from here." Merrik's words were said from behind gritted teeth. His hands balled into fists under the table, and he certainly hoped the arrogant bastard would say something to give him an excuse to use them. "You will need to find yourself from this castle, and do so quickly. My clansmen will not take this news of your threat lightly."

Baron John Monteith's face became red with his anger. He ran a hand over his short cropped red hair and finally looked up from his lap to deliver the man across from him his most authoritative look. "You have no choice in the matter. If the wench is found not guilty, then she will be let go to do as she pleases. But for now she will need to come with me, and I will see that she gets a fair trial."

"You have already found her guilty, it would seem." Merrik stood, and leaned over the table at the man, bringing his face within inches of the Baron's. "'Tis best that you take your leave, and do so now."

Baron Monteith's eyes widened and he leaned back in his chair. He cleared his throat, managing a tight smile. "'Tis nothing to get so upset--"

"I said now." Merrik's voice was low as he leaned away from the man, sitting back down. "If you choose, I will have you removed."

The Baron stood suddenly, and touched his hand to the hilt of his sword. He was immediately surrounded by Merrik's five brothers who had been behind hidden panels around the room. Each brought forth a sword, and the look in all of their eyes bid the man to tempt them into action.

Taken by surprise, the Baron relinquished his hand from his sword, and let it fall slowly to his side. "If need be, I will--"

"Do what you think is best, but," Merrik stood once again, and moved around the table to

stand directly in front of the Baron, his eyes narrowed to slits in his rage, "you are warned not to step foot on the boundaries of Farlynn again. If you do, and we will be watching, make no mistake, you will regret the day you did."

Baron Monteith's lips tightened into a thin line, and he said not another word as he took his leave, three of Merrik's brothers following in his wake.

Merrik cursed, and slammed his fist onto the thick wooden table top. "Where is Tambre?"

"I believe that she is at the training field with Crysteline and Reanna." Broswin sheathed his sword, and leaned against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. "Is there truth to what the man has said?"

"Exactly what did he say, and I will tell you if he lies." Tambre stepped into the room, her face void of any emotion. Tristan stood behind her, closing the door from prying ears.

Merrik faced her, and his body relaxed to find that she was safe in his presence. "Did you pass the Baron on the way up?"

"If you refer to the man that had your brothers surrounding him, then yes, I did." She moved further into the chamber, and went to face Merrik. "What has he said to you?"

"Leave us." Merrik waited until the room was vacant before he pulled her into his arms, hugging her to his chest. She felt warm next to his body, feeling her heat radiate through his clothing. He sighed and tilted her chin up so that she looked directly into his eyes. He said nothing as he stared at her, and he knew without even asking that the accusations the Baron had told him were true.

"Well?" Tambre pushed away from him, and waited for his answer.

"The Baron John Monteith wanted to take you to his holding and keep you there for questioning by the English government."

She raised her brows at him, but said nothing as he continued.

"He has said that you have been identified as a highwayman in several robberies of English nobility." His face hardened at her amused look. "This is not a game, Tambre! He meant to take you away!"

"He would not have gotten far, I can assure you, so rest easy." She wiped the smile from her face, and crossed her arms over her chest. "He is mistaken." She could tell by the look on

his face that he did not believe her one whit.

“Tambre, this is a serious accusation. You could be put in a prison cell and tried for this act.” He ran a hand through his hair trying to still his agitation with her uncaring mood.

“Oh, let them do what they will!” She became angry now and paced in front of him. “Don’t you see? They want to use me to get at William. They know how close we are, but what they do not know is that he would never come to my rescue. His cause is too important to risk, and my neck in a noose would not deter his on-going mission.” She stopped in front of him then and looked into his angry green eyes. “I would give my life for him, but he would not risk being caught and taken to London. He cannot! The filthy English pigs would surely kill him if he did!”

“And what about you? You would have not a care for your husband in all of this?” He gripped her shoulders in a biting hold. “Do you not care for what they would take from me? I would care if they took you. Damn me, woman, take heed.”

She shook off his hands and took a step back, her eyes shooting flames of fury. “I have told you that he is mistaken. Take me at my word.” She turned from him then, intending to leave the chamber. He caught her arms and pulled her back against him, his hard chest against her back.

He leaned his head down next to her ear, and whispered, “I would give my life to protect and keep you safe.” He gave her a gentle kiss on her neck. “Right or wrong, know that I will.” He released her then and walked over to the window, leaning on the rough stone that surrounded it, staring out at the vast land that had been in his family for centuries. He closed his eyes sadly when he heard the door quietly open and then shut.

Chapter Fourteen

Tambre leaned a hand against the door. She had wanted to walk out, had even opened the door to do so, but something he had said stopped her. *I would give my life to protect and keep you safe.* She closed the door and quietly turned in his direction. He had his back to her and she viewed his form, smiling. His long black hair hung in waves to his waist and she viewed his broad shoulders and muscled back with adoration. On silent feet she approached him, and felt her heart grow heavy as he bowed his head.

"Merrik," she whispered his name, but in the silence of the room, it sounded deafening.

Merrik turned to her voice, and felt his heart give way to all the emotions that he had held. He had thought she had gone, would disregard his warnings, but she had not. She stood before him, more beautiful than any angel, reaching out to place her hand over his heart.

She did not speak for a long moment, just stared into his emerald eyes and hoped that he understood the truth of what she was about to tell him.

"I am guilty of what you have been made aware of."

He closed his eyes briefly but remained silent as she continued.

"I would not deceive you, my lord. I am honored by your vow of protection." She smiled at him when he opened his eyes and laid her hand tenderly upon his left cheek. "Please know that I would do the same. Forever I promise this to you."

Merrik enfolded her form in his arms, holding her tightly. He rested his chin upon the top of her head and smiled as she brought her arms around his waist to grip him firmly.

"I had hoped that this was not the truth." He sighed when she stiffened in his arms. "I think you put yourself in danger too much. Know I speak true when I say that your way of life will need to change if you are to have a life with me."

He heard a muffled curse and then she pushed away from him, stepping backwards until she reached the edge of the table.

"How dare you make demands upon me? Damn me, Merrik, let it go." Her fury had returned and she tightened her hands into fists at her sides. "You are not my husband, and if I still had a choice, I would go from here and never return."

She did leave the chamber then, hurt by his words of authority. She rushed to the stables and demanded that her destrier be brought to her. As she waited patiently, she thought of his grief stricken face as she brought home her point. When the stable boy brought out Majesty, Tambre did not wait for him to help her up onto his massive back. She leaped astride him and kicked her heels harshly into his sides, sending him flying across the bailey in a fit of agitation at his master's hurtful ministrations. His hooves rang across the draw bridge and then hit solid ground as she thundered in the direction of her home.

Rage, and then fear, crossed Merrik's features as he watched her leave the safety of the inner bailey. He ordered his own destrier and was thankful that the black had his saddle upon his back already from an earlier ride with one of his brothers. Careful not to run any innocent bystanders over in his haste, he spurred his destrier in the direction he had seen Tambre take. He cursed the silly chit and her wild ways! He had just finished telling her that she was wanted for questioning, and here she goes off, all by herself, like she could fend off anyone or anything. She probably could, but that was not the point! He became angry with himself, wishing he had not told her that she would need to change if she were to live with him. He had meant to scare her, but instead he had driven her away.

He spotted her ahead, cutting into an outcrop of trees. Did she think to elude him in the woods? He knew them like the back of his hand, so if this was her game then she would surely lose! Anger sparked him forward, driving the heels of his boots into his destrier's side, urging him on faster still. He heard a shrill whistle and felt his destrier stop suddenly.

The sudden stop hurled him over the animal's head to land with a thud upon the ground a few feet away. Not moving, Merrik kept his eyes held into slits to view the area around him. He saw no one and nothing, but he heard the snap of branches and the crunch of the crisp leaves as someone crept up behind him. Just as he was preparing himself for an attack, Tambre's face appeared above his, a worried frown across her brow.

"Merrik, are you unhurt?" Her voice was a hesitant whisper, but still held a hint of humor.

Merrik groaned suddenly and held his side, not speaking.

Fear trembled through her body as she thought him truly hurt this time. She knelt beside him and placed a gentle hand upon his right cheek.

"I will go for help. Try not to move." She stood and would have run in the direction of her destrier, but a strong hand reached out to grab her by the ankle, pulling her off balance. She landed in a pile of leaves face first. Sputtering and then cursing as she removed the decaying greenery from her mouth and face, she caught sight of Merrik standing over her, his hands upon his hips. His face was a mask of fury, and she knew that if he had not done her bodily harm thus far, he may just be provoked enough to do so now. She swallowed loudly as she peered up at him with widened eyes, waiting for the attack that was sure to come, whether it be verbally or physically.

"Why did you run like that right after I had told you that you were being sought by John Monteith?" He did not wait for an explanation as he reached down and grabbed her by the shoulders, hauling her to her feet to stand before him in obvious humiliation. "Do you not understand that they mean to do you harm? They want you to stand trial for the robberies that they accuse you of doing. You could hang for this." He thrust her away from him then, knowing that if he did not he would end up beating her within an inch of her life.

She had nothing to say, no words of defense as he paced in front of her, staring her down like one of his clansmen who had done a bad deed, awaiting his punishment. She raised her chin a notch, tightening her hands into fists, daring and hoping that he would come near enough to her so she could at least get in a couple of good swings before his massive weight overpowered her. And when he stepped close enough for the first swing, he easily caught one wrist and then the other, holding on tight as she struggled to remove her hands from his iron hold. Seeing that the hands were of no use, she swung out her foot and delivered him a hurtful blow to the tender shin of his right leg.

Merrik howled in pain but did not release his hold as he cursed a string of foul oaths. Instead, he threw her upon the ground, rolled her over and soundly beat her lovely behind until he heard her muffled cries. Not feeling the least bit sorry for her, he stood then and waited for her to roll over to deliver him the tongue lashing of his life. When she did not move, he crossed his arms over his chest, waiting for her to strike out at him. He did not have long to wait.

Tambre went at him with teeth and claws bared. She was able to deliver a sound crack of her palm to the soft skin of his right cheek. Satisfied as it turned a bright crimson hue, she curled her hand into a fist and swung at his head, not caring what she hit as long as she hit something.

Her knuckles cracked as they connected to his jaw, and then she swung out at the same time with her left hand and caught his right eye. That punch made him stagger backward and she nearly laughed out loud at the hilarity of the scene as he fell over a stump and went crashing down a hill, rolling to the bottom and finally hurtling over a bank, landing back first in a small stream. She heard his curses as she scrambled to her destrier before he caught up to her. She was afraid this time he would do her some serious harm.

Merrik grasped her ankle and pulled her down from the back of her destrier. She landed upon her back with the wind knocked out of her. With both breathing heavily now, he placed his hands upon his knees and stayed in that bent over position until he saw her roll to her side. Her body shook and he thought that she had finally gave in to her situation as any other female would have done. With tears. He was surprised, however, when he knelt beside her, brushing the hair from her face, to find her laughing. He grinned at her and then sat beside her, lying down upon his back. When he turned his head toward her, his lips were only a breath away from her own as he looked at her with the stir of passion in his steady gaze. She was so beautiful, with leaves and other debris in her golden curls, and he felt the need to hold her to him tightly.

Tambre eyed him with suspicion as she sat up and then straddled his hips between her thighs, leaning over to hold his wrists hostage above his head with her gentle hands. She placed her lips upon his and felt the crack of passion that entered her own body just then. Her kiss moved to his neck and she playfully bit the soft skin there, just below his ear. She whispered how she wanted to lay naked with him in these woods and make love to him for as long as they both could stand it. She smiled when his response was a groan of lust, and when she released his hands he grabbed her around the waist, pulling her under him.

He pulled her hose down quickly and then released his throbbing member from his britches. He entered her quickly and thought how he would never tire of this woman. She made him feel whole, complete, and with each thrust he delivered into her, she raised herself up to meet him, moaning his name in a low, seductive voice. He took her lips with a soft groan as he delved his tongue into her yielding mouth, loving how she sucked softly upon him. Her hands roamed up his back and he felt the fleeting hesitation as she arched her back, finding her quick release. But she did not stop. She continued on, meeting him thrust for thrust.

Tambre raised one leg around his thigh and she pushed herself over so that she now sat on

top of him. Moving her hips slowly, she laid her palms upon his chest and felt his heart beat. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes, losing herself within the feel of him inside of her, swelling slightly as she rotated her hips around his hardness. She heard his breath quicken and felt the seed of his being burst inside of her welcoming heat. He continued to throb, bringing forth another wave of molten liquid from her center. She called his name and wondered how she had ever survived her life before she found this man.

Slowly, her body quivering from the intense seductive movements, she brought her eyes back to his. They bore into her soul and she caught her breath at the delicious feeling of satisfaction as it settled around her. The raw, animal passion that they had shared seemed to flow through her still, bringing with it the realization of how much she truly loved this man.

Merrik brushed a few leaves from her hair as he slid his palm down her neck and over her breasts, thinking that they fit his hands to perfection. She had loved him well, for he could barely move without feeling weak and breathless. She had pulled at his heart and held it in her hands now, but he wondered if she knew to what extent his love for her had now become. He wanted to wrap her into his arms and never release her. Never let her leave the circle of his embrace, keeping her there. Forever.

She smiled at him as she stood over him and pulled her hose back into place. Dropping to his side, she kissed him soundly, delving her tongue into his mouth and feeling the softness envelope her senses. She breathed in his scent and loved how the smell of him made her want to take him again. She knew, without a doubt, that she would never tire of him, would always want to be with him for the rest of her days.

She pulled back and looked deeply into his green eyes. He was so very beautiful that she could hardly believe he was her own. And she would fight to keep him; aye, she would. The love she felt for him at this very moment made her think of how very lucky she was to have him. She could never deny the fact that he would always hold her heart, and her life, in his hands.

“What are you thinking, lass?” He gave way to his smile as he brushed back her hair. “I hope ‘tis no more mischief. I think I have had enough of that for one day.”

She laughed at his words and wished she had not been so harsh in her judgment of leaving the safety of the inner bailey. She knew that the dangers lurking behind every corner could come and snatch her up at any time, taking from her all that she cared about in this life.

She shrugged, not wanting him to guess her thoughts.

"I was thinking how my behind hurts like the devil and burns like fire." She grinned at him and kissed the tip of his nose. "I have never been beaten so soundly."

"That I doubt, lass, but you have to understand that I am serious when I say that I will keep you safe." His eyes softened and he kissed her lips gently. "You do not realize how dear you have become to me. I would never jeopardize your happiness, but know that I will not allow you to put yourself in danger's way at every turn."

She contemplated his words and realized that he was right. Why would she jeopardize her own happiness? He was her life now, and he was all that mattered.

"You are right, and I express regret to you for leaving the way I did. I should think before I do, but sometimes I find that my anger works quicker than my head can think reason. It won't happen again. I beg your forgiveness, my lord."

He stood and righted his own clothing, taking her hand in his and pulling her to her feet. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he smiled at her ready affection for him. He tightened his hold when she made a move to exit his embrace, not wanting to give up the rich feel of her in his arms.

"Never leave me again, Tambre," his whispered words were fervent in their meaning. "I would not have you harmed." He kissed her cheek, and then set her from him at arms length. "Promise me that you will abide this rule. Go no further than the inner bailey unless I am with you outside the walls of Farlynn. You may roam freely within the walls. I will know you are safe there."

Tambre nodded, smiling at his worried look. "I can very well take care of myself, my lord, as I have proven to you time and again. Must I remind you that I can?" Her impish smile brought forth a rumble of laughter from his chest, and her smile deepened as she looked at him, admiring the deep dimples in his cheeks. Oh, how handsome he was!

"I shall not challenge your admission, my lady. But I await your promise of my words." He folded his arms across his chest, waiting for her answer.

"I promise, Merrik, if only to make you happy." She bit her tongue at the sharp response she almost threw out at him. No sense in starting another argument that he was likely to lose anyway.

Chapter Fifteen

The day finally arrived for Merrik and Tambre to wed. Her parents had come to Farlynn almost a week ago, and Merrik's mood was not at all light. He had not been able to steal any time away with his betrothed, not one minute alone with the beautiful woman, and his need for her was almost as great as the need for her to finally become his wife. Relatives from both of their families had bombarded Farlynn over the past day in preparation for the three day long festivities that had been planned. A jousting tournament had been scheduled for tomorrow, and Merrik smiled as he remembered hearing Tambre arguing with her father to participate in the event. Of course Elwain had flatly refused, stating that this was the last time he was to give her an order and he expected it to be carried out with no grief. She had conceded to her father's wishes and had left his side with a small bow of her head.

"Any second thoughts?" Broswin clapped his brother on the back, bringing him out of his musings.

"Nay," Merrik smiled, and turned to his brother. "I only wish for tonight to be here so that I may be alone with my bride. I have not seen her at all for two days past."

"Are you sure she is still here?" At Merrik's alarmed look, Broswin smiled and put his brother at ease. "I have seen her just this morn. Have no fear, she has not run away."

Merrik felt the relief rush through his body as he was reassured Tambre was safe. He had caught her on several different occasions outside the walls of Farlynn within the past ten days, and each time she was able to skirt her way past the issue of being alone and change the subject altogether. He grinned. He would keep her locked up in their chamber for the next week, and he dared any man to say him nay. He deserved the repast, and he was looking forward to the rest of his life spent by her side.

Broswin grinned at his brother. "You appear like the besotted whelp anxiously anticipating his first time with a woman."

"Aye, and believe me, this will be an event that neither of us are soon to forget."

Tambre looked out her window to the activity below. Well wishers lined the inner bailey

to full capacity, and she shivered to think that she would have to meet each and every one of them. She knew her face would hurt like the devil this eve after greeting each man, woman and child in turn. She sighed and turned away from the window, busying herself with the finishing touches to her gown. She had obtained from Merrik's father a long sash in the Farlynn plaid, which she would wear over her deep blue velvet gown. She smiled to herself, thinking of the low neckline and how she would wear nothing beneath the gown. She knew Merrik would want it that way.

Sighing, she wished that they had had some time together alone. A smile curled her lips when she thought of how they would not need to hide anymore after today. She heard the door to her chamber open and expected to see her mother. Instead, Merrik appeared in the doorway, giving her a devilish smile.

"I had to see you." He went to her side and gathered her into his arms. His lips touched hers, and the immediate lust he felt every time he came near to her sprung to life. He deepened the kiss, pushing his tongue inside her mouth. He groaned when she sucked lightly upon his tongue as she laved it with her own. "Woman, you sorely tempt me."

"Do I?" She raised her brows at him and grinned seductively. "Then I shall tempt you further and let you know that today I wear nothing beneath my gown." She almost giggled at the darkening of his eyes as he brushed the hair back from her face. "And tempt you again by telling you how, right now, I ache for your touch and await your welcomed entry into—"

His growl of passion stilled her words and she stared at him with a smile. Did they dare, when her mother was due back at any moment?

"I would take you now, but I fear we would be interrupted and not be able to finish our tryst." He kissed her smiling mouth, holding her close to his chest. "I wish this day would end so that I may hold you to me for the whole of the night."

"And you will, my lord. Have no fear."

Merrik waited under the arbor that hung with ivy and vines of wisteria, nearly bare now that the biting cold was entering the lands from the north. The throng of bodies pushed in at him until he thought he would scream for them all to take their leave. He wanted this to be over so that he could take his bride to his bed and love her like she had never been loved before. He

hardened at the thought of the upcoming event and hid a smile as his father came to stand before him, a smile upon his own face.

“Merrik, do you need drink to put your feet in motion to the altar?”

“Nay, I do not. I was about to go there now and await my lovely bride.”

Ian nodded, and was amazed at the transformation in his son over the past few weeks. He swore he would never adhere to this bonding, but now he seemed almost eager for the event to take place.

“And will she drag her feet or does she come as freely as you do?” Ian took a sip from the tankard that he held and looked at his son over the rim.

“I would hope that she comes freely. I have no fear of her running.” He made himself believe his words. From the warm reception he had received from her earlier, he knew his words rang true.

“Then let us go. I am sure that the cleric would like to greet you before the nuptials.”

Merrik nodded and followed his father to the great hall.

A short time later, he stood waiting for his bride to make her appearance. As the minutes ticked by, he shuffled from one foot to the other in obvious nervousness. Thoughts of her shimmying down the side of the castle to make her escape entered his mind and he took a step forward, intending to find out what the delay was.

An audible gasp from those in the hall made his eyes follow the path that was cleared to the stairs that led above. When her eyes set on his she smiled and continued down the steps, her hand resting lightly on her father's arm. She was lovely in her deep blue velvet gown, and he smiled as he caught sight of the plaid of his clan draped over her shoulders to trail behind her. And when his eyes found hers again he did not waver in his gaze, but held hers until she reached his side. Her hair gleamed a brilliant golden hue as she leaned over and gave her father a tender kiss upon his cheek. And when she finally turned to face him, he caught his breath at how beautiful she was.

Tambre held his gaze and reached out her hand to touch his left cheek tenderly. She smiled when the cleric cleared his throat loudly, a sign that they were to begin. She turned toward the impatient cleric, barely hearing the words he spoke as she concentrated on the man beside her. She breathed in his scent and almost let out a moan of desire. He was beautiful with

his long hair hanging in soft waves down his back. His linen shirt was a crisp white, and the kilt he wore was of his clan colors. The belt he wore around his waist hung low with the weight of his sword, and the black boots that encased his muscled legs to his knees shone with a dim hue.

She could see the dimples peeking out in his cheeks and she reached out a hand, entwining her fingers through his. She side-stepped closer to him, feeling the heat of his body flow into her own. And when the cleric blessed their union and presented them as one, Tambre turned to Merrik and smiled. The place remained quiet as every body crammed into the hall craned their necks to witness the bonding seal.

When his head descended slowly toward her, she let go of his hand and wrapped her arms around his neck, eagerly pulling him close. And when his lips were a hairsbreadth from hers, she gave him a small smile.

"I love you, my lord." Her eyes held his as the whispered words reached his ears. The pale emerald orbs drilled into her and made her breathless with their intensity.

Merrik stared at her with a steady gaze, and breathed his words next to her lips, "And I love you. I love you."

When his lips touched hers, a cheer went up in the hall so deafening that the sound carried for miles away. He did not release her but deepened the kiss and pulled her closer to his chest. She was his now, and he would never let any harm come to her. His heart hammered in his chest and he felt rejuvenated, like another life had taken the place of his old one. She was his heart and his soul forever.

A slap on his shoulder brought his mind crashing to the present and the chaos that greeted him. He was pulled from Tambre's arms and hauled away by his brothers and other well-wishers. Amidst bawdy suggestions and songs sung in jest, Merrik sighed, hoping that Tambre was fairing better than he. Ushered above stairs to the marriage chamber suddenly, he finally let go his merriment and laughed along with the others.

Tambre arrived a short time later, her cheeks pink and a smile upon her face. She had been told so many things on how to please a man that her head swam with the whole of it. She smiled and thought how none of the suggestions compared to the ones that she had gotten from Embra. When the women started to disrobe her in front of all those who stood in their bed chamber, Merrik suddenly appeared and pulled her to his side.

“Stay your hands!” The grin on his face belied the harshness of his words. “The treasure this woman bares is for my eyes only, and none shall see but me.”

“Oh, come now, my lad!” A burly clansman stated in sudden excitement. “We have to know if you approve of her!”

Cheers resounded in the room, but Merrik held firm to his words. “I do approve, of that you can be assured, but I will not put her on display. She is mine and I will kill any man who denies me this request.” He smiled down at her, realizing that the relief that showed in her eyes was a mirror of his own emotions. “Leave us.”

Amidst the grumbling and shouted rebuttals, the room cleared out quickly, finally leaving them alone. Merrik barred the door from the inside and made sure that none could pass through the barricade. When he turned to Tambre, his heart lurched at the sight of her. She was true loveliness, and she was his now. Her eyes sparkled with merriment as he slowly made his way to her side. He reached out a hand, placing it gently upon her cheek as her smile faded and the look in her eyes was replaced by one of desire.

Slowly, Tambre unpinned the brooch at her shoulders and let the tartan fall in a puddle at her feet. She bared one slim shoulder, shrugging out of her velvet gown in one easy motion. She stood before him, her hair swirling around her hips and over her shoulders, hiding the parts of her silken flesh that he longed to caress. Turning away from his heated gaze, she crawled upon the bed, laying her head back upon the soft pillow, a warm and inviting smile on her lips.

“Merrik, come to your wife and love her well.”

“My wife.” He did not take his eyes off of her as he undressed slowly. His eyes shone with his desire, and as he tossed his kilt aside, he saw her eyes alight on his engorged manhood. It warmed him to his soul, and as he went to her, he felt his heart beat erratically in his chest. It was like his first time with a woman, and it would be the first time with her being his wife. As he lay down beside her, gathering her into his arms, he whispered to her how much he loved her.

Chapter Sixteen

Tambre woke to a soft tickle upon her cheek. She snuggled closer to Merrik and brushed the bothersome piece of hair away. Again she felt the tickle, sighing.

"If we are to share the same bed Merrik, you must let me sleep until I wake on my own." She heard his rumble of laughter and grinned. Turning, she faced him and threw a leg over his hip. "Why do you take me from my slumber?"

"We have been up here for three hours now. I figured that 'tis time we got back to the festivities. We are the guests of honor, my wife."

"Aye, I know." She peeped open her eyes, smiling at him. "I do not feel like leaving your side. I wish to lay here with you and nothing more." Her eyes widened suddenly, and she gazed at him with her mouth open.

"What is amiss?"

"The maidenhead blood. They will seek out the blood on the sheets."

Dawning her meaning, he grinned at her. "I have a solution for that, wife." He left their bed, and produced a small dagger from his sword belt. He made a small slice upon his forearm, and winced as he squeezed the blood from the small wound. It dripped in dark burgundy drops on the snowy white sheets, and after a time he took his hand, smearing the drops into smudges.

Her heart warmed at his effort to protect her from hurtful accusations. He more than likely felt sorry for the accuser! She sighed and got up from the bed, kissing his lips lightly as she went past him, thanking him for his kind thoughts.

"What must we endure for the rest of the day?" She picked up her gown and threw it over her head, disgruntled to be leaving their haven.

"I believe that we are to attend to our guests and make sure that they are well entertained." He laughed out loud at her horrified expression. "Then we shall retire early and have the rest of our day spent with only the two of us." He kissed her nose and pulled her into his arms, looking into the deep sapphire depths of her eyes.

"Can't we just send our regrets? We have just been wed, and I think it proper for a wife to get to know her husband. In every way she can." Her meaning was clear as she felt him

harden next to her thigh with the thoughts of an erotic evening alone. She raised her brows and grinned. "What say you? Do you not think we need this time spent alone?"

Merrik wondered at her advances and knew that she dreaded the deed of making sure all the guests were comfortable. Her idea sounded more to his liking, and he raised a brow in her direction as his lips curled up at the ends. She was a woman made for loving, and bearing his children. He could not wait until she carried his first child. He would enjoy seeing her belly swell with his offering, and knew that the love he held for her would increase with each passing day. He had never thought of children before, but now that they were wed, he wanted a child right away. Taking her hand and bringing it to his lips for a soft kiss, he felt her relax somewhat.

"For a short time, I promise." He stepped back from her, lest she try to make him stay again, or give him another reason to linger. And he was sure that she could make him linger for days.

"If we must, then I suppose we should go below and make niceties before too much longer." Her eyes lit with mischief then, and she heard his growl of warning. She looked at him innocently.

"Tambre, no deviltry this eve. Or for the next two days. I do not want to have to answer to my father." His begging brought a giggle from her sweet lips and he grinned at her. "I must insist."

"And I shall abide." She walked past him, and tossed over her shoulder, "However, I cannot control destiny."

His brow furrowed as he followed her out of their chamber. What did destiny have to do with anything?

For the next two days, Tambre was forced into living a dull existence. She longed for the training field and was delighted when the jousting tournament was at hand. It turned out to be a disappointment for her as it was more fun and games than it was serious. It disheartened her that she had to hold to the promise she had made to her father of staying out of the jousting games when she knew that she could have livened the whole thing up by throwing a few sparks into the center of it all.

But the nights spent in Merrik's arms were the happiest she had ever been in her life. He

was a true gift to her, and she would cherish him for the rest of her days. The love she felt for him increased, hour by hour it seemed, until it consumed her to the point of driving her mad. She wondered how her life had turned so quickly around in the weeks that she had known him, especially since she had thought herself never to marry.

She sighed as she threw back the coverlet to rush over to the warm fire across the room. Her head started to swim suddenly and she became dizzy, nearly falling upon the hard stone floor. Breathing deeply, she tried to quell the sickening feeling but could not. Making it to the edge of the bed, her sight became blackened and she felt herself falling to the floor. This is how Tristan found her a few moments later.

Tristan had stayed on at Farlynn by orders from his father. With John Monteith lurking about, he wanted to make sure all was well with his daughter. He had been checking in on his sister often now as she seemed to have been sleeping late in the morning, which was not her normal routine. But then again, she was newly wed to a lusty man who probably kept her up for most of the night!

"Tambre!" The bellow of terror resounded throughout the castle as he stepped through the doorway and into the chamber, finding her in a heap on the floor. Immediately there was a throng of people that pushed into the chamber to see what was amiss.

He picked her up from the floor, laying her gently on the bed. He brushed back the hair from her face and ordered that someone send for the midwife and Merrik post haste. Fear touched his heart for he had never known his sister to be ill since the day she was born.

A small woman, hunched over with age, shuffled into the chamber a short time later and demanded that the room be cleared. She carried a small black leather bag with her and set it upon the chair beside the bed. Her clear blue eyes keenly swept over the form lying upon the bed as she clicked her tongue.

"Ye all must leave. I need to examine her, and I cannot do so until ye are all gone." She crossed her arms over her chest, patiently waiting for everyone to leave the chamber. When the last person left, she set about emptying her bag of salves and vials of liquids, pots of powders and a crucifix, which she put around her neck, saying a short prayer as she did so. Taking a wrinkled hand and placing it upon the cool forehead of the young woman, she turned calmly to the door of the chamber as it slammed open and banged against the wall.

Merrik stood in the doorway, his face white with his fear. He kicked the door closed behind him and he walked slowly toward the bed. He calmed his erratic heartbeat when he noticed that she looked quite normal. It only appeared that she slept. He looked at Mary the midwife and placed a hand upon the woman's arm.

"What is amiss? Is she alright?"

Mary smiled at Merrik, patting his hand. "I have not yet begun to examine her. Help me to roll her to her side."

Merrik rolled Tambre to her left side as Mary felt along the woman's back with a gentle hand. Relief flooded over him as she gave a soft moan and then opened her eyes, looking around her.

"What happened?" Tambre tried to sit up, but Merrik pushed her back against the soft pillow.

"It appears you have had a small mishap." Merrik smiled at her as Mary continued to feel over the woman's body.

Mary clicked her tongue again, shooting Merrik a nasty look suddenly. She then turned her attentions to Tambre and smiled.

"How long have ye been feeling this way, my lady?" Mary patted her arm gently.

"I haven't felt unwell, except for today. I have felt ill in the mornings, but it always goes away by mid day." She shrugged. "I thought nothing of it, with all the commotion of coming to this new place and my being newly wed."

Mary patted her arm again and then turned on Merrik with a sound tongue lashing. "Ye little bugger! I knew ye could not be trusted to be around her. I told yer father, I did, for him to keep ye away before ye were to wed her. But ye could not stand it, could ye!" Her face softened then, but still held the sternness. "I knew the maidenhead blood on the sheets was not hers. Ye have tried to deceive yer father, but the truth lies in her womb."

Merrik stared at the small woman with an open mouth, not believing what he was hearing. What in the hell was she rambling about?

Mary tapped him upon his arm sternly, and then turned to start putting her items away.

"Am I to be alright?" Tambre looked at Merrik, and shrugged.

"Oh, ye will be fine, my lady." She stopped packing her bag and turned to the woman

with a smile. "Ye be carrying a child, 'tis all." She looked at Merrik with another chastising gaze. "I suppose ye should be happy that it is his. He will make a fine father." She turned, and picked up her bag as she shuffled from the room, banging the door closed behind her.

Tambre stared wide-eyed at Merrik, trying to let the words sink in. She was with child! She searched her mind and tried to remember the last time her monthly flow had come. It was two weeks before Merrik had arrived. She swallowed and closed her eyes. That would mean his seed had settled inside of her not six weeks before. She opened her eyes, and found that Merrik still stared at her, having not moved from where he stood. He smiled suddenly and shook his head.

"A babe. You are to have our babe." Excitement gripped his chest, and he wanted to scream the news to the world.

Tambre let out the breath she had been holding and a small smile curled the corner of her lips. "A babe." She looked at Merrik and suddenly became alarmed. "I know nothing of babes. How am I going to do this?"

Merrik grinned and sat down beside her on the bed. "You will not be alone, lass. I will be here for you." He gathered her into his arms, kissing the top of her head. "Thank you."

"Why do you thank me, husband?" She looked up at him and noticed that she had never seen him so happy.

"You have given me a gift that no one else ever will." He kissed her lips and felt her heat circulate into his soul. "You have given me a child."

She looked at him, deep into his pale emerald eyes and knew that the words were coming from his heart. She smiled and drew him next to her own heart.

"I love you, Merrik."

Chapter Seventeen

If Tambre thought that she was watched closely before, she was practically locked in a tower and not permitted to do a thing now. Since the news of the babe she carried drifted through the castle like a blanket of fire, everyone watched her closely for any mischief that she might get herself involved in. To her chagrin, no one was on her side about letting her go about her own business by turning a blind eye in her direction. Even Reanna and Crysteline were treating her with boorish ministrations.

Merrik had refused to let her go to the training field for fear of her injuring their unborn child. He had even gone as far as having Majesty removed from the stables so that she was not tempted to ride. This was done without her knowledge, and as soon as she had found that her destrier had been taken away, she immediately went to the source.

Storming into the great hall, Tambre spotted Merrik conversing with his brothers. When Merrik saw the look that boded ill for him upon her lovely face, he excused himself from his brothers and met her halfway across the hall.

“You!”

He raised his brows and crossed his arms over his chest, waiting for her to continue her onslaught. He was used to the mood swings, the shouting, and the tears with the coming of the child.

Rage filled her being and she pointed her index finger in Merrik's handsome face. “Where did you take Majesty?” She poked him in the chest and knew she did little more than stir the flame to his own anger.

“He has been--”

“Bring him back! You had no right to take him away from me!” Tears sprang to her eyes, but she dashed them away angrily. She never had shed a tear before in her life, and it only added more fire to her rage. She placed her hands on her hips, or what used to be her hips being that she was well rounded now at five months along.

“Tambre, have a care. You upset yourself for no reason.” He tried to place a gentle hand on her arm but she stepped out of his reach, her eyes blazing a path across his face.

"Bring...him...back." The words were spaced so that he would not miss their true meaning. She narrowed her eyes and wished that she had her sword at her side, but the damn belt was not large enough to buckle around her waist any longer. She would slice him into stew meat within the breath of a second!

Merrik sighed and moved toward her again. She did not step out of his way this time and his body instinctively went alert to any punches that she might send his way.

"He is still here. I have just had him moved so that you would not be tempted to ride him. I just wanted to watch for your safety, as well as my son's."

The bluster went out of her then and she bowed her head, letting the tears fall freely. She felt the strong arms of her husband wrap around her and she went into his embrace willingly. She buried her face in the softness of his tunic, crying her heart out, balling her hands into fists and pounding him lightly upon his muscled chest. He did not release his hold upon her, even as he swung her up into his arms and carried her above to their bed chamber.

He sat in the chair that faced their fireplace and held onto her as her sobs finally quieted and, exhausted, she slept in his arms. He brushed her hair from her face as he leaned his cheek against the top of her head, staring into the bright orange flames licking at the logs a maid had just placed in the hearth. He placed a hand on her rounded belly and felt the tiny foot of his son kick his hand irritably. He smiled. Or mayhap it was a daughter she carried, given the quick response to his disturbing the bliss of sleep. It mattered not to him. It would be their child, one conceived in love, and one born with the whole world at its tiny hand. He sighed, wondering if his life had ever felt this complete before. He knew that it had not. His life had not even begun until he had set eyes upon her lovely face. She *was* his life. Now and forever.

She shifted in his arms and nuzzled her cheek into his chest, murmuring that she loved him, and then she was quiet once more.

He would never be tired of hearing those words from her and he held her tighter as he thought of how, even in her sleep, she would tell him of her love. His eyes closed and he thought of all the women that he had been with in his life. They were faceless beings in his mind's eye, the memories of what they looked like was gone. But he did know that none of them even came close to her spirit, her desire, or her love. He had never before known anyone like her, and knew that the love he held in his heart was, and would always be, only for her.

As the weeks past, Tambre found herself more emotional than not, and she would cry at the toss of a coin. Merrik stood by her side during the horrendous ordeals and did little but listen to her arguments on issues that were decidedly petty in nature. He would always comfort her and never get furious, though her tirades deserved as much.

During her eighth month of pregnancy, she felt as if she needed a cart to haul her swelled belly in as it became difficult to even get out of their bed. She ate massive amounts of bread and cheese and would always send Merrik to the kitchens in the middle of the night for food to sedate her never-ending hunger. And when she was not sleeping or eating, she was trying to keep Merrik satisfied by making love to him nearly every day. He had taken to entering her from behind, which she found to be thrilling and very enjoyable for them both. She knew her time was almost at an end, as did Merrik, and they were warned by Mary to settle themselves as it could hurt the babe this close to her time. So they huddled in their bed and held each other for comfort.

As it was nearing upon the middle of August in the year thirteen hundred and five, Tambre had just lumbered down the set of steps that led to the great hall when she noticed that some visitors had arrived. A stately man dressed in a brilliant tunic of burgundy velvet greeted Merrik's father with a jovial hug. He was handsome for an older man, and his eyes sparkled with kindness and laughter. She grinned as the two moved to sit on the dais and entertain themselves with mugs of cool ale. Female giggles brought her attentions around to the main door as a beautiful young woman entered on Merrik's arm. Tambre raised her brows slightly and watched as the two went to a table in the corner of the hall and sat talking quietly. Merrik's eyes did not once leave the woman's brilliant green orbs as he sat listening to her, laughing at the remarks she made to him.

The woman was beautiful with her green eyes and deep auburn hair that hung in luscious waves down to her knees. She wore a form-fitting gown of green velvet with a low cut front that nearly had her ample bosoms spilling out of the straining material. And when the woman reached out and touched Merrik's cheek, bringing her head to his for a soft kiss, Tambre felt her knees weaken and her heart beat hazardously in her chest. She turned from the sight and made her way quickly back up the stairs, cursing his hide to the devil and swiping at tears that threatened to blur her vision.

Merrik pulled back from the lips that were not his wife's, and regarded the woman across

from him with a tight lipped expression. "My lady, I am sure you know me to be wed now." He resisted the impulse to wipe the kiss from his lips.

"I have heard that it is not a happy union, Merrik." Camelia pouted as she flung a lock of auburn hair over her shoulder. "We can continue where we have left off. It does not bother me that you have a wife now."

"You have been misinformed, my lady. I happen to love my wife very much."

"You may love her, but does she give you the passion you so desperately crave, my love?" Camelia lowered her eyes and stared boldly at his manhood.

Merrik had to smile as he thought of all the passion he and Tambre had shared. When it was no longer safe for him to enter her, she had taken his member in her mouth and had loved him a hundred different ways with her tongue and her hands. Aye, passion was the one thing that they had an abundance of.

Camelia took Merrik's smile as the remembrance of the passion they had shared. She felt that he would come to her readily, and she craved his touch, the feel of his manhood deep inside of her. Her eyes glazed with her own seductive thoughts, and she licked her lips in her anticipation of the event.

She watched as Merrik look past her shoulder and saw his eyes alight with the look of true love. She turned her head and caught sight of a very pregnant woman, beautiful in all aspects even carrying a child, rushing across the hall and out the main doors. Her eyes grew envious of the woman, knowing that her own beauty could not compare to that of the woman she had just seen. She looked back at Merrik and gave a gasp of outrage as he strode across the hall after the lovely creature.

"Tambre!" Merrik tried to keep from running after her, but the look of utter fury on her face did not ease his mind of who or what her anger was to be directed at this time. He had no idea it was to be him.

She stopped and spun around, drawing the sword that she had held hidden in the folds of her red velvet gown. Her eyes pierced his heart as she cursed him for what, he did not know. He jumped back as her sword spun left, and then in a right arc intending on severing his head. She was blinded by her fury now, not caring if she caused him injury or not.

"Stop!"

His shout of rage only increased her sparring, and she rewarded him with a clean slice upon his upper left arm.

"What the hell do you think you are about?" Merrik made a move to grab her sword arm, but she sidestepped him quickly, keeping him at bay with the tip of her sword gleaming in the sunlight.

"You pig!" She spat out at him, not caring that a crowd had gathered around them. "Be gone from me lest I take that rotten hide from your body and feed it to the crows!" She whirled away from him, heading in the direction of the stables, throwing curses over her shoulder as she went.

He followed her at a safe distance, wondering and searching his mind as to why she wanted to cause him bodily harm this time. He swallowed as he thought of only one thing: the kiss from Camelia. He cringed as she passed every male in the bailey and delivered unto each one of them a murderous look of sheer contempt. He hoped that she had not seen what he had allowed to happen with the other woman, and prayed for strength from above to get him out of this predicament.

Tambre spotted Tristan just going into the stables when she bellowed for him. He winced as he spotted her rage-filled face, but he did not move as she made her way quickly to his side.

"What is amiss?" His eyes took in her haphazard appearance and wondered if she and Merrik had had a minor conflict again.

"I wish to return to Lockbourne." Her breath came in angry gasps and she felt the need to sit down but refused to until they were on their way from this place.

"What?"

"Lockbourne." She brushed the hair from her face irritably as she waited for him to understand her request. "Take me home, Tristan."

"Tambre, I cannot take you from here." Tristan looked over his sister's shoulder and spotted Merrik coming their way. His look was grim and tight lipped, not at all friendly.

"Tristan, I beg of you. Take me from this place." Her pleading words brought a worried expression from him, and she tried to pull him after her as she made her way into the stables. "We need to go."

Tristan looked over his shoulder at Merrik, and saw the other man's face turn a lighter

shade. He turned his attention back to his sister who was insistently pulling him into the stables.

Tambre looked around the dim interior of the place and picked up on Majesty's stall right away. He stood a head above the other war horses. She let go of Tristan's arm as she made her way toward the animal.

"Tambre, you cannot ride. Remember what Mary has said." Tristan touched her arm, letting go suddenly as she shot him a murderous look.

"My child and I will be fine, I assure you." She unlatched the gate of the stall and Majesty lowered himself for his mistress to alight upon his back. She did so with little effort and applauded herself for what agility she still had left in her bulging body. Grabbing hold of the white mane, she kicked his sides lightly, steering him out of the stall.

Merrik barred her way with his hands upon his hips, a stern look marring his handsome features. She sat atop the destrier with her gown hiked up to her knees, exposing the luscious flesh of her shapely legs. He would pull her from the animal if he knew it would not hurt the babe, and then he would beat her ass until she could not sit down for a month.

"You will go nowhere." His words were softly spoken, and he motioned for Tristan to take his leave.

"I most certainly will. You will not dare to stop me after what I have just seen."

That comment gave Tristan pause as he turned back toward his sister, waiting for more of the exchange.

Merrik sighed, and knew that she had seen Camelia kiss him. "Tambre, she is an old friend--"

"Not so old from what I have seen. It would seem you have more than reacquainted yourself with her. I will not tolerate adultery, *Husband*, even though most women I know tend to turn blind eyes toward the misdeed. I, however, will not." Tambre kicked Majesty in the side once more and tried to move past Merrik. The animal sidestepped, causing her to grasp his mane more tightly, trying to calm him. "Get out of my path before you frighten Majesty and kill us both." Tears of frustration streaked down her cheeks now and she bowed her head as she laid her sword upon her lap to swipe her sleeve across her eyes quickly. Taking her sword in hand once more, she pushed the tip in Merrik's direction and managed to get Majesty to take another step.

"It was nothing of what you thought. She kissed me and I--"

"You let her." she seethed between gritted teeth. "I saw no struggle of you trying to push her away." She drew her sword over her head, and took a swipe at the air above his head. "Let me pass! I am leaving here so that you can have your mistress back. And do not deny that she is not."

Merrik had nothing to say to her shouted words. Her words rang true. He did not struggle and try to push her away, but she certainly was not his mistress. She had caught him by surprise, but it was still not enough of an explanation to get him out of this blunder. He knew if he tried to tell her of his regret to the deed, she would have his head on a platter quicker than he could blink. He tried another tactic.

"I love you, Tambre."

Her eyes blazed at his admission and she felt like cutting him in half. Damn him! "Let me pass!"

"Tambre, please listen to reason. She means nothing to me." Those words did not help the situation either, and he felt like yanking his own tongue out of his head to stop the flow of such foolish words.

She said nothing this time as she kicked Majesty hard in the ribs, sending the destrier leaping forward past a stunned Merrik and Tristan. She raced out into the bailey and over the drawbridge as she spurred the destrier toward the direction of Lockbourne. She leaned over the animal's neck and urged him faster still, hearing his hooves beat loudly into the sod beneath his feet. And as the castle grew smaller in the distance, she let her tears flow freely, spewing forth her pain in great shouts of anguish. She cursed his hide to hell and wished that she would never lay eyes upon him for the rest of her days.

Chapter Eighteen

By the time Tristan and Merrik were upon their own destriers and chasing after her, she was a small dot in the distance.

Merrik cursed himself as he dug his heels further into his destrier's side, making the animal leap forward suddenly with renewed strength. He prayed that she would be safe and not fall from Majesty's back at the breakneck speed she was going. He chanced a look at Tristan and noticed the worried frown he carried upon his own brow.

Topping a hill, they saw no sign of her and thought that she had already passed over the next hill in the distance. Merrik knew her destrier to be surefooted and to have great speed, but an animal's endurance could only last for so long. He would tire soon, and then they would have a chance to catch up to her.

Coming over the next hill, cold dread shot through Merrik as he saw Majesty ahead, but no Tambre upon his back. He felt like he had been kicked in the chest, and Tristan gave a cry of alarm. Thinking quickly, Tristan gave a shrill whistle, and Majesty stopped in his tracks, starting his retreat over to the two men.

Merrik searched the surrounding area quickly, but did not see the bright red of her gown. There was a small outcropping of trees to their right, and a bigger forest of roughly one hundred wooded acres to their left. Tristan took the right side, and told Merrik he would let him know if she was found. Merrik took to the woods on the left, beginning his search for her as his heart beat soundly in his chest. He thought of all the things he would do to her when he found her unhurt, deciding that the only thing he would do is pull her into his arms and kiss her sweet lips. After almost an hour of searching and calling her name, he realized that Tristan had not come to find him. Mayhap he had found her already. He headed for the edge of the woods, and when he reached the clearing he saw nothing but her destrier where they had left him, munching on some crisp grass.

Tightening his hold upon the reins of his animal, he headed quickly into the outcrop of trees and found Tristan lying unconscious, an arrow protruding from his right shoulder. Alarm gripped his heart as Merrik slid to the ground silently and made his way over to the other man.

Leaning down, he felt the breath in Tristan's chest and sighed his relief. Scanning the area for intruders, he saw nothing but his brother-in-law's destrier a few yards away. Hunched over and nearly crawling along the forest floor, Merrik made his way over to the edge of the furthest point of the trees and stepped out into the clearing. Still crouched down, he looked over the area but still saw nothing.

His heart clenched into a painful ball and he nearly screamed his frustration. It was like she had disappeared into thin air. And when he happened to look at the ground below his feet, he saw what appeared to be the hoof prints of a dozen or so horses. As he followed the prints over to his far right, he saw her sword sticking into the ground and he raced over to the thing, pulling it carefully from the soil. Tied around the handle flowed a thick curling lock of her blonde hair, obviously cut from her head. He did curse then, cursed the ones who had taken her, and he cursed himself for the hurtful things she had seen that had determined her leaving him. He blamed himself, and knew that he needed to get back to the castle to gather up his clansmen and find her. And he knew where he had to go first: to Baron John Monteith.

"Tis foolish to race ahead and not know a direction. Mayhap we will hear from someone—"

"Nay!" Merrik cut off his father's words and lay a steady hand upon the hilt of his sword. "I know where to start, and from there I shall go." He felt all five of his brothers' presence behind him and knew that they backed him in his decision. He nodded once to his father, making him promise to take care of Tristan and to send word to Lockbourne. He then left with his brothers in tow.

In the bailey, nearly all of the clansmen that resided at Farlynn had gathered to await his direction. Grim faced and feeling sick at the thought of who had taken Tambre from him, he said not a word as he alighted upon his destrier's back, digging his heels into the animal's side. They were off in a flurry of dust and loud shouts of encouragement from those who were left behind.

Going to the spot where he had found her sword, he touched the braided length of her hair that he had tied around his neck. Her sword hung by his left knee, tied to his saddle, and he felt a sense of loss as he stared over the grounds before him. He touched the hilt where her hands had gripped the strong metal many times before, and tried to gather strength for his journey.

"Which way, Merrik?" Gernald was by his side looking ahead in the distance.

"North. I believe that we may be able to follow the tracks the horses have left behind."

Gernald nodded once, turning to shout the orders. He knew his brother's heart was breaking just by the worried look upon his face, and his own heart went out to him. He hoped that they found her this day and prayed that the woman was unhurt for the sake of her abductors, who would be dead men if they found her to be otherwise.

Broswin came alongside his brother and tried to give him some encouraging words as they rode over the grounds to the north.

"She will be found, Merrik. Have no doubt." He smiled then. "And she will be angry at us all for not getting to her sooner!"

Merrik turned a worried glance to his brother. "If she will have me."

"What? What does she say you do this time?"

Merrik shook his head, turning his eyes forward again. "She saw Camelia kiss me in the great hall. She would not even allow my explanation on the matter. Nor did I have one."

Broswin raised his brows, looking over at Gernald to his right. "'Tis why she left then." It was not a question but a statement.

When Merrik did not answer, both brothers summed up their own answers. They remained quiet until one of the clansmen came racing back to them from ahead.

"My lord, they have split just ahead. One set still carries north, but the other goes west." The man's keen eyes settled on Merrik's, and he awaited the instruction he would be given.

"Take half the men and head west. The rest will remain with me and go to the north." His pale green eyes snapping his fury, Merrik continued. "And if you find her, send word post haste to me." He paused as his lips drew into a thin line. "And Neil, keep her safe, but kill those who have taken her."

Neil nodded once, not blinking an eye at the harsh orders of death to those who had taken his leader's wife. Shouting his given orders, the men parted ways a short time later.

Broswin decided to go with the men Neil had taken, and the rest of the brothers stayed with Merrik. He would need their strength as they continued on. And he pitied the Baron John Monteith if, in fact, he was the one who had taken the woman.

Tambre felt like bashing the ogre who held onto her so tightly. Their slow, steady pace drove her to the brink of madness itself, and she wondered who these men were and why they proceeded at such a pace as this. Were they waiting for something? Or someone? They were English, of that she was sure, but the one who had her seated in front of him was not. He was of a clan that she did not recognize, if the tartan he wore around his shoulders was any indication of the clan that he belonged to.

It was a bright yellow and red plaid, one she had never seen before, and she wondered if he hailed from the highlands. She had not seen his face, but she knew his strength was great for she seen the bulging muscles that protruded from his bare arms that bore around her middle. And she also knew that he had dark red hair as his long braids were flung over her own shoulders as he kept turning suddenly, shouting out orders.

He had her hands bound together at the wrists and tied to the pommel of his saddle. The war horse on which they sat was of a deep chestnut hue and sported a long, flowing black mane. She thought of Merrik's hair and closed her eyes briefly. Dear God, if she could do this day over. Her eyes opened again and she wondered if he even had come after her when she had left. She did not know, nor had she cared at the time.

But when she was surrounded by the men who had taken her from Majesty's back and spirited her away, she had screamed his name in the hopes that he had followed her. Alas, he had not come after her, and when the Scot cut off a lock of her hair, tying it to her sword as they left, she wondered if he would even care. He had not denied that the woman had been his mistress, nor had he denied the kiss she had seen, and that silence had sent a knife into her heart.

The pace continued on and on, until she could not take it any longer. Left to her own thoughts was not to her liking. Too many bad things kept popping into her mind, visions of Merrik in the arms of another woman foremost in her mind. She squirmed slightly, and the man who held her leaned down, speaking softly next to her ear.

"We will be at our journey's end soon, at least for this day. And spare yourself the illusion of your demons that creep into your mind. Know that things are not as they appear." His words were spoken with a steady rhythm of hope.

She turned to try and look at his face, but could not turn far enough to even glimpse his shoulder. Sighing, she turned around and kept her back straight so as not to touch his chest. She

heard his rumble of laughter at her stubbornness and spoke once more.

"I will not harm you, my lady. 'Tis safe to lean on me to rest your back. I am sure your babe would like to stretch a bit as well." Humor lightened his voice and he smiled at her stiff back.

At nightfall, they finally stopped at a small cottage hidden in some dense woods. Tambre was allowed to go to relieve herself, and when she was led back to the cottage, she found it to be very well lit with food being spread out on a small table set in one corner. There was bread and cheese, meat and ale, with an abundance of each. She guessed that the meal had been prepared before their arrival and left there for them by unseen persons.

She sat, eating her fill, and noticed that the Scot who had held her was not present. But when she looked up suddenly and saw that he stood before her, her breath escaped her lungs in a small gasp. His height was massive, standing over six feet. His shoulders were huge and bore the weight of his huge saddle, which he dropped beside her with a thud. His eyes, the color of winter wheat, bore into her with their intensity.

He was handsome, more so than her own husband if that were possible, and she regarded him with the same intensity as he did her. She raised her brows when he knelt in front of her and picked up her hand to look at her wrists. They were rubbed raw from the rough rope that had bound them, and he produced a small pot of salve that he gently rubbed into her soft skin. She allowed him to minister to her wounds, but kept her guard in place.

"'Tis sorry I am that you have suffered, lass. The ropes will be left off until we come closer to our destination."

"And what is our destination?" Her eyes drilled into his as she noticed that they immediately became guarded.

He said nothing as he put the pot of salve away and went to get a hunk of meat with cheese and some of the bread. A large tankard of ale was poured from a metal pitcher with a steady hand, and as he replaced it upon the table he looked at the other men that filled the room, all of them looking at the woman who sat alone in the corner.

"Leave us." His words were barked out of his mouth, full of irritable authority. He watched as each man left the cottage, leaving him alone with the woman. He turned to stare at her, deciding that she could not help that the beauty she emanated had those who gazed at her

enthralled. She was too lovely for her own good, and he decided that she could use that beauty to help her where she was going.

"Why did you send them away?" She stood and crossed her arms over her breasts, her eyes roving around the room to find something she could use as a weapon if she needed to.

"I do not condone rape, and if they stayed any longer than necessary, it would have come to that." He nearly smiled at her outraged expression, thinking that this one had to be a handful.

"I would give you my thanks, but I do not know of your intentions." She sat back down and gave him a steady gaze, daring him to try to force his way on her.

"As I have said: I do not condone rape, nor do I practice the act. You are safe with me." He did smile then. "You have my word."

She snorted and narrowed her eyes at him. "How can I take your vow to heart when you have taken me from my husband?"

"You were not with your husband when you were taken. As I remember, you were quite alone." He wondered why his response brought a pained look to her lovely, deep blue eyes. "No matter, you have my vow. What you choose to do with it is up to you."

"Can you at least let me know why I have been taken? For what purpose do I serve?" She bowed her head and waited for his reply, a reply that did not come. She closed her eyes and prayed that Merrik was looking for her. Although it would serve her right if he was not. This admission only made her angry, and she stood, stomping over to the man, eyeing him boldly. "At least give me your name and a reason as to why you will not tell me anything."

He looked up from his meal, and grunted. "I need not tell you a thing. You only need to know that you will be safe while in my care."

"And when I am not in your care? What then? What will happen to me and my child?" She nearly shouted the words out at him. She felt her face become hot in her rage and leaned forward slightly to drive home her point. "You had better pray to your divinity that I am not injured, nor my babe, in any way. The wrath of my kinsmen will be immense. Not to mention my own wrath that will likely see your skull split in two." She turned from him, this time not allowing him to remark on her words. She found her way to a small cot and decided to try and sleep, for it sounded as if their journey would be a long one on the morrow.

Chapter Nineteen

Merrik stood away from the others and stared out into the dark night. They had searched all day, following the trail of hoof prints let by the assailants. As it turned out, the trail they followed had circled about to the same place they had started out. By that time it was nearly dark, and Gernald had convinced Merrik to stop for the night.

Sighing, Merrik crossed his arms over his chest, leaning against the sturdy oak tree at his back and hoped that the other clansmen were having better luck. His thoughts kept returning to the look upon her face as she had fled: one of hurt and sadness. God above, if he had it in his power to start this day once again, he would! The fear that gripped his heart earlier had not eased any at all. It had intensified until it made him want to tear the whole of the countryside apart with his bare hands in his search for her. His wife. The woman he swore to protect. The woman that held his heart, as well as every ounce of love in his being. He seemed a useless shell now, not knowing which way to turn, but he had an idea of where they traveled next. He hoped that he would find her when they reached their next destination, or he felt that the demons inside of him would surely consume his soul. He bowed his head and prayed to God that He would keep his wife safe.

Gernald regarded his brother from across the clearing and sighed. Gray sat to his left, making a comment that mayhap they should have kept going.

“Nay, we have no way to light our travel, and I think that whomever we are dealing with is more than just an ordinary man. The trickery we have already witnessed contests to that.” Gernald looked at his brother with a furrowed brow. “I wish we knew where Skhi was hiding. I would call upon his expertise in this.”

“Skhi is more than likely involved in this.” Gray spit on the ground next to him and looked at Merrik’s slumped shoulders as he leaned against the tree. “This is exactly what he would have done when we were children. He always did have an evil craftiness about him. He thinks too far in advance of any other man I know.”

Gernald looked at Gray with a surprised expression. “By God, I think you are right. Only he could be this cunning. Damn me!”

"I wonder if he knows who he has taken." Gray looked at Gernald, and then both looked at Merrik. He had moved from his spot, and now made his way back to his brothers' side.

"I am sure that Merrik will like to hear this one." Gray's grim expression moved over the face of his younger brother, and he braced himself for the onslaught.

Tambre had a fitful night of dreams, and restless sleep. One dream brought her a feeling of death so real that she woke in a fright, and covered in a cold sweat. It was still dark out, and as her eyes adjusted to the dimness of the room she noticed that she was alone in the cottage, glad for the time by herself.

Getting up from the cot, she made her way over to the window and peered out, seeing the eight Englishmen scattered here and there in front of the cottage. She did not see the Scot and knew that he probably slept in front of the door to bar her way from escape. Quietly she looked about the room and noticed a door on the back part of the room. When she turned the handle, the door opened on well oiled hinges, and she almost gasped aloud with what met her eyes. Weapons of every kind lined the wall and hung from chains and ropes suspended by a huge plank hung from the center of the ceiling.

Thinking to take a small weapon of defense, she chose a dagger that could be attached to the inside of her gown and, seeing an arrow, she broke off the sharp tip, leaving a good five inches of the wood intact, and put that weapon in the hem of her gown. Looking around, she spotted an oil cloth hanging on the back wall, and as she pulled the cloth back, she sighed in relief, a smile lighting her face. A large door stood ajar, and without hesitation she went to the outside with just a step and she breathed deeply of her escape. With any luck, she would be long gone before any of them awoke.

She made quick work of her escape, for it had been too damn easy to get away. She wondered briefly if this was some type of trickery by the English, but she quickly dashed the thought out of her mind. They appeared to be just plain dim-witted oafs, doing the bidding of someone who held power. And one name came to mind: John Monteith.

Taking her footsteps quietly, she was able to reach a clearing that led to a wide open pasture of rolling hills and a small creek. Forcing herself not to run ahead and save her strength, she kept to the edge of the woods and then eventually followed the creek as it wound its way into

a rocky ravine, wishing that the light would come soon to give her direction back to Farlynn. Stopping only to take a drink of the cool water, she pushed ahead. It was still dark out and the bright moon lit her way for the most part, but she stumbled a few times on unseen rocks or branches and decided to slow her pace.

Walking for what seemed like hours, she finally came upon a castle set upon a hill in the distance and decided to take her chances with the people there. She judged it to be at least mid morning, and hoped that she could get some help. Seeing the direction she would have to take back to her home, she had decided against the thought, continuing on in the direction they had been traveling. The last thing she wanted was to run into the sorry bunch who had taken her, having a confrontation with the leader. She would surely kill the man if she saw him again.

It took her nearly an hour to make the trek, but when she did reach the outer bailey she noticed that the castle had been deserted. There appeared to have been a fire, and all that had resided there had obviously left for a new home. The one side of the castle that she had seen from the distance was the side that still stood intact. The other side lay in a burnt ruin of crumbling stone and wood. Sitting upon a charred stone to rest her feet for a time, she sighed, and looked overhead to see which way she had traveled. She was heading north which meant that she was getting herself further and further from her home. Whether it be Lockbourne or Farlynn, she was still going in the wrong direction.

Dejectedly, she thought of which way to keep going to continue her escape. If she kept going north, she may very well run into some clansmen from her mother's side. The Wallace name would be well known, but being that it was in the time of mixed judgments, she was not sure if the mention of the Wallace name was such a good idea. She wished she had known for sure where William had gone, but thought better if she stayed away being that the danger that had surrounded him of late would not bode well for her or her unborn child.

Standing, she made the decision to keep to the north path, and so she traveled throughout the rest of the day and into the night. She could not believe that she had passed no villages or castles along the way, and she felt the need to cry her heart out to anyone who would listen. Finding that frustration would only make her more irritated, she found a place to stay for the night. Under the jutting end of a large rock that passed as a waterfall, she found a small cave just past the blanket of water that fell at a steady pace.

At least it was dry and warm, and the little pond that provided her clean water to drink satisfied her thirst. She was starved, and thought that before she left this haven on the morrow, she would find berries or some mushrooms to carry with her along the way. Curling up beside a huge rock, she found her sleep came easy that night. Exhausted, she did not wake until the sun filtered into the small cave the next day.

Merrik and his men had set out at first light, keeping their way northward. They had had no word from the other clansmen, so the decision was made to go in the direction they had first started. They rode at a fast pace for a time, and picked up on some hoof prints that led them to a small cottage. Judging by the path that they had followed, they stopped a short distance away, and went in closer by foot. They could only see one destrier that stood outside the small cottage, but that did not mean that there were not others lurking about. Having crept up on the main door, Merrik kicked it open with his booted foot, and went inside the dim interior. He was immediately knocked off his feet by a strong arm, and a blade pressed to his throat with fierce intent.

"If you would have knocked upon my door I would have let you in." The voice bore a hard edge and words that cut like a razor.

"Skhi?" Gernald was at the opening of where the door used to be, and waved his sword toward the large man that stood over Merrik.

"Skhi?" Merrik cursed, and shoved the blade from his throat as he leapt to his feet, facing the other man, nose to nose. "What the hell are you doing here? I had thought you had gone to the English side."

Skhi sheathed his sword, and grinned at his cousin. "I find that while my heart is a Scot, I find out so much more information being on the English side of things. I think I have helped my country a great deal with the transactions I have seen and heard." He crossed his arms over his massive chest, and looked over to Gernald. "It pleases me that I am able to help Scotland in her time of need."

"So you are a spy?" Gernald stepped into the cottage followed by Gray.

"I am. And I might add that I am a very good one." The dimples in his cheeks were deep as his smile traveled to each man in turn. "It is glad I am that you have happened upon me. My

destrier has gone lame, and I was left here to rot by the English pigs that I rode with. Tell me, why do you travel so far from home?"

Merrik eyed his cousin with suspicion, never truly trusting the man. He chose his words carefully. "We are in search of something that is mine."

Skhi raised his brows, and his smile faded somewhat. "I had heard you had wed, Merrik. I am assuming that my condolences are in order." A rumble of laughter escaped his lips as he enjoyed the harsh look his cousin shot his way. "Tell me; is she as comely as I have heard?" He had to step back quickly in order to avoid the sword that swung in his direction. "What goes?" His anger was barely in check, as his fists turned white at the knuckles.

"He is a bit unstable, 'tis all." Gray tried to smooth over, and placed a hand on Merrik's arm.

"I am not unstable." He looked into the eyes of his cousin then. "I search for my wife. She was taken from me yesterday, and we believe that she had been brought this way. Tell me, cousin, have you seen a pregnant woman about?"

Skhi's face went ashen as he realized who he had held the day before. The little hellion had escaped his grasp in the night, and he had lost the promised gold for her capture. Gold that he had a purpose for, and now it was lost. He thought back to her capture, and scarcely remembered her shouting a name. He had placed a hand over her mouth to still her words, but never did learn the name of her husband. And he had not noticed that he had traveled that close to Farlynn keep. Dear God! He almost laughed out loud at the irony of it all, but knew that his cousin would run him through for sure! Obviously there was no love lost between them as children, and the same seemed to hold true to this day.

Merrik noticed the look upon his cousin's face and he took a menacing step forward. "You *have* seen her, have you not?" Hope welled in his chest.

"Aye, I *had* her." Skhi took a step back and eyed the man before him with a hooded gaze. "I did not know she was yours."

"What do you mean, you *had* her?" Merrik's eyes became narrowed in his rage, and his alarm. "Where is she now?"

"She escaped during the night. I do not know where she is now." His voice held a slight apologetic tone, and he wished he had known that the woman was his cousin's wife. It would

have made this adventure all the sweeter. "The others I traveled with had set off for England only this morn when they realized that the woman had gone."

Merrik lurched forward, and grabbed Skhi by his throat. His brothers were by his side, trying to pry his hands from their cousin's neck. "You had better pray that she is safe." He let go of his death grip and whipped around, heading out of the cottage.

"Merrik!" Skhi's voice was hoarse, and his neck showed signs of reddening as he stepped out of the doorway. "I did not know she was yours. Had I known, I would not have taken the wench."

Merrik whirled around and brought his blade next to Skhi's neck, his look murderous. "If she is safe and unharmed when I find her, you will keep your life. If she or my babe is found to be in distress, then I will come back and hunt you down to rip that black heart from your chest." He let his sword drop to his side once again as he turned and mounted his destrier, kicking the animal into motion. He had no idea of where he headed. All he knew was that he was on the correct path.

Chapter Twenty

Tambre heard the hooves beating on the ground before she saw the riders approach. She scrambled into the nearby woods, hiding under a large bush with thick foliage. She knew that she would be easily detectable in her bright red gown, so she had stayed close to cover should the need arise.

She watched as the riders thundered past her, recognizing the one in the lead as one of the Englishmen who had been with the Scot. She shivered as she realized the Scot did not ride with them, and she wondered what had happened to the man. Had they killed him? Clearing her head and sinking further under the cover of the bush, she decided to wait until nightfall to continue on. She would not risk being captured again. Her babe's life depended upon her keeping out of sight.

When darkness had completely surrounded her she set out again. Having hoped that she would come upon a castle soon, she nearly cried out her relief as she saw light illuminating at the bottom of the next hill she had topped. Trying not to break into a full run, she carefully made her way to the huge drawbridge and called out frantically to the gatekeeper. The bridge was lowered, and she felt her legs sag with her relief as she was led into the inner bailey, then to the main doors of the dark, foreboding castle that stood before her. She hesitated, thinking that she may have made a mistake, but shook it off as just being weary after such a long travel.

She was led inside by a graying, older clansman with kind blue eyes. He sat her down at a nearby table as he went to seek out his laird. He bellowed to the kitchen maid that was putting a log in the huge fireplace to get food and drink for the lady, then he disappeared down the hall and out of sight.

Tambre had fresh bread and roasted deer put before her and she ate ravenously, barely stopping to take a drink of the cold milk that accompanied her meal. When she was finished she leaned back in her chair, placing a hand upon her swollen belly as she felt the babe kick out. She smiled lightly and tried to smooth her hair and gown before the laird of the castle was presented to her. It mattered little. Her gown was ruined with small rips here and there amidst streaks of dirt that left the material more soiled than clean. She sighed. There was no help for it at this

point. She just hoped that the laird of this castle was a kind man and would understand her disheveled state.

Her brow furrowed slightly as she thought how long it was taking and then thought how he may have already been abed. Finishing the rest of her milk, she waited patiently in the hard chair for her first meeting with the laird. With any luck, maybe she could persuade him to loan her a horse for her journey home.

John Monteith studied the young woman below in his great hall. He stood above her on the second floor behind a hidden panel that gave an excellent view of the room below. He touched a finger to his mustache and smoothed the hairs around his upper lip, a slight smile reaching the corners. So, the woman had made it a far distance on foot after escaping the blundering idiots who had captured her.

His smile deepened and he wondered if she knew that she had stepped into her death chamber. His smile lingered a few seconds longer and then he relaxed into a straight face. He hoped that the child she carried would not make a difference in her sentencing, but one could always hope that it would not. His only hope would be that the Justice would know that she was William Wallace's cousin, and that her capture might bring the man right into their waiting hands.

He turned from the view and made his way back to his bed chamber. He directed the old man to have the lady put in a comfortable chamber for the night.

"Tell her I have taken ill this eve and that if I am feeling better on the morrow, I shall meet with her then." He paced in front of the other man, his hands clasped behind his back. "Oh, and when you know what chamber she is to take, inform me immediately. That will be all."

"My lord." Martin bowed before his laird, a puzzled look upon his face. He did not like the sound of this, and wondered why the baron acted so strangely. He shook his head as he made his way below stairs and back into the great hall, informing the woman as he was directed to do.

Tambre graciously accepted the offer to stay for the night and was shown to a lavishly appointed guest chamber with a massive bed dressed in heavy crimson damask curtain with a matching coverlet. The last thing she recalled as she sunk into the luscious bedding was that she missed her husband terribly.

The next day as she made her way down to the great hall, the smells of fresh ham and bread filled her senses as her belly rumbled joyously. She would be eternally grateful for the hospitality offered to her by the kind laird, and she made a mental note to richly thank him for his kindness to her.

As she entered the great hall, she stopped dead in her tracks and her face took on a pale hue. There before her was the Englishman who had ridden with the Scot. He was talking to a man who had his back to her, and as he turned to look at her ashen face, his smile deepened as he jovially introduced himself to her.

"My lady." He bowed formally in front of her, catching her hand on his way back up and bringing it to his lips for a soft kiss. "Welcome to Landmoore Castle. I am the laird here, Baron John Monteith." He laughed at her stunned expression, and dropped her hand back to her side.

Merrik had been driven on by sheer will power and the demons that kept nagging him in the back of his mind. He had stopped once in the night to rest his destrier for a short time, and then he and his men were back on their way once more. He was headed to Landmoore Castle, and he hoped that the laird was there. He knew that John Monteith had given the order to have Tambre taken, and he would enjoy the killing of this man. Neither he nor his clansmen had seen a glimpse of her on their journey, and he hoped that wherever she was, she was safe. His heart ached at the thought of her being hurt as he again prayed for her wellbeing.

He felt like a madman in his quest to find her, and he felt the familiar pangs of dread that had seeped into his chest time and time again, even though he had cast out these images as quickly as they appeared. He loved her with a passion that made him want to scream out in agony for his loss. She had become his whole reason for living, and he would not give up on getting her back. He felt her presence and knew that she was just out of his reach. But he would reach her; he would find her and hold her forever in his arms, never letting her go.

When the castle loomed before them down in the valley, hidden from the sun that shone overhead, he knew that they had been spotted by the tower watch. The drawbridge was lowered for his welcome, but he crossed over the wooden planks with caution. He took his two brothers with him, along with five other clansmen, and waited outside the main castle doors for the Baron to show himself. When he did, Merrik had to bite his tongue from cursing the man and had to

grip his reins tightly to keep from jumping from his destrier, ultimately killing the bastard with his bare hands.

"Where is she?" Merrik's voice demanded no argument as he got directly to the point of his presence.

The Baron raised his brows, and smiled his reluctant greeting. He knew that this hour would come. "Of whom do you speak, my lord?" His obvious arrogance was rewarded by an audible growl from the man before him.

"I play no games! Deliver me to my wife, and I shall leave your life intact." Merrik's voice rang out clear in the bailey filled with onlookers.

"She is not here."

Merrik gritted his teeth, swearing loudly. "I will have her back. Tell me where she is."

"And I have told you: she is not here."

"Then tell me where she has been taken." Merrik narrowed his eyes in the man's direction. "And tell me no lies. I would as soon run you through than to look at you further."

The Baron's smile faded to a frown as he motioned for his bowmen to come forth from their hiding. At least sixty men lined the towers of the castle and the stables. They were virtually surrounded by expert marksmen, who would take down anything that made a sudden move.

"She is by now, I would assume, in England." He paused dramatically to let his words sink in as a smile played about his lips. "I imagine she is being delivered into the hands of the king's prison guards right now as we speak."

Merrik felt the air being pushed from his lungs suddenly. His mind screamed out his pain, and his eyes drilled into the man who stood regally on the steps of his castle looking down his nose at him. He made a move to jump from his destrier's back with his sword in hand, but his brother stayed his actions with a whispered warning.

"Merrik, do not risk it!" Gernald hissed as he leaned over to his brother. "Let it go. For now."

Merrik regained what little composure he had left and quickly turned his destrier around, heading out of the bailey. John Monteith's laughter followed behind him, mocking his leaving. He stopped suddenly, turning his destrier around to face the man's direction once more. He said not a word, but the look that was delivered to the Baron made the laughter die in his throat.

Chapter Twenty-One

Tambre endured the lulling of the wagon in which she had been put upon. Heavy chains weighed down her arms and one leg, making it difficult to even move at all. One of the soldiers who had taken to her side since the journey was a kind man of about her own age, and she suspected that he had a wife of his own that was with child, being that he gave her every courtesy and pleasantries he could. She realized that he was the soldier that had been on her father's land all those years ago, the one she had stolen the clothes from.

He obviously remembered her well, for he thanked her on several occasions for not ending his life that day. He took to giving her half of his own food to keep up her strength, and he even had given her his cloak on which to lie, knowing that the rough planks of the wagon would do her harm. When they came upon London, she took in the sight of the great London Bridge and the huge Westminster Hall in the distance.

When the shackles were released from her wrists and leg she was helped from the wagon and was shown into the receiving room of the Westminster. Dread filled her as she looked from guard to guard, knowing that an escape would be impossible from this point. Sighing despairingly, she sat on a hard wooden chair, waiting her turn to be seen before the king's Justice.

A short time later, she was led into a large room that held at least a dozen men, all with somber looks upon their faces. She held her head high as she was presented to Peter Mallorie, the Justice of King Edward's court.

Her eyes were ablaze with her fury and even before she was directed to speak, she shot forth a tirade of curses that had the faces of all those present astonished.

"What is the meaning of this?" She took a step forward, placing a protective hand over her unborn child. "I demand to be released immediately. You hold me unjustly."

Peter Mallorie, gaining his voice first, motioned for a chair for the young woman and bid her to sit. "I have been told you have been treated kindly by the soldiers who have brought you here."

Tambre snorted a short laugh as she pulled the sleeves back from her wrists, displaying

the raw and bleeding flesh where the manacles had torn into her skin. "Is this what the English refer to as being kind?" She saw the shocked expression cross his face and sat in the chair that was placed directly behind her. "I demand to see the king, my lord."

"That will not be possible, my lady. King Edward will not be available for the next several weeks, I am afraid. You are to deal with me directly." The Justice rose from his chair and went to stand before the lovely woman, wondering if he should make her aware of the seriousness of her charges. His brows rose as her hateful look grated over his face. Her obvious displeasure nearly had him smiling, but he contained himself.

She could very well be the key to obtaining the capture of her cousin, William Wallace. He must proceed with caution. "My lady, you have been brought here for suspicion of robbery of English nobility." He paused as he watched her face closely, noting that her expression did not change. "You will have a trial—"

"You would try me for something I have no knowledge of?" Her delicate brows rose, challenging his authority. "I must tell you that my father is sure to be on his way here, posthaste. I am sure that you know my father, do you not?"

Peter Mallorie regarded the woman with a slight smile. She was cunning. "I believe I do not, my lady. Please tell me his name."

"He is Sir Elwain of Lockbourne, and I assure you, he will not be pleased that I am being held here unjustly."

Peter's brows rose suddenly as he recalled the name of the woman's father. He was one of the many lairds in Scotland that had not secured his lands with the English. It had something to do with the relation of his grandfather to that of the king's own wife.

"I am sorry, my lady, 'tis not something that I know a great deal about. You will be taken to the hold of Elms in Smithfield, where you will be kept until which time I see fit to release you. We will need to gather our witnesses for your trial, and until that time you will be treated as any other prisoner."

Outraged, Tambre jumped to her feet, and went before him, looking up in his face with a snarl. "How dare you! You had better hope that my father arrives before the deed is done, for his wrath will be swift and sure!"

"Be that as it may, you will be tried as any other prisoner, as I have already made you

aware.” He looked into her lovely sapphire eyes that fired a deep blue flame in his direction. “Take her away.” He watched as she was pulled across the room, cursing her heart out, and he smiled.

Further protests and curses resounding throughout the hall got her nowhere. She was handed back into the wagon and began the journey to the Elms. It was slow going as the wagon made its way through narrow streets amidst throngs of people.

Tambre held her head high as she was fairly condemned to her death by several pompous men who looked down their nose at her while sitting upon their horses, making hurtful, snide comments as she passed. She thought once to grab their swords and run them through, but knew that the deed would only get her a sure hanging for murder. Several women that had noticed she was with child had handed her slices of bread, and one even gave her a jug of ale to take with her. She smiled in kind, and thanked the women for their generosity.

Her thoughts turned to Merrik then as she wondered if he was aware of her plight. If he stood before her right now, she would beg his forgiveness and tell him it did not matter what she had seen. She knew he loved her, and mayhap he did not want the attentions of the woman. Regardless, he did not deserve the harshness of her words, nor the sudden leaving that she had foolishly done. She placed a hand upon her belly and felt the child within her kick out, which brought a smile to her lips. This was their son, and she had had no right to take the child from his father. Dejectedly she bowed her head, praying that he could forgive her for this one horrible infraction.

“I love you, Merrik.” The whispered words were carried from her lips by the wind, and she sighed as a single teardrop slid slowly down her cheek.

Merrik pulled the cloak hood further over his head. He and his clansmen had been in London for two days, and still none of them had found out anything about Tambre’s whereabouts. He cursed under his breath, wondering if John Monteith had sent them here in jest.

News of a different kind circulated as well, and he cringed to think of what would happen to them all if they were caught in London. William Wallace was rumored to have been captured by the English and was to be on his way to London to stand trial for treason. Merrik knew that Baron Monteith had something to do with that capture as well, and he wondered if the man

would survive the rest of this year with his head intact for the betrayal of his beloved countryman. As the news spread throughout the streets, he was shocked to learn how many of the English sympathized with William. And it was one Englishman, whom he met in a pub on his third night, which brought him news of Tambre.

Gray and Merrik sat in the back of the *Shipper's Sail*, listening intently to the soldiers discuss the upcoming trials of prisoners being held. His heart nearly beat out of his chest when he heard her name mentioned.

"And her being with child, I am surprised that no one has shown up for the lady's defense." The young soldier took a sip of his ale, and then leaned back in his chair shaking his head. "Not that it would matter. They would only be held for questioning themselves. Fearfully, their intended plea for her release would unjustly be ignored."

Merrik wanted to scream to the man and tell him that he was here, that he intended to stand in her defense, but he said nothing. He continued to listen to the conversation until the older of the soldiers left, leaving the younger one by himself.

Slowly, Merrik made his way to the table and took a seat opposite the man. With his hair being dark, he had had no problems of fitting in with the crowds of London, and as his pale green eyes lighted on the man across from him, he saw the soldier eyes widen suddenly.

"You are Merrik, are you not?"

Stunned into silence, Merrik could only nod. How had he known?

"She told me of you. She has described you perfectly." The soldier smiled, and continued. "Have you seen her yet, sir?"

"Nay, I have not." Merrik gripped the tankard he held in his hand tightly. "Where is she?"

"She is at the Elms." He leaned forward slightly. "My name is Willard, and my wife is Eloise. My wife has visited Tambre nearly every day to see to her comforts." He smiled then, and looked Merrik in the eyes. "She is with child also, and although she is allowed to go to Tambre's cell, she has never been permitted to go inside. The guards go through everything that is brought, but at least she has some comforts."

"'Tis good of you and your wife to look after her. Can you tell me how to get to the Elms?"

"I will take you there myself." Willard stood and waited for the other man to follow. "I must warn you that you should be the only one to come. I would not have the guards suspicious of us. It is my turn this eve to pass out the food. If you don't mind to help, I will show you to her cell."

Merrik agreed, thanking the man for his kindness, and went to tell his brother of the news. Gray, very mistrustful of the English, warned his brother to be careful, telling him that he should feel safe as the rest of them would follow at a secure distance.

It was a short ride to the Elms, and Merrik winced at the squalor around him. Filth lined the streets, piling into large heaps in the alleyways. And when he was led to the building where Tambre was being held, he gave a small sigh of relief. At least it was kept somewhat cleaner than the streets and did not smell as bad, although he could not fathom as to why, with the disgusting debris lying very close to the building.

Merrik followed Willard into the back of the building, making a mental note that there was no guard in attendance. They stopped in front of a large table with trays sitting on top as Willard motioned for him to take one tray and follow him. They went to the back of the building once more and turned a corner which led to a set of steps going below. If the dimly lit hallway was not enough to give him caution, he felt his boots slide under him in what he assumed to be human waste, if the smell was any indication. His earlier assumption of the building being decently clean completely went out of his mind. He cursed softly and wanted to rip the walls down with his bare hands! All he wanted to do was find Tambre and take her out of this hell hole.

Willard paused in front of him with an apologetic look. "I am sorry, but she fares better than most. Go to the end of the hall and turn to the right. Her cell is the last on the left."

Nodding grimly, Merrik passed Willard, being careful not to fall headlong into the slime on the floor, and made his way to the end of the hall, turning right. He saw her shadow pacing back and forth on the wall behind her. The tallow candle cast a dull light, but it was plenty for him to see that she looked healthy and clean. Her red gown had been replaced by a dull brown wool, and he thought he had never seen anything so lovely in all his life. He continued on slowly, as if in a trance, until he stood in front of cell. He watched as she stood on the tips of her toes and looked out the barred window into the street. He heard her curse, and he smiled. God,

how he loved her.

“Tambre.”

His whispered word sent a chill down her spine as she stopped dead in her tracks. She turned toward the voice that had called her name and when she saw who stood there, her knees went weak. She ran over to the bars and pulled him to her, hugging him with all her might, with the hard metal bars between them. She did not care about anything but him as she felt his hold tighten around her and felt his lips touch her own. It was the sweetest thing she had ever known.

She wept then, wept for her misery in knowing that the English had captured William, and wept for her sorry plight. As the tears streaked down her face, she wondered how he could be standing before her, holding her so tightly after everything she must have put him through to get here to this miserable country. She pulled back slightly and looked at his handsome face, the face that had captured her dreams every night since she had left Farlynn. His smile brought the dimples out in his cheeks, and the eyes of pale green showed her the love she needed right then.

“Merrik, I am so sorry for all of this.”

“Tambre, I love you, and only you.” He placed his hands upon her belly, smiling when the babe kicked out with all his might. “And I have missed you both so much.” He looked at her then, and his heart was in his eyes. “I love you. And I will find a way to get you out of here.”

She nodded, and then laid a hand upon his cheek. “They have William.”

Merrik's look was grim and tight lipped as he regarded her with the sad truth. “Aye, they do. I hear they are to be in London tomorrow.”

Tambre took a deep breath and tried to smile at him. “He will find a way to escape, I know he will.”

He pulled her into his arms, holding her close so that she could not see the ugly truth of his capture. William had been bound upon by ten men, he had heard, and they had nearly beaten the man to death in their struggles. He had heard of the awful treatment of no food or water for days to make him weak, to bend him to the English will. He did not see that happening, especially from one he knew to be so strong, and he knew that it boded ill for his wife's cousin. He closed his eyes and hoped that he could find someone to help him with Tambre's release.

And that someone was the last person he would have expected.

Chapter Twenty-Two

When Willard had come to pry him away from his wife, Merrik was nearly lost in the maddening thought of taking her with him then. The other man must have seen the look in his eyes as he lowered his own.

“There are ten more guards above that have just arrived, and they hate the Scots with a passion.” He sighed and rubbed at his eyes. “It would be foolish to try and take her. They would kill you both without a second thought. I do not like this any more than you. You must be patient and know that it will turn out alright for her. She is safe, for now.”

Merrik left her then with another gentle kiss and a promise of seeing her again soon. He left her behind with a small smile curling her lips and a tear sliding down her cheek.

Making his way to the outside of the cell house, he breathed deeply of the somewhat clean air and realized that the stagnant air in the lower level could not be any good for his wife nor the child she carried. He would do everything in his power to get her release, and he hoped that he would be able to do this with the few men he had brought with him. He also prayed for a miracle.

August 23, 1305

The sun shone on the horizon as Tambre breathed deeply of the fresh air that filtered in through her barred window. She had not slept at all the eve before, worrying and wondering if William was doing well. Horrible thoughts filled her mind all night, but she had dashed them away with foul curses as she fought back the tears that threatened to spill onto her cheeks. Although in the back of her mind she knew what the inevitable outcome of William Wallace's capture would be, she tried to focus her thoughts on a miracle, and hoped that he would bow to the English, for just this once, to gain his release and keep his precious life intact.

She sighed as she looked out her window once more, seeing the gallows that loomed in

the short distance. Tears came easy to her then and she prayed that the outcome for William was not what her horrible thoughts had imbedded in her mind. Hearing something in the hall behind her, she turned expecting to see Eloise or perhaps Merrik. She was nearly brought to her knees with the surprise of seeing Reginald before her.

“Reginald?”

“My lady Tambre.” His smile lightened her mood somewhat as she looked into a friendly face.

“What are you doing here, Reginald?” She had thought once to go to the bars and hug her dear friend, but the look that now reached his eyes made her shiver with a frightful chill.

“I have come to make you a deal.”

“A deal? What are you talking about?” Her eyes narrowed on him as she waited for the explanation.

“If you wish to keep your life and prevent that lovely neck of yours from being stretched by a rope, you will do exactly as I say.” He watched her eyes as they widened, and knew he had her full attention. “I know the king’s wife. I shall go and plead with her to save your life if you stay in London with me...and become my wife.”

“What?”

“That is what I present to you. This is the only way.” He smirked slightly as he reminded her, “For I am the only one who has come forth, willing to do this for you. You do not see your husband here do you?”

Tambre swallowed the bile that came to her throat, wishing she had her sword. She would run the man through without a second thought! The English has searched her for weapons before she had been put in her cell and had found the hidden arrow along with the small dagger. It was good that he did not know that Merrik was here, for he would surely send the English to find them.

“I do not understand. Why would you need to plead for my life? This has been a misunderstanding, and as soon as my father arrives, he will certainly straighten the whole sordid ordeal out. I am innocent of what I have been unjustly accused of.”

“Tambre, let us keep no further secrets from one another. I know you were the one who had robbed the English nobility for their riches, and have passed those on to William Wallace to

aid in his cause.” He gave a short laugh then. “You can do nothing that will help the beast now. He approaches London with a chain wrapped around his neck like the dog he is.”

Like a streak of lightning, Tambre was lashing out with her fist next to Reginald's jaw. Her mark rang true as he cursed her.

“This is how you want it, I see.” He spit at her and laughed as his spittle hit the front of her gown. “You will likely die for that which you have been accused of.”

“I would rather die than to be taken in by you.” Her quiet words held a warning, and he stepped back from the cell bars. “And you are wrong. Go back to your hole and stay there, for if I see you again, I shall run you through without a second thought.” She turned from him, dismissing his presence entirely until she heard him laugh. Her back stiffened, but she did not turn around.

“Well then, I shall have to tell you this one thing, and then I shall be off.” He waited for her to turn around, and cursed at her back when she did not. “You will be happy to know that I played a part in your Cousin William's capture. I knew where he was, and had convinced his housekeeper into turning the bastard over to the English authorities. For a small price, mind you, but it was well worth every shilling paid.” He continued his laughter as he left her. He knew she could hear him down the hall as he vowed that William would die for what he had done. He smiled as he heard her anguished sobs, but his smile faded as she cursed his soul to hell, and vowed that he would surely die by her hand.

Merrik's eyes grew wide as he saw his brother, Gray, speaking to Camelia. When her eyes finally settled upon his rage filled face, she quietly left Gray's side, walking toward the edge of the street where he stood. She looked up at him, and smiled. He did not smile back.

“What are you doing here?”

“I have come to help you.” She tossed her red hair over her shoulder and continued on. “I know that your wife is being held in the cells at the Elms. I have a plan that might win you her escape.” Her eyes were sincere as she viewed his handsome face, and the torment that she found there.

“And what will you do? Go back home to Scotland, woman. I want no further complications from you.” As Merrik turned to go, Camelia placed a hand on his arm.

"Please listen to what I have to say."

He sighed, turning back toward her as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"I can gain you access to the inside of the prison. And if I play my hand correctly, I will gain you the key to her barred door." She paused, lowering her eyes. "I want to help you with her escape. You may not believe me when I tell you this, but I feel that I am the reason for all of this. I express my sincere regret to you." She shrugged then. "My Father and I have taken up residence in London. I want you to know that if you should ever need a safe place to stay, you can count on our home."

Merrik felt like laughing out loud. What was she up to? He shook his head. "Camelia, go back home. I will take care of this myself."

"Merrik, please. I can gain you more than what you will get for yourself. Let me try. I do not think you will be disappointed."

He sighed and then nodded. "Alright. But I plan on leaving this place tonight. With my wife." He strode away then and went to his brother, Broswin, who had just arrived with his clansmen that very morning.

They had ridden day and night to catch up with the other men, and had finally found them in some woods on the outskirts of London. Broswin, glad to have word that Tambre was safe, greeted his brother with a grin.

"Well, where is the little hellion? Do you have her bound and gagged until we get back to Farlynn?" His smile faded at the look his brother delved out to him. "What is amiss?"

"She is being held for thievery until the king's Justice brings forth witnesses. She will then be put to trial, and sentenced if she is found guilty."

"What? Surely you jest?"

"I wish I did."

Broswin swore loudly and then looked into the woods. After a time he turned back to Merrik with a smile. "And I think that we have some witnesses among us."

Merrik shook his head. "I am in no mood for riddles this day."

"We have enough here that ride with us from our clans that have the dark hair of the English, by no fault of their own. If several of us were to dress the rich English lord and proclaim not to have seen the thief's face, then they will have no choice but to let her go."

“I can not risk our clansmen being found out for Scots. They would hold the lot of them in London Bridge, and hang their Scottish hides from the pikes that line the viaduct until they rotted. Nay, I will not risk it. And besides, we have not the clothing for this type of escapade. Where would we get the rich clothing of an English lord?”

“Give me your approval, and I shall deliver you the cloth.” He smiled when the dimples peeked out in his brother’s cheeks.

“Let us see what can be arranged.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

William Wallace, a strong man by any who knew him, was beaten and worn. His clothes lay in tatters upon his body where he had been literally dragged to London behind horses. He was filthy, and his face was a bruised mass of flesh, but he stood before the king's Justice, straight and tall. A proud man with a height of well over six and a half feet tall, he was intimidating even with his hands chained behind his back and tethered to his ankles. He eyed the man before him with respect, for he knew that this was his hour of reckoning.

Peter Mallorie stared at William Wallace with utter contempt. So this was the man who had caused them so much grief, a man that he would have begging for his life soon.

"Sir William Wallace of Glasgow, it is my duty to inform you that you have been found guilty of treason to the King of England, and I therefore impeach you as a traitor to Edward. Among other acts of thievery, pillaging, murder and total disregard to your King," he paused as he saw the eyes of his enemy take on a spark of fire. "I ask you, do you have anything to say in your defense? Any pleading words for a pardon, perhaps?"

The chamber filled with smirks and laughter of the proud Scotsman begging for his mercy. But their laughter soon died in their throats when William gave Sir Peter Mallorie his answer.

William eyed the man with raised brows and said, his voicing ringing loud and true in the chamber at Westminster Hall, "I cannot be a traitor, sir, for I owe Edward no allegiance. He is not my king, nor will he ever get my vow of arms; and while life is in this body of mine, he never shall receive it. To the other points of which I am accused, I freely confess them all. As Governor of my country, I have been an enemy to its enemies. I have slain the Englishmen, and I have mortally opposed the English King."

He paused then, and smiled at the man before him. "I have stormed and taken the towns and castles which Edward unjustly claimed as his own in my beloved Scotland. I have returned her bounty to the rightful owners. If I or my clansmen have plundered or done injury to any man, I repent me of my sin, but it is not Edward of England which I shall ask this pardon."

Peter Mallorie's eyes blazed with fire as he stood suddenly, outraged at the words this

man before him so freely spoke.

"How dare you speak in such a manner?" His head tilted up in an act of authority as his eyes narrowed. "You make a mockery of this trial, and deny asking for pardon?"

"Nay, I do not make a mockery of your just system. I am beholden to your country for the hell you have put my people through; the taking of our lands, and the raping of our women, the killing of our people. 'Tis as the Lord above proclaims: An eye for an eye. And I would do so again." He winced with the pain of the chains that bound his wrists being jerked harshly behind him for his contemptible words. "And as for my pardon, you sir, have been made aware of that notion." William held the man's gaze, and gained a small piece of satisfaction when the eyes faltered a small bit.

"Then I sentence you to death, William Wallace, on this very day. I order you to be hanged, drawn and quartered. I order this done immediately. Take him to the gallows at the Elms in Smithfield, and put him on display for all to witness!" Sir Peter Mallorie turned from the mocking eyes of William Wallace as he strode from the room, slamming the door loudly behind him as rage filled every pore in his body. The bastard would be crying for his mercy within an hour. But he would gain no outcry of clemency from the people of England.

William Wallace was dragged through the streets of London to the short distance that was the Elms. He was put in a holding cell for a short time until the gallows was fully erected. His cell was at the end of a small hall, and he grunted as he was shoved roughly into the dirty interior, falling upon one knee, but able to right himself quickly. He was left alone for a while as one of his guards went to find a high priest for his last rights.

"William?"

The voice that met his ears was like music. "Tambre, lass, be that you?"

She ran to the bars that separated their cells, and she reached her arms through the bars. "William!"

He went to her, and felt her arms go about his waist, holding him tightly. He was irritated that he could not hold her as well, being that his hands were still bound behind his back. He nuzzled the top of her head with his bearded chin.

"Lass, what are you doing here?"

"I am to be tried as a thief." She smiled up at him, and wiped her tears from her face. Her eyes became filled with fury as she took in his haggard appearance. "What have they done to you? My God!"

"I am fine, I assure you. But look at you! Carrying the babe of your handsome husband in less than a year!" His smile was genuine, and the familiar teasing sparkle lit his face. "I would welcome the little babe into our family!"

"And you will! They will need to have a trial for you, and you will be acquitted of all your charges. I know you will." She touched his bearded cheek, and grinned at him. "My father will be here any day now, and he will help us both."

William nodded his head, but did not bother to tell her that he had already had his trial. This time with her was too precious to spend weeping and wailing.

"Tell me, when is the babe to come? It makes rage fill my body to see you in this filth. If I could, you know I would get you out of this place."

"I know you would, my sweet William. And I would do the same for you. And my babe is going to come when he is damn good and ready." She laughed then. "Mayhap in a week or two."

William smiled down into her lovely face, wishing he could hold his dear cousin in his arms one last time. He knew his time was at an end, and he hoped that he had paved a future in Scotland for all to make a stand for what is their birthright. And for freedom! He prayed he had, at least.

"William, when we get out of this place, I am going to take you to my new home and show you what a lovely place it is. Farlynn will love to have you in residence. Say you will come and stay with me, if only for a short time? I would have you teach my son what a wonderful man you are." She laughed at her own silly words, and then dropped her hands to his waist again as she pulled him to her, laying her head against his beating heart. "I love you, William. Don't ever forget that."

"I will not forget, lass, just like you will never forget that I love you just as much."

"Will you teach my son to wield a sword?"

"Aye, lass, I will teach him. But don't you think that he would like to learn from his mother? Or his father?"

“Oh, we will teach him all the other things, but to learn from you how to brandish a sword, and to know what it is to have a kind heart such as yours, will make him a very powerful man. He will be your right hand man when he is old enough. Just you wait and see. All the years you have vowed our great lands freedom will be in the palm of your hands, and those that follow you. I know that you will make this independence of our homeland a fact of your true leadership. You are a great man, my sweet William, and I am proud to shout the knowledge to the world.” She smiled up at him then. “I do love you, my dear, sweet William.”

“Lass, you make me very proud. And I love you, too.” He kissed the top of her head, and they remained silent until the guards came for him once again.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Tambre was puzzled that the guards had come to take William away so soon. Until she heard the cheering outside her cell window. Rushing over to peer out, her eyes widened with the display of townspeople that had gathered. Being at ground level it was difficult for her to make out anything around her and to see what was going on. The crowd parted then and she felt sick to her stomach. There before her, William Wallace was being led up to the gallows stage. He was pelted with rotting vegetation and meat, and still he stood tall and strong. Proud. They had pulled his tunic from his torso and had lowered his wool hose to below his waist, making of him an unwarranted, vulgar display.

She could see him now as he stood on the stage with his hands chained behind his back and a noose being placed around his neck. She whispered her denial to the act as her breathing came out in tiny gasps. Nay, this was not real! She had to be dreaming, she had to be! She cringed as she heard the people become quiet and the Justice recite his words to those who had come to watch.

“My dear people! You have come today to witness the execution of Sir William Wallace, who stands before you accused of treason, thievery and murder!” The man turned a solemn face to William, who stood and looked over the crowd as the people cursed and spat out at him. “William Wallace! Do you beg for mercy?”

When William remained silent the justice nodded his head once and a noose was placed about his neck, being pulled tight from behind him.

Tambre gasped and tried to scream, but the sound was stuck in her throat. Her hands that gripped the iron bars were white with the pressure, and she swallowed the bitter bile that came to her throat as she continued to look on.

“Then I have been ordered to have you hanged, drawn and quartered. And so it shall be done!” The justice nodded his head, and watched with the other people in the square as William was pulled up by the neck, just far enough for his feet to dangle, having the air cut off from his lungs.

Tambre did scream then, but her heartfelt agony of watching her cousin's hanging was

drowned out by the cheers that rose around her. She felt lightheaded, but she refused to sit down.

William's face had turned a deep shade of purple by the time he was released from the noose. They had let him hang by his neck until he had almost died from no breath in his lungs, making him weak and unable to fight any further. The Justice let him fall to the floor of the stage, but ordered that he be set upon the block that sat in the center. The rope had been removed from his neck, and his hands were unbound as he lay on the block gasping for breath, nearly dead.

"Again I ask you, Sir William Wallace. Do you beg mercy?" The Justice smiled, for he knew that William was in no condition to speak, even if he did want to beg for his life at this time.

The people cheered as no reply was made. More rotting meat was thrown upon the stage, and curses were heard in an uprising of voices. This made Tambre close her eyes and pray that when she opened them, this would be a dream. A horrible, horrible dream.

The grim-faced Justice looked at the executioner with the black hood covering his face as he nodded once. The man stepped forward carrying a lethal looking sword with a hook on the end. He looked at the man lying before him, half dead in a sense, and dug the hooked end of the sword into William's lower stomach making a slice all the way across from hip to hip.

Tambre screamed again, and cried out William's name, so blinded by her tears that she could barely see. She watched in horror as the executioner pulled the man's intestines from his body slowly. She swiped at her eyes with the cuffs of her gown, not really caring what she did at this point, for she felt numb and dead herself. She heard her cousin's agonized cries of pain, and her cries of misery mingled with his. Sickened as several dogs leapt upon the stage, starting to feast upon her cousin's entrails, she cursed the English with every fiber of her being! Her shouts went unheard as the crowd began to beg for the man's mercy themselves, revolted at the disgusting display of torture.

The crowd became quiet then as the executioner took his ax from behind his back and went to stand beside William's head. Continued cries of mercy spewed forth then as the inhumane act had reached a point of being vile. In one fair swoop, the head of William Wallace was severed from his body. Two other men joined the executioner as they set about cutting the body into four pieces, as was their direction to do, to send to the four corners of the country as a

warning to all traitors. His head would be placed upon a pike at London Bridge for all to see and know the fate of any who deny the King his right.

Tambre dropped her face into her shaking hands and fiercely screamed her grief. Gone was her beloved cousin, killed by the hated English. Hanged and disemboweled, beheaded and quartered. As fury settled into her soul, she curled her hands into fists and struck out at the slimy stone wall. Over and over she swung out until she could swing no more. Spent, she fell to the filthy floor and let the grief of his murder seep into her soul, wailing her sorrow.

The square became silent then as her echoing wail reverberated over the crowd. It was filled with such anguish, such disheartened sorrow, that small children began to cry, as did the women. Never had the sound of sorrow cut like the very axe that had beheaded William Wallace.

Merrik had been on his way to see Tambre when the news of the execution was heard. He pulled the cloak hood over his head and entered into the square, witnessing the man's beheading. He shuddered and looked around him at the horrified faces, the tears of the women and children who had come to see the horrendous deed heartbreaking. He spotted Kollif Wallace looking on with tears streaming down his own face, and he made his way over to the man's side.

"Kollif." Merrik's whispered words took the man beside him by surprise. He saw him reach for his sword, but stayed his hand when he recognized who he was.

"Merrik." He wiped his face and looked back at the stage at the brutality of the English. They had finished cutting the man into pieces and were now carrying the bloody limbs out of the square. He looked back at the man beside of him, and it was at that time they both heard the wailing of a woman.

"Tambre." Merrik was gone before he could explain what was going on. He pushed his way through the crowd, stepping into the back entrance of the small prison, Kollif at his heels.

"Is Tambre here?" Kollif's voice held the rage of ten men as Merrik turned to look at him with a finger to his lips, motioning for him to remain quiet.

Merrik took the stairs that led below and tried to swallow his nausea at the smell that assaulted his nostrils. He heard Kollif growl behind him. They heard a rustling of keys and, with no place to hide, they stood in the middle of the hall until they were met by a young guard.

The guard's face became ashen when he saw the two and uttered not a word of alarm as Kollif cuffed him suddenly on the side of the head, rendering him unconscious. Pulling the keys from the guard's belt quietly, he handed them to Merrik and followed as they went further down the hall, rounding a corner.

Merrik cursed when he saw his wife's miserable state and made Kollif stay by the corner to watch for anyone who might surprise them. Taking the key and unlocking the cell door, he rushed in, pulling Tambre into his arms and nearly cried out his own grief with the sobs that racked her body. She clung to him tightly, her knuckles bloody from obviously hitting the stone wall in her rage.

Kollif's eyes widened and he went to her as he whispered her name. Not getting a response, he told Merrik to hide her under his cloak and to follow him out of the prison.

The escape was too easy, and Merrik did not breathe his relief until they reached the outskirts of London. Kollif had several of William's closest followers with him, and as he left Merrik and Tambre with the clansmen from Farlynn, he bid Merrik to wait until his return, telling them all that they would ride out that eve under the cloak of darkness.

"Nay. They will find her gone soon, and I would be departed from here before that happens." He looked down at her grief stricken face, refusing to release his hold upon her to anyone.

"You are right. Let me get the men and we shall leave together. Be ready to take flight when I return. I should only be a few moments." Kollif was gone then, not waiting for an answer.

Broswin appeared at his brother's side and brushed the hair back from Tambre's face. He looked at Merrik, seeing the pain of his wife reflected in his own face.

"William is gone then?"

Merrik drew his lips into a thin line as he nodded his head. "And she saw it all. The whole horrible act." He finally looked at his brother then, rage replacing the pain. "Get my mount. And tell the men to be ready. We leave when Kollif Wallace returns."

Broswin turned away quickly as he called three men to his side quietly. The clansmen learned quickly of William's death, hurriedly gathering their things in preparation to leave. They were all sitting upon their warhorses when Kollif returned a few minutes later, ready to make

their escape.

"Let us ride from this despicable place." Kollif spit on the ground then as he took the lead and made sure that Merrik rode in the center of all the clansmen to keep himself and Tambre safe. They rode hard and fast for the Scotland border, not wishing to stay in the country any longer than was necessary. Two days into their journey, barely stopping to rest at all, they met up with a man who had ridden with William since the start of the Scotland independence.

Robert the Bruce listened to the news of William Wallace's brutal death with a strained face. Agony clouded his eyes, and he allowed only one tear to escape his right eye before he wiped it away, fervently vowing to seek revenge upon the country who had taken their Governor from them. He and his followers left in a flurry of rage, their destination unknown. And, perhaps, it was better not knowing.

Tambre cried out then as she clutched her stomach in pain. She looked at Merrik with pleading eyes.

"The babe comes. Get me to Scotland, for no child of mine will be born in this filthy country." She buried her face in his chest as she grasped the front of his tunic with a tight fist.

Broswin led the way then, telling Kollif the catch up to them when he could. They pushed forward, like madmen, to reach their own country before the newest member of the clan was born. They came upon a small village just inside the Scotland borders several hours later, finding the small cottage of the midwife. She was a middle-aged woman with graying hair, and kind eyes that took on a seriousness when she opened her door to Merrik holding Tambre in his arms.

She stepped aside, bidding Merrik to place Tambre upon the soft bed in the back room and then set to work gathering clean cloths and hot water from the kettle that sat upon the hearth. She smiled at Merrik's worried frown as his wife writhed in pain upon the bed, clutching his hand tightly.

"Go now. She will be fine. I will come for you when all is done." She watched him leave the room quickly and smiled in his wake. Men. Fierce to the end on the battlefield, but when it came to being with a woman who was about to deliver a child into the world, their child, they became petrified. She shook her head and turned her attentions back to the woman.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The birthing had been a fairly easy one, at least that was what Tambre had been told by the kind woman who helped to bring her sons into the world. She had delivered twin boys with blue eyes and shocks of dark hair. They were tiny babes, and she smiled as she held first one, then the other in her arms for the first time. Their yelps of hunger were not tiny, however, and she nursed the first babe. When he had had his fill and had dozed off, she then satisfied the second babe, who had waited so patiently.

She heard a cheer go up outside the cottage and she smiled. She knew that Marley, as the woman called herself, had told Merrik of his two sons. A few minutes later he joined her in the room, his eyes wide at seeing the two babes for the first time.

"Tambre, are you all right then?" His worried frown made her smile as she patted the mattress beside her, bidding him to come and sit.

She handed him his first son and laughed softly as Merrik fumbled with the tiny creature. "He will not break, my lord."

"He is so small. And so beautiful." Merrik grinned at his sleeping son, and then looked at Tambre. "I love you. And I give my thanks to you. You have not given me one son, but two."

"They appear to take after their father in their looks." She smiled at the babe she held, and then looked at Merrik. "They are beautiful."

Merrik nodded but then stiffened as the babe he held let out a great cry, and then was quiet once more. He looked at Tambre with wide eyes. "Did I hurt him?"

"Nay, you did not. Babes do that sometimes, I suppose." She laughed. "I imagine both of us have quite a bit of learning ahead."

Marley had insisted that Tambre not ride so soon after the birthing, so she had gone into the village and had found a cart that Merrik had purchased willingly for the safe ride to Farlynn for his wife and children. Padded with thick blankets and pillows, all donated to the new family by the kind villagers, they were on their way by the fifth day.

Tambre fretted that the slow pace would mean a better chance of the English catching up to them, but Merrik assured her that he would let nothing take her away from him again. Kollif

had sent a messenger ahead, and had stated that he and his followers would remain behind to keep them safe from any English that might try to pass into Scotland. Tambre settled into a quietness during the journey, and Merrik knew her to be contemplating the death of her dear cousin. She tended to the needs of her children and allowed him to hold her tight in his arms at night, but she had changed. He did not know if it was seeing the execution, giving birth, or a combination of both that had her quiet and somber looking, carrying an almost vengeful look in her eyes.

She named their children after the third day of their journey. The oldest was named Drayven William, and the youngest was given the name of Mykal Wallace. She smiled at him for the first time since their travels as tears trickled down her cheeks. And when they stopped that night to rest she came to him, crying herself to sleep in his arms. He held her close to him from that night forward, and hoped for the day that her smile would light her eyes once again.

After one more day of travel, the clansmen surrounded the wagon when they noticed a group of travelers on the horizon. With their swords at the ready, they sent three men ahead to see if the group was friend or foe. When the messenger came back to let Merrik know that it was Elwain from Lockbourne, Merrik nodded in relief and went to inform Tambre that her father was at hand.

"My father? Why does he come now?" The look of condemnation in her eyes made Merrik bite his tongue with a sharp retort.

"He is your father, and no doubt concerned for your safety."

"My safety was not an issue." She looked over to Drayven who let out a yowl of hunger. "I need to tend to my children." She turned her back to him, dismissing her husband altogether.

Merrik tightened his hold upon the reins, making his destrier sidestep to the right. When she did not turn around to face him, he cursed as he kicked his heels into the animal's side, sending him leaping in the other direction. He met Elwain halfway down the valley.

"Merrik! How is my daughter?" Elwain looked tired and worn, as they all did.

"She is fine." He smiled then. "And she has delivered to me two fine sons."

"Two?" Elwain's eyes went heavenward as he smiled. "Blessed God, I give you thanks. She was never one to do things normally." He turned his eyes back to his son-in-law, and then frowned. "'Tis not the look of a happy father. What is amiss?"

"You have heard about William?" Merrik was hesitant to bring up the subject.

"I heard just this day. There is sure to be an uprising from this misdeed." He sighed. "And Tambre? How has she taken the news?"

Merrik shook his head. "She saw the whole of the event. She was being held in a small prison cell on the Elms. She was no more than fifteen feet from the gruesome deed."

Elwain closed his eyes, whispering a quick prayer. "I will go to her."

"She is not herself." Merrik smiled sadly. "She is very quiet and takes care of the babes, but that is all." He paused, hesitant to speak further, but decided to warn the man. "She is bitter, Elwain. She thought that you would have come to save William with your influences. Being disgruntled as she is, her words bite like the blade of her sword. I tell you this to prepare you for her fury that will likely be thrown your way."

Elwain nodded dejectedly as he followed Merrik to the small wagon. Tambre had just finished feeding the last babe and had put them side by side on a soft pile of blankets.

She heard them approach and had to fight down the rage that filled her heart. Elwain was her father and he loved her, that she knew, but she could not slake the urge to lash out at him for not trying to do something to save her dear cousin. She felt her father's hand upon her shoulder, and turned to face him with a steady gaze.

"Father."

Elwain dropped his hand to his side. "Tambre. You look well, my lass. And I see I have two fine grandsons that are handsome and strong."

Tambre said nothing as she gave him a half smile. She lowered her gaze so he could not see the fire that burned there.

"I heard about William just this day." He paused wanting to say more but not wanting to say too much. "I am sorry that I did not reach London in time."

She did look at him then, and the fury that lit her eyes made her father take a step back. "Sorry? No more sorry than I. But you were not there, were you, to try and save him." She stood and jumped from the edge of the wagon as she turned to face him fully. "But I was there. I saw everything. How the English pigs mocked him, how they beat him like a dog, dragging him along the streets." She swallowed the tears that threatened to spill over her lower lids. "How they *murdered* him." She closed her eyes to the horrible memory and turned from her father to

check on her children. Seeing that they were still sleeping, she kindly asked Kollif to keep an eye on them as she sprang upon a borrowed destrier and kicked the animal into motion, away from everything and everyone. Leaving it all behind her, if just for a short time.

Merrik followed her, trying hard not to let his fear show. She was traveling at a break-neck speed like she had not a care for herself, kicking her destrier faster and faster still. And when the group was left behind, small dots in the distance, she slowed her destrier to a slow trot, and then to a walk, finally stopping altogether.

The tears had come, and she dropped from her destrier's back, falling to the ground on her knees, wailing her sorrow. She felt the strong arms of her husband encase her, but she pushed at him until he let her go, wailing foul curses as she did so. This was something she needed to do, to let out her grief and to be by herself. Merrik must have sensed this, for he left her to herself, staying a short distance away.

She cried her rage, her fear and her sorrow for a long time, letting it rip through her heart like the sharpest of blades. Standing suddenly, she pulled her sword from her side, and sliced it wickedly through the air, seeing the wicked faces of the men who had taken her cousin's precious life. She cried for her dear, sweet William's pain, for his beliefs...and for his freedom, which he now had. And when she thought she could cry no more, the tears still came.

Upon the wind that whipped at her hair, she heard a voice, softly at first and then louder. It was William. He bid her to stop her tears. She looked around suddenly, so real were the words, but she only saw Merrik waiting for her nearby. She turned her back to him, thinking she had imagined the words, or that maybe she was leaping into madness. But they came again as she closed her eyes and knelt to the ground.

When the wind stopped blowing around her a short time later she opened her eyes, seeing things differently, in a whole new light. She felt an inner peace and breathed deeply of the fresh air, ridding her body of the foul stench of death. She turned and caught sight of Merrik, still waiting for her. She smiled then, running into his waiting arms, giving her the strength his own body held.

Merrik caught her to him, pulling her body close to his own. She held tightly to him, and he closed his eyes to savor the moment, a pleasure that had been lost to him for over two weeks now.

“Merrik, I love you.” Tambre whispered the words next to his ear as she kissed his neck softly. “Please forgive me this foolish mood I have been under. I think I have found my peace with William’s death, although its still pains me to think I shall never see his face again.” She looked at him then, her gaze serious. “Do you think I will ever forget?”

“Nay, I do not. Nor would William want you to.” He kissed her gently on the cheek. “Never forget.”

“Never forget our freedom.” She smiled when she felt Merrik’s arms tighten around her once more.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Tambre's parents stayed at Farlynn for the next several months to help out with the new babes. Although her mood had improved, and after she had apologized profusely to her father for her unaccountable outburst, Tambre was seemingly her old spirited self once more.

Merrik was glad for the normalcy in their lives yet again, but he seemed to look the other way in most cases as his wife assumed her normal daily activities and mischievous ways. One activity was being on the training fields with Crystalline and Reanna. She was becoming quite the expert markswoman with the bow and arrow, and the merriment that glittered in her eyes when she saw her husband approach one day made him hesitate to go to her side. He longed for the touch of her hands upon his body, but they had been stilled for months now.

He was sure that the memory of William's death plagued her mind night and day, knowing that she would come around when she was able. He refused to press her, even though he wanted desperately to. The hunger for her that raged through his body had nearly set him on the path to insanity himself, but still he hoped for the love they had once shared.

"Merrik!" Her smile radiated over her face as she kissed him soundly on the lips. "Did you see our children this morn? Have they not grown more since the day before? They will be wielding swords by the end of the year, I warrant."

"I have seen them, and they seem to be very happy crawling out of their cribs to teethe on the sword you have left for them." He grinned at her raised brows.

"They are only two months old. And if they have gotten from their cribs, then mayhap I have misjudged when they shall be taking the sword in hand." Her lips curled up at the ends and she leaned on her own sword as she stuck the tip in the ground. "Drayven shall be the swordsman while Mykal will master the bow."

Her matter-of-fact voice made Merrik pause in his next comment. "Now how could you possibly know that? They are but babes."

"I see the way they flail their arms. Drayven swings about his right arm, although he should be able to manipulate a sword with both." She moved closer to Merrik's side, and placed a gentle hand upon his chest. "And Mykal has a strong grip with both of his little hands. He will

be steady on the draw of his bowstring.”

“And who will be teaching them the art of their future?” He pulled his wife into his arms, feeling the deep longing for her that came from the center of his soul. They had not made love since their return, and he ached for the day when he could join with her once more. He had been warned by Mary not to lay hands upon his wife until she had a chance to heal properly from the birthing...and from the brutality she had witnessed with William's death. And he knew that she still needed to heal from the death of her beloved cousin, for he saw it in her eyes still.

He had patiently bided his time, but when she touched him the way she did now, he could think of nothing else but her legs wrapped around his hips and her lips moaning her pleasure. He swallowed and looked into her deep sapphire eyes, sucking in his breath as he did so. The invitation was clearly there, one he thought never to see for some time again. His mouth dropped open slightly.

“We both shall teach our sons. Come ride with me, husband. I wish to show you my appreciation for the two fine sons you have given me.”

“Lead the way, my bonny lass. I go with you willingly.”

They rode slowly toward the forest of tall trees just north of Farlynn. Tambre sat in front of Merrik as they felt the awareness of the other, of the impending pleasure that was sure to come to them both. After making sure that their sons were to be looked over in their absence, the two made a hasty retreat for a few hours of solitude.

Tambre breathed in his scent and reveled in the man that held her close to his body. His strong arms surrounded her with protective strength, one that she never wanted to let go of. He had stood by her in her hour of need, and she loved him all the more for that kind act, allowing her the time that she desperately needed to go on. She rubbed her palm along the length of his thigh, smiling as she felt him harden at her touch. Leaning back against his firm chest sent delicious tingles down her spine as he kissed her neck softly, running his tongue along the same path where his lips had just touched. She closed her eyes and whispered his name. She was glad that they had entered the woods then, for the heat that she felt beginning in her center was only the beginning.

Merrik stopped Majesty by a small stream and eased off the back of the animal, taking Tambre down after him. He held her in his arms for a moment wondering at the love he felt for

her, growing every day. Life with her had become very precious, especially since the birth of their fine babes. And because of the misdeed with William Wallace, he realized that his life was truly enriched with the love of a beautiful spirited woman, one that he would cherish for the rest of his days.

Tambre smiled at his serious expression. "Do not look so, my husband. I will bring a smile to those lips posthaste." She kissed him then, feeling the smoothness of his lips beneath hers. Rising upon her toes, she grasped him around the neck, deepening the kiss, delving her tongue into his mouth to taste the sweetness that she found there. It was intoxicating, like a heady wine drunk too quickly. Her hands roamed over his muscled back, sliding with feathery fingertips to his chest where she pushed up his tunic, pulling it over his head to reveal this brawny strength. Her lips then trailed a path to his nipples, where she laved and suckled softly.

Merrik drew in his breath at the seductive way her mouth moved over his bare flesh. She left not an inch of his exposed skin untouched by her tongue and her lips, moving over him with precision in her haste to make her way to the hardness of his body that awaited her tender caress. And when she pulled his hose away from his skin, he gulped down the groan that so badly wanted to escape his lips. She had taken his hardness in her hands and massaged gently as she kissed around the throbbing member. Taking him into her mouth, he did let his voice be heard then as he groaned her name with a desire so strong, it took his breath away. The velvety softness of her tongue left him weak-kneed, and he pulled her head into his body as she began to suckle softly. She tickled his sensitive flesh, making him call out her name on a heated whisper, begging her to make the ache go away. And he did ache, but it was a very good ache, one that he had craved for so long.

She pushed him down to the ground gently, kissing along his chest, making her way back to his handsome face. She stopped for a moment to remove her cumbersome hose and tunic, and then continued with her seduction. She could no longer subdue the thoughts of his hardness inside of her once more, knowing that the feel of him would be the sweetest she had ever felt. She craved the act every time he set eyes upon her, so much so that she felt his caress rove over her time and again, like it was actually his hands upon her bare flesh. And it was as she had known before, his palms rough and calloused, enjoying the feel so much. It was as if she dreamed this act now, but she knew it to be real. She knew his moans of pleasure to be real as

she kissed her way back down to his hardness, taking him gently into her mouth once more.

Merrik closed his eyes to the madness that she pushed him to. She felt delicious next to his bare skin, and when she pulled his manhood into her mouth, he nearly burst with his wanting. Her flesh was hot to his touch, and he knew that this woman was the only life he had ever sought, had ever wanted. He loved her with a passion and a desire so strong, it made him shudder at the thought of his near loss. He pulled her up to his mouth then and kissed her lips tenderly as he entered her hot core slowly. His groan of near pain emanated around them as he pulled himself out slightly from her tight sheath, and then slid smoothly back inside her warmth. She was hot and wet, begging him for a release that would take them both to heaven.

Tambre smiled when she heard his whispered words of love as she relaxed her body, drawing her knees next to his side and raising herself into a sitting position on top of him. Slowly she rocked her hips over his hardness, feeling him throb deep within her center. Closing her eyes, she continued the sensual movement until he grasped her hips roughly, thrusting himself into her with a sudden jerking motion. She knew he had found his release and she gave way to her own, taking his lips with her own and delving her tongue into his mouth.

Breathing deeply of the scent that was Merrik, she glided her palms up his chest, along his neck to stop around his face as she brushed his dark hair from his forehead. His breathing was erratic, as was her own, but she dared not move lest the spell be broken and reality crept back around them.

"I love you, Merrik. My life would not be worth living if not for you." Her eyes closed slightly and she felt tears well up in her chest. "I would give you my own life if it meant to save yours." One single tear fell from her eye. She watched as it hit Merrik's own cheek, running down to the side of his neck.

He placed his hands on her shoulders, and pulled her into his tight embrace. He closed his eyes and let the warmth of her body seep into his own. He felt her grasp his shoulders and hold onto him as if this were to be the last time she held him. This brought an alarm to his mind as he broke the tender silence.

"Do not leave me, lass. I mean to lock you away in my tower if I suspect you to take flight from here. I promised you that I would keep and protect you from all dangers. I mean what I say. Promise me that you will not leave me."

Tambre looked at him then, and saw the panic gathering in his pale emerald eyes. She tried to soothe his worries, but knew that she lied to him even as she lied to herself. The revenge upon England was at hand, and she had been called upon to lend a hand.

She dared not let Merrik know her plans, but hoped that he would not hate her overly much when she left to find Kollif and the others. Some overdue scores to settle were also on her agenda, and there was one in particular to settle with a greedy baron. She applauded Merrik for his great instincts that bid him warning. She just hoped that when the time came for her to go, his instincts would not be so keen.

“My word to you, Merrik, as a promise to tamp your fears.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“And when will they be expecting us?” Tristan sat back in his chair and took a drink of his mulled wine. He looked at the other man over the rim of his cup, wondering if he should do the bastard in now or wait for Tambre to take care of him. He smiled to himself. He would let his sister do what she would.

“My guess would be by nightfall. The troops are slated to be here by the next day, with an assured victory, I might add.” Baron John Monteith plucked an invisible piece of lint from his elaborate velvet tunic of pale blue. His eyes went to the man who sat across from him as he agreed with a smile about the English victory that was sure to come. “It is refreshing to converse with decent Englishmen! England will prevail in her quest to make Scotland mirror her own ways. It is an inevitable fact, and one must let nature take her course.”

Tristan bit his lip, but smiled at the Baron while nodding his understanding. “Quite so. I am just waiting to hear what they have in store for us next. I am sure it will be more of the same since the start.” He leaned forward slightly, raising a brow at the Baron. “Tell me, sir, what lands do the Englishmen plan on taking next? Would I be privy to the information, even though I have been a member of The Group for just under one year?” He waited for a reply and nearly reached across the table to grasp the bastard around his skinny neck to strangle the answer right out of him. Patience was never a good virtue of his, so he gripped the arm of the chair tightly to still his hands from snapping the neck of the man.

John smiled and took a rather slow sip of his wine, obviously pondering the request. The Group had been formed nearly two years ago, and had grown to an overwhelming forty members in that short time.

“I suppose that I should start letting you in on the positions of our troops. And I will caution you by the rights under The Group that you will not breathe a word of this to anyone.”

Tristan sat his cup down in front of him, and smiled. “You have my word, sir.”

The Baron nodded and went on, the wine loosening his tongue tremendously.

Derrick and Galwain awaited their brother at the edge of the woods, and when they saw him leave the castle of the Baron Monteith, they followed him along the wood line until they were well out of sight of the castle. It was nearing nightfall, and their destination was not far.

Tristan steered his prancing horse into the woods and cursed the thing for its high stepping walk. He shook his head. He would never understand the English and their reasoning of horseflesh. He smiled a greeting at his brothers and followed them in silence as they made their way further into the dense woods. After an hour had passed they stopped and dismounted, coming into the circle of light from a fire that burned low.

Kollif looked up at the intruders, pushing back the hood of his cloak when he recognized who they were.

"Tristan, or should I say Ropart Brythen." He gained a ready smile from the three men as they sat around the fire to warm their hands and partake of a meager repast of roasted rabbit and bread. He nodded at the other two brothers. "What word have you brought us this eve? I hope 'tis something we can use."

"Aye, it is." Tristan said with a full mouth of meat, and took a swift drink of cool water to wash down the dryness. "The baron had a loose tongue this eve, and I have Tambre's wine to thank for that."

"My wine bares no drug, my dear brother." Tambre appeared from the darkness and stepped into the light silently, startling all those who had sat around the fire. She smiled as she sheathed her sword. "You all must be aware, even when you take your food. Chew slowly, and listen to the things around you."

"Did my guards let you pass willingly then, or did they get their throats slit by your sharp tongue?" Kollif rose and placed a light kiss upon her cheek. "Good men are hard to find these days, you know!"

"They will be fine when they awaken." She grinned at her cousin's outraged look. "Do not look at me so! They will learn to stay alert, and be at the ready always. A good man is of no use to us dead. If they were that good, they would be hauling me into this camp bound and gagged! But I see not bonds upon my body. Have a care who you set as your guards. It could be the last mistake you make." She kissed his cheek and grinned at him as she sat down beside Tristan, shaking her head at the proffered food.

“What news do you have?” Her brow drew into a frown as her eyes narrowed to the sound of the snapping of a twig in the woods just beyond where she had come.

Kollif drew his sword silently, and stood alone by the fire as the others made their way into the surrounding darkness, hiding themselves. He gave a sigh of relief when a gray wolf appeared, growling a warning.

“’Tis old Nat. She has been gone from us all this time.” Kollif sheathed his sword, and handed the wolf a few pieces of bone from the rabbit. Hungrily the wolf snatched the meager offering, heading back into the woods.

Tambre passed Kollif, and held up her hand as she passed, still unsure of the wolf’s presence. She knew Nat to be careful of where she placed her paws, and knew that the wolf was not alone. A few paces into the woods, she knelt down by a sturdy oak, and watched in the dim light as the wolf growled low in her throat. William Wallace had taught the beast well, Tambre mused as she watched two furry bundles bound out of their hiding place and to their mother’s side. Ah, so she has had her offspring late in the year. She smiled as she whistled a low note, and the wolf came to her side wagging her tail.

“Nat, you have returned, old girl.” Tambre patted the gray head, smiling. “And you have brought your two babes, I see.” She nearly laughed out loud as the two small cubs made their way cautiously toward her. One was of a black color, almost like that of a dog. His coat of fuzzy fur was short, even around his head and tail. The other cub bore the markings of his mother, although he appeared to be white in the dim light of the moon that shone overhead through the thicket of tree branches. He moved cautiously until he reached his mother’s side, and then decided to investigate further while the other remained behind his mother’s hind legs.

On silent paws he kept his head low and his eyes trained upon Tambre, watching as she tilted her head to the left, viewing him with narrowed eyes. The wolf’s eyes glowed an eerie, pale blue, almost white as he made his way to her side, obviously unconcerned with the danger of humans. Once near enough, he sniffed the ground around her and delivered a low growl of his own. This surprised Tambre, for he was a small cub yet, but the growl that had rumbled in his chest made her think him to be full grown had she not known better. She slowly put out her hand to let the cub smell her scent, and bit back a yelp of surprise as the cub bit quickly into the palm of her hand, bringing blood to the surface.

The cub lowered its head again, and began to lick the blood from the soft palm as he kept a steady gaze upon Tambre. After a few moments, he moved next to her side, and sat staring at his mother, his ears perked upright. Nat licked her babe once on the side of the head, and then disappeared into the woods with the other cub following closely behind her.

Tambre watched them go and knew that the cub who sat beside her had picked his master. And for what ever reason, she felt immensely pleased that he had. She patted his soft fur and again marveled at how the eyes seemed to glow white in the darkness. Standing, she made her way back to the fire, the cub following closely behind her. She stopped suddenly, and leaned down to the side of the wolf cub.

"Since you have picked me as your master, I shall pick a name worthy of one so brave." She smiled suddenly. "I shall name you Ashe, for you have appeared from out of the ashes of what was once a great country, and what will be yet again."

Ashe looked at Tambre, his eyes glowing with a more intense light than before. He continued to follow his new master to the fire and sat by her side, offering a growl of warning to any who came near to the woman.

Kollif raised his brows, grinning at Tambre. "I take it that Nat has left a little gift for you." He looked at the pup and offered the animal a rabbit bone. Ashe snatched the bone from his hand and lay down beside Tambre, placing the bone between his paws to chew upon it. His white-eyed gaze studied the man with an intensity that nearly had Kollif shuddering. "He looks as if he wishes to rip the throat from my body."

Tambre shrugged. "He has bitten me on my hand. Mayhap it is his way of making a new friend."

"I will pass on that one." Kollif smiled at the pup, and then looked back to Tristan. "Now, back to our news. What have you found out?"

"I have heard that the English are to be marching some troops this way within the next day. They are relentless in bringing our country under their rule." He turned his attention to his sister. "How long can you stay with us?"

She shrugged, and took a drink of the cool water that had been passed to her by Kollif. "Merrik is away to his cousin's lands with his father. 'Tis the only reason that I am here right now. I have secured the confidence of his two brothers, Gray and Luther, and they helped me to

leave unnoticed.”

“And what of my nephews?” Galwain raised his brows, as he studied his sister from across the fire.

“They have been left in very capable hands. I would not have come if it were otherwise.” She handed the cup back to Kollif, pulling her black cloak tighter around herself as she smiled. “I must return the day after tomorrow. I would be back in plenty of time before Merrik arrives at Farlynn.”

“And what if he should come back before he is to be expected? What then?” Derrick took a bite of rabbit meat, and regarded his sister with humor in his eyes.

Tambre grinned. “Then I shall receive the beating of my life, and will not be able to sit down for a week.” She smiled down at the wolf cub, patting the white fur between his eyes. “But mayhap Ashe shall protect me.”

Tristan snorted, and shook his head. “I do not think that your wolf will be able to protect you from the anger of your husband.”

“I think you speak true.” She laughed quietly with the others, and their conversation turned back to the news that Tristan had obtained. “Did you receive the name of the castle the English are to take?”

“’Tis a castle that I have heard little of. And I was not told the name of the clan who resides there.” Tristan took a drink of his water, and sat the cup by his side. “The castle is Brodmore.”

Tambre stilled in her action of patting the wolf’s head, and narrowed her eyes at her brother. “What say you?”

“Brodmore Castle.” Tristan stood when he noticed the fear that had crept into his sister’s deep blue eyes. “What is amiss?”

“The Clan Douglas is where Merrik has gone. ’Tis his cousin’s castle. Brodmore.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Merrik looked out over the inner bailey with a critical eye. It was barely light enough to see his hand before his face, but his father's cousin, James, had insisted that the work begin early in the morn for the past two days. He and his father, along with approximately one hundred of the Douglas clan, had reinforced the outer walls of the guard's tower and the portcullis gates. The stone walls of the keep seemed to be in good condition, so little had to be done with that.

All of the serfs were given caution as to the impending danger of the English troops showing their ugly faces in challenge to bend to the English will or forfeit the lands being held. He thought of how lucky Farlynn Castle had been so far, but knew that the inevitable would happen sooner or later. But they would be ready for the English dogs. Their keep was strong, and would outlast any skirmish that the English should cast their way. He smiled then, and knew that Tambre would be in the front lines handling the men, encouraging them to make their targets true.

He sighed as he turned away from the work still being done, and went back into the castle to discuss with his father what needed to be tackled next. He had been here for two days now, and he wished to return to the warm embrace of his lovely wife. And of course there were his two sons, Drayven and Mykal. The boys had grown over the last few weeks, and nearing the eleven month mark, both were trying very hard to walk on their own. He did not want to miss that. Spotting his father by the massive stairs that led above, he went to his side and knew right away that something was wrong.

"What is amiss?" Merrik's stance was one of ever alertness, and his eyes roamed over the hall quickly.

"We have received word that the English have been spotted a few hours away, and they are heading this way." Ian frowned at his son and looked about the hall himself. "We will need to stay and help protect the Douglas lands. I am hoping that the few men we have brought with us, along with the Douglas', will be enough to fend off the upheaval that the English will surely deliver to us all."

Merrik nodded and gazed at his father with worried eyes. "Where is their armory? We

should start the distribution of weapons to every able bodied man.”

“James has already begun the deed. I would have you get yourself and our men gathered. He wishes to speak to them all.” Ian turned and went above stairs to gather his battle gear, preparing for the inevitable.

Merrick watched his father go into preparation of the on-coming battle. He thought of the stories he had heard of the English bringing at least a thousand soldiers to take the lands of the resisting clans. All of those battles had turned into blood baths and certain death. Even with his clan members being paired with the Douglas', their numbers would barely reach two hundred men.

He thought of Tambre, and how she would refuse to let the English have her lands, and knew that his own cousin would do the same. Even though they stood not a chance against the arms the English would raise against them, they would fight for what was theirs. He feared that they would be sorely outnumbered, and was glad that Tambre was tucked safely away at Farlynn under the watchful eyes of his brothers.

Tambre kicked her heels into the sides of her destrier to spur him on faster. She heard the others behind her, roughly five hundred men that they had gathered along the way; poor clans that had had their holdings taken away by the strong arm of the English. Looking at the sun above, she judged the time to be about ten in the morning, and she hoped that they were not too late. Fear struck her heart suddenly when she realized that Merrik's life was in danger. As she spotted the castle of the Clan Douglas sitting atop a hill that seemed a million miles away, seeing the English troops that had already gathered there, she knew how Merrik felt when he had tried to explain to her that he wanted to keep her safe. Now she knew.

Galwain came alongside of her, as he shouted, “Slow your mount! We will need to gather a diversion plan. The English are already about at the Douglas holdings, and we must proceed with caution.”

Tambre's heart beat rapidly in her chest as she pulled Majesty to a halt. She looked at Galwain with a grim face. “What do you suggest?”

"Come back to the others. I believe they are devising a plan even now."

She followed her brother back to the group of clansmen almost a half mile back. She had been in such a rush that she had not noticed that the others had stopped. Pulling alongside Kollif, she leaned forward and patted her destrier's neck, praising him for his swift hooves that had carried her so far.

"Tambre, we will need you to put this on." Kollif handed his cousin a very elegant gown of green velvet. It had puffed sleeves with golden lace at the hem and neckline.

Tambre viewed the creation and smiled, immediately dawning the meaning of the change in clothing. It was a lovely gown, and she hoped that she could play the part, knowing the plan even before it was suggested to her. As the group went into a nearby outcrop of trees, she set to work putting the gown on and trying to assemble herself in a lady-like, English fashion. Tristan assisted in braiding her hair, and then set out a leather pair of slippers, which when presented to his sister, he laughed outright at her horrified look.

"Must I?" Her grin was infectious, and she had a twinkle in her eye.

Tristan nodded, and waited for her to pull her worn leather boots from her feet. She had slipped the gown on over the men's clothing that she wore, and he smiled when he noticed that she had not given up her sword. It was still buckled at her side, ready and waiting, if need be.

Kollif appeared by her side, giving her a quick shove, sending her flailing, face first, into a pile of rotting leaves. He smiled when she looked up at him with a murderous look in her eyes as he shrugged and crossed his arms over his chest.

"You and your party have been attacked by vicious clansmen seeking to gain your riches. You have escaped, *barely*, and seek the help of the English soldiers, your own countrymen."

Tambre smiled then and did away with her Scottish accent, putting in place a very English one. Tears spilled from her eyes, to give a more realistic look of a ravished Englishwoman, and she assisted Tristan in helping to disarray her hair, putting small rips on her sleeves and hem of her gown. She already had debris in her hair with smudges of dirt upon her face and hands. She grinned at both men.

"Perfect!" Kollif guided her to the other men as the finalization of the plan was set in place.

Lieutenant Paulis Ramey spotted the woman first. She appeared over the hill to the south, and he blanched at her bedraggled appearance. He and his troops had met with resistance, and they were trying to devise a way to scale the walls of the Douglas keep to take the castle by force. He loathed this part of his orders. There was no rhyme or reason to any of this. All the bloodshed he had seen, and had done himself, was enough to last him a lifetime.

As he spoke to his officer, he happened to catch sight of the woman from the corner of his eye. As she drew nearer to him, he thought that she looked half dead. Shouting orders to his men, he got up on his own mount and rushed to the distressed female. Her hair was in complete disorder and her clothing filthy and torn.

When she saw him, her eyes turned frightened, until she realized that he wore the uniform of the English army for His Majesty. She fainted dead away in his arms, and without his quick thinking of grasping her around the waist and hauling her next to his chest, she would have fallen upon the hard ground beneath her, surely injuring herself more so.

Tambre felt the arms tighten around her, and she nearly bared her teeth and bit him upon his arm. She quelled the thought though, remaining limp in his grasp, letting him take her to where his other soldiers were. She felt him ease down from his saddle and carry her to a nearby tent that had been erected for the officers to plan strategies. He sat her upon a hard wooden chair and demanded that a cup of water be brought to him posthaste. Taking his kerchief from inside his breast pocket, he wiped her face clean of the dirt and tapped her cheeks gently to try and revive her.

Tambre moaned, and brought her hand to her forehead. She fluttered her eyes, turning her head to the side, and opened her eyes to slits to view her surroundings. She seemed to be safe enough, so she allowed her eyes to open a little more, and then turned her head back to the soldier. She met the palest blue eyes she had ever seen in her life, and she thought of Ashe. The man's eyes were kind, and she thought that perhaps there was still some compassion for the Scots by the English. She nearly smiled when he expelled the breath he had been holding.

"My lady!" He stood upright, nearly collapsing against the table behind him.

"I-I was...attacked...by the heathens of this godforsaken country! They set upon us from

nowhere, and took all my jewels...my husband...my husband!" Her deep sapphire eyes became wide then. "My husband! They took my husband!"

"Calm down, Lady, and tell me where you were. Do you remember how many set upon you and your party?"

"We were heading to our new lands, just east of Glasgow, when we were set upon by those heathens!" She fanned her face rapidly, and swallowed in relief as she was handed the cup of water. Taking a drink, she viewed the soldier from over the rim. "You must go and find my husband, kind sir. They have taken him!"

Paulis stood then and yelled out the flap of the tent, ordering his men to get their mounts and fall into formation. He looked back at the woman, and his eyes shone with relief that she did not seem to be too injured. Only shook up with the near miss.

"My lady, how many were there?" He walked back over to her, and knelt down beside her chair.

"I don't know. Mayhap two hundred." Her eyes looked at the man pleadingly. "We only had about fifty men in our party." She grasped his hand in hers. "I fear for all of their lives. You must go in search of them. Please."

Paulis swallowed loudly as the woman begged him to go in search of her lost relatives. She was lovely, absolutely the loveliest woman he had seen in a long time. And she was obviously from England, one of his countrymen. But he realized that he had to proceed with caution. "Which way did they take your party?"

Tambre tried to smile at the man, but instead started to cry. As tears streaked down her dirty cheeks, she wished that he would just be on his way and be done with her. She wanted to see Merrik, although she knew he would be furious at her for tricking the English soldiers and putting her life in danger once again. She mumbled something about heading to the north and sighed as he rushed from the tent, ordering his horse be brought to him. In a thunder of horse hooves and shouts of avenging a fine English lady, the soldiers were off, and the Douglas' were forgotten momentarily. She shook her head and hoped that the kind man would not come to harm, for she sent them into the web of the clansmen with whom she had ridden with earlier. Peering out of the tent flap, she realized that he had left a handful of soldiers behind, so she quickly gathered her skirts in her hands, and ran to the portcullis demanding to enter.

James Douglas met her at the iron gate with a rise to his brow and a question on his face.

Tambre lost her patience when the man said nothing to her. "I bid you to let me enter. I am here for my husband, Merrik of Farlynn." She waited as the man called Merrik, and when she saw him approach, his face was partially hidden by the helmet that he wore. She blanched when his eyes widened, and then narrowed suddenly. He yanked the helmet from his head, and shouted for the gate to be raised.

He said not a word, only let his furious gaze settle upon her face before he grasped her arm in a biting grip, hauling her to the steps of the castle and inside to a corner of the great hall.

When he spun her about to face him, she thought she might have to draw her own sword to fend him off. His eyes burned a fire of rage unlike any she had ever seen before. She would have taken a step back if she had not already been pressed against the rough stone wall.

"What are you about, woman?" He wanted to strangle her for this mischief. He had seen the distressed woman making her way to the aide of her fellow Englishmen, but he had had no idea that it was her, his wife, sent in to be a diversion. "How could you be so careless?"

"Careless? I was not careless." She poked him in the chest with her finger, her anger mounting. "I came here to warn you, and to bring additional help. Which, by the way, they should be here any moment." She shot him a look of contempt. "Had I not come, the English would have ripped this castle to the ground, for there are so few to defend this keep."

"We could have defended this castle without your help. For every one man here, his strength equals that of three Englishmen." Merrik ran his hand through his hair. "Why do you constantly put yourself in harm's way? Why can you not stay where you belong, which by the way, do not think I have forgotten *that*?" He crossed his arms over his chest, and regarded her with a narrowed gaze, wanting to beat her lovely little ass.

Tambre jerked the gown over her head and pulled the braid from her hair in irritation. She shoved the discarded gown onto Merrik's chest and strode away from him, heading for the main doors.

Merrik grabbed her arm and swung her around to face him. "You will stand here and listen to me this time, Tambre. I have had enough of your mischief to last a lifetime!" His pale green eyes bore into hers, and he saw her lift her chin a notch, a sure sign of retribution.

"I do not have to stand anywhere to listen to anything you have to say." She wrenched

her arm out of his tight grip, but took another step toward him, rising up on her toes to gain some height. "When I heard that the English planned on coming here today to take this keep, I had never been so scared in all my life. All I could think about was you coming to harm. Or worse. I did what I thought best to keep you safe and you throw it back into my face. I--"

Merrik grabbed her arms and pulled her to his chest as he lowered his head to take her lips with his own in a harsh kiss. She was surprised at first, putting up a meager struggle. He then felt her arms glide over his chest to come around his neck. He deepened the kiss, crushing her body to his, not wanting to let her go. His hands roamed over her back, and then over her bottom, which was round and tight.

He felt himself become hard at the images that flashed before his eyes of her squirming beneath him, moaning his name in her ecstasy as she ground her hips next to his own. He knew that this was neither the time nor the place to take his lovely wife and make love to her, even though her actions begged him to do so. He pulled back slightly to gaze into her eyes with half closed lids.

"You are the dearest thing in my life and you will not cease putting yourself in harm's way. What must I do to keep you safe, and by my side?" He brushed the hair from her forehead, rubbing his fingertips along her cheek. "I love you so much, but I am at a loss as to what I need to do with you." He kissed her again, and felt her melt into his arms.

"I love you, Merrik, and I only did what I thought was best." She tilted her head, and her lips pulled into a hesitant smile. "I only wished to keep you safe. I will not let those bastard Englishmen take another loved one from me. I told you once that I would give my life to save yours. I meant my vow with sincerity."

Chapter Thirty

The Clan Douglas was very glad to see the extra men that happened by the keep. There were tales of a merry chase by the English, and how the soldiers would never find their way out of the woods in which they were led, most losing their lives in the rage of the clansmen who had lost everything to the English. The few English soldiers who had been left behind were bounded upon by those same men, who shouted their fury as death was delivered to the unsuspecting troop.

With an extra five hundred men to lend a hand, the reinforcements of the castle continued. Tambre stayed by Merrik's side for the most part, and made sure that he was introduced to all of the men whom she, Kollif and her three brothers had gathered along the way. The majority of them were without homes and stayed mostly in the woods, living off the land.

When James Douglas heard of that tale, he immediately decided that his keep would be a refuge to any clansman who was in need of a home. Many of the men took him up on his offer, pledging to keep the castle safe. And as the word spread from village to village, the Douglas Keep was fairly bursting at the seams with men. Additions to the castle were planned, and a larger outer bailey was in the works within the next few weeks.

Within days, the Douglas keep had transformed into one of the most powerful clans in all of Scotland. And James Douglas, known as the Black Douglas because of his deep hate of the English, could not have been happier. So many of his clansmen had died in the past, trying to defend the smaller keeps around his own. And now he knew that he had evened up the score. News of his generosity brought many a man to him that pledged to keep the Douglas holdings in the Douglas hands.

Merrik decided to go easy upon his wife this time, being that she had given his father's cousin strong men to fight for his lands, but he warned her that he would lock her away to keep her safe if need be in the future. But when all she did was raise her brows and give him a saucy smile, laughter rumbled in his chest as he pulled her to him, kissing her soundly. He truly did love this woman who had come into his life and had made his whole world the best it had ever been. He knew that she loved him, and she had given him two of the best sons a father could

ever want. Aye, she was his life, and he thanked God every day for giving her to him.

On the day that they were to make the journey back to Farlynn, Tambre became ill suddenly, and was put abed for the next two days. Merrik nearly had to sit atop the woman to keep her in her bed, and after a third day of being inside and watching her become worse with a fever, he became concerned, and summoned Galwain to the chamber.

Galwain's eyes widened when he saw how pale his sister had become. "What ails her?" His worried gaze settled on Merrik, and he shook his head. "She has never been ill before. We should send for a midwife."

Fear raced through Merrik's body as he realized that his brother-in-law was right. "I will send for someone right away. Stay with her while I go seek out my father."

Merrik found his father doing work on a stone wall at the west side of the inner bailey. Seeing his son approach with an expression of fear, Ian dropped his tools, and went to his son's side.

"What is amiss?"

"'Tis Tambre. She has worsened, and I would like to send for the midwife, if there is one in the keep. If not, I will dispatch a clan member post haste to find one."

"I believe there is a woman that lives in the woods not far from here. Let us find James and see if he can get her here." Ian headed off in the direction of the stables and found his cousin a few moments later. James sent one of his men to get the midwife and went into the castle with Ian and Merrik. On the second floor outside of the chamber, all three of Tambre's brothers were present and looked expectantly at Merrik as he proceeded up the hall towards them.

"What is the news? Be there a midwife among us?" Tristan's worried eyes turned toward Merrik hopefully.

"She is being sent for now as we speak." Merrik gave all three of his brother-in-laws a slight smile. "She will be fine. I would wager that she will be up and about, wielding her sword in no time." As he went into the chamber, he smiled at Tristan, and then closed the door behind him.

Going to Tambre's side, he pressed a hand to her forehead, and was relieved to find that she was warm, but not hot like she had been earlier. He kissed her forehead, looked into her lovely face and smiled. She was looking at him.

"Merrik, when shall we journey home? I wish to see my children."

"You have been quite ill, and there is a midwife coming now as we speak to look you over. I want to make sure you are in the best of health."

"I am fine. I worry about Mykal and Drayven. Are they doing well, do you suppose?"

"I am sure they are fine. What we need to concentrate on is you." He pressed her back onto the bed when she tried to get up. "Wait until the midwife comes."

Tambre sighed and lay back upon the bed. "I will wait but a few moments more then I must insist that we be on our way. Kollif has some...errands to run." She smiled weakly, and then closed her eyes once again. "I love you, Merrik."

Merrik stayed by her side until the midwife appeared half an hour later. She was a small woman with hair as black as a raven's wing, even though he judged her to be in her sixties. She came forth with gentle hands to examine Tambre, saying not a word until she was done.

"My lord, am I to assume that you are this one's husband?"

Merrik nodded, and looked at Tambre who still slept with a worried frown.

"And when was the last time she has eaten?" The black brows rose as she waited for an answer.

"Two days ago. All she has had since has been water, and a cup of mulled wine."

"When did she last have the wine?"

"On the first day, I believe." Merrik looked at the woman with a narrowed stare. "Why do you ask?"

"My lord, she has clearly been poisoned." The woman nodded matter-of-factly. "I cannot be certain how she was poisoned, but it would appear that the wine was the culprit. You did right by giving her water. 'Tis the best thing to flush out the system of toxins. Has anyone else become ill at the same time, I wonder?"

"Not that I am aware of."

The woman nodded. "Then if the wine came from a jug or barrel, it would appear that only her cup was tainted. Especially if others had drunk of the same wine." She reached out a hand, and patted Merrik's arm. "I need to do some further examining of the girl."

Merrik watched as the woman's hands smoothed along the contours of his wife's body. When she reached the hip area, her hands stilled in their ministration. She continued on after a

few moments, and then looked at Merrik, smiling wanly.

“Is there someone you can ask about the wine? I want to be sure in my accusations, but I would not put anyone else at harm so please be discreet.”

Merrik nodded, and went out of the chamber, closing the door behind him. His eyes lit on his father and James with resignation. He motioned for both of them to follow him down the hall, and when they were out of ear shot from the others, he stopped and turned toward both of them.

“The midwife thinks Tambre has been poisoned with tainted wine. Where is it kept?”

“It is kept in the kitchen area in barrels. I had some myself as did nearly everyone in the hall two days ago. I do not believe that anyone else has fallen ill.” James rubbed his bearded chin, shaking his head. “The women in the kitchen would know where the wine has come from. I am sure that it is the same as we have always gotten. I will go and check with them.”

Merrik nodded and watched as James went down the hall to the steps that went below. He turned back to his father and whispered, “If everyone had wine from the same barrel, the midwife has suspicions that Tambre’s cup may have been poisoned for her alone.” His eyes narrowed, and his steady gaze filled with rage. “I beg you not to utter a word of this to anyone, including James. If I find that my wife has been the only one to fall ill, I would catch the villain myself, and find out what goes. Then he dies by my hand.”

Ian nodded, and watched as Merrik made his way back down the hall, and into the chamber that housed his ill wife. He sighed, wondering if they had a spy among them.

Eria, the midwife, worked quickly while Merrik had exited the chamber. Pulling a hidden vial from under her tunic, she set to work opening the woman’s mouth, and pouring the clear liquid down her throat. Her brow furrowed as she set about the devious plan, and she wondered if she should tell the husband that the woman was with child. She shrugged. It did not matter. The coin she was going to gain from this incident would set her in comfort for the rest of her life. Her plans included going to her sister’s castle in England, and staying with her until her time on this earth was over. She sighed as she put the vial back inside her tunic. She would say nothing

to Merrik. His grief would be great enough as it was.

Chapter Thirty-One

Skhi watched from under the hood of his cloak as Eria was led out of the castle by Merrik and Ian. They stood on the steps, talking for a few moments, and then the midwife turned to leave. She looked around the bailey, and spotted him waiting by the mount he held by the reins.

As Skhi lifted the slight woman onto the back of the mare, he caught a glimpse of her face, seeing that it was drawn and her mouth held a frown. He was quiet as he led the mare out of the keep and into the surrounding glen. They remained quiet until the castle was a mile in the distance, and only then did he break the silence.

“It is done then?”

“It is.” Eria pulled her cloak tighter about her shoulders, and wished that this day would be over soon. She knew that she would be summoned to the castle on the morrow. Unfortunately, she would be long gone from this place.

“You will have your coin by this eve.” His voice was quiet even though they were the only ones about. “Leave this place, and do not return.”

Eria nodded her understanding, thinking quickly of how she would not be able to bring any of her possessions with her. She would prepare to leave immediately. “I wonder why you would want the woman so badly. She is quite lovely, but I fear that is not the reason.”

Skhi stopped the mare, turning to face the midwife, his eyes showing no emotion, but his voice was low and filled with venom. “My reasons are my own. You need not worry further on the issue. Just know that you will be paid to hold your tongue.”

Eria raised her brows at the man before her and shrugged. “It matters little to me. I do not know the woman or her husband, nor do I know you. Take me to my cottage. I will leave this eve, and I need to prepare for my journey.”

Skhi turned away from the woman and pulled the reins once more. They remained quiet until the woods appeared in the distance and he spotted her small cottage set back into the trees, nearly hidden from sight.

He turned from the woman, warning her never to speak of this again. Then he was gone, disappearing into a thicket nearby.

Merrik stood by helplessly as he watched as Tambre became worse, going into a delirium by that night. Her face had become pale and her breathing labored. He held onto her hand and refused to leave her side, praying that she would open her eyes and smile at him. Fear wracked his body and he felt close to delirium himself as the water he tried to pour down her throat dripped from the corners of her mouth. He was frightened, calling for his father and for Tambre's three brothers.

"She has worsened." Merrik had not released her hand for the past three hours, and he set weary eyes upon the men before him. "I want to take her back to Farlynn, and I wish to do so in the morn. I trust that Mary will be able to help my lass. Can you find a cart in the keep so that I can transport her that way?" His eyes were hooded as he directed his question to his father. "I want to be gone before dawn."

"I will see what I can find for you." Ian laid his hand upon his son's arm, and squeezed slightly. "She will be fine, Merrik. I will leave with you at dawn." Ian left the chamber then, his eyes downcast.

Tristan, Derrick and Galwain decided to leave at dawn as well. The strain on each face was obvious, for they had never seen their sister like this before.

"Merrik, did you find out anything from the midwife?" Galwain stepped beside the bed and placed a hand upon his sister's brow.

"Nothing more than what I have already told you." Merrik looked down at his wife and sighed. "She has been poisoned, and the midwife could not tell what poison had been used." He sat down on the edge of the bed. "Leave us." His voice was quiet, and the three brothers left the chamber quietly.

Left alone with his wife, Merrik lay down beside her, pulling her next to his chest and cradling her head on his arm. He smoothed her hair back and tried to smile. He could not. Fear clutched his heart and he felt rage there as well. She was so very pale and limp in his arms. He closed his eyes as he laid his head upon her chest, hearing her heart beat softly within. He slept then, with her in his arms, dreaming of the smile that lit her face, the same one that had endeared

her to his heart.

Skhi had caught up with the English soldiers by midnight. As he was directed to the tent that held the commanding officer, he shrugged the hood of his cloak from his head. As he stepped into the tent, his pale eyes went to the man who sat behind a small table working over some maps. The blue eyes regarded him with interest as the man indicated for him to sit.

“Skhi MacPherson. I had thought you were long gone from this Godforsaken country ages ago. What brings you here this eve? I hope it is good news.” Paulis leaned back in his chair and waited for the man to speak. He was in no mood to dally with words, so he hoped that the man went directly to the point of his visit.

He and his men had been duped by a very smart woman, and his lips twitched slightly as he recalled her act. He applauded her for her bravery. While he and his men traipsed along in the woods, the Douglas keep had grown to thrice their number, and he had decided that they had not the manpower to go against such a powerful holding, being that most of his men had been killed recently.

“I will have the woman by tomorrow.”

Paulis eyed the man with disdain. He knew exactly of whom he spoke. He would never understand how a countryman could turn over one of his own. Even though this treasure would gain him stature in his commission with the King's army, he still felt ill at the thought of her being held in a stinking cell awaiting her imminent death. It did not matter that she had tricked him into going after ghosts of her making. The event, surprisingly, had not deterred his mission.

“You will receive your payment when the woman is delivered into my hands. Not before.”

Skhi regarded the officer with a narrowed gaze. “I would expect nothing less.” He stood then, preparing to take his leave when he paused. “I will be leaving rather quickly, as I am sure you will understand.”

“I will not delay your departure.” Paulis stood as well, and leaned over his desk. “She will be unharmed, and in good health when I receive her into my custody. I would expect

nothing less as well.” His words drove home the meaning as the other man hesitated at the tent flap with a smile on his face. Then he was gone.

He sighed wearily and sat back down, rubbing his eyes. Something was not right with that man, and he hoped that, besides delivering the woman into his care, he would never see him again.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Merrik awoke with a start. His heart beat erratically in his chest, and he felt out of breath, as if he had run for miles. Fear is what he felt. The chamber had grown dark without the glow of the fire, and he got out of the bed to put more wood on the glowing embers that still remained. He stared at the orange flames for a time, and then went back to his wife's side. She lay still, the thrashing she had done earlier in the day had sapped all of her strength.

He placed a gentle hand upon her brow as he kissed her lips. He stilled as the arms of terror gripped his insides, pushing the breath from his body completely. He paced over to the fireplace slowly and then back again, as if doing so would change what he felt. It did not.

Gathering his wife's limp body in his arms, he carried her to the chair that sat before the fire, pulling the coverlet along behind him. He placed her in his lap, wrapping the cloth from the bed around her, thinking to warm her body from the coldness he had felt on her lips. He held on to her tightly, not feeling her move at all, and he shuddered as he touched his hand to her chest, feeling no rise or fall of her breath.

No breath at all. The realization slammed into his body suddenly, to confront him head on. The terror he had felt earlier gripped him harder, but this time he brought his head back, and let out an anguished cry, so loud that it shook the whole of the castle and could be heard for miles.

"Tambre, do not leave me! I will not live without you!" His shouts reverberated down the hall. He leaned his head against her cool one, and whispered, "I love you, please do not go from me. Do not leave me. I love you." Tears streaked down his face, and the pain of what he felt came to the surface. Rage filled his heart and his soul, leaving a madman in its wake.

He stood with her in his arms and paced back and forth, telling her that he loved her, and praying to God that he had not taken her from him. This is how his father and Tambre's brothers found him.

Kollif came into the chamber as well and leaned weakly against the door when he heard of the whispers of Tambre's death. He watched as Merrik paced back and forth in front of the fireplace, refusing to relinquish his hold on his dead wife. A mixture of fear and rage was

evident across the man's face, as he once again leaned back his head, crying out his grief.

Merrik cradled her next to his chest as he laid a tender kiss along her cheek. She was so very pale, and her lips were extremely cold. He tried to shake her into wakefulness, but his efforts were for naught. His chest tightened again as the thought of death brought an anguished cry from his lips. Tears blurred his vision. He pulled her tighter against him, begging her to wake, to open her eyes.

Tristan took his fist, and struck the stone wall next to his shoulder as he cried out his own grief. Galwain grabbed him in a hug as he himself allowed tears to fall from his eyes. Derrick joined them, wrapping his arms around them both. Their beloved sister was gone.

Merrik stared at his father with wild eyes. "I will await the cart you have promised me. We must get back to Farlynn."

Ian winced, and shook his head. "My son." His voice cracked with emotion, but still he continued on. "She is gone."

"Nay!" Merrik held her closer to his chest, seeing her head lull back awkwardly. "She is not gone! She would not leave me like this! Drayven and Mykal need their mother! I need my wife!" His tears started anew as he buried his face in her neck. He breathed in her scent and sobbed out his anguish, cursing everything alive around him.

When he looked back to his father again, the rage and fury that had been upon his face moments before had been replaced by a deep sorrow and painful admission. He shook his head and gathered her next to his chest, leaning his head back as he bellowed his grief at the top of his voice.

"She is gone, Merrik." Kollif laid a strong hand upon the man's shoulder as he touched Tambre's hair, and gave her a kiss on her forehead. When his eyes went back to Merrik, he could see that the man had a lost look in his eyes, and that his face held a deep suffering.

"She is gone." Merrik whispered his words sadly as his gaze went to his wife's face. He kissed her cold lips and allowed Kollif to take Tambre from his arms, placing her upon the bed.

Kollif gently wrapped the coverlet around the woman's body, covering her face after a few moments of silence. A sob escaped his lips as he realized he would never look into her deep blue eyes again. Hanging his head, Kollif left the chamber and went to the stables.

Merrik demanded all of the men leave their chamber. When he heard the door shut

behind him, he walked slowly over to her still form, and pulled the cover from her face. She was so beautiful, so lovely, and his tears started anew. He knelt by the bed, and pulled her hand into his own, cradling her palm next to his cheek. Deep sobs racked his body as he dropped his head to her chest, and finally wailed his horrible grief. Gone! Never to return to him.

“Tambre, I love you!” His whispered words turned to shouts of sorrow as they filled the chamber with an eerie echo. “You cannot leave me. I have not held you long enough. I have not yet loved you for a lifetime!”

Lying next to her body, he pulled her close to him and breathed in her scent. He closed his eyes to the awful truth of his loss, wishing to dismiss it, to have his wife brought back to him. Still holding her tightly to him, he spewed forth all the rage and fury of his own failure to keep her safe. His one love, his heart, his very soul.

The wind had started that morning and had not let up. The burial lot set in the woods over the glen of heather and clover was to be Tambre's final resting place. The carpenters at the Douglas castle had fashioned a coffin from fresh honed pine, and one had even carved a sword with a rose entwined around it on the lid.

Merrik had went with his father and Tambre's brothers to dig his wife's grave, and each time the metal scoop dug into the earth, he felt like it was wrenching the heart right out of his chest. His tears had stopped hours ago, not that he had any left to shed. She had been his life, the very essence of his being, and now she was gone.

Never again would he look into her face and see the smile that had lit his heart with longing. Nor would he feel her arms around his neck, feel her gentle touch; see the anger in the firm set of her jaw. He had to smile then, and knew that the memories of her were all he had left. The memories and the two sons she had given him. He would treasure them all forever.

“The last thing she said to me was that she loved me.” Merrik mused with a sad grin. “I fear I will never love again the way I have loved her. She has left me quite broken in my spirit and in my body.”

Tristan smiled sadly, and reached over to grasp Merrik's forearm. “She did love you.

Very much. Although she is gone from us, she will never be too far away.”

Merrik nodded and continued on with the digging, wanting to leave this place of sorrow and pain. He knew that the next couple of hours would be the hardest he would ever have to endure in his life. He would carry the body of his beloved wife in her coffin and put her in the cold ground, throwing dirt over her face and body. It did not seem right for her to be covered with dirt as beautiful as she was. She should be encased in gold, and...

She should not have died like she did. His eyes closed as he thought how they had first met, and his heart tore a little more. He thought of the first time he had made love to her and how, afterwards, she had raged at him, nearly beating him black and blue. And he thought of when she had given birth to their sons. Opening his eyes, he noticed that the other men had started back toward the castle. The grave had been dug, and now all that was left was to finish the deed. A deed he would rather never do, one that made his heart break with the thought. But he knew he must.

Sighing, he rose to his full height and looked around him, appreciating the serenity of the surroundings. She would love it here, he thought as his mind drifted to the many times he had made love to her in the woods that surrounded Farlynn. By rights, Farlynn was where she should be taken to rest, but his father had warned him against the heat of the summer days with nothing to preserve the body with, and he shuddered at the thought. He knew that she would be fine here, and he would come to visit her when he got the chance. He would bring his sons here when they were old enough to be told about their mother so as not to forget.

A single tear slid slowly down his cheek as grief and anguish wrapped their clutches around his body once again. He grieved for his loss, and he grieved for his sons, who would never know their spirited mother. But most of all, he grieved for her. And as his pain came to the surface of his being, he vowed that he would catch the one who had poisoned her, the one who had taken her away from him. And he would be glad to take their life as they had taken her life, her love, from him.

He dropped to his knees and gathered up the freshly dug earth, letting it run through his fingers. Closing his eyes, he leaned his head back and shouted his sorrow once again. Blinded by the tears that ran freely from his eyes, he pounded the freshly dug dirt until he was left breathless from his efforts, his knuckles raw. The quiet forest echoed his labored breath, and the

sobs of pain that pushed for a release from the very depths of his soul. After a while, he stood and looked about him, looking anywhere but at the grave that would hold his wife.

Starting the slow walk to the castle, he drew in a ragged breath, and continued to put one foot in front of the other, even though he knew that it would ultimately take him to his dead wife's side.

Eria had hurried to her cottage and had gathered a few small items to take with her on the journey she was about to embark upon. She placed all of her herbal medicines into a sturdy leather bag and wrapped the straps around the pommel of her saddle. Not looking back at the home she had lived in for the better part of her life, she set out to find the trail of the man who had pulled her into this evil that she had performed. She made the sign of the cross over herself and knew she would more than likely never make it to England.

Finding his footsteps set into the damp ground of the woods was the easy part. It had only taken her a few moments to find his careless passage through the dense woods. He had literally left his mark at every pace he took. She raised her brows when she spotted where he had found his mount, and she kicked her mare in the sides to step up her pace. The man should have been more careful to cover his tracks. He should have laid a red carpet in his wake while he was on his way. It would have been just as easy to follow.

She was not aware of the pale eyes of the gray wolf pup that followed her into the woods. Slowly Ashe followed her, careful not to be seen, not to make a sound.

Eria traveled for a few hours until she reached a camp where the English army had set up tents. It was late in the night, and a chill had settled into the air. Low fires burned here and there, and she judged that there were approximately three hundred soldiers that moved about tending to horses and weapons. Spotting a young man approaching her cautiously, she smiled kindly at him.

"My lady." The soldier inclined his head in her direction.

"Young man. I am Eria. I wish to speak to your commanding officer, if I may. It is of an urgent matter, and of great importance."

"I shall fetch another soldier to take you to his tent." He bowed, and then turned, hurrying to the middle of the camp. He returned a short time later with an older man who smiled at her when he helped her from her mount, and kept a firm grip on her elbow as he guided her through the throngs of soldiers in the camp.

Eria smiled her thanks to the man and stepped into the tent as the flap was held back for her. Her eyes adjusted to the light from the candle that sat upon a rough table in the center of the makeshift room. She pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders, and she regarded the man who sat behind the table. The intense pale blue eyes held a kindness, making her relax slightly.

"My lady." Paulis stood, and extended his hand to the vacant chair across from him. "May I offer you some wine?"

"Nay, I am fine." Eria sat in the chair, and pulled the leather bag from under her cloak, sitting it on the table in front of her. "Am I to assume that you will be in receipt of one very lovely Scottish lass?" She smiled at him, and raised her brows, waiting for his answer.

Paulis cleared his throat, and sat back down. "My lady, I do not--"

"Let us not mince words." Eria interrupted him softly. "I am the one who...well; let me say that I will need to give you some medicines for the lass. It will help bring her out of her sleep."

Paulis raised his brows, and rubbed his bearded chin thoughtfully. "You are a midwife, I am to assume?" When she only nodded her head once, he sighed. "What has the heathen ordered done to her? I told him she was not to be harmed in any way."

"Oh, she is not harmed. However, her husband thinks her to be dead. What she has been given only gives her the appearance of death's clutches about her. But she lives, of that you can be sure."

Paulis leaned back in his chair, and closed his eyes. What had he agreed to? To take this woman from her husband made his gut wrench, but to deceive the man into thinking that his wife was dead was not part of the arrangement. But, alas, both would have the same ending, no matter the outcome. Deception.

"I can see you have had no knowledge of what had been done." Eria opened the leather bag as she spoke. "I have what will be needed, and I give this to you for her sake. I have a fear..."

When she faltered in her words, Paulis leaned forward slightly. "What is amiss? What will you give me?"

"'Tis herbs, and a liquid drink that will need to be mixed together and taken by mouth." Her dark eyes looked at him sharply then as she pushed a vial toward him, and a small packet of red powder. "Pour the powder into the vial, and give it one shake only. Make her drink the whole vial. 'Tis bitter, but she will thank you for it." Eria closed the leather bag and stood, making her way to the flap of the tent. She paused, turning to face the commander again. "She is with child, my lord. And God forgive me if she should lose the babe for the gain of a greedy king's army." She left then, snapping the flap into place behind her.

Paulis sat stunned for a moment, and then snatched up the vial and powder, putting the items in a safe place. He felt rage well up within his chest as he thought of how to deal with the mongrel that would deliver the woman to him. His eyes narrowed as his hands balled into fists. Feeling sick, he sat back down in his chair to await the delivery of the woman.

Outside the tent, the gray wolf pup sniffed the edges cautiously. His eyes glowed in the moonlight as he made his way back into the cover of the woods.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Merrik had left the castle of his father's cousin that night. He wanted to leave this place behind and make his way to Farlynn, to his children. He felt empty, a shell of himself as he kicked his heels into his destrier's side to spur him on. The only thing he had to hold in his arms were his babes, and he promised to keep them safe from all harm. Dejectedly, he thought of how Tambre had died, and he realized that the harm that had taken her was not a physical thing he could ever fight off with his sword or fists. Even though death had wrapped its black arms around her and had taken her from him, he would have fought death, this unseen monster, if he could.

It was nearly dawn when they finally made it to Farlynn. Merrik leapt from his destrier and went in search of Drayven and Mykal. He found them sleeping in the chamber next to his own and relief washed through him as he felt for their breath. Leaving the chamber quietly, he went to his own rooms and looked around in the dim light.

Everything in the chamber reminded him of Tambre. A pale green velvet gown lay across the foot of the bed where she had discarded it. He walked slowly to the bed and picked up the garment, bringing it to his face as he breathed deeply of her scent. Closing his eyes, it was almost as if she was standing next to him and he groaned out his misery, for he knew she was not. He missed her so much, and he wondered how he would be able to go on without her by his side.

Burying his face in the soft fabric of the gown, he let his tears flow once again, trying to hold them back, but his heart would not allow the repast. Misery enveloped his body as he knelt down upon his knees and cried out his pain. He vowed to her spirit that he would never love another for as long as he lived. Images of her smiling face appeared before him and he tried to reach out and grasp her hand, knowing that he would not be able to. His torture was almost too much to bear, and he wished for death himself. Aye if it would bring him by her side again, he craved it!

Paulis looked down at the woman sleeping peacefully on the cot. Although it was a cool night, he felt the bitter fingers of chill run up his spine. When the man had arrived with the woman, he had been soothing his rage and had ordered the Scot to place the woman on the cot. The man had collected his coin and had left as quickly as he had come. He had then gone to the woman, mixing the vial liquid and powder exactly as he had been told to do. He had poured the foul smelling stuff down her throat, and watched as she gasped air into her lungs, her pale face gaining back some color within the first few minutes.

He smoothed back the woman's hair from her face and looked at the rich velvet gown she wore. It was snow white with golden vines and leaves embroidered along the hem and neckline. Delicate roses in the same golden thread adorned the cuffs. Her hair shone in the dim light cast by his candle on the nearby table, and he felt the softness of her curls.

He shook his head, sighing as he turned from her and sitting at his desk thinking of the scoundrel who had brought her to him this night. Skhi MacPherson. No one had known about this arrangement, nor had any of his men seen the man bring the woman to him. The rage he still felt for the man did little to ease his thoughts of what was to come.

What lay before him now was a decision that must be made. He knew which way he should go, but his loyalty to his king's army screamed for him to follow the route back to England to deliver her into the hands of...death. Once more.

Eria was not surprised that the promised coin had not made it to her cottage. She shrugged, thinking that this place was her home, and here she would die. She pulled a chair over to the fireplace and soon sat before a blazing fire, warming her cold body and her thoughts. She closed her eyes, wishing for the past three days to be gone from her memory. The things she had done were unforgiving in human nature. Her eyes opened suddenly as a thought of retribution entered her mind.

She could go to the woman's husband and tell him of the deed she had been a part of. At least he would know that his wife still lived, and he could go after the soldiers from England who

now had her in their possession. She would leave in the morn and journey to the Douglas keep. She knew that she would most likely step into her own grave, but at least she would do so with a clear conscience.

Nodding, her mind set with her plan, she closed her eyes and let the heat seep into her weary old bones.

Merrik had stayed in the confines of his chamber for two full days, eating only a stale loaf of bread and finishing off a jug of the sweetest wine he had ever tasted. Like her lips it was sweet and soft, and it made him think of her. Tambre. His wife.

As he sat in a chair by the fire rubbing the green velvet gown over he cheek once more, he closed his eyes, wishing that she were here with him. He would give up everything, save his children, if he could have her back in his arms once more. Aye, he would trade all of his tomorrows for just one yesterday spent in her arms. He loved her with a passion unlike any he had ever felt, and knew that what he held in his heart for her would never die. It would be there forever; a passion's hunger that would eventually consume his very soul.

He opened his eyes and caught sight of her sword that had been given to him by Kollif upon his return to Farlynn. He was told that Majesty had disappeared into the glen mist, and could not be found. He knew it was for the best. The destrier would never let anyone else upon his broad back other than his mistress.

He stood and pulled the sword from its resting place on the mantle. The blade gleamed in the firelight and he smiled as he touched the hilt, knowing that her hand had been there many times before. Bringing the blade to his lips, he kissed the cold iron and thought of his last kiss to her still lips. They had been cold as well. He leaned his head back and allowed the blade to rest upon his chin, keeping the hilt of the sword enclosed in his tight fist held next to his heart.

It would take him a great deal of time to be over this notion of not having her by his side. He would no longer feel her touch or hear her whispers of affection next to his ear. Her curvaceous body came to his mind's eye, and he smiled sadly. Since the birth of their sons, her woman's curves had become more pronounced, her breasts fuller and rounder. She had been a

true vision with her smile that could light up the darkest night, and he hoped that she was sitting above, in God's kingdom, looking down upon him right now.

"Tambre," his hoarse whisper drifted softly over the chamber. "Spare me my grief, my love, and come back to me." As a single tear fell from under his closed eyelid, he imagined that the tear was the light brush of her lips upon his cheek. "You must know that I will never let you go, for I love you with my whole heart, my entire soul." He dropped the sword to his side as he felt the sting of tears in his eyes once again. He shook his head and opened his eyes to look out the small window. It was still dark, but he felt the sudden need to get his destrier and ride as fast and as long as he possibly could. He needed the diversion; he craved it.

With gentle hands he placed Tambre's sword back up on the mantle. Grabbing his cloak from the floor, he headed to the chamber door. He paused and turned back to the bed, going over to the small table that held a chest on its top. Opening the lid, he pulled the braided length of her hair from the inside. He had kept the strand, for whatever reason, when she had been taken from him the first time. He felt the softness of the lock as he wrapped it around his wrist. Turning, he headed for the door and out into the hall.

His father sat on the floor outside his chamber, and he nearly tripped over the figure in the faintly lit hall.

"Father. Why are you here? You should be in your own chamber abed." Merrik held out a hand and helped his father to stand.

"I have been worried about you, my son. I know that your grief is great." His pale green eyes looked into the eyes of his son's. "I only wanted to be nearby if you should need me."

Merrik frowned. "My needs are not for my father to catch his death by sitting in this cold hall."

"My heart goes out to you and your loss." Ian placed a hand upon the strong, muscled forearm of his son. "I know what goes through your mind, for I have lived it all these years with your dear mother being gone from my arms. I love her more with each passing day, you know."

Merrik nodded his understanding, and leaned against the stone wall next to him. "I know. I see it in your eyes every time I gaze upon them. Does the pain ever go away? Does the loss of a physical being ever fade with time?" He lowered his eyes, and looked at the braid of hair wound around his wrist. "Does the sorrow seep into your bones and make you weak with the

knowledge that she will never return to you?"

Ian sighed. "Aye, it does. I wish it were otherwise. For some men, I am sure that they go on. But for those who held the deepest love of their soul, I believe that it will haunt you for the rest of your days. As it does me." He smiled then, and added, "'Tis why I have never taken another wife. The love I hold for your mother in my heart was never banished as I put her in the ground. It only intensified as I go through every day, looking at the gifts she left behind."

Merrik looked at his father with a puzzled look upon his handsome face. "Gifts?"

"Aye. She had given me six sons, and in each of you I see her lovely image. Don't you see? She will never be gone from me in whole." Ian patted his son's shoulder, feeling that he could leave him now. Mayhap he had given the man something else to think about.

Merrik watched his father go down the hall, disappearing into the darkness. He smiled when he thought of the gifts that Tambre had left behind. Drayven and Mykal; their sons.

Eria made the long trip to the castle of Farlynn when she had been told that Merrik had left the day before. It had taken her nearly five days to make the journey, and she hoped that she would be allowed entry into the keep to speak with Merrik. She had played over in her mind what she would say to him, and knew that her own life was indeed at risk when she would tell him of her deceit. She shivered, even though the day was quite warm and the sun beat down upon her from overhead.

Spotting the castle in the distance, she pulled her mare to a halt and wiped her face with the sleeve of her gown. Her keen eyes drifted over the glen and she smiled at the purple tint of heather as it swept over the hillsides like a blanket. She could smell the fragrance now as the wind blew her direction, and she inhaled deeply. Sighing, she kicked her mare into motion once again. She should make it to the castle by noon, and she hoped that Merrik was there.

The gate house loomed before her as she pulled the mare to a halt, waiting for the guard to appear to allow her entrance over the drawbridge. When the guard did appear after a few minutes, she noticed that he wore a black strip of cloth tied to his left forearm, indicating a death. She winced as she closed her eyes to say a short prayer.

"What is your business, woman?" The guard yelled down from two stories above, hanging out an opening.

"I am Eria from the Douglas glen. I wish an audience with Merrik, if I may." She held her breath, and waited patiently, expecting arrows to fly her way at any moment.

"Wait here. I will see if he is about this day." He hesitated, and called down sadly. "His wife has passed on more than a week ago, so be prepared for him not to see you. He is still in mourning, as we all are."

"Please tell him this is about Tambre. 'Tis urgent that I speak with him anon."

The guard nodded once, and then disappeared from the opening.

Eria waited for what seemed almost an hour before she heard the drawbridge chains clank heavily as the massive piece of iron was lowered. Her mare's hooves clacked over the bridge, and when she was inside the outer bailey, she was halted by the same guard who had spoken to her from the gate tower.

"Merrik has agreed to see you, my lady. If you please, I shall escort you to the castle."

Eria nodded, allowing the man to grasp the reins of her mare and tug slightly to get the animal moving once more. The keep was very large, the buildings well placed, and when she was finally brought to a stop before the castle, her eyes traveled upward to the four stories that loomed over her. Sliding to the ground with the help of the guard, she made her way up the steps that led into the great hall.

Merrik watched the old woman enter into the hall with a frown upon his handsome face. He was in no mood to speak with anyone, let alone the woman who could not save the life of his wife. He sighed. He should not blame her. There was nothing that anyone could have done. Taking the steps that led to the main hall, he nodded once as the woman's eyes met his own.

"My lady. What brings you to Farlynn?"

Eria looked up at Merrik, and almost ran from the castle. His look was not friendly, as she well could have guessed, and the frown he wore helped none either. She swallowed, licking her dry lips.

"My lord. I have journeyed many days to get to Farlynn." She paused, and took a deep breath. "I have something I wish to tell you about your wife."

"My wife? You know that my wife has died over a week before. What do you wish to

say?" His eyes narrowed slightly, and his heart beat a little faster in his chest. When the woman said nothing, he felt agitated by her silence. "Speak, woman! Say what you have come to say. I grow weary and wish to return to my sons."

Eria closed her eyes, but snapped them open suddenly, blurting out, "Your wife is not dead!"

Chapter Thirty-Four

The swirling mist of the glen enveloped her with a cold fear. Something terrible had happened, she knew, but she was unable to clear her thoughts enough to find out what had gone awry. The white mist around her had cleared within the past several days, and she began to hear certain sounds again. The whimper of Ashe in the distance, the steady beat of horse's hooves, and then the sounds of rain hitting steadily over her head.

She was not sure what protected her from the weather, nor did she care. That was not on the list her priorities as her mind slammed into memories that she could not sort out. She had not felt the gentle hands of Merrik upon her body, and she wondered where he had gone to. She missed him, wanting him by her side.

A million times she tried to open her eyes, but could not. It was like they were weighted down by heavy steel, as were her arms. She could move her toes, and she even wiggled her fingers once, but it was as if it were not her body. She felt strange and weak. This brought her thoughts back to her feeling of doom. Something terrible had happened.

The gentle rocking of the bed in which she lay lulled her in and out of a deep slumber for the next two days. Her every waking thought returned to Merrik, and if she could bring her voice to the surface, she would scream his name, making him come to her side. A chill had settled around her, and she almost grinned at the cold nose of Ashe as he sniffed around her head.

She felt his tongue lick her cheek as his body nestled next to hers; giving her the much needed heat that warmed her to her bones. If she could reach out a gentle hand and pet the soft fur of his head she would but, try as she might, she still felt weak as a kitten. So she slept, on and on, until the day came when the rocking of her bed stopped, and rough hands grasped her from the warm shelter of where she lay.

Her mind screamed out in agony as the clothing she wore was stripped from her body and she was left to lay naked on a cold hard slab. She shivered all the time now, and wondered if she would ever feel warm again. She lay like this, naked and unable to cover herself, until she felt warm breath upon her cheek one day. Rough hands followed the contours of her neck, and she heard herself cry out softly in pain as one of her breasts was squeezed too tightly.

Her thighs were parted, and again she felt the rough hand of a stranger touch her most intimate parts. Revulsion overcame her, and without even knowing that she possessed the strength to do so, she kicked out with her right foot, and knew that she had come into contact with the unprotected apex of a man's thighs. Victory lifted the corners of her mouth as she heard his sharp curse followed by a resounding slap across her cheek. It was then that her eyes opened.

Coming face to face with a bearded man, her eyes narrowed upon his features in the dim light. Every outline was embedded in her memory for a later retribution. Even though she did not want him to think her awake, her body tensed for the next attack. But somehow she was spared the molestation as a loud bellow rang out in the small room in which she occupied.

"Mollins! You know that Paulis will have your hide for this!" The voice of the other man was shrill, almost feminine.

"I could care less what he thinks! He is no longer the person in charge when the prisoners are released into my care." Mollins wiped his mouth with his filthy tunic cuff. "Now leave me be. I was just going to get me a piece of this fine ass when you interrupted me."

"You will do nothing of the kind." The new voice was deadly quiet in the small room. Paulis looked down at Tambre's naked body, and snarled his lips. Taking off his own cloak, he laid it gently over her. His narrowed eyes then turned back to Mollins.

Mollins swallowed loudly, but then squared his shoulders. "Your presence has no bearing here any longer. I do not take orders from you."

A slow smile spread across Paulis' face as he clamped his hands behind him, and rocked forward slightly on his booted toes. "Guess again, you slimy bastard."

Mollins took a step back, and was rewarded with the cold stone wall poking into the tender flesh of his shoulder.

"I suggest you take leave of this chamber while you still have legs to walk upon." Paulis paused long enough to pull his sword from the sheath at his side, and pointed the tip directly at Mollins' throat. "And take any personal possessions with you. You are relieved of your commission."

Mollins' face turned red with his fury. "How dare you! Who do you think you are? This is not your jurisdiction, I might remind you!"

Paulis took a menacing step forward, lowering his sword point to the man's groin. "This

is my jurisdiction. You had best leave now, or I shall have you bodily removed from this place. In pieces, I might add.” His eyes narrowed as the other man made to speak his mind once more, but thought better of the situation. The blade of the sword had curbed his tongue as it pushed through the thin material of his hose, bringing blood to the surface of the skin beneath.

Mollins stood his ground for one slow minute, and then relented as he shuffled to the door. Once at the door, he turned and looked back at Paulis, the man who had embarrassed him in front of the group of on lookers.

“You have not seen the last of me.”

“I would dare say not. But take heed to my warning, and do not make threats. Take your leave.” Paulis sheathed his sword, and went to stand beside the cot on which the woman lay. Stealing a glance down at her, he noticed that her eyes were open but the glazed look as the deep blue orbs found his made him concerned for her wellbeing. Dismissing Mollins altogether, he knelt down beside Tambre and tucked the cloak around her neck.

“I want to know what happened to her gown.” The command was quiet, but the two men who jumped to do his bidding knew that it held the authority of one whom they did not wish to anger.

“Merrik.”

The whispered word was softly spoken, and Paulis grinned down at her, shaking his head. So, she remembered her husband.

“Rest, my lady. We will speak later.” Paulis left her then, and ordered a guard to be placed at her door as he stalked down the hall intent upon a visit with the Justice.

Merrik felt his heart flip as the words the woman had spoke slammed into his head.

“What say you, woman?” His fists gathered tightly in a white knuckled grip at his side. He dared not take a step forward for fear of thrashing the woman where she stood. Did she mock his sorrow?

Eria swallowed, and pulled the cloak tightly about her small form. “My lord. I have come here to tell you that your wife did not die. I was part of a deception to dupe you into

believing her dead.” Eria lowered her head in shame. “It was I who gave her the liquid to hush her breathing.”

Merrik could not believe his ears. Was he going mad as he had thought himself to be? He turned away from the woman suddenly, and bellowed for his father and brothers to join him in the hall. He shouted for a passing serf to call Tambre’s brothers from the stable posthaste. And when he turned toward the woman once more, he felt the chill of some strange jest being played upon his mind, wrapping around his heart.

Alive? How could that be? His icy stare bore into the faded eyes of blue as he saw fear creep into the depths. He tried very hard to keep his hands at his side instead of around the woman’s throat. What cruel jest did she play? As his eyes bore into her face to detect some type of deceit, he found none. Only fear swirled in the depths of her eyes as she looked back at him, her gaze becoming steady.

“My lord. I know that this must be a shock to you--”

“What is a shock?” Ian took his place by his son, and looked at the woman before him, recognizing her as the midwife from the Douglas castle.

Merrik looked at his father with pleading eyes, eyes that held a hint of madness. “She tells me my wife is not dead as we all had seen.” He looked back at Eria, and ground out the rest of his words. “I think she plays a terrible mind game with me, and I do not like the results. Nor will she.”

Ian was left speechless as the rest of his sons, and the brothers of Tambre crowded around Merrik, who seemed to be on the edge of a breakdown. They all watched in astonishment as he drew his sword, Tambre’s sword that he now carried by his side, and pointed the tip at the woman’s throat. He drew blood as the razor’s edge lay against her skin.

“What is amiss, Merrik?” Derrik brought his hand up to lay it against the other man’s wrist gently, puzzle by the display he witnessed, having just arrived by Merrik’s side.

“This woman claims that my wife is not dead.” Merrik’s words rang loud in the hall, and then all was silent. His icy gaze did not leave the woman’s even as he shook Derrik’s hand off of him. “I believe that the death of my wife was tragic enough without these words being brought to my ears to tease me into thinking otherwise.”

“I do not lie.” Eria spoke her words quietly as she looked to each man who stood around

her. "I would like to explain, if I may."

Ian stepped forward then, and made his son relinquish his hold upon the sword, sighing as Merrik finally dropped it to his side.

"Speak, woman." Ian demanded harshly. "I would be done with this. And you had better pray that your words are true."

"Merrik, I am deeply sorry for the deceit that has been brought upon you." Eria sighed as she pulled her cloak tighter around her frame. "I was promised coin for my part in this, but I realized that the coin was not what I wanted. I wanted you to have your wife back." No one said a word as she continued on. "I gave her a vial of liquid that made her pass into a deep sleep. She only appeared to have died. But she did not."

"I put her in the coffin myself!" Merrik's voice thundered about him as his mind raced wildly with the thought of his love still being alive. "She was buried!" His voice cracked as a single tear drifted slowly down his cheek, and he wiped it away angrily.

"Nay, she was not. Her body was pulled from the coffin before the dirt hit the lid." Eria closed her eyes to the rage she saw on the man's face, and the others who stood around her as well. "I saw it with my own eyes."

Tristan stepped forward then, and grasped the woman's cloak front, his eyes blazing his fury. "What trickery is this? You have been sent by the English dogs to have us go in search of my dead sister! You set us up for an ambush! 'Tis trickery!"

"Nay! I do not try to trick you!" Eria knew now that her time had come. Gathering herself up, she pushed upon the chest of the young man who held her cloak. "She was given to the English, but not by me. 'Tis Skhi MacPherson's doing."

Merrik's eyes widened, and then they narrowed. "I should have killed him the first time." He looked at his father then. "Tell me I am not falling into madness. Tell me that what I am hearing is fact, and not a dream sent to woe me further in my life." The pale emerald of his eyes pleaded with his father to give him the truth. He closed his eyes then, and he prayed to the Lord above that it was true. That he would have his life back.

Ian looked at the woman, and as she nodded, he touched his son's arm and gently squeezed. "Let us all sit and discuss this." He watched as the others took seats around a table, all of them keeping an eye on the old woman. Looking at his son, whose arm he still held in his

grasp, he leaned over and whispered, “Merrik, it would appear that you have been given a second chance for happiness.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Tambre's mind raced as she took in her surroundings. She kept her eyes half lidded on purpose so that she could view the dim interior of the chamber in which she was held. It appeared to be very clean, at least no foul smells assaulted her nostrils, and she noticed that there were no windows. Only one door stood in the center of one wall which faced her small cot. All was quiet, as she assumed it to be late in the night, so, encouraged; she tried to move slowly off the cot.

Her body felt like the weight of a large stone as she tried to move her legs and then her arms. In her weakened state, the effort nearly took her breath away, so as she lay back upon the pillow beneath her head, she closed her eyes and prayed that Merrik would come to her soon.

Merrik kissed the top of Drayven's head and cuddled the babe close to his chest. Mykal had just been put in his small bed a few moments before, and he thanked God every day for the life of his sons, and for his family. He closed his eyes and prayed to God that he would be able to find his wife alive and well. The crushing of his heart upon her death was nearly more than he could bear, and now he had been told that she still lived. He was scared, so scared, that it was not at all true, what he had been told. Just more demons to tear at his soul. But, encouraged, he must go on and find out for himself if she was still alive.

Tambre sat on the edge of the cot and viewed the man in front of her with malice. Her mind raced with ways to overpower him, and as she took in the small chamber, she knew that what was outside awaiting her in the hall was where her true concerns lie. Sighing, she crossed her arms over her chest and stood, going over to the small window, which afforded very little light, but was still the only connection she had to the outside world. The guards had moved her

to a different chamber a few days ago, and she was thankful for the one small repast.

But it was still a prison cell, no matter having a window or not. Rising on her tiptoes, she smiled as she saw that the sun was high in the sky. She guessed it to be about noontime, and wondered if Merrik was all right. She wondered where he was, for her time here had stretched from days into weeks now.

Turning back toward the man, she walked slowly toward him, and then stopped a few feet away. Still saying nothing, she dropped her arms to her sides, and felt her hands curl into hard fists, wishing she had her sword.

“His Majesty is willing to let you go on the condition that you tell him of the plans the Scots have made to overtake our royal troops. The King knows that you are very much involved with the rebellion, and refuses to make any kind of bargains with you until he knows what Robert de Bruce’s next move is.” The knight paused for a moment and adjusted his hat to sit further over his brow.

The insolent wench! Still she refused to talk! “There is also the matter of your thievery. We do have several eye witnesses who have described you very clearly. Do you deny the charge?” He smiled then when she remained silent. She looked as if she was about to have said something, but her lips clamped together again stubbornly. “There is no need for the words you are about to say, Madame. Your silence is admission enough.”

The nasally voice raked over her mind like metal scraping metal. So, he meant to have her head? She smiled suddenly, and folded her hands in front of her. Not saying a word, she turned her back on him, but whirled around again, with eyes narrowed.

“I will not talk to you. Send another of higher authority.” Her smile was genuine as he bristled at her words. He started to sputter his anger, but stopped suddenly when the small blade entered his neck, cleanly slicing it open from ear to ear.

Tambre let the body fall to the stone floor silently as she placed the small metal piece back into her right sleeve cuff. The metal spike out of one leg of her cot had given her a handy weapon when nothing else was at her fingertips. She had spent days quietly sharpening the piece to a fine point. Now, working quickly, she pulled the linen shirt from the neck of the body and deftly untied the pulls at the top. Pulling the thing, along with the fancy tan colored wool cloak from the limp body, she moved on to easily extract his hose and boots as well.

They all looked to be about her size, and she quickly set about discarding her own clothing, replacing it with the man's garb. The blood at the neckline of the shirt was minimal, and with the cloak pulled tightly about her throat, she knew the blood stains would not show through.

Dragging the body over to the cot, and throwing the rough wool blanket over it, she set about cleaning up the blood from the floor. She had waited for days for someone to come to her that had the same color hair as she did. The agent from the king did not even know he was doomed as he had stepped haughtily into her chamber, and made detestable demands from her. With the blanket covering the biggest part of the body, and having only small bits of hair showing out the top, she knew that she would not be discovered missing until late this eve, or if she were lucky, perhaps not until tomorrow morning.

She shrugged and cleared her mind of the thought of death. Her main concern was taking her leave of this place and finding her way back to Farlynn. Placing the bloody rag under the man's head and then pulling the belt that held the man's sword tightly about her waist, she quickly braided her hair and placed it under the large hat, setting it at a jaunty angle over her brow.

Nodding once on her approval of the attire, she swiftly went over to the door and beat on the scarred wood loudly. The door opened on squeaking hinges, and making sure to keep her head low, she rushed from the chamber and down the hall as if she had supreme news from the woman the king had ordered held against her will.

That evening on the outskirts of London, Tambre pulled the wool cloak tightly about her as she set out on foot toward her beloved homeland. Her thoughts drifted back to the guards she had had to kill in order to gain her freedom. She shook her head. It was no more than what they had afforded her cousin. She leaned down and patted the white fur of the wolf, Ashe, and was amazed that the animal's sense of loyalty was as great as he had shown her.

The thing had met her a few blocks from the tower where she had been held, emanating a growl from deep within its chest. She had been ready to pull her sword and be done with the animal until she realized who it was. He had grown quite large since she had set eyes upon him last, and his eyes were still the pale blue they had been when he was a pup. She did not care how he had gotten to be there with her, just as long as he stayed.

She would welcome the company. And his protection. She had stayed in the woods until darkness had set about her, cloaking any light that may identify her face. Keeping close to the tree lines and saying a quick prayer that she was on her way home, she left the horrid place behind and set her visions for the homecoming with her husband and two little sons.

Merrik pulled the reins of his destrier tight as he stopped suddenly, nearly sending himself over the head of his mount. Tristan pulled up beside of him, and looked ahead at the small firelight shining from the woods at the top of the next hill. Deciding to go the rest of the way on foot, the other men in their band were told to hold their positions until they heard otherwise. It was dark as pitch, and the cover of the blackness made it easy for both men to steal up close to the fire, and observe the surrounding area without being detected.

Crouching down several yards from the low light cast by the fire, Merrik motioned for Tristan to stay behind as he made his way closer. No one stirred about the fire even though a rabbit lay over the burning flames being roasted. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end as his warrior's instinct bid him caution. A low whistling sound was heard to his right, and he quickly ducked behind a large oak tree for further cover. The figure moved noisily back to the fire, and sat on the ground to begin turning the rabbit again.

Making his way to the left so that he could get a good look at the man's face, Merrik saw no additional sign of any others about. There was no mount to be seen, and he saw only one blanket roll nearby. When he had gone far enough to at least get a good glimpse of the man's face, the jolt to his midsection nearly brought him to his knees. Skhi MacPherson!

Skhi whistled softly as he set about roasting his dinner. A small fare indeed, but at least he would have some nourishment this day. He could barely contain himself, for it had been at least two days since he had eaten anything. He closed his eyes as he smiled to himself, thinking of the reward money he was to gain from the English dogs as soon as he got to London. He could hardly wait to buy himself a pint of whiskey, along with a good meal, a bed for the night, and find a willing woman. Surprising himself, he did feel a little remorse over turning his cousin's wife over to the English king, but he had had little choice in the matter.

Once he had made his connections with the English, it was like they were crawling all over his skin like a nasty invasion of louse. He did truly regret his decision to take the beauty away from his cousin, but there was little he could do about it now. She would be dead soon anyway and Merrik thought her to be dead weeks ago. He shrugged. It pained him to be so heartless, but the gold coin made up for it, he supposed. He grinned.

Merrik silently stepped out of hiding, and into the firelight. When his narrowed gaze met that of his cousin's, he knew that what the woman Eria had told him was true. But he would hear it from his cousin as well. He would make sure of that. Rage engulfed his insides and spread throughout his whole being like wildfire. His hands grasped the hilt of his sword as he pulled it slowly from his side without a sound. He tossed it into the woods, making the oncoming fight even, but knowing that the rage he felt would soon overpower Skhi, and he would kill the man with his bare hands.

Skhi's face paled as he saw Merrik step into the dim light and toss his own sword aside. Regaining his wits, he stood to his full height and placed his hands upon his hips.

"So, Cousin, you offer me a challenge?" Skhi felt his body beginning to tense to the upcoming battle.

"I want to know what you did to my wife." Merrik's voice was low, but the anger that pulled through every word did not go unmissed by Skhi.

"I, personally, did nothing with her." Skhi crossed his arms over his chest, and viewed his cousin with mild amusement. Summing Merrik up to go head to head with him would be easy, and so his confidence afforded him a smug look.

And it was one that Merrik did not care for in the least.

"Do not play with me, Skhi." Merrik took a menacing step forward. "I want you to tell me where she is."

Skhi's slow smile that appeared upon his face did little to ease his cousin's plight. "I would imagine that she is still buried in her grave by the Douglas lands. 'Tis the last I had seen of her."

Merrik, enraged beyond words, grasped the front of Skhi's tunic as he bounded toward the man, and pulled him over to peer into his face. "I have talked to Eria, and she has told me of your deceit. Tell me true; where is my wife?"

Skhi's face blanched at the news of Eria spewing forth their plan. He should have taken the old woman's life when he was done with her. Recovering quickly from the news, his eyes narrowed as he shoved harshly against his cousin's chest to gain his release. It did not work. The grip that Merrik had upon him was like iron, and he succeeded in only further angering the man.

"I don't know what the woman has told you, but I saw her placed in her coffin just like you."

"I did not know you were there. Why did you not make yourself known?" The rage Merrik felt flowing through his body quickly became overwhelming to him. His grip tightened, and he twisted the tunic material tighter in his fist, wrenching his hand just under his cousin's throat. One more tight squeeze and Skhi would have his neck broken. Merrik would not feel any remorse.

Skhi swallowed loudly. "Release me. You don't know what you are about. And I do not know what this madness is that you accuse me of. I know no Eria."

"You lie!" Merrik's harsh words made him jerk his cousin closer to his own face. "You are a dead man, so you may as well tell me what you know. I know that you were the one who had given Tambre to the English the first time, as you had said so yourself. What was there to stop you this time?" When Skhi remained silent, Merrik took the man's arm and twisted it harshly behind him. Hearing the shrill sound of the cracking bone was not as satisfying as he had thought it would be. He wanted blood.

Skhi howled in his pain and shoved his right shoulder into Merrik, hoping to at least take the man off guard. When that did not work, he thought to reason with him.

"Merrik, I am your cousin, for God sakes! Unhand me, and let me tend to my injury!" His eyes glazed over with his pain, and he closed his eyes briefly to gather the strength he knew he would need.

"Tell me what you know." Merrik's voice was harsh, and held the rage he had kept inside since seeing his cousin. He decided that he would not let Skhi live even if the man told him nothing. But his tolerance was wearing thin.

"All right, I will tell you. Just let me go."

"Nay. Tell me what you know, and be quick about it. I wish to be on my way."

Skhi was hoping that his cousin would release him as he had requested, but he realized that it was not to be. His arm ached terribly from the broken bone, and he knew that his cousin would be relentless in his quest to find the information he sought.

"She is in London. I know not where she is being held." Skhi's voice was filled with agonizing pain as he looked at Merrik with pleading eyes. "'Tis all I know. I was to go to London to get my coin from Justice Mallorie. I was to meet him at Windsor Palace in his chambers a week from today."

"Has he ever seen your face?"

"What?"

"You heard me!"

"Nay, he has not. It is through my contact that this meeting was set."

"Give me his name, and any other information you have on him." Merrik twisted Skhi's tunic when he hesitated in answering. "Do not make me ask you again."

"His name is Talbot. He is to give me the coin for her capture."

"How much?"

"One thousand pounds." Skhi grimaced. "She was worth much more, I know, but that was all I was to get. I have told you all, now let me go."

Merrik gritted his teeth, and then placed his hands on either side of his cousin's face, and with narrowed eyes flaming his hatred, he quickly snapped the man's neck, bringing death to him quickly. He let the body fall to the ground with a thud, and went in search of his sword, feeling no regret at having done what he had. He found the sword a few moments later, and then called out to Tristan who stood waiting behind a tree nearby.

Neither said a word as the flames were extinguished, and both men returned to their mounts. With determination, Merrik had a direction to go in. London would rue his presence, and that of his clan. He would get his wife back at any cost, and he would make sure she was kept safe from here on out. It overjoyed him that the tale was true, and it made him want to shout to the heavens that she stilled lived. But right now, all he wanted was to get her back to Farlynn.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Tambre, having waited until nightfall to journey home, decided that the travel was going quickly. Not having a mount to take her on her way, she figured that it would take her at least three weeks to make it to the borders of her beloved homeland. As a frown furrowed her brow, she wondered why Merrik had not come for her. She did not blame him for not crossing onto English soil, but it still made her question his intentions. If, indeed, he had any. The last she had remembered was his anger of her foolish venture into the Douglas castle after duping the English into a fruitless chase across the countryside. She remembered becoming very ill several days later, and then nothing.

She smiled down at the wolf that had nudged his nose into her leg irritably, bringing her thoughts back to the present.

"Our journey is a long one, my friend. I am sorry my thoughts stray from time to time." She sighed as she crouched down beside him, throwing her left arm over his middle and laying her head upon his neck. "I just wish to be home, 'tis all my heart desires."

Standing once more, she pulled the cloak around her and knew it would be a long night. The cloak that she had taken from the man in her cell had the coat of arms from the king's army embroidered on the back side in a brilliant crimson and gold. She kept the crest visible, for now, until she reached the boundaries of Scotland. She would burn the thing when she had a chance, but that would not be for a few weeks.

Sighing, she started to walk toward the north once again.

"This is the second time she has eluded our grasp. I am not sure what to think, nor where to go from here. It appears that she is receiving help from within our own walls, and cannot be kept in one place for too long before she escapes." Warily rubbing his eyes, John Monteith looked to the man at his side before he settled his apologetic blue gaze back on the man before him. "Her family protects her well, and it would seem that they do not want to let the woman go.

I am not sure of her value—”

“It matters little of her value in Scotland. Her value there is obviously immense, and now that she has eluded our grasp one last time, the price upon her head shall be thrice the original amount. Post the announcement. Be this done and over!” Shaking his robe at he stood, the authority in the man’s eyes settled over the two men before him. Justice Mallorie cleared his throat and continued on. “I will not have her escape us one more time. This little escapade has the king’s army being the laughing jest upon every man’s lips in England! The price upon her head is to be for her capture, be it dead or alive. Whichever way she is brought back to us is of little consequence, just as long as she is brought back here, to me specifically.”

He paused as he turned to go, hesitating long enough to catch the glimmer of hope in Baron Monteith’s eyes. “Baron, a word in private, if you please.” He then smiled wanly at the other man. “Skhi MacPherson. I will retrieve your coin from our coffer. You did deliver us the woman as you said you would. I shall return post haste as I am sure you would like to be on your way.”

The man grinned. “Aye, that I do. I do not wish to be in the way of other matters.” He inclined his head. “And if there is a further need of my services, do not hesitate to contact me.”

“We most certainly will.” Justice Mallorie turned toward the other man with raised brows. “Baron, if you will follow me.”

“Certainly.” John glided from the room on the heels of the man before him. Stepping into a private chamber, and securely shutting the chamber door behind him, John waited patiently for the coin he knew was to come his way. He had great plans for this sorely needed batch, one of which was waiting in his chamber at Windsor Castle. A sweet delectable treat named Bethany.

The man who waited in the other chamber who they thought was Skhi MacPherson, tried to keep the jovial look from his face. She had escaped! He knew that he had taught her well in ways of stealth and protection. Derrik closed his eyes and said a quick prayer that his sister was away from this place. And he knew that Merrik would be overjoyed at the news. From the conversation he had just heard, she had been gone for only a couple of days.

They had all ridden non-stop since Merrik had met up with his cousin and delivered him his well deserved demise. They had laid their plans carefully, and now he knew that within a

matter of a few hours, he would be relaying the wonderful news of Tambre's escape to his brother-in-law.

The chamber doors opened suddenly, and the Justice quickly walked toward him holding a brown leather pouch.

"Our thanks to you, my good man. If we should need to get in touch with you again, how may we do so?" He deposited the pouch into the outstretched hands before him.

Derrik slid the pouch inside his tunic front and smiled. "I will be at the Whaler Inn for a few days. If you need to get in touch with me, send someone. I will come anon." With the words spoken, he bowed to the Justice and took his leave.

The Justice Mallorie watched the man leave and decided that the price had been worth what England had paid. Granted, the woman was no longer in their possession, but that was a minor detail. They would get her back, and along with her, the other troublesome Scot, Robert de Bruce. The man had traded side so often that he wondered about the merry chase he led them all on.

He sighed heavily as he made his way back to his private chamber, a frown marring his face. Yet another bothersome Scot to deal with as well, and a greedy one at that. The fool! They all had their suspicions about the Baron, and he wondered why they did not just do away with him like the others. It was rumored that he was a 'mole' for both the English and the Scots, but nothing had been confirmed as of yet. He hoped it would be soon, for the man's company was becoming quite intolerable. Pasting a smile upon his face, he opened the door to his private chamber and stepped inside.

"Baron Monteith, my apologies." Justice Mallorie started rather hesitantly as he shut the door in place behind him. He settled himself into a chair before he continued. "It has been a long road to where we are today. Your help in turning over Scotland to our graces have not gone unnoticed. The king has admired your perseverance and is accommodating your request for payment forthwith." He smiled, touching the ends of his mustache with his index finger. "However, being that the funds are temporarily unavailable at this point, we have allotted you a portion of your request. For now."

Baron Monteith's brows furrowed as he looked at the man, taking a seat across the desk from him. "I see."

"I am glad you understand. And please, know that this is only temporary." Shuffling some papers around the polished wooden top of the desk, the Justice paused momentarily as he noticed that some of his missives had been moved and shuffled around already. Biting his tongue so as not to confront the man before him in his growing rage, he turned a half smile to the Baron as he tossed another leather pouch upon the desk top. The coins jingled noisily as they came to their final resting place within the bag. "'Tis more than three-quarters of what England owes you for your services. We expect to have the rest of the coin within the next day or so."

The Baron inclined his head as he snatched up the pouch and hid it in the folds of his cloak. "I trust that you will notify me when you do receive the rest. I should like to be back in Scotland by early next week. I do have more of His Majesty's business to attend to." He raised his brows at the Justice and stood, pulling his cloak tighter around his frame. "I will be in touch with you, I am sure, within the next day or two. Good day."

Justice Mallorie watched the man sneak out of his chamber and pull the door shut behind him. It repulsed him to have the need to incorporate the aid of any foreigner, but he knew that this is the way his king wished the transactions to be held. He shrugged. With any luck the silly twits of Scotland would come to realize that the true reign of authority was here in England.

Once they had rid the Godforsaken country of the heathens, much like that of William Wallace, the better off they would be. Things would eventually fall into place, and he would just need to bide his time. It would come soon enough. A smile touched the corners of his lips as he stood and went to his sideboard, pouring himself a small glass of wine.

Merrik's heart raced as the words finally registered in his mind. "You are sure then? She is alive?"

Derrik grinned and placed a firm hand upon his brother-in-law's forearm. "I tell you true. It is Tambre that they spoke of. She is a few days ahead of us, but I know that we could catch up with her easily. She would not bring attention to herself by stealing a horse."

"Nor would she travel during the day. She would seek the cover of night to aid her in her journey. Once she reaches Scotland, she will be hard to find. She will hide until she knows that

no danger will be brought to your castle, Merrik.” Galwain clapped Derrik on the back. “Damn me! I still cannot believe the good news! Mother and Father will be overwhelmed, I am sure!”

Merrik smiled as the two brothers continued to talk about the miracle of their sister's survival. He did not want to tell them that they were not on safe grounds yet. They still needed to find Tambre, and make their way back into Scotland.

“I will leave within the hour. I think she has headed north, and she will stick to the forest as much as she can, especially during the day. She will try to stay hidden, so I will need every man we have brought with us to keep their eyes open. You are right. She will conceal herself very well, and travel in the dark of night.”

Derrick nodded. “I will go let the others know. I am afraid that I will be staying behind for a few days. Justice Mallorie says he will send someone for me if they should need my services again.” He eyed Merrik wearily. “I trust that they will have every available soldier looking for her, so go with caution, and know that I will soon catch up to you. While I am here, I will try to learn what I can.” He started to turn away, but paused as a grin lit his handsome features. “And, Merrik, when you see my sister will you give her a big hug and kiss for me, and tell her that I will see her as soon as I can?”

“I will.” Merrik smiled, and brushed the hair from his brow. “Now go, and Godspeed.” He watched as Derrik hugged his brother Tristan, and then vanished into the forest soundlessly.

“Go gather our men. We leave at once.”

Tristan nodded, and was on his way, giving low whistled calls as he went. Within minutes he had returned with all of the men that had come with them on their venture. Speaking quietly, Tristan directed the men to use care in their search for his sister.

“If I know her as well as I think I do, she will set up warning triggers all around her while she sleeps during the day. She will be alerted to anything that tries to pass her even before you know it will happen. Her wits are quick and so are her reflexes. She will most certainly have gained a sword somewhere along the way, so make sure that you are on the lookout.”

“Do not let anything happen to her.” Merrik joined the group as he mounted his destrier and waited for the others to follow his lead. “We will travel within thirty yards of each other so if any of you see her; I want to be notified immediately.” He closed his eyes and whispered a prayer that he would be holding her in his arms again this eve. It pained him to think that after

all he had been through with the hoax of her death, that she would elude him until his mind screamed out in agony once more. "We must find her this day. With any luck, we can notify Derrik of our find, and be on our way home this very eve."

Tristan nodded, and although he knew his brother could take care of himself, it still worried him that he was left alone in a strange country, surrounded by their most despised rivals in a rundown, deplorable inn. All of them had their necks on the line right at this moment, and he prayed that they would be able to reach the others who had been left behind some two hours outside of London. They had only brought enough of their men to suffice the rigors of their unknown journey in case they ran into trouble.

The others were laying in wait for the return, and escape back to Scotland with their mistress riding by their side. The lot of them would not be leaving this country if Tambre was not by their side when they did so. After all, she was the reason they were all here.

"I will rely on each of you to help me find my lady wife, and I promise you, God as my witness, that each one of us will make it out of this hellhole unscathed." Merrik's hands tightened upon the reins of his destrier, which had the animal prancing suddenly to the left. Realizing the unintended harshness, he eased his hold and patted the animal's neck to calm him. His pale green eyes met those of Tristan's. The other man nodded his encouragement and pulled himself to the back of his own mount. "Let us ride."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Tambre brushed leaves over her body and settled back against the rock, supporting her back against the roughness as she pulled dead branches around her. They would camouflage her exposed torso, blending her into the dead leaves and other branches that lay strewn here and there. Ashe had gone to scout the area, and she smiled as she thought of how shielding he had been of her. He was so much like his mother Nan, and she wistfully thought of her dear cousin, William, and how protective the wolf had been of her own master.

She missed him terribly, and would hold him close to her heart for the rest of her days. Sighing, she popped a berry into her mouth and shuddered at the horrible taste. The English could do nothing correctly, not even with their food! Provisions had been the last thing she had thought about, and now she wished that she could roast a rabbit or squirrel, but knew it would be out of the question until she reached Scotland.

Looking about her, she spotted a deer some fifty yards away, and grinned as it twitched its tail to its young. The small deer appeared by its mother's side on long legs to nuzzled the underside of her belly, suckling milk. She smiled and closed her eyes, remembering her own two sons, Drayven and Mykal. How she longed to have them in her arms again, to feel their downy heads nuzzle her own breasts as they sated their hunger. She longed for home, and she longed to be held in Merrik's arms again.

She still had not figured out why he had not come for her, and knew that whatever the reason; she would most likely slap his handsome face before hearing him out. By her calculations, she had been in the cell for over three weeks before her escape. Long enough for him to lay claim to her.

If it were him, she would have been there, come hell or high water to pull him from his imminent death. But it could be that he did not know where she was being held, and perhaps was searching for her even now. She shrugged. It mattered little now. Her intent was to make it to her homeland soon. She would then seek out her husband and put the question to him.

A low growl alerted her to Ashe's return, and she smiled as the wolf pup settled himself a few yards from where she lay. He would not nestle next to her, his instinct to keep danger from

her uppermost in his mind. He would distract the attention from her and allow her to make a quick head start from danger, if need be. He laid his large head upon his front paws and looked at her through the cover of branches. He would find his own rest soon, so as she settled back once more, she gave him a low whistle to ease his mind, and allow him to find the rest he deserved.

Merrik continued on his quest for three days, heading further and further into a dense forest that afforded very little light to see by. He had agreed with Tristan to stay in the woods to continue their search, but all the men were tired and hungry, needing to rest. They decided that a small respite would do them all good. The men paired up, going in different directions, allowing one man to sleep for a few hours, and then permit the other to sleep after that. Being split into pairs gave them the advantage in case of the king's army happening upon them, taking them by surprise. With thirty men hidden strategically, they could very easily overtake a group of one hundred of the English soldiers if the need arose.

Merrik paired up with Tristan and allowed the other man to sleep first. When it came for his turn, he had not realized just how tired he was. It seemed he fell asleep as quickly as his head had lay upon a pile of leaves. He dreamed of Tambre, her kisses, her caresses, and her smile. He felt her rake her fingernails across his neck harshly, which jarred him out of his sleep suddenly. And when his eyes opened, he stared at the tip of a blade trained at his neck. Taking a silent breath, he followed the blade's length until he met the arrogant eyes of an English soldier staring back at him.

"Arise, Scottish pig! You have met your doom here today!"

The man's orders sent a flash of rage through his body, and he tensed as he waited for the blade to move so that he could rise. Once on his feet, he towered over the young soldier who still stared down his nose at him.

"Go stand by your friend over there."

Merrik followed to where the man pointed, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Tristan had been tied to a tree, but was very much alive. Slowly he walked toward Tristan and saw a twinkle

in his eyes as he came to stand beside him. He allowed the English soldiers to bind his wrists, making sure he kept them slightly apart.

"Now, then." Mollins sheathed his sword and grinned as his men gathered around their leader. There were about twenty of them, and all seemed a bit into their cups. "I have been given the order from our king that we are to bring in anyone who does not look English. You two do not look English."

Tristan grinned at the fellow, and mustered up a resounding English accent. "My good fellow! How can you deny that we are not the same countrymen! For shame! My cousin will be sorely put out by your mistake, I admit!"

Mollins crossed his arms over his chest arrogantly, as he narrowed his eyes. "What cousin do you speak of?" His lopsided grin pulled a short bark of laughter from Tristan.

"My cousin is His Majesty's admiral in the Royal Navy. Do you know of who I speak of now?" He nudged a fallen branch forward in mock anger. "I will not be treated this way! Joachim will be very upset when he learns that you—"

"Silence!" Beads of sweat appeared upon Mollins' upper lip as he took a menacing step forward. "I know nothing of your so called cousin, and that matters very little to me at this moment. If it is found that you truly are English, then you shall be set free upon questioning by the Justice Mallorie. My orders are to bring in the Scottish wench who has escaped, and anyone else who looks suspicious. And you two look suspicious."

"Aye! 'Tis why we are about this day as well. I hear the reward is thrice the amount of originality. I aim to gain that coin for myself to buy commission into the royal forces in our fight against Scotland." When the man did not make a move to comment, Tristan went on. "It will be your commission that I gain when my cousin finds out this absurdity."

Merrik raised his brows at the soldiers as some of them backed away slightly. He had not spoken and would allow Tristan to continue the farce for the time being. His clansmen would just about be in position, if he judged the timing right.

Mollins looked behind him hesitantly, and then turned back toward the two men. "I do not believe you. My orders—"

"Your orders are to obtain the Scottish wench. Well, here I am. Come and get me, *Mollins.*"

Merrik turned in the direction the voice had come from, and blanched as he saw Tambre step into the clearing. She was alive! He felt his knees weaken and his stomach cave in. And she was so beautiful, with her hair braided and hanging down her back to her waist. The men's britches she wore hugged her legs like a second skin.

The white linen shirt was stuffed into the britches and left very little to the imagination as it gaped open in the front, showing off a generous display of well rounded, creamy breasts. There was blood around the neckline, and he sighed when he realized that it was not hers. She wore a black belt around her waist that held a very large sword. And when her eyes shot to his momentarily, all he wanted to do was pull her into his arms and kiss her sweet lips.

Taken by surprise, the soldiers drew their swords, intending to capture the beauty and sing their praises upon the return of the woman to the Justice. However, it was not to be.

Tambre winked at Merrik and wondered briefly of the stricken look upon his face. She would worry about that later. Right now, she needed to work on the jesters before her. And she was ready for this fight. The grin she wore upon her face suddenly bloomed into a full blown smile. Pulling her sword from the belt at her side without losing contact with the soldier's eyes, she took a step forward.

"Well? Do you come to get me, or should I come to get you?" Her mocking tone sent rage through the soldiers that stared in awe at her appearance.

"Oh, we will come to get you, you little bitch! But we will have our fun with you before you return to your cell. Of that you can count on to be a true fact. You may have stopped me before, but you will not stop me from gaining a taste of your sweet ass this time!"

Tambre raised her brows, and grinned. "As I have said before, come and get me, Mollins." She disappeared into the thick grouping of trees, her tinkling laughter grating along the nerves of the soldiers whom she had outright challenged.

Rage filled Mollins' eyes as he motioned for his men to split up and set out after her. He would get the little whore, and she would know that she had had an Englishman when he was done with her!

Merrik looked at Tristan in astonishment and twisted his wrists free from the loose ropes that bound him. Pulling a dagger from his knee high black boots, he cut the ropes that bound Tristan to the tree and then set off in search of his wife. He could hear the soldiers in the woods

tromping around and making an enormous amount of noise. Obviously, none of them had been trained in the art of silence and surprising your enemy.

Picking up his pace, he brushed past low limbs and thick thorn bushes, ignoring the biting slashes the sharp points made upon his face and exposed forearms.

Bursting into a clearing, Merrik and Tristan stopped suddenly to the scene before them. The soldiers had been surrounded by their clansmen, and Tambre raised her sword over her head as she took the head of Mollins, the first soldier to die by her hand. Her face was bitter, and she spat at him as his body crumpled to the ground. The others quickly followed to their deaths, a total of twenty-two men beheaded with others having swords thrust into their chests, but little emotion was shown to any of them as the clansmen set about taking the coats, boots and pants from the dead men. The uniforms could come in handy for future use.

As they set about piling branches and dead leaves over the corpses, Tambre spotted Merrik coming toward her. She sheathed her sword and literally threw herself into his arms, all thought of her intended abuse to him disappearing altogether. She covered his mouth with her own and wrapped her arms about his neck, holding onto him tightly.

He kissed her with such emotion that she pulled back from him, and concern filled her deep blue eyes as she gazed into his handsome face. Tears filled his eyes, and she became alarmed when she saw a single tear slide slowly down his cheek.

“Merrik, what is amiss?”

He could not speak, just pulled her to him tightly and shook his head. He felt her soft lips upon his face and neck, wondering if what he felt was a dream. His hands roamed down her back and over her bottom. He pulled her closer to his length and then wrapped his arms around her waist, not wanting to ever let her go. He had his life back, and he thanked God over and over while he told his wife how much he loved her.

“Merrik, tell me what is amiss. What has happened?” She brushed his dark hair from his forehead as she looked into his handsome face. How she had missed him! She leaned her forehead onto his, waiting for his replay.

“I love you,” was all that Merrik could say. Over and over until his throat became raw with the words. He was not sure how long he had stood there with her in his arms until he realized that night had fallen and the moonlight shone upon her lovely face. “Tambre, I thought

you gone from me forever. You left me alone.”

Alarmed, Tambre stared at Merrik with wide eyes, saying nothing.

“You went away, and all I wanted was my soul back. I wanted *you* back. I came in search of you. And I found you. You came back to me.” He kissed her gently and picked her up in his arms, carrying her into the thicket of woods, laying her under a canopy of ivy that had twined around two dead trees. Settling next to her, he unbuckled her belt that held her sword, and then pulled her shirt from her britches.

Tambre leaned her head back and moaned as the delicious waves of desire swept over her body. She tingled all over when he touched her nipples with the tips of his fingers and then laved them with his tongue. All thoughts of the questions she had for him vanished from her mind as his fingers slid beneath the waist of her britches and he began to softly massage her. The sensation was maddening, and she reached up to pull his face to hers where she delivered upon him a sensual kiss, one of great promise, and full of passion's hunger.

Merrik groaned aloud when her tongue snaked into his mouth and dueled with his own. She licked and sucked gently, making his urge to take her all the stronger. It had been so long, but still he remembered her touch, her scent. It moved him to a new high, one that he had never had before, one that he had longed to taste for an eternity. He loved her so much, and the feelings that welled up in his chest brought him to the realization that she was real, here with him, pliant under his touch.

Tambre deepened the kiss just as he began to pull her britches from her body. He loomed over her, his braided hair coming over his shoulder to tickle her breasts as he left a searing trail of kisses along her belly to her inner thigh. She gasped with the sensation of his hot breath raking over her skin, making her squirm beneath his heated touch. She could no longer wait for him to come into her so she pushed him onto his back and climbed upon him, straddling his thighs and taking him into her with wild abandon. He was hot, and he throbbed deliciously with his wanting. She tossed her head back and cried out his name softly, telling him that she loved him so much.

Merrik believed in miracles of a spiritual kind, but none such as this. He had prayed to God every day since the loss of her, and he had been granted the one thing that this mortal man had ever wanted. He wanted the one woman back who had taken his heart within the first hour

of their meeting, and he wanted the love she gave him, love that he so desperately needed to go on in this world. She was everything to him, not just a mere wife to birth him sons. She was part of his being, his own flesh and blood, and he loved her without restraint.

He pulled her down to his waiting lips and sighed as he felt the brush of her hardened nipples cross over his chest. Her slow movements over his manhood had brought moans of pleasure from him but he craved more, so much more.

Tambre sighed as her body met that of Merrik's. His hard muscles pressed into her flesh and she felt him tense as she circled her hips over his length slowly. He exhaled little by little, groaning his pleasure as she continued on with her seductive movements. She kissed him thoroughly, laving her tongue over his slowly, pausing as a pleasurable touch found its way to her swollen breasts. Having him here with her, like this, was a dream that she had often thought of in her absence from him.

Sitting straight up, she tossed her head back as she thrust over him, slow and savoring the feel of him, taking every inch of his length into her welcoming heat. Her pulse quickened as she slowly raised herself up, and then back down over him with movements that were unhurried, softly teasing. She wanted their time together to last as long as it could, finding the sought after pleasure, and treasuring the feel of complete ecstasy and love.

Merrik rubbed his palms over her silken flesh and smiled at her. She was a true vision, one he had thought he had lost, and he felt the complete bonding of her to him. They were one, and he could not think of another place he would rather be than with her. She had come back to him, and for that he was most grateful. Her pleasurable moans nibbled into his thought, and he released himself to her ministrations completely. The softness he felt mixed with her heat had him spiraling into an oblivion of luscious sensations, unlike any he had ever felt before.

She loved him well, and as she plunged back over his length once more, he felt the pulsing of her need mingle with his own. The release of his love left him breathless and wanting more. He did not want to end this sensation, this love she gave so freely to him, and he moaned as she found her release, her softness tugging delicately over his hard length. And when she lay over him, breathing harshly from her efforts, he enclosed her into his embrace, kissing her face softly a thousand times over.

"I love you, Merrik." She rose up on her elbows, braced on either side of his head, and

kissed the tip of his nose. "I love you."

Merrik said nothing, just stared at her beauty emanating around him. He smoothed back her hair that had come loose from her braid and kissed her lips softly. And when he felt that he could finally speak, he told her of his promise.

"I love you more than my own life, my lass. You have taken my heart, my soul, and have left my body a shell. Without you I am nothing. You are the air I breathe, and the soul of my existence, and I love you more than words could ever say. I promise this night that I will never have you gone from me again. I will keep you safe for the rest of my days, never leaving your side for a moment."

"Merrik, what is upsetting you? What has happened? I don't know what to think about any of this. You must tell me what I need to know. Our children are fine, are they not?"

"They are fine boys, both of them, and they are unharmed."

She sat up and pulled him up in front of her. She reached around him and unbraided his hair, letting it fall over his muscled chest as it sifted through her fingers, waiting for his explanation. She turned concerned eyes his way, and smiled. "Tell me. I hate to see you this way."

"You remember nothing, do you?" He placed a gentle hand upon her cheek, gazing into her eyes.

"I remember as far as becoming ill at the Douglas castle, but 'tis all I can recall up to the point of finding myself in a prison cell in London." She looked down at his hand resting in his lap, and pulled it up to her lips, kissing the palm.

Merrik sighed, and placed his palm next to her cheek, feeling the softness against his skin. "You were taken away from me once again. But this time, I did not know you were to come back."

"Why? What would ever make you think a thing as horrible as that? You know I would never leave you. I love you too much to release you from my grasp."

"And I love you. So much." He paused as he leaned over to kiss her, leaning his forehead upon her own. "You were taken away from me by what I thought was your death."

Her eyes widened, and she became alarmed. "My death? But how could that be? What trickery made you believe such a thing?"

“Do you remember the old woman who came to see you at the Douglas castle?” When she shook her head no, he continued. “She came to see you when you were ill. She was convinced that you had been poisoned by wine. I left her alone with you for no more than a few moments, and she had given you a vial of liquid to make you appear to die. It was so real that my sorrow did not know the difference. You were dead to my eyes, for your breath had stopped.”

Tambre was stunned into complete silence. She closed her eyes as the tears threatened to come. When she looked back at Merrik, he had a smile upon his face.

“But we learned that you did not die, that it was all a deceit to hand you over to the English. You were returned to me after seven agonizing weeks. And just like the sorrow that had poured tears from my eyes in my deepest regret, my tears now are of the wondrous joy of having you back by my side. I did not think that I could go on. You possess my soul, and have made me not human in my mind without you. The deepest love I feel for you would have never gone away from my heart.”

“Merrik, I am not dead. Put your mind at ease. I am real. Death has not taken me as you had thought.” She settled herself onto his lap and hugged him around the waist. She felt his strong arms envelop her into his warmth, and she sighed her contentment. “I am your wife, and I love you. I will never leave you behind again. ‘Tis my promise to you.”

He pulled her face up to his own, gazing into the incredible deep blue of her eyes. “I will never let you leave my side again. Once we get back to Scotland, I intend to make sure that I keep you abed, and pregnant with my sons. No more mischief for you, my love. I am determined to bend you to my will and keep you safe with me.”

“I believe I told you once before, if my memory serves me correctly, that I will bend to no man’s will.” She teased him gently, and felt his arms tighten about her waist. “But perhaps I shall let you think that I am compliant to your every suggestion. And I do like the part about keeping me abed.” She grinned. “I just might like the bending to your will if it holds all the delicious feelings we have just now shared.”

“Then we will start immediately.” He smiled at her, and placed his hands on either side of her head. “Did you know that you carry another son for me?”

Startled, Tambre looked at Merrik as if he had grown two heads. “What? How do you know that?”

“The woman who drugged you. She is the one who told us of the deceit, and she also told me that while she examined you, she found you to be with child. You are probably about three months along now.” Merrik laughed as his wife’s smile grew.

“I had no idea. I have lost seven weeks of my life, and when I regain my senses, I am told that have died, and then I am alive, and that I carry another child.” She looked at him, and grinned. “Are you happy, Merrik? Are you happy to have more children with me?”

“What are you talking about? Of course I am contented. You are the woman I hold above all else in my life. For you to give me such a gift makes me very pleased.” He brought her lips to his for a searing kiss. “I would have you bear many more of my children. ‘Tis what I want with you.” His smile became mischievous then. “That and the fun in making the babes.”

“Well that, my lord, is something I shall love bending to your will on.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Derrik met up with his group later the next day. Since no word had come from the Justice Mallorie on further work, he had taken his leave of the deplorable place and made his way back to Scotland. It was with luck that he had run into his original group as he made his way over a winding hill on foot. They were camped in the woods, and one of the watchmen had spotted him as he made his way to the small stream that had run along an embankment of pine trees.

He was overjoyed at the thought of his sister back with them, and gave her the biggest hug he had. They both cried tears of joy, and when Merrik came to place a protective arm around her middle, Tambre smiled up at him and placed her hand over his. She leaned back against his hard length and had never been happier in all her life. They were going home to their two small babes, and she had the man that she loved deeply by her side.

They had at least another couple of days' travel to go before they reached the borders of their homeland, and she could not wait to hug each of her children. She missed them so much. But they did not let down their guard, for the English soldiers were swarming into the valleys and glens looking for her. It puzzled her as to why her value to the English was so great, and she supposed it was because William had been her cousin, and that they shared the same feelings of freedom for their country.

Neither was afraid to voice their opinions of the dear gift of freedom. But she was no threat to the English government. Perhaps it was because she had escaped their clutches too many times in the past, making them appear to be the idiots that they were, especially by the escape of a mere woman.

Moving onward, they traveled at night still, being that it was the safest time, shielded by the dark cloak of night. Merrik insisted that Tambre ride with him, and so she accustomed herself to nestling into his warmth in the cool night air. They had no time alone, however, save for the first night they had met up in the woods, and each held on to the precious moment as if it were plated in gold.

They were content just to lie beside one another and know that the other was just a breath

away. The dangers that surrounded them were vast, and everyone had to be aware of their surroundings at all times.

As Merrik snuggled into her from behind, he kissed her neck and whispered that he loved her as Tambre turned in his arms, kissing him with all the pent up passion she felt. It was unnerving to have him so close and not be able to make love to him.

“Do not tempt me, my love. I would save our next time for our homecoming. I will then lay you out on our bed like a fine piece of silk, and love you till morn.” His eyes had darkened slightly as he kissed her lips with a passion that belied the words of denying them both the love they sought.

“I want you now, my lord. I want to wrap my legs around your waist—”

“Do not entice me so. I want you so badly now that I am half tempted to throw you over my shoulders and carry you off further into the woods. This will all be over soon. Trust me to keep you safe, and I shall make you most satisfied the very day we return home. And every day henceforth.”

She smoothed her palms over his chest, and down further to the evidence of his obvious desire. “I can see that you would like to have a moment's tryst just as much as I do.” She kissed him as she continued to massage his bulging manhood. “I ache for your touch, Merrik. Give me what I request, and I shall be forever in your debt.” She licked his lips with the tip of her tongue, and moaned his name quietly upon her breath.

He kissed her with all the passion he felt, and knew that if they did not stop now, he would be hauling her over his shoulder and into the woods to find a secret place where he could love her thoroughly.

The pounding of horses' hooves interrupted his thoughts. With dawn almost upon them, what little light the clan had was used to gather unhidden items and dash for cover. Everyone waited with bated breath as the horses slowed in their pace and came to a stop. Destriers snorted, shaking their massive heads as the jingle of bridle chains clinked loudly in the quiet morning.

Tambre slowly reached for the sword at her side. Not finding the sword where it was to be, she cursed silently and nudged Merrik, showing him the empty sheath. They were hidden under a pile of dead branches and leaves, but they could still peer out here and there to see what was going on. All they could see was up to the horse's bellies, and the booted feet that were slid

into stirrups. The destriers were great beasts, and continued to snort loudly as they pranced with their masters' tight hold of the reins.

There had to be at least seventy men, Merrik judged quickly, and he took Tambre's hand in his own, giving it a reassuring squeeze. If they all remained quiet, they had a chance of going unnoticed by the men.

The leader's hooded gaze traveled over the area with expert eyes, missing nothing. He pulled his cloak tighter about his shoulders, and motioned for several of his men to go beyond the stand of trees over the small hill a few yards away. As the men moved on with their orders, the leader's eyes stopped upon the sword that lay on the ground near a pile of branches. He scanned the pile, and nodded his head.

Dismounting, he went over to the sword, and kicked the blade up into the air, catching the handle with his left hand. The rustle of leaves behind him brought his attention fully to where the noise had come from. His black cloak moved in waves around his form as he drew his own sword, defenses at the ready. He let his breath out silently as a small rabbit raced into a pile of leaves and burrowed underneath.

Sheathing his sword, he turned back toward the pile of branches and peered inside the tangled mess from where he stood. His handsome face lit into a grin as he stabbed the blade of the sword into the ground in front of him. Silently, it wobbled back and forth, finally coming to a stand still. "Arise, fair lass, and give unto me your hand."

Tambre stiffened next to Merrik, and gripped his hand tighter. A low growl was heard beside her, and she looked through the thickets to see Ashe at the ready. His head was bent low, and his teeth were bared, obviously not willing to give the man any quarter. Snarling at the stranger who threatened his mistress, the wolf took a step forward, enticing the man's attentions upon the forthcoming bite from the sharp teeth that glistened white as snow.

"I am friend, lass. You and yours have no fear from me, so call off your beast. Come and greet your cousin's fondest friend." He crossed his arms over his chest, waiting for the woman to come out of her hiding place, but kept a wary eye upon the wolf.

"My cousin is dead, you swine, and I know not who you are!" She pulled harshly from the iron grip Merrik had upon her hand and forearm, and leapt from the pile of decaying greenery with teeth and claws bared. Snatching up her sword, she had the sharp blade trained to the

intruder's throat within the blink of an eye.

She stopped Ashe in time as he made ready to jump for the man's midsection. She regarded his rich attire and the handsome features with narrowed eyes as she felt Merrik's presence behind her. She heard his sword being pulled from its own sheath and was glad that he had her back. Ashe stilled growled low in his throat, still sensing the danger.

The man smiled at her, and unfolded his arms, letting them drop to his side. "William said that you were always very quick with your sword. I always laughed at him and said that he had to be daft." His eyes twinkled in merriment. "I should not have doubted his word."

"Nay, you should not." Kollif stepped into her line of vision, and he smiled as he held out his arms for her. She lowered her sword and ran into the arms of her dearest friend.

"Kollif!" Tambre hugged the man to her tightly as she kissed his bearded cheek. "You know you should never try to get the best of me. I could have killed you all!"

Kollif released his dear friend, and set her at arms length. "Aye, 'tis what I told him, but he would not listen. He had to find out for himself!"

"Aye, that I did!" The man went over to Tambre and bowed before her formally, clasping her hand in his and bringing it to his lips for a gentle kiss. His eyes still twinkled merrily as he straightened to his full height of six feet. "I am Robert de Bruce, lass. 'Tis a pleasure to meet you finally."

Tambre's jaw dropped to her chest before she realized what she had done. Standing tall, she inclined her head. "My lord. 'Tis a pleasure to meet you. My cousin had mentioned you on several different occasions." She went to stand by Merrik who still held his sword in his hand. "This is my husband, Merrik of Farlynn."

Robert bowed before Merrik, smiling. "And I have heard about you as well. William said that you had challenged him upon your first meeting. Is that truth, or did he make that tall tale up to boost his own image?"

Merrik smiled. "'Tis true, I am afraid. I took him to be someone else."

Laughter rumbled in Robert's chest. "He told me that you would take the lass in hand and make her see reason. I've no doubt that she has taken you in hand for the same!" He turned his attentions back to Tambre then, a smile still lingering upon his lips. "My lady, a word if I may?"

Tambre nodded and followed Robert a short distance away, refusing to leave her sword behind. She sheathed it when they came to a stop. Robert turned to face her with a smile, eyeing the wolf that followed his mistress.

"Your pet is protective."

"He is. He has kept me safe from many a scoundrel, I assure you."

Robert laughed merrily. "You are as he said you would be. I wondered how long it would be before we finally got to meet one another. I had heard you had been turned over to the English, which is why I am in this country with my men. I was coming to plead for your life."

Tambre snorted a laugh as she folded her arms across her chest. "I need no one to plead for my life, sir. I was able to handle the situation quite well on my own." She knew her voice was harsh, but this man had no idea who or what she was about.

Plead for her life, indeed!

Robert raised his brows and cleared his throat. "I am sorry if I offend you, Madame. I did not mean to do so." The smile returned to his face, and he regarded her with curiosity. "I wondered about you, if you were being treated well, I mean to say. Some of our countrymen have been misused, and have died for what they wanted most of all; their freedom."

"I know all about the killings. I heard the screams of agony coming from my dear cousin's own lips as the English pigs tortured him before all upon the town square! I know of the deaths, and how many more are to follow in our quest for freedom." Her eyes narrowed, and she drew her sword from the sheath and turned the sharp blade to the man's exposed neck.

"Where were you when my dear, sweet William was murdered? Where were you, *his most fondest friend*? I saw the whole thing! I saw how horrible it was for him to die the way he did! How he screamed in anguish! And no one helped him. Not one soul. I would have laid my life down for him if I could have. Had I been able, I would have died right along with him, taking a few of the English dogs with me, I swear I would have!" She swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand.

Robert closed his eyes and felt the sharp blade dig into his neck. He pondered her words and knew that she would run him through if he told her where he had been. When he opened his eyes, the anger on her face made him swallow. He now knew the love she had held for her dear cousin.

"I doubt that even I could have done anything. He had already been dubbed a traitor--"

"A traitor to what country? To England? A country that invaded our peacefulness and tried to bend us to its rules? William Wallace was no traitor, sir, of that I will stake my life. What he believed in was the freedom of *Scotland*, not just the freedom for his own good welfare."

She turned away from him then and headed back to Merrik. The comfort of his arms as they folded around her eased her mind somewhat, but the shivering that wracked her body now was the rage of unlawful death in the eyes of her country for a truly good man, whose life was lost for all of their freedom.

"My lady." Robert's voice was soft as he laid a hand upon her shoulder. "I did not come here to argue with you, nor to upset you further. I was only trying to make sure you were all right. I will take my leave, and wish you Godspeed on your return home."

"Robert, I will not apologize for what I have said, for every bit of it I believe with my whole being." Tambre faced him then and regretted the harshness of her words. The sadness upon his face matched her own as both remembered such a great man in their own thoughts of him from days gone by.

"I thank you for the thought of my welfare. I am sure that you meant only to look after me as best you could. But you do not know me, sir. While I would have accepted your help with gratefulness, I would also wonder why you would help me at all. Since William's death, I have wondered on the stability of our country, and know that we, as a whole, will win this fight. Our independence is more than just for our freedom alone. It is for our future, our children's future, and all that we hold dear.

"And if you are to take William's place in this fight, you must realize that you cannot do it alone. You have many people to back you, but only if what you want is for the good of our country. Do not be duped into listening to a king who only wants to gain more power and rule with an iron fist over people he knows or cares nothing about. And if that is what you believe in, then our country will be nothing but a prison cell for its people." She sighed and shook her head. "All I want is to go to my home and be with my children, love my husband, and live what is left of my life in peace."

Robert smiled and took her hand in his once again, kissing the back. "William was right

about you. He once told me that your words of wisdom often guided him on his quests. No wonder he loved you so. He also said that you could be sweet as wine or mean as a wild horse, but either way, he valued what you spoke to him. Believe me, my lady; the man did not die in vain. We will have our freedom, of that you can be sure. I stake my own heart on that.” He turned from her then and mounted his own destrier. “If you care for an escort, we will be more than happy to do so. I wish to see you safely returned to your home. All of you.”

Tambre nodded. “I believe that there is safety in numbers, sir. We would welcome your escort home. It will give me a chance to know the man my cousin called friend.”

Robert smiled down at her. He truly did believe that William would have enjoyed the thought of the two of them becoming friends. He had spoken of his cousin fondly and often. He treasured her opinions as well as her help in his cause. William was a great man in everything that he did, everything that he stood for. He just hoped that he could continue on with the efforts and deliver the freedom his country so craved. It would be a long battle, he feared, but it was one he was more than willing to take on.

“I would welcome the opportunity, lass.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

"He loved you. Very much."

"And I loved him. Very much. He was my most trusted friend, and I miss him every day since he has gone." Tambre smiled at Robert and handed him another portion of roasted rabbit. "He spoke of you in our conversations."

Robert raised his brows as a small smile curled his lips. "He did? And what did he say?"

"Sometimes he was at odds with your decisions, but for the most part, he valued your friendship greatly. I wonder why he never spoke of you more."

"We were at odds on quite a few issues, but we also agreed on several subjects. As I am sure you have heard. I must tell you not to believe all that you would hear." Robert lowered his eyes, and thought of how William must have misconstrued his last battle as deceit on his part. He had let his friend down, had led him into the jaws of the enemy, and now he was gone from them all. "I valued the man above all others as much as I valued his friendship. He was like a brother to me, more so than the ones who hold the same blood as myself."

Tambre stood then, and understood what he felt. The pain was etched upon his face once again, and he would become quiet soon, walking away from the other to be alone, to think of his friend and the memories they shared.

"I go to seek out my husband, sir. I suppose we should make it to our home in two days time, and I cannot wait to hold my babes once again."

Robert nodded, and stood as well. He watched her walk away, head held high like any royal queen he had ever seen. She was the loveliest woman he had ever set his eyes upon, and the longing he felt for his own wife dug deeper into his chest. He would see her soon, for his plans included a small visit to her within the week. His thoughts once again turned to William Wallace, and he strode into the woods to ponder those thoughts.

Tambre spotted Merrik sitting beside Derrik, polishing his sword. He wore no tunic, just his hose and knee high boots and her body literally tingled as she watched the muscles in his back bunch and relax with his movements. He wore his hair braided, and it hung in a thick plait down the center of his back to his waist. He laughed at something Derrik had said, and the deep

dimples in his cheeks made a handsome display.

He was beautiful, and she was so lucky to have him, and his love. She watched as his hands expertly handled the blade, rubbing his fingers along the length of shining metal. She must have groaned aloud at the sensual thought of how those fingers had brought her great pleasure many times before, for he looked up then, and the gaze he turned her way took the breath from her body.

His eyes caressed her, giving her a weakness in her knees, and she licked her lips in anticipation of their next joining. She craved his touch, ached for the gentle love she knew he would bestow upon her. She had, the day before, caught him unaware as he slept, waking him with a delicious hot tongue running the length of his swollen manhood. She had wanted to give him pleasure, to show the love she felt for him, and she did. She closed her eyes and remembered the taste of him, the sweet nectar he had spilled into her mouth.

Merrik watched his wife as she slowly ran the tip of her tongue along her bottom lip. The smoldering look she threw at him made his heart beat rapidly in his chest, and he could feel the heat from her, even from where she stood. He smelled her scent as it wafted on a gentle breeze over to him, to tease and tantalize his mind. A mouth-watering need started in the center of his belly and traveled along the length of his manhood, swelling him as he thought of the wetness he would find if he touched her between her silky legs at that moment.

She wore no cloak, only the thin linen of the white under tunic, and he watched in fascination as her nipples swelled and hardened before his eyes, straining against the material, begging for his touch. He swallowed and put his sword down beside him. Standing, he went to her, folding her into his embrace. She felt so good as she clung to him, and he smelled the heat of her desire as it filled his head and his body with lust.

He kissed her neck and heard her slight intake of breath as a small moan of pleasure exhaled next to his ear. She whispered his name, begging him to take her where they stood, and he nearly complied, so great was his need. But he did not. He held her in his arms and teased her with whispered love words and seductive kisses along her neck. He felt her pulse quicken and he smiled as she groaned her longing for him, a soft sensual sound that entered his mind like a hundred arrows.

Tambre breathed in his heady fragrance and his scent made her longing all the more

intense. She roamed her palms down his bare back and then over his chest, feeling his hardness and muscles ripple under her tender touch. She rested her forehead upon his chest and slowly drew a circle around his nipple with her tongue, finally taking the nub into her mouth and suckling gently. She heard his soft groan of pleasure and she moved to his other nipple, laving upon it with the same attention the other had just received.

Her hair shielded her ministrations to those who looked at them, but Merrik's face, full of longing and lustful intensions, was sure to give them away. Slowly she worked her way back up to his face, leaving sweet kisses of sugared fire in her wake.

"My husband, I fear that my need for you has grown to a point beyond the ordinary. I ache for your touch, and want nothing more than to love you soundly right now. Take me into a hiding place and let me give you the love I so desperately seek to give. I am wet with my want for you, and seek out your lust to sedate what I feel."

Merrik grinned down at her. "I have been searching all morn for just such a place. Come, and I will take you there." He grabbed her hand and knew that she needed no further coaxing to follow. He looked back at her once to make sure she was alright after they had walked a few minutes, and desire swept through him as he viewed her passion-filled eyes. He quickened his pace, and within moments they had reached their destination.

Holding aside a curtain of moss covered branches, he let her pass before him, kissing her softly on her neck as she glided by. Closing the natural curtain, enclosing them in a haven of pure bliss, he turned toward her and was rewarded with an excellent view of her backside as she pulled the boots from her feet and slid the hose from her long, silky legs. He groaned his own need and pulled the clothing quickly from his body.

She tossed the unneeded clothing into a heap on top of her discarded under tunic and then turned to face him, thrusting her breasts forward as he bent to take a tight nipple into his mouth. She reached around him to hold tightly to his back, drawing him forward and into her softness. Her need grew as his hands roamed over her arms, belly, and then to the apex of her thighs. Sliding a finger over her wetness, she sucked in her breath and begged him to bend her to his will.

Merrik smiled as he lay her down upon his cloak that he had brought with him earlier when he had found this place of seduction. He did not wait in his urgency to go slow with her,

but instead thrust into her heat and was delivered her outcry of pleasure, filling her further as she lifted her legs, placing them about his waist. She felt like heaven, a true place of peace as he caught her knees in the crook of his arms, lifting her higher.

He felt her kisses on his chest and he groaned as she pulled his nipple into her mouth and suckled him, laving her hot tongue over his fevered flesh. Her hands grasped his buttocks, pulling him harder into her softness as her nails dug into him in her urgency. She bucked wildly beneath him and his release came suddenly, like a wave of hot liquid heat spewing from deep inside of him.

Tambre pulsed around his hardness, and felt his love fill her as she quickened her pace, feeling her own heat burst over his length. She continued to move with him and was gained the satisfaction of a second, more powerful release than the first had been. She kissed him, bringing his head down to hers, and laving her tongue over his own. She loved him with a true passion that made her heart ache for his touch every second that passed. She wanted him near to her always, and her obsession for him, for his love, made her wild with the awareness.

He held her life in his hands, and those hands that gently stroked her into a heated oblivion only moments before, now ran over her still. She felt the calluses upon his palms from handling his sword in his strong grip and loved how it felt on her flesh. She whispered his name and gazed into the pale green of his eyes. Her smile was lazy and filled with sleep as she closed her eyes and kissed his waiting lips once again.

They lay naked in each other's arms as a deep sleep overtook their souls. Wrapped in a lovers embrace, the sounds around them escaped their ears and they both slept peacefully for the first time in months. It was nearly nightfall when they both awoke and loved again, one more treasured time before they dressed and made their way back to the camp, breaking the spell of their cherished time together.

Tristan handed Tambre a cup of water and grinned at her ruffled appearance. Merrik got the same grin from Derrik as the man handed him his tunic.

"We estimate to be at Farlynn within two days. I am sure your lady's homecoming will be met with a celebration."

"I would have it a quiet celebration, if any at all," Merrik mused as he pulled the tunic over his head. He looked over at Tambre, and grinned. "I wish to keep her to myself for now. I

will not tolerate any undue time apart from me.”

“You love her that much?”

“I do. And more.” Merrik said without hesitation. “She carries my babe once again, and I will keep her abed with me until the child comes.”

Derrik smiled at the prospect of his sister having more children. “I am most happy for you. And if I had a wife that I loved so deeply, I would do the same.” He shook his head. “Another babe. Mayhap it will be a girl babe, just like her mother.”

Merrik stilled in his motions, and gazed at his brother in law with mock alarm in his eyes. “The thought of a girl has never entered my mind.” He then snorted his mirth. “If the babe is as willful as her mother, then God help us all!”

Tambre grinned at her brother and husband across the way, not knowing that they talked of her.

Chapter Forty

Farlynn was a sight that the clan had longed to see for over three weeks. And when they topped the hill, seeing the castle looming upon the glen in the valley below, they set their destriers to racing over the ground in an effort to make it to the castle and be done with their journey.

Tambre's head swam with all the well-wishers, and she nearly had to scream at the top of her lungs to get the people to move from her path so that she could see her children. Merrik was behind her then, as if sensing her plight, and picked her up into his arms, carrying her above stairs. She smiled into his chest as she buried her face in his soft tunic, holding onto him around his neck. Her muffled giggles had a rumbling of laughter churning out from his lips, and she kissed those lips soundly.

"My thanks. I did not know how I was to get out of the great hall without crawling under everyone's legs to make my escape."

"Save your crawling for later, woman. Envisioning you on hands and knees is an image I am want to behold."

Tambre kissed his neck. "For you, I would be willing to try anything." She let out a small groan as the erotic image floated into her mind. "I am willing to wager that your mind holds the same reflection as mine does, and that if I were to whisper for you to take me to our bed later and try this new thing, you would be willing to do so."

"I would." The growled response made her giggled once again, and he smiled down at her as he stopped. He still held her in his arms, and as he set her upon her feet, he held her close, kissing her soundly. "I will await your command, my lady."

"Let me see to my children, and then I will command you." She grinned. "You will bend to *my* will, I've no doubt."

Merrik's laughter followed her into the chamber where Drayven and Mykal slept. They had just awakened from a nap and were still a little cranky, but when they saw their mother, both babes let out a yell. Tambre smiled as tears ran down her cheeks. She gathered both boys into her arms and held them for the longest time. Neither seemed to mind much, and lay their heads

upon her breasts as she rocked them against her, humming.

Merrik stood by the door and watched his wife with their children. They posed a beautiful picture, and he smiled for the elation he felt in his heart. He had been given a second chance for happiness, and he knew that he would make each moment count from now on. He winked at his wife when she gave him a smile, and walked over to her side. He crouched down in front of her and laughed when Drayven reached out for him. He cuddled the babe in his strong arms as he kissed the other that refused to move from his mother's hold.

"I love you, Merrik. You have given me two of the most beautiful children, and I thank you for them."

"It was my pleasure, and I look forward to many more." His teasing tone made her grin widen as he leaned down to kiss her. "I love you. More than you will ever know."

"Merrik, I will love you forever."

Chapter Forty-One

Merrik leaned against the door jam of his bed chamber and watched his wife sleep. They had just made love, and he had to smile at how quickly sleep had taken her hand. She tuned to lie on her back, and his smile deepened with the swell of her belly. At eight months along, she was not nearly as large as she had been with the other two babes, so he figured that her womb held one child this time. She was so lovely, his wife, and he thanked God every day for her.

Love welled in his heart to overflowing, for he knew that a love such as this was rare indeed. Most men would take mistresses to sedate the boredom of the marriage bed, but the thought had never crossed his mind. He did not need a mistress to liven up the life in his bed, or otherwise. Tambre was often more than he could handle on any account, and every day spent with her was an adventure. He smiled again as he shut the door quietly behind him, making his way down the stairs to the great hall.

Kollif saw Merrik coming down the stairs and smiled a greeting his way. "I was wondering if you were to stay abed all day."

Merrik grinned and sat down at the table as he rubbed his eyes. "She wears me out. Her energy has been great these past couple of days, and I fear that she will harm herself if she does not slow down a bit."

"Have no fear, my friend. She is being watched closely. I have a suspicion that her time is at hand, and she will deliver a new babe to you any day."

Merrik nodded. "I feel the same. But she is insistent upon doing the most unusual things. Yesterday I caught her trying to go for a ride on Majesty, and the day before that, she was headed to the jousting field with her sword." He shook his head. "I can barely contain her in one place for more than a few moments." He sighed, and then grunted as Tristan placed a tankard of wine in front of him. Nodding his thanks, he drank deeply of the sweet liquid, thinking of his wife's lips and how she had given him such immense pleasure an hour before.

Kollif grinned devilishly at the comment. "I bet you could think of a few things to occupy her mind, and wile away the time, my friend. 'Tis how she got in the condition she is in now, I would warrant!"

Merrik grinned, and nodded. "I think myself lucky that I have a wife to moan about. The near misses we all have been through the last several months have drained me of my sanity as well as my reserve to beat the woman within an inch of her life. She is forever putting herself in danger's way, and I don't believe that I could stop her from doing what she really wants to do any more than either one of you could. Her will is as strong as her heart's desire to do me harm, more often than not."

Kollif and Tristan grinned at Merrik's weebegone look. They both knew how headstrong Tambre was, but they also knew how much her husband loved and worshiped her.

"What say you to a ride this morn?" Tristan stood and set his empty tankard on the table top. "It would clear your head and give you a new hope on how to deal with my sister this day."

Merrik nodded and stood as well. "I think it is a grand idea. Tambre will most likely be abed until mid morn, so that should leave us with a couple of hours to ride."

Kollif followed the two outdoors and to the stables to ready their mounts.

Tambre delivered another son to Merrik three weeks later. He came into the world with a shock of blonde hair, and yelling loudly his fury. His proud father had named him Chance, and thanked God for his wife and his children. Drayven and Mykal had their first meeting with their new brother the next day, and both babes giggled in glee with the new addition to the family.

Tambre's parents came to stay at Farlynn to help with the children, and decided that while they lived too far away, a new castle would be built within a mile of their daughter's home so that time spent with their grandchildren would not be such a far journey. Derrik and Tristan would hold Lockbourne and make it their home in which to bring their own wives. If they ever did decide to marry. Elwain worried that his daughter would be the only one of their children to give them any grandchildren, and he knew that with her lusty husband he would have many more to bounce upon his knees in the future!

The battle for Scotland's independence became a full blown reality finally, and Merrik held his wife as she sobbed her tears of joy. It had been such a long battle, one that would never be forgotten, and he knew that Sir William Wallace would forever be mentioned upon the lips of

his kinsmen as a true hero to their country.

And as Merrik kissed his wife one night, thinking of all the horror they had been through over the past year, he was glad that their lives were returning to a semblance of normalcy. Or so he thought.

Three Weeks Later...

Tambre placed a hand to her heart as she thundered across the valley that surrounded Farlynn. If Merrik knew of her plans, he would surely lock her in the tower as he had threatened to many times in the past! Sneaking a peek over her shoulder, she knew that not a soul followed her. This time. Just a little further and she would be in the sights of her brothers, who awaited her over the next hill.

Majesty's hooves rang loudly in the morning quiet, and she leaned over his neck as she dug her heels into his ribs to urge the animal on. Spotting one of her brothers waving an arm over his head, she veered her mount to the right and slowed him down as they got closer to the men who awaited her arrival.

"You are late. We were worried!" Derrick's smile was tight, and the fear upon his face was evident.

"I am here now, so let us be on our way. I wish this deed done and over with for all our sakes." She looked around her and saw Tristan and Galwain in the clearing to her right. "Let us be gone from here before my husband realizes that I have taken flight."

They rode on to the north, meeting up with Kollif and twenty of his men along the way.

"How many?" She had to shout to be heard over the pounding of the hooves.

"I have one hundred surrounding the keep. But worry not. They are well hidden, and some have even gained entry into the fortress. Our plan is going well." Kollif turned his laughing jade eyes in her direction. "Your redemption is at hand, lass!"

Tambre threw back her head, and laughed outright. "As we knew it would be. Now all

that is left is the piper playing his tune of death.”

“We have one of those pipers, lass. He awaits a few hundred yards away, and lingers for our signal. ‘Tis as you have said. We will scream our victory to the glens that are our homeland of Scotland. I can almost taste it!”

“Taste the sweetness after we have had our victory, Kollif! It will be ours soon enough. I promise.” Touching her heels into the sides of her mount, she took the lead and came closer to the one man whom death would greet with open arms: The Baron John Monteith!

Taking a sip of his wine, John Monteith viewed the other man over the rim of his tankard. He terribly disliked the scoundrel, but being that he was part of The Group, there was little he could do about the situation at the moment. He was in the process of having the man blackballed from the organization, and could only hope that it would be soon.

“I assure you, Baron, that all has been arranged. Even though there seems to be a halt in the English overtake, I would not foresee that lasting for very long.” Reginald shook his head and drew his brows down suddenly. “King Edward’s son has quite a bit to learn.”

So do you, my man. The Baron inclined his head but remained quiet, keeping his distaste to himself. Even though this man’s opinions were a mirror of his own, that certainly did not mean that he had to wholeheartedly agree with him.

“It is out of our hands for now, but I tell you that I still have one score to settle before all of this is said and done.” Reginald set down his tankard, sporting a grin at the other man. “Tambre of Lockbourne will know she is being dealt with accordingly!”

“I would think about that, my man.” The Baron ran his index finger along his upper lip, smoothing down his mustache. “She is a favorite of Robert the Bruce, and I would not want the wrath of that one upon my brow.” Things were a lot different now that King Edward had passed. The new young king that had stepped into place did not have the obvious knowledge that his father had. Edward’s tactics were ones that most would not gainsay. Except for a choice few who had held such a rebellion against England. And now, the Scots who had originally been in favor of the English were now in favor of Robert the Bruce. He sighed.

"I do not fret for one man who is hardly around these parts. I would wager that it is not he himself that is feared, but those who have the brawn who follow him, issuing the influence of his name. They wield their swords to defend his hide. It is never the actual man." Reginald laughed. "Why, if the man were here right now, he would be shaking in his boots!"

"Would you care to wager upon that, Reginald?" Tambre stepped from behind a hidden panel in the enormous library and made her way toward both men on silent feet. She grinned. "Two birds with one stone! 'Tis my good luck." She held her sword with a steady hand and nearly laughed out loud at the hilarity of the situation. Both men looked as if they had seen a ghost, their wide-eyed stares and alarmed looks filling her with a true gratification.

Reginald found his voice first as he stood, and then sputtered, "W-what are you doing here?" His face had turned a nasty ashen hue.

She shook her head and waved her sword in front of him, a sure indication to sit down and be silent. "I had come here in hopes to learn of your whereabouts, but, alas, you have fallen directly into my lap. So there is no need to go any further in my search. The two vermin I seek are here."

"What is the meaning of this? How did you gain access to my keep?" The Baron's eyes nearly bulged out of his head as he slid a hand into his jacket pocket.

"Remove your hand, Baron, or I shall have to call in my men." Her sapphire eyes narrowed as she made a menacing step forward.

"I demand--"

"You are in no position for demands, my man!" The deep rumbling voice of Robert the Bruce sounded then, and he nodded toward Tambre as he stepped by her side. "Lass, I heard that you were in need of assistance. Was that statement true to your plight?" His lopsided grin made her smile.

"I would think that I could handle the two parasites on my own, but assistance is always welcome, my lord, as I have told you all along." There was humor in her voice as she placed the tip of her sword into the wool carpet of crimson at her feet. "Of course, it goes without saying that I am glad you are here."

She looked at Reginald with raised brows as a frown marred her face. "'Tis that man there," she emphasized Reginald by pointing her sword tip in his direction, "that once told me,

long ago, that he was the one who had turned in my sweet William to the English dogs.” Her eyes narrowed to mere slits then. “And I promised you then that your life would be forfeit, Reginald.”

Robert grunted as he drew his own sword then. “I shall let you have that one then, lass.” His eyes turned to the Baron and he smirked. “But this one has caused me grief beyond mere annoyance. I would have this one. Besides the fact that it was he who had turned you over to the English king the first time, I know that your hand itches to slide your blade into his chest. But I request this one repast, if I may. I would do the deed myself.”

“If you must, you must.” She looked over at Robert, and smiled. “However, I shall let you know beforehand that this will not take overly long. Reginald’s demise will be a quick one.”

“But I am unarmed!” Reginald’s whining voice grated along her nerves.

“William was unarmed as well. It would seem that the results would be the same as his passing.” She clicked her tongue. “However, your passing will be quick where his lingered on and on.”

“You will regret this, Tambre!”

“I will regret nothing! I saw what they did to William! I was there, remember? I saw it all.” She narrowed her eyes at his as they spit out the blue blaze of her fury. “I will place your head upon a pike for all to see and know that you betrayed your own country. You dog! Killing you will be my pleasure!”

She lunged forward suddenly, and caught Reginald in the throat with her sharp blade. His eyes bulged in his surprise, and she withdrew the blade, arching it over her head, and cleanly sliced the head from his body before he went limp and fell to the carpeted floor. She wiped the blood splatters from her face with the cuff of her tunic sleeve as she grabbed up the dismembered head by the hair and headed outside, throwing over her shoulder as she went, “I expect you will follow shortly, Robert?”

“Aye, lass! Right behind you!”

Tambre smiled at Robert and hugged the man. Stepping back, they both turned their

gazes to the two heads that topped the ends of tall pikes which had been erected by the front drawbridge of the Baron's keep. Under each head was a crudely written plaque that bore a single word on each: Traitor.

"I think William would have been very proud of you had he lived through this entire mess." Robert dropped his gaze to the woman beside him and smiled lightly. "He was very fond of you."

"Aye, and I was very fond of him. I loved him like he was my own brother." She sighed and turned toward the other man, placing her hands upon her hips. "I often wonder how things would have turned out had he survived. Would he have lived a life of misery in the gallows, or would they have released him?"

"I do not think that they would have let him live either way." Robert pulled out a soft piece of linen and tried to wipe away the dried blood spots from her face. "You were vicious in there, you know." His voice held humor and his eyes sparkled with mischief. "The new landowners will have a mess to clean off the floor before they move in."

"I did no more than what their actions were toward me and mine. And even you had a taste of their deceit. I think you should take this holding, Robert. 'Tis close to the English border, and it is a tight fortress, to be true. With the natural bog around the perimeter of this place, it would be a holding worth keeping for yourself." She grasped his hand then and stilled his gentle ministrations. "My thanks to you for what you have done for me, and for our country. You are a great man, Robert de Bruce, and I am proud to call you friend."

Robert grinned. "Why, what a complement. I do not believe that anyone had ever said such nice things to me before." His look became serious then. "You know, your husband's cousin has come to my rescue quite often. His keep holds the roughest of my followers, and I was glad for his backing. He certainly lives up to being known as the *Black Douglas*. Death and destruction have followed in his wake for over a year now, with good reason, mind you. Mayhap things will settle down for all of us to enjoy our families for a time."

He turned back to the castle and nodded his head. "I think you are correct in your way of thinking. I believe I shall keep this holding for myself. My wife will love this place!"

"Tambre!"

At the bellowing of alarm from across the bailey, both Tambre and Robert turned to see a

virtual army heading in their direction. Not seeing the banners of the clan who rode forth at such a great speed, they immediately drew their swords in defense.

"Get you inside the bailey!" Robert shouted as he headed toward his destrier a short distance away.

"Nay! I ride with you, my lord!" She whistled shrilly for Majesty, who appeared from the inner bailey and clomped across the drawbridge at a high rate of speed. He skidded to a stop before his mistress and bowed down for her to gain his back. He snorted loudly and shook his head, smelling the danger closing in. She grasped his reins tightly in her left hand and held her sword steady within the other, waiting for the onslaught.

Robert came to her side upon his own mount and nodded at her grimly before looking at the men who gathered around them to defend the keep. Kicking his heels into his destrier's side, the animal leapt forward, with Majesty following close behind.

Tambre heard shouts behind her but she paid them no heed. She pushed her mount on faster until she was neck and neck with Robert's. Onward they went, shouting their own cries of revenge. Until the blue banner was pulled upright to flap in the breeze. The blue banner with the dark green castle crest in the center. Merrik!

"Robert! Nay! 'Tis Merrik!" She pulled hard upon Majesty's reins and turned him in the direction she had just come from, racing against the wind. Robert caught up to her easily and smiled over at her as both raced toward the keep. And to the safety of her own hide.

"He is angry, do you suppose?"

Tambre snorted loudly, and shook her head. "I saw the fire shooting from his eyes under the helmet he wears upon his head! It does not bode well for my ass, I assure you!"

Robert's shout of laughter brought a smile to her face.

"We must hurry and pull the drawbridge to bar his entry! At least until he calms himself!"

Robert nodded and shouted the orders as they neared the gate tower. As soon as they crossed over the bridge, the sounds of the cranking chains reverberated throughout the bailey. Both turned in surprise, however, as a single rider was able to jump onto the bridge before it had fully closed. That rider was Merrik, and he was not pleased!

Merrik thrust the helmet from his head, and threw it upon the ground as he leapt from his

destrier's back.

“Tambre!”

Chapter Forty-Three

Tambre blanched and jumped from her destrier's back in an urgency to find a safe place to hide. Trying to make it up the steps before Merrik got to her was a feat in itself as her legs seemed not to want to move in the direction she ordered them to go. Finally gaining the last step, she felt his hot breath upon her neck and then felt the hard stone stoop as it met her shoulder. He had tackled her!

She let out a rush of air from her lungs as Merrik moved his weight slightly off of her form. She squirmed unmercifully under him, and even threw out several curses as he tried to gain control of her wiggling body. She would fight to the end, he could tell, and he made a move to capture both of her arms behind her back as she lay on her belly underneath him.

"Cease this, woman!" His words rang loud over the bailey, and he could hear male laughter in the background. He would deal with that later. Right now he was about to beat his lovely wife's ass black and blue. When the first crack landed upon her soft backside, she howled in pain, and her struggles became tenfold. Obviously he had made a wrong choice in this venture to contain her.

Twisting around to lie on her back, Tambre tried to swing out her fist, to hit anything that she could. She cursed as he caught one flailing hand, and then the other easily within the iron grip of his right hand. She ventured a look up into his face, and ceased her struggles. He was laughing!

"Merrik, what are you about? Why are you here?" She relaxed a little as she laid her head upon the hard stone underneath her, and gazed into his pale emerald eyes. She admired his handsome features that showed his dimples to perfection as she felt the familiar delicious warming in her lower belly, the stirrings of a heated desire she yearned to grasp.

"I should beat your ass for this, woman! I told you not to venture out on your own. Ever! And you defy me time and again. What am I to do with you?"

Tambre grinned then as the saucy little smile curved her lips upward. "I could think of far better things than this to keep me occupied, my lord. You should let your imagination carry you away with the same delicious images that I myself hold."

Merrik threw back his head and roared with laughter. "I can only imagine what that wicked mind holds!"

"Wicked, aye, but 'tis a wicked you will enjoy, my lord. Of that I can assure you." She placed her hands behind her head and stared up at him with a grin lighting her features. "Lock me in your tower, my lord, I beg of you. Keep me there for an eternity!" She laced her arms around his neck then, and pulled him down to her face.

"For I give you my true and honest word that this is my last venture. I have completed what I had set out to do, and now I am done. My revenge is sated. I am releasing the fighting to the men from now on, and will not say you nay on anything that you should set before me. I love you, Merrik, and I want to be your wife, and a mother to my children. I want to have a dozen more babes, and I want to start...right...now."

As her velvety tongue touched his own, Merrik knew he had never tasted anything sweeter. Her lips were like honey, and he felt the longing enter his body full force as she deepened the kiss. He picked her up in his strong arms and entered the castle's main door among loud cheers from those who had stood outside and witnessed the whole deed. Going above to the second floor, he was able to find a bed chamber and lay his wife gently upon a rich velvet coverlet of royal blue. As he went to close the door and to soundly throw the lock into place, a roguish grin lit his handsome face as he pulled the tunic over his head.

Tambre raised her brows and smiled at his very detailed physique. A growl resounded in her throat as she sat up on the bed and pulled her own tunic off, tossing it carelessly upon the floor. Her nipples hardened when she felt his gaze upon her flesh as if he had actually touched her. Pulling off her boots and then her woolen hose, she balanced herself upon her knees at the edge of the bed, waiting until he wrapped his strong arms around her waist before she left the events of this day behind. She wanted only images of him to fill her mind, to fill her, and felt herself become wet with the delicious seduction she had planned for him this time!

He heard her soft murmurs and teasing words skip through his mind as he felt her fingertips brush over his chest tenderly. She left a trail of white hot kisses in her wake as she laved her velvety tongue over his chest and midsection, taking tantalizing nibbles with her teeth as she went. She slid her hands into the waist of his hose and grasped his hardness with a firm hand, stroking him as she pushed the bothersome material out of her way.

She looked up at him with passion filled eyes, and then dipped her head to take his throbbing member into her mouth where her tongue stroked over him sensually. He moaned her name as he delved his hands into her hair and tilted his head back, letting the feelings of this most welcomed act overtake him completely.

Sucking softly and allowing her tongue to play over the smooth skin of his hardness, Tambre moaned her own desire as she felt him grow larger in her mouth. She loved to give him the sensation of this hot yearning, to feel him nearly burst with his need of her, and only then did she give him what he truly craved. She straightened herself and settled over him, rubbing her velvety heat over his length, aided by her wet desire for him. Her whimpers of longing mingled with his own as she plunged her tongue into his mouth and delivered him a rich kiss, like the sweetest of wine, to intoxicate his mind and his soul.

Pushing her back onto the soft bed, Merrik parted her thighs and slid smoothly into her heat, feeling the ripples of her wet flesh encase him tightly. He groaned as if in pain, a pain that filled his body with want of more, the delicious feelings consuming him whole. With each thrust, he felt her hips rise to meet his own, her hands grasping his buttocks, pulling him further into herself as she lifted her legs to curl enticingly about his waist. He ground into her, felt her release pulse over his entire length as her moans of heightened passion subdued over her body with the intensity of sheer unabashed lust finally spent. He continued his thrusts, reaching his peak within a matter of moments, only to spill every ounce of love he had for her into the invisible hands that would nurture his seed and deliver unto her a gift of his undying love.

She felt his powerful release as it pumped inside her, filling her with the welcoming love he had so desperately wanted her to have. Reaching up to smooth back the hair from his brow, she smiled at him and tenderly rotated her hips in a circular motion, gently squeezing around him. Her heart ached at the tender kisses he placed upon her neck and along her jaw line. Then he rose upon his elbows, gazing into her soul, it seemed, nearly taking her breath away.

"Tambre, you tempt me beyond logical reason." His breath was labored still, and he laid his forehead next to hers. "I came here to beat your lovely ass for disobedience and I end up loving you instead."

Her laugh was low and throaty, seductive. "Ah, and beating me will only warrant you more of the same. You know I will enjoy it too much." She grinned at him as she ran her

fingertips over the deep dimples that had appeared upon his cheeks. “So, beat me...and then love me well, Merrik, for I will forever hold you next to my heart. I will never deny you access to the love I embrace for you.”

Merrik grinned at her sensual words and knew that within minutes she would be flipping him upon his back to deliver him another show of her rebellious nature, one that he was want to hold to him forever.

As things started to ease into their normal state once again, Merrik knew that his wife was no longer in danger, so he allowed her a bit more freedom to roam the lands around his holdings. She would take out their children nearly every day and teach them things about the forest and trees and how to survive in the outdoors. He was very proud of her for teaching their children the heritage of their births. He knew that each one of his sons would grow to become great warriors in their own respect, and knew they would fight for the continued freedom of their country.

And Merrik knew he would never tire of this life with her. She would bring to him more love than he could ever imagine, knowing that each day spent with her, his love for her grew.

She was a part of his soul and would forever hold the love he felt for her in the palm of her hands. She was his true desire for life, his one passion's hunger, and he would love her like no other man had ever loved his own wife.

He promised this to her each day, knowing that what he felt would last a lifetime. Knowing it would last forever.

The End