

*To win the Heart of
a Warrior, a Lass
must have Valor...*



Lass' PITH TRILOGY BOOK THREE Valor

KARA GRIFFIN

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The Pith Trilogy - Book Three

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DEDICATION

This story is dedicated to those who make it their goal to protect children no matter what the cost. And to Trixie for 19 years of love and friendship.

In men of the highest character and noblest genius, there is to be found an insatiable desire for honor, command, power, and glory. ~Cicero

LASS' VALOR

The Pith Trilogy - Book Three

Kaitlin Stanhope learns of her father's death delivered with a strange medallion and a cryptic message. He warns, *beware the friend with the black heart*. Wrenched from her beloved home, she's sent to live with her vile guardian. Escaping his clutches, she embarks on a dangerous mission, one that could mean the death of both her and the child she rescues. A believer in the ancient ways, Kaitlin has a vision of a warrior which brings comfort and many questions.

Brendan MacKinnon, the protector of his clan and doting uncle, is devastated when his niece goes missing. His mission is to find her however long it takes. When he comes across Kaitlin, the violet-eyed fairy enchants him. The woman risked everything to save his niece's life, and courageously she stands up to his obstinate nature.

How can the LASS' VALOR not touch his heart? Yet is it enough to win him over to the idea of a happily ever after?

PROLOGUE

Whitehall Castle, England
June 1221

“Hell, I’m caught.” The edge of Henry’s golden threaded gray cape caught the bottom of a lance held by a vacant suit of armor that stood sentry beside the wall. He sighed woefully and yanked his cape free, rattling the armor, and hurried on. His official crowning as king was delayed until he reached his majority. At six and ten, he wasn’t old enough to sit on the throne, and the regency ruled the kingdom. Steven Langton and Pope Innocent influenced Hugh de Burg—the highest regent. Hugh complied with their demands lest he sent the country into an uproar again with the church. England couldn’t risk excommunication again. Clergymen had recently accepted the edict was lifted and returned. England came into the church’s good graces just before his father, King John, had died.

Henry put aside his thoughts of England’s turmoil as he turned the corner of the hallway. He was beside himself because his beloved cousin, Julianna MacKinnon, had come for a visit. Henry met her in his father’s court when he’d turned nine. She lived in Scotland, but they kept in contact through letters.

He’d just received word of her arrival and was restless for her visit. Julianna came with her husband, Colin MacKinnon, a powerful Highland laird, and their daughter, Bonnie. Bonnie just turned seven-winters old. Henry loved the little girl more than anything. Even when she poured milk on his chair on purpose, all she had to do was pout with her innocent eyes and say it was an accident. Who was he to dispute it? He chuckled—he being the unofficial King of England.

Sweet, sweet Bonnie. The adorable girl looked like her mother with her light-colored hair and bright blue eyes. Who would ever think she’d do something so wicked? Alas, the truth was—the little lady was a hellion. She made him smile with her endearing antics. It had been a year and a half since he’d visited them, so he’d sent a summons for them to come during his summer retreat. He laughed aloud at that because his cousin wasn’t one to abide his summons, nor his father’s when he’d been alive.

Now that Julianna was here, he would discuss the lands held in her name, which became the heated debate among his council. Henry spent most of the morning cloistered with several lords, all spoke on their behalf for the grant of those lands. The most arrogant lord, Richard de Morris, insisted he be given the property bordering his, but Henry wanted to speak to Julianna before he allowed the Regent’s proceedings.

He scurried down the hall and rapped at the door. Colin MacKinnon opened the door and scowled. Highlanders were an ornery bunch.

“Colin, you’re here at last.” Henry strode past him. “Where’s my sweet, lovely lady?”

Julianna held out her arms, but he bypassed her. He didn't stop until he reached his dear-heart. Henry lifted Bonnie in his arms and threw her high in the air. She squealed when she landed against his chest, and he placed a loving kiss on her baby-soft cheek.

"Sweeten, give me a hug."

Bonnie wrapped her hands around his neck and giggled in delight. "I missed you, Honey."

Her nickname broadened his grin. Henry nodded to Julianna. "Greetings."

"You finally welcome us, Henry. We shouldn't have bothered to come, Colin, we should've just sent Bonnie for a visit." Julianna laughed heartily.

Henry smiled in his roguish way, much like his father had. Even though he dressed in regal flamboyant fabrics, the trend of the courtiers, he tried to be cordial. He continued to hold Bonnie and gave her another hug.

"I'm glad you're here, Julianna, and you too, Colin, but I've missed this little minx. Have you behaved, sweeten?"

"Oh, aye, Honey, I've been a good lass. Papa hasn't punished me since yesterday." Bonnie's innocent tone told him she must've caused trouble on the journey.

"What did you do to warrant punishment?" He smiled then frowned at her father. "Colin, you're being too harsh on the poor little mite."

"Poor little mite! She knotted my horse's reins so badly, I had to remove them and get a new harness, but I can't stay angry with her. Look at her innocent face, she's my bonny button." Colin's affection softened his usual gruff manner.

"Perhaps 'tis a good idea to be strict. How are you, Julianna? Are you well since delivering Colin his son?" Henry took a whiff of Bonnie's sweet scent.

"Aye, I'm well. Kevin is well, and safely at home. He's too young to travel yet. I had to beg Colin to let Bonnie come. He doesn't want our children away from our home, and it was bad enough traveling with..." Julianna ceased her ramble when Bonnie's attention perked.

Henry squeezed Bonnie and laughed. "It's good to see you, all of you. My heart is pleased at your happiness, Julianna. Father would have been fond of your children."

"You're well? All goes well in your kingdom, Henry?" Julianna asked.

"Hugh rarely advises me on the happenings, but there are ways to enforce my rule. I don't worry too much about it yet. Now, I have a surprise for you, we've invited many to a tourney, even those Scots you favor, Colin. I must settle a betrothal contract for a woman whose father died in the holy lands and I'm considering Angus Barclay. What do you know of him?"

"Only that he's a rough sort and causes a bit of mischief among the nearby clans."

Henry sighed because he didn't want to place the woman in a bad situation. Her father was a great noble. "Is Angus honorable, there's rumor of his clan's raids on the borders?"

Colin nodded. "As honorable as any other. I'm not aware of his activities."

"Well, we shall attend the parties and games and I'll assess this Angus Barclay for myself and decide whether to gift him with the lady later. I want you to enjoy yourself whilst you are here. How long do you plan to stay?"

"I thought we would stay a fortnight." Colin stood beside Julianna and took her hand.

"Then we shall have a long visit. I'll sit with you at supper. We must speak of your mother's

lands, Julianna. Hugh wants to gift them to a knight in his service, but we can discuss it later. Get rest from your travel.” Henry left, elated his family arrived.

The next day, the castle filled with fanfare as Henry’s summer festival began. Bonnie stood by her nurse and gawked at the boisterous activity. A group of men played beautiful melodies, their chairs cascaded the steps that swept the palace’s lawn. Everyone hurried outside because the weather was sunny and warm. Trumpeters sounded in the distance and declared Henry’s arrival at an event. Games were played on the expanse of the lawn, and an archery contest held in the lower courtyard drew crowds of spectators. Knights placed their names on the lists for the event of the day, the joust. Their shiny armor reflected the sun and sent blinding streaks toward the onlookers.

Bonnie couldn’t contain her glee as arrows flew through the air. She ran off, and in her excitement, she forgot her nurse. Her attendant, Emma, couldn’t keep up with her. Emma held her skirts and chased after her all morning.

She pulled Bonnie along and held fast to her arm. “Now you’re in for it. If I can’t get you to listen to me, I’m sure your laird father will.”

“Pray, Emma, don’t tell Papa on me.”

“You haven’t listened once this morn, wee lass. I’ve chased after you eight times, no more. You’ll answer to your papa now,” Emma chided and gave her a ‘you’re-in-trouble-now’ scowl.

Her plea hadn’t worked. Papa would be disappointed. Emma tugged her along, and she tried to pry her arm free. They reached the tent where she was pulled inside. When they entered, Bonnie snickered because Papa kissed Mama. She hoped Papa was in a good mood, he usually was after kissing Mama. He turned to give her a warning glance.

Mama strode to her and knelt. “Bonnie, listen to your papa, now give me a kiss.”

Bonnie kissed Mama’s soft cheek, and she waved goodbye as Mama exited the tent. Emma, in the meantime, regaled the tale to Papa. Bonnie fiddled with her tartan and waited for his attention.

“Papa,” she called.

“Don’t Papa me, lass. Emma says you keep running off. You’re supposed to stay with her for your safety. What do you have to say for yourself?”

She was glad they weren’t home, because she would surely be put in Papa’s chair. The chair was uncomfortable, and she didn’t like sitting on it because there was nothing to do but wait until Papa said she was punished enough.

“Aye, Papa, I know och...” Bonnie didn’t finish giving her excuse, because Papa frowned and she didn’t like it when he frowned.

Bonnie lowered her eyes, gave her sweet little pout, and tried her hardest to mellow him. She hoped it would make him forget her punishment. Papa looked as though he wanted to laugh, but he didn’t. His melodic voice was soft, but he wasn’t pleased.

“I will have to punish you, lass. Where is that bloody chair when you need it? You’ll stay inside the tent for an hour. Give poor Emma a wee break, take a rest, Button.”

“Aye, Papa, I’ll rest, but I want to see the people on the sticks.”

“Sticks? Oh, you mean the stilt walkers.” Bonnie nodded. “All right, I’ll take you myself if you

pledge that you'll behave and rest for an hour."

"Really, Papa, you'll take me?"

Papa lifted her. She always liked when Papa picked her up and held her in his strong arms. His familiar scent and love in his eyes comforted her. Even though she was about to be punished, she hugged him.

"Aye, now give me your pledge."

Bonnie smiled with her face against his neck and took a whiff of his scent. He always smelled good. "I give my pledge, Papa."

"Pledge what, Button?"

Papa always made her repeat her punishment and promises, something he'd learned the hard way—he'd told her. He hid his smile because she reminded him of her mother, or so he'd said many times. She smiled widely and had no choice but to obey.

"I'm supposed to rest and give poor Emma a wee break."

"That's right, lass. Give me a kiss and I'll come back for you later."

Bonnie lifted her head and gave him a wet kiss on his rough cheek. Papa set her down, and she scrambled to the pallet. She placed her head on the tartan atop a pile of coverings, and as was her habit, she pulled nubs of lint from her cover and rubbed them on her face. Papa smiled at her action and soon after, he left the tent.

The tent grew hot and Bonnie grew restless awaiting Emma. Her nurse nodded off and snored loudly. She snickered in laughter at the sound. Bonnie looked across the tent but wasn't at all tired. An idea came and she slunk to the tent's flap and peeked outside. People walked around, and she heard laughter from across the grounds. Excitement called and not one to wait, she slipped through the opening.

Bonnie gawked as she skipped along. She looked everywhere at once and didn't notice the man who followed closely. A row of high green yew shrubs blocked her view of the tournament. She rounded the corner of a hedge when a man yanked her from the grass. At first, she thought it was Papa and she turned to him. Only it wasn't Papa. The man's hand clamped over her mouth when she tried to scream. She kicked and squirmed to no avail. The man ran and jostled her. He almost dropped her as he ran to his tethered horse and settled her across his lap.

"Be quiet and I won't hurt ye."

Bonnie was scared, butterflies fluttered in her tummy. She couldn't get free from the man's grip and twisted as the view of the castle drew away. Tears streamed from her fear-stricken eyes and she whimpered against the hand that covered her mouth. How she wished she listened to Papa and stayed in the tent with Emma. Papa would be angry when he returned and found her gone.

CHAPTER ONE

Cheshire, England

July 1221

Bright wildflowers speckled the green fields that lay beyond Kaitlin Stanhope's home. Fifty men-at-arms protected the small fief, but the modest home didn't attract attention by passing knights. Twelve flags flew, bearing the family's coat of arms and that of its overlord, Aldwyn de Guylet's insignia. Cheshire's brilliant sunshine made for a glorious day. Various makeshift tents nestled between trees, where a caravan of travelers occupied the land with Kate's permission. With her father gone, she allowed the nomads to camp on her land, because none would gainsay her.

She stepped around a group of acrobats who practiced for the night's performance. Variegated meals cooked on open pots and caldrons and filled the air with enticing aromas which caused her stomach to grumble. An animal performer, with his head wrapped in a white cloth, pulled the rope tied to an enormous bird. She'd never seen such a creature with its overlong neck and broad beak. The performer offered to let the children ride on the bird's feathered back. She'd been told the animal was an ostrich and came from a faraway land in the east. Kate witnessed many unusual sights in the village, but nothing compared to the animals the visitors brought. The bright hues of the tent she sought came into view and she hurried inside.

"Madam Serena? Madam, are you here?" Kate pulled aside a fashioned curtain inside the tent and entered the personal area of her longtime friend. The scents of rosemary and incense drifted throughout the confines.

"Darling, I'm glad you're here. Come, sit, Kate." Madam Serena waved her hand over a table laden with the tools of her trade: cauldrons, spheres, daggers, sand, candles, and herbs. She even used cards with pictures depicting kings, queens, knights, jesters, and such, in determining the lives who sought her wise guidance.

Kate smiled at the aged woman. "I've seen the vision again."

Madam smiled in return and placed a clear sphere on the table. "It does my heart good the spirits use ye. My old Gaelic Grandma used to say that about me." Madam Serena cackled. "Speak of your vision, darling, while I look at my ball. Mayhap I can answer you this time."

"The dark-haired warrior floated like a ghost in the night, Madam, but I wasn't afraid. He frowned at me, yet I sensed he tried to tell me something. Do you think this has to do with my father?"

Madam shook her head. "Ah, it's a sign from the spirits, but alas, it's not about your father. Go on, continue."

Kate nodded. "I couldn't make him out, but he appeared to be a mighty warrior. His stance suggested he was fierce and strong. Yet, he comforted me. Will he reveal himself to me?"

Madam Serena's dark eyebrows furrowed. "Oh, dear, this is worrisome."

"What?" Kate sat forward. "What is it?"

"It involves a child. You will come across the warrior when ye meet the child."

"How will that happen?" Kate was confused. "There are no children here."

"You must tell me more." Madam pushed back the grayed locks of her hair, took a handful of wrinkled linen to reposition her garment, and leaned back.

"I sat in my circle and just placed my candles when the vision came. He has dark hair, dark as night, and light eyes, blue, or perhaps gray. He seemed unearthly. I sensed he wasn't pleased with me."

Serena's eyes twinkled. "This man will cause much grief, but don't despair for it's well-meant. Perhaps 'tis kismet. I sense nothing else about your vision, Kate."

"I don't understand why this vision comes, but I thank you for trying. It has plagued me for so long, since my father left. That is why I assumed the vision has to do with my father."

"All shall be revealed when ye meet the child. Have you heard any news about your father?"

Kate sighed with despair. "Nay, it's been four years now, and still, no word since his letter last year. I worry so. Can you see anything?"

Madam placed her hands above her eyes then glanced down into the glass sphere. After a few minutes of reflection, she spoke, "I sense doom. Evil lurks around your father's spirit. I am sorry, Kate, but I don't believe your father lives. He's been gone for a time."

"How did he die?"

Madam looked sadly at the globe. "Beware the friend with the black heart."

"What does that mean?"

"It, too, shall come to ye."

"Madam, you're being evasive. It's unlike you not to reveal the truth. Please, don't hold back. I can handle the truth."

"Greed is the motive. Your father won't return from the strange land."

Kate's lower lip trembled. "I have sensed that as well and shall miss him. We had a lovely last day together. I shall always remember it."

"Tell me about it."

"I had just put away my herbs when he came with news of the missive from Aldwyn. Our overlord requested he leave at once for the excursion to Egypt. He was to relieve the knights... He called me his fairy, and we talked about my marriage. I tried to tell him I didn't want to leave our home or him, but he wouldn't listen and made me promise to write to him with my choice. We both knew that I wouldn't."

Madam Serena looked at her with her dark eyes and smoothed Kate's flaxen hair with a touch of her hand. She sighed. "Kate, I shall not see ye again. You will embark on a somber mission, and I shan't be here when you return."

"Where are you going? What kind of mission will I go on?"

"Your questions shall be answered when ye meet the child, and you will know where to go. Your life will forever be changed. I shall miss ye, darling."

"I will miss you, too, Madam." Kate placed her hand upon Madam's wrinkled hand and

squeezed it. “Thank you for your guidance these past years. I learned much from you. You’ve been a wonderful teacher.”

“I packed a trunk full of objects. Take and use them.”

“Oh, Madam, your lovely things. I cannot, please, take them back.” She sensed sadness in Madam’s dark-brown eyes.

“You need the objects more than I.” Serena scratched her silver-streaked raven hair. “I am leaving the area to visit my brother.”

“But you never travel.”

“I fear my age won’t allow me to continue as I am. I will retire from advising these good people and shan’t return.”

“How will we ever get along without you?”

“They will survive, just as you will.” Madam stood. “Go now and remember all I have foretold. Here.” Madam handed her the small trunk.

Kate placed the trunk aside and hugged Madam. After, she picked up the trunk and rushed through the curtain. She glanced back at the tent in sadness she’d miss her dear friend, but Madam aged and needed rest. Her grandmother was Madam’s childhood friend, and she promised to show her the ways of their ancestors. She was glad Madam retired, but she seemed immortal to her and had enlightened people for years, even before Kate was born.

Kate reached the manor and ambled to her chamber. She placed the chest beside the door and lit a candle. Once she erected a circle in the center of the room, she readied for her morning ritual. She sat inside the circle and held a shiny golden goblet high—an offer to the Goddess. Candles sat around her, with four others outside the rope pointed to the cardinal directions: north, south, east, and west. She meditated with her eyes closed and concentrated on the silence with her cat curled into a ball beside her.

She hoped the vision would come again. It haunted her repeatedly since she’d turned four and ten. If Madam Serena’s prophecy came true, she would meet the warrior in the flesh. Yet, he didn’t come while she prayed.

Each morning, the same prayers and queries crossed her lips. She prayed her father would return and she would meet the warrior. She appealed to the gentle spirits to guide her in her choice of husband, yet she worried her guardian would select someone unsuitable. Her father said he would take her to court when he returned, but now that wouldn’t happen.

Kate receded deeper within herself and chanted the Celtic prayers taught to her by her mother, grandmother, and Madam Serena. After a time, she opened her eyes to find her beloved nurse by the door. Lolly’s frail figure was barely noticeable as thin as she was. She wore her silver hair knotted at the nape and those startling green eyes often reflected motherly adoration. Something was wrong, Kate sensed it, and upon closer inspection, Lolly’s face downcast.

“Lolly, what brings you here?”

“Good morn, my girl, I must speak with you, but if you’re busy, I shall return later.”

“Nay, you’re always welcome. Come inside and sit with me. You work too hard. I told you to have others see to the chores. We should take care of you.”

“Bah, I wouldn’t know what to do with myself. ‘Tis not fair tidings I bring. Manik returned with

news of your father.”

A sudden chill made Kate shiver. “Oh, dear, come and sit next to me, Lolly. I suppose he hasn’t brought good tidings.” She sat on her pallet and waited for Lolly to join her.

Lolly took her hand. “Dear sweet girl, I fear you’ll become distraught when I tell you—”

“My father is dead. Go on, tell me the news, I am prepared to hear it.”

Lolly took a deep breath. “Perhaps you should read the missives he gave to Manik, ere he died.” She opened a scroll written in Lord Hawk’s hand and read:

Dearest fairy, I’ve been on this excursion for years, yet I tire of fighting the heathens and destroying their homes. My heart is heavy. Death surrounds me, likewise, I fear for my own. We’ve made progress and moved our forces along the river. This morning, my regiment was chased by a score of soldiers into the jungle. I only tell you this because we retreated to a cave hidden behind strange-looking trees. We crawled on our knees into the cavern and once inside, we were able to stand. I lit a torch, but couldn’t see much. The walls were wet with slime and emitted a sulfuric smell.

Lolly stopped reading and looked at her.

“Oh, goodness, Lolly, that sounds horrible. Pray, continue.”

Creatures hung on the ceiling above us; red eyes glowed in the darkest part of the cave. All I could see was blackness. I’m sorry to say this, fairy, but I thought I entered hell for all the sins I have committed. We followed rugged corridors and didn’t know which direction to take. We went into the bowels of obscurity and stopped at a dead end. Worry not, but I received a wound on my leg. I leaned against the wall for support and knocked something loose. When I lifted the strange object, it gleamed in the torchlight. I didn’t have time to view it and shoved the object in my pouch.

Kate interrupted, “What do you think it was, Lolly?”

“Let me continue.” She lifted the parchment closer to her eyes.

A guard found a way for us to leave the cave. We crawled through a hole in the rock. When we reached the outside, we were in a jungle of sorts, not lush with green, but enough to give us cover. We ran back to camp and I had my leg tended to by the camp healer, and remembered the object. I pulled it from my pouch and studied it. It was a medallion with a strange spider-like symbol on the front. I flipped it over and found a smooth surface on the back. There was a hole on the back and I pried it open. Inside, I found a map with unusual writings and symbols, but I couldn’t read the heathen’s language. How fortunate am I to have found it? Your loving father, HS.

Kate stood and turned to Lolly. “What do you think the object is? Do you deem it caused my father’s death? What did Manik say?”

“Manik shall come to you after you read the letters. There is only one more. Shall I read it?”

“Aye, please.” Kate took her place again next to Lolly.

My sweet fairy, I write with such discontent. Richard de Morris, my comrade, became interested in my find. He has threatened to take the medallion. I should never have confided in him, and now I regret showing it to him. He has attached himself to finding it and claims we shall be rich men. I just want to return home to you, and don’t know what will happen. I refuse to give Richard the medallion. If anything should happen to me, Katie, I warn you. Beware the friend with the black heart. I hope to be home with you soon, HS.

Kate’s eyes widened. “Madam spoke those very words this morn. She said to beware the friend with the black heart. Richard must’ve killed my father for the medallion.”

“Mayhap. I’ll have Manik come. I loved Hawk like a son. He was a sweet lad. How I shall miss him. Will you be all right?”

“Aye, Lolly, I expected this news, and Madam’s visions confirmed my fears.”

“Did she tell ye he was dead?”

“Aye, she said there was evil afoot and many other things, but you know Madam. Lolly, she’s leaving, retiring to her brother’s.”

“Serena’s leaving? Oh, dear, I must go see her before she goes and bid farewell.”

As Lolly left, Manik entered the chamber. His manner was sullen.

He shook his dark-haired head when she stood. “Nay, My Lady, please sit. I must talk to you privately.”

Kate couldn’t sit. “Manik, I’m glad you made it home safely. Are you well?”

“Aye, I’m well. I’m sorry, My Lady, but your father is dead.”

Kate’s head lightened as she sat on the bed. “Papa is dead. I didn’t want to believe...”

“My Lady, he asked me to give you this.” Manik handed her a wrapped cloth.

She held it but kept her gaze to the floor. “How did he die?” Shock lodged its unemotional bearing inside her, and coldness sat in the pit of her stomach.

“Your father gave me the item and told me to hide it. I put it with my belongings, and when I returned, he was injured. He told me to go, but I didn’t want to leave him, My Lady, but he commanded me to,” his voice grew thick with emotion.

“Who killed him?” Kate looked at the cloth she held. She didn’t want to believe her dear papa was gone. It seemed unreal, as though she’d dreamt it.

“I know not, My Lady, the heathens came and a battle ensued outside the tent. Lord Hawk told me to tell you he loved you and then he yelled at me to leave. He was a good man, the Hawk.”

Kate saddened because he’d been fond of her father. “Manik, you were brave. I’m sure Father thought so, too. What does Lord Richard have to do with this?”

“When Lord Hawk returned from battle, I took his gear to clean it. The healer tended his leg, and I saw Lord Richard and my lord talking, they were heated. After Lord Richard left, Hawk ordered me to hide the object. When I returned, he lay dying.” His dark eyes glossed.

“Did you see Richard?”

“Nay. Hawk fought to stay alert, but the sound of soldiers’ shouts bore down on us. He bade me to leave, so I lifted the edge of the tent to escape. There was little I could do for him. Before I slipped out, I saw a large man enter the tent. I waited for the blow that would surely end my lord’s life, but I admit my fear, and I quickly left the tent. Look at the object. My lord said he wrote a message.”

Kate unwrapped the cloth and found the medallion, it looked old but lustrous. She turned it over and back again.

“My lord put the note inside, open it.”

Kate turned it over, took the dagger Manik held out to her, and pressed the tiny clasp, it clicked open. She removed the folded parchment and read it.

Beware the friend with the black heart. “Where was Lord Richard when this happened?” She didn’t trust Richard, not after her father’s words implied he’d wanted the medallion.

“I know not, when I returned, Hawk was alone.” Manik’s face turned bleak.

“We’ll have to keep this a secret until I can figure it out. Pray, don’t let on that I have it. I sense

evil afoot. I don't trust Richard."

"I shan't tell a soul, My Lady. I was unable to protect my lord. I'll never be able to..."

"It's not your fault, Manik, don't hold guilt. You're back with us and that's all that matters. My father wouldn't want you to hold yourself accountable."

"Thank you, My Lady, for your kindness." Manik opened the door and left.

Kate sat on the bed and stared at the medallion. She glanced at the note again and recognized her father's hand. Why wouldn't he tell her whom he referred to outright? Until she uncovered its importance, she would be wary.

Kate stood in stunned silence. Immediately upon his unexpected arrival, Richard de Morris handed her a missive which she read with furrowed brows.

Lady Stanhope, Regrettably your father is presumed dead. His tent was found burned to the ground and we could not locate his whereabouts. I will remain in Egypt for some time and give guardianship to my vassal, Lord Richard de Morris. On my return, I shall turn your father's lands over to your husband which the king has selected. His Grace betrothed you to a Scot, and your marriage will take place upon my return. Condolences, de Guylet.

Apparently, her betrothed wasn't knighted or titled and likely landless. The most astounding news was that he lived in Scotland. Her worst fear came true. She was betrothed to a man not worthy of her rank, but the king chose him so she hoped he was prosperous. With shaky hands, she rolled the missive and handed it back. She was forlorn but resisted the tears gathered in her eyes. If only she might flee the hall and retreat to her chamber. There, she'd soothe her restlessness and pray to the spirits.

"Lady Kaitlin, I'm sorry for your grief." Richard stood next to her and spoke with a gentle voice, "I cared for your father as much as you did. 'Tis sorrow for us all."

"Thank you, Lord Richard. I shall go to my chamber and pray for his soul." Kate turned to leave.

"Wait, ah, I regret not coming sooner. I've been home for several months but had business to attend and when the regent sent for me, I hadn't known Hawk was killed. This is dreadful. I should have stayed to protect him. Is there aught I can do to make you feel better?" Richard folded his hands behind him and walked beside her. "If I hadn't gone to Henry's court months ago, I would've been here to comfort you."

Kate sensed he wanted to say more, and he'd feigned concern for her father's death. His eyes gave him away; they didn't hold compassion, only coldness.

"I thank you for your concern, Lord Richard, but I must retire. Please, there's no need to account for yourself. I'm sure you would've protected my father were you there." She almost blanched at the untruth of those words. Kate needed to be alone, needed to think over what Richard told her, but most of all; she needed the comfort of the Goddess.

"Be ready to leave on the morrow."

"Why would I leave here?" She stopped at the steps.

"Aldwyn gave me guardianship and we shall travel to my home at once. You won't stay here alone...unprotected."

"I don't wish to leave my home. Surely, you'll allow me to stay until I wed, and then my husband will take over as lord here. Lord de Guylet stated the king selected my husband. I don't wish to be bothersome or cause you unnecessary hardship."

"I won't allow it, child. You will live with me until your overlord returns. I have written to Aldwyn and expressed the king's choice for your husband is unacceptable. He shall agree and select another. Your father wouldn't accept the arrangement, to a Scot of all men. The king is biased in his opinion of this man and your overlord will right this as soon as he returns."

Was that supposed to assuage Kate? She wasn't sure why he told her that, but she nodded.

"You shall pack your belongings and be ready to leave in the morn. I'll call Lolly to help." He told her nurse to ready for Kate's departure.

Kate's eyes filled with unshed tears. She didn't want to go with him and didn't trust the wretched man. Yet, she wouldn't disobey his command. Until her overlord returned, she would be at his mercy. She lowered her gaze and hid her repugnance.

"I wondered, Lady Kaitlin, did your father send you any keepsakes?"

"Keepsakes? Nay, My Lord."

"We found many treasures in Egypt. There were riches, and I thought... Nay?"

Kate eyed him warily and tried to sense if he was privy to the details of her father's death. Richard turned and was about to walk away when curiosity got the better of her.

"Treasures?"

Richard turned back, his face emotionless. "I thought mayhap he sent you something before he...died. I sent my wife gold necklaces and trinkets. Would you like one?"

"Oh? Nay, Lord Richard." Kate shook her head. "I want no reminders of that horrid place. My father sent me nothing."

"I recall him showing me a golden medallion. He said that he would send it to you. It was beautiful with a spider etched on it. Did you not receive it?"

"Nay, I didn't," she lied. She tried to remain calm and lowered her eyes. Did he believe her? She couldn't tell. He remained unemotional, not even a blink to show his interest.

"Well, I shall give you a trinket. It's the least I can do since Hawk didn't send you anything. I'll return in the morning." He smiled and turned to leave.

"Farewell, My Lord."

After Richard strode from the hall, Kate ran up the stairs to her chamber. She swung the door open, ran to the bed, and sobbed for several minutes. Her gentle, loving father was dead, killed in a war that had no bearing on their lives. The news made Kate despise her country for its subterfuge.

She erected her rope circle and sat inside it. Contentment came with prayers spoken to the Goddess. Once again, the vision of the warrior came. If only he was her betrothed, she would be protected. His powerful aura relieved her, though she didn't understand why. The vision didn't matter now. She'd be sent to her unknown betrothed, especially if Aldwyn didn't change the king's decree. During the restless night, thoughts of her betrothed, her father's death, Richard's treachery, and Madam's forsooth, replayed in her head. She had to garner courage and face what was to come. After a restless night, she readied for her journey.

The next morning, Kate rode to Richard's keep. Deep sorrow embedded inside her and caused

her detachment. The zealous late-summer day did little to warm her insides or her spirit. Richard had thirty soldiers escort her, who kept to themselves throughout the journey. She wasn't thrilled at the prospect of going to his home. Her father's last words prevented her from feeling safe. She had to beware the friend with the black heart—Richard. She tensed unknowing of what to expect.

Richard's land lay south of Londontown in the wooded forests of Surrey. They arrived after the noon hour. Smoke billowed from the manor's chimney and blackened the air. No landscape adorned the front of the manor. Large plain bricks in four steps led to the manor's entrance. Richard stood on the steps and received his steward. He looked at her with a spurious smile. Richard didn't possess a good character, of that she was certain.

"Welcome to my home, Lady Kaitlin. Come inside and take rest from your journey."

His sweet words sickened her. Richard was a thin man with dark hair, grayed on the sides, with wafts of hair stuck out beside his ears. He appeared to have wings but walked as if in pain, and she wouldn't venture a guess how old he was. He was slight, though tall. She stepped past and held her satchel in a death grip and entered the hall.

Her father's fief was much smaller but cozier and cleaner. Kate was unimpressed by the look of his home. Tables covered with layers of grime, almost blackened by soot. The tapestries on the walls tattered and faded. Designs were unrecognizable. She chanced a glance at the floors, and the rushes cracked when she walked on them. Stale ale smelled rancid, and she suppressed a gag. Must she live here?

She would write to King Henry as soon as possible and beg him to intercede on her behalf. Hopefully, he'd persuade the Regent to settle her elsewhere. If only they overturned Lord de Guylet's command and choose another guardian. Even staying with her betrothed had to be an improvement. She was appalled by the hall's lack of cleanliness.

"Lady Kaitlin, welcome," a lady called from her seat at the table. "I'm Lady Hilda, Lord Richard's wife. My husband was a good friend of your father's and we're regretful for your loss."

"Lady de Morris, it's a pleasure to meet you." Kate swallowed hard while she assessed her.

"I'll have you shown to a chamber. I'm pleased to have another lady here. It's been a long time since we entertained. I find I'm excited to have another lady at our manor."

The lady's thin hair, worn in curls atop her head, matted and flattened. Though Lady de Morris was supposedly young, her rumpled appearance made her appear aged. The chartreuse color of her gown was unbecoming. Kate shook her head. It wasn't polite to judge the lady so, Goddess forgive her, she pleaded, for being uncompassionate. She tried to find something pleasant about the woman, but even her high-pitched voice unnerved Kate. What did the lady say? She remembered now.

"Aye, My Lady, I'm tired from my journey and need rest."

At that moment, her cat made her presence known when she popped her head from the carryall Kate held. Lady de Morris' shriek was likely heard all the way to Londontown by the sound of it.

"What is that?" Lady de Morris jumped onto the bench that flanked the table and lifted her skirts high enough to show her knees. "Someone get a sword, kill it. Kill it!"

"It's my cat, Trixie. I'm sorry she frightened you. She's harmless, I assure you." Kate petted her cat and tried to soothe her. Trixie clawed at the carryall and attempted to free herself.

"Be gone with that rodent." Lady de Morris' demand came in another shriek.

Kate's first thought was that an animal living within the keep wouldn't make much difference, her second, to calm the horrid lady. The lady continued to hold her gown above her ankles.

"Lady de Morris, if you'll allow me, I shall keep my pet in my bedchamber. She'll not be bothersome. She's not a rodent, but a feline. I promise she'll behave."

"See that, that creature stays in there. I don't want it walking around my keep, the filthy, vile beastie."

"Aye, My Lady." Kate raised her eyes heavenward. Cats were revered and respected for their mystical aura. But the lady probably didn't hold with such beliefs. After all, cleanliness was next to Godliness.

Lady de Morris showed her to a large bedchamber on the second level. Several young boys brought her trunks and other baggage into the room. She set Trixie on the floor and closed the door behind the servants. Finally alone, she was thankful the chamber wasn't as filthy as the hall. The chamber contained a large canopied bed with clean linens tucked neatly at the corners. A table flanked the bedside, on which, sat a bowl and a pitcher. A tall screen stood in the corner of the room. It was a rather nice room considering what the hall looked like.

She wandered to the wardrobe and placed her garments inside. Trixie jumped on the bed, curled into a ball, and purred. Kate finished her chores and joined her friend on the bed. Trixie soothed her and made her feel not so very alone. She petted her and closed her eyes.

Kate opened her eyes and noticed the window-casement darkened. She fell asleep, but something woke her. Someone yelled in the adjacent chamber and made thumping sounds. Lady de Morris' high-pitched voice reverberated through the wall.

"You will eat," Lady de Morris' voice hardened.

A child's bawl followed and she wondered who the child was since the de Morris' had no children. Lady de Morris' yell rattled the wall again.

"Ye best get used to being here, little savage. This is your home now. If this food is not eaten, you will be punished again. I don't know why I care for the likes of ye. Starve yourself for all I care."

The door banged and the lady's footsteps retreated. Her first opinion was accurate—the lady didn't possess a good character. The child sobbed loudly and her heart ached. The child's cries diminished a few minutes later, and the night grew quiet once again.

Early the next morning, Kate awoke in her new home. She dressed and readied for the day. Trixie continued to slumber on the bed and wouldn't wake until noon. Kate gave her a pat betwixt her ears, for which she received a loathsome look. She always rose early, near to sunrise, and rushed to the hall for her morning meal. The hall was surprisingly empty, so she sat at the table and a servant girl entered with a tray of food balanced on her hip. She wore a brown frock tied at the waist. The girl seemed pleasant.

"Good morn, My Lady, I'm Susie." She set the food down and curtsayed.

"Did you prepare my room?"

"I tried to make it welcoming, not that Lady de Morris asked. Please, don't let on. My Lady doesn't like it when we tarry over our chores."

Kate frowned but nodded. "The room was a welcome relief from travel. I appreciate the food. Is there anyone about yet? Have Lady and Lord de Morris risen?"

“Oh, nay, My Lady, the de Morris’ don’t rise for another few hours yet. They are late sleepers. Lady de Morris is lazy...” Susie’s eyes widened. “Forgive me, My Lady, I shouldn’t have said that. Pray, don’t tell Lady de Morris I said such. She would grumble at me for the rest of the day.”

Kate’s eyes crinkled. “I shan’t tell her.”

Susie lifted the hem of her frock, curtsied, and strode away.

Kate ate a light breakfast then she snatched an apple from the trencher, and returned to her chamber. She crept down the hall and stopped outside the room next to hers. With her ear pressed against the wood, she listened for sounds from within. She turned the handle and opened the door.

Though it was dark inside, she made out the outline of a window on the far wall. She walked to it and pulled the worn tapestry aside. Light filtered in and brightened the room. Beams of sunlight filled with dust and streamed across the chamber. Kate waved at the dust and held her breath. She glanced around the room. A pile of covers sat in the corner. The small hearth on the opposite side was empty, save for a few cobwebs. There was a chill in the room.

Had she dreamt of the child’s presence last evening?

Kate stooped beside the covers and stifled a gasp when a beautiful child unveiled herself from beneath the pile. Her tiny hands rubbed the sleep from her eyes. She couldn’t tell if the child had light or dark hair, but peered at her beautiful blue eyes. The child looked frightened. Her fear made Kate empathize, and she knelt beside her.

“I’m Kate. Who are you?” She gentled her voice, but the little girl didn’t answer and scooted back. “I’d like to be your friend. Would you like that, too?” She hoped to soothe the child. Still, the child didn’t speak. Mayhap she wouldn’t speak? Perhaps she didn’t understand English?

“Be not afraid. Are you well, unharmed?” The child nodded. “All right, sweeten, you must eat something. I brought an apple. If you eat it, I’ll bring you a surprise.” Kate handed the apple to her and the girl reached with her shaky hand and took it. She held it but didn’t raise it to her mouth. “You eat your apple and I’ll return in a few minutes with your surprise.”

Kate rose slowly so she wouldn’t frighten the girl and left the chamber. *A child.* Was she the child Madam Serena spoke of in her prophecy? Kate scoffed, it couldn’t be. She returned to her chamber to get her cat. When she reached the child’s room, she placed Trixie next to the girl. The child slunk away and held the half-eaten apple.

“Don’t be afraid. This is my friend Trixie. She’s my best friend. Do you want to know why?” Kate smiled and continued to pet her cat.

The little girl nodded. It was progress.

“She likes to purr and listen to me talk. I talk to her all the time and do you know what? Never once has she told my secrets.” The little girl giggled a delightful sound that made Kate smile. She continued to pet Trixie and sensed the girl’s ease. “I need a favor because the lady here doesn’t want Trixie in her hall. Might I leave her here with you? You shall keep her company when I’m unable to be with her. She likes people.” Kate fibbed because Trixie didn’t like anyone, save her, but she hoped the cat would make the girl smile.

The child nodded again. It was a start.

“All right, I’ll leave her here. She likes to be petted like this.” Kate stroked Trixie’s back to the tip of her tail and showed her how to pet her. She left the room again and hoped the cat would pull

the girl out of her glumness. The poor thing looked pale and thin. Kate was determined to find out about her, how she came to be with the de Morris', and why she'd been kept in the room. Questions racked her mind. She would search out Lady de Morris later and get those answers.

A child, here at the de Morris' keep. Who would have thought such a thing was possible? Kate considered what Madam bespoke; she'd meet the warrior when she met the child. Having dismissed the comments Madam made, what with the news of her father's death, the betrothal announcement, and her sudden departure from home, she hadn't given it much thought. What were the chances she would meet a child and a warrior? Yet she met a child. Would she meet the warrior?

CHAPTER TWO

The warrior haunted her visions.

Kate returned to her chamber, cleaned up a bit, unpacked her candles and rope, and sat in her circle. Once again, the vision of the warrior came. He never moved, only appeared to look sternly at her with his arms crossed. She shook him from her mind, not wanting to venture there. Instead, she prayed to the Goddess for guidance on how to aid her. It was a futile effort because the dark-haired warrior kept intruding. His rigid stance and gray eyes troubled Kate. She wouldn't get answers this morning, not with the warrior haunting her. After she'd completed her morning ritual, she returned to the hall.

Lady de Morris called to her when she entered. Kate approached and looked to make sure the bench was clean before she sat on it.

"What have you been doing this morning, Lady Kaitlin?"

"I've unpacked and settled in, My Lady."

"How do you find the keep? It's magnificent, is it not?" Lady de Morris sounded proud of the derelict residence.

Kate almost choked on the piece of cheese she'd stuck in her mouth. She picked up a goblet and drank and swallowed the cheese caught in her throat. "It's...lovely. I would be glad to help in the keeping of it. I took care of my—"

Lady de Morris interrupted, "Nay, my girl, that's the servants' tasks. I won't have ye lifting a finger. Now, tell me, how old are you?"

Kate wasn't at all impressed with her manners. "I just turned nine and ten, My Lady."

"How is it you're not married?" Lady de Morris poured more ale in her cup.

"My father was called to Damietta five years ago and didn't make arrangements before he left. I was only four and ten and there was no time to see to it."

"My husband has influential contacts in Londontown. In fact, he just returned from a tourney at his majesty's summer palace." She boasted her husband's position as if it would impress Kate.

Kate wasn't affected in the least. "Will we be going to such events?"

"Perhaps, you shall. You'll attend with Richard. I fear I don't have the stamina for such a journey and nor do I wish to go to court. Richard won't return to court for a while, but he will help you find a worthy husband."

"Thank you, Lady de Morris, but King Henry betrothed me, and when Lord Aldwyn returns, I shall go to him." Why did it sound distressful? Her future husband awaited, whether Lord Richard insisted Aldwyn influence the king's decision. Perhaps the man was a gentleman and would be a kind husband. The king wouldn't betroth her to someone of ill bearing. Although she'd only met the king once, she hoped he remembered her.

Lady de Morris nodded. "I had forgotten that. Richard told me of the betrothal and his dislike of the circumstances. Have no fear, Richard will right it. Have you eaten, child?"

“Aye, I rise early and have eaten. I heard you speaking to a child last night, in the room next to mine. Who is she?”

Lady de Morris’ eyes narrowed and her face scrunched. “Child?”

“Aye, a child...in the room next to mine.”

“Oh, that child. Forgive me, I had forgotten about her. She’s an orphaned servant’s child. I’ve taken the poor girl in and gave her a home. Yet, she won’t speak. Perhaps she’s mute. I’ll begin training her, but she’s young and troublesome.”

“That is kind of you, Lady, to take her in. Perhaps I can help.”

“Mayhap you can get her to eat. She’ll not come out of the room, and I want to begin her training soon. There’s plenty of work to do.”

Kate knew she’d lied because the woman yelled at the girl the night before. “I’d be happy to see to her adjustment. I haven’t anything else to do and adore children.” She tried to sound unenthusiastic.

“You can begin by taking her food. She hasn’t eaten yet this day. I don’t want the servants near her, because she’s frightened. She’s a timid thing.”

“How long has she been here?” Kate feared to question her, but the lady seemed forthcoming.

“Almost three months.”

If the child had eaten little since she’d come, no wonder she looked thin. She would make sure the child ate and would fatten her up.

“I’ll see you later, dear child, I’m off to the village.” Lady de Morris strode from the hall and left Kate sitting at the table alone.

She left soon after and ambled to the kitchens. After placing foodstuff in a sack, she grabbed a small basin from a table. She took the stairs and walked the filthy corridor that led to the sleeping chambers. When the girl didn’t answer her knock, Kate opened the door and peeked inside. The girl sat in the corner, petting her cat, and slunk back when Kate entered.

“Don’t be afraid, lovey, I won’t hurt you.” Kate set down the basin and removed the sack from over her shoulder. She sat next to her and smiled in hopes to relieve the child’s fear.

“I know you speak English because you understood me earlier. I want to be your friend, and like Trixie, I can keep secrets, too.” The child didn’t move or speak. “Why don’t we start with our names? You remember, I told you my name is Kate. What’s your name?” Seconds passed before the girl uttered a sound.

“B-Bonnie,” the little girl uttered.

“Bonnie, that’s a beautiful name. We’re going to be fast friends. Where are you from?”

“T-the H-highlands. Scotland.”

“Scotland? I’ve never been there before. Is it nice there?”

She nodded and stuttered, “’Tis h-home.”

“Where are your parents?”

“At Honey’s.”

“Who is Honey?” Kate placed her hand under Trixie’s chin and scratched her.

“Mama’s cousin.”

“Where does she live, in Scotland, too?”

“Nay, England. Cousin Honey is a he.”

“How did you come here? The lady said...” Kate was stunned. Hadn’t Lady de Morris said the girl was an orphaned servant’s child? How could a servant’s child be from Scotland?

“T-the mean m-man...took me.”

“Took you? Do you mean her husband?”

Bonnie nodded.

Kate sobered. “Do you mean he was asked to bring you here and—”

Bonnie shook her head. “Nay, I was supposed to rest, Papa said so.”

“Aye, and...” She waited for her to continue.

“I snuck out, and the mean m-man...took me.”

“He picked you up and took you?” Kate realized she’d raised her voice and blew a dejected sigh.

Bonnie moved away. “Aye, he put me on his horse and rided away. I tried to scream, but no one could hear me.”

“Will your parents be upset that you’re gone?”

“Aye, Mama will cry and Papa will look for me.” Bonnie’s eyes watered, and her little body shuddered.

“Do they know where you are?”

“Nay,” she sobbed and shook her head.

“You’ve been here for a long time? Three months?”

“Aye, I’m scared and miss Papa.”

“Bonnie, do you want to go home?”

“I want Mama and Papa.” Tears rolled down her face, and she wailed.

Kate realized she was crying, too. She lifted Bonnie and settled her on her lap and held the girl in her arms, and tried to comfort her.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get you home. I’ll take you there myself if I have to. You can trust me, Bonnie. Can you stay with me until I figure out a way to get you home?”

Bonnie nodded and sniffled with another shudder.

“I promise we’ll go on a great quest.” She swiped the tears from Bonnie’s face and hugged her close.

“I like adventure, Papa always says so.”

Kate laughed. “Well, we’re alike in that. Now, we must get you cleaned, and you must eat. You need to get nice and fat before we go on our journey.” She tickled her tummy and Bonnie giggled.

She thought to wash the girl and reached for the basin, but the child needed a bath. Instead, Kate returned to the kitchen and instructed a bath to be sent to her room. She returned to Bonnie’s room and took her to her chamber. When the bath arrived, she undressed Bonnie and put her in the tub. Bruises spotted the poor girl’s back and legs. Someone beat her. Kate suppressed her rage, or at least she tried to.

“Who beat you, Bonnie?”

“The l-lady.”

That harridan hurt the poor child. She hid her fury, but her cheeks burned with anger. “I shall

get even with her.”

She washed the girl, dried her, and put her into a fresh gown, one that was slightly tight on her and no longer fit properly. Even so, the gown was too large for the little girl. She cut the bottom hem where it ended at her feet and shortened the sleeves. A mending would make for a better fit, but she’d have to see to it later. Bonnie looked silly in the overlarge garment.

Kate combed her long hair, likely never cut once in her short life. Once dried, the ends curled, giving her an innocent look. She and Bonnie spent the day tidying Kate’s chamber. After the midday meal, they sat on the bed. Trixie lay next to them, her purr filled the room.

“You’re nice and clean. You’ll sleep better now.”

“C-can I stay with you?”

“There’s more than enough room.” Kate changed into her nightdress behind the screen and when they settled in bed, she asked Bonnie to tell her about Scotland and her family. Was that ever a mistake? The child who hadn’t spoken suddenly found her voice.

“Mama is pretty, Papa says so. He loves her. Papa is laird. I’m a MacKinnon.”

“Tell me about your family.”

“I have a brother, his name is Kevin. He’s just a bairn, och I help Mama take care of him.” Bonnie couldn’t sit still and fiddled with the covers. “Sometimes I get into trouble and Papa punishes me. He doesn’t want to and says he has to. Mama always laughs ‘cause Papa tries to think of new punishments, but he always does the same thing—makes me sit in his chair. I don’t like to sit in Papa’s chair, but it’s the best one. ‘Cause you know why?”

Kate shook her head.

“‘Cause Papa’s laird.” Bonnie’s voice became arrogant as if Kate should’ve known that.

Kate laughed and hugged her.

“Uncle Brendan, that’s Papa’s brother. He’s going to be angry with me for gettin’ lost. He looks scary, but I’m not ‘scared of him. You know why?”

“Nay, why, lovey?” Kate closed her eyes. As she listened to the girl, she couldn’t help wonder why Lord Richard would abduct her. There had to be a reason, and it certainly wasn’t because they needed servants. She wondered if something happened at the king’s castle which caused Lord Richard’s ire, and he took Bonnie for revenge. Lord Richard was an evil knave. Somehow, she had to help Bonnie. She opened her eyes and found Bonnie gazing at her.

“‘Cause he has a good heart. He told me not to tell anyone. Oops, I shouldn’t have told you that, now Uncle will be angry.” Bonnie placed her hand over her mouth, her eyes twinkled with mischief.

“I won’t tell your uncle, your secret is safe.”

“Papa has a big family. They live with us and they’re our clan. Uncle Robin married Mama’s friend, Tess. She’s bonny, just like Mama, and she gaved Uncle a bairn, too. You know what his name is?”

“Nay, what?” Kate yawned.

“Robert. Mama calls him Robbie, ‘cause his Papa’s name is Robin.” Bonnie yawned, too. “I have a pet named George.”

“Is George a dog?”

“Nay.” Bonnie giggled. “He’s a goat. Mama loves ‘em, but he’s ‘badder than me sometimes. You know what?”

“What?”

“He likes to eat Mama’s tablecloths. She smacks him and he runs away.” Bonnie giggled again. “Mama says he plays games with her.”

When she finally quieted, Kate thought about what the little girl told her. Bonnie was abducted by her guardian and she had a loving family who was, at this very minute, desperate to find her. Kate knew why the Goddess sent her there now: she had to save Bonnie and return her to her family. How would she be able to do that? Madam said she would go on a somber mission. How was the warrior connected to the child? She’d met the child, but where was the warrior? She needed to get inside her circle but would wait until Bonnie fell asleep. She hoped Bonnie’s family searched nearby so she could return her.

Somehow, Kate would get even with Lady de Morris for hurting Bonnie, and she would begin the very next morning.

And get even, she would. No woman or man would hurt a child if she had anything to do with it. A sennight passed since Kate’s arrival to the de Morris manor. She and Bonnie spent every waking moment together. Kate took her out on walks in the fresh air for exercise, being cooped up in that chamber for such a long time made Bonnie pale. This day, they picnicked in the outlying area beyond the manor where the grass grew thicker, and they sat upon an old cloth taken from the bedchamber. At least outside, they didn’t have to contend with Lady de Morris, her loathsome looks at Bonnie, or the stench of the hall.

Kate got an idea. “Bonnie, are you afraid of insects?”

“What kind of insects?”

“Big, ugly beetle insects.” Kate laughed.

“Nay, why?”

“I want to collect them and put them in the lady’s bed.”

Bonnie giggled. “Aye, that would be fun. Where do we find ‘em?”

“Just go along this high brush.” Kate knelt and plucked an insect from the blade of grass. She placed it in the basket she’d brought. The creature felt strange and vile, but it was worth touching them, knowing what she would do with them.

They put any kind of insects they found in the basket. When they found an ugly insect, they shouted with glee. Bonnie found the biggest beetle Kate had ever seen. They hated touching the insects, but it would be worth it. Lady de Morris would be in for a surprise this night. Kate and Bonnie skipped back to the manor, their trick secure inside the basket. When they entered, Lady de Morris sat in her usual place.

Mayhap Kate should pity her. Alas, Lady de Morris had an evil spirit and wouldn’t get compassion from her, not after seeing what she did to Bonnie. Nay, the woman didn’t deserve a kind word, let alone sympathy. She was fortunate Kate didn’t use her skills to cause harm, for if she had, the lady would be dead by now. But Kate never used her powers to cast spells in ill against

others. It was something Madam enforced, and Kate had too gentle a heart to want to hurt anyone, even someone as vile as Lady de Morris. Although harming the woman crossed her mind several times since she'd seen Bonnie's back.

She and Bonnie returned to the chamber they now shared. It neared the evening meal, so they changed and washed. Kate disliked eating in the hall, but the lady forbade them from eating in their chamber. Once they were ready, they retreated down the stairs for the meal. Kate sat next to Bonnie and put meat on her tray. Pigeon, veal, and a variety of vegetables were served. Kate thought it odd, because she didn't think the de Morris' were well to do, yet the food served was of quality. She piled her tray with vegetables and avoided the high piled meats. The smell of it made her nauseous. As they ate, the hall's silence became palpable.

Lord Richard joined them for the meal. It was the first time he'd eaten with them since Kate's arrival. He gave her looks of loathing, which made her uncomfortable. She avoided his gaze and concentrated on finishing her food. Kate and Bonnie left the hall as soon as the meal ended. They hurried to take care of their little chore of releasing the creatures.

Kate entered her room and grabbed the basket. "I have them, Bonnie, let's go."

"Aye, Kate."

They tiptoed down the hall to the lady's room. The empty chamber darkened because the sun faded, which produced a hazy atmosphere. Dimness added to the shabbiness of the abode. When they approached the bed, Bonnie pulled back the covers and Kate dumped the contents onto the bed, shaking the basket until all the creatures were out. Insects crawled in various directions.

"Hurry, pull back the covers."

After they finished the chore, they crept toward the door. Someone's footsteps sounded in the hallway. Kate grasped Bonnie's hand and pulled her behind the door. She cracked the door open to peek and they held their breath. A servant hummed as she passed by, laden with a pile of wash. They slipped from the room, and once they were inside their chamber, they fell on the bed in a riot of laughter.

"Kate, if Papa knowed what we did, he would make us both sit in his chair for a whole day." Bonnie giggled.

"I can't wait until she comes. Let us ready for bed." Kate opened the wardrobe and took a nightgown.

They finished washing and changed into their nightclothes. She read to Bonnie from a large tome she'd bought from home. Bonnie seemed to enjoy being read to. After reading a few pages, they heard the lady in the corridor. They scrambled from the bed and ran to the door. Kate cracked the door open, their ears pressed against the wood and listened. The lady entered her room, the door creaked.

They waited.

"A few more minutes," Kate whispered.

All quieted, but then Bonnie let out a low giggle.

"Shhh." Kate held the door ajar.

In a sudden rush, the lady's door opened, and she ran down the hall shrieking. Kate closed the door and she and Bonnie fell into a fit of laughter. Bonnie's giggle lightened the chamber as they

both tried to fall asleep.

Early the next morning, they entered the hall to break their fast and found Lady D there in her usual place. They now referred to her as 'Lady D.' She slept in the hall the night before and looked groggy.

"Kaitlin, have you seen any insects in your room? I was beset by the vile beasts last eve. They overtook my chamber, and I'm having Suzie give it a thorough scrubbing."

Kate stifled her laughter. "I haven't noticed any." She regretted Suzie would have to clean Lady D's room, but that couldn't be helped.

Bonnie stood next to her and hid her smile. They ate breakfast and spent the day thinking of nasty things to do to her.

The next day, they collected toads all afternoon by the pond beyond the village. It was fun, and they were soaking wet from their jaunt. They placed fifteen toads in the ale barrel just before the evening meal. Lady D happened to open the barrel to refill her goblet. Her scream caused many men-at-arms to run inside the manor. Lady D glared at Kate, but she held herself circumspect because the lady couldn't prove that she'd done it.

"Kaitlin, Lord Richard was called away to a tenant's home." Lady D placed food on her tray, and Kate didn't think she wanted a response, so she kept quiet.

Kate was glad he'd left because he repulsed her with his glares and ogles. She tried not to look at him, but his stare made her uneasy. At least, the meal that night would be more enjoyable without his company.

Later that day, Kate threw her basin water out the window. Luckily, Lady D stood below it. She stuck her head out the window and yelled down, "Oh, My Lady, I didn't know you were walking by. I apologize." She and Bonnie had a fit of laughter over that. Kate enjoyed torturing her and anticipated the next day.

When Kate arrived in the hall the next morning, it was vacant. After she poured herself and Bonnie a bowl of pottage, she mixed dried mandrake and yarrow roots in the porridge pot that sat on the fire. It would cause the lady to have stomach cramps for the rest of the day. Lady D came down to break her fast. Kate hoped she would pour herself a heaping bowlful, as she normally did.

"Kaitlin, will you get me a cup of ale?"

"Of course, My Lady." Kate couldn't resist, she put grounded raspberry leaves in the cup.

Lady D would run from the room. Likely, she'd spend the rest of the day in the garderobes. It had been a long time since she'd pulled such pranks. She sobered because it reminded her of when she was young and carefree, living at home with her beloved father, Lolly, and Madam Serena. How she missed her father's keep and him. He often remarked jovially about her pranks, though she didn't do such vile things to him or the servants. She knew that she needed to form a plan to return Bonnie to her home, and she had a few ideas.

Lady D's shout interrupted her thoughts. "This porridge is horrible, take it away." She sipped the ale Kate gave her.

Kate watched, not smiling outwardly, but inside she burst with giddiness.

"What are you girls about this day?"

Kate kept her expression serene. "We're going to the village for a while. We'll return later, and I

will begin instruction on sewing.”

“’Tis time the girl learned to sew,” Lady D agreed.

The two girls walked the mile to the village. Kate wanted to talk to the smithy. Master Hemmings seemed a kind old soul. Kate hoped he would offer to help her. She entered the smithy’s hut and found him at his work. He hit a flaming mass with a large maillot, tapping pieces of steel. When he noticed her, he stopped his banging. Her ears rang from the deafening sound.

“My Lady, what can I do for ye?”

“Master Hemmings, I’m Lady Stanhope, a ward of Lord Richard’s. I need your help.”

“I’ll help if I can. What do ye need?”

“I need a good, sturdy horse. I have a few jewels as payment. Do you know where or how I can go about getting one? Is there a hostler in the village?”

“Aye, there be, My Lady. I can take care of that.” He seemed proud that she asked him.

“Thank you, Master Hemmings. I need the horse as soon as you can arrange it. When might you be free to take care of this matter?”

“I’d be free this noon. Would that be soon enough?”

“Oh, aye. Can you keep the horse tethered out back?”

“Aye, My Lady. Why do ye need a horse, there’s plenty at the manor?” He flushed at his insolence.

Kate was alarmed by his question, her mind raced, searching for an answer. “Um...I will teach the young one to ride. She’s always wanted to learn and—”

“Why he need be sturdy then? They have horses at my lord’s manor.” He stepped toward her with his brows raised.

“Master Hemmings, I beg your pardon, but I’m a good judge of horseflesh. Please be sure it can handle a tough hand and a rough ride.” Kate’s tone became stringent.

He swallowed hard at her words. “Of course, My Lady, I didn’t mean to offend ye.”

“Very well.” She smiled and handed him the jewels, but kept the coins. She realized that she should placate him before she left. “Please, don’t say a word about this...you see, it’s meant to be a surprise. They adore the child, her being the relative of my lady’s and I want to teach her in private.”

“I understand,” he said.

She hated lying to the old man, but she couldn’t tell him the truth. She and Bonnie walked around the village, and they waved to those who passed by. Kate removed the cloak she placed around Bonnie because the day grew warm.

She was responsible for the girl and had to find a way to return her to the caring arms of her family. The need to leave pressed on her. Lord Richard looked at her oddly when he ate the evening meal with them the other night. He had been gone for two days and expected to return today. She knew she’d have to leave soon. Tomorrow, they would begin their journey. She had an idea of where they would go and would take the child to Honey’s, wherever that was. It was after all, still in England. Kate had never traveled all the way to Scotland.

They stopped at the miller’s hut where Kate bought a large saddlebag to hold their belongings. She carried the thick leather bag and left it behind Master Hemmings’ hut. They headed toward Madam Flichard’s hut down the path. She enjoyed Madam’s bread and hoped the lady would give

them a loaf or two for their journey. When she asked if she had any extra bread, she was given three fresh loaves. The woman beamed with pride over Kate's compliments on her baking.

She stopped back at Master Hemmings' hut and noticed the horse tethered out back. The gelding was beautiful, dark-brown, with black spots. He was sound and docile, with a strong sturdy girth around his middle. The horse nibbled at the grass along the path.

"Will he do?" Master Hemmings came outside, shielding his eyes from the bright early-afternoon sun.

"Aye, thank you. What's his name?"

"His name be Ralph, but you can call him anything ye want. He's yours, right and tight."

Kate laughed. Ralph was as fine a name as any. "You'll leave him tethered here? We shall return on the morrow for the lessons."

"Of course, My Lady, as ye asked."

They left the smithy's hut and walked back to the manor. For the rest of the day, they sat in the hall practicing sewing. Kate tried to keep calm because Lady D would suspect something if she was agitated. Lady D's chair sat empty, and that gave Kate another idea. She and Bonnie strolled outside and walked along the keep's walls.

"Where are we going, Kate?"

"I'm looking for a plant."

"What's it for?"

"Lady D. It has three leaves and whatever you do, don't touch it. You'll break out in a rash that'll have you itching for a week."

"What are we going to do with it?"

"I'm going to rub it on Lady D's chair, it's what she deserves." Kate knelt down and spotted the weed she sought. She used her gown to pull out a big stem.

They skipped back to the hall. Kate hurried and rubbed the leaves over the lady's chair. Bonnie pointed to the spots she missed. She was thorough, making sure that if the lady's skin touched anywhere on the chair, she'd be itching by the end of the night.

The day wore on, and Kate was grateful it passed quickly. Her stomach fluttered madly. She wanted to retire and have the morning come. Supper became a tumultuous affair because Lord Richard returned. He sat at the end of the table, sending peculiar glances at her. She ignored him as best she could. At last, supper ended with Lord Richard's departure. She took Bonnie's hand and stood to leave, but Lady D stopped them. Blotches of redness streaked her hands and arms, making her scratch. Not only that, but her face was blotchy, too.

"Are you unwell, Lady de Morris?" Kate feigned concern.

"Oh, aye, I seem to be itchy, must be this new material. My dear husband brought this fabric from Londontown, and I had it made into this gown. I believe I'll go and have a bath."

Kate smiled. As soon as her body touched the water, the rash would spread and she would itch all over, but Kate kept that thought to herself. "Aye, a nice warm bath."

"I need the young one to go to the kitchens and peel onions for tomorrow's stew."

"I'll help her." Kate took Bonnie's hand, but Lady D pulled her away.

"Nay, you rest. You've been with the child all day. It won't take her long, there are not many to

peel, and cook cut himself this morn. He needs help.”

Kate nodded. “All right, don’t be too long, Bonnie.”

Bonnie nodded because she’d never spoke in the lady’s presence. Bonnie hesitated to leave her side, but she had no choice. She had to obey Lady D, and send her to the kitchens.

The light faded and night approached, Bonnie would have to walk back in the dark. She wanted to retrieve her when she finished her tasks. Kate hurried to her chamber and gathered the items they needed for the journey. She pulled the satchel aside and placed inside: a dagger she’d taken from the hall, a small bow her father gave her when she was younger, arrows, and a few garments for them both. Once the large satchel crammed with their belongings, she set the satchel by the door.

Kate positioned her rope on the floor, set the candles in place, and then sat. She folded her legs beneath her, closed her eyes and waited. Trixie took her place beside her. Kate hummed a light tune and tried to ease the tension from her body.

And then it came, the vision of the gray-eyed, dark-haired warrior. Kate shook her head. “Please, Goddess, send me a vision about the journey. Will we be safe? Will I get the child home?” She hummed again, but the warrior’s silhouette framed in sunlight came to her. Answers wouldn’t come this night, not with his vision intruding. Was he trying to tell her something with his austere frown?

Kate jumped when her door banged open. Lord Richard stepped inside and closed the door behind him. He gave her an indignant glance.

She froze.

“What do you want?” She frowned at him from her position on the floor.

“What every man wants. My wife suggested you might enjoy it. Lord knows she’s no good at it. You’ll make me a fine wife once I rid myself of—”

“S-surely you don’t m-mean what you just s-said,” she stammered. She hastily picked up the rope, doused the candles, and set them aside.

“Aye, I do, Kaitlin. You will remove your garments and do my bidding. You are indebted to me for letting you come here. As your guardian, I command you to do it.”

Kate’s face reddened. “Nay, I’ll do no such thing. I don’t understand what...you mean by this. I shall never submit to you. I will never marry you, and besides, the king has betrothed me.”

He laughed coarsely. “A betrothal that shall be set aside. You’ll obey me or the child will suffer. I’ve seen how fond you are of her.” Richard crossed the room, his eyes glared like a wolf’s in the night.

Kate backed away. “Nay, you’ll not hurt that child.”

“Then you’ll do as I say, now remove your garments. I’ll not hurt you if you do my will.”

She walked away from him, stalling, hoping to think of a means of escape, but he blocked the path to the door. An intense pain settled in her chest as panic seized control over her.

“B-but I-I am betrothed. You wouldn’t go against the king.” It was all that came to her.

“The king is a sniveling fool. Your betrothal won’t come to pass. Aldwyn will listen to me. Ah, my dear Kaitlin, there are things we need to discuss, but after we enjoy our pleasure. One of which is the medallion, I know you have it. You believe me a fool, don’t you?”

His voice lowered to such a pitch that it frightened Kate. Fear mingled with panic in her

stomach, and she thought she'd be ill. Just what had he intended when he brought her to his home? Surely he wouldn't go against the king and refute her betrothal?

"I don't know what you speak of, Lord Richard. What medallion?"

Richard reached out and slapped her across her cheek. The force of it sent Kate to the floor. She cried out but didn't move. She tried to abate the sting in her cheek by rubbing it. Richard grabbed her arm and jerked her to him.

"Don't lie to me, I know you have it. Where is it?"

"I'll never give it to you, never. You're a blackheart. My father told me not to trust you. I'll die before I give it to you." She pulled away from him.

Richard laughed snidely. "If that's your wish, Kaitlin. I shall find the medallion amongst your belongings, but first, I'll enjoy myself. You've become rather appealing. Now remove your garments or I'll have the child fetched so she can witness your downfall."

Kate searched the room with a quick glance, her mind raced. Terror spread throughout her insides, shaking every nerve in her body. He stalked about the room and removed his robe. When he stood before her, she withheld the urge to gag. The man was downright dreadful.

He reached out and grasped her arm. Kate struggled and tried to get free from his clutch, but he threw her on the bed and laid his body atop hers. He pulled at her garments, his hands moved over her body touching her lewdly. She screamed, but his chilling laughter banished her panic.

Kate focused on the canopy above and fumbled to reach behind her. If only she found something, anything to use as a weapon on the bedside stand. Why couldn't she have left the dagger on the table? She felt a quill used for writing—that wouldn't do. Then she fingered the book she'd read to Bonnie. The tomb was heavy and she barely lifted it with one hand. She held it with both hands now.

Richard pawed her breast and kissed her face. How she withstood it, she had no notion. He pressed his body against her, mindless to what she was doing. She gripped the book and brought it down upon his head as hard as she could. A loud whacking noise followed and he stilled.

Had she killed him? Her breath rasped from the exertion and she pushed him off her. She grabbed the tie from his robe and bound his wrists and gagged him with a belt. She hadn't killed him she realized when his breath rose his chest. At least she'd made it so he'd spend the night there. He wouldn't give an alert that she fled. That was until someone found him in the morning. Her chest rose and fell with excitement.

Kate stumbled to the basin and splashed water on her face. The vile man touched her. She was appalled and tried to calm her indignation. Her torn garment drew her notice, so she donned a cloak. She picked up her satchel, threw in her rope and candles, clutched Trixie under her belly then ran for her life.

She reached the kitchens and called to Bonnie. "Bonnie, lovey, we have to go now." Kate was amazed at how calm she sounded.

"Where are we going, Kate?"

"Home, but we must hasten. We have to run. Can you do that, Bonnie?"

"To Ralph?"

"That's right...to Ralph." The village was a mile or so from the manor house. Nightfall gave

cover from anyone trailing them, so they stopped a few times to catch their breath. Kate held Bonnie's hand and pulled her along.

"Kate, I can't run anymore."

"I will slow down, but we must keep moving." They continued, and after making more progress, the young girl slowed again. Kate finally picked her up. They ran the rest of the way. Bonnie didn't weigh much, so it wasn't too difficult, but holding her belongings and making sure she didn't jostle Trixie, was a difficult task. When they reached the smithy's hut, there, as promised, waited Ralph.

CHAPTER THREE

Kate lifted Bonnie onto the horse's back and secured the satchel to the harness by the horse's forelegs. Trixie jumped into the satchel so Kate wouldn't worry about her. She touched the medallion covered by cloth on a string, tied around her pet's neck. The only clue to her father's death was secure. She had all she needed. Thank goodness she'd made plans this day, for if she waited, Richard would've hurt her, perhaps have even killed her. She wouldn't have been able to get Bonnie to safety. Kate kicked her heels into Ralph's flanks.

All Kate wanted was to get far away from the evil place. They were in southern England west of Londontown. Kate headed north, not knowing where to go. She held the sleepy child and rode through the night.

They made a good distance as the sun rose. The hues of yellow and pink indicated it would be a hot day. She had a hard time keeping her eyes open and needed to stop. Kate thought it safe to rest for a spell. After she lifted Bonnie down, she tethered Ralph.

"Bonnie, sit beside me and don't move for any reason."

"Aye, Kate."

"If there's trouble or you hear someone, wake me."

"Aye, Kate."

"And Bonnie, don't let me sleep long."

"Aye, Kate." Bonnie nodded at her instructions.

As Kate lay sleeping, Bonnie made a fire. Papa taught her how, and she couldn't wait to tell him she did it all by herself. She found flint in Kate's satchel and struck it against the rock as her uncle showed her. When the kindling caught, she shouted but quieted and realized her loudness. She took the bow and arrows from the satchel. Uncle Brendan taught her how to use them, but this bow was larger than the one Uncle made for her. She had trouble notching the arrow and keeping her aim fastened on the clearing.

Kate would be surprised when she awoke. Bonnie sat in a secluded dell and waited. Uncle told her she had to have... What did he say? Oh, aye, patience. He'd told her you had to wait a long time before a target came.

Then she spotted it, a very large hare hopped into the small glen not too far from where she sat. She pulled the arrow back, scrunched her eyes closed, then let go. Amazingly it hit the target. In awe, she smiled. "Wait until Papa hears this."

Kate lay on a grassy spot covered by a small counterpane, and Bonnie smiled at the pretty lady who saved her. Kate was tired, but it got late, and she shook her.

"Not now, Lolly," Kate grumbled.

"Kate, wake up," Bonnie whispered. "Please."

Kate shot up and remembered that she slept in the forest. She listened to the approach of dusk. Only the sound of birds on their return flight to their nests sounded nearby. Sighing relief, she released her bated breath. "Lovey, are you all right?"

"Aye, but the day is gone."

"You're right about that. Why didn't you wake me sooner? What do you have there?" A furry creature clutched in her hand.

"'Tis a hare. I used your bow," Bonnie explained.

"I cannot believe you notched the arrow, the bow is almost larger than you." Kate laughed in disbelief of the girl's ability. "Did anyone ever tell you you're a remarkable girl? Where'd you learn to shoot an arrow?"

"Uncle Brendan taught me," Bonnie said proudly.

"You mean the one with a heart?"

"Aye, don't tell him I told you. He will be angry at me."

Kate laughed. At least, the poor man's niece thought kindly of him and she sensed no one else did. So he didn't want anyone to know he had a kind heart, did he? "I won't tell, I promise."

She then noticed the fire. It was small with perhaps four logs caught with flame. "Now I am amazed. How old did you say you were? Are you certain it wasn't ten?"

Bonnie giggled. "Nay, I'm this many." She held up both hands and showed seven.

Kate pulled the dagger from the satchel and thought to keep it close. She used it to skin the hare and once that was done, she placed the hare on the fire with a makeshift spit. Hunger overrode her guilt for eating the animal.

"Bonnie, where does Honey live?"

"In the castle—"

Kate grabbed her shoulders and turned the girl toward her. "Who is Honey, Bonnie?"

"Mama's cousin, King Henry."

"Oh, Goddess above, you're the king's cousin? Why didn't I realize that before?" Kate placed her hands on her head. "What to do, what to do?"

"Aye, Mama, Papa, and me visited. Cousin Honey was happy we came. He was happy, I know he was. He had a festival for us. What if they went home without me? What if Mama and Papa aren't looking for me?" Bonnie's eyes lowered, her lips turned, and she wept.

"They wouldn't do that, Bonnie. We're a long way from London. I don't know if we—"

"We were at Honey's summer castle, that's what Mama said."

"Do you know where the summer castle is?"

"Nay." She shook her head. "Somewhere in Londontown."

"All right, then. Think...think... I can't chance to take you to Londontown, we would have to pass right by...we'd risk getting caught. Nay, I must take you to Scotland."

"Yay," Bonnie shouted.

"Shhh, be quiet."

"You can come home with me, Kate. You can meet Mama and Papa."

"It won't be easy. We'll keep going north until you recognize the land. The distance is greater and will be a long journey and it might very well be dangerous."

Bonnie set her head on Kate's lap. "Don't worry so, Kate. When we get to Scotland, we can get someone to take us home."

"No wonder you're such a clever girl, you're related to the king."

After eating the hare, they put out the fire and mounted Ralph. Kate tugged on the reins and headed in the direction she thought was north.

"Kate, are we on our way to the Highlands?"

"Aye, lovey, we are. I hope we're not being followed, and we make it to the border before he catches up with us."

"The mean man?"

Kate nodded. The night grew darker, but she needed to keep riding through the night. Not enough distance was put behind them and she needed to be more vigilant during the darkest part of the night. She wouldn't let her guard down, at least until they were farther away.

Their second day was uneventful and the quiet forest and gentle breeze calmed Kate. She only had about six hours of sleep in two days and was exhausted, but she pushed onward. Ralph continued on, as she drifted off to sleep on his back. Bonnie nudged her.

"Kate, wake up, you fell asleep again."

"We better stop. I'm too tired to continue."

"Do you want me to build a fire again?"

"Nay, not tonight, something is not right. I'll hide Ralph." She took him to a closed-off spot, tied his reins to a bush, and returned to Bonnie.

"I don't feel safe, let's move under that thicket. Be careful of the thorns."

She placed a cover on the ground. The spot was tight, and they squeezed together. Bonnie curled up against her and they fell asleep minutes later.

Kate awoke to the sound of horses pounding the ground, and by the sound of it, there were many. Was it men from Lord Richard's keep? She put her hand over Bonnie's mouth and prayed they didn't find Ralph. As the horses flew by, Kate held her breath until she no longer heard them. She and Bonnie continued to rest until morning and set out as soon as it lightened enough to see.

For the next five days, they rode over the dusty roads and through the forests. They were tired and dirty. Kate had several coins tucked in the seam of her gown, and she hoped to find a village or an inn. Instead, they settled for a stream and slept on the soft high grass. They stopped early that day because they both grew weary. After a bath in the stream, they finished the remains of their foodstuff. Kate refilled the flask with water. She gave Ralph a well-deserved rest and rubbed him down. Trixie stalked away, in search of her meal. Kate rested beside Bonnie on the ground, her back was sore, and her muscles ached because she'd never ridden so long. She groaned and rubbed the ache in her lower back.

"You know what, Kate?"

"Nay, what, Bonnie?"

"I can't wait to see Papa and Mama," she said sadly.

"We'll get there soon, lovey. I hope we can find someone who will direct us because I haven't

figured out if we're headed the right way."

"Papa will make me sit in his chair."

"If he does, Bonnie, I'll sit with you." Kate hugged her.

"Uncle Brendan won't let Papa punish me."

"Why not?"

"He always gets me out of it. He says that I'm just a wee fairy who likes venturing."

"My father used to call me a fairy," Kate said sadly. "Your uncle sounds like a nice man." She wished her betrothed was just as kindhearted as Bonnie's uncle sounded.

Bonnie rolled on the ground, held her tummy, and giggled.

"What's so funny?" Kate smiled at the delightful sound of her gaiety.

"He's not nice—he's mean. Mama says ladies don't like 'em cause he frowns too much, but he only frowns at me when I do something to 'em."

Kate didn't like that he frowned. "What have you done to him?"

"Once, a longed time ago, when I was wee, I stoled into his bed."

"Stole," Kate corrected her.

Bonnie continued. "It was late when he came to bed, and I scairt 'em, and he swore loudly."

"Scared," Kate corrected her again.

Bonnie nodded and resumed her story, "Mama came running, och when she got there, she standed there staring at Uncle. That's when Papa came and yelled at Uncle Brendan. He swore, too. Then he said I had to contemplate and sit in his chair the whole next day. I don't know what contemplate meant so I just played with George."

"Why was your Papa mad?"

"Oh, 'cause Uncle didn't have clothes on and Mama sawed him. Papa pulled her out of the room. Every time Mama saw Uncle after that she got a red face."

Kate laughed. "I can't wait to meet your family, sweeten. They sound fun."

"Aye, Uncle Brendan will like you."

"Why do you say that?"

"'Cause you're bonny, but you'll be scairt of him. Most ladies are."

"Scared," Kate corrected her again. "Nay, I won't be afraid of him, I promise. Let's get sleep now, we have a lot more riding to do, I think."

They fell asleep, and it grew chilly during the night, but at least it was dry. It had rained little since they began their trek. When they awoke in the morning, Kate's stomach growled.

"I'm hungry," Bonnie complained, as she scooped up the cover from the ground.

"Me, too. I'll think of a way to get food. We could catch another hare."

"I can fish. Mama's uncle taught me how when he was alive."

"Taught," Kate corrected her. "What do you need?"

"A big stick. Can you make a point on the end? That's what Uncle Walden used."

Kate found a narrow branch that fell from a birch tree on the ground. She whittled the end until it was sharpened into a point. "Now what?"

Bonnie laughed. "You have to stand in the water until a fish swims near. Then drop the spear fast and try to catch 'em. 'Tis hard, Uncle Walden used to swear and shout."

Kate removed her slippers, lifted her hem, and wadded in the stream. Her gown billowed atop the water's surface. She waded knee-deep in the water, the soggy stream's bottom slimy beneath her feet, but thankfully, the water wasn't too cold.

"Bonnie, did your uncle say how long this takes?"

"Shhh, Kate, you will scare away the fish. It takes a longed time. I used to sit for hours and wait for 'em."

Kate watched a fish swim by and she tried to spear it, but it got away. Its scales brushed against the skin of her leg. "Damn."

Bonnie chuckled at her curse.

Another large speckled-trout came toward her and she tried not to move. She positioned the spear just right—she would get this one. Slamming the spear downward, it pierced its middle. The caught fish wiggled on the spike when she lifted it from the water.

Kate jumped up and shouted. "I got it, I got it!"

"Yay, I knowed you could do it, Kate."

"I'll catch another one. Here, put this on the bank." She handed the fish to her. Bonnie used both hands to carry it. The fish wiggled and jerked from her hold. Bonnie flipped the fish onto the grass, where it lay still. The child was resourceful.

After a few tries, Kate caught another fish, and a good-sized one, at that. They would be full for the rest of the day. The fish tasted bland, but it would suffice as a meal.

"Who is your Uncle Walden? Does he live within your clan?" Kate used a leaf to wipe her hands.

"Mama's uncle. Mama was sad when he died and Aunt Mathilda cried."

"That's sad, I'm sorry he died."

"Aye, me too. Mama said he had a good life."

"He's with the Gods now, probably showing them how to use the spear. Thanks for the idea." After she cleaned up the campfire, she collected Trixie, and they moved on, going farther north.

"Kate, how long do you think it will take now?"

"I hope not too long, but we must keep moving."

"I can't wait to get home. Papa will be angry and Mama will cry."

"Lovey, your Papa will be so happy to see you, it won't matter. You'll see." Kate hugged her.

Kate couldn't sleep that night. The image of the warrior floated in the recess of her mind. She didn't understand how he was connected to Bonnie or if she would ever meet him. Try as she might, the image wouldn't go away. She didn't fall asleep until the middle of the night, but Bonnie slept soundly.

In the morning, she realized they were past the border. The terrain changed, and Bonnie insisted they were closer to home. How would a seven-year-old know that? Kate felt safer with the distance they'd put behind them. They had left England behind and the land hillier. Richard wouldn't find them in the deep woods and expanse of Scotland. She grew tired from sitting on the horse and decided it would do them good to stretch their legs.

Kate dismounted and helped Bonnie down then she released Trixie from the satchel.

"Do you deem we're in the Highlands?" Bonnie skipped beside her.

“Mayhap, it’s eerily quiet and the birds aren’t making any noise. Why do you suppose that is?” Kate searched ahead for danger but saw nothing amiss.

“I’m scairt, Kate.” Bonnie moved closer and took her hand.

“I’m certain it’s only my imagination running wild. Trixie seems to have run off.”

She searched along the trees for her. They continued to walk and after a few minutes, Trixie returned with a small creature in her mouth. Kate found a trail a half-hour later. The forest remained eerily quiet, but they walked along silently.

A man jumped out from a bush and stood with his sword aimed at her. Not just any man—but a daemon. To protect Bonnie, Kate shoved her behind her. She stood mesmerized and bit her lower lip so she wouldn’t yell out. She was afraid—terrified, was more like it.

“Good Goddess above.” The man was a barbarian, painted like a heathen. He would kill her and make off with Bonnie. How would she ever get Bonnie home now?

The warrior stood in a hostile manner and held the largest sword she’d ever seen. Several men strode from the thick forest and surrounded them, seeming to magically appear. All of them, including the warrior, wore blue painted symbols on every part of their bodies, except for the parts covered by their tartans. Kate swallowed the lump that formed in her throat. Bonnie pressed against her back, holding her up. She was thankful for that. If not, she’d probably be on the ground at the heathen’s mercy. Swooning seemed a reasonable reaction to the horrifying situation, but she wouldn’t dare.

His eyes, made even colder by the dark paint that covered his face, pierced hers. Kate turned to see if there was a way to bypass him when she noticed the man motioned to the others to stay back. They obeyed.

“Lass, don’t be afraid, I mean no harm.”

“I’m n-not a-afraid.”

The warrior laughed.

“Aye, you are, don’t be. Why do you travel alone in the darkened forest? Are you by chance a damsel in distress or a fairy bent on trouble?”

The warrior’s laughter drew an odd look from his men.

“I’m Lady Kaitlin Stanhope, and I’m on my way to the MacKinnon clan’s holding.” She couldn’t believe she spoke to the man. Was she still standing? Nay, she hadn’t swooned, as she thought she might have. Bonnie continued to press against her legs and tried to get around her, but Kate held her back.

“You are?” He sounded surprised. The warrior turned and gave a look to the others, but they remained quiet.

“Aye, and if you would be good enough to point me in the right direction, I’d be grateful.”

“Why, lass? Are you a friend of Julianna’s?”

“Julianna, um...nay. Can you direct us?” She hoped the warrior would accommodate her, and at the very least, give direction, but he wasn’t compliant. He stood there with a scowl drawing his brows close, and shook his head.

Bonnie peeked around Kate’s skirts and screeched loudly. She ran full force at the warrior. Kate was dizzy, an overwhelming sense of faintness struck her, and she wavered on her feet.

"Bonnie, don't." Kate tried to pull her back, but she was already out of her reach.

"Bonnie?" The warrior stepped forward.

"Aye, Uncle, 'tis me."

"Oh, Bonnie, lass!" He lifted her high in the air and hugged her close then kissed her face. "Oh, fairy, I missed you. Don't ever scare me like that again."

"I'm s-sorry, Uncle. I j-just..." Bonnie's lip trembled and she cried.

"Where have you been? Your Mama and Papa are worried sick." The warrior continued to hold her close and petted her hair. His face gave the impression he disbelieved he held his sweet niece in his arms.

"I been with Kate."

"It's a long story." Kate stood by and watched their reunion, still reeled with dizziness.

He turned back to the men and spoke in a stern voice. "Make camp."

The men turned hastily and set to make a fire and placed their bedrolls. Kate stood shocked to the ground, not wanting to move for anything. The warrior was Bonnie's uncle? Good Goddess, he intimidated her more than she'd admit. She hoped she didn't show signs of fear and tried to calm her rapid heartbeat. *Please, please, Goddess, get me out of here.*

"Lass, who's the lady?" He spoke in Gaelic to Bonnie.

Bonnie turned to look at her. "That's Kate, she saved me."

"She did?"

"Aye, and you know what?"

"Nay, what, fairy?"

"She brung me home."

"Aye, she certainly did."

The warrior gazed at her and stared intently as if he judged her. Kate felt awkward under his scrutiny, but she also felt the sudden urge to run.

He scowled and motioned to her. "Lady, join us."

She walked slowly to where he stood with Bonnie.

"How did you come to have Bonnie in your care?"

A lump formed in her throat and Kate's voice refused to cooperate, robbed of all her senses. The man was a huge warrior covered in paint for Goddess's sake. She couldn't even tell what he looked like. His hair matted down with paint, and no skin showed on his face, arms or legs. He wore a tartan around his waist and had a huge sword in a scabbard by his side. The man made Kate feel uncomfortable with him towered above her. Her blood crept to her neck and heated her skin.

"Lady, I asked you, how did you come to have Bonnie?" his voice hardened.

"I-I uh..." Kate couldn't get a word out, her throat closed, and her heart beat madly.

"Uncle, I'll tell you." Bonnie turned his face toward her.

"All right, lass, I wish someone would explain."

"Papa's going to make me sit in his chair 'cause I was supposed to rest, giving poor Emma a wee break, but I didn't. I left the tent and a mean man picked me up. He took me to his home and I was there a longed time before Kate came. She promised to bring me home and you know what?"

The warrior silently listened to his niece's babble.

“Nay, what?”

“She did. She’s bonny, too.” Bonnie spoke in Gaelic, and Kate didn’t understand a word she said. She barely paid attention, because her body stiffened and heat rose within her. A situation made worse when the warrior stood ridged with his gaze fastened on her.

The warrior hesitated as if he tried to make sense of what his niece told him. He didn’t introduce himself, which she thought was rude, but he certainly daunted her. She wanted to ask what Bonnie had told him, but she kept quiet. Besides, Bonnie mustn’t have finished, because she took a breath and regaled him with more unknown words.

“Kate and I ran to the horse. We got away, and now you found us, Uncle.” Bonnie yawned and her eyes drooped.

“You will explain now, lady.” He nearly shouted and his eyes blazed with fury.

Kate watched the warrior turn into two images then both waved before her eyes. The thump of her heart pounded in her ears and her eyes teared. She searched for something to grab hold of, but the closest thing was the obstinate warrior. Darkness took hold and she fainted dead away.